Blurry Ghosts: Luther Price and the Slide Projector

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A slide projector sits alone in the center of a room. It rests on an elevated stand, beaming a strange 35mm slide onto a white wall. A series of sprocket holes cross horizontally along the top edge of the frame: three sprockets at the top left and another two at the top right. In the center, a strip rips vertically down the frame, violently separating the left and right sections. However, there are two more sprocket holes at the bottom center of the frame. The central portion has been cut from the unified picture frame, flipped upside down, and pasted back together. There is a woman on the left side of the frame. As in familiar family photograph, she glances toward the camera with a tender smile. Her eyes are hidden beneath a pair of Jackie O sunglasses – no, a smudge from a brown marker. A series of vertical scratches stretch upward from her waist. These material markings emphasize the physicality the slide and point back to the slide projector, made ever present in the room by the mechanistic clicking of the shuffling slide carousel, the soft whir of its fan, and its beaming light. The projector’s heft balances the slide’s remarkable density. The two are in union. After eight seconds, the projector clicks, the fractured image vanishes and another appears.

However, the disappearing slide is not gone forever. Some ten minutes later, the same slide beams from the projector once more. When the slide reappears, other elements stand out: the abstract, blinding white light that fills the entire right side of the frame; the emanating light shines from the two top-right sprocket holes, bleeds into image below, and resembles the shape of an upturned figure; slight slivers of light bridge the slide’s three sections; the deep blue and
fading turquoise of the woman’s clothes are so similar to the environment surrounding her. If the marks and scratches emphasize the slide’s materiality, they do so by showing the physical destruction of the slide itself. The nostalgic return to the familiar family photograph takes on a haunted, shifting quality. The figure within the image, the physical slide, and the slide projector apparatus each confront their obsolescent condition. The histories, memories, and figures begin to fade yet take new shape through infinite reappearance.

This image is just one of Luther Price’s 35mm slides. Trained in sculpture, active in performance, and known primarily for his remarkable work as an experimental filmmaker working in 8mm and 16mm film, Price has turned his focus to the slide photographs over the last several years, crafting a prolific body of work that refines and extends his filmmaking concerns into the realm of moving image photography. In the isolated instance above, Price’s complex interplay between the still image and the moving projector, the image taken and the image remembered, is already apparent. The material for his slides include family photographs, discarded strips of film, dirt, glue, tape, and bleach. In this talk, I will briefly sketch the history of the slide projector’s incorporation within art historical writing, which has tended to overlook the technical device of the projector in the midst of its post-medium reinvention. Then, I will illustrate the ways Price’s contemporaneous return to the slide projector refocuses our attention on the histories and conventions of the slide projector itself, particularly the cyclical, repetitive temporality of slide images stored in the carousel, the slide’s status as a material object, and their intimate projection within a confined, domestic settings. Rather than essentializing the device, Price’s return to slide projector apparatus reveals an originary multiplicity within the domestic technology takes account of its expansion into disparate context. Relying on a strained return to ideas of home, Price’s work is fundamentally situated in the context of nostalgia. However, here nostalgia becomes an active force and a trans-historical tool for investigating representations of history and memory in the process of their precarious transposition. Recalling DW Winnicott’s
analysis of the psychoanalytic fear of breakdown this sense of nostalgia relies on looking for past details not yet experienced.¹ Nostalgia looks forward to that which has not happened. Considered in this way, Price’s work provides an intimate consideration and an alternative account of interpersonal technological mediation in the present moment.

Representative of the slide projector’s incorporation into artistic production is the work of artist James Coleman. [SLIDE PIECE; LIVING AND PRESUMED DEAD] Utilizing voice-over narration, music, and overlapping temporal structures within slide tapes advanced by the innovation of an optical dissolve mechanism, Coleman’s hybridized works pluralize the slide projector. Situated between theater, painting, photography, and cinema, Coleman’s work introduces artistic production to the slide projector by adding traditions and conventions of theatricality and pictoriality to what is seen as an empty, industrial technological support. This idea is most clear in Rosalind Krauss’s writing on Coleman, in which his work is used to identify and define the post-medium condition. She argues that the reinvention of a medium occurs at a moment when the medium in question enters the condition of the outmoded, that is, when a technical support passes from mass use to obsolescence. In the moment of obsolescence, a path is opened for the medium to enter into “a new relation to aesthetic production.”² This new relationship does not restore an earlier form. Rather, it develops “a medium as a set of conventions derived from (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support...”² Thus, in the case of Coleman, the slide projector turns away from its role as a technological support and is re-invented as a medium. Krauss goes so far as to explain that Coleman’s use of slides has “no aesthetic lineage and…is so singular as a support that to adopt it as a medium is immediately to put a kind of patent on it.”³ Though presumably driven by the material conditions and conventions of the technological support, the newly patented technological support is free to abscond its particular histories and conventions in order to

