# Penelope Umbrico: MONUMENT

Penelope Umbrico acts to radically reimagine our relation to technology, both physically and psychologically. Encompassing a range of media including digital photography, media-based sculpture and installation, and video, her work has spanned interests in the materiality of consumer technology, the Internet as social archive, and, as reflected in this exhibition, the monolithic state of current technologies in relation to their obsolescence. In MONUMENT, Umbrico begins with the idea that all technologies — including the most ubiquitous consumer electronics we use at home and in the workplace — are in effect "black boxes" whose contents are largely incomprehensible to the end user. Umbrico aims to demystify the black-box device and to engage the public in creative modes of transforming and visualizing the electronic detritus that accumulates in our homes and in landfill.

Exhibition curator Elizabeth Ferrer conducted a roaming interview with Penelope Umbrico over the course of a few months.

Elizabeth Ferrer: Let's start by discussing the title of the exhibition, MONUMENT, and the work that is its centerpiece — a monumental wall of stacked, broken, and semi-operational LCD TVs streaming the news.

Penelope Umbrico: My intent with the title is to emphasize the monumental presence of electronic devices in our lives and the weight of their afterlife. There's something like 50 million tons of e-waste created every year — that is monumental — and something like only 10% of it gets recycled. Having spent some time at the E-Waste Warehouse in Gowanus, Brooklyn, last year, I was struck by the monumentality of this. And there, the stacks of CRT TVs, plastic wrapped to contain their poisonous insides (in case of breakage during transport to disassembling centers), seemed to speak directly to this monumentality. These monolithic structures, old clunky objects full of mercury and lead, were the specific inspiration for the title.

For the wall of broken and semi-operational LCD TVs, I had originally thought I would play a set of horror movies I found at the E-Waste Warehouse. I like the analogy of the broken body to the broken screen — both expressing outwardly what's going on inside. But the idea of streaming the news, equally horrific these days, seemed even more relevant as a subject represented on broken screens: the news and the screens — both the result of something gone wrong.

**EF**: This exhibition anticipates active participation by visitors. Please explain how you've conceptualized that aspect of the exhibition.

PU: Though the centerpiece of the exhibition is this wall of broken LCD TVs, the entire exhibition acts to invert our relationship to the electronic devices in our lives. I am inviting the viewer to understand the materiality of the devices we engage with every day, especially those we perceive to be invisible such as the screen, allowing a peek inside, and an invitation to turn the devices inside out. I am interested in the screen in particular. There's a ritual power in the screen — it gives us light, we go to it every day, it's something we all engage with quite intimately, and we now get all our information from it. And though we tend to think of it as invisible, almost everything we learn and know these days is mediated through the filters of its technology.

EF: You are speaking of the electronics in the screen, the liquid crystal, and the code that creates images?

PU: Yes, and specifically I am thinking about the idea of the black box — a device that contains information or technology that is off limits to users. This exhibition takes those technologies and attempts to make their materiality accessible, including what happens to these materials when we no longer want them. We all know that things get recycled, but very few of us understand what that actually looks like. So we will be disassembling devices on site. We are inviting the BRIC community to bring in their unwanted electronic screen-based devices — smartphones, iPods, Kindles, and the



like — and together we will disassemble their devices, taking them apart and arranging the pieces for a photograph. It's a trade: people bring an object and they get an object in return for their labor: photographic documentation — a portrait of the insides of their device. In this way, BRIC becomes a temporary e-waste collection center, but one for individual and collaborative acts of upcycling.

**EF**: You've called this collaborative photograph "knolling" and propose for the exhibition a "knolling table." Can you explain?

PU: Knolling is a process that originated in the design world — I think the artist Tom Sachs actually coined the term, referring to the furniture company Knoll — of arranging similar objects on a surface and then photographing them from above. The aesthetic comes out of ideas around classification and pattern, and I think it's particularly relevant to disassembling a personal device because the insides of these devices are highly designed and quite beautiful, though we rarely get to see this aspect of their design. These devices are 'black boxes.' So here, visitors use the 'knolling table' as a site to disassemble and arrange the inside components of their old devices. And an overhead camera captures this arrangement for the trade, and also to share on Instagram. Disassembling these 'black boxes' is also a way to understand the component parts of a device, and how they get redistributed in the recycling process. So it makes the invisibility of recycling visible as well.

**EF**: Much of your earlier work was based on crowd-sourced images you found on the Internet in the early days of online communities — the seemingly infinite number of photographs of sunsets posted on Flickr that became the basis of one of your best known works, *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, or snapshots of old broken televisions or remote controls offered for sale on Craigslist and eBay. But lately, you've turned to creating works that physically manifest the material qualities of the technology we use, in your installations, *Out of Order: Bad Display*.

