Image Commodification and Image Recycling: Penelope Umbrico's Suns Sunsets from Flickr

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Image Commodification and Image Recycling:

Penelope Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*

Submitted to
the Faculty of the Division of the Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Humanities and Liberal Arts

by

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Respectfully submitted to you all,

Minjung “Minny” Lee
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INTRODUCTION

From its inception, photography has increasingly enjoyed societal acceptance that has only accelerated with advancements in technology. Photography is the rare medium that is widely used and consumed by both artists and the public. Since the introduction of digital photography in the 1990s, analogue photographers have lamented the ontology of traditional photography and the resultant demise of film supplies and film processing labs. Nonetheless, digital technology has enhanced the permeation of photography deeper and wider into the fabric of society more than any other technological development.\(^1\) A digital device with a camera function, such as a smart phone or a tablet computer, together with an Internet connection enables one to create, upload, distribute, and consume an image in a matter of a few seconds.\(^2\) Photographs are ensconced within a spectrum, from print media to online media, from personal space to the public sphere. It is from such an image-driven world that New York-based artist Penelope Umbrico (b.1957) draws inspiration for her work.

For the last twenty years, Umbrico has worked on the concepts of consumerism and the role of images in consumer markets, first deriving sources from print media and then from the Internet.\(^3\) In 2006, Umbrico shifted her source material from online home décor websites to Flickr, a photo sharing and social media website where she could find online

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\(^2\) Cooper Smith, “Facebook Users Are Uploading 350 Million New Photos Each Day,” *Business Insider*, September 18, 2013, accessed January 11, 2014, [http://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-350-million-photos-each-day-2013-9](http://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-350-million-photos-each-day-2013-9). The capabilities and ease of use of digital devices enabled social media websites to experience a dramatic increase in photo uploads. Although Facebook was not intended to be a photo sharing website, it now hosts the highest number of images online with the startling 350 million image uploads per day and this is just for one social media website.
\(^3\) Print media includes mail-order catalogues, newspaper inserts, and brochures. Internet source includes Flickr ([https://www.flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com)), Craigslist ([http://www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org)) and eBay ([http://www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com)). Umbrico started using online images from 2001.
vernacular photographs. Social media has become an important communication tool and platform for both individuals and corporations alike, due to its instant connectivity that enables sharing and exchange throughout the world. It reflects the lifestyle of contemporary society, which explains why so many artists are drawn to and use it to make social commentaries. This thesis will discuss Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* (2006-ongoing) (fig. 1) proffering the premise that Umbrico was one of the pioneer artists who appropriated images from one of these platforms. Umbrico evolved into an appropriation artist, social commentator and a photographer who did not take her own photos. Flickr, the first website that cultivated a global online photo-centered community evolved into the premier locale where the uploading and viewing of online vernacular photographs exploded due to the combining two emerging forces—social media and digital photography.

*Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* embodies Umbrico’s shift of focus to the most consumed commodity in the 21st century—photography. Through *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, Umbrico criticizes society’s incessant production of homogeneous-looking sunset

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4 Flickr: [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com). I define vernacular photographs as everyday images made by ordinary people. Nowadays many websites utilize the model of social media where people can comment, follow, share, and real time posting is common. Flickr started as more of a photo sharing website but it emphasized the community aspect and group discussions so it had social media components from the beginning.

5 For the individual, social media is useful for self-promotion and communication. For corporations, social media provides platforms for advertising their products to potential customers and gathering market information about their tendencies although website’s gathering of such information via “cookies” has been deemed an invasion of privacy to the point where the “block cookies” option is offered on all Internet – related hardware such as laptop computers, desktop computers, smart phones and tablets.


7 Both Flickr and Facebook were founded in 2004. Umbrico started appropriating images from Flickr in 2005.
photographs. Umbrico’s work asks important questions: what role does image-making play and what is the role of the image-maker in this overwhelmingly image-saturated world? Using easily available online vernacular photographs on Flickr, Umbrico takes the role of social commentator, recycling images rather than producing images—an act that contributes to visual ecology in a contemporary society that voraciously engages in energy consumption through the use of technology and information.\textsuperscript{8}

With the advancement of digital technology in the 1990s and the explosion in popularity of social media websites beginning from 2004, image making and image sharing have become daily activities amongst the general populace. As a result, images became commodities to the point that they could even be regarded as necessities. With camera phone and Internet connection in hand, citizen journalists began usurping the jobs of veteran photojournalists since the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century, blurring the line between the professional and amateur.\textsuperscript{9} Anyone who happened to be on the scene and captured and sent an image to media outlets could get published on the front page of a newspaper. Bloggers with a large following can be regarded as important journalists or even movers of society. Social media websites with millions of users presented a new vehicle through which power and influence in society could be exerted. Many such websites host millions of image uploads per day.\textsuperscript{10} In such an environment, professional photographers are required to adapt to the new technology to remain relevant in the industry. Constant updates are essential, but with fast changing digital

\textsuperscript{8} Visual ecology is a term used by Joan Fontcuberta, a renowned Spanish photographer. The term refers to the activity of artists appropriating found photographs instead of making new photographs. This recycling of images actually helps the environment, as it does not take up any new server space. A detailed discussion of visual ecology is provided in chapter two.

\textsuperscript{9} Professional photographers are those who make living from their photography.

interfaces, it is not an easy task. Many professional photographers use social media websites as a way to promote their photographs and to connect with the general public. Fine art photography has experienced a change as well; images made by smart phones are now routinely being published and exhibited.\footnote{Damon Winter, a staff photographer for the New York Times won a prestigious photojournalism award in 2009 for the work he made in Afghanistan with an iPhone using the Hipstamatic application (app). There were heated debates online due to the nature of photojournalism and heavy photo enhancement by Hipstamatic. Winter responded to this on Lens Blog. New York Times Lens Blog. accessed March 31, 2014, http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/11/through-my-eye-not-hipstamatics/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0. Nowadays, it is common for photojournalists to use an iPhone to make pictures. Benjamin Lowy is another photojournalist who has been actively utilizing iPhone photography. In October 2013, Aperture hosted an annual benefit gala with photographs printed from Instagram, curated by Katy Ryan (editor of New York Times Magazine). They were auctioned as editions 1 of 1 and the auction price ranged from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars.}

On the other hand, photographers such as Umbrico, stopped making images of their own and turned to recycling existing images. Due to the wide and easy availability of online vernacular photographs, many photographers utilize the Internet as an archive and make use of the online images. Although there have been artists who appropriated online photographs before Umbrico, she was the first one to appropriate images from social media websites.\footnote{Thomas Ruff and Joan Fontcuberta are two examples. Thomas Ruff published a monograph JPEGS with Aperture in 2009, culminating online JPEG images from 2001 to 2007. He blew up JPEGs to a much larger scale to emphasize pixelated digital images in low quality. Joan Fontcuberta made Googlegrams (2005) with images searched through Google website. Fontcuberta used the photo mosaic technique to make an image with a large number of smaller images that are put together by the software’s color evaluations. Googlegrams was exhibited at Zabriskie Gallery from January 31 to March 11, 2006.}

Some of her contemporaries utilized social media websites, such as Erik Kessels and Joachim Schmid who started using Flickr images after Umbrico did.\footnote{For example, Joachim Schmid started working with Flickr images from 2008 and Erik Kessels had an exhibition with Flickr images in 2011. A more detailed discussion is provided in chapter three.} While many artists present appropriation of online images in book form—taking the role of editor and archivist—Umbrico goes beyond this; she takes small fragments from her source images and transforms...
them from low art (low resolution digital image files) to high art and exhibits the final product as her own at galleries and museums around the world.\footnote{With a limited edition system, Umbrico’s works sell within a comparatively high price bracket, except for her \textit{TVs from Craigslist} (2008-2009), where she set two price ranges: gallery prices and ironically enough, Craigslist prices. Umbrico also makes artist books for many of her projects but their purpose is to compliment her exhibitions.}

The practice of artists appropriating photographs dates back to the 1920s with Dada and the Surrealist movement, and became popular again in the 1960s with the work of Andy Warhol and conceptual artists. In 1977, Douglas Crimp organized an exhibition called “Pictures” at Artists Space in New York City, including artists’ works that were not confined to any medium.\footnote{“Pictures” exhibition was held from September 24 to October 29, 1977.} Free from traditional curatorial categorical restrictions, these artists made use of a variety of mediums such as painting, photography, film, performance and sculpture. Artists included in the exhibition were Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith, later referred to as the “Pictures Generation.”\footnote{More artists were added to that category later on. In \textit{Pictures} (1979) essay, Crimp stated the meaning of the word ‘pictures’ as recognizable images but also the ambiguities it sustains. Crimp said drawing, painting, photography can all be called pictures but he suggested that the picture in a verb form could refer to “a mental process as well as the production of an aesthetic object.” Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” \textit{October} 8 (1979): 75. The Metropolitan Museum of Art organized the exhibition, “The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984” (April 21-August 2, 2009) with 160 works by thirty artists. Featured artists were John Baldessari, Ericka Beckman, Dara Birnbaum, Barbara Bloom, Eric Bogosian, Glenn Branca, Troy Brauntuch, James Casebere, Sarah Charlesworth, Rhys Chatham, Charles Clough, Nancy Dwyer, Jack Goldstein, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Thomas Lawson, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Allan McCollum, Paul McMahon, MICA-TV (Carole Ann Klonarides & Michael Owen), Matt Mullican, Richard Prince, David Salle, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Michael Smith, James Welling, and Michael Zwack. Pictures Generation artists are also referred to as appropriation artists of the 1980s since many of them, such as Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, and Richard Price, appropriated photographs. These artists question originality in art and also commented on social issues, such as feminism and consumerism.} From Dada to the Pictures Generation, print media such as newspapers and magazines served as source materials for appropriation artists to make social commentaries as these media carried timely news and articles about society. As print media declined due to the rise of online media, artists of the 1990s also turned their attention to the Internet for inspiration.
Art historically, Umbrico comes after the Pictures Generation and before the digital evolution in photography. She obtained her higher education during the time the Pictures Generation artists were on the scene.\textsuperscript{17} In the fledgling years of her career, Umbrico appropriated print media, such as mail-order catalogues and newspaper inserts.\textsuperscript{18} This type of work is reminiscent of the Pictures Generation artists’ using mass media photographs to present a critique of society’s consumerism and mass culture. Umbrico then transitioned to digital images. Her works with digital images comprise two formats: scanning from print media and downloading online images. Umbrico’s first project using online images is *Arrhythmia (All the Dishes on EBAY-10/28/01) (2002-03)* (fig. 2), a compilation of all the dishes for sale on eBay on October 28, 2001. On her website, Umbrico created an animation with all the dish images flashing (appearing and disappearing) in under one second intervals, perhaps mimicking the impulsive buying and selling habits of consumers.\textsuperscript{19} In 2006, Umbrico started two major projects using online images: *Views from the Internet (2003-2009)* (fig. 3) and *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* (2006-ongoing). Both projects focus on nature as a main element. *Views from the Internet* is a collection of image cutouts from home décor and home-improvement websites. Umbrico is commenting on how nature is utilized as an invitation to retreat and escape in selling home décor products.\textsuperscript{20}

Umbrico is a substantive and compelling example of an artist responding to a change of technology and shift of paradigm: from analogue photography to digital photography and from print media to online social media websites that showcase 21st century digital

\textsuperscript{17} Umbrico got a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Ontario College of Art in Toronto, Canada in 1980 and Master of Fine Arts from School of Visual Arts in New York in 1989.

\textsuperscript{18} Examples are Umbrico’s *From Catalogues* (1998), *Viral Fields/Seasonal (Catalog Jewelry Arrangements)* (1998-2000), and *Doors (From Catalogs)* (2001-2002).

\textsuperscript{19} Visitors to Umbrico’s website can view the animation. Penelope Umbrico’s website, accessed April 1, 2014, http://penelopeumbrico.net/arrhythmia/Arrhythmia.html.

vernacular photographs. More than any other artistic medium, photography’s developmental history is directly correlated to the introduction of new technology for each period. From paper positive to glass negative, albumin print to gelatin silver print, 8x10 large format camera to 35mm small format camera, black and white negative to color negative, and analogue photography to digital photography, technological developments influence and embody the photographic tools of the time, thereby effecting the resulting photographic outcome. Needless to say, photographers who responded to, embraced, and adapted changing technology in their early stages became the pioneers of their time.

Umbrico presents *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* in the form of a grid with thousands of pictures of the sun tightly cropped and printed on four-by-six-inch consumer photo paper. Visually, the grid looks decorative and playful, yet it intends a social commentary message about societal values and provokes responses that transcend its vibrant colors and mesmerizing scale.\(^{21}\) Indeed, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* tackles many facets of visual culture of our time and asks important questions for both photographers and the general public. Umbrico’s work aims to compel us to look anew at the images we make, share and distribute on the Internet and to reconsider the role and meaning of images in this image-saturated world.

Because Umbrico is a contemporary artist, publications of her work in the academic field are sparse, despite the fact that she has been widely exhibited and collected in institutions throughout the world.\(^{22}\) Umbrico’s bibliography includes many short articles, most being exhibition reviews. Umbrico’s first major publication, *Penelope Umbrico*

\(^{21}\) The size of the grid depends on the size of the exhibition wall. At the New York Photo Festival in 2008, the grid was 44 feet long.

\(^{22}\) In the USA, Umbrico’s works are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among other prestigious venues.
(Photographs), published in 2011 by Aperture, was intended to be an artist book, and includes an artist statement and short interviews about each series. While the work is a well-executed artist book for a broader audience, Penelope Umbrico (Photographs) does not discuss Umbrico’s fruitful career from both art historical and critical perspectives. Sheryl Conkelton’s catalogue essay for Out of Place: Mirrors and Doors From Catalogs (2001) provides greater insight and comparative analysis of Umbrico’s pre-Internet works: The Ends of Things (1993-1997) (fig. 4), Doors (From Catalogs) (2001-2002) (fig. 5), and Mirrors (From Catalog) (2001-2007) (fig. 6). Conkelton compares Umbrico’s early works to that of Surrealists defamiliarizing ordinary objects through close-ups, distortions of focus and manipulations. She asserts that Umbrico’s work differs from those of Surrealists by creating “instability in perception” as her photographic objects “oscillate between depiction and perception, and destabilize the position of the viewer.” Conkelton is convincing in characterizing Umbrico’s works. Her works are not mere representations of subjects; they act as a signifier that requires the viewer’s further investigation in order to understand her intentions. In Ends of Things, Umbrico’s utilization of abstract shapes in colorful backgrounds, results in a final work that has no correlation to an identifiable subject matter. Umbrico toys with the camera’s trusted lens, creating an unreliable optic, twisting the assumption of fidelity imposed on photography as a representation of reality.

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23 Lesley Martin said this during a studio visit to Penelope Umbrico on October 26, 2013. I define artist book as an artist-made book with custom details and conceptual execution as opposed to more standardized format of photo books and monographs. Umbrico’s monograph: Penelope Umbrico, Penelope Umbrico (Photographs) (New York: Aperture, 2011).

24 Sheryl Conkelton, catalogue essay for Out of Place: Mirrors and Doors from Catalogues, December 2001. The catalogue essay was to accompany Umbrico’s solo exhibition at Julie Saul Gallery in New York in 2002. Doors (From Catalogs) and Mirrors (From Catalog) will be discussed in chapter one.

25 Conkelton, catalogue essay. There is no page number and this appears on the forth page.

Conkelton’s essay provides an important analysis of Umbrico’s works, it is limited to works made before 2002.

Lyle Rexer addresses Umbrico’s work in his book, *The Edge of Vision*. The article provides a short analysis of a few of Umbrico’s works up to 2009. Rexer asserts that Umbrico selects images according to persistent visual themes (sunsets, TVs, advertising products) and she exhibits them emphasizing repetitiveness and ubiquity. In Umbrico’s works, repetition is an important aspect. For *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, Rexer proffers that “The sheer volume of imagery underscores what is surely the most powerful element of her work: desire.” He focuses on her preoccupation with the desire to own and here it is the sun. The book focuses primarily on the notion of abstraction in contemporary photography, and thus, does not discuss Umbrico’s work in depth. In another text, Rexer discusses Umbrico’s appropriation of online photographs including *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*. Rexer declares that Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* is not the classical sublime. Instead, he calls it “Disneyworld sublime” or the “second-hand sublime.” He is making a reference to Jean Baudrillard’s simulacrum where Disneyland is referred to as “a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation.” Rexer views the countless pictures of

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28 Rexer mainly discussed *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* and featured several other Umbrico projects, such as *Ends of Things* and *For Sale/TVs From Craigslist*.


31 Rexer, essay for artist portfolio.

sunsets as “the wholesale consumption of nature through the camera” and “a form of mass hysteria.” This is true when looking at the rapidly increasing number of sunset pictures on Flickr alone.\textsuperscript{33}

Overall, there is a lacuna of literature about Umbrico’s appropriation of online photographs and the importance of archives in the creation of her work in the digital age. This thesis further develops the formal analysis commenced by Conkelton and Rexer by adding visual analysis and focusing on Umbrico’s use of the grid and Internet archive. Books and articles on media theory are referenced to highlight characteristics of digital images. Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media* and his article “The Database” are used to enhance an understanding of digital data.\textsuperscript{34} Martin Lister’s *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* is an invaluable resource for understanding digital photography.\textsuperscript{35} José Van Dijck’s *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* is useful to understand various social media websites’ histories and functions, including that of Flickr.\textsuperscript{36} As a primary resource, in-person interviews with the artist have been conducted, which provided new source material that were not included in Umbrico’s monograph.\textsuperscript{37}

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\textsuperscript{33} Umbrico’s own Flickr search result indicates that there were 2,303,057 sunset pictures on September 25, 2007 and 8,730,221 sunset pictures on February 20, 2011. These figures indicate more than a six million increase in fewer than four years. The number of sunsets on the day Umbrico starts to assemble the grid is referenced in her titles for the *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* series.


\textsuperscript{37} Penelope Umbrico, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, December 18, 2013.
While there is extensive literature on the earlier generation of artists who used photographs from print sources, only a handful of essays exist on artists using online photographs, even though the interest in utilizing online found photographs and vernacular photography is on the rise.\(^\text{38}\) Thus, this thesis contributes to the field of art history by adding critical analysis of Umbrico as a forerunner of artists appropriating online photographs from social media and contextualizing her work within the history of photography. This thesis contributes to and compliments existing literature by comparing Umbrico’s use of online photographs to 1980s appropriation artists.

Chapter one discusses the background and details of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* and the Flickr website. Umbrico’s working method and her choice in each step of developing and presenting *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* is detailed, followed by a discussion of Umbrico’s aesthetic choice of snapshot and amateur photography and how she transforms common materials into high art. Umbrico is a contemporary photographer who makes social commentaries by not making her own photographs. Chapter one argues that Umbrico is a

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\(^\text{38}\) Here, the earlier generation of artists is referred to as the “Pictures Generation” artists. Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman, just to name a few, all have enjoyed lengthy bibliographies. There have been two major exhibitions and accompanying catalog essays on artists using found photographs: Douglas Fogle’s *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003) and Douglas Eklund’s *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009). Since artists started using online photographs only recently (within the last decade), there are very few essays on appropriation of online photographs. One of more relevant publications is Joachim Schmid: *Photoworks 1982-2007* (Photoworks/Tang/Steidl, 2007) but most essays discuss Schmid’s work in the vein of archiving and editing vernacular visions rather than discussing his use of online images. Galleries and museums have begun exhibiting appropriation work using found photos more and more. Lesley Martin, publisher of Aperture, curated a group show “The Ubiquitous Image” as a part of New York Photo Festival (May 14-18, 2008), which showcased nine artists who manipulated found photographs including Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*. International Center of Photography (ICP)’s “A Different Kind of Order: ICP Triennial” (May 17-September 22, 2013) included Roy Arden’s “The World as Will and Representation – Archive 2007,” which consists of 28,144 found photos that runs for 1 hour 36 minute-slideshow. A notable exhibition that dealt with appropriation of online photographs is “From Here On” at the Rencontres d’Arles photo festival in Arles, France (July 4-September 18, 2011), curated by Clément Chéroux, Joan Fontcuberta, Erik Kessels, Martin Parr and Joachim Schmid. An exhibition catalogue was published in a newspaper format but it only featured one-page scholarly text by Clément Chéroux on “digital appropriationism.”
pioneer of appropriating online photographs from social media whose approach and concepts are purposefully intertwined.

