



*on Unintentional Images and
the Web as a Self-Portrait of
Our Culture*

Anna-Kaisa Rastenberger Let's start with us people. When the Internet was young, and online photo circulation was new, and everybody appropriated everything, the aspect of representation was still very central. But nowadays, talking about appropriation feels a bit fake, since we know that the biggest appropriators are the corporations. It seems to me that the whole contemporary photo circulation system focuses on images in action instead of on questions dealing with representation. Many of your works deal with the ways people act with and through photographs.

Penelope Umbrico

This is something I have always been fascinated by. I think these images still deal with representation when they're in the hands of the individuals who take them, but as soon as they're shared they stop being about representation and become only about presentation. I started thinking about this in relation to selfies taken in front of sunsets; how these images are posted to open channels on Instagram or Facebook. There are millions. I find the visual accumulation of that particular scripted photograph fascinating because when you see the accumulation you totally understand the disappearance of the individual. The insistence of the selfie is like an antidote to the anxiety and fear of disappearance. The selfie has this odd kind of paradoxical inversion: the more one pictures oneself online, the more one disappears because one's singular individuality becomes multiplied and fragmented. One is everywhere with everybody else who is also everywhere. Or maybe it's not an antidote but a form of agency. Since all these media platforms and technological devices that we use are so corporate and monetized, perhaps the selfie provides a moment of control or authority for the individual. "This is me taking a picture of me." And in both cases, I'm thinking about a kind of psychological anxiety. In reality, most people are not thinking about the corporate structures of media platforms or the technologies they use, and this is another form of the disappearance of personal agency.

AKR With many of your projects, the images represent certain things, but the work is not about what they represent. I'm thinking for instance of your multifaceted project *RANGE* (ongoing since 2012), where the images are of mountains but the work itself is about photographic technologies and how people use them. Can you talk about that project?

PU

In all of my projects, I look at something that affects us in a very physical way, then turn the attention to how that experience is mediated through technologies. I'm interested in how these images actually change how we experience and think about these things.

So the *RANGE* project began when Aperture invited me to do a project using one of their books. I decided to use the entire *Masters of Photography* series. I focused on the mountains in them because the mountain is the most masterly and stable object, and master photographers are the most stable photographers. I wanted to speak to a perceived current instability of photography (though photography has always been unstable), so I re-photographed all the mountains in these books with my iPhone, using camera apps that had light-leak and chemical-burn filters. I found it fascinating that digital camera apps replicate the aesthetics of analogue film by synthesizing the mistakes of that technology. The iPhone, for me, presented the largest distance between myself and these masters, as well as the largest distance between what the device actually is and, in this case, the image it makes: instead of light leaking into a volumetric box containing chemicals on film, an iPhone is a vacuum that just makes code.

AKR I've seen many different kinds of installations of this work. How do you decide its final form?

PU

With this particular project there is no ideal form, because I was running the images through camera apps that digitally generated all sorts of file formats and sizes. They could be pretty much anything. When I first printed them for Aperture, I made them standard sizes



Penelope Umbrico, *TVs from Craigslist*, screenshots, 2008. Courtesy of the artist

based on the Aperture books I was using. More recently, for large museum installations, if the museum has a set of frames they can use for the installation, they give me the sizes and I make files that fit those frames. I like the idea that the work itself comes out of standardization. I have also made videos with the images, as well as a leporello-format book. The physical form of the work has no underlying conceptual logic, so the project really allows for any kind of physical form.

AKR We were talking earlier about the feminist aspects of *RANGE*. You mentioned that in the early history of photography, mountains were something really stable and male, because at that time most of the photographers who were able to carry (or hire a person to carry) their things were male.

PU For me, the feminist position became an important subtext in the creation of this work. In Aperture's twenty-book *Masters of Photography* series, there were only four female photographers, and there were no mountains in their books. It may be because they didn't have the resources; but I suspect it was because they didn't have the inclination to stand on top of a mountain. For the text in the book, I used dictionary definitions of "mountain," "range," "ranger," and "master." It was striking how all of the definitions spoke to masculine characteristics. They also presented poetic dialectics around distance and mastery, which the work was already addressing both in physicality and in time: the idea of distance between the mountain and photographer; the "range" the camera can capture; the "ranger" as someone who ranges the mountains; the distance between my female self and the male photographers; their mastery of photography and my un-masterliness according to all of the definitions.

AKR How much do you think about gender when you think about your career? From which perspective is it a relevant topic in connection with your work?

