



Mirror, 2001-02  
15" diameter  
chromogenic color print

Pictures in mail-order catalogues intend to show us the selves we desire. Their pages are filled with chic situations, fashionable furniture and sleek objects that we must have in order to fulfill our material destinies. We daydream about inserting ourselves into the spaces between the outlines of the objects, onto their inviting textures, into the soft light that falls into these arranged environments. Each ensemble represents someone we might be, aided by objects, prompted by appealingly appointed spaces. The objects exist without us; they try to coax us into believing that, without them, we do not.

Penelope Umbrico has worked—consistently, and almost obsessively—with images that are meant to make us crave the objects they present. She has collected pictures from mail-order catalogs and advertising circulars that came to her door, accumulating pages of proffered domestic settings. Experimenting with the imagery and its accumulated desire, she began to blot out all but the single object in each vignette that caught her attention. She blanked out the surroundings, removing the familiar and contextualizing elements so that nothing would distract from the single form. In this isolating enterprise, she then became very interested in the objects and features that offered a means of escaping the space of the room—the windows, doors and mirrors. Umbrico began to work with them, whiting out everything except their forms with the eponymous office fluid until only the mirror's surface or the view past the opened door remained, slung in a modulated sea of white strokes. Each of these odd drawings turned out to be full of detail all on its own: the mirrors held their former surroundings, replicating the imaginary rooms' details, while the doorways contained oddly summary landscapes—shorthand, emblematic images in the midst of a blankness.

Umbrico scanned the catalog images into her computer, trimming away any superfluous information beyond the outlines of her central objects. The images were rotated digitally to straighten their perspectivized angles and make them squarely frontal and confrontational. In addition, each was enlarged to the advertised size, remaking it in human scale. These reorientations bestow an objectness on the images: rather than existing as fragments of two-dimensional depiction, each picture gains a presence of its own in the viewer's space. Installed in ensembles, they mimic their real counterparts'

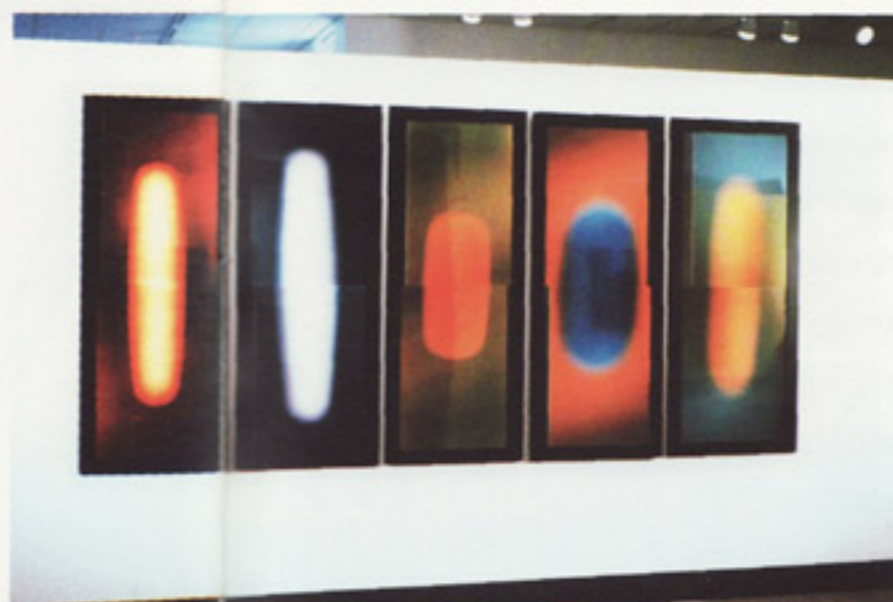
positioning and relationships to the viewer as features of the gallery space. The slight out-of-focus resolution that results from their duplication and enlargement is a subtle clue to their doubly-derived character—a representation of reflected and excerpted imagery rather than a direct picturing—and they read as a series of disjunctions and displacements. Umbrico is interested in how we maintain our equilibrium in the incessant flow of images and information that surrounds us, and her interest extends beyond consumerism and discussions of cultural representation. Her earlier series moved back and forth between images that mark ways in which the surfeit of objects and pictures in our culture seduce us and those that trace perceptual activity and the physical act of seeing. She makes ordinary objects strange and complicates visual incidents—not to create more cultural information, but to generate a visual apperception, often induced by movement or proliferation. In this way, she is able to reveal and explore the psychological spaces that open up, such as the anxiety produced by the irresolvability of a rapid shuffle of images, or the desire generated in the abundance implied by a room filled with images.

