On Photography

By Teju Cole

Faced with a torrent of digital photographs, some artists have become collectors — remixing other people's pictures into new images invested with new meaning.

When he visited the Plumble National Daguerrian Gallery in Manhattan in 1846, Walt Whitman was astonished. "What a spectacle!" he wrote. "In whichever direction you turn your peering gaze, you see nought but human faces! There they stretch, from floor to ceiling — hundreds of them." In the seven years between the invention of the daguerreotype and Whitman's visit to Plumble's, the medium had become popular enough to generate an impressive, and even hectic, stream of images. Now, toward the end of photography's second century, that stream has become torrential.

"Take lots of pictures!" is how our friends with us a good trip, and we oblige them. Nearly one trillion photographs are taken each year, of everything at which a camera might be pointed: families, meals, landscapes, cars, toes, cats, toothpaste tubes, skies, traffic lights, atrocities, door-knobs, waterfalls, an unrestrained gallimaufr that not only indexes the world of visible things but also adds to its plenty. We are surrounded by as many depictions of things as by things themselves.

The consequences are numerous and complicated: more instantaneous pleasure, more information and a more cosmopolitan experience of life for huge numbers of people, but also constant exposure to illusion and an intimate knowledge of fakery. There is a photograph coming at you every few seconds, and hype is the lingua franca. It has become hard to stand still, wrapped in the glory of a single image, as the original viewers of old paintings used to do. The flood of images has increased our access to wonders and at the same time lessened our sense of wonder. We live in inescapable surfeit.

A number of artists are using this abundance as their starting point, setting their own cameras aside and turning to the horde — collecting and arranging photographs that they have found online. These artist-collectors, in placing one thing next to another, create a third thing — and this third thing, like a subatomic particle produced by a collision of two other particles, carries a charge.

A decent photograph of the sun looks similar to any other decent photograph of the sun: a pale circle with a livid red or blue sky around it. There are hundreds of thousands of such photographs online, and in the daily contest for "likes"
Top: A sequence from "I'm Google," in which Dina Kelberman juxtaposes images found online. Bottom: Photographs curated by Eric Oglander in his "Craigslist mirrors" project. Opening page: Penelope Umbrico's "541,795 Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial) / 26/2006," also based on user-uploaded digital images.

are close to a sure thing: easy to shoot, fun to look at, a reliable dose of awe. The American artist Penelope Umbrico downloads such photos of the sun from Flickr—she favors sunsets in particular—and then crops and prints them, assembling them into an enormous array. A typical installation may contain 2,500 photographs, organized into a rectangular mural. It is the same sun, photographed repeatedly in the same way, by a large cast of photographers, few of whom are individually remarkable as artists and none of whom are credited. But, with Umbrico's intervention, the cumulative effect of their images literally dazzles: the sun, the sun, the sun, the sun, in row upon brilliant row.

Optical brilliance is also the key to the American artist Eric Oglander's "Craigslist mirrors" project, which is also based on found photographs. His biographical statement is deadpan: "I search Craigslist for compelling photos of mirrors." Oglander posts these pictures to his website, to Instagram and to Tumblr. A surprising number of them are surreal or enjoyably weird, because of the crazy way a mirror interrupts the logic of whichever visual field it is placed in, and because of the unexpected things the reflection might include. Photographic work of this kind—radically dependent on context—can be unsettling for those who take "photograph" to have a straightforward meaning: an image made with a camera by a single author with a particular intention. This is where collector-artists come in: to confirm that curation and juxtaposition are basic artistic gestures.

The German artist Joachim Schmid, with a gleeful and indefatigable eye, gathers other people's photographs and organizes them into photo books. For his trouble, he has been called a thief and a fraud. Schmid initially used photographs found on the street and at sales, but more recently he has depended on digital images. His typological projects, like those in the 96-book series "Other People's Photographs" (2008-11), are alert to the mystery in artlessness. They are a mutant form, somewhere between the omnivorous vernacular of Stephen Shore's "American Surfaces" and the hypnotic minimalism of Bernd and Hilla Becher's water towers. Schmid brings the photographs out of one kind of flow, their image-life as part of one person's Flickr
account, and into another, at rest among
their visual cognates.