Chapter two analyzes how Umbrico’s appropriation differs from 1980s appropriation. By discussing digital photography in depth, we see Umbrico’s methodology of collecting, preparing and archiving images is inherently different due to developments in available technology such as JPEG. This chapter addresses society’s instant relationship to digital photographs and their ephemeral character. The Internet as an archive and the role of photography in experiencing art is also addressed. Chapter two explores the use and purported abuse of images in the digital era and how that affects our living condition. The rationale espoused by artists such as Umbrico to use found photographs as a contribution to visual ecology is examined in the context of social mores and responsibility.

Chapter three discusses Umbrico’s use of the grid and contextualizes it within the history of photography. Umbrico has been utilizing the grid since the beginning of her career and Suns from Sunsets from Flickr marks her first massive use of the grid. Extensive discussion on authorship enhances an understanding of the legal concept of fair use and permissible appropriation. Derivative projects of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr are discussed in order to provide a fuller understanding of Umbrico’s work relating to the subject of the sun. There is no literature that discusses all of these projects together comprehensively, thus it adds to existing literature as a new source. This chapter also compares Umbrico’s use of Flickr images to that of Joachim Schmid and Erik Kessels, her contemporaries who subsequently used Flickr images. By doing so, insight that is often left out when discussing

Umbrico’s work is provided. These three chapters are followed by a brief conclusion, which connects the issues and arguments of this thesis, including the changing paradigm in photography, the interchangeable role between the image producer and image consumer, social media’s role in enabling access to vernacular photography, and the commodification of images.
CHAPTER 1. Umbrico’s Transformation of Vernacular Visions Found on Flickr

Standing in front of Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, one comes across a mesmerizing number of sunsets. Unlike the actual sun that powerfully radiates from faraway, Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* is a grid comprised of thousands of suns acting as visual simulacra of our one and only sun. Umbrico downloaded more than 2,500 images, selected from millions of sunset photographs on Flickr, and cropped them to show the orb of the sun. Each sun in the *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* series represents an individual eye for photographing the sunset; when thousands of them are joined together, they represent society’s collective act of photographing the sunset. *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* marks an important turning point for Umbrico’s work; it was the first time she appropriated online vernacular photographs. Before then, Umbrico appropriated commercial product photographs. The Internet enables one to easily find and download someone else’s personal photographs and Umbrico is one of the earliest examples of an artist who partook in such appropriation. This chapter provides an overview of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* and the Flickr website and discusses related issues.

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*Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* and the Flickr Website

Although Umbrico had previously and frequently stated that *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* began in 2006, recent email correspondence with her revealed that she actually started

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40 The number of images (2,500) was conveyed to the author via email on April 3, 2014. The project is still ongoing and this number indicates her activity on *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* from 2006 to 2013.

41 Geoffrey Batchen, “Vernacular Photographs,” in *Each Wild Idea* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), 57. Geoffrey Batchen defined vernacular photography as “ordinary photographs, the ones made or bought (or sometimes bought and then made over) by everyday folk from 1839 until now, the photographs that preoccupy the home and the heart but rarely the museum or the academy.” Umbrico started appropriating online photographs more frequently in 2003, downloading images from home décor websites. As social media websites gained popularity around the globe, Umbrico turned to Flickr as it is a photo sharing website with search capability.
downloading sunset images in October 2005. By then—twenty months after launching the website, Flickr enjoyed great success with rapidly increasing photo uploading and sharing amongst the general public.\textsuperscript{42} Umbrico was curious to ascertain what the most photographed subject matter was in this web-based world and society. Flickr’s early adaptation of a tagging system—embedding keywords—enabled her to determine this easily. Umbrico manually searched commonly photographed subject matters, such as babies, dogs, cats, etc. Her resultant social commentaries on society’s use of images gained further momentum when she found that the word “sunset” yielded the most results.\textsuperscript{43} Umbrico started downloading sunset photographs, cropping the sun, uploading her edited version to the Kodak EasyShare website, and getting digital color prints delivered to her house. The index print with thumbnails (fig. 7) sent by Kodak shows that her first order was processed on October 30, 2005. It was not until January 2006 that Umbrico started putting prints together on her studio wall; that became her first installation. Umbrico entitled it \textit{541,795 Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial) 01/23/06}, which indicates the number of “sunset” tagged photographs on Flickr that day.\textsuperscript{44} Stephen An image becomes searchable when the user tags the image. Tagging is assigning related words for each photo and tagged words are embedded into an image. Flickr gives

\textsuperscript{42} Flickr was launched in February 2004, the same month Facebook was launched. There is no public disclosure by Flickr about statistics of uploaded images by year. One Flickr user (Franck Michel) ran data statistics using Flickr API and made a chart showing how many photos are uploaded to Flickr. His chart indicates that there were about 7 million uploaded photographs on Flickr in October 2005. This number includes only public photos (photos that are visible to the public by user setting). Franck Michel, “How many public photos are uploaded to Flickr every day, month, year?,” accessed April 4, 2014, \url{https://www.flickr.com/photos/franckmichel/6855169886/}.

\textsuperscript{43} Her conclusion that the sunset was the most photographed subject matter was her own, not verified by any research group. Umbrico commented that not all photos are tagged and not all photos are open for the public to see. Therefore, her findings are confined to tagged images only and the sunset was the most tagged word at the time of her research in 2005.

\textsuperscript{44} Penelope Umbrico, email message to author, April 3, 2014. The number of sunset images on Flickr has consistently increased ever since, numbering as high as 11,569,254 on November 2, 2012. Penelope Umbrico, “Documentary Practice… of Sorts,” \textit{Afterimage} 41, no. 1 (July/August 2013): 26.
their users an option to make an image either public or private. Only public images would be visible on a public search. Tagging enables one to organize a massive number of uploaded images online and to relocate them later, quickly and easily. Some photo editors and curators use Flickr as a resource to find photographers, and this is one venue that can be utilized by Flickr users to gain exposure.45 Umbrico cites her reasons for using Flickr as:

In 2006 I was researching the most photographed subject in the world, so I went to Flickr because it’s a cross-generational, noncommercial, nonprofessional, global photo-sharing platform. And useful to me is that people are tagging their photographs based on what they think the subjects of their photographs are. In some way, my dependency on this tagging to find images could be thought as collaborating with these Flickr users.46

For Umbrico, it is important to derive images from a website that is used by the general public, worldwide, to gather images made by a diverse and international group of people. These kinds of amateur photographers are not necessarily inferior to professional photographers in terms of technical and artistic merits. They create images for their enjoyment as opposed to professional photographers whose purpose is to make a living from photography. Amateur photographers have always existed since the beginning of photography, especially after the introduction of Kodak cameras in 1888, but their photographs remained in individual homes.47 In contrast, with the Internet today, images

45 Recently, a success story on Flickr Blog appeared. After graduating from a College in Canada, Joel Robison was inspired to make his own pictures after seeing some creative photographs on Flickr. Using Photoshop, Robison began making imaginative images and posting them on Flickr. Coca Cola contacted him to use one of his images and later asked him to become a moderator for Coca Cola’s Flickr page. Eventually, Robison got a job as a photographer and the voice of social media for FIFA World Cup Trophy Tour, sponsored by Coca Cola. Robison’s story was possible because of Flickr’s network capability. The story on Flickr Blog, assessed March 18, 2014, http://blog.flickr.net/en/2014/01/17/imaginative-photographer-lands-world-tour-job-at-coke.


created by general public are all over social media networks. The role of the Internet in image dissemination is revolutionary and Umbrico not only appreciates but takes advantage of this phenomenon as evidenced by her projects utilizing online vernacular photographs.

Susan Murray observed Flickr’s success is the result of showcasing vernacular photographs: “When I first began researching the practice of photography in 2005, what stood out to me the most was the site’s engagement with the mundane and yet often fanciful imagery resulting from the careful attention and framing of daily moments in a person’s life.”

Unless the user goes out of her way to set a photo to be private, photos are publicly accessible. By utilizing the screen grab function, one can wrest even locked images that are supposed to prevent download capability. The boundary for privacy on the Internet is indefinable. Putting something on the Internet is tantamount to offering the content for public consumption, which makes the Internet a public domain. Umbrico does not seek out

loaded 100-exposure film, the camera was sent to Kodak in Rochester for processing film, making prints, and reloading with a new film. The recent increased interest in vernacular photography is embodied in snapshot photography and amateur photography. There are several exhibitions that are accompanied by exhibition catalogues that should be noted. Mia Fineman and Thomas Walther, Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000). The exhibition was at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts (June 6-August 27, 2000). Sarah Greenough et al, The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978 (New York: Princeton University Press, 2007). Photographs were culled from the collection of Robert E. Jackson. The exhibition was at the National Gallery of Art, Washington (October 7-December 31, 2007) and at the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth (February 16-April 27, 2008). Barbara Levine and Stephanie Snyder, Snapshot Chronicles: Inventing the American Photo Album (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006). The exhibition was at the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College (May 24-July 11, 2005) and at San Francisco Public Library (April 15-August 20, 2006). Marvin Heiferman, Now is Then: Snapshots from the Maresca Collection (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008). The exhibition was at the Newark Museum (February 13-May 11, 2008). Ross Barrett and Stacey McCarrill Cutshaw, In the Vernacular: Photography of the Everyday (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 2008). Photographs were culled from the Rodger Kingston Collection. The exhibition was at the Boston University Art Museum (November 5-January 23, 2005) and a conference “Vernacular Reframed” was held in conjunction with the exhibition (November 5-6, 2004).


To capture a screen shot, use Command+Shift+3 to capture the entire desktop or use Command+Shift+4 to capture a portion of the desktop.

If anyone really wants to keep something private, s/he won’t put the material on the Internet. On the other hand, when one puts something on the Internet, the material is vulnerable to be plagiarized. Once someone downloads photographs or copies text, it is hard to claim ownership because one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Internet is “to share.” As long as one doesn’t infringe a copyright by using images and
Umbrico’s explanation of justifying this is that, “I use only a tiny fragment of each image (the sun is often less than five percent of a much larger picture.) What I end up with is not at all recognizable in relation to its original source.” Umbrico’s use of appropriation is discrete. It is hard to reclaim ownership when the image is not recognizable as stemming from the original source and only a small portion of it was actually used.

One of Flickr’s extraordinary features compared to other social media websites is its viewing capability of Exif info on each photo, which bears detailed information about the camera, lens, camera settings, photographer’s name, copyright info, precise time of image creation, uploading, editing, image title, tags, description of the image, editing software, JPEG quality and so on (fig. 8). Exif is the shortened form of Exchangeable image file. When people take pictures using digital cameras and smartphones, these devices automatically record Exif information and it is embedded onto digital files, which can be read by the Flickr system and be displayed upon prompting. This function is particularly useful for photographers or other users who are curious about camera settings and locations of the shootings when encountering great images on Flickr. This type of embedded information is called metadata. Metadata and tags that Flickr users embed onto image files...
enable people to find images through search engines.\textsuperscript{54} Umbrico finds her images from Flickr due to the existence of the metadata and tags.

During its evolution Flickr opened the door to the personal image world by enhancing the speed and ease of organizing and sharing images online. Founded in February 2004 as a photo-sharing website and emphasizing the community aspect, Flickr’s original motto was “Share your photos.”\textsuperscript{55} Its website has a one-page statement, the “Flickr Community Guidelines” to apprise members what to expect and how to comport themselves.\textsuperscript{56} As a User Generated Content (UGC) website, the content of the website depends on its members’ activities, from uploading to sharing to commenting on photographs. Flickr quickly gained popularity amongst people who loved photography and participating in the community. The site currently has more than 51 million registered members with over 6 billion total photographs on its site.\textsuperscript{57} Flickr members with free accounts are allotted one terabyte of storage space with up to 200 megabytes per image upload—the largest per image upload size in the industry.\textsuperscript{58} One terabyte is one trillion bytes and enables the uploading of more than

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\textsuperscript{54} Jesse James Garrett, “An Interview with Flickr’s Eric Costello,” \textit{adaptive path}, August 4, 2005, accessed April 4, 2014, http://www.adaptivepath.com/ideas/e000519/. Flickr was the one of the pioneers to use a tagging system, copying the idea from del.icio.us (later became delicious.com), a social bookmarking application founded in 2003. Other popular social media websites like Tweeter, Tumblr, and Instagram all use tagging systems via the hashtag (#). For instance, in order to tag the photo with the word “sunset,” type “#sunset” at the time of posting.

\textsuperscript{55} Van Dijck, 94.

\textsuperscript{56} Flickr Community Guidelines, accessed February 18, 2014, http://www.flickr.com/help/guidelines. Flickr provides a dedicated page for Community Guidelines that starts with this statement: “Flickr accounts are intended for members to share original photos and video that they themselves have created.” Some examples from their to do list: Do play nice. Do upload content that you’ve created. Do moderate your content. Do link back to Flickr when you post your Flickr content elsewhere. Some examples from their not to do list: Don’t upload anything that isn’t yours. Don’t forget the children. Don’t vent your frustrations, rant, or bore the brains out of other members. Don’t be creepy.


500,000 photos in original sizes. Most websites, including Facebook, downsize images when users upload them. Flickr offers members the option to upload original image sizes. For those who want to archive their images online, Flickr is a good site. Flickr still offers benefits comparable to other photo-sharing websites, as it is challenged to stay competitive in the ever-expanding photo-sharing and social media sectors centered on photographs.

Since Yahoo acquired Flickr in March 2005, it expanded into archive and commerce sectors. Flickr is affiliated with participating institutions around the world to showcase public photography archives under the name of “The Commons.” According to Flickr, “The key goal of The Commons is to share hidden treasures from the world's public photography archives.” Visitors to The Commons can view historical and vernacular photographs and download them for personal, educational, and research purposes. For the commercial sector, Flickr has a partnership with Getty and provides a platform to buy and sell photographs. Flickr also started printing and photobook services where members can get prints and photobooks made with their images. Many of Flickr’s original members left due to this evolution into a website with more commercial uses rather than community aspects. Changes in designs and function over the years also created dissatisfaction amongst members and an impetus to move to other photo-sharing websites. Nonetheless, Flickr is still

61 Ibid.
62 The copyright status for images on the Commons is designated as "no known copyright restrictions." This indicates that the images are in the public domain and no longer regarded as intellectual property since the copyright may have expired or the work is unclaimed. Institutions typically utilize a “Rights Statement” for public use of their archive pictures, limiting use to personal, educational, and research purposes.
64 Van Dijck, 96.
centered on photographs from uploading to sharing to commenting. Furthermore, Flickr Groups enables like-minded members to share photos and have discussions online.⁶⁶ There are meet up groups among Flickr members who have regular offline meetings.⁶⁷ Despite corporate intervention, which led to commercialization, Flickr was the first photo-sharing website that enhanced an international communal love of photography and it became a prototype for many later iterations.⁶⁸

**Working Methods for *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr***

Umbrico’s working method is systematic and each step is conceptually tied to the next. When selecting sunset images on Flickr, Umbrico looks for a clearly shaped sun.⁶⁹ The sun is the most clearly shaped subject in the picture and is easy to use as a small part for the grid. Although some images don’t look as if they are actually from the time of sunset, Umbrico only downloads images that have the “sunset” tag.⁷⁰ By doing so, Umbrico accords deference to the individual photographer’s classification and thus collaborates with Flickr members. Since the photographs were taken by different photographers of various levels of skill with different cameras, on different days, times, and locations, each possesses a different color and shape. Some have a clear look while others appear smudged. Not all the images bear a halo and some have radiating beams of light. The background color also varies, encompassing both warm and cold palettes.

⁶⁷ One example is “Singapore Flickr Meetup” Group that has 1,473 members and 8,589 accumulated pictures since March 30, 2006. Singapore Flickr Meetup, accessed April 5, 2014, https://www.flickr.com/groups/sg_meetup/.
⁶⁸ Two examples are ipernity.com founded in 2005 and 500px.com founded in 2009.
⁶⁹ Umbrico, *Penelope Umbrico*, 1.
⁷⁰ Umbrico, interview by author.
It is interesting to see the many different representations of the same subject. A commonality of the thousands of photos utilized by Umbrico is the location of the sun in the middle, creating an oculus-type illusion.71 Using Adobe Photoshop, Umbrico crops images close to the orb of the sun. After the crop, each photograph has a similar composition: the sun in the middle of the frame, with space a little above the center and with space a little below the center (a small border of sky on all sides).72 Because Umbrico manipulated the suns in the same way and organized them in a grid, her cropped images resemble mass-productions made by machines. By cropping the images, Umbrico emphasizes their standardized look and demonstrates her bemusement about society’s collective act of making sunset photographs and their uniformed outcomes.73

Consequently, Umbrico takes the image out of its context, creating anonymity and eradicating the background story. For Umbrico, each individual’s capturing of the sun is important and the background relating to each picture is not, as she is interested in the collective act of making sunset pictures by the masses.74 Cropped pictures do not give any hint about the original image; it can be the sun photographed from anywhere in the world. The time and place where the image was made is unknown and therefore the individual story relating to a particular image is lost. The history that the image had until then—from its creation to uploading to sharing—is totally discarded.75 As a result, the viewer sees anonymous suns with no further information other than the limited visual elements of the picture. Because Umbrico’s underlying concept is not apparent on the surface level, it leaves

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71 Oculus, eye in Latin, is a circular opening in a dome building, which lets natural light to come in. A famous example is the Pantheon in Rome.
72 Ibid. In the beginning, Umbrico placed the sun in different places in the frame but she did not like the result from an aesthetic viewpoint.
73 An in-depth discussion of this issue is offered towards the end of this chapter.
75 This is the very point of Baudrillard’s simulation defined as: “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality.” Baudrillard, Simulations, 2. This topic will be discussed in depth in chapter two.
the work susceptible to the misguided criticism that it is merely decorative. However, the collection of thousands of images of the sun in *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* presents vernacular visions of digital photography.\(^{76}\) Regardless, Umbrico’s grid can easily be mistaken as nothing more than the gathering of pretty sun pictures. Only when the viewer looks at the title or reads Umbrico’s text may (s)he realize the concept of the work.

When arranging images on the grid, Umbrico follows her intuition.\(^{77}\) As her background training is in Fine Arts for both her undergraduate and graduate degrees, it is no surprise that she would have a good sense of color and composition. Each sunset picture from Flickr is used only once in a grid.\(^{78}\) It is important for her not to repeat the same sun in order to make a statement about the infinite number of sunsets on the Internet. Not only are there an infinite number of photographs on the Internet, but many have a similar look. This is evident when looking at several photo-sharing websites. People are exposed to the same kind of images and there is a tendency for amateurs to emulate professional’s photographs’ crispy clear and perfect frame and angle, the characteristics of the majority of media advertisings.

For the first few years of working on *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, Umbrico uploaded images to the Kodak EasyShare website to get four-by-six-inch C-prints on glossy surface.\(^{79}\) Her prints have a standardized size and look, like the ones that used to be attainable from a one-hour photo lab and local drug stores.\(^{80}\) The four-by-six-inch print is a standard size for general consumers in many countries, produced by a commercial C-print machine.

\(^{76}\) This statement is my own assessment.

\(^{77}\) Umbrico, interview by author.

\(^{78}\) Umbrico, *Penelope Umbrico*, 1.


