

# The Digital Sublime

A dialogue with Penelope Umbrico

**Penelope Umbrico invited us out to her Downtown Brooklyn studio as a continuation of the conversations held at The Photographic Universe. Penelope's ideas resonated throughout the conference. The presentation of her work sparked dynamic conversations on the significance of the increasing global accessibility of Internet snapshot archives to photographic theory. In the following interview, Christina Labey and Elizabeth Bick talk with Penelope about the future of her Suns from Flickr Project, the status of the appropriated digital image, and the investigation of a uniquely digital sublime.**

CM: In the introduction to your conversation with Anne Collins Goodyear, you spoke about the overwhelming and somewhat subliminal experience of looking at images on Flickr. Let me borrow the question about Google Earth that someone asked Michael Jones: do you think that these photographs taint our fresh perspective of the world and our sense of place?

PU: I thought his response was really great, "What do you know of your own knowledge?" This was the premise of my question; I assume that we are certainly products of our experience – what we are taught; what we see; how we see – however it's quite different being products of everyone else's experiences – especially when these experiences are curated by corporate or market interests. There is definitely something interesting about experiencing a place through Google Earth and this kind of access to place is seductive, magical even, but in a way, it is only that: magic, illusory. I guess I'd be concerned that our sense of place and context, already disconnected and abstract, is becoming even more so – that this illusion too often replaces the possibility of a first-hand experience with both people and places.

CM: In a certain way, your work embraces the overwhelming amounts of images on the Internet. Why did you choose, from everything out there, to focus on images of the sun?

PU: To begin with, I was simply struck by the amount of pictures of sunsets. I was thinking about the fact the sun is actually out there, so far away, warm and so on. What was interesting was how we take that thing [the sun] and subsume it to this electronic space. That to me was really poetic. I started to look

at the images and think about how they are all the same, how I could comment on that sameness. Of course, we only have one sun but if millions of people are taking pictures of it, then we have millions of suns.

CM: If the sun is always there, why do we feel compelled to photograph it?

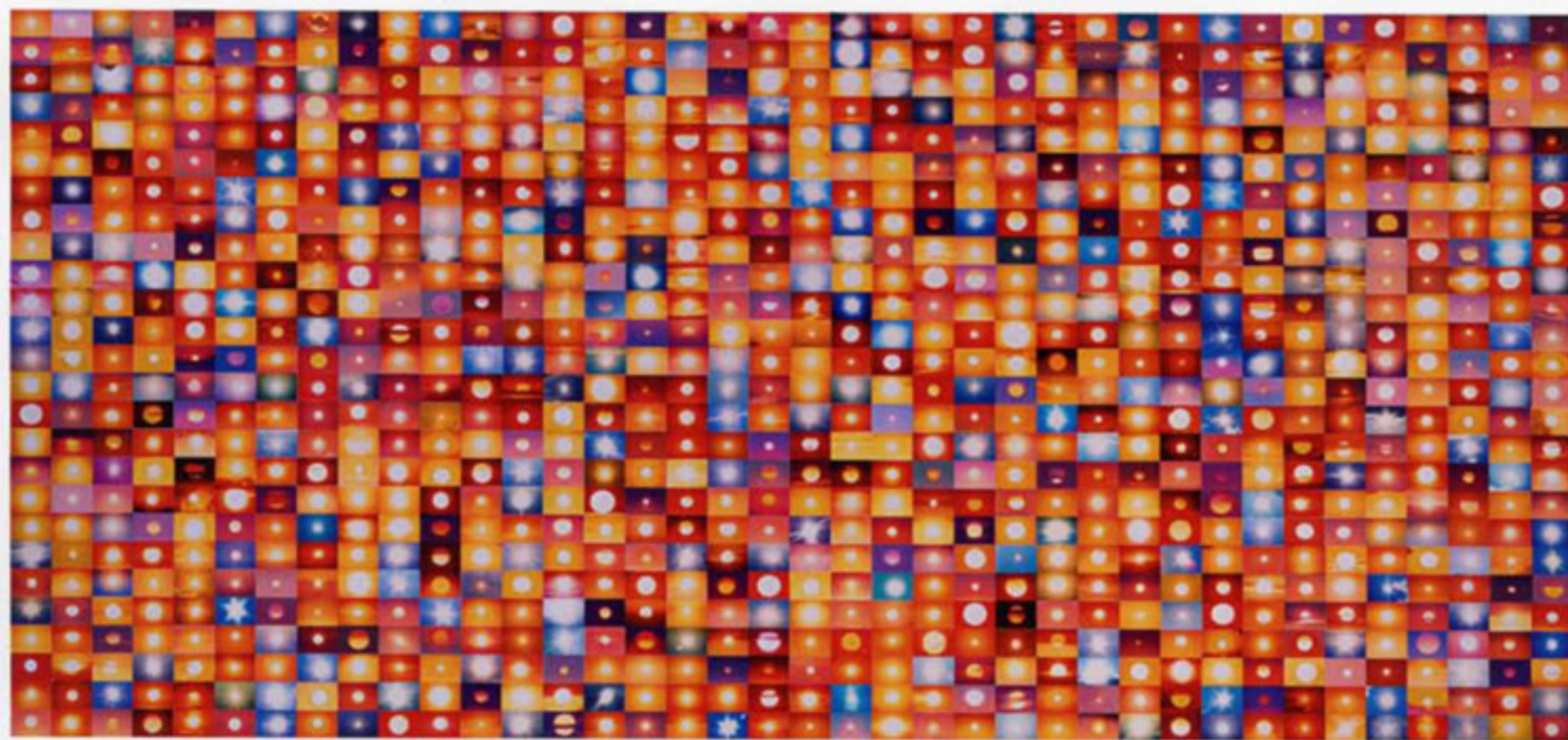
PU: Exactly, as if to own it. If there is an element of awe and worship toward the sun, is photographing it taking control of it? And what does it say that we all participate. Oddly the question of authorship gets tangled up here – it's lovely and poetic to engage in an activity that virtually everyone does – and in the process make photographs that follow a very defined script. It's another, entirely, to claim individuality or subjectivity with these photographs.

