Empty Apartments consists of ~~all the available photographs~~ approximately 150,000 photographs of apartments listed for rent on Craigslist on May 20, 2016. We automatically scraped these images from the site, then sorted them manually to remove anything that was not an interior shot, including ads, floorplans, and shared areas like gyms and foyers. The images are shown as an endlessly scrolling field, a mass of the intimate spaces where people carry out their private lives. ~~Spaces that we are not normally privy to, turned inside out.~~

These images show transitional spaces – rooms in various stages of their inhabitants exiting and entering. They are paused, their final outcome yet to be realized. Some show a life caught in midstream, a candid photo of someone else’s living space with nothing arranged for the benefit of the camera. Others are highly polished and staged: several glasses of wine and a bottle set out on a table with beckoning chairs inviting the viewer to envision themselves there. Others are newly empty – the bareness made more bare by the remains of a previous tenant, a pile of pillows stacked in a corner, boxes by a door.

We were interested in these spaces, and in the anonymous landlord-photographers who took them. Craigslist organizes their site by location, mostly cities and major metropolitan areas. In total there were 413 areas listed starting with Abilene, Texas and ending with Zanesville, Ohio. But rather than an ethnographic investigation, we wanted the photographs to remain as images; prices, location, descriptions are no longer attached to the images, but instead sorted by visual similarity.

In doing this project we divided the labor between us. Jeff was responsible for coding (a script to download the original images, intermediate steps of reformatting and sorting, and the website). I provided the manual labor of going through hundreds of thousands of images (three times) to weed out the ones that we felt didn’t fit. My task allowed for a granular familiarity with the images: I pored over images for a period of several months. At times the process of sifting and culling was meditative, other times tedious, with one image bleeding into the next. Each day there was a surprise, an image that would take my breath away with its unintentional beauty.

This set of images exists as a vast, seemingly endless array of interior spaces. You are at once struck by the overall ~~totality~~ of the images, but up close you can lose yourself in the surprise of the individual details. When you pull back you start seeing similarities. The consistency of highly varnished wooden floors reflecting the light back from a sunny window is a visual thread through the nearly every listing. The image of a cable TV wire snaked in a corner kept on reappearing. You look more closely and find the surprise of a calico cat, captured crossing a bed in a beam of light; the loneliness of an empty lawn chair, in an empty room, by a curtainless window; the solitude of 3 hangers in an otherwise bare closet. I found an atavistic satisfaction in seeing fresh vacuum marks on carpet (there are thousands of these). There were the inexplicable images where the intention of the photographer was unclear: unfocused corners, stairs descending into darkness, a blurry shot of wood grain. There was a pervading sense of loss and abandonment that seemed to hang over most of the images, only to be broken by a shot of a kinky pink hot tub.

The places we reside in, the walls, ceiling and floor act like a secondary skin. The house acting as a protective layer where we perform and act out our most primary functions of the private self. Even in the reign of social media most of us still lead very private lives. There is an inside out quality to these images, of something exposed to the open air that should not have been. It’s the shock of looking at a photograph of a Gordon Matta Clark cut, the disorientation of seeing someone’s living room from the street. There is a vulnerability found here, of faces heavy with sleep exposed to too bright a light.

Every photograph on Craigslist is anonymous, no photographer is ever credited. We were drawn to the idea of an accidental collaborative buildup of images, the culmination of thousands of cameras and eyes. The purpose that of capitalism, but the result an unintentional document of our nomadic, mostly vacant American living spaces. Sometimes I would catch a glimpse of the photographer: a fragment of a face, a crook of an elbow caught in a bathroom mirror, a reflection in a window turned mirror at night, a shadow projected onto the floor. Their presence was always surprising and jarring when stumbled upon. They were fugitives, breaking the illusion of emptiness and introducing a paradox: though the images exuded an existential loneliness, at the moment they were taken, at least one person was present.

The project also revealed a clear demarcation of class, evidenced by the technical quality of the photographs themselves. Those that could afford to, or for whom it was financially worthwhile, hired professional photographers. The rooms shown were neat, generically but tastefully decorated without the marks of lives being lived. Exorbitant rents merited the cost of a wide-angle lens and HDR post-processing. The professional photographs were lit with care and carefully edited but ultimately entirely generic – they all could have been taken by a single photographer. ~~Their skill and expertise created a closed system that allowed for no oxygen.~~ The images taken by amateurs, casual and perfunctory, held the most joy and surprise. Low quality jpeg compression and patterns of overexposed windows with underexposed interiors create photographic magic. I would imagine the photographer, probably the landlord themselves, pausing and caught up for a moment in the beauty of the way light hit a wall. How it broke up as it ran through the slats of the blind, throwing a pattern on a well-worn wooden floor. That for a moment they paused in their task, caught up in capturing something beyond just documentation and a rush to get the place listed.

The project started around the same time we began a months-long search for a home to purchase. We were saturated with images of homes, spending hours online and hopefully projecting ourselves into these virtual spaces. The project continued even as our plans for purchasing a home sputtered and we rented yet another apartment, both like every other place and yet chock-full of unique details. We continued to work on the project for the next year, and in fact as I write this we are looking again for another apartment.

Misc. notes.

Explain Drift Station.

The cable snaked in a corner.

Connected to my own nomadic life – the hopefulness of a new apartment. My stationary friends have moved 3 times and all own homes now.

I have not lived anywhere longer then 3 years now since I moved out of my parents house. 16 apartments

Buffalo 1

Buffalo 2

Buffalo – alone

Buffalo – Krisitn Rob

Buffalo – Ti

Jersey City

Clinton Hill

Fort Greene

Maine

Harlem

Jackson Heights

Greenpoint

Montclair

Lincoln

Bloomfield

JC