\(^{80}\) This type of paper is called RC (resin coated) paper, which has been used both in black and white and color darkrooms. Most one-hour photo labs closed their doors and only a small numbers are still in business. Most of these remaining stores have adopted digital printing technology in order to embrace customers using digital cameras.
Umbrico purposely uses the consumer option as opposed to professional printing options available at professional photo labs that offer a diverse range of sizes at a higher quality and price. Since the photographs she downloaded from Flickr are snapshot photographs taken by ordinary people, Umbrico applies their method of printing. Working with cheap and accessible prints, Umbrico mimics the domestic convention found in the homes of ordinary people—such as four-by-six-inch prints one typically found in family albums. Umbrico is working with vernacular snapshot photographs and she chose the proper size and printing method that convey the feeling of consumer snapshot photographs. She turns common products into a gigantic visual representation of society’s collective act of photographing sunsets.

**Changing Titles**

The *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*’s changing titles reflect an important aspect about this work; the number symbolizes the transient and fast changing Internet world. Umbrico changes the title for each exhibition installation according to the number of sunsets found on Flickr on the day of the exhibition installation. Umbrico’s title consists of three components: the number of sunset photographs found on Flickr, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial)*, and the search date. She uses the vernacular “partial” to indicate that the sunset photographs she selected are only partial downloads from the whole. Some examples are:

541,795 *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial)* 01/23/06
2,303,057 *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial)* 09/25/07
4,064,589 *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial)* 09/02/08

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81 Professional photo labs typically charge much higher prices for prints as they use technologically advanced machines to print and cater to individual instructions from the photographer.

By looking at Umbrico’s titles over the past few years, one can see the changes (approximately 2 million new sunset images are added each year). The number of photographs and search dates are constantly changing as images are continuously uploaded to Flickr. Only *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial)* remains the same. Umbrico’s title is an effective way to show the large number of sunset photographs on the Internet (in this case, Flickr alone). Umbrico is commenting on society’s obsession with uploading photographs, pointing out how many people take a picture of the same subject in a similar manner and share it with others even though so many already exist. She writes, “The pleasure of watching and photographing the sunset is something we probably all share.” The increasing number of its images each year on the Internet proves her point. The desire to photograph beautiful scenery is a universal impulse, perhaps motivated by the desire to create lasting memories. Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* reveals the fact that the act of photographing the sunset is ubiquitous, like the act of photography itself within today’s society. Everyone is an author and a content provider and it only takes a few seconds to achieve this status.

**Exhibition Installation**

Depending on the wall size of each exhibition space, Umbrico makes the grid with a different number and combination of images. For example, she assembled 1,440 images for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMoMA) (fig. 9), 1,302 images for the

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83 Umbrico, *Penelope Umbrico*, 1.
84 Ibid.
Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, and 2,100 images for the New York Photo Festival (fig. 10), covering 44-foot-long wall space. The ceiling height determines the height of the grid and the width of the wall determines the width of the grid. SFMoMA displayed 26 rows of photos that measured 104 inch high (8.7 feet) and 38 columns of photos that measures to 228 inches long (19 feet). For each location, Umbrico makes a mock-up of the grid using Photoshop and sends it to the institution to use as a reference for assembling of the exhibition installation. This is useful whether she is present or not during the installation process as she can control the order of images and final outcome. Umbrico uses double-sided tape to affix the back of each four-by-six-inch print onto the exhibition wall and also to apply tape on the connecting parts of the front side of prints (fig. 11). The process mimics mosaics, resulting in one large photo mosaic. If the grid were printed on one piece of paper, it would be very flat and it wouldn’t have the textured physicality and dimension that Umbrico prefers. Slightly uneven alignments indicate imperfection of human hands, compared to a computer’s ability to make perfectly aligned images.

Large-scale installations physically take up more space and their size naturally overwhelms the viewers. When encompassing a whole wall, the installation becomes a part of the architectural space. Whenever possible, Umbrico creates an installation art-like approach to the exhibition by interacting and customizing to the space rather than simply

85 Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* series was a part of Lesley A. Martin’s “The Ubiquitous Image” exhibition at New York Photo Festival (May 15-18, 2008).
86 Due to the size of the wall that did not fit 1,440 images, SFMoMA ended up exhibiting 988 prints.
87 It is possible to print the whole grid on one or two large piece of paper with perfect alignment, but Umbrico chooses to print piecemeal and assemble them on the wall. In her Aperture monograph, Umbrico used this imperfectly aligned grid (fig. 11) for the dust jacket and perfectly aligned grids for inside of the book.
hanging photos in frames.\textsuperscript{88} An installation artist works with the given space and maximizes its potential by creating something specific to the space.

From the beginning of her career, Umbrico has been using a variety of ways to present her work, each according to the subject matter and ideas she wants to convey. For example, for Mirrors (From Catalogs) (2001-2007), Umbrico scanned images of mirrors from home-improvement catalogs and after using Photoshop to create a look that looked more like actual mirrors, she printed them out and face-mounted them to Plexiglas. In her solo exhibition at Julie Saul Gallery, she hung them as if they were actual mirrors (fig. 12).

For Views from the Internet (2003-2009), Umbrico downloaded images from home-décor and home improvement websites of rooms with windows that have pleasant scenery portrayed outside. She isolated only nature from the window views, eliminating any interior elements (furniture, window frames etc.). Umbrico printed these cutout-looking sceneries and hung them on the window of the exhibition space at the New York Photo Festival in 2008 (fig. 13).

Four-by-six-inch prints alone are diminutive but when displayed in the thousands, their collective has a greater impact. Affixing the prints by hand also results in a one-of-kind installation since each will be slightly different due to the differences in the space, lighting, etc. Through Umbrico’s hands, the ubiquitous becomes one of kind. Umbrico discards her prints after the exhibition ends since the usage of adhesive tape on both sides of the prints ruins them when taken off from the wall. The temporality of the materials and transient quality of digital images are substantiated by the disposing of the prints.

It is in a sense lamentable that what was once a work of art becomes discarded after the exhibition ends. However the digital images can be by reproduced when a new exhibition

\textsuperscript{88} A typical way to exhibit photographic art is to frame the photograph and hang it on the wall. When participating in a group exhibition with a space limitation, Umbrico shows Suns from Sunsets from Flickr in a frame, but when space allows, she makes a large installation as discussed above.
begins. The ability to reproduce has been a main characteristic of photography from the
beginning, but with digital photography, reproduction has become much quicker and easier.
With analogue photography, one has to set up darkroom chemicals and go through enlarging,
printing and washing photosensitive paper. Initial set up and the first printing takes a lot of
time and so too the following prints. With digital photography, only the first time requires the
digital file to be prepared using image editing software; from the second time and on, a print
is made in a matter of a few clicks on the computer. Umbrico’s way of using double-sided
tape to attach prints to the wall and disposing prints after the exhibition reflects her treatment
of the digital images in accordance to their ephemeral and contingent characteristics.

**Dissemination of Work**

Umbrico makes her work salable by creating a unique edition system for each
occasion. For the Aperture monograph, Umbrico assembled 1,560 images from 8,309,719
*Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial) 11/20/10*. Umbrico made an edition of three: Edition
1 of 3 as a whole (1,560 images); Edition 2 of 3 as a spread (195 images); and Edition 3 of 3
as a page (half of 195 images). When an institution buys Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from
Flickr*, she sells a set of prints along with JPEG image files. San Francisco Museum of Art
(SFMoMA) included Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* as a part of its 75th Annual
Exhibition in 2009. Since the exhibition culled works from SFMoMA’s permanent
collection, the museum acquired Umbrico’s work beforehand. Umbrico sent 1,440 four-by-
six-inch prints and JPEG image files on a CD in addition to the exhibition prints for the
display. Since the museum owns the image files and mock-up of the grid, it can reprint

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90 Umbrico, interview by author.
images before each future exhibition. The museum responds to the contemporary practice of the artist. Each exhibition will be a new experience for the installers and each installation will be unique from previous ones. Attaching 1,440 of four-by-six prints onto the wall is a massive job, which requires involved planning and execution far beyond simply hanging picture frames. By doing so, the museum is taking a part in finalizing and presenting Umbrico’s work. Umbrico, thus, collaborates both with the Flickr users by utilizing their tagging images and with the exhibition venues by making them install her final presentation.

The Temporality and Mortality of Umbrico’s Work

The temporality and mortality of Umbrico’s work is more complicated than it appears. Her exhibition prints are destroyed after each exhibition. However, these short-lived prints can be reincarnated any number of times by printing them again from the JPEG files. Digital data, such as JPEG, is not, however, destruction-proof; it can be corrupted at any time. If corrupted data cannot be restored, the institution has to ask Umbrico to re-send JPEGs but this is viable only for as long as she is around and has uncorrupted JPEG files herself. We face a conservation issue surrounding a photographic medium. Conventional color prints (C-Prints) made in a darkroom have always had archival problems as they fade fairly quickly. Black and white prints made in the darkroom (gelatin silver prints) have a longer life but they too have problems with oxidation and deterioration over time. Inkjet paper manufacturers claim such prints have a much longer life (supposedly exceeding 100 years) but the validation of this claim has not yet passed the test of time and there are often issues with

91 C-prints are considered to be good for 30 years and fade quickly.
scratches and the falling off of ink.\textsuperscript{92} It is unclear what will happen to digital files 50 or 100 years from now. CDs that store JPEG files also can fail. It is hard to predict what storage system will be in use many years from now and we cannot predict what will happen to, for example, the Umbrico files currently owned by SFMOMA.\textsuperscript{93}

It is quite shocking that museums accept four-by-six-inch prints in consumer print quality along with JPEGs for their collections. Not too long ago, museums and fine art galleries did not present digital prints in their exhibitions nor did they collect them.\textsuperscript{94} However, the fine art photography world finally accepted digital prints as an art object. Digital photography found a place in the art world while analog photography quickly became obsolete. Whether an image is scanned from a negative or transferred from a memory card, once put on the computer, they are digital photographs. All images may look the same to the human eye but digital photographs are different than analog photographs. Perhaps the greatest distinction between analog and digital photographs is physicality. Analog photographs always embody a physical form, from negatives to prints. Digital photographs, on the other hand, are derived in non-physical, non-tangible source code. Through JPEG or any other digital file format, the image exists as data rather than as an object. A photographic print made from a negative can exist either in the form of the negative or in the form of print that people can see and touch.


\textsuperscript{93} New Macintosh computers have no DVD slots. VHS video players and VHS videotapes are currently hard to find.

\textsuperscript{94} This was true even ten years ago.
A digital photograph, whether in a memory card or in a computer hard drive cannot be seen or touched. We cannot find that particular digital image in the computer and grab it.95

**Universality vs. Individuality and The Expanded Role of Photographers**

Through *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, Umbrico parodies an individual’s image-making experience by creating a homogenous and universal work of art from the very photos individuals took great pride and joy in taking. Umbrico writes:

And equally striking to me was that most of the sunset picture looked the same. They followed a visual script. So I started to focus on the sun itself and think about the idea of individuality versus collectivity. What does it mean for us all to take a picture of the sun? What kind of ownership is involved in that? I downloaded the images that had a very distinctive sun imaged in them somewhere. I wasn’t interested in images that looked unique or authored. I wanted only those that looked the same as all the other images, that had the same iconic “sunset” quality to them.96

Umbrico, thus, challenges the concept and extent of ownership a photographer can exert. Through *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* Umbrico displays a tongue-in-cheek approach towards society’s behavior in picturemaking; why do so many individuals take a picture of the sunset even though millions have already done so? Umbrico asserts that our pictures of the sun are pretty much the same, so why fuss over her appropriation of Flickr pictures? She provides a rationale for her utilization of the sunset photographs from Flickr, but she also makes visible the multitude of similar-looking sunset pictures made by millions of people. For Umbrico’s grid, the photographer would be unable to assert ownership of his/her photo. Even from her source pictures (fig. 14), one would be hard pressed to claim authorship as they mostly follow a “visual script” of what sunset pictures should look like.

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95 Although a digital file can be printed out as a physical object, the original can never be seen by the human eye.
At first Umbrico’s assertion that the making of sunset photographs by individuals is a homogenous act sounds absurd, but after looking at her source pictures (fig. 14) and looking back at my own photographs, I find her assumption quite compelling. I too am guilty of making the same kind of sunset photographs, not once, but many times. Why do we all make pictures of the sunset and why do they look alike? Umbrico uses the sunset as an example but this can apply for other subjects as well. People perform the same actions: view a beautiful sunset, make a picture of it, and share it with others. So for photography, the experience of watching the beautiful sunset and sharing it with others is also important. What is lacking in the action is to think about how the particular sunset picture differs from preexisting sunset images and what the implications and ramifications are of uploading the picture to a social media website where millions of sunset photographs already exist. This lack of context of the meaning of image-making is perhaps the reason why there are so many sunset photographs on the Internet. Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* is thus, a parody that reveals the lack of introspection by millions of photographers when taking such photos.

When weighing the universality versus individuality dichotomy, one should not simplify the matter because both exist in reality. Although there are many sunset images that are similar in composition and follow conventional landscape photographs—like the ones Umbrico chose (fig. 14)—there are others that present an individual take on (the) sunset. Out of curiosity, I visited the Flickr website and searched the word “sunset.” I found many striking and iconic looking sunset images, but I also found a handful of more distinctive sunset images (fig. 15). For example, user name “Bahman Farzad” made a photo of the sun reflecting on the sea, but clouds overlay some parts of the sun, so the photo is comprised of strips of clouds parallel with the waves on the sea. The burning color of the sun and the
surrounding sky and sea contrasted to the silhouettes of clouds and waves. The sun is in close range, which indicates his use of a telescope lens. User name “Le.Sanchez” made a surreal sunset picture with layers of reflections. She writes about this photo on her Flickr page:

So many things I like about this photo
this is the train tracks although you can't really see them.
A fence with the tracks behind it XD
Love sunset, powerlines, birds, flag, etc.
Flickr makes it a little darker

Her comments reveal that she was aware of all the elements and made use of reflections to create a complex composition. Ignoring these individual images can create a skewed viewpoint. No matter how many images look the same, different images should be taken into account. These differentiating examples suggest that there are individuals out there who strive to create something different, knowing that there are already many sunset photographs on the Internet. Especially on Flickr, there are many motivated amateurs who strive for excellence and recognition.

The New Way of Image-making: Being an Editor or a Curator of Found Photos

By emphasizing “universality,” Umbrico diminished “individuality” to a great degree. To prove her point, Umbrico only selected images that had an iconic sunset quality—a horizon dividing the land and the sky with a radiating sun reflected on the sea (fig. 14). Umbrico’s sampling is an edited version, not necessarily an accurate reflection of sunset photographs on Flickr and her editing process is akin to a photographer photographing only a selected part of the world. Umbrico calls herself a “photographer” based on this reasoning.

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97 Flickr/Laura Sanches/Sets[/ powerline / light ], accessed April 7, 2014, https://www.flickr.com/photos/lauraesanchez/6788911036/in/set-72157629146343890. Although this is her comment about the photo, Sanchez wrote it as prose, giving each observation its own line. The quotation is a direct copy of her comment as written on her Flickr page.
She writes, “For the first time, I have been able to actually call myself a photographer as opposed to an artist who makes photo-based work. I wander this virtual space of the internet, looking for my subject.” Umbrico is not alone in this practice of picturemaking as there is an increasing number of photographers who turned to found photos to create works rather than taking their own photographs.

This new way of image making should be recognized in the history of photography. Nowadays, many photographers look to both physical and online archives, and select and organize photographs as a way to convey their artistic visions and messages. A writer’s job is editing the words—deciding what to include and what not to include in writing. A photographer’s job is editing the world—framing only the parts and views that they are interested in photographing. This is true of photographers who construct scenes to photograph, like James Casebere or Gregory Crewson, for instance. Their settings reflect pre-visualized and pre-conceptualized visions. Photographer as editor or a curator is more apparent when working with found photos. Only the ones that have relevancy or purpose would be included. Looking through tens and thousands of images is an act of seeking, like a photographer with a camera on the street. Hence, Umbrico is not overreaching when she calls herself a photographer, wandering through the Internet.

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99 If you look at recent exhibitions and artist book fairs, this is apparent. For example, the Saatchi Gallery in London had an exhibition, “Out of Focus: Photography” (September 27-November 4, 2012), featuring appropriation works by artists such as Daniel Gordon and Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin. International Center of Photography (ICP)’s “A Different Kind of Order: ICP Triennial” (May 17-September 22, 2013) included Roy Arden’s “The World as Will and Representation – Archive 2007,” which consists of 28,144 found photos that runs for 1 hour 36 minute-slideshow.
100 James Casebere is at the forefront of constructed photography. He has been constructing tabletop architectural models and photographing them since 1970s. Gregory Crewson stages fictional scenes and makes visual narratives, inspired by movie sets. Crewson’s process is well documented in this video, accessed March 14, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RywAfp4KFcY&feature=player_embedded.
Umbrico has been working on *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* for more than eight years now. During this time, more photo-sharing websites emerged, more people used such sites, and the number of images downloaded to the Internet proliferated. One thing, however, that remained the same was that people still made the same kind of pictures, a societal trend that Umbrico was able to substantiate by employing Flickr metadata and Photoshop software. Umbrico also utilized this technology to collect vernacular photographs and to transform them in a way by which she commented on society’s use of photography and Internet technology. *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* separated Umbrico from 1980s appropriation artists because she recognized and responded to photography’s changing paradigm caused by the onset widespread use of digital technology.
CHAPTER 2: The Ephemerality of Digital Photography

Within two decades of its invention, digital photography surpassed analog photography in almost every technical aspect, from image clarity to flexibility of editing. Burdensome characteristics associated with printing in the traditional darkroom include the limitations of time, a higher need for physical dexterity, and the unforgiving result when incorrect exposure results. In contrast, digital photography affords one abundant time and discretion regarding the allocation of time. Indeed, one can even take a break, leaving the task for another day mid-stream. Near-infinite mistakes are also easily afforded and easily eradicated.\(^{101}\) The quality of digital prints also has improved significantly; it is now difficult to distinguish between digital and analog prints.\(^{102}\) Analog photography and digital photography have a fundamental difference: analog being physical and digital being immaterial. The myth of digital photography lies in the fact that one can never see the actual image file – as it exists in our physical world. We see what we call “images” through visual devices that translate binary electrical signals but we never can touch or even see the actual files in their original form. Digital files are ephemeral as they are often viewed for a quick moment and can be corrupted at any time and get damaged, changing how the final translated “image” is perceived by viewers. While there are several other formats, it is important to understand the meaning of JPEG for this thesis, as this is what Umbrico downloads from

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101 In the darkroom, the exposure time is relatively short (often from a few seconds to few minutes). Within that given time, one has to expose the negative and make burning and dodging skillfully and cautiously with their hands or light tools, with great care. Burning and dodging lightens or darkens the image for optimal tonality. If the slightest mistake is made, an entirely new paper must be used and a completely new (and perfect) exposure must again be attempted within the limited time. With image software, one can take a few minutes to unlimited hours until one is satisfied with the result. Both take an immense amount of practice to master, and each have their respective learning curves. However, with digital image software there is always the option to reverse one’s actions.

102 Digital camera companies have been working towards assimilating the look and feel of analog photography. Many analog users have been switching to digital. The superiority of aesthetics of analog for colors, grains, and tonalities is now questionable.
Flickr and adds to her image collection. This chapter discusses the characteristics and misconceptions of digital photography and its connection to the social media and the aftermath over-production.

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The Meaning and the Role of JPEG

JPEG stands for Joint Photographic Experts Group, a committee that created the JPEG standard. The JPEG format was officially released in Geneva by its founders in 1992 after being tested for several years. To enable faster loading time and saving space on the storage device (whether it is a hard drive inside of the computer or an external storage device), digital image data are compressed and converted into JPEGs, which become smaller file sizes and in turn lose image quality. Thus JPEG is considered ‘lossy’ compression. While there is a downgrade in image quality, overall JPEG has contributed to image dissemination deeper and wider throughout society. With analog photography, people collect the print—tangible photographic image imprinted on paper or other photosensitive surfaces. With digital photography, people collect JPEG—an intangible photographic representation projected onto computer monitors.

