Since the end of the 20th century, digital inventions have been fundamentally changing both the reception of images and how we deal with them. A key aspect to this phenomenon is the supposedly limitless accessibility to all kinds of content via the Internet. The form in which photographic images are presented also exhibit symptoms of these technological shifts. Whereas in the 20th century a photographic image was primarily bound to a real body – be it a print or a reproduction in book form – nowadays it is contingent upon the body of some technical device. Millennials are scarcely able to imagine what a floppy disk is, while analogue photographic data carriers such as the slide (diapositives) are fading into oblivion.

Until the mid-2000s, students across lecture halls in art history institutes and art museums were well accustomed to a slide projector's meditative rattle and hum. Before digital forms of presentation were introduced, the 35mm slide was considered the principal medium for screening purposes. Over decades, not only did it serve to impart knowledge but also to promote and publicize museum collections. Given its high-quality image for the time and its extensive contrast range, institutions and art galleries alike made use of positive film as a reproduction template for illustrations in catalogues or magazines. Viewed from this perspective, the slide as a medium was significantly involved in canonisation processes, namely, establishing standards and sets of rules within the disciplines of art and cultural history. Where the original artwork was not available – whether on account of precarious transport conditions or if a particular piece was only to be used for comparative purposes – it was literally mobilised with the help of the slide.

Ever since the medium was invented, repro-photography has been a prominent work field for photographers. Projects for documenting and disseminating historical architecture or significant art objects were already being conducted using the first photographic process, the daguerreotype, and were often financed by the State. Ever since, photographic techniques have been continuously optimised with a view to achieving the desired closeness to reality. Consequently, countless museums are now in a position to present a history of their reproductions alongside their artworks. In addition to digital versions, they can now also deposit in their archives early engravings, albumen prints, silver gelatine and C-prints, as well as other historical image-carriers of a given motif. The prominence accorded to a given artwork is and always has been contingent upon its reproduction quality and the associated media reach. From the very outset, the quality of photographic techniques has been constantly optimised and heralded by manufacturers with proclamations of even newer extremes: shorter exposure times, colour photography, increased image sharpness, higher image resolution, face recognition, metadata embedding – the list is endless. It is an incessant race related to available storage capacities in the context of Big Data and the economic interests of market-leading corporations.

As for the art objects themselves, this never-ending product optimisation also has consequences: Where no good repro is available (i.e., repro-photography matching current standards), it will not appear in print and will not be put online; this, in turn, will lead to reduced demand and the work in question increasingly loses visibility. Over decades, slide film was thus one of the favoured means of professional repro-photography; it was to become obsolete following the introduction of digital media, however. In order to both save on storage space and financial resources, numerous museums and art history institutes are now getting rid of their slide collections and giving them away or auctioning them off – in the best case scenario.

As of 2019, Sebastian Riemer has been devoting himself to these rejects from art and/or the history of photography in his series Stills. He has been using these discarded slides as templates for his photographic works that show artworks from the Middle Ages right up to the present day.
As a macro shot – enlarged many times over – Riemer photographs the framed slides in full format against a grey background. Most art-lovers should be familiar with the creators of the original artworks (at this point, we are dealing exclusively with male artists) – he has brought together Albrecht Dürer, Caravaggio, Kazimir Malevich, Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Goya, and various other protagonists of Western art history with the themes of their iconic masterpieces. The shooting mode employed in a contemporary form of repro-photography hints at media-theoretical and art-historical considerations; these go well beyond the recurrent debate regarding originality and aura that gave rise to much discussion throughout the 20th century. Instead, consideration can be given to the relationship between image and viewer, to the function of reproduction as a form of photographic expression, and to the specific texture of photographic objects.

Framed and flush-laminated behind Plexiglas, the photographs are displayed in the exhibition space in formats of up to two-by-two metres. In external appearance, the slides and their corresponding frames exhibit a broad diversity, condition, and quality of reproduction. Invariably, the slide film's image plane, i.e. the reproduction of paintings, prints and sculptures, is positioned in the centre of the pictorial field and is thus initially the most prominent image object. The presence, however, of the slide frames also swiftly comes into focus. Typically made of cardboard, metal, or plastic, the frames contain captions. At one time, the titles on the frames were written by hand, stamped printed, fitted with stickers, numbered and marked for correct alignment in the slide projector. Given that numerous traces of their ageing and former use are visibly discernible, Riemer evidently photographed his original objects in the condition he found them: all the slides bear traces of dust particles, hairs and lint, while many areas are yellowed, gashed or scratched.

Based upon Riemer's selection of templates and the artworks reproduced in them, multiple references can be made to previous debates about media theory applying to his works: Duchamp with his readymades, Warhol with his mass serial repetition of popularised images, or Chuck Close with his photographic-painterly hybrids are but some striking examples of diverse artistic appropriation strategies. So dense are the art historical references, so multi-layered the information contained in the films and in the frames surrounding them that each individual work in Riemer's series could provide sufficient material to merit an essay exclusively devoted to it.