PU: True. But my work has always moved between concrete materiality and digital ephemerality. The subjects I source images for are usually heavy and weighted, and made ephemeral through their digital images shared on various social media or consumer-to-consumer platforms. The broken LCD TVs in my work are an example of this: since they are derived from the failure of their own technology, printing them as formal compositions in their own right, collapses that failure with the aesthetic of Modernism and invariably points to and reveals their underlying materiality.

This newer, more sculptural work follows from that. I emphasize this materiality by creating physical objects the viewer has to navigate in physical space.

EF: And you have also included these digital photographs of cropped images of screens from eBay in the installation at BRIC.

PU: Yes — I've cropped just the screens from these utilitarian images, and printed them on some of the broken screens I've disassembled. For Out of Order: Bad Display at BRIC I will include the components of devices people bring during the e-waste collection times that we will be disassembling in the gallery. The exhibition will be constantly changing, with new (old) components as they arrive.

I have sandwiched, hung and propped up the screen parts, and prints, with various elements from the skeletons of their own material bodies. Colliding with, or supporting, their images, this varied ensemble of screen components — plastics and films from inside the TVs and their rectangular supports — are standard modular substrates; modularity, itself, a modernist cipher through which all these technologies speak. I've been thinking about how much we live by the screen, and curious about how to actually get inside the screen, how to think about the psychology of the screen. Visitors are able to step inside these materials, view the world though an opposite vantage point from inside-out so to speak.

**EF**: There is also a more lighthearted element of the exhibition, the wrapped and mobile CRTs on wheels. How did those come to be?

PU: Well, this is truly obsolete technology — you hardly find those kinds of televisions lying out on the sidewalk anymore. CRTs are the ancestors of the current LCD screen; they perform the role of cultural memory. But when bound in plastic wrap, as they are en-masse for recycling at e-waste facilities, they remind one of mummies. But they are still functioning, could still be breathing life. There's a kind of anxiety associated with this kind of suffocating wrapping ... so not so lighthearted after all.

Special thanks to echoAR, LeSportsac, and Materials for the Arts, for their contributions to this exhibition.

## ABOUT PENELOPE UMBRICO

Penelope Umbrico utilizes search engines, web platforms, common software applications, and imaging technologies to create multidisciplinary works that explore screen space, light, and electronic signal, in relation to the material detritus of technology. Her work navigates between producer and consumer, local and global, the individual and the collective, with attention to the technologies that are produced by, and produce, these forces.

Umbrico graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto, and received her MFA from the School of Visual Arts in NY. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is included in the collections of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Metropolitan Museum of Art; Milwaukee Art Museum; Museum of Modern Art; SFMOMA, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, among many others. Her recent exhibitions include a video installation at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; a solo exhibition at the Musée des Beaux Arts, Le Locle, Switzerland; and participation in major group exhibitions at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, MA; the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston; and the New York Public Library. She is the recipient of many awards including a Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program Residency, a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, the Anonymous Was A Woman Award, New York Foundation for the Arts fellowships, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Monographs of her work have been published by Aperture, NY; and RVB Books, Paris. Umbrico teaches at the School of Visual Arts, NY, and lives and works in Brooklyn.

#### ASSOCIATED PROGRAMMING

#### Coffee & Conversation

SAT, DEC 1 | 12PM

A gallery tour and conversation with the artist about her new exhibition at BRIC House.

#### Inside Out: Artists Working with Technology

WED, DEC 12 | 7PM

A panel discussion moderated by Umbrico with artists Jean Shin, Mary Mattingly, and Eva and Franco Mattes, who all employ technology in their work.

## Residency Hours

THURSDAYS & FRIDAYS | 2-6PM

Drop by the Gallery, where Umbrico and others will assist you in the process of disassembling, demystifying, and transforming your old devices.

## E-Waste Drop-Off

During the Opening Reception and Gallery Hours

Drop off your old devices (LCD TVs, iPods, Smartphones, Kindles, etc) to be disassembled and creatively transformed, as space permits.

## COVER IMAGE: Out of Order: Bad Display / eBay, 2018

Disassembled LCD screens, images of screens cropped from broken LCD TVs for sale on eBay, and UV printed on disassembled LCD screens; detail of installation at Postmasters Gallery, NYC

### FOLD IMAGE: Keyboard (CFFP, HEAD), 2018

Screen-grab of digital image files displaying a disassembled keyboard from an Apple laptop with the disassembler/owner's hands

#### INSIDE IMAGE: Out of Order - Bad Display (eBay), 2017

Images of screens cropped from broken laptop screens for sale on eBay and UV printed on disassembled laptop screens