Being an image standard for diverse computer platforms (both PC and Mac) as well as for compatibility with numerous software programs and most importantly the Internet, the JPEG is one of the most important components of digital photography, ensuring a smooth

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103 Although jpeg (lower case) is used as an image file extension, JPEG (upper case) is used in scholarly writings. It is official way of writing JPEG. Although Flickr supports three file formats (JPEG, GIF, and PNG), JPEG is the most common file format. When someone uploads a TIFF file format, Flickr automatically converts and stores it in JPEG format by compressing and resizing the image file into several sizes. Flickr Help / FAQ / Photos, accessed March 1, 2014, http://www.flickr.com/help/photos/#16. If a photo is not downloadable due to the setting by the Flickr user, one can still take the photo away by using the screen grab function.


operation of images without technical obstruction. Of course, there are more sophisticated raw file formats (the digital original equivalent to film in analog photography) produced by each camera brand, but raw files are not compatible with many computers and software and so may not open. They also have much larger file sizes, which require significantly more storage sizes and can be costly. The general public and even newspaper photographers widely use JPEG for its smaller file sizes and its compatibility with any device. This is a phenomenal achievement in the digital imaging field as difficulties across different computer platforms (between PC and Mac) and file extensions.

Paul Caplan in *The Atlantic* wrote an informative and in-depth article about JPEG and asserted that social media websites are taking advantage of this standard. Caplan explained:

> JPEG is a compression standard, not an image type (the formal name for the latter is JFIF and EXIF). That compression routine is built into a digital camera’s software, taking the data stream from the camera’s sensor and compressing or encoding it into a form that can then be read by software in Web browsers and operating systems, photo management and editing applications, and even surveillance systems.

Web browsers such as Firefox and Google Chrome enable one to navigate the Internet. An Operating system is a system software that manages computer hardware. Apple’s Mac OS X is an example. Photo management software allows users to organize photographs and currently the function has expanded to include editing capability as well. Adobe’s Lightroom is an example. The most sophisticated editing application is Adobe Photoshop, which offers extensive editing capabilities. The use of JPEG in surveillance systems may not be well

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106 Each camera brand makes different file extension for raw file. For example, Canon uses CR2, Nikon uses NEF, Fuji uses RAF, and Pentax uses PTX. A separate raw file converter software is needed in order to open these files.
known by the general public. Surveillance is deeply embedded in society from banks to shopping malls to private homes but it became more widely used after 911. To detect someone in surveillance video requires a higher resolution image and JPEG and MJPEG (Motion-JPEG) have that capability.\textsuperscript{108} Any frame in a surveillance video can be converted into JPEG and be seen as a still image. The JPEG image file is compatible in video editing software like Apple’s Final Cut Pro and Adobe’s Premier, which means that JPEG images can be imported into editing software without the need to convert the file before hand.

It is crucial to note that standardization was implemented in order to enable a smooth communication and web browsing experience. Caplan’s assertion that Facebook uses JPEG because it is efficient is compelling.\textsuperscript{109} Facebook has a database of user information analyzed by the person’s use of JPEG images through tags and the likes.\textsuperscript{110} This database is useful for advertisers to match interests and needs of individuals. The image, as a commodity, plays a central role in monetizing for both Facebook and its advertisers. Caplan mentions that Google tried with a new compression file format, WebP, that is only compatible with Google applications. Not surprisingly, Google did not succeed in eliminating JPEG.\textsuperscript{111} Perhaps the biggest triumph for JPEG is its position as a digital sovereignty of visual language throughout the world. Daniel Palmer calls this “visual democracy in an age of networked photography.”\textsuperscript{112}

Today with diverse technologies and intertwined sectors all working together one way or another, it is unthinkable to not have an image standard such as JPEG. Because JPEG

\textsuperscript{109} Caplan, “What Is a JPEG?”
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Palmer, “The Rhetoric of the JPEG,” 150.
compresses image files and decompresses them when they are opened, storage space is saved as well. Relatively small image file sizes enable quick image loading when viewing images on the Internet or via an email attachment. The larger the file size, the longer it will take to open. JPEG is used so much in our society that “Send me a JPEG” is understood as “Send me a picture.” JPEGs are used in digital cameras, camera phones, and the Internet. Most of our daily encounters with pictures are with JPEG. Thus, JPEG represents our visual culture with digital images.

**Digital Photographs as Data**

Images uploaded to "Flickr" and similar websites are made by devices such as digital cameras and cellular phones with a camera function. This technology has a binary system that consists of ones and zeros. Digital photographs as data are invisible and intangible, residing in the realm of megabytes and disk space. Until we translate this data into corresponding images, they remain visually illegible. Once transferred to a computer, image files can be uploaded to the Internet on sites such as Flickr. Even when files are uploaded to the Internet, what one sees is a representation of an image, (or phrased differently, translation of source code) which is still intangible and invisible. One can never see the digital data or 1s and 0s. By printing images from the Internet, Umbrico is transforming the invisible to the visible, intangible to tangible, and switching the mode from digital to analog. Boris Groys makes a convincing analogy of the digital image to a Byzantine icon:

> The digital image is a visible copy of the invisible image file, of the invisible data. In this respect the digital image is functioning as a Byzantine icon—as a visible copy of invisible God. Digitalization creates the illusion that there is no longer any difference between original and copy, and that all we have are the copies that multiply and circulate in the information networks. But there can be no copies without an original. The
difference between original and copy is obliterated in the case of
digitalization only by the fact that the original data are invisible: they exist
in the invisible space behind the image, inside the computer.\(^{113}\)

Groys’s characterization of the digital image being invisible may sound strange since
we can see images on the computer monitor and other visual devices. What we see on the
devices is a visual representation (copy) of the digital file (original) and we will never see the
original. Instead of writing images onto the film, the images are written onto a memory card.
This epochal change, both physically and conceptually, is hard to fathom and perhaps most
people do not give it a second’s thought. With negative or positive (slide) films, one can look
at each frame and guess the final outcome in print.\(^{114}\) With digital photography, a change of
photographs inside of the memory card does not affect the memory card itself. The memory
card remains the same whilst only the inside contents get changed. When the memory card
gets full, the owner has to either transfer the contents to a storage device and delete
everything (formatting) so that it can be reused or just leave the content as is; then the
memory card is no longer capable to make more images. With digital photography, the image
is visual information and gets transmitted as data. Digital photography is mythical, yet it is
not worshiped like Byzantine icons. Modern day web-users unwittingly worship social
media, especially photo-sharing websites like Flickr and Instagram, and blogs like Tumblr
and Tweeter. It is very rare to see any blogs these days without seeing images attached. It is
rare too to peruse a website without images.

\(^{114}\) Photographers often look at film on a lightbox with a loupe to see if any frames are worth printing out
before they get a contact print (index print for all the frames onto one piece of paper).
Groys further claims that the loss of aura is significant in the process of “visualization of an image file” because the aura of “Invisible” is the greatest.\footnote{Groys, 86.} In Walter Benjamin’s view, aura exists only in the original and any copies made from the original lose aura.\footnote{Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in \textit{Illuminations: Essays and Reflections}, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1986), 220-221.} However, with photography, only the copy of the original (reproduction) is possible. With analog, the original is the negative (film). The negative itself doesn’t function as artwork. It is only regarded as a photograph when it is printed in the darkroom. However, printing from the negative means making a copy from the original. With an enlarger, an image can be printed into many different sizes, creating many copies at different scales.

With digital photography, the original is the image file, which is never visible to us. When we take a digital picture, what we see on the camera’s screen is a visual representation of the image file that went through the image processor on the camera, which records image data on a memory card. When we transfer image files from a memory card to a computer, what we see on the monitor is again a visual representation of the image file consisting of thousands and millions of pixels. Each time with the changing of the device, the information is shown with different colors and a different number of pixels. We never see the actual image file, as it is an abstract thing. Ironically, these invisible digital files take up physical space whether on a storage device (CDs, memory sticks, external hard drive, etc.) or computer. For each subsequent transfer, the JPEG image file loses quality and has less information. Umbrico is not daunted by this degradation of image quality. She allows low digital quality in her work, such as noise, pixilation, and chromatic aberration.

Noise is similar to grain in analog photography. With a digital camera, noise (that is optical disturbances) is apparent when photographed with low light or not enough light.
Digital picture “noise” is more apparent when images are enlarged. They are unnatural colors that have a smudged look that are especially visible in the dark areas of images (fig. 16). Pixelation constitutes the visible difference of a digital image between a smooth and continuous surface and a rough, discontinued tone in the shape of a square. The square is called a pixel, an element of a digital image, and it only becomes visible when enlarged into a much larger size. For instance, changing a 1x1 inch image into an 8x8 inch image will result in a pixelated look (fig. 17). The chromatic aberration in dictionary terminology is: “The variation of either the focal length or the magnification of a lens system with different wavelengths of light, characterized by prismatic coloring at the edges of the optical image and color distortion within it.” Chromatic aberration has more to do with the lens mechanism and is hard to avoid, especially when pointing the camera at a bright light source such as the sun (fig. 18). All the aforementioned imperfections are characteristic of digital photography and Umbrico wants them to be present in the work. As her work is a reflection of the everyday use of digital photographs rather than refined fine art photographs, it makes sense to leave them as is.

Most of the images from Suns from Sunsets from Flickr bear a chromatic aberration due to the cameras being pointed towards the sun when the images were made (fig. 18). Chromatic aberration is so strong in Suns from Sunsets from Flickr that even at a small scale, it is visible. The halos around the sun in various colors from clear to yellow to cyan to red constitute the chromatic aberrations. The unnatural colors form strange shapes around the sun. Chromatic aberration is considered to be an undesirable element to have in digital photographs, along with noise and pixelation. They are flaws of digital photography and every digital camera manufacturer strives to ameliorate these elements when producing new

upgraded models. Fine art photographers would try their best to fix these flaws using Photoshop. Conceptual artists like Umbrico, on the other hand, do not seem to be bothered by their presence at all. Some artists even exaggerate these characters. Thomas Ruff (b.1958), for instance, made a series called JPEG with online JPEG images he collected from 2001 to 2007. Ruff’s pictures, a collection for the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 19), small JPEG images were blown up to about 8x11 feet. The pixelation is so visible that it becomes an important character of each picture. Umbrico’s treatment of the digital images is deliberately casual and the installation of the grid reveals tapes all over the prints (fig. 18). It is a vernacular look that she wants to present. Casual image-makers would not go out of their way to fix chromatic aberration. Moreover, since digital photographs are widely accepted by society, we forgive such flaws.

**The Aura of Digital Photography**

The collage of thousands of suns in Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets Flickr* is artist-made and hyperreal—neither real nor imaginary. Jean Baudrillard analyzed the relationship between simulation and hyperreal as: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” In this vein, Baudrillard’s assertion that simulation is no longer a reference to the real is analogous to the Internet since it too has no origin nor is it a copy of

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118 Umbrico mentioned that she does not alter the images to enhance the look. The only alteration she makes is cropping close to the orb of the sun.
121 Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 4. Jean Baudrillard said that a hyperreal is “sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference.”
122 Ibid., 2.
reality. The Internet encompasses an invisible and intangible world that we call virtual or cyber space. We cannot enter the Internet world physically, yet we gain access through a virtual ID (and password). Even with Facebook, where most people use their real names, one can create a pseudo name for an account, not just once but multiple times. By creating hundreds of email accounts, one can enjoy hundreds of separate IDs in the cyber world.

Umbrico’s grid of the sun does not exist in the real world. In reality, there is no such thing as thousands of the sun gathered together. At the same time, it is not a completely imaginary world. The images are of the real sun. Therefore *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* is a hybrid product of the real and imagined. At any given time, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* can be exhibited at galleries and museums around the world, enjoying status as high art while the very substance of it comprises a group of four-by-six-inch consumer quality prints. Overall visitor reactions to *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* have been positive, which is evident in many photographs of people in front of the work. Used as a photo op, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* succeeds, transforming kitsch into high art and inviting viewer interaction.

Baudrillard’s idea of simulation can be applied to Umbrico’s work, producing genetic miniaturization that can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. Photographs used in Umbrico’s installation are representations of the sun but they are copies of copies, which went through several reproductions from Flickr member’s camera to Flickr page to Umbrico’s computer to exhibition wall. The repetition of the sun and recurrence of the sun over and over again in *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* mirrors the fact that sunset photographs

\[123\] Ibid., 3.
endlessly appear on the Internet. Umbrico’s installation is nothing more than a collection of about 2,500 four-by-six-inch prints of the sun, but it creates an aura of its own for viewers to react to as if it is spectacular scenery. Umbrico’s simulacrum of multiple suns is successfully gaining its own authenticity. Copies of copies can act as a new original. Or perhaps it is more correct to say that digital copies have their own aura that is different from the original.

Umbrico’s grid is made possible because of digital technology. If one tried to mimic her grid with analog photographs, a lot of time and energy would be consumed. More importantly, it might not even be possible to recreate it. The challenge begins with gathering the materials: where can one find people’s photographs of the sunset? Even if some photographs of the sunset were located, the task of cropping the sun from the picture requires it to be scanned into a larger size and cropped closely (which involves relying on digital technology); or a negative to be obtained from the photographer needs to be enlarged in a color darkroom and then that has to be closely cropped. Access and creation would be very daunting tasks and creating the grid would be a monumental endeavor if digital technology could not be relied upon.

Umbrico spends a lot of time looking for photographs, but once she finds what she likes, the process of downloading and cropping takes only a few minutes. Making a grid

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124 Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London and New York: Penguin, 1984), 12. In his well-known novel “White Noise,” Don DeLillo wrote about “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA.” DeLillo insightfully observed the tourists’ camera crazed behavior in front of a famous landmark. Through the character named Murray, he wrote: “No one sees the barn,” he said finally… “Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn.”... “We are not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies.” This short conversation is perhaps one of the most concise observations about the modern day camera craze, which is empty clicking of shutters that leaves impression on the film (or memory card) but not on the mind of people.

125 Visitors to Umbrico’s exhibitions made photographs in front of her installations and uploaded the photos to the Flickr website. One can search on Flickr website with the words, “Penelope Umbrico Suns from Flickr” and see the resulting photographs. Umbrico made a project using these photographs. Discussions on this topic appear later in this chapter and also in chapter three.
using Photoshop is much easier and quicker than making it physically on the wall. With
digital technology, Umbrico can make a mock up of a grid that can be used for herself and
exhibitors as a reference. She can easily make multiple copies. This luxury of creating
multiple copies of the grid is only afforded through digital technology. Despite there being
multiple reproduced copies at each venue, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* enjoys respect as an
original work of art. People no longer distinguish between the original and copy when it
comes to digital photography. The truth is, we always see copies and never the original.
Walter Benjamin’s concern for original and reproduction is no longer applicable when
discussing digital photography.126

*Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* installations evoke interesting phenomena. Visitors to
her exhibition often took pictures in front of the installation and uploaded those images on
social media websites. Umbrico accidently found out about this when she was unable to go to
an exhibition opening in Brisbane, Australia.127 Eager to see the installation pictures,
Umbrico searched “Penelope Umbrico Suns from Sunsets from Flickr” on Google Images
and found these visitor images on Flickr.128 She downloaded some of the images and started
a series, *People in front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* (2008-ongoing) (fig. 20). People
may have regarded the installation of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* as a landmark or
monument such as the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls where they typically would take

Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin declared that: “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept
of authenticity.” He also said, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work
of art.” This article was written in 1936 and while it is still an important article in photographic discussions, the
aura and authenticity of digital photography cannot be measured by his arguments, as amply demonstrated by
Umbrico’s works where digital photography can have its own aura.
127 “The Leisure Class,” Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Brisbane, Australia
(October 13, 2007 – March 2008). Umbrico was a part of this group exhibition with the theme on commercial
consumer culture. The exhibition title was inspired by economist Thorstein Veblen’s monograph, *The Theory of
the Leisure Class* (1899).
pictures of themselves in front of, creating a visual record of their presence at the location. People also regularly take pictures of themselves in front of famous works of art. A trip to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) would make one realize how challenging it can be to view a work of art without being disturbed by other visitors taking pictures of themselves and friends in front of artworks.

Suns from Sunsets from Flickr usually exhibits in a larger format size than Frederic Edwin Church’s (1826-1900) *The Heart of the Andes* (1859) (fig. 21) with 66 1/8 x 119 ¼ inches.\(^{129}\) Church’s painting of impeccable details of nature—close and distant mountains, dramatic shapes of clouds, waterfalls, flora and fauna, a small village, human figures in front of the cross—on a grand scale drew 12,000 visitors in New York when it was first shown in 1859.\(^{130}\) *The Heart of the Andes* is a composite in a sense that Church painted from many sketches he made while in New York and surrounding areas and also during trips to South America.\(^{131}\) The beauty of nature in the painting creates a sense of the sublime. It is awe-inspiring due to its overwhelming size. In this sense, Suns from Sunsets from Flickr can be regarded as a sublime work of digital photography with its grand scale of nature-based pictures.\(^{132}\)

Compared to Church’s one large canvas painting, Umbrico’s grid is a composite of humble four-by-six-inch consumer quality prints. Although the subject matter of Suns from

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\(^{129}\) At SFMoMA, Umbrico’s grid measured 104 x 228 inches and at the New York Photo Festival 80 x 528 inches. Church was first recognized for *Niagara Falls* (1857) but it was *The Heart of the Andes* that propelled him into prominence in the New York art scene. John K. Howat’s Forward for Kevin J. Avery, *Church’s Great Picture: The Heart of Andes* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 5. Church was one of two pupils of Thomas Cole (1801-1848), a founder of the Hudson River School. Kevin J. Avery, *Church’s Great Picture*, 11. Avery’s book was an exhibition catalogue for the exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from October 5, 1993 through January 2, 1994.

\(^{130}\) Kevin J. Avery, *Church’s Great Picture*, 9.

\(^{131}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{132}\) In the Introduction of this thesis, Lyle Rexer’s analysis of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr is mentioned where he refers to it as “Disneyworld sublime” or the “second-hand sublime.” Rexer, essay for artist portfolio, 95-114.
Sunsets from Flickr is of nature (the sun), the pictures are downloaded from the Internet and they are placed onto a grid—a format that is unnatural and man-made. Suns from Sunsets from Flickr evokes an image of romantic paintings of the first half of the 19th century, as can be seen in Joseph Mallord William Turner’s Sunset on Rouen (c. 1830) (fig. 22) and Caspar David Friedrich’s Sunset (Brothers) (between 1830 and 1835) (fig. 23). In Friedrich’s Sunset (Brothers), two figures watching the sunset turn their backs to the viewer. Regardless, awe and respect for the nature can be felt. Watching a sunset seems to be a timeless human activity. The only difference may be that people in Friedrich’s painting are solely focused on watching the sunset while people nowadays seem incapable of doing that due to modern day distractions presented by technology. Instead, modern day viewers multi-task, making photographs, checking out social media websites, answering text messages, tweeting, talking on the phone, etc.

Photography as a Tool for Experiencing

Our propensity to use photography to record experience is not new. In her 1977 book, On Photography, Susan Sontag described this sort of public behavior as “A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it—by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir.” Sontag’s analysis addressed tourism and the use of photography not only as documentation of special events but also as evidence of their presence, transforming the intangible experience into a

133 William Vaughan, Romanticism and Art (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 10. It is hard to demarcate exact beginning and ending of any art movement or style but in general, Romanticism is considered to be from 1800 to 1850. Well-known artists of Romantic period are Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828), Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), John Constable (1776-1837), and Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840).
tangible photograph, into memorabilia. However, the very act of photographing condenses the whole experience into a two-dimensional object, a photograph. When we look at a photograph, we look at that very moment which is a small part of the whole event or experience—a slice of time or a frame of time. Photography is capable of capturing and showing only a fraction of time, as demonstrated by Eadweard James Muybridge and others in the early history of photography.\textsuperscript{135}

Sontag further asserted, “Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation.”\textsuperscript{136} Sontag also declared “picture-taking is an event in itself.”\textsuperscript{137} In her observation, photography is playing an active role in our life; we use photography to experience something and also create a visual record of our participation. That very process makes photography an event. Nowadays people experience and memorialize pretty much everything through photography: photographing artworks at museums or delicious-looking foods at restaurants and homes. Taking pictures of themselves (called “selfies”) in front of the artwork creates a record of their presence there. The fact that they are there and are able to post photographs on the spot onto social media websites has more meaning to them than taking the time to understand the artwork. The process of engaging with art by taking pictures and referencing them on social media websites baits others to participate by commenting and sharing those pictures, spurring the images to further travel on social networks. Photographs contribute to spreading the word about the artwork beyond the physical parameter of the museum or gallery space. With the Internet, there are no limits for artwork to reach its potential audience, albeit in the form of a digital reproduction seen very differently on each monitor. A digital reproduction of an

\textsuperscript{135} Detailed discussion on this topic will be in chapter three.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 11.
artwork resides on the Internet and is searchable on search engines, such as Google Images. It can be seen everywhere in the world at once.

