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HYPERALLERGIC

Archival Slides from the Metropolitan Museum Find New Life as Artworks

After sitting in storage space, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's thousands of 35-millimeter slides found a new home at the Department of Cultural Affairs's reuse center, Material for the Arts.

Claire Voon



Martina Mrongovius, "drawing room" (2017) in 'Institutional Memory: 35mm Slides from the Met's Collection Reimagined' (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

A few years ago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art digitized its massive library of 35-millimeter slides, which capture thousands of objects in its collections as well as views of the museum's galleries over the last few decades. But once preserved in pixel form, theoretically for eternity, the original pictures were just eating up precious storage space. They could have ended up in the trash, but instead they found new life at the Department of Cultural Affairs's reuse center, Material for the Arts

(MFTA), where five artists have transformed the little squares into contemporary artworks, from sculptures to a multimedia installation.

These are now on view in the exhibition *Institutional Memory: 35mm Slides from the Met's Collection Reimagined*, curated by Omar Olivera and Hallie Bahn, in MFTA's on-site gallery. The small, dark space sits above MFTA's 25,000-square-foot warehouse for once-discarded objects, which is an astounding repository of potential.

Members of affiliated organizations are invited to shop, free of charge, in its seemingly endless aisles, which contain everything from damaged musical instruments to toys. Thanks to MFTA's dedication to sustainability, trash has often turned into treasure for use in projects for public schools, arts organizations, and beyond.

"No other organization in the city can accommodate such an amount of material," Bahn told Hyperallergic. "We are the landing ground for materials that are no longer needed for their original purposes."

In the case of the Met's slides, they arrived as a donation arranged by artist Marco Castro Cosio, the Met media lab's former manager. MFTA then commissioned artists for the exhibition, inviting them to sift through the trove and have their pick to haul back to their studios. One of them, Jean Shin, took a different approach and created a workshop with Teens Take the Met. Collaborating with students, most of whom had never before seen a slide projection, she created a light box filled with strung-together slides, like a reliquary for their imagined narratives.

Through careful handiwork, artist Martina Mrongovius also formed new connections from these artifacts by creating nine collages of slides, each backlit by light boxes and set under microscopes. Some simply layer copies of the same image, but are shifted slightly, so galleries appear as unfocused spaces or artworks appear mirrored. Other slides are brought together to form wider views of the Met's architecture, only they're fragmented, hovering between reality and fiction. Mrongovius's installation, which

forces you to closely scrutinize the slides, like specimens, highlights their objectness. The tiny image requires a type of viewing we don't often employ today, as a picture that's static, unzoomable, and unswipeable.

Embracing our ways of digital consumption is Andrea Wolf, who has created a slideshow of slides that plays on eight monitors, rather than on a manual carousel. Viewers control its speed by pressing a button, which pulls up a random slide from Wolf's chosen 74. Each also features a quote she's scribbled over a portion of the picture, drawn from texts of critical theory such as Hal Foster's *Bad New Days* or Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Also inspired by her own memories of the Met, Wolf's image bank suggests new narratives, contemplating how an institution interprets its archives and consequently produces knowledge through its methods of documentation and organization.

Other artists, like Dustin Yellin and Michael Kelly Williams, paid more attention to the vintage, metallic casings of the slides. Yellin's "Attn Viewer: Please bury for 2000 years" recalls his *Ant Farms* series, filling a metal frame with over 500 slides, arranged as if held up at its base by an invisible mound. Placed to form many layers, the images of the slides are nearly impossible to make out; they form an incredibly dense mass of metal and celluloid, representing the obsolete contents of our era trapped in a hardy time capsule.

Nearby, in Williams's sculpture, slides are shown as lightweight ornaments dangling from a wooden staff he carved and playfully titled "Curatorial Staff." Resembling the powerful rod of some fictitious chief, the piece alludes, somewhat simplistically, to the power curators yield over the spaces recorded in these slides. Even if they serve mostly as decoration here, I found myself attempting to view their colored windows and make out scenes in the shadows. Useless as they may be in the 21st century, there's something undeniably wondrous about these tiny records, many of which are annotated. Each, in the end, represents someone's efforts to manually

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document the encyclopedic art museum. To display them is to honor those past, quiet labors.

Institutional Memory: 35mm Slides from the Met's Collection

Reimagined *continues at the Material for the Arts (33-00 Northern Blvd, Long Island City, Queens) through June 2.*