

## *SlideShow*

### **The Baltimore Museum of Art Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati**

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For half a century, many saw sparkling sequences of celluloid as patches of rich terrain in which virtually anyone with rudimentary equipment could stake a claim. Now industry and commerce have no further use for them. It remains to be seen what the judgment of artists will be. —Robert Storr (2005, 69)

Four months after the last slide projector rolled off a production line at Kodak Park in Rochester, New York, the first museum exhibition focusing on slide projection in contemporary art opened in Baltimore. *SlideShow* was a smart show. It literally illuminated the art of the past four decades by foregrounding a medium and method—the color slide and automated carousel projector—that were ubiquitous in the pre-digital museum world of not so long ago.

A glance back at the moment just before the digital-image genie escaped, the exhibition was a reminder of how exhilarating it once was to discover new ways to obliterate old distances between memory and image, time and technology, public and private, art and daily life.

This ambitious show revived 19 rarely-seen works made from what Robert Storr, in an accompanying catalogue essay, called “converging beams of light and mind.” It began and ended with a new generation’s witty, nostalgic take on family slide shows—those first communal, larger-than-life personal “reality shows”—and the tech-

nology that matured along with them in the second half of the twentieth century. With 2,500 slides projected by 41 projectors for a total viewing time of four hours, the exhibition required and rewarded a half-day visit, best timed to end with a twilight glimpse of Louise Lawlor’s images of art world sites (such as a donor’s salon) projected onto the museum’s exterior, turning it into a giant projection screen viewed by rush-hour commuters.

Inside the museum, the mostly-gallery-size installations ranged from early descendants of 1960s Happenings, to Nan Goldin’s epic *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, to the kind of works that seemed ubiquitous in the art biennials in the 1990s and that were re-energized in this congenial new context. The many familiar uses of slides were displayed and transformed in works that opened up and expanded the medium.

Travel souvenirs, trophies of treasured family “Kodak moments,” archival documents—these images and their like serve as “the coin of the realm” of the art world, in Storr’s words (2005, 51). The projections were characteristically crisp, but efforts to categorize them as conceptual, performance, or narrative art failed to corral their fluidity. In this show, slide projection techniques moved towards the cinematic, critical categories and variations within them overlapped, and the twin-projector slide show as a central act in the pedagogy of art history was called into question.

Perhaps it is the boundary-busting capacity of artists’ appropriations and cre-

ative applications of a technology designed for corporations and consumers that fuels this art and its startling beauty. These works are brilliant, translucent, hypnotic, and almost magical in their capacity to dominate the spaces in which we experience them. Despite the stated intentions of *Slide Show*'s organizers to highlight the means of production and projection of these works, their power as art eclipses their common technological denominator.

**Moments in time**—Jonathan Monk's *One Moment in Time* (Kitchen), 2002, served up a sly critique of the medium's original use and original users, and thus functioned as a brilliant introduction to the exhibition. The youngish British artist ruthlessly subjected his own family narrative to a post-modern lens via 80 projected color slides presented from "a projector and pedestal complex." As if slide labels and images had

been switched, and the images lost, lines of text (only) were projected on the wall. They read as captions that substituted for the things they described, photographs and prints in the artist's mother's kitchen, as narrated to him over the phone by his sister: "Mum and Dad with Sally," "You with a friend in Los Angeles," "Me and James on our honeymoon," "Christian heroes (bible quotes)," "Egypt," "Postcard from Jersey." An irresistible but blunted invitation to friendly voyeurism and nostalgia, the work defies categorization. Is it conceptual? Narrative? Performance?

Goldin's notorious *Ballad* also gives new meaning to the notion of the family slide show. Her sexually charged sequential portrait of New York's downtown demimonde from 1979 to 1996 was central in the exhibition. Other installations displayed many permutations of artists' narratives and performances (land, feminist, body art, and so



Nan Goldin, an image from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 1979–1996. Photo courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

on), yet even in toto barely balanced the mesmerizing power of this rock epic and its evocative sound track.

Ana Mendieta enlisted slides almost incidentally to document *Untitled (Body Tracks)*, 1974. Literally breaking new ground in the early 1970s, Mendieta used her own body to leave impressions—some more ephemeral than others—on the earth. She also used cameras to leave a longer-lasting record of her work. *Untitled (Body Tracks)* is a sequence of nine projected color slides (shot by Hans Breder) that freeze-frames the artist smearing animal blood on a white sheet. Meanwhile, Dennis Oppenheim seemed to push the projected sequence until it nearly became a moving image in *Ground Gel*, 1972, in which the artist, swinging his young daughter on a beach, almost appeared to be trying to leap the frame. And in 1969–1972, Robert Smithson challenged the slide show

and his self-assumed roles as artist/professor/performer in *Hotel Palenque*. Presented to students as a straight classroom lecture, it was a send-up of the form's origins as quasi-academic travelogue, purporting to document exotic places and catalogue new anthropological and architectural finds.

