

# Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art

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Kate Palmer Albers

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## About

*Circulation / Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is an online writing project devoted to contemporary art practices that engage with our current world of moving photographic images. I don't mean moving images as in film, but moving images through space, between friends, across platforms, from digital to material space and back again. Images that gain new meanings as they shift from one form to another; images that become untethered from their origins and drift through digital space; images that are posted, downloaded, appropriated, stolen, repurposed; images that live multiple lives. Images that are made on a smartphone and end up on gallery walls, images that are uploaded to Wikipedia and end up in books, images that are made by a Google Street View camera and become authored artwork, images that are exchanged among strangers only to disappear. Though conventionally there is a distinction between photographic images and photographic objects, these images might be both, simultaneously, equally valuable iterations from one to the next. As with most photographs, the form is as notable as the content.

Of course, aside from camera-less photograms, photographic images have, nearly by definition, always moved: from a film negative to a print; from a slide to a projection; from one kind of paper to another; presented in a frame, in a book, in a magazine, or on a screen. Until recently, it was iconic images that moved the most, often existing as prints of various sizes, ubiquitous newspaper and magazine reproductions, and, eventually, emblazoned upon posters, coffee mugs, mouse pads, and t-shirts.

But what I'm interested in here is – I think – a different kind of movement: one in which the meanings of the images are in fact defined by their channels of circulation and their points of exchange. Or maybe that's not new at all. As I read through two recent books filled with essays about the impact of digital media on photography, one of the primary things that struck me was that nobody could decide: is this all new, or is this all history repeating itself? Do we need to grapple with authorship via Penelope Umbrico if we've already absorbed Sherrie Levine? Do we need to think about the relationship between automated imagery and artists in terms of Google Street View if we've already got Ed Ruscha and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*? Do we need to talk about Richard Prince and Instagram if we've already talked about Richard Prince and Marlboro?

For many swaths of contemporary work made by serious artists and discussed by serious critics and historians, the answer to those questions would be a resounding “no” (or, at least, “can we just not?”) I don’t consider myself a disciple of the great and influential John Szarkowski, but he sure got one thing right: photography is a medium that was born whole. Not much happens in photography that William Henry Fox Talbot didn’t think about first – in some iteration – in *The Pencil of Nature*. So while I am occasionally quite envious of my colleagues who get to immerse themselves in the gorgeous rarity, quirkiness, and stunning insights of the 19th century world of photography, I find myself drawn to the contemporary iterations of what are often old concerns, updated for today’s culture.

Privacy and surveillance, originality and authorship, sharing and distribution, saving and loss, distribution and networks ... how these categories will unfurl into the future marks some of the central concerns (or anxieties) of our contemporary culture. I rely on artists to help me make sense of these questions, particularly as they play out in the world of images. The writing that will appear on this site will be – I hope – informed by past practices but focused on very recent work. Now that we have moved into a period of digital ubiquity, I have often frequently heard “pre-digital” photography all lumped together into one category, as if it can now be easily understood and digested as “how things used to be before they were digital/

social/networked/mobile". I want to resist this generalizing tendency, and seek instead to use the complexities of today to preserve the complex and moving role that photographs have always had as they traveled from place to place over time.

*August 18, 2015*

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Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation



# FaceApp: A Graduate Seminar

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July 6, 2017



kev  
@kept\_simple



history doesn't have to be so  
depressing



4/24/17, 12:27 PM

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1,902 RETWEETS 7,581 LIKES

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The Smile, the Pose, and FaceApp: Portraiture and Ethics, 1936-2017 Professor  
Kate Palmer Albers  
Mondays, 1-3:50pm  
Art Building 245

This graduate seminar will address the emergence in the 1930s of the concept of documentary photography, the shifting possibilities of photographs as agents for social change and persuasion, the ethics of photographic portraiture, the gender politics of asking women to smile, and the dynamically changing role and function of iconic images. Course topics will also include the influence of both technology and advertising on the history of photographic smiles (covering advances in film speed and dentistry as well as Kodak's early 20th century advertising campaigns in the US), artificial intelligence in machine learning and computer facial recognition, and the effects of social media, meme culture, and viral social contagion on each of the above. This course will also include several practicums designed to enhance students' technical facility with the latest advances in flattering selfie angles and beautifying, age-defying apps.

Outcomes and assessments: Upon completion of the course students will be able to accurately identify their own inability to read facial expressions as captured in photographs, they will be aware of a long and fraught history of efforts to do so, and be filled with a sense of wonderment at the persistent impulse of people to still try, even in the face of long odds. Students will also become expert in the feminist politics of gaze, desire, and resistance, and the ongoing efforts — via technology, commerce, and even one's own complicit self — to undermine and flatten complex experiences of visibility, gender and sexuality.

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### Note

*This is not a real course that I'm teaching, but it sure could be. And, I don't know kev @keptsimple, but I wish I did, and I am grateful for the inspired tweet. It took me 243 words to begin to get at what kev suggested in just seven words and two images – I can only hope my translation is fair. I'll add a shout out as well to @JonEHecht whose comment, "Great Depression, or GREATEST Depression?" on the tweet above made me laugh more than it should have.*

*p.s. Who is writing this dissertation?*

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Kate Palmer Albers, "FaceApp: A Graduate Seminar," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (July 6, 2017). [./articles/FaceApp\\_seminar.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after July 6, 2017, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project:  [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2017-07-06-FaceApp\\_seminar.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2017-07-06-FaceApp_seminar.md)

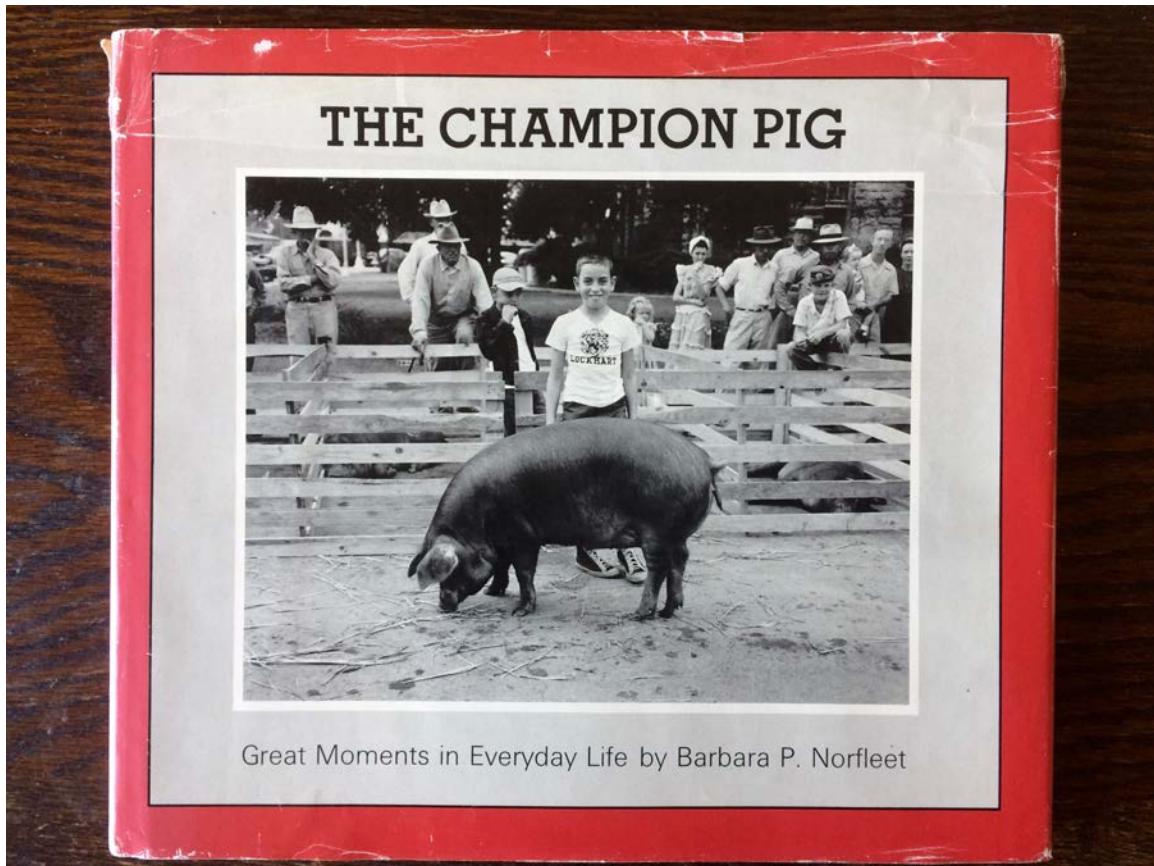
*Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# The Pig and the Algorithm

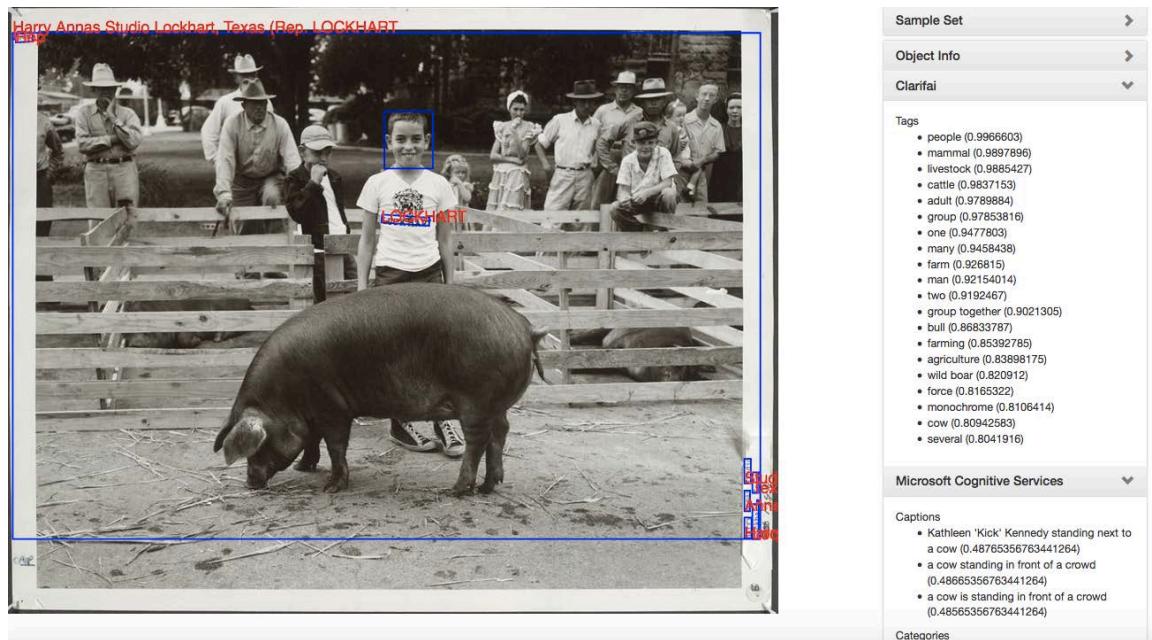
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March 4, 2017

*Previously published in PLOT, P #16 (March 4, 2017).*



**The Champion Pig: Great Moments in Everyday Life**, edited by Barbara P. Norfleet. Boston: Godine, 1979



Screenshot of Harry Annas Studio, Untitled (boy with pig, Lockhart, TX), 1948 from the Harvard University Art Museums data analysis site

## I.

It can be a daunting proposition, to caption a photograph. The moment one settles on a description – here, for example, “boy with pig, Lockhart, Texas”—a host of other propositions and possibilities begin to percolate. Should the caption include something about the crowd of onlookers? That the boy is smiling? What about the presence of wooden pens, or hay on the ground, or cowboy hats, or, more abstractly, phrases like “small town” or “summer”? Choosing a caption often anticipates the future needs of an imagined viewer – rarely do we caption photographs only for our own private purposes. It is a fundamentally communicative act, then, and one that simultaneously acknowledges and tries to ignore the difficulty of representing images with words, of adequately translating images into words. It’s hardly a newsflash to suggest that words can easily change the meaning of an image, but, at this moment in history, it is worth asking: how do the stakes change when it is a computer, not a human, writing the caption?