CM: And yet this remote and ubiquitous object is drawn into relationships with so many different people, in so many contexts across histories and cultures, which figure the sun in different ways. That brings us back to the idea that you brought up at the conference – the photograph as a record of the idea of "I am here, now." Photographing the sun must challenge or at least confuse this idea.

PU: Yes, interesting – during a recent talk in China, I felt a palpable disappointment when people realized I hadn't traveled all over the world and photographed the suns for my installation myself. Afterwards, someone suggested it had to do with the symbolism of the sun in Chinese culture and of repetition as a meditative Buddhist practice. This makes sense – they loved the installation. People were touching the pictures, and taking photographs of themselves in front of it... Though since then I've actually found many such pictures from other installations.

CM: The way the Suns from Flickr project has taken on this new dimension is fascinating. You are finding images all over the Internet of people posing for pictures in front of the sun installations, which lends itself to one of the concerns of your work: the proliferation of suns. Were you anticipating this?

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Penelope Umbrico. *Suns (From Sunsets) from Flickr*, 2006-ongoing

PU: It took me by surprise that this was happening. I now have a collection of these images of people posing in front of my installations as though they are in front of an actual sunset. I am collecting the ones where the subject is looking straight into the camera and as I start showing these images alongside the installation, hopefully it will encourage more of these photographs.

CM: From the outside your practice seems very digitally based, however, sitting here in your studio I can see how much you respond to the tactile and physical nature of photography. You have stacks of photographs and work tacked up on all the walls. I think it's really interesting how you still seem very committed to the tactile process of the printed photograph.

PU: At the conference, Tina Barney asked James Welling if he ever gets frustrated with the flatness of the two dimensionality of the photograph. I was surprised by the question – to me that flatness is seductive, and I love the physicality of the print. I like the work to sit right on the edge between representation and abstraction, illusory 3-dimensional and 2-dimensional object. So yes, I am very particular about material and craft. It's important to me, for example, that the sun photographs are produced via a mass-market process – 4" x 6" Kodak "Easy Share" machine prints (Kodak actually calls them this) or that Broken Sets (eBay) are digital c-prints on metallic paper – the sheen and luminescence of that paper lends to the coolness of the subject matter (the technological breakdown derived from images of broken electronic displays sold on eBay).

CM: During the conversation between Susan Meiselas and Chris Boot, it was suggested that your work is a de-contextualization of the photographs you collected from Flickr. In response you pointed out the fact that your work was also a re-contextualization of the images. Can you elaborate on this?

PU: All photography is a de-contextualization. And as soon as it can be viewed – by anyone, in any way, place or form – it's a re-contextualization. As photographers, the first thing we learn is how to frame the world. And when you put a frame around anything, you de-contextualize it. To not see the re-contextualization at this point is to normalize that framing, to make it invisible – in some ways, I'd say my work calls attention to this invisibility – makes it visible.

CM: At the conference, Anne Collins Goodyear referred to your process as an "ambition to form." In response to your conversation, you were later asked if, in addition to your role as the artist, you ever consider yourself an editor or curator of your work? What were your thoughts on this?

PU: I think Walter Benn Michaels raised the idea of "ambition to form." I would say a curator or editor engages in their practice as a form – as a means in itself. I am an artist and my "ambition to form" might utilize a curatorial or editorial process but only as a means to an end. I do create taxonomies, archives, edit and curate images, but this is always in service to the form of my work. That form is not an archive or collection, but something altogether different than, and often opposite to, the source material's original meaning.