Smithson might have been the biggest-name artist in the exhibition, yet his work was perhaps of most interest when considered in conjunction with the Belgian Marcel Broodthaers' work *Bateau Tableau*, 1973, which also subjected the traditional art history lecture—with its ritual reliance on comparison and enlargement of representations of objects—to close-up scrutiny. Metacommentary on the art-and-museum world, as it turns out, is an important thematic concern of many of these artists. Krzysztof Wodiczko's beautiful, understated *Real Estate Projection*, 1987, quietly but powerfully drew attention to dynamics of



Marcel Broodthaers, a still from *Bateau Tableau*, 1973. Photo courtesy of Pamela and Richard Kramlich.

displacement and projection at many levels of meaning.

Lawlor's *External Stimulation*, 1994–2005, attempted to X-ray the art system by projecting scenes of its private sites in public. The British artist Ceal Floyer beamed a halo of white light through an empty projector onto a wall at the entrance to the gallery in *AutoFocus*, 2002. For two or three generations of artists, slide projection has offered a unique means for seeing the related fields of art history and museum studies and the role of the projected photographic reproduction within them.

*SlideShow* included a few more overtly political yet similarly enigmatic works, such as Willie Doherty's *Same Difference*, a 1990 two-projector "portrait" of a suspected IRA terrorist. His fellow Irishman James Coleman had a much-heralded *Slide Piece*, 2002, that also focused attention on inter-

pretation, whether textual or verbal, and its ambiguities in relation to photographic reproduction. Oddly, the reverberations of the political and social changes set in motion in the 1960s—which pervaded the exhibition—seemed to escape explicit comment (other than a paragraph or two in Charles Harrison's essay in the catalogue) in the otherwise exemplary wall text.

Color slides, with their luminosity, saturated color, clarity, and precise detail, are particularly well-suited for examining natural phenomena. Exhibition curator Darsie Alexander, curator of prints, drawings, and photographs at the Baltimore Museum of Art, had expected time and memory to emerge as the major themes, and noted her surprise when nature appeared in the exhibition as "an unexpected guest." In *Projection 4 (P)*, 1997, for instance, Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, "operating as botanists," used 162 slides, two projectors, a dissolve unit, and a wooden pedestal to project extreme close-ups of flowers and mushrooms morphing seamlessly on gallery walls—as if they (or perhaps their viewers) might be in a chemically altered state.

To create the hypnotically beautiful *Land/Sea*, 1971, Dutch artist Jan Dibbets used 360 slides in six projectors, firing simultaneously at two intersecting walls. These images blended into a subtly shifting horizon of blue light that seemed to move in slow motion to the rhythm of unseen waves—or in time with the relentless beat of Kodak Ektagraphic carousels advancing and dropping slides into slots, one by one.



Willie Doherty, installation view of *Same Difference*, 1990. Photo courtesy of the artist and Alexander and Bonin Gallery, New York.

**The Magic Lantern and the sorcerer's apprentice**—A color slide is simply a “fragile 35-mm integument of light-sensitive cellulose laminated in a reinforced paper square” (Storr 2005, 52). *SlideShow* reminds us of the magic in the Magic Lantern—the name given to nineteenth-century devices for projecting glass transparencies. Light, beamed through cardboard squares, transforms empty rooms and blank walls into a temporal, spatial art.

Exhibition organizers employed a number of strategies to direct visitors' attention to the technology that made slide-based art possible. The projector was given a room of its own, displaying historic versions, from an 1870s “cherry globe” lantern slide projector to the stalwart 2004 Kodak Ektagraphic with round carousel and zoom lens. A film by Paige Sarlin, *The Last Slide Projector*, documented the demise of this historic technology. Those who hate PowerPoint, please note: Kodak, according to its corporate marketing office, plans to

continue Ektagraphic projector service and support for the next seven years.

The exhibition documentation included wall text, spotlighted to look like slides, which identified the number of slides and projectors in each installation and detailed their physical supports. Some projectors were ceiling- or wall-mounted; others had a physical, sculptural presence. There were interactive opportunities for visitors to contribute to and view *Project Yourself*, a continuously-running show incorporating their own slides. Projections of works in the exhibition ran in a nearby theater, serving as trailers.

It doesn't take a particularly close reading of the wall text to appreciate the challenges of exhibiting a technology that has been pronounced dead by its primary manufacturer. “A majority of the equipment (controllers, lenses, mounts) was found on eBay and is not available in any other market,” said technical director Cliff Dossel, unsung hero of the exhibition and wrangler



Jan Dibbets, installation view of *Land/Sea*, 1971. Photo courtesy of the artist and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

of its 41 projectors and 2,500 slides. While curatorial participation in the art market alongside collectors and other institutional representatives is not a new phenomenon in the art world, direct competition with the public in online auctions is a relatively recent addition to the curator's job portfolio.