The ensemble of works chosen reflects a male-dominated canon from European and North American art history, one which Riemer's selection initially seems to confirm. The sole exception is: 20th Cent. Art Guerilla Girls Trent l'Oscar Billboard 2003 CCNY ART SLIDE LIBRARY S00232 which shows an installation in public space by Guerilla Girls, the subversive and feminist artist collective. Not only is this piece Riemer's sole work linked to female authorship, but this Guerilla Girls' installation is the only work created after the Millennium (2003). Seen from this standpoint, this work could be interpreted as a portent for the new era. But in its singularity, it can at best be viewed as an artistic commentary on the cultural sector's endeavour to achieve quotas for women and a gender balance, as well as to raise questions about the true extent to which these efforts have actually generated results.

Riemer makes use of familiarity with and the recognition value of his source materials in order to question his audience's viewing habits and prior knowledge. As a vivid illustration of this point, it is worth scrutinising MAGRITTE 1 La Trahison des images 1922 MADE IN U.S.A. U.S.PAT. NO.3, 013,354 3 MAR72H8 (2020) in which one can see a slide frame made from yellowed cardboard on a grey background. The positive film shows The Treachery of Images, a 1929 painting by the Belgian surrealist René Magritte. Alongside the iconic image of the pipe and the inscription underneath bearing the words Ceci n'est pas une pipe, the artist's signature associated with the original work can be seen. In addition, a fold and another caption in tiny lettering: LA TRAHISON DES IMAGES can be discerned. Closer scrutiny thus reveals that this slide is in fact a reproduction of a reproduction. The motif was obviously photographed at an angle from a catalogue or a magazine and is thus cropped from the border of the image. The original of the slide was printed in grey tones, the film itself has a blue cast. The slide frame, conversely, reveals manual titling and a (false) date written with a blue ballpoint pen. Further markings were made in the form of pencil numbering and an upside-down abbreviation of red block letters and numerals. One can also observe on the lower edge an embossing containing information from the frame maker.

"This is not a pipe"– we have known that at least since Magritte's counsel. This, however, is also no longer a reproduction of a work of art. The original painting with its singular surface texture, its fine colour gradations and concise lighting design has been reproduced in the slide reduced to grey scales and, moreover, labelled with an incorrect year of origin. And nevertheless! Despite the oil painting's somewhat shadowy reproduction, despite its serious visual reduction due to a dearth of colour information, contrast range and further details from the original painting, the initial impulse to recognise the iconic original still reigns. Magritte's painting's mass dissemination has ensured this instant recognition; any possible discrepancies or doubts concerning the level realism in the depiction of the original image only emerge upon closer scrutiny. Any reflections about the paradoxical nature of the relationship between reality and image triggered by Magritte's Trahison des images [The Treachery of Images] is transferred in Riemer's Stills series to the prevailing discourse in photographic theory concerning referentiality, authenticity, and knowledge production.

The retrieved reproductions' image quality varies enormously within Riemer's series. With Hidden Noise, Marcel Duchamp's readymade from 1916 comprising a ball of twine pressed between brass plates, for example, is reproduced with relatively high image sharpness. Conversely, the slide of a detail of Roy Lichtenstein's painting on canvas Drowning Girl appears blurred. In other reproductions such as Caravaggio's Narcissus, dated between 1594 and 1596, or a detail from Albrecht Dürer's self-portait of 1493, pronounced printing dots are visible; these also originate from offset printing and partly interfere with the photographic film's grain. In some instances, the motifs are cropped at the image margins, while in other cases the colour reproduction is utterly flawed. Irrespective of how distorted a photograph might be, however, we instantly recognise and accept it as the image of an artwork known to us, before any doubts arise concerning deviations from the original. On the whole, nowadays there's no longer any need to compare it with the original. We can readily form an idea of what the original work actually looks like via an image search function on a smartphone, with the help of additional reproductions.

Seen in terms of an educational tool, this inadequate image quality has a particular significance. Older generations will still remember their professors at lectures explaining each individual slide during projections of the artworks. It was commonplace to photograph catalogue images and reproductions, especially in higher education, where illustrative materials were often required for lectures at short notice, or simply where resources for high-quality reproductions taken directly from the artworks were lacking. In 1975, Heinrich Dilly, in view of the inadequacies associated with a slide presentation of artworks, resorted to the drastic formulation: "slide projection as a prosthesis of art viewing"1. In addition to the challenges to teaching on account of this inadequate visual material, the limited availability of illustrations of artworks from outside of classical art history only further endorsed the pre-established canon.