Umbrico’s colorful installation of large scale powered by repetitions of the suns evokes people’s photographic impulse—photographing as if it is something worthy to be recorded and remembered. Or perhaps making photographs of the artwork and taking a picture in front of the artwork completes the very last step of (or it could be the only step of) experiencing the artwork. Using photography to experience something explains why so many people still photograph the sunset. It is an act of preserving one’s experience. Photography invokes a feeling of completion and security that a record is made and can be archived away for later viewing. The viewer may not own the original artwork but s/he owns the reproduction of the artwork, thus creating the satisfaction of ownership. Walter Benjamin insightfully acknowledged this phenomenon even before digital technology enabled quick and easy reproduction. He wrote, “Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.” 138 This desire of the masses is responsible for the phenomena of the overwhelmingly image-saturated world we live in. From personal computers to websites to magazines, reproductions of images are everywhere. Even the original photograph is a reproduction of something. It is an imprint of a real—the scene that individual decided to record as a photographic reproduction. Mechanical reproduction is ubiquitous with photography and art collectors finally came to understand that, evidenced by the popularity of photographic prints in virtually every art fair these days. Today the distinction between the

original and reproduction is lost, echoing what Baudrillard said: “simulation threatens the
difference between “true” and “false”, between “real” and “imaginary”. 139

**Image Production vs. Image Recycling**

While the terms appropriation and recycling are used interchangeably these days,
there is a slight difference in nuance. Both describe artists making works using photographs
made by others instead of their own. Appropriation is used more frequently with the 1980s
artists of the Pictures Generation and its connotation is usually associated with stealing.
Recycling is used more recently with a positive connotation, perhaps due to the increasing
concern for the environment. 140 It is critical to think about appropriation art from an
ecological point of view since the number of images on the Internet is directly correlated to
the number of physical servers that support and house digital data—a point that most people
do not think about when snapping photographs. For the environmentally conscientious
image-maker, it is crucial to pose and ponder the question—which serves the better purpose:
image production or image recycling?

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139 Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 5.

140 The word ‘appropriation’ has been used for decades but ‘recycling’ is a fairly new term that substitutes
for ‘appropriation’ occasionally. The first encounter with image recycling during my research for this thesis was
MacDonald and John S Weber (Brighton: Photoworks, Göttingen: Steidl, Saratoga Springs: Tang Museum at
Skidmore College, 2007). In 1989, the year which marked 150 years from photography’s invention, Schmid
declared, “No new photographs until the old ones have been used up!” Even before digital photography was
invented, Schmid identified the abundant production of vernacular photographs that seemed boundless, with no
controls. For his project, *Archiv*, Schmid founded The Institute for the Processing of Used Photographs in 1990
and advertised in magazines and newspapers, asking people to send him unwanted photographs that he would
recycle environmentally. In the advertisement, Schmid warned of the health threat that photographs possessed
due to the use of chemicals in processing films and making prints. He urged people to dispose and recycle
unwanted photographs properly and stated: “Participation in this recycling program is guaranteed free of
charge!” Schmid wrote this 24 years ago when the concern for environment was much less prevalent than it is
now. Further discussions on Schmid’s work are proffered in chapter three. John S. Weber, “Joachim Schmid
Stephen Bull makes a good case about artist’s solution to image overproduction in an essay in Joachim Schmid’s monograph:

Joan Fontcuberta, for instance, has recently argued that, ‘All of Schmid’s work is governed by a spirit of visual ecology: there is an excess of images in the world, therefore instead of contributing to that super saturation we should impose on ourselves a task of recycling, of salvage among the residue.’

Fontcuberta uses the vernacular “visual ecology” without providing a precise definition. From the quotes, one can sense that both Fontcuberta and Schmid are aware of image overproduction, which depletes resources due to the use of energy to run servers and data centers to accommodate the ever-increasing number of visual data made by the masses. “Visual ecology” implies that the images are commodities, which can contribute to image pollution (overwhelmingly over productions of images) and therefore society should minimize production and instead recycle images. Both Schmid and Fontcuberta are critical of the current trend and status of image overproduction and favor recycling. While 1980s artists often used images made by professionals, sourcing them from print media (newspapers and magazines), subsequent artists used vernacular photographs made by amateurs. Pictures Generation artists like Sherrie Levine (b. 1947), Barbara Kruger (b. 1945), and Richard Prince (b. 1949) appropriated images by re-photographing the source images. Their appropriations actually produced new images, contradictory to ecologically responsibility.

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141 Stephen Bull, “The Elusive Author: Found Photography, Authorship, and the Work of Joachim Schmid,” in *Joachim Schmid: Photoworks 1982-2007*, 62. Joachim Schmid has been appropriating found photographs since the 1990s and still continues doing so with online photographs. Joan Fontcuberta is an artist who utilizes found photographs. He is also a curator and an educator.

142 Some examples of younger generation of artists are Joachim Schmid (b. 1955), Penelope Umbrico (b. 1957), Roy Arden (b. 1957), Erik Kessels (b. 1966), Martin Crawl (b. 1967), Corinne Vionnet (b. 1969), and Marco Bohr (b. 1978), just to name a few.

143 Sherrie Levine re-photographed male photographers’ works like Walker Evans and Edward Weston, raising question of originality. Barbara Kruger re-photographed a collage of photographs and text, raising questions of gender, identity, and consumerism. Richard Prince re-photographed advertisements and magazines, raising questions of authorship and our culture.
Fontcuberta and Schmid were both aware of the abundance of images available and their
appropriation encompassed the actual recycling of existing images. Perhaps Umbrico is less
concerned with visual ecology and more concerned with making a statement through
appropriating other people’s photographs. Nonetheless, the result is that she is contributing to
visual ecology by recycling images.

Image production actually affects our physical space and the human condition on
earth. Individuals who make photographs and save them to their computers utilize storage
space either internally (on the computer) or externally (outside of the computer, for example,
on a cloud server). Those who upload images to the Internet need to have a modem, a router
and an Internet service provider. Even if one uses a smart phone to photograph and upload
images to the Internet, storage space on the phone is used and an Internet connection is
needed. Online images are stored on each website company’s data center (fig. 24) and this
takes up physical space in the form of memory. The image data themselves are not visible to
our eyes but they require physical space to store them. They also require a server to transmit
data from point A to point B. Internet companies like Google and Facebook operate data
centers in multiple locations.\footnote{Google says, “We own and operate data centers around the world to keep our products running 24 hours
a day, 7 days a week.” Google has 12 data center locations in seven countries.
http://www.google.com/about/datacenters/inside/locations/index.html (accessed April 12, 2014).}
The \textit{New York Times} conducted a yearlong research and
examination of the information industry for efficiency and environmental impact. It
of the report are profound and alarming.
James Glanz reported that data centers run 24/7 consuming vast amounts of energy in a wasteful manner—wasting more than 90 percent of energy.\footnote{Glanz, “Power, Pollution and the Internet.”} Google’s data center consumes 300 million watts and Facebook’s consumes 60 million watts of energy.\footnote{Ibid.} This relates to millions of dollars in energy costs.\footnote{In relation to my own monthly electricity bill, I calculated Facebook’s 60 million watts, which costs about 8 million dollars. Glanz’s article doesn’t indicate if the usage is monthly or yearly.} Although companies like Google, Facebook, Yahoo, and eBay are devising and actually utilizing reusable energy sources like wind and solar power, the sheer volume of the daily transmission of data is just too enormous and tremendous amounts of resources are ultimately expended.\footnote{Katie Fehrenbacher, “Facebook’s new data center in Iowa to be fully powered by wind,” \textit{GIGAOM}, November 13, 2013, accessed April 12, 2014, \url{http://gigaom.com/2013/11/13/facebooks-new-data-center-in-iowa-to-be-fully-powered-by-wind/}. Facebook, for instance, is planning to open its fourth data center in Iowa using wind technology.} To run a data center, servers, cooling systems (fig. 25), and generators are all required.\footnote{Ibid.} The goal of fast transmission of data with no errors or crashing of servers comes at a high price.\footnote{Ibid.} To achieve this, data centers run their systems all the time with the help of lead batteries and generators that emit diesel exhaust.\footnote{Ibid.} All in all, data centers take up land and facilities, consume tremendous amounts of energy, and pollute air quality. However, most of them get away with it and only few are fined for pollution.\footnote{Ibid.} Glanz wrote, “The complexity of a basic transaction is a mystery to most users: Sending a message with photographs to a neighbor could involve a trip through hundreds or thousands of miles of Internet conduits and multiple data centers
before the e-mail arrives across the street.” As consumers of data and participants of the Internet and members of social media websites, we are all partners in this crime.

People who make digital photographs believe that digital photography is ecologically responsible since one does not need to buy and use film and process actual prints on paper with chemicals. Some take pride in using a digital memory card that holds thousands of pictures that they can upload to a personal computer and websites. Some think they are saving money by using a digital camera. In reality, digital cameras contain mercury and other toxic chemicals. It is often the case that people upgrade their camera as new technology emerges. The most advanced camera can quickly become obsolete within a few years. Buying a decent quality digital camera is much more expensive than buying a film camera and companies make money by selling cameras at low prices and lenses at high prices.

Batteries for the digital camera also contain mercury. Producing and sharing images, whether analog or digital, consumes resources, time and effort, and furthermore, involves the consumption of energy and creation of environmental pollution in the form of air pollution from the data center and toxic landfills of used equipment. The more images uploaded to social media websites, the greater the demand or bigger data centers. For this reason, recycling images is a great environmental solution.

The circulation of sunset photographs from Flickr—the eco system of image recycling—is complex. The images Umbrico downloads from Flickr are used many times both by her and visitors to her exhibitions, creating a chain of image circulation and recycling. To understand Umbrico’s use of image circulation, assume person A and person B. A makes a photograph of the sunset and uploads it to Flickr. Umbrico sees A’s photo, downloads it and saves it to her computer. Umbrico decides to use A’s photo for her

154 Ibid.
exhibition and prints it out. Umbrico installs thousands of photos including A’s sunset photo. Person B goes to see Umbrico’s exhibition and takes a picture in front of her installation and posts on Flickr. In close up profile pictures of people in front of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, her work is only shown partially and functions almost as a decorative backdrop or wallpaper. Umbrico researches on Flickr and sees B’s picture of her installation and downloads the image. Umbrico makes a grid of pictures she downloaded including B’s picture. In B’s picture, there are sunset pictures made by many others including A’s. For an exhibition of *People in front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* (fig. 20), Umbrico prints out a collection of exhibition installation pictures including B’s. Although A, B and Umbrico never meet physically, they interact and collaborate knowingly (only through Umbrico) and unknowingly through sunset photographs.

Through this process, A’s photo appear at least four times on: A’s photo of the sunset, Umbrico’s print of A’s sunset, B’s photo of an exhibition installation, Umbrico’s print of B’s photo. The original photo that Umbrico first downloaded from Flickr is now seen as a background photo for B’s picture. Through pictures of other visitors to Umbrico’s exhibition, A’s photo could appear countless times. A’s picture is just one of 2,500 sunset picture that Umbrico selected in the first place. There are many other sunset pictures that go through a similar cycle. Umbrico recycles and recirculates sunset photographs fanatically, making the process an almost infinite exercise. Millions of sunset photographs are circulating on Flickr alone, yet more sunset photographs are added everyday. With digital technology, production

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156 Ibid.
and reproduction of images is out of control. It is hard to trace this overwhelming operation in its totality and there is no one who can stop society’s image consumption.

The Internet as a Database and Cultural Archive

Since its inception, photography functioned as an archival form. From daguerreotype to carte de visite to gelatin silver prints, photographic prints have served as proof of a memory, event or experience—invented to be preserved. The moment captured in a photograph is always unique as is each moment in time. Before the abundant presence of economical one-hour photo labs, photographic prints were treated as precious objects—something to store in albums, frames, and boxes—and treasure for years. In contrast to analogue photography’s physicality in the form of an object, digital photographs are comprised of data with visual information; therefore a collection of digital photographs can be called a database. Artists working with online images create a database that functions as an archive of digital photographs.

Lev Manovich’s “Database” defines database as “a structured collection of data” for fast search and retrieval, but without hierarchy.\textsuperscript{157} Manovich views database as a cultural form that is “a new symbolic form of the computer age.”\textsuperscript{158} He asserts that the world is reduced to two kinds of software objects: data structures and algorithms.\textsuperscript{159} Data structure is the way data is organized for efficient search and retrieval, such as CD-ROMs and Web databases.\textsuperscript{160} Algorithm is “a final sequence of simple operations that a computer can execute

\textsuperscript{157} Manovich, “Database,” 218. All the data is equally regarded without hierarchy.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 219.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 223.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
to accomplish a given task.”¹⁶¹ Manovich asserts that database corresponds to data structure whereas narratives and computer games correspond to algorithm.¹⁶² The data creator collects and organizes data in a way that necessitates active involvement from the user.¹⁶³

To further his discussion of “database/narrative opposition,” Manovich compares syntagm and paradigm—semiological theory originally developed by Ferdinand de Saussure.¹⁶⁴ Syntagm is a combination of signs that string together in a linear sequence—explicit and real.¹⁶⁵ Paradigm is related elements grouped together—implicit and imagined.¹⁶⁶ Manovich asserts that database is implicit (paradigm), from which the narrative is constructed while narrative is explicit (syntagm) with material existence.¹⁶⁷ However, with new media, this relationship is reversed.¹⁶⁸ Database (paradigm) is given material existence while narrative (syntagm) is dematerialized.¹⁶⁹ One example is the film-editing software, Adobe Premiere, where a database consists of elements (images, buttons, video footages and audio clips) and a narrative links these elements from the database and constructs them into sequences; thus the database exits materially while the narrative exits virtually.¹⁷⁰ Manovich sees photography and digital computer as mediums for the database and film as a medium for narrative.¹⁷¹ His focus is on database-narrative problems in cinema. Manovich ultimately concludes the essay by urging new media artists to learn “how to merge database and

¹⁶¹ Ibid.
¹⁶² Ibid., 226.
¹⁶³ Ibid., 224.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 230.
¹⁶⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid.
¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 231
¹⁶⁸ Ibid.
¹⁶⁹ Ibid.
¹⁷⁰ Ibid.
¹⁷¹ Ibid., 233.
narrative into a new form." Looking at Umbrico’s work, her process and work is centered on database but they do not have the narrative. Umbrico’s grid is a collection of items (database) without any story (narrative).

Manovich proffers that the Internet is where database form really flourishes. The Internet has been both a mining ground and platform for new media artists since the 1990s. The Internet stores a vast number of databases and thus functions as a cultural archive. The Internet’s searchability is instantaneous. With metadata, tag, and key words, a search is quick and easy. The Internet houses up-to-date information as well as older documents of historical importance (e.g. Google Scholar). Social media with its live streaming of updates and newsfeeds supply the most up to date status for personal, national, and international news and events. Postings from the previous month would be called an “archive” in the blog world.

The Internet is the face of our time, encompassing all areas of human activities, including cultural, political, technological, historical, and recreational. For this reason, the Internet provides endless possibilities and inspiration to contemporary artists.

In this vein, Umbrico functions as an archivist, documentarian, social commentator, editor, and curator of online photographs and she presents her viewpoint on current image culture. While 1980s artists would clip newspapers and magazines for their archives, Umbrico downloads JPEG files from the Internet. Instead of making physical folders, she

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172 Ibid., 243. The essay was written in 1998. Manovich gave credit to two movie directors for their attempt and success in merging database and narrative. They are Peter Greenway and Dziga Vertov. He discussed in length Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* as “the most important example of a database imagination in modern media art.” Lev Manovich, “Database,” 239.

173 Ibid., 220.

174 Lev Manovich, “What is New Media?” in *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The MIT Press, 2001), 19. Lev Manovich defined new media art as “the use of a computer for distribution and exhibition rather than production.” He explains, “Accordingly, texts distributed on a computer (Websites and electronic books) are considered to be new media, whereas texts distributed on paper are not. Similarly, photographs that are put on a CD-ROM and require a computer to be viewed are considered new media; the same photographs printed in a book are not.”

175 Umbrico, *Penelope Umbrico*, 7. In an interview with Steel Stillman, Umbrico said she is more of a documentarian or an archivist.
creates a virtual folder system on her computer. Without having an adequate archival system, her creative process would not be well organized as she downloads thousands of picture files. Umbrico maintains file names that were given by the original creators on Flickr.\textsuperscript{176} Images that are used for a particular exhibition are in the same folder so that she can locate them quickly later.

The Internet as an archival resource provides convenience and economy (free of charge) to artists Appropriating online photographs. With analog prints, people had to go to estate sales, flea markets, and eBay to buy photographs, although some artists like Joachim Schmid roamed the streets to scavenge photos. With digital photographs, one just needs to sit at the computer with access to the Internet, there are endless possibilities to access photographs. Google alone contributes vast amounts of the information world with great searchability: Google Images, Google Earth, Google Scholar, Google Street View (GSV), and Google Art Project, each cover different areas of specialization.\textsuperscript{177} Canadian artist, Jon Rafman (b. 1981), has been working on \textit{9-eyes} (2008-ongoing) (fig. 26) with GSV photos he has been collecting.\textsuperscript{178} American artist Doug Rickard (b. 1968) screen grabbed 10,000 GSV images, rephotographed them with a 35-mm camera, and made adjustments using Photoshop. Rickard’s work is called \textit{A New American Picture} (2008-2012) (fig. 27) and is widely

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{176} Umbrico, interview by author.
\textsuperscript{177} Google Images was launched in 2001, which allows users to search online images. Google Earth was launched in 2005 and shows satellite images of the earth. With search field, one types in address and Google Earth will show satellite view of the location. Google Street View was launched in 2007, taking images of street views with Google street view cameras. Now it is capable of showing 360-degree street-level imagery. Google Art Project was launched in 2011 in partnership with participating art institutions around the world to give access to museum collections online. Virtual tours of the inside of the institutions are enabled as if one is walking into the actual space.
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published and exhibited. The works of Rafman and Rickard are modern day versions of Walker Evans (1903-1975) and Lee Friedlander (b. 1934), but instead of making their own photographs on the streets, they are using images made available by modern technology. Both artists have extensive archives of online photographs that serve as source materials for their works.

In this environment of the Internet as an archive, Flickr made several important contributions. First, Flickr offered a tagging system from its incipient stage, making images searchable. Flickr’s “World Map” utilizes tagging by region, which currently has 1,433,946 geotagged images. Secondly, Flickr provides one terabyte of storage space for a free account. Photographers can use Flickr to upload, organize, store, and share images and it can serve as a back up storage system in case their hard disk gets corrupted. The total number of images uploaded to Flickr now exceeds 10 billion. This means there is an archive of 10 billion vernacular photographs in one place. Thirdly, with “The Commons,” Flickr hosts the world’s public photo archives online, currently with 82 participating institutions. Forthly, with “The Flickr Collection on Getty Images,” Flickr is building up a stock photography

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180 Walker Evans is famous for his documentary work for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). His work from this period was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art with the publication of *Walker Evans: American Photographs*. Lee Friedlander is famous for landscapes and cityscapes across America. His work was included in the important exhibition “New Documents,” curated by John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art in 1967.


market with images made by Flickr members.\textsuperscript{184} Flickr is not currently the most popular photo-sharing website but its focus is always on photography and its practice revolves around organizing, archiving, and sharing photographs.\textsuperscript{185} Flickr’s archive comprises many areas of photography: vernacular, historical, and commercial. Most importantly, they are in one place.

