

Penelope Umbrico Variants

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Penelope Umbrico: Variants

Tenth in the series, NEW DIRECTIONS, supported by the National Endowment

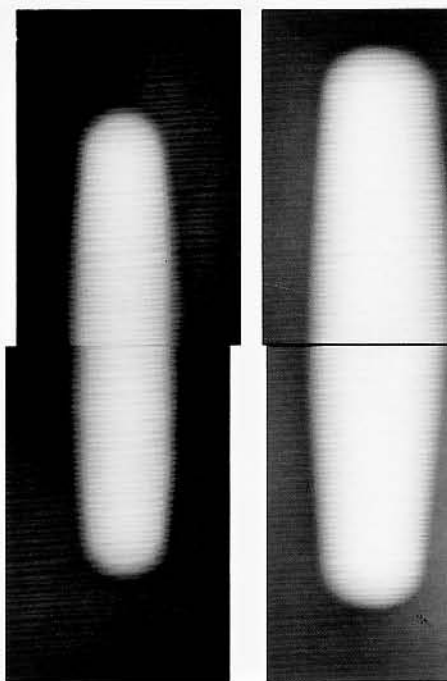
Photography seems an unlikely medium for the exploration of abstraction. The camera image is so strongly associated with the accurate reproduction of objects in front of the lens that we tend not to think of it as a tool for the transformation of the world. While most of us value the camera's ability to provide infinite detail, Penelope Umbrico discards sharply focused representation to imply more fundamental aspects of perception. Umbrico's works are suggestive of the mental operations through which we recognize and understand basic physical forms and give them meaning.

Umbrico combines photographs of simple objects, rearranging them to create something all together new. Often she photographs objects either in motion or severely out of focus, against colored backgrounds. The identification of the original object is impossible and exact description is irrelevant. Umbrico wants us to consider only the essence of the resulting form. These works primarily provide us with experience, more than meaning, making us aware of the connection between the physical act of seeing and the cognitive act of understanding.

Umbrico enhances the viewer's response through the form and presentation of the work. Her photographs are not singular images presented in a traditional manner. Rather, they are combined and shaped into forms of unique character. Often her works are made from the same image presented in reverse on two separate panels which combine to make a new form. These are joined symmetrically and presented as single units or in groups.

The viewer's experience of the work is also affected by shifts in scale from 4x6 inches to 4x6 feet; shifts in color, which explore changes in the relationship between the object and its background; shifts in shape, as works vary in form from rectangles, to joined rectangles which create squares, to ovals of color running linearly across the wall.

When presented as a group, each work interacts with the others in a way that



amplifies their character and relationships in space. As one observes the works, perceptions of their scale, color and shape are influenced by distance and angle of view. Umbrico's concern for the viewer's physical interaction with the work is a strategy more common in installation art, painting or sculpture, than the display of traditional photography. However, it is this physical relationship that forms the basis for our understanding of the work.

Trained as a painter, Umbrico was drawn to photography as a method for cataloguing forms which she could then easily reproduce. It was also important to her that photography accomplished these tasks in a mechanical way that was more anonymous than painting. To further remove the presence of the artist's hand Umbrico has used the drawing abilities of the computer to create and modify forms, making infinite variations rapidly. Photographs of these drawings are spliced together to expand on the original configuration. These notations exist in vast numbers, from which shapes are selected to be used for the creation of other works. For instance, starting with a computer drawing of four connected spheres, Umbrico

Biography

Born

1957, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Education

School of Visual Arts, New York City, M.F.A. Honors, 1989
University of Toronto, 1984-85