The first of these series to garner attention was *The Ends of Things*, which Umbrico worked on from 1993 until 1997. In this project she photographed the ends of various things in her house—broomsticks, handles and the like, framing them tightly and focusing the camera somewhere in the short distance between object and lens. She made two photographs of each object. Flipping the second one, she attached it to the bottom of the first to create a lozenge-shaped closed form. The doubling obscured the fragmented nature of the original subject and proposed a new thing, a Pop object in bright colors and large scale (they are roughly the size of a human torso). In pairing the images Umbrico lined up the edges of the object perfectly; because it was not perfectly centered in the picture, this caused the photograph's edges to shift out of alignment. The pictured object is whole, but the picture itself is fragmentary. The photograph is revealed to be a fiction, and the play between real and constructed is enacted on several levels. Umbrico installs these photographs in large numbers in long rows: their compounded lack of focus creates a veritable hum of desire, exchanging photographic integrity for contingency.

Another important

Ends of Things, 1995  
60" x 20" each  
chromogenic color prints.

project is *From Catalogs* from 1998, a large installation of out-of-focus photographs of objects from direct mail advertisements and catalog pages. Umbrico again distorted focus to create her images; the resultant deformation of subject replaced the clearly articulated consumer object with a swirl of shape and color that is curiously organic and visceral. Umbrico contradicts the original intention of the catalog and confuses the semiotic function of the photograph, substituting for photographic replication an uncanny visual experience and an intimation of disease. Umbrico again assembled many images for her presentation, this time creating large grids to fill walls. The effect is a proliferation of



shapes and movement that exceeds commentary on consumerism, and becomes instead a visual drama, full of blur and whirl. Rather than invite a symbolic reading of meaning, the series produces physiological sensation, induced by the sense of constant changing and becoming.

This dysfunctional use of the camera is a locus for Umbrico and she also used it to strategic effect in two variants of a video project in the mid-1990s, *Object Throb/Focus Struggle*. In each, she took advantage of

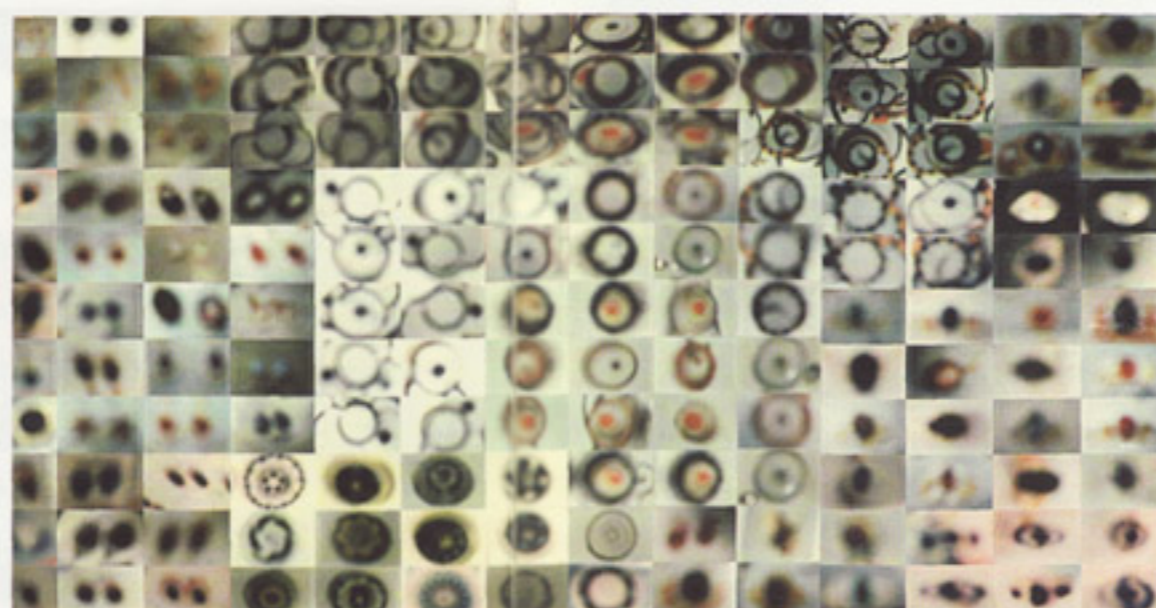
her video camera's autofocus function to create an anxious pulsing. In one piece she trained the camera on an out-of-focus photograph. Because the camera needed a clear line to focus, this caused it to continually adjust. The resultant videotape is a repetitive sequence of images that shrink and expand with the fluctuating focus, creating pulsating shapes that look like animate organs. For the other piece, created for installation in the Anchorage under the Brooklyn Bridge (a project of Creative Time), she placed a tiny kidney bean in front of the camera. The bean did not provide a large enough mass for focus, and the camera again continually attempted to correct itself. The video contains no specific information, only throbbing movement in energetic sequence, the camera spawning an

