Part of Martina Mrongovius’s use of old slides from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in an exhibition at the Materials for the Arts gallery in Long Island City, Queens.
Emon Hassan for The New York Times

It is definitely a digital-age question: What to do with old-fashioned color slides of all-but-forgotten visits to see Grandma or department store Santas? Year after year, they lie in their boxes on a shelf, no longer looked at.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art faced the same question on a much larger scale — but without Grandma or Santa. It had thousands of 35-millimeter slides, showing everything from close-ups of Manets and Monets to wide-angle shots of the galleries. For generations, the Met maintained an image library that lent slides to art teachers who carried them to class, loaded them into a projector, aimed the projector at a screen, delivered a lecture and eventually returned the slides to the Met.
The Met had the slides digitized several years ago, prompting the “what to do with the slides now that we no longer need them” question. The Met’s answer was to give them away to Materials for the Arts, a program of the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs that functions as a kind of clearinghouse.

The warehouse for Materials for the Arts, which takes in surplus items from businesses and museums and makes them available to arts organizations, nonprofit groups and public schools. Emon Hassan for The New York Times

Materials for the Arts takes in surplus items from businesses and museums, like the Met, and makes them available to arts organizations, nonprofit groups and public schools. It receives castoff displays from Bloomingdale’s and Macy’s as well as discarded sets from “Saturday Night Live,” “Orange Is the New Black” and Broadway shows that have closed.

“The stuff that we get is the stuff no one wants anymore,” said the executive director, Harriet Taub.

That is, and is not, strictly so, of course. Anyone who searches the shelves at Materials for the Arts wants “found” material. John Kaiser, the director of education, noted proudly that Materials for the Arts made possible creative reuse: “All of this is stuff that would end up in landfills.”

Ms. Taub said that when donors think about jettisoning things in a more conventional way, “we say, ‘No, give it to us because people can reinvent it.’”
Materials for the Arts heard about the slides from Marco Castro Cosio, an artist who was the manager of the Met’s media lab.

“I was definitely thinking, how could we give the slides new life, instead of discarding them?” said Mr. Cosio, now a research fellow at the Brown Institute for Media Innovation at Columbia University. “We looked at them as something to appreciate, just as any artist would look at something and find beauty.”

The Met still saw value in the slides, even though their original purpose was obsolete. “The technology moved on, and nobody’s borrowing slides anymore,” said Egle Zygas, a spokeswoman for the Met. “Who even has a slide carousel anymore?”

Materials for the Arts does. And, just as websites and search engines have made it easy to track down images that once had to be borrowed, Ms. Zygas looked up Materials for the Arts and delighted in an Instagram video of teenagers in a Materials workshop looking at the Met slides.

“The kids are running a slide projector,” Ms. Zygas said. “The look in their eyes is magic. They don’t know this was supposed to be a slide lecture ingredient — they just see it as images projected through light.”

With the video is a note from Jean Shin, an artist who led the workshop. “We had a slide jam every 15 mins,” she wrote, abbreviating the time element the
way people do in the digital world. “Some things never change, even for a generation that has never seen a slide before.”

Works by Ms. Mrongovius in the Materials for the Arts exhibition, with slides on lightboxes and magnifying glasses above them.
Emon Hassan for The New York Times

Materials also commissioned five artists for an exhibition, and, unexpectedly, the two curators assigned to the project bridged the digital divide. One was Omar Olivera, 37, who remembers submitting a Kodak Carousel tray filled with slides of his work to get into Brooklyn College. The other, Hallie Bahn, 25, said she never had to use slides. By the time she arrived at Kenyon College in Ohio in 2009, slides were obsolete.

“These to me are archaic remnants of predigital life,” she said, sounding almost as if she were talking about remnants of prehistoric life. The Paleolithic types in France had their caves. Mid-20th-century photographers had their slides — and their Kodak Carousel projectors, to show them. (The exhibition will be on display at Materials for the Arts, on the third floor of 33-00 Northern Boulevard in Long Island City, Queens, until June 2.)

One artist in the show, Andrea Wolf, chose 74 Met slides that rotate in sequence on video screens. One shows a Carousel tray, another a different relic: the typewriter the Met used to make labels for the slides.

Martina Mrongovius, another artist in the exhibition, focused on the slides not as images but as objects. She snapped them apart, lifting the tiny pieces of film out of the frames. As she did so, Ms. Mrongovius thought back to her childhood and postvacation slide shows in Australia, where she grew up.
“You’d often fall asleep because there were too many slides,” she said. “I have a memory of setting up the Carousel, setting up the screen, image after image — Europe, the beach. There was a feeling of sharing a story.”

She set the pieces of film she removed from the Met slides on lightboxes and put magnifying glasses above them. That led her to think about the experience of looking at a slide — and how different that is from the experience of looking at a digital image.

“When you look at a slide,” she said, “you really look into it. You dive into the image more. You’d never hold a magnifying glass up to your iPad. You’re not trying to look through it. You’re so aware the image is on the surface, on the screen, where with a slide, you look through the slide, into the image.”