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# eVeryDay eBay

Culture, Collecting,  
and Desire

Edited by  
**Ken Hillis** and **Michael Petit**  
with **Nathan Scott Epley**

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- eBay and the Traveling Museum
- Elvis Richardson's *Slide Show Land*

□ DANIEL MUDIE CUNNINGHAM

For inside [the collector] there are spirits, or at least a little *genii*, which have seen to it that for a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.

Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library"<sup>1</sup>

In his essay, "Unpacking My Library," Walter Benjamin invites us to join him in his private library to reflect on what it means to be a book collector. Sitting amidst "the disorder of crates that have been wrenched open, the air saturated with the dust of wood, and the floor covered with torn paper" (61), Benjamin explains how a collector forms a special relationship with the thing collected. Passionate in his description of beloved volumes, Benjamin reveals that "one of the finest memories of a collector is the moment when he rescued a book to which he might never have given a thought, much less a wishful look, because he found it lonely and abandoned on the market place and bought it to give it its freedom" (65–66).

A sense of responsibility informs Benjamin's understanding of what it means to be a collector, because he or she will invariably act with "the attitude of an heir" (68). Secondhand books—captured, collecting dust, and unread for the longest time in thrift stores and book exchanges—instill such an attitude because they are acquired or inherited with the knowledge that they once formed part of another's prized collection. According to Benjamin, secondhand books are granted new life when collected, and a "process of renewal" occurs: "I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth" (63). As the book is renewed, it "comes alive in him" in much the same way that the collector comes alive by inhabiting them. In becoming part of a greater collection, the secondhand

book is reborn bearing its collector's face and signifying meanings specific to the collector's cognitive library of memories, emotions, and histories. Benjamin articulates a poetics of memory in collecting: "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories" (61–62). Memory is chaotic because, in addition to being embodied, it lives inside the objects we collect. Changes in meaning occur when those collections (in their entirety or not) appear in the secondhand marketplace, and are eventually adopted into a new set of circumstances. Whether public or private, a collection acts as a repository of memory—an exterior mnemonic device—because both the collector and viewer interpret a collection based on their subjective ties to the objects in question.

For Benjamin, the collector is a romantic figure, and justifiably so, considering the care and passion with which he describes a collector's relationship to the thing collected. The romance of collecting is owed in large part to the roles that nostalgia and memory play in the shaping of a collection. The urge to collect things from the past often stems from their ties to uniqueness, innocence, and authenticity. Mining the past of its rare treasures allows us to relive a time when life was sweet and unfettered by the soullessness of contemporary capitalism. The phenomenon of eBay reverberates with the sentiments Benjamin expresses in his essay in that eBay acts as a memory machine, where even the most personal items are returned to the secondhand market, ready for potential rebirth through new ownership. eBay participates in and actively encourages the chaos of passion and memory, because while preloved items will always bear some trace of their previous owner's identity, the former owner is largely forgotten. All that remains are objects awaiting a "process of renewal." But, as I will argue, what makes eBay unique as a secondary marketplace is the way it *remediates* past technologies and secures them in the digital archives of the present.

eBay fosters Benjamin's poetics of memory through the resale of personal items such as family photographs, especially those reliant on obsolete or fading media formats such as the 35mm slide transparency. In addition to preserving the representational histories and memory imprints embedded in photographic images, a collector of slide photographs safeguards a medium fast becoming redundant. Photographic slide shows, like Benjamin's unpacked library, are archives of memory supported by their owners' urge to tell the stories of their lives to others. But what happens when a slide collection's owner discards these personal histories in eBay's secondhand marketplace? In 2001 Australian artist Elvis Richardson began *Slide Show Land*, an ongoing art project composed of slides bought through eBay. These private, amateur snapshots of travel, family life,

landscapes, and architecture reveal family dynamics now severed from the referent of their originating source. A window revealing past customs, conventions, and ideologies, the slides are "renewed" by Richardson, their adoptive collector. Imprinting her own subjectivity and history on these found objects of "human ephemera,"<sup>2</sup> Richardson explains that her desire to buy the slides from eBay stemmed from being adopted and having "an empathetic attraction to personal items I find in thrift stores and in the rubbish, objects that are not wanted or loved anymore." Richardson also notes that in buying the slides, "I felt I was rescuing them, preserving their history, which was otherwise destined for oblivion. Collecting these slides and keeping the collections together is a way to keep the families themselves together."<sup>3</sup> Like Benjamin, Richardson is a lifeguard rescuing objects invested with the trace of others' memories so that they might be renewed and brought back to life as art objects.