Ontario College of Art, Toronto, AOCA Diploma, Honors, 1980

Selected Group Exhibitions

Museum of Modern Art, *More Than One Photography*, New York City, May 1992

Lieberman and Saul Gallery, New York City, May 1992

P.S. 122, *Fearful Symmetry*, New York City, January 1991

Lieberman and Saul Gallery, New York City, October 1990

Visual Arts Gallery, *Photoart*, New York City,

The Drawing Center, *Selections 41*, New York City, February 1988

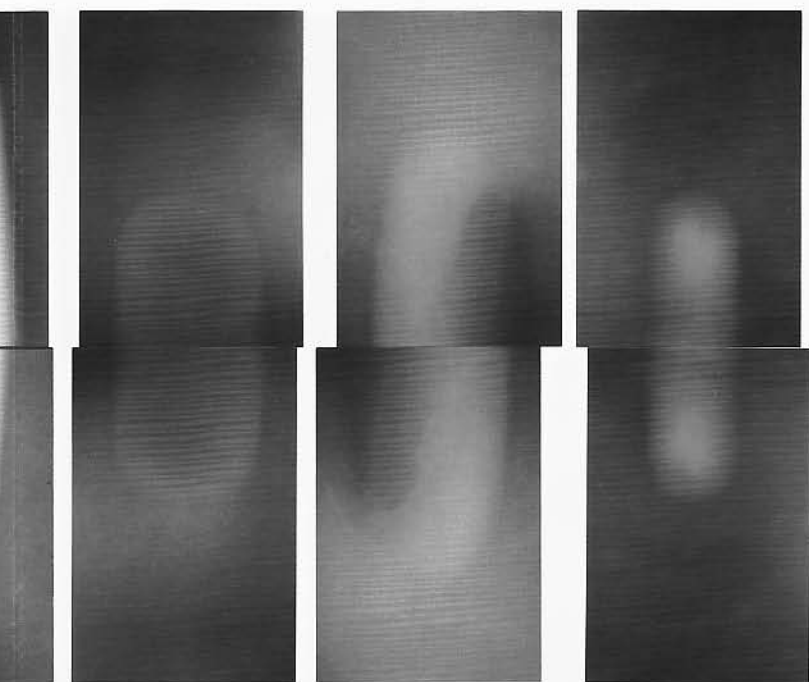
Visual Arts Gallery, New York City, March 1989, November 1987

Pitt International Gallery, Vancouver, August 1986

A Space, Toronto, May 1986

Artculture Resource Centre, Toronto, April 1985

Group Material, *Subculture: Art in the Subways*, New York City, September 1983



Untitled
1991

photographs it four different ways; vertically, horizontally, bisecting the form to show only the top, and then only the bottom. She then combines the resulting images in a variety of ways creating four new forms out of many possibilities; the single vertical of the whole image, a symmetrical image made by joining two of the bisected images of the top of the shape; another image combining two bisections of the bottom in the same manner; and an image made by combining the two horizontal frames. These processes of replication and reproduction are central to her activity, as she builds a never ending inventory of permutations.

In the most recent works Umbrico combines a number of different media to experiment with issues of evolution, repetition, surface and perception. Umbrico photographs a drawing of an organic shape directly from the computer screen. She then overlays the print with a sheet of glass on which she paints a complementary form based on her inventory of computer drawings. These two layers, while superimposed, do not touch, with a space of one inch separating the photographic image from the opaque painted form on the glass.

While the transparency of the glass allows us to see sections of the photographed form beneath, it is largely obscured by the parallel relationship to its sister form. While we can mentally complete the photograph there is a barrier between the amount of information the image contains and what we are able to perceive.

Penelope Umbrico's work began with an awareness of shapes in her daily life that physically, visually and psychologically had a relevance and meaning for her. Her art is an attempt to understand her own responses to these shapes by uncovering the essence of their basic forms. Simple shapes are the building blocks she uses to investigate variations within the construction of her imagery. Through abstraction and sculptural presentation her works become primary objects unto themselves, related to but vastly altered from the original subjects. For the viewer, this is an active rather than a passive interaction, requiring that we define our own perceptual experience in confronting her abstracted forms.

Willis Hartshorn
Deputy Director for Programs

Selected Bibliography

The Village Voice,
Vince Aletti, New York City,
October 17, 1989

Impulse Magazine,
Toronto, Fall 1986

Toronto Star,
Christopher Hume,
Saturday, Sept. 11, 1982

Artists Review,
Tom Hodgson,
Toronto, February 1980

Awards, Grants, Scholarships

Paula Rhodes Memorial
Award, 1989

School of Visual Arts
Tuition Scholarship, 1988

Ontario Arts Council,
Artist Residency, 1983, 1984

Ontario College of Art
Tuition Scholarship, 1978

Collections

International
Center of Photography,
New York City
Museum of Modern Art,
New York City