**2.**

My first encounter with the photograph at hand, some 15 years ago, was on the cover of a book, *The Champion Pig: Great Moments in Everyday Life*, originally published in 1979 by Barbara P. Norfleet. Norfleet was the author of the book, but not of the image: that was already three decades old, the boy and pig having been photographed by Harry Annas, a professional photographer in Lockhart, Texas, a small town in Caldwell County, not far from Austin, in 1948. My first mental description of the photograph was of a non-caption variety: A young boy standing beside an enormous pig grins at me, his infectious smile explained by the book's title, "champion pig." The winning pig, snout to ground, is clearly oblivious to its newly crowned achievement, and the men and women in the crowd behind the boy, nearly uniformly, seem nearly as disinterested in this moment as the pig is. The boy, however, is irresistibly triumphant. A quick glance sets the scene: the wooden livestock pens—some of which contain exhausted, non-champion pigs—the men and women clad in cowboy hats and worn denim, the stray pieces of hay scattered on a hard ground that attract the pig's attention, and the town square setting together indicate a mix of ordinary and out-of-the-ordinary, perhaps a small town hosting the county fair or an annual 4-H club competition. But despite my immediate adoration of the boy's smile, the heart of the photograph, for me, was in his feet – in the unselfconscious expression of his canvas high-tops, one turned into the other, a tentative sweetness not seen in his more public display of pride.

My occasion for looking at this book in the first place was having just started a part-time job in the Photography Department at the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, MA. The ordinary/out-of-the-ordinary photograph anchored a collection characterized in a parallel way by its constant pivot between the mundane and the extraordinary: the museum's then-newly acquired 20,000+ photographic negatives and prints that comprised what had come to be known as the American Professional Photographers Collection (APPC). Flipping through *The Champion Pig* (the book) quickly revealed the character of the collection: photographs of newborns in hospital nurseries, schoolchildren at birthday parties, small town parades and theatrical

productions, scout trips, bar mitzvahs, Halloween parties, high school dances, rodeos, batting practice, beauty pageants, weddings, family portraits, barbeques and backyard parties, church, pets, holiday celebrations, and, ultimately, old age and death as they played out in small towns across the United States from the 1920s through the 1950s. The images were gathered together by Barbara Norfleet, an artist, sociologist, and former curator at the Carpenter Center for the Arts, from professional photographers' studios in small towns throughout the United States, where Norfleet traveled, by car, to look at archives of stored material that spanned much of the 20th century, and especially the post war years.<sup>1</sup> Neither Annas, the photographer, in 1948, nor Norfleet, the curator, in 1979, offered a caption to me, the cataloguer, in 2002.

### 3.

These types of images are alluring and beguiling because they seem, on the one hand, to offer so much, and yet, on the other, they offer such an invitingly blank slate upon which to project our own stories, narratives, and desires. This capacity of a photograph to invite narrative overwriting brings to mind the provocations of several artists and writers. I think, for example, of the lovely essay by film scholar Annette Kuhn, “she’ll always be your little girl,” in which Kuhn reflects upon competing captions inscribed upon a photograph of herself as a child.”<sup>2</sup> In Kuhn’s case, the mother and the daughter disagree about the facts of the photograph and, consequently, a charged debate of familial meaning is played out, over generations, via seemingly objective captions.

Annas’s image, and those in the rest of the book, are precisely the kind of photograph that, for better or for worse, invite just such opportunities for competing narrative, even discord among viewers. Until recently, though, they would have quickly disappeared from public view, receding into an abyss of analog archive inaccessibility. My job at the museum, however, was to prepare the recently-assembled group of otherwise disparate photographs for collective digitization (of the images) and deep storage (for the objects). In

other words, the terms of their accessibility was on the brink of shifting. They had shifted already, having moved first from visual objects that told a story about a community back to that same community, in Lockhart; to negatives tucked away in a local archive; to images selected by a Harvard curator and physically re-located to Cambridge, MA to join a much broader collection of image with new (art) viewers.

My work facilitated another shift in the lives of these photographs as well: they went from objects stored in boxes onsite, viewable upon request, to objects stored offsite, viewable onscreen in digital form, at any time. The nature of the work that I was doing with these thousands upon thousands of images was, on one level, really very functional: I was looking at objects, I was re-housing them for archival storage, I was noting condition, I was capturing and transcribing relevant information about the objects into the museum's database. I was generally aware that the words I chose as "relevant" caption description—aside from the photographers' name and studio locations—would be the primary way future users would be able to access the images. There would be no browsing through the boxes, moving without purpose from one image to the next; that kind of looking that I was doing would be replaced by users' specific keyword searches, perhaps for "birthday", "woman", "deer" or "child". And so, this image became, "Untitled (boy with pig), Lockhart, Texas."

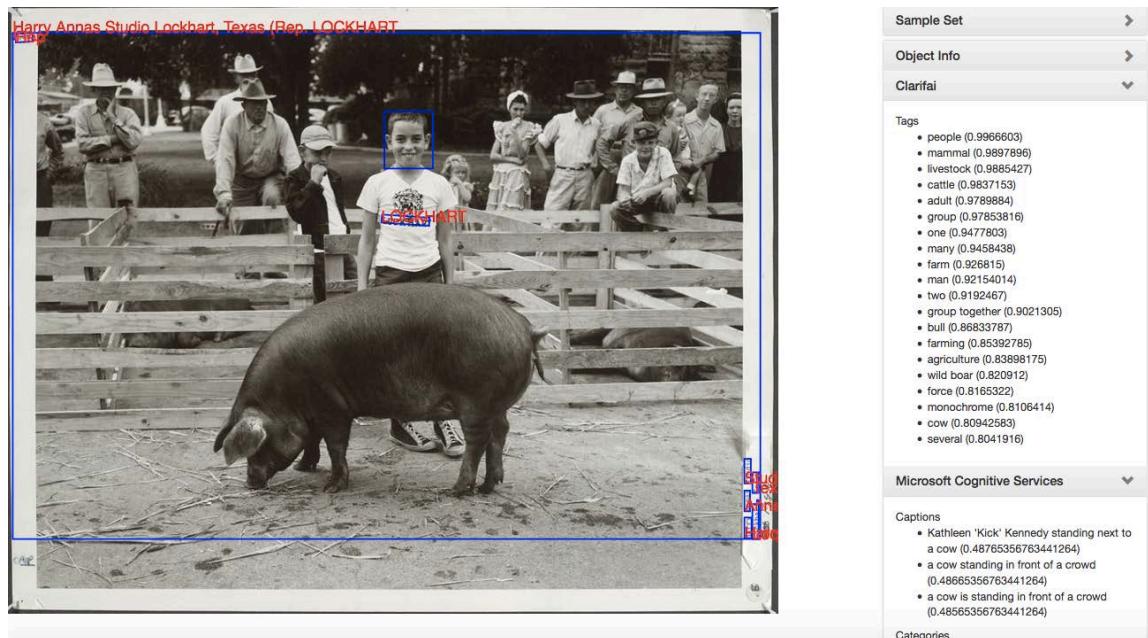
#### 4.

What I could not have anticipated, a decade ago (or, rather, what I did not anticipate), was the rapid rise of computer vision and machine learning technology. In fact, 2016 may become something of a pivotal year for historians in terms of dating a shift in the ease of public access to and awareness of computer vision: iPhones now automatically sort, tag and identify our subjects, and even make us vacation albums and videos; dating apps will algorithmically choose our "best" profile pictures; Facebook automatically assembled a year-end "Best of 2016" video for its users, and,

from time to time, its algorithms will produce a friendship video of posts between two people.

I am aware, viewing these algorithmically-sorted reflections of myself, that a certain identity is being constructed—one that I may or may not have chosen on my own. And I am aware that the algorithm has been programmed to identify certain visual cues to present our own self-images back to us, creating an identity based on projected use. And though I find this slightly unnerving, an auto-generated vacation album is—within its own contained framework, anyway—a relatively innocuous outcome, notable primarily for the way it makes computer vision and machine learning both visible to and accessible for an everyday user. But, of course, these images do not, in fact, exist within a closed circuit and the potential outcomes in this emerging field of artificial intelligence are vast, and, in a fundamental way, deeply de-humanizing.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely within this newly automated yet still generally uncharted and unlegislated frontier of algorithmic search terms that this radically-expanded circuitry of visibility proposes profound shifts in image use and analysis.

And yet, there remains a fascination even within the (perhaps illusory) closed circuit of one discrete collection's caption data. When I learned that the Harvard Art Museums had found my 20,000 captions a useful data point for running their own experiments using multiple computer vision platforms to identify objects in the collection, I was nothing short of giddily intrigued. It was weirdly flattering, in a way, as well as satisfying, to know that all that grad school labor of devising “objective” captions for the thousands of photographs I looked at might potentially be compared with a machine eye. Would a computer make meaning—produce a caption—in the same way that I had?



Screenshot of Harry Annas Studio, Untitled (boy with pig, Lockhart, TX), 1948 from the Harvard University Art Museums data analysis site

The museum's tests generated results from four different services: Clarifai, Microsoft Cognitive Services, Google Vision, and Imagga, and additionally provided "sentiment recognition" on identified faces in the images, an automated process that "reads" the visible emotional makeup of human subjects, categorizing their likelihood of feelings such as joy, happiness, anger, or sorrow. The bulk of the results provided keywords and tags: further finding aids for future object recognition of photographs. "Untitled (boy with pig)" yielded 76 tags and categories from the combined results of the four platforms: they ran the gamut from the correct (people, mammal, livestock, group, outdoor, animal, agriculture, young, monochrome, black, white, hog, swine, pen, grass) to the puzzling and awkward (animal sports, ungulate, old world buffalo, bovid, ruminant, cattle like mammal) to the just plain wrong (beaches seaside, cow, bull).

The computers had been trained to see like people see and, consequently, to privilege words and facial expressions as they worked to make meaning: the programs paid special attention to the text on the boy's t-shirt ("Lockhart") and honed in on his facial expression, identifying him as "very likely" to be feeling joy, while "very unlikely" to be feeling anger, sorrow, or surprise (and

similarly unlikely to be wearing a hat, or have the misfortune of turning up in a photograph blurred or underexposed). The programs found more or less all the quantitative details I had considered, except for those canvas high tops. But surely no search function would be performed for “whimsical feet” or “tentative shoes.” And neither would I have considered adding this very punctum-like detail to my own efforts at objectivity.<sup>4</sup>

## 5.

Though tempted by the idea that a computer, somewhere, like me, had also zeroed in on the high tops yet ultimately found them inadequate to fulfill search term status, the more salient point with which to conclude is the trio of multiword captions, offered by Microsoft Cognitive Services. More complex and sophisticated than a single word tag or category, these short phrases represent the current acme of computer vision recognition capabilities: the program moves from identifying “cow” “crowd” and “standing” to forming a sentence, “a cow is standing in front of a crowd” (never mind that the livestock identification is rather off the mark; we can give the computer the benefit of the doubt since it is, after all, a “champion” pig, so its scale, we know, is outside of normal expectation).

But though the computer does not (yet) recognize cultural custom or an intangible (non-concretely-visible) quality of county-fair pride, it has become confident enough in facial recognition to offer a name: Kathleen ‘Kick’ Kennedy. Many human viewers will quickly deduce an error in identifying this small-town boy as a woman from the Kennedy family dynasty. But, like the pig/cow mix-up, an error of identification is not the interesting point. Rather, it’s what the error points to that should give us pause: the presumably substantial number of images online previously tagged “Kathleen ‘Kick’ Kennedy”, in which her facial features have already received mechanized scrutiny analyzing the precise distance from brow to hairline, or from pupil to pupil, or from nose to upper lip – data points long in place in the fraught histories (and presents) of physiognomy and biometrics.