By performing a close reading of *Slide Show Land*, and the way eBay users discard evidence of personal histories at auction, I will investigate eBay to articulate the ways in which it raises questions about the value (or non-value) of personal history in relation to slide photography. Are such histories too difficult to preserve, comprehend, and maintain, once formats such as the slide are rendered redundant? How is history, as a representation of memory and perception, discarded or reformatted once a media format becomes an outmoded technology?

Having amassed a collection of more than 30,000 slides, Richardson has exhibited her traveling slide museum in New York, Alabama, Sydney, and Christchurch galleries.<sup>4</sup> Multiple slide carousels are positioned "on long tables, flea market style,"<sup>5</sup> and are projected simultaneously onto secondhand screens at automatically timed intervals (Figure 14.1). Richardson encourages viewers to interact with the work by selecting any carousel they desire. This strategy counters a dominant convention of art being off-limits to viewers in terms of touch and viewing conditions. Moreover, a viewer can resist seeing the collections in sequence and instead choose random configurations of slides from one or more of the collections. Since 2004, Richardson has altered the viewing experience by transferring the collections onto DVD, a development I discuss below.

Situated on each carousel is a tag indicating the geographic source of the collection and its eBay purchase value. Richardson has paid as little as 2 USD for such slides and, in one instance, purchased a collection of 2,500 slides from an amateur photographer in California for 67 USD. Dealers from secondary markets rather than the photographers themselves list many of the slides on eBay because they often derive from deceased estates.



Figure 14.1 *Slide Show Land* by Elvis Richardson, 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

This fuels Richardson's adoptive desire to rescue these abandoned collections of "vernacular" photography from the dustbin of history and honor their origins by sequencing them in the order in which they were taken.<sup>6</sup> In sequence, the slides contrast the unshelved chaos of Benjamin's unpacked books, "not yet touched by the mild boredom of order" (62).

I first encountered *Slide Show Land* in 2002, when it was installed at Room 35, Gitte Weise Gallery, Sydney, and was struck by the wonder it instilled, a wonder in keeping with Stephen Greenblatt's definition: "the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted exaltation."<sup>7</sup> The "uniqueness" of the work relates to the way the slides are derived from the photographic closets of strangers' personal history and memory banks, but paradoxically there is a familiarity about these images in that they recall family dynamics, travel customs, and even (amateur) photographic conventions (see chapter 14) that are recognizable despite the anonymity of the subjects depicted. This familiarity and recognizability, due in large part to the nostalgia in which the slides are soaked, evoke for many the homespun slide show and memories of having staged such a slide show or, at worst, sat with barely concealed boredom as a family member or friend screened slide after slide of a recent travel adventure.<sup>8</sup>

The slides are also unique because, unlike the infinitely reproducible nature of photographs printed from negatives, or the images on eBay produced with digital technology, slide transparencies are part of an original positive strip of film cut apart and placed in cardboard or plastic mounts. They are irreplaceable once damaged or lost. Although transparencies can be duplicated or used to print conventional photographs, they are touched by their owners' hands and retain an aura of authenticity. Benjamin notes that daguerreotypes require "proper light," are "one of a kind," and are "kept in a case like jewellery."<sup>9</sup> This same uniqueness applies to slides as historically specific and "one of a kind," and contributes to their marketability on eBay.<sup>10</sup>

The uniqueness of the slides Richardson collects makes them apt art objects because one of the prevailing myths about art (especially "masterpieces") is that their visual power derives from their uniqueness and authenticity. Greenblatt argues that when displayed in museums, masterpieces possess "the power to arouse wonder, and that power, in the dominant aesthetic ideology of the West, has been infused into it by the creative genius of the artist."<sup>11</sup> By adopting other people's original images and inserting the individual collections into a larger body of work, Richardson evokes wonder while simultaneously resisting a myth of "creative genius" because she was not originally involved in their production. In a sense, the wonder of *Slide Show Land* derives not from any dated notion of artistic genius or originality, but rather from the way its authenticity has been borrowed or bought through eBay (see chapter 11).