From Catalogs, 1998  
detail of 2000 4" x 6"  
chromogenic color prints

infinity of animate things. In each of these projects Umbrico constructed a situation in which both the object and its identity (the cultural information that forms its content) are transformed, a metamorphosis that denies our expectations of narrative or linearity. In place of information and clear knowledge, she propagates a multitude of abstractions: reductions and distillations, vaguely cellular in their simplified forms, but ultimately unknowable. The accumulation of images in each of the works produces contingency, a mutating state of being that refuses to become any one thing, to stay put, to be registered as one thing or another. Her grids do not suggest order but the potential for self-perpetuation; her series and sequences do not lead to a conclusion but instead hint at extension, a kind of organic—even viral—growth. Vibratory and hallucinatory, they come undone as linguistic constructions. Illegible, they are unknowable—transformed from object into matter and phenomena.

Umbrico's work quietly disturbs our relationship not only to objects but to photography and its imagery. These earlier photographic works do not mirror reality; there is no doubling here, no recognition of self or symbolic order. Instead, Umbrico uses the photograph itself in an uncanny way. Her picture strategy is not new: the Surrealists utilized strange angles, close-ups, distortions of focus, and manipulations of printing to defamiliarize their ordinary objects, constructing new subjects in images that operate on the edge of recognizability. But Umbrico disrupts her own Surrealist construct: she creates an instability in perception that shifts attention from the pictured subject to the process of seeing. Her photographic objects oscillate between depiction and perception, and destabilize the position of the viewer.

Like the earlier grids of estranged and indistinct forms, Umbrico's recent project, *Out of Place*, also denies easy conclusions. In this new project, however, it is not contingency that suspends closure but disruption and refusal. Umbrico offers us pictures of domestic tranquility and quotidian objects that, like the original catalog images, invite us to choose an identity. As



representations of the ideal, they portray coherent unities and promise the achievement of completeness. But Umbrico also remakes them as objects and, available and legible in the viewer's space, they become confusing and ambivalent. They are physically present and yet resistant to approach. The mirrors both presuppose the viewer as absent referent and erase her; the doorways deny any possibility of passage. They occupy a position of suspension between the concrete and the pictorial. Subjectivity is continuously displaced and repositioned, provoking anxiety, reversing and interfering with the power the viewer holds to determine a relationship to object or the meaning of the image. The deeper

significance of *Out of Place* is this uneasy relationship between viewer and the work, and the proposal of a presentational terrain that consumes representational capacity.

Umbrico has produced an array of complicated projects over the last decade, and in each she has explored the various ways in which representations summon viewing relationships and declare various positions of subjectivity. In this latest project, Umbrico abandons her preference for agitated perception; instead, she complicates both the

ordinary, obdurate presence of objects and their symbolic role in realizing our imaginary selves, and achieves a stilled but dissonant cognition, a sense of being both subject and object in a complex of operations. In French there is a saying, "la peinture me regarde." It translates as both "the painting looks at me" and "painting concerns me." In *Out of Place*, Umbrico subverts this idea: we become the disquieted objects of the pictures' disregard.

SHERYL CONKELTON | DECEMBER 2001

Sheryl Conkelton is a curator and writer living in Seattle.