The stakes of misidentifying this boy—who is now an old man, if alive at all—for a well-known public figure are low, just as the stakes of Facebook’s algorithm choosing one vacation photo over another for my automated album are similarly without much consequence. But variations on this associative visual dynamic play out with ever-greater frequency and in environments in which the stakes of computer recognition do matter: in sorting through accumulations of surveillance, policing, security, and warfare imagery, to name arenas that come immediately to mind. The larger point here, then, is to dwell on the mode and means of making an identification, which is to say, of producing meaning.

## 6.

We understand images not just through the visual content they offer, but through the other images with which they are associated, by the company they keep. “Untitled (boy with pig)” has seen previous shifts in these associations—first, moving from an association with an individual and his family or activity; on to an association with a town (Lockhart) and a maker (Annas); then as a representative of a type of photograph made in the US at midcentury, by a particular kind of photographer (as seen by Norfleet). In each of these moves, the circuitry of meaning shifted. The borders of association have expanded, previously, but the kind of sight offered by computer vision is qualitatively and quantitatively different in terms of seeking these associations.

But as the image has traveled it has, over time, come to require—for different reasons—an abbreviated caption description. The impulse to caption at all speaks to a communicative impulse, but also to a desire for simplicity, for fixed, straightforward, and searchable meaning. In the space of a caption, nuance necessarily escapes, as did my own impulses toward human quirks and a kind of diffuse nostalgia for the small triumphs of a small-town childhood. Ultimately, the computer and I understood our captioning assignments to produce a kind of bureaucratic and reductive seeing on more or less similar terms.

There is, however, no reason not to imagine that the computer's vision—trained *by* humans, if in large part *for* other computers—will not become more nuanced. These nuances will reflect the humans who construct the algorithms. But the slight distinctions of perception that inform our human views reveal nothing if not our subjective biases. What, beyond a caption, do I consider noteworthy, or self-evident? Surely the answers to these more complex frameworks of viewing reveal, for better or worse, the subtle – and not so subtle – systems of preference and hierarchy that subconsciously permeate our subjective views of the world. The history of photography is rife with instances of human bias informing an apparently neutral technology with undetected programmatic bias. In just one recently popular example, the history of color film production reveals that the film was “optimized” to record fair skin tones with greater sensitivity and accuracy than darker pigmentation; the most “neutral” of visual recording systems (camera + film) in fact was built with a preference for pale complexions. These are areas where the stakes *are* high. In such arenas, the human programmers of computer vision have an extraordinary opportunity to encode nuances that correct for past biases. Whether or not they act on this opportunity remains to be seen.

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### Acknowledgments

I'm grateful to the editor of PLOT, Claudia Weber, for the invitation to consider two images in conversation, and for her insightful feedback on my drafts. I thank Jeff Steward, Director of Digital Infrastructure and Emerging Technology, Harvard Art Museums, for sharing several sample sets with me; and Matthew Battles and Sarah Newman at the university's MetaLab for the opportunity to re-visit the American Professional Photographers Collection material in 2016.

## Notes

1. See Barbara Norfleet, grant application to support her project from the National Endowment for the Humanities, “Assemble, Protect, and Use Photographs made by Professional Photographers as a Unique and Valuable Record of American Life,” 1975. ↵
2. Annette Kuhn, “She’ll Always Be Your Little Girl,” in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 2002). ↵
3. See two recent and incisive essays on this topic: Trevor Paglen, “Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You),” in *The New Inquiry* December 8, 2016 and Hito Steyerl and Kate Crawford, “Data Streams,” in *The New Inquiry* January 23, 2017. ↵
4. I am referring to Roland Barthes’s opposition of “studium” and “punctum” modes of photographic viewing, the former referring to a viewer’s generic interest in a scene and the latter referring to a photographic detail or quality within an image that may “puncture” or “wound” the viewer, creating an individual and highly charged viewing space. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), originally published in Paris as *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (1980). ↵

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Kate Palmer Albers, "The Pig and the Algorithm," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (March 4, 2017). [/articles/Pig\\_and\\_Algorithm.html](#).

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Any updates or corrections to this article made after March 4, 2017, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project: ⌂ [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2017-03-04-Pig\\_and\\_Algorithm.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2017-03-04-Pig_and_Algorithm.md)

Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# At My Desk and In My Hand: Nine Ways I Enjoyed Photography in 2016

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December 21, 2016

In 2015, I wrote [a year-end list](#) of ten things I liked in photography—my only rule was that none of the items be photobooks or exhibitions, both categories that are clearly—even exceptionally—well-covered elsewhere. As I wrote then: another way for photography to come into your hands or into your view—to find you where you are and offer a unique viewing experience—is to arrive on a nearby screen, like the ones in your pockets and on your desks. These closely held, frequently-accessed, and highly personal viewing spaces are often overlooked as viable creative—and, I would now add—scholarly realms. So, as my contribution to more expansive list-making in matters of photography, this list is a shout out to a few of those moments of meaningful content and engagement that found their way (mostly) straight to me in 2016.

## 1 + 2. Veteranas and Rucas + Rhizome's Webrecorder



Samples from the Veteranas and Rucas archive

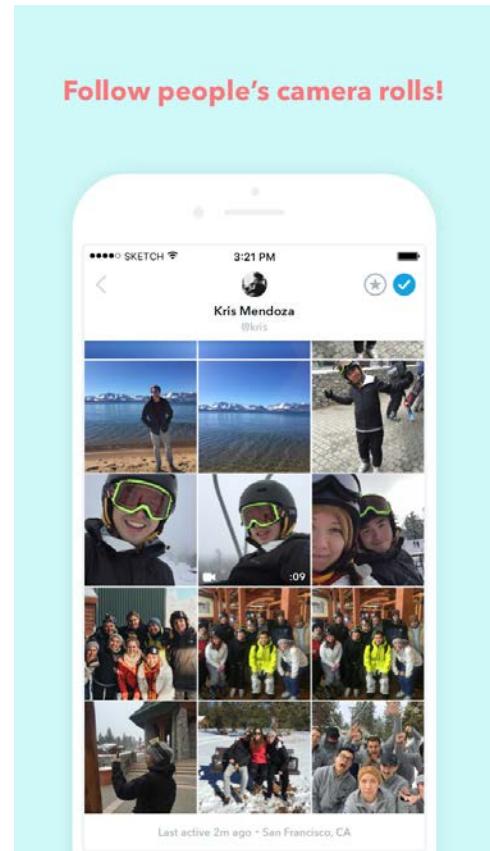
1. I'm a fan of Veteranas and Rucas, an Instagram account run by Guadalupe Rosales, for its vernacular chronicles of Chicana life in East Los Angeles, and beyond, in the 1980s and 90s. Nearly all the images and accompanying texts that Rosales posts are sent in by followers of the account who want to contribute their own images and memories to this collective archive-in-the-making. That dialogue and exchange is important to Rosales, who comments, “The archive is not just photographs, it’s archiving language and the way we relate to a photograph.”

2. It's an effort that rests on the possibilities that social media offers and yet, at the same time, is subject to the parameters of Instagram's format and corporate ownership. The arts organization Rhizome has become a leader in recognizing the challenges of creating a permanent record of this type of increasingly common digital and live cultural production. As they point out: “Current digital preservation solutions were built for that earlier time and

cannot adequately cope with what the web has become.” Veteranas and Rucas—fortunately—is a case study for Rhizome’s newly launched, Mellon-funded responsive archiving tool Webrecorder, a free service that allows any user to archive dynamic web content—and, hopefully, will ensure the ongoing digital preservation of these complex new resources.

### 3. “Shorts” photo sharing

How many people would you let look through the entire camera roll on your smartphone? The core of the idea for Shorts, a photo-based social media platform that launched in March was, essentially: share what you don’t share. If other photo-sharing apps are clearly performative, and just too polished, Shorts proposed that, among your network of contacts, one option would simply be to share all the photos in your smartphone’s camera roll. As a writer for *Wired* commented, “Giving someone (fairly) unfiltered access to your phone is like letting them fish around in your purse or backpack, freely digging through everything you’ve amassed or hidden in there—it’s a frightening level of intimacy to share with most people.” After its launch, this app lasted for about 5 minutes before the company called it quits, so it’s on this list for its provocation, not its success.



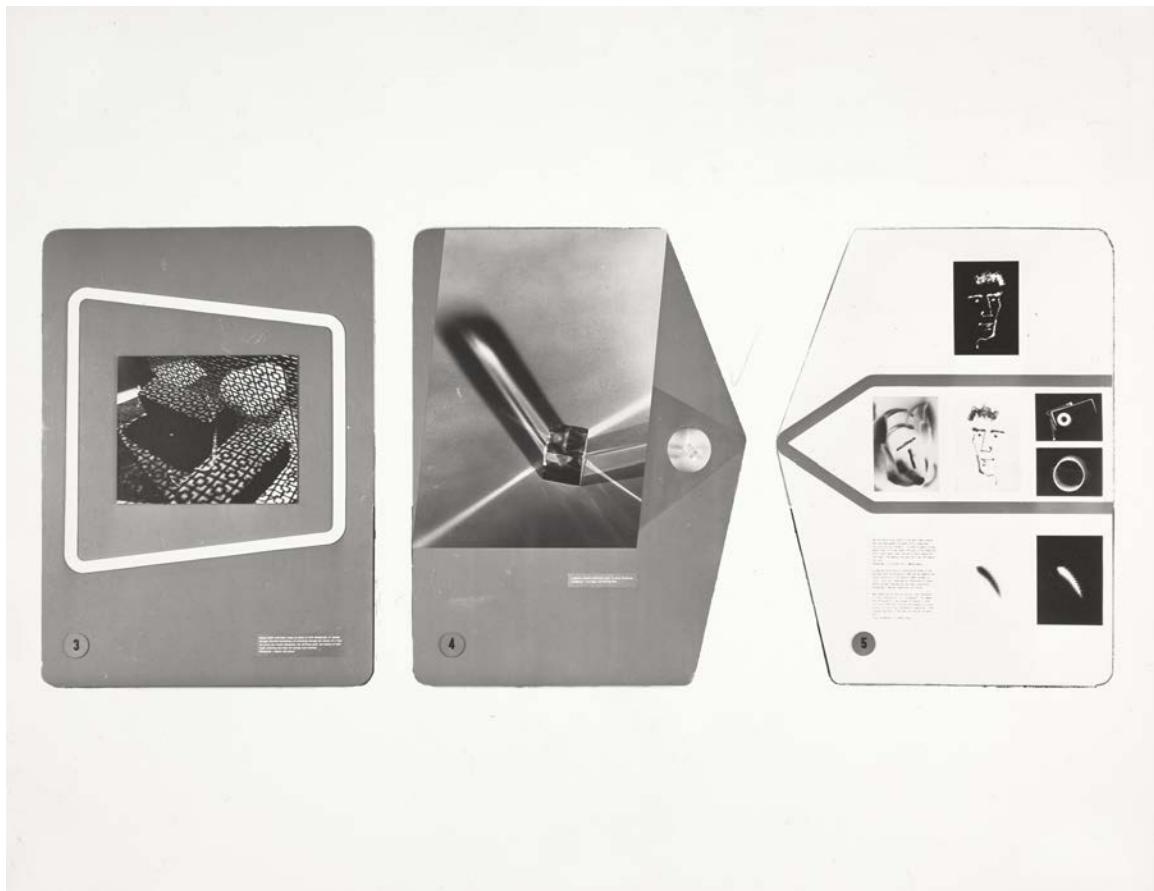
#### 4. Fei-Fei Li's TED talk on computer vision



A computer in Fei-Fei Li's lab describing zebras and grass in a photograph (but not recognizing a rainbow)

I don't think I'm going out on a limb by suggesting that most photo people in the art world—whether artists, curators, critics or historians—don't really understand how cameras work anymore, let alone consider it particularly relevant to consider the ways that cameras and computers now work together to arrange our pictures for us—on our phones, on social media apps, in dating profiles, in auto-generated vacation photo albums, and so forth. A good place to begin to shore up this knowledge gap is by watching computer scientist Fei-Fei Li's TED talk on computer vision, "How We're Teaching Computers to Understand Pictures".