Ironically, masterpieces from an official history of art are often viewed through the slide format in the pedagogical contexts of museum studies and art history.<sup>12</sup> History is told through images, projections, a telling in keeping with the stories told during the slide show. Often taken in domestic, private space, Richardson's once-orphaned amateur slides destabilize art history hierarchies, and question what kind of images constitute art because, as abandoned images, they are suddenly invested with the cultural capital of high (or at least higher) art. Since analog slide technology endures in art history departments, *Slide Show Land* takes on a self-reflexive and ironic character because it counters an official art history by inserting private, forgotten narratives into the institutional contexts of the museum, gallery, and academy. Anthropological museums privilege the kind of familial domestic customs and conventions represented in Richardson's slides, while art institutions only do so when ironic postmodern artists (for example, Mike Kelley and Cindy Sherman) resignify the private as public or the raw material of everyday life as art (see chapter 13).

Richardson's work also reveals how personal histories become difficult to preserve, comprehend, and maintain once the slide format becomes redundant. By performing a rescue mission on anonymous private histories that might have never again seen the light of day, Richardson demonstrates how it is not only certain media formats that face extinction, but also personal history itself. When a house is burning, family photographs are the first thing rescued after people and pets. But the growing market for slides on eBay and other secondhand markets illustrates how some media formats do not take kindly to posterity. Photographs may be passed down through generations of families, but slides seem to be treated as easily discarded anomalies.

Earlier I noted that many of the slides available on eBay derive from deceased estates auctioned by secondary dealer markets. Slides, it seems, die along with their owners. Perhaps they become too onerous to view when the appropriate technology of the projector becomes scarce. Like LPs rendered unplayable when a turntable is discarded or breaks, a slide is often severed from the nostalgic gravity of private history because it relies so heavily on specific viewing conditions. While daguerreotypes may also be "one of a kind" or subject to viewing in "proper light," their historical, cultural, and aesthetic value is assured by their close ties to early photography. Less glamorous in this respect, slides cannot be displayed permanently without a projector, yet to keep a projector switched on for an indefinite time period risks damaging the transparency. A format deemed unviable for long-term preservation, the slide passes away, redundant as a technology, deleted from cultural memory.<sup>13</sup>

A deceased technology once popular with generations of families also now deceased, the slide says much about the way the photograph is inextricably linked to death. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes explores the relationship of photography to death and refers to the *punctum* of a photo—a minor detail in the image, "that accident which pricks me"—as capable of transforming the reading of a photographic image.<sup>14</sup> Barthes refers to the formless "intensity" of time as a *punctum* because when looking at photographs, we are looking at moments frozen in representation, potentially dead in reality. Barthes writes, "The *punctum*, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die."<sup>15</sup>

The images in *Slide Show Land* enact the notion of "time as *punctum*" not only because they refer to representations of people who are dead or going to die, but equally because the format of the slide is itself subject to a

similar process of erasure.<sup>16</sup> Personal history, as a representation of memory and perception, is discarded once the media format used to depict that history is obsolete. But, as with so many collectors who use eBay to build their collections of cultural minutiae, Richardson counters the process of redundancy written into the design of media formats by foregrounding the rich archives of personal history and memory embedded in these objects. *Slide Show Land* is, as Richardson claims, "for the nostalgic and lost"<sup>17</sup> because of the way it preserves both personal histories and the media technologies once used to capture them. Under the tutelage of their new owner, Richardson's anonymous slides resist a fixed, singular, or "unique" interpretation. In a renewed environment they become subject to a viewer's understandings of the cultural ritual of the "familiar" and familial slide show.

While Barthes uses historical photographs to illustrate "time as *punctum*," there are resonances of this notion with the way eBay listings work. An eBay auction differs from "real-world" auction formats largely because the seller decides how long an item will be listed and because bidding stops once time has run out.<sup>18</sup> The thrill of eBay derives largely from the urgency of the auction's looming *deadline*. In his memoir on eBay obsession reprinted in this volume (see chapter 1), William Gibson informs readers that "with less than an hour to go before the auction closed, I was robotically punching the Netscape Reload button like a bandit-cranking Vegas granny, in case somebody outbid me." An awareness of time and its rapid passing informs users' responses to eBay, as we see in Gibson's use of the site to boost his collection of (appropriately enough) rare watches. But what happens to a particular eBay listing? After sixty days, it disappears from eBay's publicly available but temporary archive of recent auctions to make room for new listings. As with much of the rhetoric around the temporal nature of the Web, the eBay listing is never meant to be permanent; when browsing through listings, users are aware that the listing (and the page containing it) will soon die. The same "defeat of time" is an imperative driving the activities of selling and purchasing on eBay, and is made all the more resonant when the images used to illustrate the listing are either collectible historic photographs or photographs reconstructed from dying media formats such as the slide. Two points of finality, then, emerge here: one is the moment the auction ends, and the other is when its listing disappears. If a bidder "wins" the item, that commodity stands in as a record of the auction process—that past event and event passed.