PU

I'm aware of it all the time because I'm subjected to it all the time. Aside from the most obvious ways—the price disparity between art made by males and art made by females, male-weighted gallery rosters and museum shows, etc.—there are also those strange, often maddening encounters, like, "If you have a child, will you be able to make your work?" No one asks a man this. One of my first such maddening experiences was during a conference where I gave a talk. This was before the Internet was ubiquitous, and the work I was making used home-improvement catalogues to look at how, post-9/11, when most retail stocks fell, home improvement, crafting, and home-decor retail stocks rose. In the media, the phenomenon was written about in terms of cocooning. Apparently, Americans wanted to make their homes better as they turned inward for security, and they were doing so by filling their homes with homemade kitsch. To me, it felt like Milan Kundera's idea of kitsch being the fear of history. Anyway, so the work I made around this theme involved re-photographing aspects of home-decor catalogues. I was giving a talk about this work at a conference and the guy who presented right after me got up and said, "I don't have enough time to sit around at home and look through home-decor catalogues. I travel around the world and take photographs."

AKR How do you work in different media and exhibition spaces? You start with material you find online but end up in a gallery space. Meanwhile, you also make books. What interests you when you make these transitions between the different spaces to exhibit images?

PU

The physicality and materiality of the work are really important to me. Almost everything I work with originates from a physical object that's in the world in a way that makes us struggle with it. For example, *Out of Order: Broken Sets and Bad Display* (2007–ongoing) starts off with physical objects that someone is trying to sell. They photograph them, then the representations of these objects become ephemeral digital code on the

web, where I find them. In my work, the digital code which creates the images is transcribed back into material object again. I think this is especially important with the screen. We don't think about the materiality of the screen when it's working, but when it's broken we are very aware of its physicality and material make-up. The book I made with the images of broken screens I found for sale on eBay—sellers turn the screens on to show that the parts are working, and you can see all the liquid inside—extends this materiality. I print them on a Heidelberg XL 75 offset press, which can print so precisely that you're not aware of the printing at all. You look through it at the image on the page. But I manually add more ink than necessary to make the print. It gets really messy! I undermine the precision of the press and the slickness of the screen by calling attention to the material messiness of both. Every book and every print is different. Also, the book is unbound, which further subverts the idea of a clean, readable screen. Plus the images are laid out as full spreads on single pages and then folded into the book, so if you want to see the entire image of a screen you need to take the book apart. But if you keep the book together the images are broken up. I like that the organizational logic of the book is destabilized in this way. It requires incompatible maneuvers to view one or the other. I love watching people fumble with it at book fairs, trying to keep the pages from slipping out.

AKR I'd like to hear your opinion about the screen. How should we approach it as the main platform for showing and looking at images?

PU I think the screen can be very neutralizing, but it's also important to understand it as a material object. We tend to think of it as invisible, but it's interesting to contextualize it within the history of representational media. The shift between egg tempera and oil paint, for example, is like the shift between early tube screens and the more-real-than-real 4K HD LCD screens. After the opaque flatness of egg tempera, it must have been like magic to look at an oil painting with its transparent

glazes that could build up the illusion of light. The history of photography follows the same desire for illusory transparency; as does the screen, except that the screen is projective. A lot of my work deals with how material things that are reflective, such as prints and objects, start to take on a different character when presented in the projective space of the screen.

AKR You said earlier that even if everyone has a camera and knows how to share images on social media, the technology is not so well understood, and what is done with the images online even less so. In your work, you make technology visible, which for me is a political thing: how technology creates images and how, at the moment, we are created through technology.

PU Yes! And also how the work changes through technology. *TVs from Craigslist* (2008–ongoing) is a project in which I search online for photographs of used televisions for sale and focus on the individuals reflected in the screens of their TVs. Nobody cares about these photographs. Sellers are just taking photographs of the TVs to sell them, so they're not looking at details like what's reflected in them. When I first started the project, it was the seller's camera flash that revealed a reflection of the person. At the time, the images were quite small—something like 100×300 pixels—and the point-and-shoot lens was not good enough to photograph inside without flash. But as camera technology got better, and now with smartphones with smart cameras, I'm finding really detailed photographs without flash. They are very personal images, with people and all of their personal stuff reflected in the screens. There is a kind of inadvertent expression of individuality, privacy, and intimacy that you do not find in the photographs people take intending to share. In these utilitarian images, people stand beside unmade beds, beside dogs looking lovingly into the TV; sometimes people are naked. There are just really beautiful humanistic images in these dark-screen reflections. And I'm able to find them because technology delivers this kind of detail.

AKR It's a wonderful project. What I find interesting is the unintentional focus you're looking for: it's like going back to the specific motive for photographing where you photograph because you want to see something you couldn't see without taking a photo. Now you're diving into a similar kind of information that is exhibited without intentionality.

PU

I think it's interesting partly because these people are completely anonymous. It's not about the individual in the end. If there were a lack of anonymity, if there were any kind of identification going on, I'm not sure I would be doing this project. I think because the people are anonymous, and they know they are anonymous, they don't worry about certain things. As an archive of images, this consumer-to-consumer web space is fascinating because it reveals something that would never be revealed if there was an element of authorial intentionality there. I think an important thing to realize about the web in general is that it's a kind of self-portrait of collective culture.

This conversation took place via Skype, on August 14, 2018.