#### 4. The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition archive



Installation view from MoMA's 1942 exhibition "How to Make a Photogram", courtesy the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

In September, the Museum of Modern Art launched an online archive of its exhibitions. Starting with the museum's first shows in 1929, most pages include, at the least, the press release, object checklist, and installation views. It's not only a great way to lose several hours, the visual chronology presents a little something for everyone, and a multitude of research possibilities. Beginners can familiarize themselves with MoMA's most famous photography shows; book lovers can delight in the full pdfs of numerous exhibition catalogs; snapshot photography fanatics can ponder MoMA's 1944 embrace of that form; collectors can salivate over the pricelists from exhibitions such as American Photographs at \$10 (1942) and Christmas Photographs (1952), both of which demonstrate MoMA's early efforts to

build a market for this new art form. It strikes me that a history of color photography exhibitions at MoMA (put on in 1943, 1950, 1966, 1974, and, most famously, in 1976) could be a useful essay. And there are some fantastic installation views. My dearest hope, however, is that someone will explain how this unexpected 1970 exhibition fits in with how we understand the evolution of the photography program at MoMA.

*5b. Honorable mention in this category:*

Princeton University Art Museum's Minor White Archive, launched online in October. Admirably, both the MoMA and White archives were made public as "works in progress", meaning that the institutions have opened up a substantial degree of material but work is ongoing, and new material will continue to be added.

## 6. Photography as Live Event: Cassils' *Becoming an Image*



Cassils performing "Becoming an Image"

Lovers of photography may argue that all photographic viewing is a live event. But what I have in mind here are neither exhibitions nor publications nor artist talks, but rather events that merged photography with performance, insisting on the unique shared experience of a particular time and place, whether online or off. Mostly I missed these events, which is part of their point, and what makes them special for those who attend.

In November, surrounded by an audience in a room of total darkness, the trans performance artist Cassils restaged “Becoming an Image” (originally 2013), an event in which Cassils—who is also a bodybuilder—pummeled a 2,000 pound block of clay to the point of the artist’s total physical exhaustion. During this solitary feat of creation, aggression, endurance, and depletion, the audience heard the sounds of Cassils’ physical exertions,

which only periodically are viewable by way of the strobe-like illumination of a photographer's flash.

Cassils has spoken compellingly about the effect of this scenario, offering a reinvigorated conception of the possibilities of the photographic medium. The artist says of the photographer's crucial role in the performance: "When the flash of his camera goes off, it will illuminate the image for maybe an eighth of a second, and the light is so bright that it will burn an image into your retina, creating, essentially, a live photograph."

See images and watch the video trailer here.

## 7. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Art + Artists series

If I'd been writing this list in 2008, Doug Rickard's American Suburb X would have been on it in a second, for its incredible accumulation of online resources—videos, TV clips, interviews—that collectively insist upon an alternative photographic history to the established textbook view of what's important in American photography (and beyond).

This kind of cumulative spirit of bringing together "behind-the-scenes" resources about artists and their work also animates the more recent—if also more institutionally-driven—series of artist interviews growing at a rapid pace as part of SFMoMA's Art + Artists series. It's a great selection of artists, and photography is very well represented—both familiar figures and those who are lesser-known. I recommend starting with Michael Jang's family snapshots.



from Michael Jang's 1970s series, *The Jangs*, featured on SFMoMA's Art + Artists series

## 8. Visualizing the Public Domain: NYPLEmoji + New York Public Library Labs

I love a good Twitter bot, and this year the New York Public Library made a new favorite, [@NYPLEmoji](#). When you send an emoji tweet to @NYPLEmoji, the bot will tweet back a corresponding image for the library's outstanding digital collections.

For instance, the grape emoji ... ? ... becomes this 1812 beauty:



**George Bookshaw, "Raisin de Calmes (grapes)", 1812. Rare Book Division/The New York Public Library Digital Collections.**

The playful exchange of old and new imagery may make you reconsider the emoji form within a long visual history. What's more, this humble bot may also call your attention to the fantastic work the New York Public Library is doing to visualize, make accessible, and encourage research and creative work in their public domain collections.

## 9. Brandon Tauszik's *Tapered Throne* GIFs

Okay, #9 is a real cheat on my list of favorites, because not only did I learn about it on the last day of 2015, it was from someone else's "Best of" list. But just as I've been a fan of artists who manage to use social media platforms in ways that both creatively build on the specific parameters at hand and also resist the common denominator offered by any particular platform's profile, I'm similarly taken with Brandon Tauszik's embrace of the quintessential meme format to offer something quite unexpected.

The *Tapered Throne* GIF series updates a traditional documentary photography aesthetic and beautifully translates the quiet subtleties of life inside the many African-American owned barber shops in Tauszik's hometown of Oakland, CA. The short loops, painstakingly crafted from sometimes hundreds of individual frames, manage to slow time and provide a poignant view of this community. Looking at them again nearly a year after I first saw them, I find I'm most compelled by the loops in which almost nothing happens.





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Kate Palmer Albers, "At My Desk and In My Hand: Nine Ways I Enjoyed Photography in 2016," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (December 21, 2016). [/articles/ninethings.html](#).

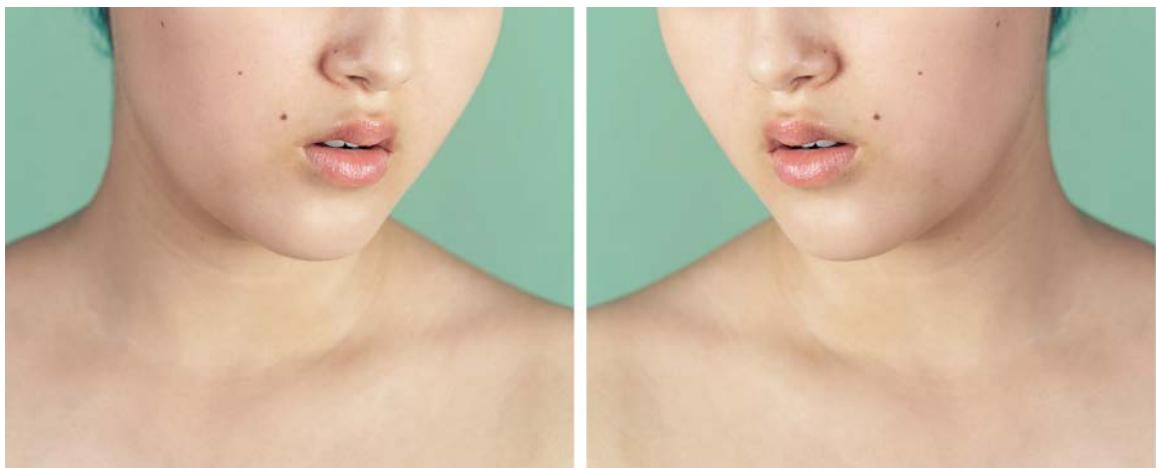
Any updates or corrections to this article made after December 21, 2016, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project:  [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2016-12-21-ninethings.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2016-12-21-ninethings.md)

*Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# A Conversation with Duncan Forbes

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October 19, 2016



Oskar Schmidt, *Portrait (No. 2)*, 2015, C-Prints, © Oskar Schmidt

Duncan Forbes is Director and Curator of Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland. He was previously Senior Curator of Photography at the National Galleries of Scotland. Recent collaborative curatorial and publishing projects include Provoke: Between Protest and Performance – Japanese Photography 1960–1975 (Steidl, 2016), Beastly/Tierisch (Spector Books, 2015), Manifeste! Eine andere Geschichte der Fotografie (Steidl, 2014) and Edith Tudor-Hart: In the Shadow of Tyranny

(*Hatje Cantz, 2013*). Our conversation revolved around Fotomuseum's engagement at many different levels with the question of post-photography.

**Kate Palmer Albers:** Fotomuseum Winterthur has launched the Post-Photography Prototyping Prize. You're well underway in the nomination and selection process, with the first awardee to be announced in November.<sup>1</sup> One of the aspirations of the award is to seek 'photographic work that engages directly with the creative and conceptual opportunities opened up by computational technologies'. In what ways has this played out in terms of thinking through what post-photography might mean, and in bringing together the worlds of photography and computational technology?

**Duncan Forbes:** Since I arrived at Fotomuseum in 2013 we've wanted to engage very directly with the problematic of post-photography and have made significant changes to the way the museum operates – in terms of program, personnel, visual identity, digital and physical infrastructure etc. – in order to do so. I can't here go into too much detail, but perhaps it's worth beginning by thinking a little more abstractly about what post-photography might be.

I think it's important not to think of post-photography as a straightforward temporal relation, something simply following after 150 years of 'photography'. It might be possible to read its emergence chronologically, but as a primary explanatory framework this is very misleading and immediately forecloses on innovative thinking. Neither is post-photography a movement (this is clear), or in any sense a stylistic or artistic development related to transformations in 'the medium' simply understood. Rather, post-photography represents a significant shift in the ontologies of photographic media, driven by the vast power of computational technologies, but in a way that needs to be understood against the historical experience of those media. We need to begin to describe the ontologies of post-photography against the complex institutional and disciplinary discourses that constitute its present, but also in relation to its 'photographic' past, which might not be entirely foreign. To my mind that description will be profoundly transmedia and transdisciplinary and will also revise the way we think of the history of

photography, or rather what I would prefer now to call the history of photographic media. This is a rather simplistic schema and of course it conceals considerable intricacy. But the creative potential for photography curators is huge and I think a few now are beginning to grasp this.

Second, I think we need to begin to talk more about what Joan Fontcuberta has recently termed the 'post-photographic condition'. This is the context of our post-photographic moment which is marked by a deep technical, aesthetic and social transformation, distributed now on a global scale – what might be termed the 'worlding' of the post-photographic is another very interesting question. The institutional discourses in which the post-photographic is embedded are vast and are having a profound impact on the way we lead our lives – think of the changes wrought over the last ten years or so by surveillance culture; the power of the attention economy; the changing boundaries of public and private; and the virtualization of the image archive, to name just four obvious examples. And we are very much in the infancy of these developments. This is now the context from which the internal transformations in the media of post-photography are taking place. Again, I think we are all struggling to come to terms with this, but more institutions are following advanced artistic practice in this arena and developing programs that speak to this situation.



**Maryam Jafri, Getty vs. Ghana, 2012, 8 inkjet prints, 4 framed text panels, installation view (detail), © Maryam Jafri**

KPA: I want to pick up on several things you just said, but let's start with the counter-intuitive resistance to thinking of post-photography as a temporal relationship. Because, I agree, efforts to define photography 'now' very often rest on advancing a false sense of unity about what photography 'was' – say, by creating a sense that there was a coherent thing like the analogue era – so that more recent developments can be situated as a departure from 'the way things were'. So your interest in articulating a history of today's algorithmic photographic trends that is located in earlier discourses around histories of computational science seems to me a usefully specific way to identify both current work and realities, and to outline a historical thread for photography that may not have been visible to previous generations of scholars and curators. But amid the conditions you articulate – of how surveillance actually functions, of ways of accessing large quantities of images, of the relationship between individuals and large entities such as states or corporations, of the commodification of attention – the role of the algorithm

is crucial. As you say, all of those facets of photography today are pervasive in everyday life. And one thing I'm really interested in understanding is how museums and curators – those kinds of institutions with their own particular histories – resolve collecting and exhibiting a history of vernacular photography with the scope of vernacular photography today. So, to wrap that around into a question: how do you think that re-writing a historical ontology for photography, one that takes into account a much earlier appearance of computational thinking or systems, might affect the way photographs can be understood within the context of the art museum? Are there areas of collecting, exhibition, or programming that might present openings or invitations to this other way of thinking about the medium? I ask this knowing (or believing) that the institutional pressures within museums around not thinking this way are quite strong.