In 2004 Richardson began experimenting with transferring the slide collections onto DVD to expand their potential to travel beyond the gallery and back into the domestic realm they so insistently represent. Richardson

scans the slides individually, including their cardboard mounts, on a flatbed scanner, thereby emphasizing the material and physical authenticity of the slide format. Ironically, the artist's original intention to preserve the nostalgic storytelling performance of the slide show is lost or perhaps *remediated*. In their book *Remediation*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue that the ideologies of "newness" that underpin new media are based on modernist rhetoric that insists new technologies cannot make significant contributions to culture unless they dispense with the past. Digital media never really break with the formal considerations that structure past technologies; instead, they become subject to a process of remediation. Defined as "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms,"<sup>19</sup> remediation relies on the contrasting strategies of "transparent immediacy" (where representations efface the "presence" of the medium) and "hypermediacy" (where representations foreground the "presence" of the medium). According to Bolter and Grusin, the "double logic of remediation" is set into action by these dual strategies, whereby "[o]ur culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them."<sup>20</sup> Photography stresses immediacy in the way its ties to the "automatic" efface its mechanical and chemical processes as well as its relationship to the photographer. Conversely, the presence of photography, its hypermediacy, is highlighted by technologies like the slide projector and its significant spectral ancestor, the late Renaissance magic lantern, because a viewer is always aware of the projector's cumbersome presence.<sup>21</sup> While the slide projector remediates to a large extent the operations of the magic lantern, eBay also plays a large role in remediating the dying technology of the slide.

By being digitally reformatted and presented on DVD, Richardson's slides undergo a process of remediation that shows how new digital media cannot entirely be divorced from the formal language of past media. When viewed on a television screen, Richardson's slides are no longer projected onto a white screen where particles of light and dust unite with the whirring, hypnotic rhythm of the clunky slide projector. With the slides reformatted onto DVD, the artist, rather than a viewer who might feel compelled to linger over some images longer than others, now determines the timing of the sequence. More important, the slide image becomes documented twofold. As scanned "documents" of discarded family "documentation," the slides become museum-like specimens to be contemplated in the frame of their seemingly peripheral mounts. In its tactile state, the mount originally was a functional means of framing the slide, making it compatible with the slide tray, including Kodak's carousel. Once scanned, however, the mount

is "photographed" like the image contained therein and becomes an active part of the overall digital image presented on screen. A viewer is made aware that once digitally reformatted, the analog slide format faces extinction only in the sense that it has become remediated, swallowed whole by digital screen-based technologies in a paradigm shift.

In a similar manner, eBay itself is a site that, through its strategies of display, remediates slide technology. eBay provides several optional means of including an image in a listing. A seller may mount a thumbnail photograph on a listing's page, elect to include a thumbnail as part of her or his listing's hyperlink that will be included in the results of a search of eBay listings (Figure 14.2), or include in the listing a "Picture Gallery" composed of a number of images of the object for sale. These ways of including an image in a listing heighten an item's visibility when searching, and also demonstrate how digital contexts remediate the slide image. That the formal constraints of the slide endure on eBay is ironic considering the way eBay positions the slide as a "collectible" category due to its status as a dying media format. eBay listings that do not contain a thumbnail in the hyperlink may instead include a camera icon that links to an image of the eBay item. The icon of the camera makes explicit the ties that photography has to consumer culture, and the way eBay relies on the photographic as much as Richardson depends on eBay for her photographic practice. eBay's depiction of the thumbnail (as slide) and camera icon (as link to a photograph) ultimately highlights the way older technologies are remediated through the foregrounding of eBay's hypermediacy.

eBay sellers' ability to mount an image "gallery" of a listed object (resonating with a "galleria" of retail outlets) implies that the listed object has an art object's aura. Of course, art is a commodity like any other, but art galleries often deliberately efface art's relationship to the commodity and enforce an aura of unattainability even when a price list is available upon request (see chapter 15). Greenblatt argues that objects in museums especially function in this respect because, unlike eBay, "the treasured object exists not principally to be owned but to be viewed."<sup>22</sup> That a museum probably purchased the object for its collection is secondary to its power as an official historical object. Economic "value" is glossed over by historical and cultural value.