¹ See Eickoff’s “Modernity of an old concept”
regain a sense of the modern as it precariously fades into obsolescence.

In accounts of Coleman, the slide tape, its projected images, and the overlapping narratives all overwhelm the slide projector. Their experiential size and scale leaves no space to account for the projector’s longstanding, familiar role in the home, or, perhaps more pertinently for art history, its status as the fundamental mediator of encounters with works of art. Post-medium reinvention subsumes technological particularity and heterogeneity. The new, pluralized medium flattens its old, outmoded support. My point in this very brief account of a complicated history is not to reject any of these particular accounts, but rather to suggest that a material, media archaeological consideration of the slide projector itself opens onto similar questions and concerns, and also retains an investment in the very technological histories and conventions that Krauss calls for. Indeed, a close look at the technology reveals its heterogeneity and multiplicity in form and historical context. Rather than seek a reinvention of the outmoded, a return to the technological support through the lens of nostalgia allows for a deeper consideration of the histories and contexts of technological mediation and artistic media. In this way, nostalgic media can allow us to rethink not only contemporary relations between outmoded media forms and aesthetic production, but also the precarious mediated relationship between the personal and the technological over the passage of time as it is encountered through an encounter with outmoded technology AND phenomenologically experienced through contemporary art.

Luther Price’s incorporation of the slide projector insists on the device's past as a domestic technology. In many of his earliest slides, Price emphasizes displaced figures – often the lost figures of his own family history – trapped underneath layers of dust, debris, and other materials. Such images call back to the slide projector’s initial context within the home as the container and projector of family photographs. In this case, however, it appears as if the images have been rediscovered after being stored in a tray, lost for a period of time, and only recently found again. Forms of decay mark each domestic image. Expanding from Price’s filmmaking
practice, the question of domesticity operates concurrently with an investigation of the film medium. Through size and scale, in Price’s slides, the domestic past becomes intimately connected to photographic film practice.

In one remarkable image, a house is seen in the distance. Masked by a dark purple filter, a burnt speckled sunset lurks around the house. In the center of the frame, a set of film sprocket holes divides the image: the house to the right and a strange accumulation of shape, color, and texture imprinted on the clear celluloid to the left. The isolated domestic home is caught in a beautiful, dissolving nightmare. Another image shows a faded red courtyard that seems to dissolve into the crackly, dirty white background. Multiple slides include the presence of film sprocket holes in otherwise dark and abstract patterns. Others include lopsided film strips from Price’s filmmaking career. The wide variety of images reflects an impulse toward documenting that is seemingly fixed yet is always changing through distortion over time. Each image appears in the process of being stripped of its content, and yet the slide projector’s clicking carousel insists at the same time of their precarious return. What remains are fading memories, marked by traces of erasure, and, in this process, the reassertion of the photographic slide as a material object.

Price’s negotiation with the slides as decaying bodies, as moving sculptural objects, progresses as he shifts from representational slides into the more abstract images of the recent Light Fracture series. In these abstract slides, Price’s process is entirely reductive. He claims there is no material added to these images, unlike in his re-photographed films, in which photographs are seen under water, or his Inkblot series, in which he paints directly onto found footage. Instead, he uses combination of Pho with bleach, salt, lime and lemon juice, reducing the slide to its barest elements, modifying the slide into an array of abstract patterns. The bodies and figures seen in his earlier slides are reconfigured as swirls of nearly blinding color. The fixed moment in time captured by the photographic slide transforms into a series of indecipherable
movements, as if the photographic shutter had never closed, recording instead the perpetual motion of bodies and spaces inhabiting time.

