Breaking the mould

AT THE Large Hadron Collider near Geneva, Switzerland, physicists are used to looking for signs of particle decay in the detectors. But as they were digitising archival photos of particle collisions, Matteo Volpi and Jean-Yves LeMeur came across a different kind of decay: mould.

For 30 years, this slide was exposed to a mould that marched across the image, eating through the protein in the gelatin-based emulsion. The resulting chemical reactions left a chaotic swirl of colours and textures reminiscent of an abstract painting. To save the corroded image as it is now, Volpi and LeMeur shone a light through the slide and then photographed the projection.

Volpi is a photographer himself, and has tried to recreate the effect. "I've tried burning and freezing, and I use yeast and beer to create mould. It makes a nice effect, but I can't reproduce these colours and textures. I don't have 30 years to wait, like this mould did."

The slide was unearthed in a dusty desk drawer in a corridor of the experimental physics department at CERN. Like its better-preserved companion slide below, it showed a simulation of an electron-positron collision at DELPHI, one of four detectors at the LHC's predecessor, the Large Electron-Positron Collider. The blue horizontal lines represent the beams of particles that meet head on in the detector's cylindrical cavity, and the spray of arcs extending from the middle track the particles born in the smash-up. Chelsea Whyte

Photographer
Volmeur © 2017 CERN