### Digital Photographs as Commodities

It is important to acknowledge the current trend of artists’ uses of photographic archives and their claim to be photographers. It is, however, also reasonable to ask: Why is it happening now more than ever before? Perhaps it has something to do with the overwhelming creation and uses of photographs by the general public and photographers themselves, accelerated by digital technology. An image is a commodity; it is made and consumed quickly or rather, images are made for consumption. The life of an image is fairly short; most images are made, seen and forgotten within a few seconds. Although smartphones provide several gigabytes to store photographs and videos, it is a short-term solution. When the device’s memory and storage capacity is used up, the data needs to be erased or transferred. In this process, images are either deleted or moved to different storage devices (internal or external) where they will eventually be forgotten.

Instagram is a good example.\textsuperscript{186} Once one takes a picture with a smartphone using the Instagram application downloaded from an App store, one is immediately asked to choose a


\textsuperscript{185} The most image uploaded website is Facebook. Instagram, owned by Facebook has more daily photo uploads than Flickr.

\textsuperscript{186} Instagram: http://instagram.com. Instagram was launched in October 2010. Users can take a picture in square format and go through choice of filters that have vintage Polaroid look.
filter to enhance the image.\textsuperscript{187} Once the filter is applied to the image, it gets uploaded to the Instagram site and appears on the newsfeed for other people to see and perhaps “like” or comment, but the image gets buried when new images are added. As soon as one sees an image, the next image is already there to attract one’s attention.\textsuperscript{188} The advantage in using Instagram is its ability to make, edit, and upload photographs instantly in one application. This not only saves time but also consolidates the photo activities. Instagram’s users and daily image uploads far exceed Flickr. This is reflective of people’s relationship to the images; they prefer a quick and easy image-making tool that enables them to communicate fast.\textsuperscript{189} That may be the reason why the microblogging application Tweeter has become popular, surpassing in popularity of regular blogging websites like Wordpress and Blogger.\textsuperscript{190} Instant communication is the key.

Not surprisingly, Facebook acquired Instagram in April 2012, consolidating the image-uploading market. Daniel Palmer calls this move evidence of “a strong desire to monetize the popular transaction of images.” He also argues, “Photo apps are thus an exemplary commodity of digital capitalism, an ‘immaterial’ consumer product that enlists the

\textsuperscript{187} Currently there are 20 filter choices, which resemble vintage Polaroid looks with de-saturated or saturated colors and strong contrast. ‘Normal’ filter is the only filter that doesn’t enhance the look.


\textsuperscript{189} Instagram posted that it has 150 million monthly active users, 16 billion photos shared, 1.2 billion Likes per day, and 55 million average photos daily. Instagram Press News, accessed March 20, 2014, http://instagram.com/press. Flickr has 51 million registered members with over 6 billion total photographs on its site. Van Dijck, 90. Instagram’s hashtag of sunset yielded a result of 26,367,775 as of March 22, 2014. This amount far exceeds Flickr, which is six years older than Instagram. Hashtag is a metadata tag that is used in social media websites, such as Instagram, Tumblr, and Tweeter. A keyword is immediately followed by # symbol that is useful when searching the term. In Instagram, there are two search categories: username and hashtags. To determine the number of sunset posts, I searched #sunset under the hashtags, which yielded immediate search results of 26,367,775 followed by tagged images.

\textsuperscript{190} Microblogging is quick, easy, and a simpler way to post a blog compared to older blogging platforms like Wordpress and Blogspot. Currently, the most popular microblogging website is Tweeter. Each tweeter post can have up to 140 characters with attachment of image, link, and text. Other people can retweet, which will appear on their tweeter page for their followers to see. Following tweeter means to get notification of new tweets from the person one is following. With the use of hashtags, a post can be searchable by others. Tweeter currently has 241 million monthly active users and 500 million tweets per day. Tweeter/ About, accessed April 6, 2014, https://about.twitter.com/company. Tweeter: https://twitter.com, Wordpress: https://wordpress.com, Blogger: www.blogger.com.
energies of amateur production resulting in their becoming commodities on on-line services.\textsuperscript{191} Facebook, for example, has a database of user information analyzed by the person’s use of JPEG images through tags and likes.\textsuperscript{192} This database is useful for advertisers to match interests and needs of individuals. The image, as a commodity, plays the central role in monetizing for both Facebook and its advertisers.

A more recent venture to join this quick social image sharing practice is Snapchat, which was launched in 2011.\textsuperscript{193} A user can take a picture or make a video, send it to a list of people, and the image will live in the other person’s phone device between 1-10 seconds and get deleted from the Snapchat server. Although the new features allow an image to live for a 24-hour period, there is even another option to save the picture onto one’s photo album on the phone and also make a screen capture of a received image, the images are meant to live only for a few seconds. Deletion from the server is callous and robotic, without consideration of fact that the image once had a life. Nowadays the relationship between images and people is intimate and personal, yet also instantaneous. The fact that images can be made by quick snaps and the same images can be deleted after a few seconds reflect people’s attitude; photographs are quick, easy discardable commodities.

The advancement of technology and the widespread use of the Internet changed people’s attitudes and lifestyles. Convenience and speed permeate our daily life. The Internet enables people to perform online banking, shopping, academic researching, and getting information on anything and everything. Social media websites enable people to connect to far away places wherever Internet service is available. We live in a world commodity of

\textsuperscript{191} Palmer, “The Rhetoric of the JPEG,” 158. Photo apps are photo applications developed for smart phones and range from photo enhancing to photo editing to photo uploading programs. Some apps are free while others charge from 99 cents and above.

\textsuperscript{192} Caplan, “What Is a JPEG?”

goods and services. Many things can be done or obtained by a few clicks on the Internet. Because there is so much information available on the Internet and we are constantly distracted by instant message and emails, to reflect on anything is not easy. There is even an application called Instapaper where one can save websites to go back and read later.\footnote{Instapaper: \url{https://www.instapaper.com}. Instapaper was launched in January 2008. Betaworks acquired it in Spring of 2013. Instapaper Press, accessed April 6, 2014, \url{https://www.instapaper.com/press}.}

People are busy and things move fast. Our own experience is saved onto a digital device in pictures and videos. Instead of enjoying the moment, people are busy taking pictures and logging into social media websites to share and exchange comments with others. Our experience is commodified through social media websites and the Internet. Do we enjoy life due to the advances in technology or do we end up being controlled by it?

**Digital Photography and Consumerism**

*Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* reflects upon the relationship between digital photography and consumerism. The majority of the population at large owns some sort of image-making device: a film camera, a digital camera, a camera phone, a tablet computer (like Apple’s iPad), or an mp3 player such as an iPod with a camera function. More than likely, most of these people also connect to the Internet. All such gadgetry and technology encompass the purchasing of products and services in order to make images and upload them to the Internet. These image-making devices enable images to become commodities. With the advancement of digital technology, images can be made quickly and easily. The images can just as easily then be uploaded to share on websites. There is no lead or waiting time as there was when one had to finish shooting a roll of film, drop it off for developing and prints. Even the one-hour photo labs took a minimum of one hour. Nowadays be it through a smartphone...
or tablet pc, images can be made and downloaded within seconds. Immediacy and spontaneity are now taken for granted. This convenience comes at a cost; people pay more for products like smart phones with an Internet connection than having simpler phones with no Internet connection.

Technology-related capitalism is now deeply embedded into the society. While most digital devices have many functions and high quality beyond one’s need, new product releases frequent the market with regularity. With upgrades, added functions and higher quality, these products lure potential buyers accumulate “outdated” digital waste at home. There are online boards where discussions about new technology and gear are all the rage. Since photography’s development goes hand in hand with science and technology, we are bombarded with new products everyday. Compared to any other artistic medium, photography is tightly connected to consumer markets, which explains society’s commodification of images.

Social Media Websites and The Online Community

February 2014 marks both Flickr and Facebook’s ten-year anniversary. Facebook is the second most visited website after Google. This reveals a lot about the societal function and role of social media websites. Instead of keeping photographs in their memory card or computer, the decision to put one’s private photographs into the vulnerable Internet world is a portrayal of our societal values and mores. Why do people share their private moments with

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others? Why is it so important to share? This phenomenon goes beyond Sontag’s assertion of experiencing through photographing. Here, images function as a tool for socializing on the Internet. Images are a way to display one’s lifestyle and self-image. The social function of images plays a major role in our society.

In a recent panel discussion, “Documentary Expanded: Interventions in Social Media” at the Aperture Foundation, Teru Kuwayama, a photojournalist and a photography advisor to Facebook and Instagram said, “What makes social media better is the personal connection and strength of bond,” thereby answering photojournalist Susan Meiselas’s question, “What can social media do to help us?” The social component and connectivity are strengths of social media websites. Kuwayama sees the merit of using social media websites as the capability of “eliminating middlemen” such as editors, publishers, and operators. Having such freedom from any editorial control, one can literally post anything and be free from constraints such as waiting for an editor’s approval. This freedom of expression is usually taken for granted and yet most people create similar content. Personal websites, blogs and social media pages, seem to follow templates of some sort. For example, vacation pictures usually constitute individuals or families featuring their own photos with beautiful scenery or landmarks. Umbrico called this “visual script” when characterizing sunset photographs on Flickr. Perhaps because people are exposed to the same content through mass media, they end up making similar things. We are copying and repeating each other.

197 “Documentary Expanded: Interventions in Social Media” was a panel discussion held at Aperture Foundation on February 25, 2014. The panel was a part of three-part discussions in association with newly released Aperture magazine publication, “Documentary, Expanded,” Aperture 214 (Spring 2014).
198 Although there are censorship on image nudity and use of copyrighted music for personal videos in the case of Facebook, not having a middleman gives quick and easy posting for users.
Connectivity is what sums up social media. Posts on the Internet can reach far and wide in a matter of seconds. Furthermore, people can respond and have discussions about images in live time without delay. These instantaneous responses among users make social media an appealing place to gather even if it is a virtual space. It also enables Umbrico to find her exhibition installation pictures without travelling. All this is possible because an incredibly large number of people take the time and energy to share pictures online and actively engage in commenting. The Internet is fairly democratic. People don’t have to be accepted into museums and galleries to show their photos online nor do they need to have any qualifications in order to post an image or text. The democracy of images makes photography a more ubiquitous medium. Through technological innovation, image-making has become second nature requiring little thought. As a result, we are bombarded with the reductive use of photography, like the many sunset photographs in *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*.

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The JPEG standard and the Internet both contributed enormously to enhance our connectivity and ability to communicate using images. Photo-sharing and social media websites provide a venue and method to easily enter someone else’s life. People make pictures of virtually everything and share them with others. Photography enables one to experience something and preserve memories. While technological advancements in digital photography provide us with new tools, functions and more freedom than analog photography, a question arises: does it make us more creative or homogeneous? With all the tools to explore and liberty to publish online, why do people still make similar looking pictures all the time? What is the impulse for them to upload those pictures that we have seen
so many times? Does this reflect something larger than the incessant itself? Does one outweigh the other—the weight of the fast-paced overgrowth of this repetitive act or the thread of the need for dependence and community stringing the majority of image-sharers, image-takers, and image-viewers alike? Another factor to consider is that technology comes with a cost, depleting enormous resources. We are living in a continuously accelerating world in which the majority of people probably do not pose and ponder upon these issues. Umbrico’s work intends us to think about how we tend to treat photography and the image as a commodity. Our resulting casual attitudes can become stifling in the making and sharing of this information. What does this reflect about us societally, as constantly growing and malleable individuals?
CHAPTER 3. Typological Variations and Authorship of Appropriation Art

The format of the grid affects the way Umbrico’s images are perceived. She utilizes scale to enhance the impact of her grid. When Umbrico places her expansive grids of small photographs across a single wall, viewers are faced with countless tiny images so they must utilize their peripheral vision, as well as their imagination, to take in the work. An essential component of Umbrico’s work is that every single image she displays is not hers. She collects and appropriates her images from the Internet, all with the same generic subject matter. Members of Flickr who object to this appropriation and close followers of fair use court-cases alike fuel the growing discourse surrounding the ways Umbrico’s work questions authorship and ownership. Is she stealing others’ images that they made themselves? What is really at stake when she emphatically points out that she did not make but merely collected all of them from a steps-removed and accessible JPEG located on the Internet? Surely, Umbrico evokes the questions of what constitutes ownership and when is it legally and or morally permissible to appropriate the work of another? Umbrico’s work and her own social commentary question the tendency of the generic propensity to photograph the same scene, the same sunset, the same sunrise, the same feet, legs, or couple on a beach. This tendency is something nearly every casual photographer shares, yet ironically this phenomenon, which millions of peoples partake in, is done without awareness of its generic and repetitive nature.

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The Grid: Visual Democracy and the Power of Repetition

Umbrico’s prominent use of the grid format in her works parallels modern artists such as Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and Sol LeWitt (1928-2007), both of whom also relied on it as a formal choice. In her critical essay Grids (1979), Rosalind Krauss elaborated on the
function of the grid in two ways: spatial and temporal: “In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal.” In the temporal sense, Krauss asserted that “the grid is an emblem of modernity” that was not seen in the 19th century art. Krauss suggested that the grid is the art of the present, started from art movements and artists in the beginning of the 20th century, such as cubism, de Stijl, Modrian, and Malevich. Although Krauss referred the examples of grids in the 15th and 16th centuries in perspective studies by Leonardo da Vinci, she acknowledged that perspective was “the science of the real.” She asserted that with perspective, “reality and its representation could be mapped onto one another” as in the “painted image” and “its real-world referent.” On the other hand, the grid does not map a space onto a painting. It maps the surface of the painting itself. Krauss argued that the grid is schizophrenic, which can be read in a centrifugal or centripetal existence of work of art. In centrifugal reading, the grid is a fragment that outwardly extends beyond the limit of the frame. In centripetal reading, the grid is a “re-presentation of everything that separates the work of art from the world, from ambient space and from other objects.” It maps the surface inside of the frame and is a mode of repetition. When considering Mondrian’s work, Krauss conceded that separating centrifugal and centripetal readings could

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201 Ibid.
202 Ibid., 52.
203 Ibid.
204 Ibid.
205 Ibid.
206 Ibid.
207 Ibid. Krauss wrote, “Indeed, if it maps anything, it maps the surface of the painting itself.”
208 Ibid., 60
209 Ibid.
210 Ibid., 61
211 Ibid.
be conflicting sometimes.\textsuperscript{212} What is relevant for this thesis is Krauss’s assertion that grids are “visual structures that explicitly reject a narrative or sequential reading of any kind.”\textsuperscript{213} Umbrico’s grids negate any linear narrative.

In photography, the grid serves two major roles: implying motion by using successive frames and archiving typological variations. When a photograph is taken, motion is captured in the form of a still image. When successive frames of this captured-motion are placed next to each other, as in a grid, an illusion of movement (moving images) is created. Eadweard James Muybridge (1830-1904) was the first photographer to experiment with such in still photography. A particularly important experiment was Muybridge’s \textit{The Horse in Motion} (1878) (fig. 28), where he set up twelve cameras at a stable in Palo Alto, California and photographed a galloping horse to capture each different leg position throughout the horse’s motion.\textsuperscript{214} Muybridge projected this series of successive frames of a galloping horse on screen at the California School of Arts two years later in 1880, this being the birth of motion pictures.\textsuperscript{215}

The archiving of typological variations involves the collection and categorization of images in accordance to their type, which in turn, renders it an archive of taxonomies. The dictionary term for typology is “a system used for putting things into groups according to how they are similar.”\textsuperscript{216} Only when a group of photographs is put together, do images together start to convey a collective meaning. Umbrico’s work falls into this category. Bernd Becher (1931-2007) and Hilla Becher (b. 1934), a husband and wife team, are the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 61-63. Krauss asserted that Mondrian’s paintings from the same period could be read as centrifugal and centripetal depending on each painting.

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 55

\textsuperscript{214} Michel Frizot, \textit{A New History of Photography} (Cologne, Germany: Könemann, 1994), 247.


\textsuperscript{216} Merriam-Webster, accessed April 6, 2014, \url{http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/typology}.
\end{footnotesize}
forerunners of this. Since the late 1950s, the Bechers have typologically documented industrial structures, such as water towers, coalmine tipples, and industrial façades via frontal views. The Bechers photographed each structure in black and white, framed each image individually, and then arranged them together in the form of the grid (fig. 29). When hung closely together and viewed as a group, the stillness of the frontal portraits of industrial structures radiates a strange power. They take on an almost human aspect, despite being constructed of industrial materials.\textsuperscript{217} Charlotte Cotton defined their achievement in photography: “The Bechers have been instrumental in rephrasing vernacular photography into highly considered artistic strategies, in part as a way of investing art photography with visual and mental connections to history and the everyday.”\textsuperscript{218} ‘History’ and ‘everyday’ are keywords for vernacular photography that provide insight to the human condition of a given period.

Joachim Schmid is a German artist who has been working with found photos since the 1980s, salvaging them from the streets and recycling bins and presenting them in the form of a grid. In 1990, Schmid advertised in local newspapers and magazines asking people to send him unwanted photographs so that they could be ecologically recycled by “The Institute for the Reprocessing of Used Photographs.”\textsuperscript{219} It was a ruse by Schmid but much to his surprise, he received a lot of photographs.\textsuperscript{220} In his prolific career spanning more than 30 years, Schmid used the grid for Archiv (1986-1999) (fig. 30) project. Archiv consists of 726

\textsuperscript{217} The Bechers’ photographs are reminiscent of portraits by August Sander and other photographers who photographed frontal views of people. Although the Bechers’ photographs are of man-made buildings, their compositions mimic human portraits with a closer view, rather than typical architectural photographs of buildings with wide views photographed from a distance.

\textsuperscript{218} Charlotte Cotton, \textit{The Photograph as Contemporary Art}, second edition (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2009), 16.

\textsuperscript{219} Bull, “The Elusive Author,” 62.

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
panels, each in 40x50 cm with two to sixty images. Schmid arranged each panel with visual themes that he sourced from a wide scope of found images, such as a man with a camel in the desert (fig. 31), a man and woman posing in front of a car, and a couple holding a flower bouquet on a wedding day.

Each panel with multiple photographs of the same subject matter—from different countries, cities, and streets—reflects a universal repertoire of vernacular snapshot conventions. John S. Weber sees Schmid’s Archive as at “once a history, a commentary, and a celebration of the mundane weirdness of commonplace photography.” This is further elaborated upon by his comment: “specific and private individual experiences aggregate as shared photographic habits.” Weber is suggesting that Schmid is trying to prove that even if a photograph captured one’s most private and unique experience, there were plenty of others who produced virtually the same photo as well. This is the very point that Umbrico has been tirelessly promulgating when discussing her Suns from Sunsets from Flickr.

Umbrico’s work bears resemblance to Schmid’s as she tries to convey society’s shared experiences through the careful arrangement and presentation of sunset photographs. Umbrico comments, “Perhaps part of the beauty of taking a picture of a sunset is that while you are doing it it’s likely that a million other people are doing it as well – at exactly the same time.” It is easy to spot this pattern by looking at any of the social media websites. While Schmid utilizes volume (726 panels), Umbrico utilizes volume (2,100 sun pictures) and scale (some as long as 44 feet). Schmid’s grid is continuously spread out in the connecting walls or adjacent room perhaps while in contrast, Umbrico’s grid embodies one

224 Penelope Umbrico, artist statement for Suns from Sunsets from Flickr, email message to author, April 3, 2014.
large installation in one place, creating a monumentality that immediately requires the person’s full attention.

When viewing Umbrico’s grid, it is difficult for the viewer to focus on one spot. There are thousands of suns equally spaced; no one sun is more important than the other. All are treated equally inside of the grid. The only difference is placement—top, bottom, right, left, center, edge, and so on. Umbrico stated: “I like the installation to fill a space and to fill the viewer’s range of vision, to emphasize the large number and multiplicity of this kind of photograph, taken all over the world of—yes!—the exact same object.” Without having one focal point, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* commands the viewers’ peripheral vision. According to Robert Carleton Hobbs, “Peripheral vision usually refers to unfocused vision, but it also, as in the case of looking at [Adolph] Gottlieb’s pictographs, can designate the indirect vision predominating with constantly shifting foci. Between the viewer’s shifting from focal point to focal point, there are subliminal instants when his vision is out of focus and thereby peripheral.”