DF: These are huge questions, so let's begin to unpack them a little. This urge to prescribe a unity to 'the medium' of photography is now constantly reassured by institutions in our era of digital convergence. It suggests a certain anxiety. I'm struck in particular by the recent wave of exhibitions asking 'What is the photograph?' or some such – I've worked hard to prevent this line of questioning at Fotomuseum. Of course, the best of these shows have concluded that photography is many things and not really one medium in any meaningful sense of the term. To exhibit a program of photography nowadays is to accept disjunction, difference and even incoherence. But there are still the nostalgics – concerned to carve out an essentially demarcated museum positioning for photography – who want to ascribe clear material, aesthetic or technical characteristics to 'the medium' in the face of the endless malleability of the algorithmic image. It is a position which is at once defensive, boring and increasingly untenable.



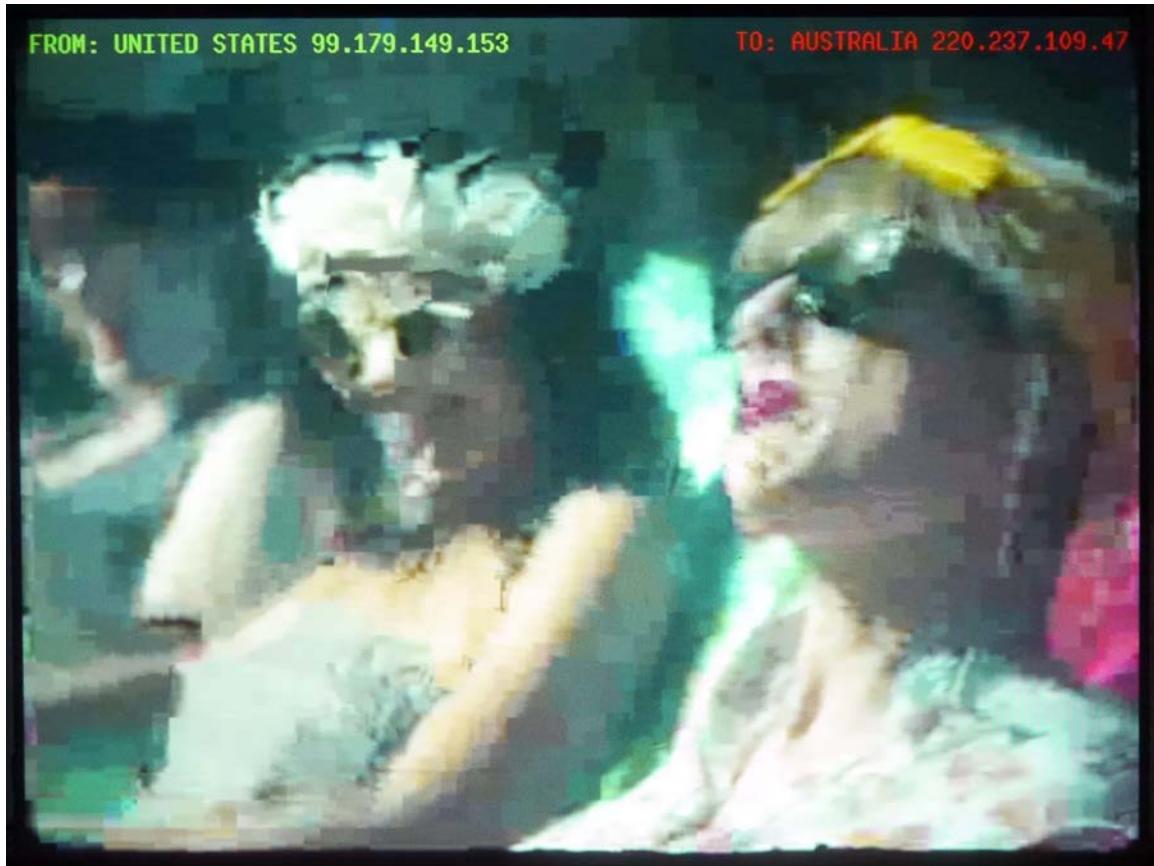
**Experimental Jetset, Lost Formats Preservation Society, 2000/2015, mixed media, installation view, © Experimental Jetset**

If there is a unity to the identity of photography, it is, as Peter Osborne has recently argued, ‘distributive’ and spread historically across a wide variety of still and moving photographic media. And this has now become even more abundantly clear when, for example, the signaletic temporality of the photograph on the screen further erodes any substantive technical difference between still and moving images. Neither is there any simple binary opposition between digital and analogue – the digital is often embedded in the analogue and the analogue in the digital. The specificities of work and process are everything. I think this has radical implications for the way that photography institutions position themselves bureaucratically, so to speak. More than ever, museum labour in photography needs to find its way to more abstract knowledge. In order even to survive, the empirical scrutiny of the curator needs to find its way to theory.

KPA: I think it’s important to ask big questions, but even more important to try to answer them, which you are doing here, so, thank you. And it’s

interesting that you bring up medium specificity, because I find myself stubbornly attached to the idea of photography's specificity but have a hard time articulating why that is, in a way that seems defensible. But it's certainly along the lines of Osborne's argument, which I wasn't aware of, so that's quite useful, as you summarize it. But what do you mean by the 'signaletic temporality of the photograph on the screen'?

DF: I mean only that on a screen a still image is a loop in a digital video signal actualized at 25 times a second. Actually, this relation is a more interesting question than it initially seems and is both historically resonant and complicated by both the variety and interactivity of screens – a question rarely discussed by photography curators. Suffice it to say that the technical capacity to combine still and moving images is far greater than ever before – earlier this year I watched my nine-year old nephew, bored on the beach, film and edit a short film on his Dad's iPhone combining still and moving images in around two hours. This kind of facility was unimaginable even six years ago. As to your longing for the specificity of the photograph – founded perhaps on its indexicality, its tactile character, its relation to truth etc. – I think this is an understandable impulse. Whatever the changes happening to our networked image-spaces a twentieth-century conception of the photographic is still dominant – Osborne refers to this as a kind of double articulation in the digital image. I prefer not to think that I'm carrying computer-generated images of my friends on my phone, even though they are increasingly 'operative', that is defined algorithmically.

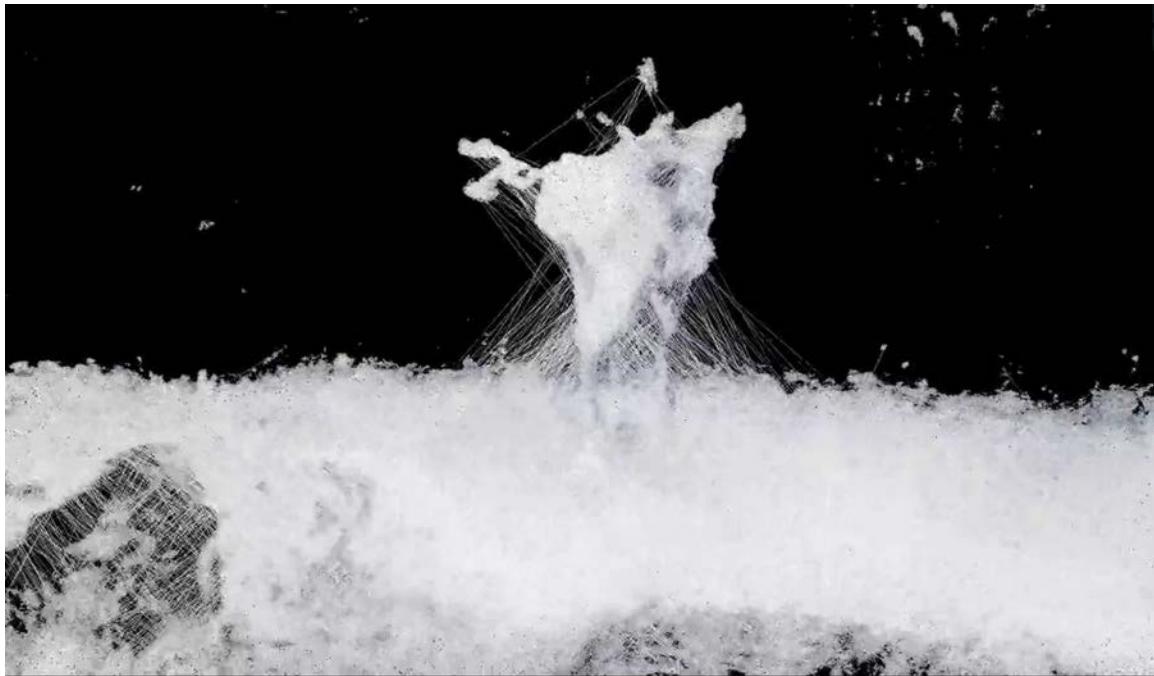


Nicholas Maigret, *The Pirate Cinema*, 2013, installation view, interactive 3 channel video installation, © Nicolas Maigret

KPA: No, no – I should clarify. My thoughts about photography's specificity aren't a longing for truth or tactility. I'm very happy to have both object and screen-based photographs in my life, similarly happy with the various kinds of tactile experiences each form offers, and also comfortable with the indexical complications that move through both (all) kinds of photographic images. I like all of it, and I want all of it. I want layering of complexity, not proscriptive or reductive declarations of narrow specificities. The specificity I'm attached to emerges from that whole complex set of contradictions that has long been characteristic of both individual photographs and groups of images, and also related to the fact that everything we're talking about – surveillance, massive accumulations, even algorithmic image production – are still, to me, distinctly photographic issues. The specificity is in this expansiveness. Also, I think the inseparability of the digital from the algorithmic is key – it's not one or the other, and never has been, nor is there

even a useful internal coherence among either term. I'm a little wary of the bureaucratic dimensions here, but do tend to think that there can be useful spots or fissures in which to find room for real material outcomes to what might seem to be the purview of abstract or theoretical thought. Let's move on to your ideas about an algorithmic history of photography.

DF: Certainly it would be possible to construct one – and it would date back to the 1840s. I'm interested in thinking about the way the algorithmic is already present within analogue histories – I've just begun to work on a project that explores the potential of nineteenth-century photography as a proto-cybernetic form, a mode of visual production that in some sense anticipates our current post-photographic condition. There's a wonderful phrase from Vilém Flusser in his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) where he suggests that 'the invention of photography will prove to be the point at which all cultural phenomena started to replace the linear structure of sliding with the staccato structure of programmed combinations' – it's so suggestive! His idea of the camera as a programmed apparatus (he means this in an institutional sense), which may or may not be subverted by its operator, is nothing if not relevant today. For me, this points to the excitement of early photography – a revolutionary transition deeply embedded in problems of human freedom.



Ryoichi Kurokawa, *Sirens*, 2013, film still, HD-video, © Ryoichi Kurokawa/Novi\_sad

So I think we also need to consider what might be termed the long wave of the digital, which in turn will help us develop a more complex temporality for post-photography. I find this very helpful in rethinking the relations between past and present, not least in countering those arguments – often fuelled by a good dose of non-representational theory – that computational culture marks some kind of dramatic break in the priorities of vision, even a kind of invisibility of the image. I'd far rather conceive of the changes we are living through as an intensification of existing processes already embedded within capitalist modernity, an intensification of practices of quantification above all else. Indeed, Jonathan Beller has recently provocatively argued that capitalism was a digital culture from the start – there's an idea that might help revolutionize the history of photography! To my mind all these questions are highly significant, including for the way that photography institutions position themselves today.