Each book in “Other People’s Photographs” is a document of how amateur
digital photography nudges us toward a
common but unpremeditated language
of appearances. Photography is easy now,
and cheap, but this does not mean that
everything is documented with the same
frequency or that all possibilities are
equally explored. As is true of every set
of expressive tools, digital photography
creates its own forms of emphasis and regis-
ters of style. Cellphone cameras are great
in low light, and so we have many more
nocturnal photos. Most of our tiny cameras
are not easy to set on a tripod, and so there
is a correspondingly smaller percentage
of soberly symmetrical photographs of
monuments; the dominant aesthetic of
the age is hand-held. A camera focused
at waist level, as old Rolleiflexes were,
differs from one held between the eyes
and the chin, the optimal placement for a
live digital display.

All selfies are alike as all daguerrean-
type portraits were alike: An image can
be more conventionally an example of its
gener than a memorable depiction of its
subject. A plate of food, with its four or five
items of varying texture corralled into a
circle, is similar to countless other plates
of food. But a book full of photographed
meals, meals long consumed and forgotten,
is not only poking gentle fun at our
obsessive documentation of the quotidian.
It is also marveling at how inexpensive
photography has become. Things that
would not have merited a second glance
are now unquestioningly, almost automatically,
recorded. The doors of our fridges,
glimpses of cleavage, images of our birth-
day cakes, the setting sun: Cheap photo-
graphy makes visible the ways in which we
are similar, and have for a long time been
similar. Now we have proof, again, and
again, and again.

The Baltimore-based artist Dina Kel-
berman approaches the question of simi-
larity in a different way. She uses Google’s
search engines to find photographs, vi-
idos and video stills that she places into a
sequence, each successive image subtly
distinct from the one preceding it. Her
project, “I’m Google,” begun in 2011, is ongoing,
and already contains hundreds of trans-
formations. In one recent sequence, an
egg yolk became, after a few variations,
a red-hot nickel ball, and then a Ping-
Pong ball; the Ping-Pong table on which
the ball rested became a squash court;
that, in turn, became the subfloor of a
house in which radiant heat was being
installed. Another sequence transforms,
almost magically, plumes of fire retardant
from planes into dust clouds from vehi-
cles speeding through a dune. The effect
is both funny and mesmerizing, revealing
how pleasing visual analogies can be, like
the slant rhymes in a poem.

The sheer mass of digital imagery was
itself the subject of “24 Hrs of Photos,”
a project by the Dutch artist Erik Kes-
sels (first in 2011, and other times since).
Kessels downloaded every photograph
uploaded to Flickr in the course of a
single day, about a million in all. He printed
a fraction of them, around 350,000,
which he then piled up in massive wave-
like heaps in a gallery. Asked to explain
the project, Kessels said: “I visualize the
feeling of drowning in representations of
other people’s experiences.” But that’s not
art. And yet the emotions that accompany
such an installation — the exasperation,
the sense of wonder or inundation, the
glimpses of beauty — are true of art. The
shoe fits, macabrely as it is.

What are the rights of the original
photographers, the “nonartists” whose
works have been so unceremoniously
reconfigured? And how can what is
found be ordered, or put into a new
order, and presented again to give
it new resonance? And how long will
that resonance itself last? The real
trouble is rarely about whether something
counts as art — if the question comes
up, the answer is almost always yes —
but whether the art in question is start-
ting, moving or productively discom-
fiting. Meeting those criteria is just as
difficult for straight photography as it
is for appropriation-based work. After
all, images made of found images are
images, too. They join the never-ending
cataract of images, what Whitman called
the “immense Phantom concourse,” and
they are vulnerable, as all images are, to
the dual threats of banality and oblivion
— until someone shows up, says, “Find-
ers keepers,” rethinks them and, by that
rethinking, brings them back to life.

Poem

The colloquialism of the title, which means “and them” — as in
“Tell your mama n’em I said hello” — encompasses a host of people
made familiar by the world of the poem. Most of us have known
them: elders and distant ancestors whose way of being was rooted
in the wisdom of folk knowledge, a generation now all but gone.

’N’em

By Jericho Brown

They said to say goodnight
And not goodbye, unplugged
The TV when it rained. They hid
Money in mattresses
So to sleep on decisions.
Some of their children
Were not their children. Some
Of their parents had no birthdays.
They could sweat a cold out
Of you. They’d wake without
An alarm telling them to.
Even the short ones reached
Certain shelves. Even the skinny
Cooked animals too quick
To catch. And I don’t care
How ugly one of them arrived,
That one got married
To somebody fine. They fed
Families with change and wiped
Their kitchens clean.
Then another century came.
People like me forgot their names.

Illustration by R. O. Bleichman

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poetry, “The New Testament,” was published last year by Copper Canyon Press.