When an image has no main subject matter and has thousands of similar looking elements, the resultant visual paranoia provides no brake or exit point. Her grid even suggests the possibility that more pictures can be added at any time. Krauss talked about the unfinished look of the grid: “By virtue of the grid, the given work of art is presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric.” Krauss’s assertion can be applied to Umbrico’s work. Umbrico’s sun pictures are pulled from millions of sunset photographs on Flickr. This fragmented representation is thus a partial view of the

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226 Krauss, 60. This fits into Krauss’s centrifugal reading of the grid.
whole, as Umbrico writes in her title, *10,291,373 Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial)* 01/12/12. According to the wall size, Umbrico’s grid can be extended or contracted, but in whatever dimensional format, her grids will be always fragments of the whole. From a more extended and “meta” perspective, because there are always a growing number of sunset-images online and on Flickr, even if Umbrico exhibited all 10,291,373 collected suns at once, that grid would still be a part of a larger whole.

Krauss’s spatial aspect of the grid (flattened, geometricized, ordered, antinatural, antimimetic, and antireal) is pertinent in discussing the grid comprised of digital pictures. The perfect grid is made by a machine or mechanical tool. By nature a grid consists of exact 90-degree angles and straight lines. The human hand, no matter how stable, cannot create perfect lines. For Umbrico, the grid is the ideal tool to organize digital files that are comprised of many tiny pixels with precise edges and alignments. Perhaps for this reason, many artists started using the grid with digital photographs. Lev Manovich’s *Selficity* (2013) (fig. 32) and Natalia Rojas’s *The Face of Facebook* (2013) are two recent examples. Like Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, Manovich’s *Selficity* and Rojas’s *The Face of Facebook* emphasize the sheer number of digital images made by the masses. In both cases, the portraits were made in order to be uploaded to social media. Natalia Rojas’s *The Face of Facebook*, is a web project that contains more than 1.2 billion Facebook profiles on a single webpage in grid format. The website’s cover page is seemingly comprised of billions of miniscule meaningless dots of diverse colors (fig. 33) but the information passage by Rojas explains that each dot is actually the (highly) minimized photograph of a particular Facebook profile. When the viewer clicks on any particular dot, that particular Facebook profile becomes enlarged and a decipherable image of that person can be seen (fig. 34). It is hard to
say if Umbrico influenced these two artists to use the grid format, but they more likely were exposed to *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* through exhibitions and publications. Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* has become an iconic work, not only representative of her style but influential to others who followed her.

**Authorship, Ownership, and Fair Use**

Since Umbrico appropriates images created by others, her process raises the issue of authorship. After Umbrico’s exhibition and artist talk at the New York Photo Festival in 2008, she was accused of stealing others’ images and being lazy as an artist, while at the same time, her work gained popularity among visitors and critics.\(^{227}\) Umbrico included such views of her work in her Aperture monograph:

> Interesting lectures including one infuriating one on people who “appropriate” images from Flickr, create a new piece from them while claiming that they aren’t really stealing anything since “anyone could take the picture” Yikes. Made me want to take my photos off Flickr altogether.\(^{228}\)

Another user commented in response to this post:

> Her claim is that “nobody owns the circle of the sun.” I think she is being dishonest (at least with herself) and lazy (not even showing the courtesy to ask people if she can use their work) – there I said it. Although I liked this work among the very best in the show.\(^{229}\)

The first commentator accused Umbrico of stealing images. The second criticized Umbrico for being lazy, not making her own photographs and also for not obtaining the permission of the maker of the photograph to use it in her work. These people focus on the moral and legal

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\(^{227}\) Umbrico. *Penelope Umbrico*, 1. Umbrico’s work was discussed in many of the media coverage, which attests to the public and media’s interest in her work among many other works that were exhibited at the New York Photo Festival. Umbrico mentioned that she was accused of stealing photographs but she did not specify any individual. She said this during the Aperture Foundation’s studio visit to Penelope Umbrico on October 26, 2013.

\(^{228}\) Ibid.

\(^{229}\) Ibid.
aspects of her practice. While their criticisms are reasonable, appropriation artists rarely ask for permission. Umbrico was never sued for intellectual property infringement for her appropriation and she never claimed ownership of them. Umbrico functions as collector, editor, social commentator and curator.

Umbrico’s work evokes strong emotions such as anger and incredulity. Interestingly, Umbrico seeks out such criticism using Flickr. The most common complaint is that Umbrico appropriates photos taken by others without even asking permission. This criticism demonstrates Flickr users’ strong feeling about ownership of their pictures on Flickr, even though those who posted pejorative comments about Umbrico didn’t have their pictures “stolen.” Thus, their sentiments are motivated not by any personal experience of being wronged, but by Umbrico’s methodology. Their caustic criticism about image ownership and the copyright issue, while logical, are not supported by the laws of the United States.\(^\text{230}\)

Copyright ownership is not absolute. The permission of the creator of the work, meaning the owner of the copyright or the assignee, the person who the copyright owner transfers ownership rights to, is not needed in every instance. Fair use is the use of someone’s copyrighted work for a social commentary or academic or research purpose. For instance, a scholar could use a photo taken by another without permission to make a point or proffer an argument. Copyrights are protected by federal as opposed to state laws in the United States. Section 107 of the federal law, addresses fair use:

Section 107 contains a list of the various purposes for which the reproduction of a particular work may be considered fair, such as criticism, comment, news

\(^{230}\) Some professional photographers put watermarks on images to protect them from copyright infringement. Some people do not put watermarks simply because they do not want to disturb their images. Some others do not bother to think deeply about copyright issues because they enjoy making photos and share with others from an amateur perspective. To copyright images, one needs to go to the US Copyright Office website and file an online application for a $35 fee. This process is tedious for amateurs but it is advisable for professionals who rely on income from their photographs. US Copyright Office, “How to Register a Work,” accessed April 12, 2014, http://www.copyright.gov/eco/.
reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research. Section 107 also sets out four factors to be considered in determining whether or not a particular use is fair.

1. The purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of commercial nature or is for nonprofit education purposes
2. The nature of the copyrighted work
3. The amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole
4. The effect of the use upon the potential market for, or value of, the copyrighted work

Number 3, above, addresses the critical issue here. If a work is transformed, others beside the copyright owner can use the derivative form even for a commercial purpose. Transformation is the process by which the original work undergoes a change so that it is different in character, purpose and content to the point that the work no longer retains the initial identity or essence and hence, no actual copyright infringement has taken place. The transformation doctrine has been applied to exonerate artists who appropriated work, even for profit. If Umbrico were to be sued for copyright infringement by one of the makers of a sun that was downloaded to Flickr, substantial transformation would be the doctrine relied upon by her lawyers. What is problematic about this is that within a series, some works may be exonerated from copyright infringement based on this doctrine while others will not. Moreover, the federal court system is divided into districts and there is no guarantee, as with other issues, that there will be a uniform standard applied since each judge is different and hence, there is a subjective element in the adjudication of all lawsuits.

With Richard Prince’s recent lawsuit on fair use, the issue of authorship has become even more high stakes and germane among contemporary artists. Richard Prince

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232 U.S. Copyright Office on Fair Use, accessed March 14, 2014, http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html. US Copyright Office states that the “fair use” can be determined case by case. The language used is obscure and their statement does not give any specific information. The following is from the website: “The distinction between what is fair use and what is infringement in a particular case will not always be clear or easily defined.
appropriated pictures from Patrick Cariou’s book, Yes Rasta (Powerhouse, 2000) and exhibited the series as Canal Zone at Gagosian Gallery in New York in 2008. In one of his works, Prince used Cariou’s entire image and painted orbs on the face and inserted collages on a small part (fig. 35). Cariou, a professional, photographed Rastafarians in Jamaica in the mid-1990s while he lived there for six years. He brought a copyright infringement action against Prince in 2009. Cariou prevailed for the initial district court trial on the grounds of infringement, that court ordered that any remaining unsold works and the catalog of Prince be impounded and then destroyed. Prince immediately filed an emergency appeal to stay the destruction order and to rehear the issue. Prince won on appeal and the appellate court ruled that social commentary about Cariou’s work was not a necessary element of a fair use defense. One of the three judges that decided the case did, however, issue a partial dissent comment. The petition to have the Supreme Court hear the case was denied.

Besides the fact that Prince used Cariou’s photos without permission, Prince sold some of his paintings and collages for over one million dollars while Cariou made a nominal sum from his books and exhibition prints. Prestigious art institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and Andy Warhol Foundation filed a “friend of the court” brief to support

There is no specific number of words, lines, or notes that may safely be taken without permission. Acknowledging the source of the copyrighted material does not substitute for obtaining permission.”


Prince’s art. The art world was alerted to protect appropriation artists and freedom of art making but photographers were siding with Cariou, emphasizing copyrights and intellectual property. Cariou did all the legwork: travelling to Jamaica, photographing local people, publishing books and having exhibitions, all of which took time, energy, and money. Prince, by scanning pictures from the book, skipped the groundwork and expense. His lawyers argued that his appropriation gave new meaning to the photographs.

When taken as a legal issue, the tendency is to look only at how much change (transformation) an artist made from the source work. What is often missing in analysis is not only what an artist did with the source material, but also what kind of new meaning an artist created throughout the process and resulting work. When a case goes to the court, reproductions of reproductions are often used to compare and analyze distinctions between the original work and the appropriated work. People who decide these issues are not of the art world. Umbrico bemoaned this in a conversation with Virginia Rutledge about the *Cariou v. Prince* case for *Aperture Magazine*: “Seeing a photocopy of a photograph side-by-side with a photocopy of a photograph of a painting really doesn’t give us any sense of what we are supposed to be looking at. Both sides of the evidence actually start to look alike.”

This kind of visual comparison cannot only be misleading but it may lead to missing the point. One must look at Prince’s whole series and see what he is trying to convey in his work by appropriating and transforming the source material. Virginia Rutledge, legal counsel for the Andy Warhol Foundation told *Art in America* that the visual comparison is not

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239 “The Image World is Flat: Penelope Umbrico in conversation with Virginia Rutledge,” *Aperture* 210 (Spring 2013), 71.
adequate for detecting new meaning to judge copyright infringement.\textsuperscript{240} It certainly doesn’t do justice to Prince’s large work scaled to a letter sized photocopy of a photograph of his painting and collage.\textsuperscript{241} Cariou’s book measures about 9 ½ x 12 inches while Prince’s \textit{Graduation}, for example, measures 72 ¾ x 52 ½ inches. Prince, from the beginning of his career, has always appropriated images aggressively. In Prince’s earlier works, he often used images from magazines. In the Cariou case, Prince used a professional photographer’s personal work, which had been embodied in book format, thus making the case more germane, controversial and contentious.

In the end, the appellate court found that 25 of the 30 artworks did not infringe Cariou’s copyrights since they were transformative. Five other works were to be re-evaluated by the district court based on the new instructions about transformation and fair use. Before any new evaluation could be conducted, Cariou and Prince settled out of court with Cariou receiving an undisclosed amount of monetary compensation. On April 3, 2014, Carol Vogel of \textit{New York Times} reported that Richard Prince’s \textit{Canal Zone} would be exhibited at Gagosian’s Upper East Side Gallery (980 Madison Avenue, New York) from May 8 through June 14, 2014.\textsuperscript{242} The Cariou v. Prince lawsuit incited heated discussion within the art world and artists are more informed about “fair use” now. Still, confusion and doubt remain and again as each controversy is case specific due to the fact that each art piece is different and the same panel of judges does not decide each case.

\textsuperscript{240} Boucher, “Warhol and Rauschenberg Foundations."
\textsuperscript{241} For instance, Prince’s “Tales of Brave Ulysses” from the \textit{Canal Zone} measures 84 x 132 inches (213.4 x 335.3 cm).
\textsuperscript{242} Carol Vogel, “Richard Prince’s ‘Canal Zone’ to Be Shown at Gagosian,” \textit{New York Times}, April 3, 2014, accessed April 4, 2014, \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/04/arts/design/richard-princes-canal-zone-to-be-shown-at-gagosian.html?action=click&contentCollection=Arts&region=Footer&module=Recommendation&src=recg&pgtype=Blogs}. Some unsold works and exhibition catalogue that were put to the storage due to the litigation will see the light. It will be interesting to see if the litigation changed the value of Prince’s work.
The fundamental difference between Prince’s work and Umbrico’s work (Suns from Sunsets from Flickr and afterwards) is the source of images. Prince uses images made by professionals while Umbrico uses images made by amateurs. Umbrico’s use of Flickr images can be regarded as fair use because she is commenting on society’s use of images and behavior plus her usage of only a small portion from the source images could obviate a claim that the essence of the image was copied or absconded.\textsuperscript{243} Another factor is Umbrico’s choice of images; she uses pictures that have genetic sunset quality and it is hard to distinguish the authors of these pictures. If she chose more distinctive sunset pictures, the original works would be more recognizable and then her work would be vulnerable to lawsuits. Umbrico’s suns are isolated in a close-up and it is hard to imagine the original photographs. When the source is unrecognizable, it is hard to make a case against Umbrico. Because the source materials are from the Internet—where the determining factors for ownership is more obscure—it is hard to argue when someone like Joachim Schmid says, “if you can download it, it’s fair game.”\textsuperscript{244} On the flip side, if one would like to keep one’s image completely safe from copyright infringement, one should not upload images online, especially photo-sharing websites. If one uploads an image to the Internet, then it is hard to predict where the image will circulate. The life of the image becomes unpredictable and undeterminable.

\textsuperscript{243} I conducted an in person interview with an attorney who has twenty years of experience with intellectual property right matters. Because the lawyer is contractually bound to represent only one (large) client, the lawyer asked that their identity not be disclosed even though this thesis is for an academic purpose. The lawyer took the time to look at the art works in question, the initial and appellate decision, and then Umbrico’s works. The lawyer opined that Umbrico would not be susceptible to law suits alleging infringement based on the fair use doctrine, reverse substantial transformation meaning the essence or identity of the original work could not be easily desciphered and the general concept of “property” contained within intellectual property law governing copyrights, trademarks and patents.

\textsuperscript{244} Umbrico, Penelope Umbrico,1. A Flickr user quoted Joachim Schmid’s words on the Flickr discussion board when discussing Umbrico’s appropriation work after her panel discussion at the New York Photo Festival.
Projects Related to *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*

*Suns from Sunsets from Flickr,* which marked Umberto’s first-time use of online vernacular photographs, proved to be the vehicle through which she attained gallery, museum, and photo-festival exhibitions. *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* is still ongoing since Umbrico thinks of it as an infinite project, as the sun symbolizes infinity to her.\(^{245}\) It is interesting to note that many of Umbrico’s ensuing projects are directly related to *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* to the point that these projects can be called derivative or subset works. While some were short-term whimsical projects, others are also ongoing with layers of complexity. A discussion of these related projects follows in chronological order of the starting date.

**79 Moons from Flickr – 51 Visible and 87 Suns from Flickr – 29 Visible (diptych)**

79 *Moons from Flickr* – 51 Visible and 87 *Suns from Flickr* – 29 Visible (2009) (fig. 36) is a diptych Umbrico made for *Aperture* and for 20x200.\(^{246}\) Umbrico downloaded photographs of moonrises and sunsets from Flickr and made the diptych with two composite photographs. Using Photoshop, she varied the opacity of each un-cropped photograph. The moons are in all different stages of visibility from crescent to full, reflecting the changing time of the month. Elements like tree leaves and ocean waves give some hint of reality but overall the pictures are fantasy-like abstractions. Umbrico acknowledges the aesthetic influence of abstraction from Klee and Kandinsky. She also references the cult television series and movie, *Star Trek* for “fiction and psychedelic cosmic fantasy.”\(^{247}\) It is interesting

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\(^{245}\) The author had a short conversation with Umbrico during her solo exhibition opening for *Slideshow* at LMACK Project in the Lower East Side (139 Eldridge Street, New York, NY) on September 15, 2013.


\(^{247}\) Penelope Umbrico, “Some Notes on *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* and Related Projects,” email discussion with author, April 1, 2014.
how Umbrico turned Flickr images into otherworldly photographs that diverge far from reality. While snapshots on Flickr are everything having to do with the real, the present, the here-and-now, Umbrico’s work transforms these grounded images beyond the tangible world surrounding us into the realm of imagination and invention – this speaks to the nature of how the sun and the moon are often perceived by many.

36 Copyrighted Sun / Screengrabs

36 Copyrighted Suns / Screengrabs (2009-2012) (fig. 37) consists of 36 sun photographs with watermarks on the photos placed by stock photo agencies. Umbrico downloaded these images from stock photo websites like bigstockphoto.com (as seen on few photographs). Here Umbrico hints at the absurdity of people’s laying claim to ownership of the sun. She is parodying the arrogance behind the purported ownership of the sun and how photographs of the sun are commodified as a product. The truth is that people may own land and even islands, but nobody owns the sun. Umbrico further parodies this absurdity by making titles of each and keeping the descriptive tags assigned to each photo by the stock agencies. Some examples are:

- Meditation Under Sunset Zen Concept
- Two Glasses of Champagne and Beautiful Sunset
- Couple in Love Enjoying Beach with Woman Embracing Man
- Pregnant Woman Holding Belly Against Sunset Sunlight
- Man Thinking at Sunset with Straw in His Mouth
- Couple at Beach Smiling and Looking at Each Other With Love

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248 The definition of stock photography by Shutterstock: “Stock photography is existing photography that can be used for print and web ads, in books and magazines, in news, on websites, in brochures and packaging, and in a large number of custom applications, according to the licensing terms to which the photographer and buyer have agreed. Using an image that already exists saves the purchaser the time and expense of a custom photo shoot.” Shutterstock, accessed April 14, 2014, http://www.shutterstock.com.

Umbrico is interested in “the collective narratives we weave around its setting.” Each narrative creates a generic association with the sunset. *Couple at Beach Smiling and Looking at Each Other With Love*, for example, conjures romance but it may not be a true characterization of what that particular couple is experiencing. Umbrico’s titles, thus, represent general perceptions of the sunset and all the associations we bring to it from our own lives. The descriptive tags become useful when potential buyers search terms on stock photo websites. These search terms serve as a communication tool between the stock agency and potential buyers of stock photographs.

**Universal Sunsets (of 6,922,112 on 2/18/10)**

In 2010, Umbrico was invited to present a public installation of *Universal Sunsets (of 6,922,112 on 2/18/10)* (2010) (fig. 38) at the Toronto Pearson International Airport, Terminal 1 as a part of Scotiabank Contact Photo Festival. For this project Umbrico concentrated on the horizon of sunset photographs and evenly divided the space between suns above and below (the horizon) to feature the duality of the phenomenon. Each sunset photograph depicts a scene of the sun right before it starts to disappear. Installed next to a moving walkway in the airport, the work was intended to convey the duality of the horizon: “the hope of escape” and “the illusory nature of escape.” Horizons are often depicted in advertisements related to romance or escape, often with sunset settings. However, we can

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250 Ibid.
252 Penelope Umbrico, “Some Notes on Suns from Sunsets from Flickr and Related Projects,” email message to author, April 1, 2014. It is 7-page PDF file with text and images on her projects.
never physically reach or touch the horizon; thus it symbolizes the illusory ideas of romance or escape.\textsuperscript{253} By their very nature, the horizon and sunset represent two embodiments of hope.