KPA: I appreciate your willingness to think in terms of the revolutionary capacity of ideas or histories. And I want to push us a little more back to: well, what does that look like in practice? When you do it? And that's an interesting translation challenge, maybe the translation challenge for

photography today. It's certainly why I'm so interested in artists in whose work we see movement across material and screen-based forms, incorporating a kind of variability into their work in what seems to me like a logical extension or outcome of how images, and photographic images in particular, live today. This might be a good place to ask you to reflect on what seem, so far, to have become the challenges and successes of the SITUATIONS series. This is a project that, as I understand it, is quite unique among institutions for consciously and regularly programming both physical/material and screen-based/immaterial work that can exist in both realms simultaneously (and in an ongoing way online).



Roc Herms, <YO><YO><YO>, 2007-2015, installation view, © Roc Herms

DF: At Fotomuseum we've seen a substantial shift in the work of (mainly) young artists towards the multi-platform presentation you suggest. Forms of production now are multiple, utilizing a wider variety of formats, materials and processes (both still and moving) within a context of dramatically transformed circulation and reception. This generates the expansive

specificity you highlight. It's a potent crucible of change marked by tremendous variety in the possibilities of photographic and filmic visualization. In a sense the image is less passive than it used to be, involving, too, a higher level of technical complexity. For example, I've been working recently with a photographer who is rewriting software, that is intervening in the apparatus's program.

For any museum interested in contemporary photography this poses considerable challenges. At Fotomuseum we moved very deliberately to deal with these changed circumstances, creating a new program, SITUATIONS, which is a kind of laboratory of post-photography. Building on the success of our blog, *Still Searching...* we wanted to create an exhibition format that had a strong virtual and physical presence and we offer content both on- and offline. SITUATIONS is curated collectively by our curatorial team according to a series of thematic clusters and we stage five or so a year alongside our more mainstream exhibition program. It has a kind of investigative quality, often featuring younger artists, as well as playing the present off against the past. The laboratory context allows us to take more risks. It hasn't been entirely plain sailing – our stakeholders are sometimes quizzical and there are still individuals in the museum who think post-photography means anything made on an inkjet printer. But we are staging innovative installations – a recent very successful cluster was devoted to in-game photography for example.



Kent Sheely, DoD, screenshot, 2012 © Kent Sheely

KPA: What have been some of the most successful experiments, as you see it, and what were the characteristics of those projects? Does Fotomuseum collect and preserve some of the work that is presented through SITUATIONS? It seems that quite aside from the content, politics, or aesthetics of some of the new modes of photographic work today, there are enormous challenges for collecting institutions that were set up to accommodate prints, albums, discrete objects. My sense is that institutions with media or new media departments are more readily positioned, currently, to navigate some of these complexities of acquisition, storage, and preservation.

DF: The work is highly diverse and it's hard to isolate specific characteristics – interested readers can run through the clusters online. We've made a strong commitment to the distributive identity of the photographic, building a

state-of-the-art projection space and showing films by artists such as Ryan Trecartin, Ryoichi Kurokawa, Mario Pfeifer and Nicolas Maigret. Other artists such as Maryam Jafri and Oskar Schmidt engage with transformations in the photographic archive. There have been net-based projects – David Horvitz, Eva and Franco Mattes, Kasia Klimpel, Tabita Rezaire – as well as artists who offer historical interrogation such as Experimental Jetset. We've also attempted to engage post-photographically as curators, assembling, for example, SITUATIONS comprised of screenshots or curating material directly from the Internet. I guess if there is one key characteristic it is that much of this work is conceptually charged, offering a kind of mapping of our post-photographic condition. I don't think this is just a curatorial fad. The complexity of the post-photographic demands qualities of abstraction in order to draw out meaning that is resonant in aesthetic and political terms – a major question for the training of young photographers today.



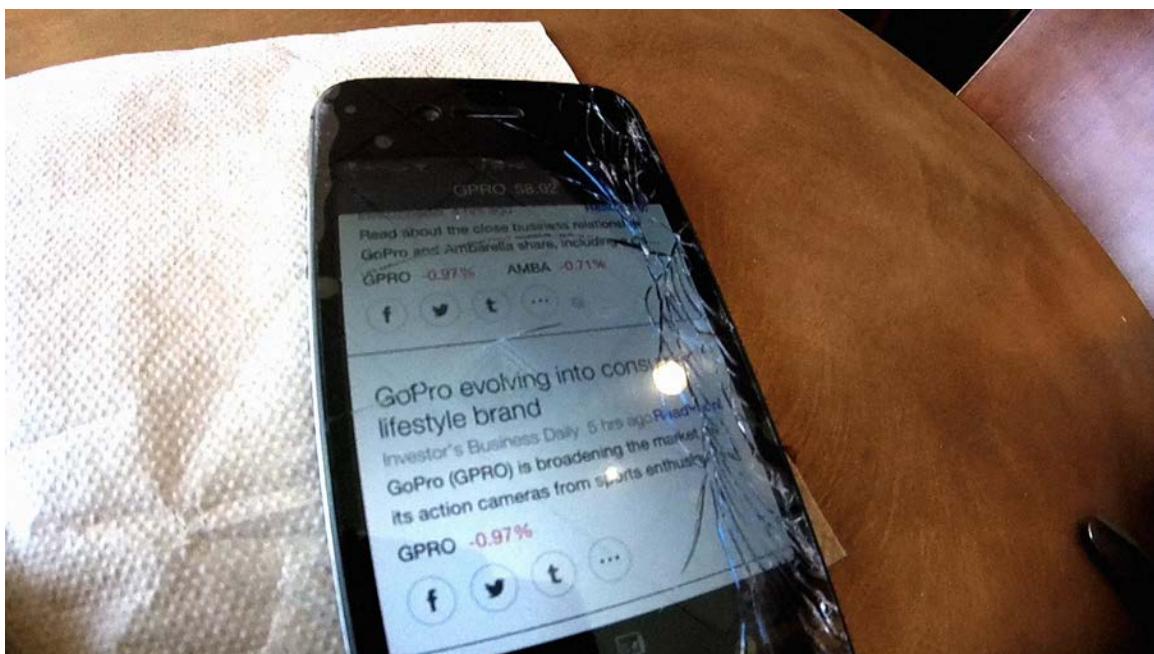
**Mario Pfeifer, Approximation in the Digital Age to a Humanity Condemned to Disappear, 2014-15,**  
installation view, 4K Cinema transferred to HD video, © Mario Pfeifer

As to collecting, well there are no real practical problems here, beyond having the spaces adequate to physical installation and a decent digital infrastructure. The bigger problems are conceptual and, indeed, bureaucratic (and I don't mean this in a negative sense). My feeling is we are at a kind of tipping point for photography institutions – do they embrace the distributive identity of the post-photographic, or do they foster a more museal (that is primarily historical) conception of photography? I am still being told privately by some major institutional curators that their commitment is to the still photograph. The danger, of course, is that this positioning is increasingly nostalgic, even in terms of presenting an adequate history of photography. Our response to this is threefold: to look very closely and with an open mind at new practice; to think theoretically about photography's identity; and to try and rethink the history of photographic media. Of course, this isn't easy, particularly in a context in Europe where most small museums are struggling even to keep their doors open – the crisis in photography's post-industrial institutional identity is a key related factor here. Whilst I'm very wedded to the creativity of small institutions, I also wouldn't underestimate the bureaucratic difficulties faced by the larger institutional curators. To be a photography curator in a large institution was always to engage in a very complex war of position. And the battles are becoming ever more strategic.

**KPA:** I don't doubt any of that, and it's just that sense of a tipping point that makes me interested in these conversations right now. There is certainly no shortage of still photographs to attend to, so it does become a matter of potentially competing priorities — it always is. The hope, I suppose, is that all of these types of venues offer or innovate different types of support, different forms of public platform and programming, in ways that make sense for their particular collections, histories, and audiences. And while we've been focusing on exhibiting institutions, there are certainly related challenges in academic scholarship, research and writing. It's potentially a daunting set of challenges, but hopefully an exciting one, too.

**DF:** Yes, the challenges are daunting and they also lie significantly beyond the realm of the image. For example, I recently heard a lecture by the geographer,

David Harvey, in which he began by describing the extraordinary volume of concrete now being poured in China. Between 1900 and 1999 the US poured 4405 million tonnes of concrete, whilst between just 2011 and 2013 the Chinese poured 6651 million tonnes – an astonishing increase. I've been haunted by these figures ever since I heard them – they are the dialectical antipode of the intensification in algorithmic processing that we have been discussing. In a sense this pouring of concrete (a new, emerging form of urbanization) also has something to do with the ‘worlding’ of the post-photographic I mentioned earlier. I'm fascinated by the potential of bringing these antipodes together, of using one to illuminate the reality of the other. We need to try and grasp the very material relations between digitality and capital, in this case the vast surpluses of Chinese capital that are rapidly turning our world into one big car park.



James N. Kienitz Wilkins, *B-ROLL with Andre*, 2015, film still, HD-video, © James N. Kienitz Wilkins

And of course there are artists doing this. We are about to stage James N. Kienitz Wilkins' film *B-Roll with Andre* as part of our SITUATIONS program, a digital film which in a similarly dialectical vein brings together the utopian possibilities of 4K camera technologies and the reality of the US's prison-

industrial complex. I'd far rather work like this – informed by what might be described as a digital realism – than the Photoshop formalism which is now beginning to forge a place for a version of post-photography in the marketplace. We are living through a period of very exciting production in this arena, much of it below the radar of institutions and the market. In our age of permanent structural underemployment the (networked) social base of post-photography is also taking new forms. This is another compelling topic – institutions should pay attention. But I've already said too much – perhaps it is something we can return to?

KPA: Yes, let's. Thanks, Duncan.

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*Our conversation took place in Google Docs from August 22 – September 11, 2016.  
All images are courtesy Fotomuseum Winterthur.*

1. Full disclosure: I was one of twenty-three nominators for this prize. ↵
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Kate Palmer Albers, "A Conversation with Duncan Forbes," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (October 19, 2016). [/articles/Forbes\\_conversation.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after October 19, 2016, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project: ↗ [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2016-10-19-Forbes\\_conversation.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2016-10-19-Forbes_conversation.md)

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# The Hereafter Institute: A Letter from Violet

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August 29, 2016

Dear Al,

Have you thought about the future of your digital self? I know you want your body to be cremated, but in the end that's just your bones. There will still be so much of you left behind – so many traces. Does this question seem strange? I went to a presentation yesterday afternoon at the Hereafter Institute. It was for new clients – well, for anyone who needs some help thinking about their digital afterlife. It was just chance, really, that I stumbled into it. I was on the 5pm tour. Strangely, I bumped into your old colleague there, Anne – she was with her husband and their dog. They'd just come from a basketball tournament in San Diego – they'd rushed up to make the tour. She said to say hi, and to tell you she's happier in her new job.

Anyway, I was glad not to be alone on the tour. Our guide was so brisk and efficient – like someone you'd imagine in a movie giving a tour of a cryogenics facility. White lab coat, tidy clipboard, a little bit intimidating in her demeanor – and it was uncanny how her blue blouse perfectly matched her eyes. She led us into a Japanese style pavilion – I think you would have liked the room's earthy elegance.

She had us raise our hands to give her a sense of where we had our data stored.... Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace... Gmail, Yahoo email, work email, school email... OKCupid, eHarmony, Match, Tinder, Grindr... Tumblr, Wordpress, Pinterest... And what about Amazon! I really do feel like Amazon knows me – how many times have their suggestions, generated from my purchasing history, been so right on? There were more but honestly I don't remember them all. Her point was, our personal data – our words, our photographs, our videos, our preferences and tastes, our financial information – it's everywhere, dispersed over networks, entrusted to corporations, backed up in “the cloud” but, at the same time, totally out of our hands, completely vulnerable. (I thought about making a joke about how they handle Snapchat accounts – it seemed the wrong mood, though.)