There were relatively sophisticated slide shows in public theaters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, according to Darsie Alexander. However, most of us associate the term with the family slide shows popularized in the 1940s. The home slide show, and home slide archive, evolved from souvenir family snapshots and travel trophies to sequenced, narrated displays of treasured memories, as the color slide film and projectors initially designed for corporate communications—to disseminate, train, archive, advertise, and publish—became affordable and reliable.

Kodak sold an astonishing 50 million projectors in the past 68 years.<sup>1</sup> In addition to its family, industrial and corporate, educational and training markets, a significant sub-set of buyers consisted of artists, academics, dealers, publishers, museums, and academic departments of art and art history. While Alexander dates the first use of slides in art history lectures to the 1880s, when photographic images could be printed on glass, Donald Preziosi has suggested that Jesuits used transparencies and light to educate during the seventeenth-century Counter-Reformation. He argues further that photography and photographic technology are not ancillary to—but constitutive of—art history and its relationship to museology, that “art history is in a real sense the child of photography” (2003, 25ff).

Regardless of the date of the first use of twin projectors, it is impossible to imagine

generations of pedagogy without them. It is equally impossible to conceive of the art world of recent decades without the slide as the means to shrink and enlarge images of art objects in order to move them from studio to gallery to classroom to museum to book or magazine or lecture hall, as Storr's catalogue essay elucidates so brilliantly—and hilariously. His sketch of the perils of preparing and delivering a slide lecture is priceless: “Then there is the awkward business of loading circular trays only to find that the metal disc at the bottom is not aligned and that a slide has fallen through (at which point one turns the carousel over, forgetting that the sealing ring on the top is missing, so that all the remaining slides fall out)” (2005, 51–52).

As programmed multi-projector slide-tape shows developed in corporate settings and, to some extent, in academia, from the 1960s through the 1980s, it was inevitable that artists would adopt this increasingly affordable and accessible technology. Allan Kaprow's *Happenings*, beginning in 1959, are often credited as the first use of projected slides in public art. From the mid-1960s on, hand-painted slides were projected as part of light shows at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco (and at its New York counterpart) and at other rock concerts—and the rest is the (art) history that *Slide-Show* so brilliantly resurrects.

**The last “Kodak moment?”**—The grand finale of the Ektagraphic projector—“probably one of the most successful equipment products ever made by Kodak”<sup>2</sup>—was a Kodak moment that did not go unmarked. In fact, it did double duty as a Kodak marketing moment. Parties and publicity included ceremonial donations to the International Museum of Photography and Film at George Eastman House and the Smith-

sonian Institution. The last projector off the production line was autographed by “dozens of Kodak people involved in its making, marketing and support” and given to the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, to add to its extensive photography and technology collections. In a program that included seven slide shows, a Kodak executive noted that “Kodak slide projectors have written an important chapter in the history of imaging” and that their legacy—digital cameras, picture CDs, and “online photo services”—makes it possible for people everywhere to create and email slide shows “to anyone and everyone they choose, anywhere in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

But what of *SlideShow*, and slide shows, in our new age of global 24/7 emailable digital reproduction? In an increasingly virtual world, diminished contact with the real, the democratization of image-sharing, and the technologies in daily use are all issues that impact art and museum disciplines in the scramble to compete for the public’s attention. Thus it is surprising that more explicit attention was not paid to the significance of multi-image slide technologies as precursors to today’s multimedia—or to the impact of the digital revolution—in the exhibition and its catalogue. (The absence of a reference to the work of Walter Benjamin and Marshall McLuhan is also puzzling, although Benjamin is listed in the catalogue bibliography).

To notice these missed opportunities is only to suggest the need for more scholarship and an extended run or encore for this provocative exhibition. The law of unintended consequences raises the possibility that *SlideShow*’s focus on the slide as a way to see into and through art history may have the effect of reinvigorating the medium, or at least the regard accorded its place

in art history. A revival of the programmed slide show may not be in the cards, or on the disk, in the age of the 24/7 digital image surround. But thanks to *SlideShow*, any obituary for the humble color slide is premature.

#### NOTES

1. Telephone conversation with Charles Smith, Kodak corporate communications office, April 22, 2005.
2. Telephone conversation with Charles Smith, Kodak corporate communications office, April 22, 2005.
3. Remarks by Kodak executive Bernard Masson at the Slide Projector Farewell Reception, George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y., November 18, 2004; transcript provided by Kodak.

#### REFERENCES

- D. Alexander, ed. 2005. *SlideShow*. Exhibition catalogue. University Park, PA: The Baltimore Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania State University Press.
- D. Preziosi. 2003. *Brain of the Earth’s Body, Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Storr, R. 2005. Next slide, please.... In *SlideShow*, D. Alexander, ed. University Park, PA: Baltimore Museum of Art and Pennsylvania State University Press.