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The Digital Sublime
A dialogue with Penelope Umbrico

Penelope Umbrico invited me to her Downtown Brooklyn studio as a continuation of the conversations held at The Photographic Universe, Penelope's ideas move towards the conference. The presentation of her work sparked deconstructive questions on the significance of the increasingly vast accessibility of images. In the following interview, Christina Labor and Elizabeth Black talk with Penelope about the history of her Suns from Flickr Project, an assemblage of the emic digital image, and the investigation of a uniquely digital sublime.

CM: In the introduction to your conversation with Anne Colin-Gardeau, you spoke about the overwhelming and somehow subliminal experience of looking at images on Flickr. Let me borrow the question about Google Earth that someone and I have come to think that you think new photographic era on a fresh perspective of the world and our sense of place.

PJ: I thought his response was really great. "What do you know of your own knowing?" This was the premise of my question; I assume that we are certainly products of our experience — what we are taught and how we see — however it's quite different being products of everyone else's experience especially when those experiences are curated by corporates 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. Illusion. I feel gullied because I see that our sense of place and context, already disconnected and abstract, is becoming even more so — but this illusion too often replaces the possibility of a first-hand experience with both people and places.

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

PJ: To begin with, I was simply struck by the amount of pictures of suns. I was thinking about the fact the sun is actually out there, for so many, warm and so on. What was interesting was how we talk about that thing (the sun) and subsume it to this electronic space. That was new and really poetic. I seem to look

PJ: I think it was 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 sun. I am collecting the ones where the subject is looking straight into the camera and 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, string here your at stake is can I see how much more open to the tactile and physical nature of photography. You have stacks of photographs and work tucked up on all the walls. I think it's really interesting how you will see very something very connected to the tactile process of the printed photograph.

CM: During the conversation between Susan Meiselas and Chris Hill, 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?

CM: In a certain way, the Suns from Flickr project has taken on this new dimension is fascinating. You are feeding 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?