So this is where it got interesting. She proposed three options for our digital remains (that's right, our “digital remains”.... what a term, huh? She had our attention.) They were: continuation, deletion, or memorialization.

The easiest, as she described it, is deletion. I guess it's a little like cremation, or burial. Sort of a traditional aftermath of dying. You hand over all your accounts, entrust them with all the passwords, and the analogy she used was like cleaning out a house. They just wipe everything clean. Actually it made me think this could be a nice option for the material world, too. Instead of the burden of the kids dealing with all the stuff – think of all the furniture, the cars, the papers and files, and, my god, the books. Imagine if it could just all – poof! – be gone. So that's an option. At least for the Twitter you, or the Facebook me. But I don't know – I have to say I kind of like some of your tweets. I might be sorry to see them go. (I wonder, would they save your draft tweets, too? The ones you wrote but never posted? Some of the best stuff is in there, if you ask me.)

The second option was actually my favorite, and definitely the coolest, but also the weirdest. Continuation. If we sign on with the Hereafter Institute, and choose this option, they'll create bots for us that – get this – will be algorithmically programmed to maintain the illusion of presence on social media. So, I'd be dead, but the bot would have analyzed my social media

habits – the kinds of photos I post, my tone in captions, my habits, like how often I post in various places, what time of day – and it would just keep it all up, like it were me. No one would have to live without my pretty sky pictures, or art reports, or miss a second of the kids' cuteness. (Do you think the bot could even auto-generate good license plates to post? They'd have to be funny ones. I don't like the obnoxious ones. Could a bot tell the difference?) On the other hand, now that I'm writing it out, this sounds like a more valuable service for the living – maybe I could pay them double to create a bot to just start posting as me now? I should have asked if it would also comment on my friends' posts for me, wouldn't that be great? But what if the bot learned to become a better version of me? What if, after a while, I could never live up? Ugh.

Okay. Well, the last option was memorialization. They were really selling this one. I guess the guy who founded the Hereafter Institute is most excited about these options. In fact, he came in to the presentation at this point, and told us about all his ideas himself. Charming guy, really persuasive – brimming with ideas and enthusiasm. It was infectious. (No mean feat, given the subject matter.) A sleek, black memorial plinth that plays – and displays – all my tweets, ever, (or yours) from a custom LP. A virtual reality experience in which my 3D body scan combines with recordings of my voice and an illusion is built around me in my favorite place – so, for example, they could take photos of Echo Lake and generate its virtual version, and you could visit me talking about my favorite artists or the book I last read. There was also a wearable necklace – bulky, but pretty good looking all in all – that played uploaded videos on shuffle. This would be great for you, it could be all your Vines and gifs and little videos on Instagram, but also videos from our phones. It's like an old nineteenth century Victorian locket, updated.

Anyway, dear, it gave me a lot to think about. You should think about it, too. I'd suggest we make an appointment for a consultation, when you're back in town, but it was just a two-day opportunity. But here's their website. Take a look. As the guide said at the very end of the presentation, "We won't live forever. But our data will."

Love, Violet



William deLappa, from *The Portraits of Violet and Al*, c. 1973, as published in *Creative Camera*, October 1977

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The Hereafter Institute debuted at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 27-28, 2016, affiliated with the museum's exceptional Art + Technology program. Read more about the Hereafter Institute [here](#) and [here](#).

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Kate Palmer Albers, "The Hereafter Institute: A Letter from Violet," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (August 29, 2016). [/articles/Hereafter-Institute.html](#).

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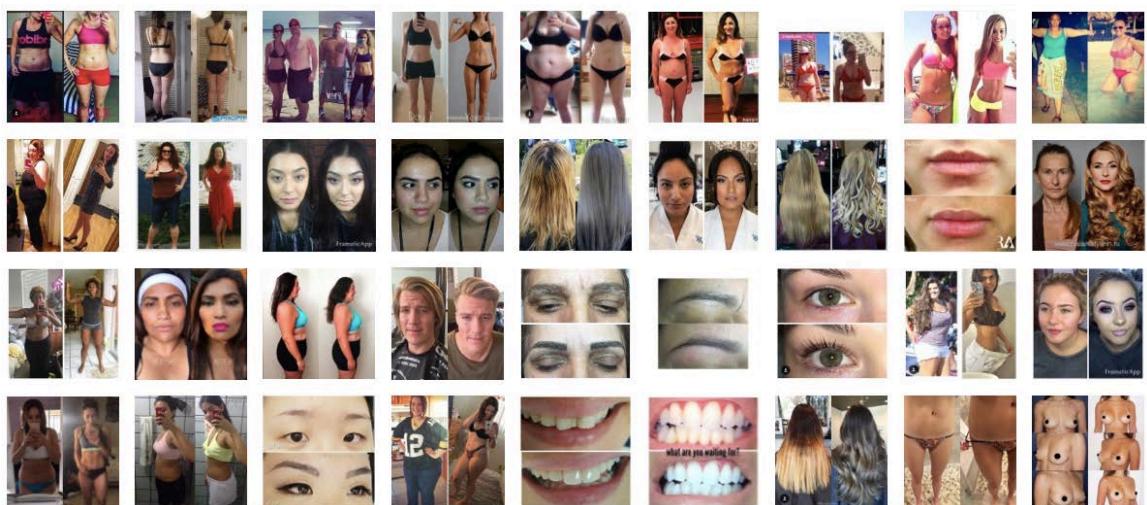
Any updates or corrections to this article made after August 29, 2016, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project:  [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2016-08-29-Hereafter-Institute.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2016-08-29-Hereafter-Institute.md)

*Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# #beforeandafter

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August 28, 2016



Excerpts from #beforeandafter on Instagram

Until this past Friday morning at the Tucson airport, when I sat down next to a discarded copy of the *New York Times* that was left open to Jennifer Weiner's op-ed on the subject, I had been unaware of the hashtag #weartheswimsuit, which has become somewhat of a social media summertime rallying cry to encourage those (women, mostly) who have elected to remain covered up, even uncomfortably so, at the beach or the pool. I'm in the right demographic – female, 40+, carried, pushed out, and nursed two babies – to have some natural empathy for the swimsuit anxiety Weiner describes, but I don't give the issue much active thought. I'm glad she

does, though, and I'm even more glad that she connected #weartheswimsuit to the realm of before-and-after photography, a topic to which I have, by contrast, devoted considerable thought.

Weiner writes:

*As summers go, this wasn't a totally terrible one for body positivity. The Playboy Playmate Dani Mathers, who snapped a photo of a woman at her gym with the giggly, grossed-out caption, "If I can't unsee this then you can't, either!" was roundly shamed on social media.*

*Then, during the Olympics, in between commentators' cracks about how a female swimmer's husband was actually the one responsible for her gold medal, or how our gymnasts looked as if they should have been hanging out at a mall, you could actually see larger bodies being celebrated for their achievements; bodies that were winning medals as opposed to being "befores" on those weight-loss reality shows.*

The before-and-after mindset has been produced and circulated via photographic means, to serve various ends, nearly since the invention of the medium, in areas from medical treatment to climate change to drug awareness to disaster documentation. In the book I have co-edited with my colleague Jordan Bear, *Before-and-After Photography: Histories and Contexts*, a real absence among the contributions we solicited is serious attention to some of the most banal, pervasive, and commonly seen before-and-after photographs in our contemporary culture: those from beauty magazines, celebrity gossip rags, and advertisements for all manner of body improvement strategies ranging from teeth whiteners to bleach creams to cosmetic surgeries, each promising an easy fix for the bodies they touch.

To acknowledge this oversight, I wrote in the introduction:

*The hashtag #beforeandafter on the photo-sharing app Instagram yields, as of this writing, over 3 million posts, most commonly depicting weight loss, hair styling, and make-up application. Beyond typical portrait views of predominantly female bodies and heads, particular body parts are often highlighted: Eyebrows, lips, bare bellies, and bikini-clad bottoms join the*

*relentless parade of physical display and underscore the powerful effect of the beauty industry on the self-perceptions, aspirations, and publicly shared personal documentations of millions. The visual narrative of personal transformation is unquestionably one of progress and improvement; it goes without saying that the end result is believed to be preferable to the starting point. Whatever process or length of time it took the subject to attain more voluminous tresses; red-carpet worthy make-up; or a tighter, leaner body is collapsed into the side-by-side pair of magical transformation: the ugly duckling is transformed into a swan and viewers are spared the dirty process of becoming. In these cases, the before-and-after trope works to hide the intervening series of events: the less the viewer thinks about the visually absent period of time, confirmed by its absence as a private matter, the better. The images have to exist as a pair: the “before” can only be tolerated as a public post in the presence of the triumphant “after,” which both confirms and eradicates the personal shame of the “before”.*

So it was particularly gratifying to read Weiner's counter to this deeply ingrained trend – particularly set, as it was, within an immediate context of cultural attention to and celebration of Olympians' extraordinary range of strength in body types. As shotputter Michelle Carter (aka the Shot Diva) summed it up, "You have to understand, everyone's body was built to do something."

Weiner concludes:

*These are the images I want to take with me from this summer: [Olympic weightlifter and bronze-medalist] Sarah Robles's smile; Michelle Carter's confidence, and what my Facebook friend Jaime Rydman wrote beneath a shot of herself in a black one-piece with waves frothing around her ankles and wrote, "I'd always say 'this will make a good 'before' picture. I need to stop ... it makes a good NOW picture!"*

I have a couple of people in my life – both male and female – who can't seem to look at a photograph of themselves without commenting on how terrible they look. It always seems a little futile to point out that I think they look good, and that I'm pretty sure I'm right. While I'm fascinated by the

pervasiveness of before-and-after photographs, the NOW picture seems like a much better model towards which to aspire.

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Kate Palmer Albers, "#beforeandafter," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (August 28, 2016). [/articles/swimsuit\\_before\\_and\\_after.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after August 28, 2016, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project:  [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2016-08-28-swimsuit\\_before\\_and\\_after.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2016-08-28-swimsuit_before_and_after.md)

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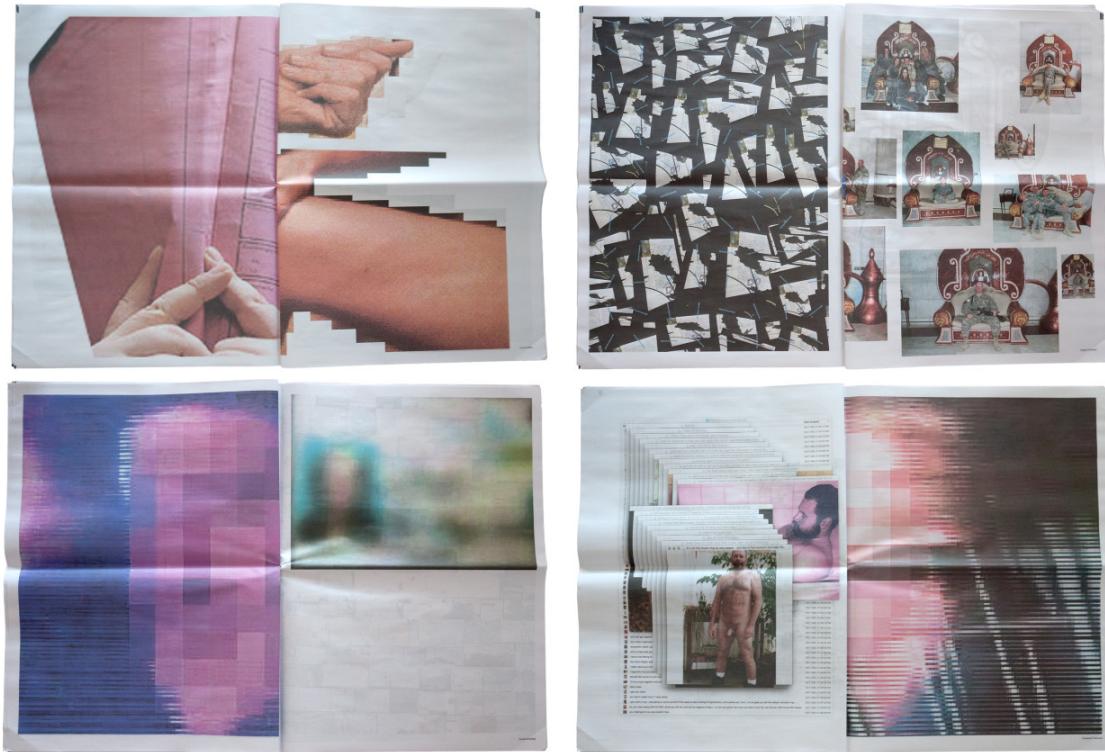
# A Conversation with Paul Soulellis