The framing device of the slide mount is a space that encloses representations of histories, memories, customs, and commodities. According to Greenblatt, "[T]he frames that enclose pictures are only the ultimate formal confirmation of the closing of the borders that marks the finishing of a work of art."<sup>23</sup> When presented on DVD, *Slide Show Land* resists

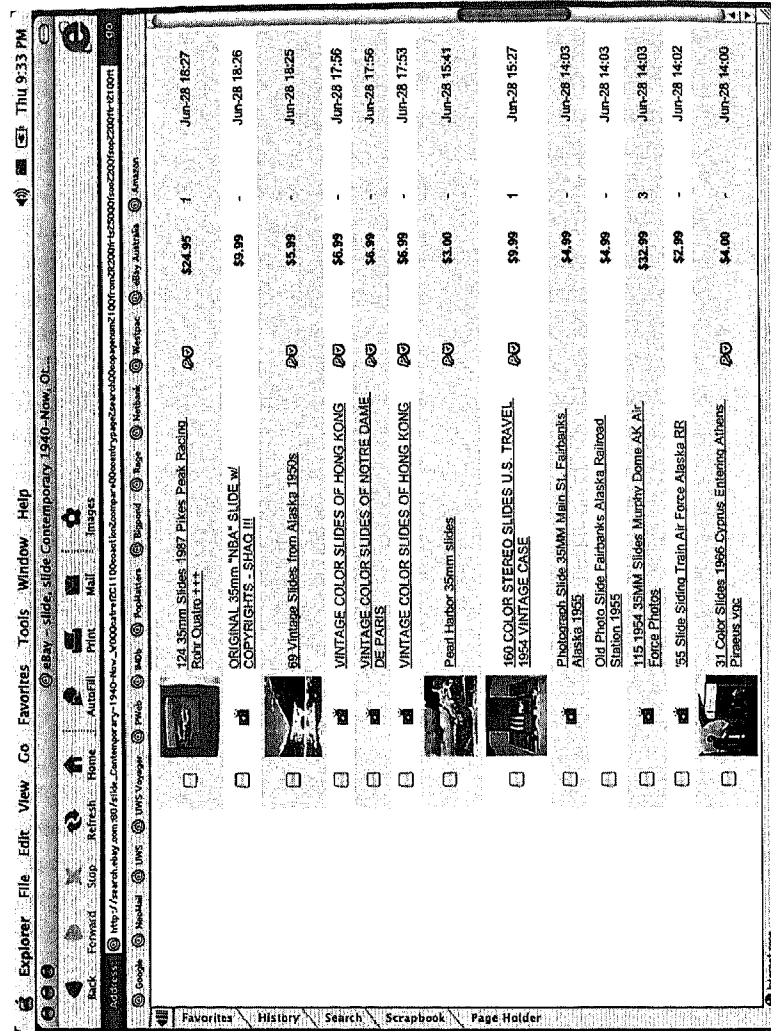


Figure 14.2 eBay remediates the slide.

this notion in that the frame of the mount becomes an essential part of the overall image. The work of art is not “finished” within the “border” of the slide mount, just as Richardson stresses the overall unfinished nature of the project. Surely the work cannot be completed as long as there are more slide collections to collect from eBay, for each slide exists only in its connections to a greater whole. In a sense, the strong community focus found on eBay (despite the users’ relative anonymity) resonates in the slides because they speak to community and connectedness, however unknown the depicted subjects remain. If suggestive of a digital thumbnail, the slides cannot be “contained” or “finished” because by implication viewers would be directed to “go to a larger picture.” And the larger picture here is the open-ended meanings and interpretations encouraged by images that are at once familiar and anonymous.