\textit{Suns from Sunsets from Flickr / Travels}

For \textit{Suns from Sunsets from Flickr / Travels} (2010-2011) (fig. 39), Umbrico asked curators, friends, colleagues, and visitors to mail her leftover sunset prints from exhibition installations as if they were postcards. Her sun prints came back with ink smudges from postal stamps, transforming the look from a clean print to a battered postcard. Umbrico marvels at the effects of this project since “the digitally sourced ‘sun’ physically travels through the skies via airmail, crossing countries and borders, and registers on its surface a record of time and place, beginning and end, to its destination. The idea that images from Flickr can travel physically astonished Umbrico.”\textsuperscript{254} She gave new life to prints that would have otherwise been relegated to a storage box or thrown away. By changing the role of objects that comprised her shows, she converted fine art prints (selectively exhibited at galleries and museums) into postcards (mass-produced and widely distributed). Her prints played multiple roles, depending on the situation and place, and on the perspectives and associations attached to them. For Umbrico, these prints served as souvenirs from each exhibition venue. They are tangible reminders of an exhibition’s ephemeral nature.

\textit{Sunset Portraits}

\textsuperscript{253} Penelope Umbrico, email message to author, May 4, 2014.
\textsuperscript{254} Umbrico, “Some Notes on \textit{Suns from Sunsets from Flickr}.”
Sunset Portraits (2010-ongoing) (fig. 40) is Umbrico’s partial response to seeing people taking pictures in front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr exhibitions. In this series, Umbrico manipulates the images of hundreds of people taking pictures in front of the sunset, reducing their facial features when necessary to barely decipherable silhouettes. While Suns from Sunsets from Flickr shows our desire to photograph a beautiful sunset, Sunset Portraits shows our desire to have proof that we were there when there was beautiful sunset. Because of the automatic mechanism in digital cameras, the exposure is measured by the brightness of the sun instead of people’s faces. For this reason, the sun is perfectly exposed but people’s faces are often dark and almost unrecognizable. With the advancement of technology, some of the newer digital cameras focus on people’s faces and render the faces recognizable. Umbrico darkens the faces when the faces are recognizable—the only time Umbrico manipulates images in this series. She makes everyone anonymous because it is not about an individual’s photo but the collective act of people taking pictures of themselves in front of the sunset. People are inclined to create a “proof” shot in front of the sunset. “The sunset was beautiful and I was there.” The irony is that this act will never stop even though countless pictures like this already exist. Further, in the act of trying to capture that moment, the maker of the photograph doesn’t fully experience the moment since he or she has to concentrate on framing, composition, exposure, and photographing. Umbrico parodies the reinforcement of the almost-fabricated imagery and moment for future reference in their memories at the expense of truly experiencing the sublime impact of a sunset.

People in Front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr
Since 2011, Umbrico started collecting photographs of people taking pictures in front of her *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* and has been working on *People in Front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* (2011-ongoing) (fig. 20). For the exhibition, *Art That Iterates* (Curator: Sean Justice), Umbrico made rows of pictures that feature different stages of people taking pictures (fig. 41). Her titles for each row reveal how each step is another circulation of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*. For the last row, even the descriptive wording becomes exhausting to read in one breath: “People taking pictures of the pictures of people taking pictures of people in front of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr.*” As she exhibits more of this work, the title for each row builds on its predecessor. This seems to be an infinite project, just as *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* is an infinite project for Umbrico. The particular wording also seems clearly to reference the “meta-nature” of both the project itself and of the sourcing of the images: with each image and with each action of a person-taking-a-picture-of-people-taking-pictures, we are removed one more time from the original experience we are viewing, as in a feedback loop when two mirrors are placed directly facing one another - the endless reflections mimic the endless feedback loop created and encouraged by the Internet and photography-centered websites.

**Other Artists Who Use Flickr Images**

There are other artists who use Flickr images in their work. Joachim Schmid and Erik Kessels have been working with vernacular photography for decades. Both utilize the book format, publishing books with vernacular photographs that they collected.  

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255 Joachim Schmid published several hundred books. Mostly self-published books and some are exhibition catalogues. Erik Kessels published about 70 books through his publishing house, KesselsKramer Publishing.
Joachim Schmid’s work featuring Flickr photographs, *Found on Flickr* (August 19, 2008 – December 23, 2009), started as a weblog (foundonflickr.wordpress.com) and then evolved into a self-published book. Schmid, a champion of self-published books, uses print-on-demand services by which he published several hundreds of books containing found photographs. His concept of recycling images works well with print-on-demand books where the books only get published when an order is received. While *Found on Flickr* is a small book (5.5x8.5 inches) with black and white photographs and relatively short text, the content of the book is rich in thought about how we make and use photographs. This little book seems to sum up his observations and the knowledge that he accumulated about vernacular photography since the 1980s. With *Other People’s Photographs*, Schmid self-published ninety-six books, each with a specific event or idea such as “dogs,” “food,” “gathered together,” “self,” “trophies,” and “wanted.” Rather than commenting with the standard practice of using words, he made visual commentaries about recurring patterns in vernacular photography by way of organization in grouping pictures sharing a common perceivable theme. In contrast, with *Found on Flickr*, Schmid wrote his observations on each page. Conceptually, Schmid’s *Found on Flickr* and Umbrico’s *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* are similar in that both focus on and revile redundancy. Schmid wrote a note under the picture of two pairs of legs and feet on the beach:

11 October 2008 – Comments

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256 A Weblog or blog is an online journal or online diary. Schmid used Wordpress (one of popular blog websites) for the *Found on Flickr* project. The website doesn’t exist now. *Found on Flickr* book (21.5x14 cm, 272 pages, soft cover) was published in 2013 by lulu.com and is available for purchase directly. Lulu, accessed April 14, 2014, [http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/Schmid](http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/Schmid).

257 Blurb: [http://www.blurb.com](http://www.blurb.com). Lulu: [http://www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com). These websites revolutionized the publishing industry since photographers and writers alike could design their own books, get published, and get copies of books with an order as little as one. Other people can buy self-published books directly from the websites, cutting out the middlemen. Because the copy is only published and delivered as orders are received, it is called print-on-demand.
“Oddly, I have a similar picture!” – what a striking comment. I can hardly think of any photograph that does not exist in a multitude of variations on Flickr. This is actually one of the fascinating things here: you do something with a camera and looking at the ever-growing pool you discover that someone else is doing it, too, and has been for years. Reading the comments we learn that many people have a problem with this simple truth.\(^{258}\)

Visiting the Flickr page where Schmid obtained the picture of two legs on the beach, the user named “in vino veritas” captioned the photo as, “Bored legs on the beach.” In reply to the picture, user name “James Thorpe” wrote, “Oddly, I have a similar picture!” It seems that “in vino veritas” and “James Thorpe” went to the beach together and took similar pictures by coincidence, not knowing of the other’s photo. Schmid points out how absurd it is that Flickr users are surprised to find similar pictures by others. Perhaps this also explains why so many people still take basically generic pictures of sunsets. While Schmid’s book provides an insightful observation about the Flickr phenomenon, it has yet to transcend obscurity in that only those who are in the photo book world or are interested in vernacular photography as a concept and phenomenon know of his books.\(^{259}\)

Erik Kessels is a Dutch artist who is a principle of a communication firm, KesselsKramer. He established this firm in 1995 with Johan Kramer and created a publishing house within it. Through KesselsKramer Publishing, he has published 70 books and magazines, most of them with found and vernacular photographs that he and his staff collected. In 2011, the Foam photography museum in Amsterdam asked Kessels to co-curate “What’s Next: The Future of the Photography Museum” (November 5-December 7, 2011).\(^{260}\)


\(^{259}\) I saw Joachim Schmid’s books while visiting New York Art Book Fair in September 2013 at PS 1 in Long Island City. The book fair is usually very crowded but it is more likely for art book lovers rather than the general public.

\(^{260}\) Other curators were Lauren Cornell, Jefferson Hack, and Alison Nordström.
For the exhibition, Kessels exhibited loose prints of the photographs that were uploaded to Flickr during a 24-hour cycle (fig. 42). The number of photographs in the exhibition is unknown but it can easily be projected to be a million, filling rooms, hallways, and stairways. Kessels said, “This glut is in large part the result of image-sharing sites like Flickr, networking sites like Facebook, and picture-based search engines. Their content mingles public and private, with the very personal being openly and un-self-consciously displayed. By printing all the images uploaded in a 24-hour period, I visualise the feeling of drowning in representations of other peoples' experiences.”

Kessels points out that what people are uploading to Flickr and Facebook constitute pictures of their experiences. The special or mundane moments that each individual records on a daily basis can accumulate quickly when a million or billion others are doing the same thing at the same time. To highlight this phenomenon, Kessels dumped the pictures onto the floor to create a vast pile of photographs. He did so to create the analogy that while others released their photographs (and personal experiences) by quickly uploading them to the Internet with little to no thought, he similarly released them onto another space, a physical plane with similarly minimal thought. As the usual nature of these personal, special moments and experiences are to reminisce each one singularly, perhaps posted on a webpage, perhaps framed on a desk or hanging on a wall, Kessels takes away the precious makeup of these unique moments, by dumping them onto an irreverent pile on the floor and by making the images indiscernible from one another, many being partially or fully covered by others. In this way, he creates the analogy to the “dumped” digital images of the Internet focusing on the fact that the very act of trying to preserve special life-moments creates an infinite space.

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where they ultimately get lost like a blade of grass amongst a large field. The fact that the images represent only one day of uploading from one photo-sharing website was thought-provoking on another level, prompting concern for our environment. To demonstrate this phenomenon, Kessels printed out nearly one million pictures. The cost of production and materials was certainly substantial.

At present, Facebook alone generates more than 350 million images uploaded per day. Artists like Joachim Schmid, Erik Kessels, and Penelope Umbrico are keenly aware of the current trend and changing paradigm in photography and they continue to make works that question and challenge our behavior concerning social-media and online photography so that we at least pause and ponder about what our actions reveal about ourselves and society, how our actions impact the environment, and how they impact our own constantly-developing societal perspectives.

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Starting with the goal of finding the most photographed subject matter on Flickr, Umbrico expanded her idea to encompass society’s use of images. With *36 Copyrighted Sun / Screengrabs*, she questioned the rationality of claiming ownership of sun pictures by the mere insertion of a copyright watermark. With *Sunset Portraits*, she featured countless numbers of people in front of the sunset. With *People in Front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, she showed the circulation of photographs by visitors to her exhibition. This work proves Umbrico’s point that people use photography to experience something and by doing so, they also preserve their memories onto images. Umbrico, Schmid and Kessels comment on society’s use of photographs the overproduction of digital images. Since there is no one to limit an individual’s image production and sharing by uploading to social media, the number
will more likely increase at an unparalleled rate, as has been the case for the last few years. It is within these conditions that Umbrico’s works are positioned to remain relevant for the foreseeable future.
CONCLUSION

Penelope Umbrico was the first artist to utilize online vernacular photographs from Flickr, the first globally accepted photo-sharing website. In so doing, Umbrico became a photographer who did not take her own photographs, a cyber-space ecologist, social commentator and commercially-and-institutionally-recognized artist, all in one. Umbrico’s prior works prepared her to take this direction. She had been consistently working with online images for more than five years prior to commencing work on *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*.

From an analysis of Umbrico’s work, one can understand the change in the paradigm of photography. The role of both producers, meaning those that make images, and the role of consumers, meaning those who view, observe and react to images, have become interchangeable due to the popularization of social media and advancements in technology. Now photographs can be instantly uploaded for viewing worldwide and thus, sharing and exchanging photographs has become a daily habit for many. Photographs have become a commodity, a tool to experience something, to connect with people, and a means by which to communicate with others. Publishing one’s work has become as easy as creating a Facebook account or one’s own blog.

Prior to the entrenchment of photo-sharing websites, people’s private lives were showcased in personal albums. Then with platforms such as Flickr and Facebook, people’s private lives became accessible worldwide. For the first time in history, we could easily delve into the private lives of millions of people without personally knowing or physically seeing them. It is this Internet as an archive that provides abundant source materials to an artist like Umbrico. The sheer number of photographs uploaded daily and the user-friendly platforms
created by social-media websites have resulted in the commodification of photographs. Umbrico’s tongue-in-cheek parody of people’s fascination with sunsets embodies many of the societal issues we now face.

Umbrico’s ability to utilize the intricacies of the Internet and computer software such as Photoshop enabled her to transform low art into high art that evoked emotional responses ranging from umbrage to admiration from viewers. Moreover, the work, which was accepted by both institutions and high-end collectors, was a vehicle through which she could proffer social commentary on issues such as the commodification of photographs; the inclination of humans to engage in the repetitive exercise of taking a vernacular photo, despite the fact that an abundant source of such photographs already existed and the substantive expenditure of resources and resultant waste that fuels innovations in high gadgetry cameras and the like and the servers that support the social media websites. Umbrico’s perspective of focusing on our common tendencies in this sea of internet-imagery and fast-changing technology is reflected in her earlier referenced comment, “Perhaps part of the beauty of taking a picture of a sunset is that while you are doing it it’s likely that a million other people are doing it as well – at exactly the same time.”

Before Umbrico, no one had made a grid of thousands of suns. While artists have been appropriating found photographs since the Dada movement in the 1920s and many with different uses and interpretations of found photos finding a second life in collages, silkscreen, re-photographing, and books. Umbrico’s grids, the way she presented them at exhibitions and then summarily disposed of them or recycled them, demonstrated that she controlled the images unlike most of society that were reliant upon images to validate their existence and identity.

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262 Penelope Umbrico, artist statement for Suns from Sunsets from Flickr.
Umbrico’s use of the photos she found and appropriated was different in methodology than that of her predecessors. The artists of the 1980s appropriated found photos from print media and often re-photographed their creations. Umbrico, on the other hand, started using online vernacular photographs and specifically digital technology from sourcing images to making manipulations. Unlike many of her contemporaries who made photobooks with found photos, Umbrico manipulated source images in a way that transcended reality (sunset photos) and turned them into abstractions using the grid format that has minimal form and content. Her grid requires the viewer to use his or her peripheral vision due to its scale and repetition of the same subject matter thereby maximizing the effect on viewers.

With the onset of digital photography, smart phones and the ease of the Internet making it easier for us to make and distribute images, do we “use” or “abuse” photographs? Is it about excessiveness and consumption without much consideration? Is it about the redundancy of people’s actions while taking a snapshot reflecting an underlying connection within our humanity? Underlying Umbrico’s work and those of her contemporaries, such as Schmid and Kessels, is the question, “What does it mean to make images in this overwhelmingly image-saturated world?” Regarding our environmental concerns, building more server farms and data centers cannot be the solution with the limited resources on earth. More importantly, having awareness and being conscientious while image-making should be taken into consideration by us all. As we look at Umbrico’s grid, we can draw our own conclusions.
ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Penelope Umbrico, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, 2006-ongoing. Kodak EasyShare C-prints: Each to be printed 4x6 inches (10.1x15.2 cm). Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 2. Penelope Umbrico, *Arrhythmia (All the Dishes on EBAY-10/28/01)*, 2002-03, online animation. The image on the right is constantly changing in order to show all the images of dishes for sale on eBay on October 28, 2001. Image from Penelope Umbrico’s website, accessed March 31, 2014, http://penelopeumbrico.net/arrythmia/Arrythmia.html.
Figure 3. Penelope Umbrico, *Views from the Internet* (partial), 2003-2009. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 4. Penelope Umbrico. *Ends of Things*, 1993-97. C-Print, 2x12 inches each. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 5. Penelope Umbrico, *Doors (From Catalogs)*, 2001-2002. Chromogenic color prints, 74” high, variable widths. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 7. Penelope Umbrico, Kodak EasyShare index prints dated October 30, 2005 and January 23, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 8. Exif information screen shot from a Flickr page. Image resource, Flickr, accessed January 26, 2014, https://www.flickr.com/photos/24500807@N04/5657048733/in/photolist-9BTRuZ-8npw8H-9ZXko-8P5jNo-9YrRqZ-cZzCrf-9YuybE-8kU4js-9YuL2u-9XPow-5q78Wy-5q2Paa-7iMRv-4unKvx-4urSAp-9Kp4mi-5P6TYz-7UXA7b-5mfzD-5mfcn-5mfck-5mfch-cvsMBo-aWhLZF-cvsKME-cvsJVh-cvsLSo-cvsMpb-cvsKfA-cvsIL9-cvsK5mcvsLwc-cvsKCh-6ETkt6-6aTC1g-9k3Myn-5J3md3-5PbeHL-cqyi51-dsStxH-9gNdc4-9gRjqy-9gNd7F-7JmHjg-5Pb8gi-5P6Tgt-5PfoRU-dzV7Ab-u5XDp-9YMbCr-aDsAV2.
Figure 9. Penelope Umbrico, *5,377,183 Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial) 4/28/09*. 1,440 Kodak EasyShare C-prints: Each to be printed 4x6 in. (10.1x15.2 cm). Installation view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 10. Penelope Umbrico, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, 2006-ongoing. Kodak EasyShare C-prints: Each to be printed 4x6 in. (10.1x15.2 cm). Installation view at the New York Photo Festival in 2008. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 11. Penelope Umbrico, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* (detail), 2006-ongoing. Kodak EasyShare C-prints: Each to be printed 4x6 in. (10.1x15.2 cm). Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 12. *Out of Place/Mirrors and Door Openings From Catalogs*, 2002, exhibition installation view at Julie Saul Gallery, New York. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 14. Screen shot of collected image files selected for *Suns From Sunsets from Flickr* prior to cropping. Image scanned from the book, *Penelope Umbrico (photographs)* (New York: Aperture, 2011), 1.
Figure 15. Selected sunset images from Flickr. From left, images are made by (using Flickr user names) Bahman Farzad and Le.Sanchez. Images are from my own collection of Flickr Gallery: http://www.flickr.com/photos/minnylee/galleries/72157639839214756.
Figure 16a. An Instagram picture made at night. 16b. Picture on the left got enlarged and cropped to show noise and chromatic aberration. Photo by the author.
Figure 17. An Instagram picture that shows pixelation. The photo was enlarged and cropped. Photo by the author.
Figure 18. Penelope Umbrico, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* (close-up). Enlarged and cropped to show chromatic aberration. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 20. *People in front of Suns From Sunsets from Flickr*, 2008-ongoing. Various photographs from photo sharing website. Image courtesy of the artist.
Each city has a different style when it comes to selfies. Compare yourself:

BANGKOK

BERLIN

MOSCOW

NEW YORK

SAO PAULO

In these grids, we have arranged the photos horizontally by head tilt; the vertical axis shows you if people look up or down. In addition, we can crop and rotate the

Figure 36. Penelope Umbrico, *79 Moons from Flickr – 51 Visible*” and “87 Suns from Flickr – 29 Visible (diptych), 2009. Inkjet print on archival rag paper, variable sizes: 11x14, 16x20, 20x30 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 37. Penelope Umbrico, *Copyrighted Suns/ Screengrabs*, 2009-2012. Digital C-prints, each 5x7 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 39. Penelope Umbrico, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr / Travels*, 2010-2011. Kodak EasyShare machine c-prints, postage stamps, ink from postal stamp, each 4x6 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 40. Penelope Umbrico, *Sunset Portraits from 9,623,557 Sunset Pictures on Flickr 8/22/11*, 2010-ongoing. Machine c-prints, each 4x6 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.
Figure 41. Penelope Umbrico, *People in Front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, 2011-ongoing. 25 Inkjet prints on 8.5x11 inch paper and 15.5x7 inch framed c-prints. Installation photo at the exhibition, Art That Iterates at Teacher’s College Columbia University, 2012. Installation photo by Sean Justice. Image courtesy of the artist.

Title of each row provided by Penelope Umbrico:
Row 1: People taking pictures of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*.
Row 2: The pictures people took of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*.
Row 3: People taking pictures of people in front of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*.
Row 4: The pictures people took of people in front of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*.
Row 5: People taking pictures of the pictures of people taking pictures of people in front of *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*.
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Monograph


Writings by Penelope Umbrico


**GENERAL**

**Appropriation Art/ Appropriation of Photographs**


**Archive**


**Art History / Critical Theory / Photography Criticism**


_______. “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition.” *October* 18


Authorship


Media Theory/ Digital Technology/ Social Media


Novel


Snapshot Photography


**Vernacular Photography**


**Visual Culture Studies**