Just as important as the individual slides is the material technology of the slide projector. We have already seen how the slide projector’s carousel indicates a sense of repetition and nostalgic return, an indication of ongoing decay through infinite reappearance. However, the exhibition of the slides foregrounds the role of the projector as an intimate viewing machine. In galleries, the projector is almost always set at shoulder height, allowing space below the projector for viewers to gather, sit, and watch the slide show. The slide are projected on a relatively small scale, positioning them not as an art historian’s tool but rather a domestic one. In some exhibition spaces, the slides may be difficult to see given the time of day. The environment is not always controlled. Light may shine in from outside windows, blinding the projector’s light as it precariously beams the images onto the wall. Viewers may stand behind, beside, or in front of the slide projector, cutting off its potential for display. These qualities, most apparent in gallery installation, bring the projector back to its domestic past while simultaneously situating it within an institutional and art historical context. If the slide images indicate Price’s merging of the domestic and the cinematic, their installation reveals a similar interplay between the domestic and the artistic. Returning to the slide projector as a domestic tool, Price finds the technology accumulating and combining its adopted forces, recalling Freud’s consideration of artists in which he states “The ‘creative’ imagination is quite incapable of inventing anything; it can only combine components that are strange to one another.”

For Price, such a combination does not eliminate technological, historical, or phenomenological specificity, but rather allows those combined elements to individually stand out all the while accumulating into alternative forms. His merger of the domestic and cinematic, and the domestic and artistic, continues to extend across his engagement with slides. In particular, Price has situated the slides as a fundamental art historical tool for historical and
stylistic comparison most directly within the context of cinematic space. At the 2013 New York Film Festival, Price set up a side-by-side projection of this new series of slides. Recreating an art historians slide lecture gone wrong, the abstract slides cycled through each projector at a different rate of speed. What began as slide comparison turned into a rapid transformation of moving images. With the projectors out of synch, it became nearly impossible to view the images with any specific detail. They accumulated, one bouncing off the next, with the viewers eyes forces to slingshot back and forth. The automaticity of the slide projector itself became an active force pushing the slides forward at will with little regard for their actual viewing. The comfort and ease of the domestic technology transfigured in the cinema into rapidly moving images. Conflating the domestic setting with the cinema and simultaneously positioning the slides within the framework of an art historian’s slide exam, Price’s Light Fractures left a sense of temporal, spatial, and contextual chaos made manifest by the multiplied slide projector. This is precisely the condition he finds both the images and technologies from the past. They remain open to changes over time, which have the ability to alter the experience of what came before.

Georges Didi-Huberman writes, “If you want to photograph a moving object…you can and even must make a choice: you can shoot a single moment, even a series of moments, or you can leave the shutter open through the whole movement. In once case you will obtain crisply defined images of the object and a skeleton of the movement (a form absolutely empty and disembodied, an abstraction); in the other you will obtain a tangible curve of the movement but a blurry ghost of the object (in its turn “abstract”).” Throughout his slide work, Price instigates this motion not between figuration and abstraction, but different modes of deferred temporality contained within each image and within the slide projector’s specific histories and contexts. These overlapping periods represent nostalgia as a form of breakdown that takes account of the moment of lived experience, the formation of memory, and the contemporary moment of a new interpretation – moments, following Jeffrey Skoller, of evocation rather than representation.
Through his slides, Price opens multiple periods of time to a critical practice, investigating his own blurry ghosts – the blurry ghosts of his past and the blurry ghosts of technology. The slides are not just a marker of a moment in time, but a reflective moment that develops with Price and the viewer in time. Infinitely rotating the slides and the slide projector back and forth between multiple forms from multiple time periods, Price initiates the perception of nostalgia – nostalgia as a mode of critical, deferred perception – through the encounter with precarious, outmoded objects and domestic technologies. The home, its technologies, and its inhabitants are the precarious moving images that remain tangibly open to the curves of time. Their negotiation of the domestic technology between the home and the gallery, the home and the cinema, the cinema and the gallery, suggests Didi-Huberman’s “blurry ghost of the object” is simultaneously the moving object of technology and the technology itself: moving across time, history, and tradition, and gathering modification along the way. The clicking carousel of the slide projector enables not only moving images, but a moving technology – sliding across time, gathering and accumulating a precarious nostalgia all the while uncovering the distorted traces of its various formulations and opening onto a continually deferred outside that awaits a future encounter through the nostalgic past not yet experienced.

2 Ibid.