Attention should also be paid to Riemer's shooting mode and formal decisions. His serial and typologising shooting mode, as well as the colossal form in which they are displayed in the exhibition space, evoke an aestheticisation of the objets trouvés. This aesthetic enhancement equally applies to their supposed defects, the dust, the fluff or the dirt. The found objects' authenticity thus equally becomes an overriding pictorial theme. The fact that Riemer's series central motif is not just the paintings, sculptures or prints, but also incorporates the found photographic documents per se, can be demonstrated in various ways. A first clue is the image alignment of the photographed templates. Many works depicted in the slides are upside down. In multi-part works, for example, one and the same slide is thus photographed in different positions and then displayed side by side comparatively, as can be observed in Andy Warhol's silkscreen print Campbell's Soup Cans. In addition to the aforementioned appropriation of past artistic approaches, Riemer equally refers to the original use of his photographic templates: these had to be inserted upside down into the projector. Furthermore, rotating the slide enables a shift in prioritisation: Hence, the labels can be read correctly when presented in a particular way, but Warhol's can of tomato soup lies sideways in between, given that the individual pictorial elements are not aligned in the same direction.

Another aspect that suggests Riemer's interest in the photographic object per se is the equivalence between the individual pictorial objects. This sense of equalisation is evoked both by the artist's lighting strategy and by the shooting process itself. The slides were photographed both from behind with back lighting and frontally with incident light. Moreover, the grey background allows one to determine that a special apparatus had been devised for the photograph, one on which the slide frames were mounted and fitted with recesses for light coming from the rear. This is the only conceivable way to perceive both the frame and the slide itself as evenly lit. Under normal circumstances, the frame is clearly visible in daylight with reflected light, whereas the film is darkened. Conversely, if the film is lit from behind – as for example with the help of a light box – the frame is in shadow. It is only through attentive analytical observation that one can see how Riemer's series is a hyper-realistic representation of the found objects, particularly considering that this form of image projection is no longer used on a daily basis.

As for the aforementioned equivalence between content and its associated hyperreality, Riemer's photographs also exhibit a remarkably extensive depth of field (DOF). Each and every focal plane – whether a speck of dust, a sticker, a slide frame, or film – can be seen in sharp focus. The grey background used in all the images contrasts with this attention to detail like a diffuse, indefinable space, lacking in sharpness. Sculpturally standing out from the background, the slides appear to hover. Image sharpness can only be technically attained with an additional highly elaborate process. For the photographs, a camera was used that can record images in the highest possible resolution. With the help of focus stacking, all image planes are individually captured in focus in series shots and subsequently reassembled into a single image with the assistance of digital image processing program. Given that the DOF range is extremely narrow for the macro shots required, only one image element could be in focus within a single image, resulting in the rest being blurred. Only through the use of focus stacking can each image plane be displayed with equal precision. Riemer's images are effectively a montage of dozens of high-resolution single shots with an immense file size.

In classical photography, the use of depth of field is a basic design tool. Pictorial objects can thus be sculpturally staged and highlighted. Thanks to Riemer's painstaking efforts, he has levelled out such a hierarchisation of pictorial objects, primarily through his shooting technique, his lighting of the original, and the slides' alignment in pictorial space. Each individual speck of dust, every fingerprint, every scuffed sticker is thus accorded the same relevance as the artwork reproduced on the slide. Seen from this perspective, the object in its entirety, with its individual historicity and the corresponding art historical narratives, is of interest. Furthermore, multiple enlargement renders visible any technical limitations: the texture of the previous imaging processes, so to speak, in the form of blurring or printing grids and grains of the film. This time-worn texture stands in direct contrast to the state-of-the-art photo technology, notably on the slide frames. Unlike his photographic models, Riemer's photographs display no visible pixels, no film grain, or superimposed grids. The small frames are reproduced in their sheer physical state, without the "curtain" of photographic texture, with each detail discernible.

The uniform frontal presentation of the slides in their untouched state equally suggests a sober and realistic reproduction of what Riemer has found. Akin to a slice-slice inventory, this focus stacking method is moreover reminiscent of diagnostic procedures deployed in medicine, such as magnetic resonance imaging. The appearance of a systematic and factual reproduction is also underpinned by the works' bulky titles. All inscriptions found on the slide frames —whether printed or handwritten, in capital or small letters, in pencil or ink—were simply replicated one-to-one. The artist's interventions (or more precisely the lack thereof in terms of dust removal) are as subtle as they are decisive. While displaying the utmost attention to detail, the suggested proximity to reality is over-moulded and transformed into a hyperreality. Viewed from this perspective, Riemer's works seem to be visual conundrums somewhere between scientific objectivity and artistic appropriation. While revisiting the repro-photography mode, these works could equally be regarded as "still lives" in the sense of a memento mori, as the title for Sebastian Riemer's series duly suggests: Stills.

Translation: John Barrett

1 Heinrich Dilly, Lichtbildprojektion – Prothese der Kunstbetrachtung, in: Below, Irene (Ed.), Kunstwissenschaft und Kunstvermittlung, Gießen 1975, p. 153–172.

STILLS

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