As Benjamin claims, “[O]wnership is the most intimate relationship” a collector has with his or her collections. This intimacy is forged by the amorphous mnemonic characteristics imposed on objects by collectors. But no matter how “anonymous” a collected object such as the slide transparency might be, its familiarity is owed in large part to the way analog media formats are subject not only to Benjamin’s “renewal” but also to the ongoing process of digital remediation performed by eBay. Memory, then, is fashioned not only through the accumulation of objects but also through the refashioning of technologies by which those objects are imaged.

## NOTES

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1. Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting” (1931), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), 69. Additional references cited parenthetically.
2. I borrow this phrase from Australian photographer Edwina Richards, whose book *People I Don't Know in Photographs I Took of Something Else* reframes her private archive of snapshots by emphasizing “human ephemera: people I didn’t know or hadn’t consciously noticed before, passing through the back-grounds of the hundred of photographs I’d taken over the years” (Sydney: Peninsula Paper, 2002), 2.
3. “Alumni Spotlight: An Interview with Australian Artist Elvis Richardson,” Columbia University, School of the Arts, Visual Arts, <http://63.151.45.66/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.viewNewsDetails&newsID=11>.

4. The collecting of anonymous slides for the purposes of art also informs the work of the Trachtenburg Family Slideshow Players, [www.slideshowplayers.com](http://www.slideshowplayers.com). The self-professed “indie-vaudeville conceptual art-rock pop band” takes slides bought from garage sales and thrift stores and “turn[s] the lives of strangers into pop-rock musical exposés based on the contents of these slide collections.” Cited in CD liner notes, Trachtenburg Family Slideshow Players, *Vintage Slide Collections from Seattle*, vol. 1 (Hoboken, NJ: Bar None Records, 2003).
5. “Alumni Spotlight.”
6. Val Williams defines “vernacular photography” as found photography that through its use by a new owner has the potential to resist traditional notions of authorship. “Vernacular photography is important,” writes Williams, “because it is open to any kind of interpretation. It can be refashioned, re-imagined, resequenced, made into a multitude of different stories.” Val Williams, “Lost Worlds,” *Eye* 55 (Spring 2005), 22.
7. Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42.
8. Super 8 film shares an affinity with slide photography because of the way both signify memory. Australian filmmaker Emma Crimmins writes, “For many people, Super 8 film has become synonymous with what they understand to be ‘memory.’ Saturated colours seep into one another, the film’s graininess quivering and accumulating like dust on every frame. . . . At a slender 8mm in width, this tiny memory strip stutters through a camera burning everyday life onto emulsion at 24 frames per second.” Emma Crimmins, “Traces: Naomi Bishops & Richard Raber,” in *Remembrance + the Moving Image*, ed. Ross Gibson (Melbourne: Australian Centre for the Moving Image, 2003), 37.
9. Walter Benjamin, “A Small History of Photography,” in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), 242.
10. To date, a specific category for slide photography does not exist on eBay. In an eBay search I conducted on March 17, 2005, most of the posted auctions for slide collections were found in the “Collectibles” category, and subcategorized under “Photography: Contemporary (1940–Present).” How eBay defines “contemporary” remains elusive, as a majority of the photographic items listed were dubbed “vintage” in their sellers’ descriptions.
11. Greenblatt, 52.
12. Artists also use the slide format to document their work and promote it to galleries. Increasingly, however, digital photographic technologies are eclipsing this practice, contributing to the obsolescence of the slide format.
13. A related reason for the decline of slides lies in the proprietary nature of slide technology. While Kodak had competitors, none of them had the highly successful and patented carousel. And Kodak charged a small fortune for a slide projector (and replacement light bulbs), which is, technologically, a very straightforward device—thus severely limiting its market to the upper-middle-class domestic sphere and the larger institutional market. Unlike the camera, the slide projector never was fully a part of the consumer marketplace for earlier image-rendering technologies.
14. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (1980; London: Vintage, 1993), 27.
15. *Ibid.*, 96.
16. While the slide show is becoming obsolete in analog contexts, it is also reformatted in the digital realm by PowerPoint, a program using the vocabulary of the slide show and allowing for incorporating text, sound, animation, and hyperlinks.
17. Elvis Richardson, artist website, [www.elvisrichardson.com](http://www.elvisrichardson.com).
18. For a discussion of the peculiarities of eBay’s standard auction format, see chapter 10 of this book.
19. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 273.
20. *Ibid.*, 5.
21. For a history and discussion of the magic lantern, see Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).
22. Greenblatt, 52.
23. *Ibid.*, 43.