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July 21, 2016

*Paul Soulellis is, among many other things, the founder of Library of the Printed Web, a project that encompasses a physical archive, research, teaching and experimental publishing. Printed Web #4, “Public, Private, Secret” debuted in June 2016 as a 40-page print-on-demand newsprint and PDF download featuring projects by Wolfgang Plöger, Lorna Mills, Molly Soda, Travess Smalley, Angela Genusa, Eva and Franco Mattes, Anouk Kruithof, Elisabeth Tonnard, and Christopher Clary, with a text titled “Folding the Web” by Michael Connor, artistic director of Rhizome. It was co-published with the International Center of Photography on the occasion of “Public, Private, Secret” (June 2016 – January 2017), the inaugural exhibition at ICP Museum’s new location at 250 Bowery, organized by curator-in-residence Charlotte Cotton.*

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**Page spreads from Printed Web #4**

**Kate Palmer Albers:** Immaterial modes of photography are being used with ever greater frequency by both artists and casual photographers. In many cases, artists are working both with material and immaterial photographic images. I'm curious about how this shift affects the exhibition, collecting, and preservation goals or priorities of those working in photography generally, and your work with Library of the Printed Web, specifically. To start, what are the challenges or opportunities you face in publishing photographs—or other work—made in immaterial, or partially immaterial, modes?

**Paul Soulellis:** These are exactly the challenges and opportunities that I'm interested in with the Printed Web project. Since I work primarily with artists who engage with network culture, materiality is always a concern. So these challenges come in various forms. I find that the more immaterial or ephemeral the artist's work, like a fleeting screenshot, or something grabbed directly from the web, the more I can elevate its perceived value, simply by shifting its form and context. And specifically, giving it the context of a

publication. *Printed Web #3*, which was an open call, was filled with this kind of work—lots of single JPGs, screenshot assemblages, desktop gestures.

When these quick images are committed to haptic substrate (like paper or fabric), and then multiplied and dispersed, they take on new kinds of value. Printed zines and books are meant to circulate by hand, which can be a more considered action, or at least a slower one. So this kind of circulation value might be quite different from how a JPG or GIF moves on digital networks. But I'm most excited when I'm able to do both—to simultaneously publish both material and digital versions of these works, like when I post a PDF of a printed publication online and set it in motion. This allows me to experiment with multiple positions at once, and it sets up a kind of vibrational quality, as the works exist in various states. It's this lack of fixity that allows me to frame *Printed Web* as a digital project.

KPA: I want to pause on what you've said here about value, and I really like this idea of a “vibrational quality” of images or objects occupying multiple positions at once. I've been thinking about ways that images accrue value in our culture, whether material or immaterial, and I think you're right that making something material almost automatically elevates it, maybe even analogously to how photographing something from the world elevates it—a small act of paying attention, of extracting something from a larger and otherwise almost imponderable array, that becomes contagious. I'm most curious, though, about how it can work either the other way around, or simultaneously (“vibrationally”, I suppose)—how the different forms work in concert to produce a kind of value that might be a bit more foreign than object value. And I wonder how that kind of value is expressed or articulated.

PS: I definitely see the vibrations expanding in multiple directions. An obvious example might be how digitizing books or archives can suddenly open up access to otherwise unseen material objects. The value increases because the digital copy is created, circulated and ultimately locatable on the network (encoded). This idea that we might be flooded with digital copies while the original artifact disappears (or remains illusive) reverses the older model of printed copies dispersed haphazardly into the world, forever lost. So

I think the value that you're asking about can be expressed in the idea of the copy. So many artists have explored this, from Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans* (1981) to Michael Mandiberg's *After Sherrie Levine* (2001). David Horvitz's *Mood Disorder* (2015) is the perfect example of the copied image that increases in value and meaning as it circulates. Another is *The Others* by Eva and Franco Mattes, which I just published in *Printed Web #4*—10,000 photos appropriated from unaware users and re-circulated in new contexts (for this version, they selected 52 images).

KPA: Do you find that your interests or considerations shift or differ depending on whether something is considered vernacular material vs. fine art?

PS: Ideas about vernacular material and fine art naturally mix within Printed Web, and I think this is one of the strengths of the project. So far, I have mostly engaged with artists. I think of Printed Web as a curatorial practice, so I'm interested in how artists are working with the network's new conditions of materiality, and how this is informing (and changing) larger trajectories and discourse within art history.

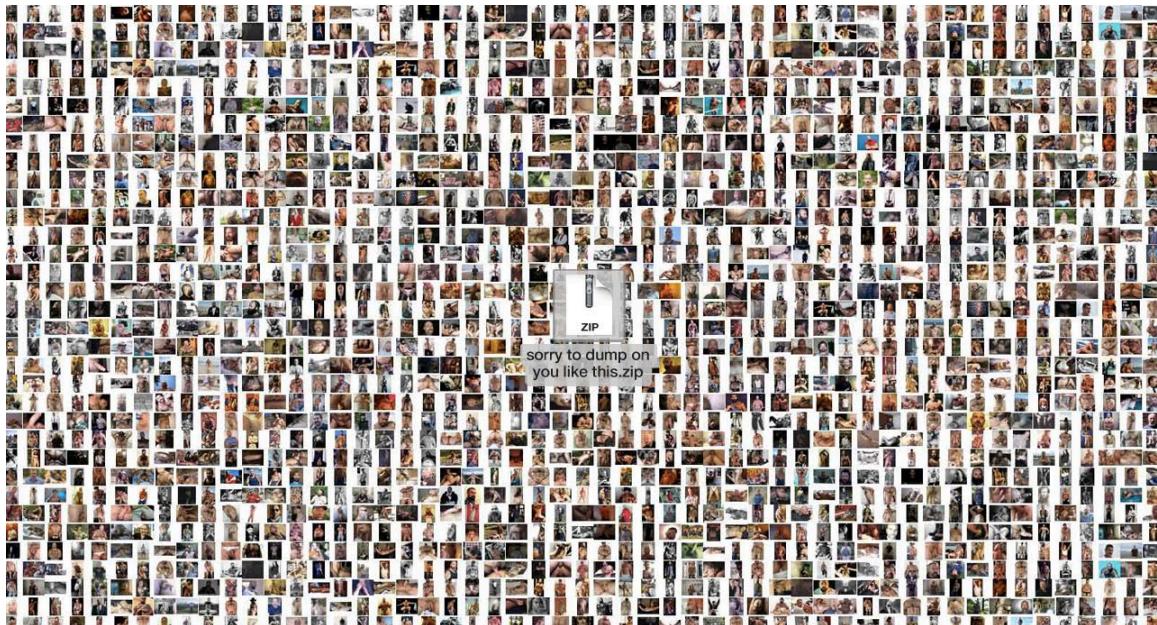


Printed Web #1 spreads featuring Joachim Schmid's "Thirty-Six Polaroids", 2014



Printed Web #1 spread featuring Penelope Umbrico's "Replacement Screens", 2014

In any issue of Printed Web we'll find artists working with the accumulation of material afforded by network conditions. I think of these artists as collectors, grabbing stuff from one archive or platform and re-staging it on another, in order to articulate something about our relationship with network culture. We see this with Penelope Umbrico's *Replacement Screens* and Joachim Schmid's *Thirty-Six Polaroids* projects in *Printed Web #1* (2014), and Christopher Clary's investigation of web-based porn and images of masculinity in "Sorry to dump on you like this.zip" in *Printed Web #4* (2016). I find these projects to be most effective when they position the material in a straight-forward way, presenting the accumulation itself as a formal composition. Kenneth Goldsmith characterizes these works as "dumb"—amplifying one specific condition and leaving it at that, like an ethnographic study. Although the visual result is usually anything but simple.



Screenshot of download page for Christopher Clary's "Sorry to dump on you like this.zip" on Rhizome.org

KPA: That particular trio of examples—Umbrico, Schmid, Clary—allows me to ask more specifically about your use of the term “substrate” above. There you used “substrate” conventionally, to talk about a material surface onto which something (like an image) is overlaid, or printed, but I know you also

think a lot about different types of immaterial substrates... which actually have very specific parameters, different types of possibilities and limitations (and “immaterial” is probably not the best word here for just those reasons). How important do you think it is for viewers to be aware of the substrate, or shifting substrates, as part of the content?

PS: I find substrate to be essential, because whether it is material or not, it is political. Ultimately, these surfaces—or platforms, say, if an image is posted on social media or a bulletin board—provide context. And context changes the meaning of an artist’s work. I think it’s our responsibility as readers, viewers and curators to examine substrate as we search for meaning. Does the work acknowledge how it’s been printed, and who can access these copies? Has the artist created work that can occupy several (social, commercial) positions, depending on how it flows from one substrate to another—or is it locked into a fixed relationship with its host? Can I change the work’s context myself, say, if the primary experience of the work is to download it to my desktop? Questions like these are critical when interpreting works that exist in relation to fluid networks. Less fixity means more opportunities to create (or shift) meaning.

KPA: You know I’m interested in how museums and curators (or, photo institutions generally) are incorporating programming or experimenting with exhibiting practices to accommodate photographic work that doesn’t follow a model that is typical for a photography department or institution (which might be characterized as a print that can be hung, framed, or boxed in a standard print room, solander box, or gallery configuration)... what has your experience been either (or both) with exhibiting Printed Web, or your seeing work you’ve printed exhibited?

PS: When I began Printed Web it was with a strong idea to explore the circulating publication as exhibition. I was directly inspired by Seth Siegelaub’s *Xerox Book* (1968) and other Siegelaub projects that positioned the group exhibition outside the context of the gallery system and within the container of the publication. Shortly thereafter I learned about Mel Bochner’s *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to*

*Be Viewed as Art* (1966), which was less about circulation and more about an unconventional presentation of a group show within a series of loose-leaf binders, exhibited on pedestals within a gallery space. Here, the book form was an essential aspect of the work (binding and assembling a collection of material), but because the books don't circulate, they are experienced more as artifacts.

At that point I began to imagine how an artist's publication might occupy multiple material positions, both as circulating copies and as a more fixed presentation of the work in space. At MoMA's "Ocean of Images" show last year Horvitz's *Mood Disorder* was exhibited as multiple copies of the publication, each open to a different spread and pinned to the wall. For me this was a stunning display and I think it was the first time that I saw a publication presented in a way that both reinforced its "publication-ness" and enabled a physical, visual experience of the entire work at once, in space.



"Mood Disorder" by David Horvitz on view at the Museum of Modern Art in Ocean of Images, 2016

I brought up the Horvitz example as a primary reference when Charlotte Cotton and I discussed how to exhibit *Printed Web #4* for “Public, Private, Secret” at International Center of Photography, and we did something similar. Each spread was shown on the wall by using multiple copies of the publication. In this case, since the project was printed as a loose folio of newsprint sheets, we were easily able to separate the pages and fix them to the wall with magnets.



**Printed Web #4** on view in "Public, Private, Secret" at International Center of Photography, 2016

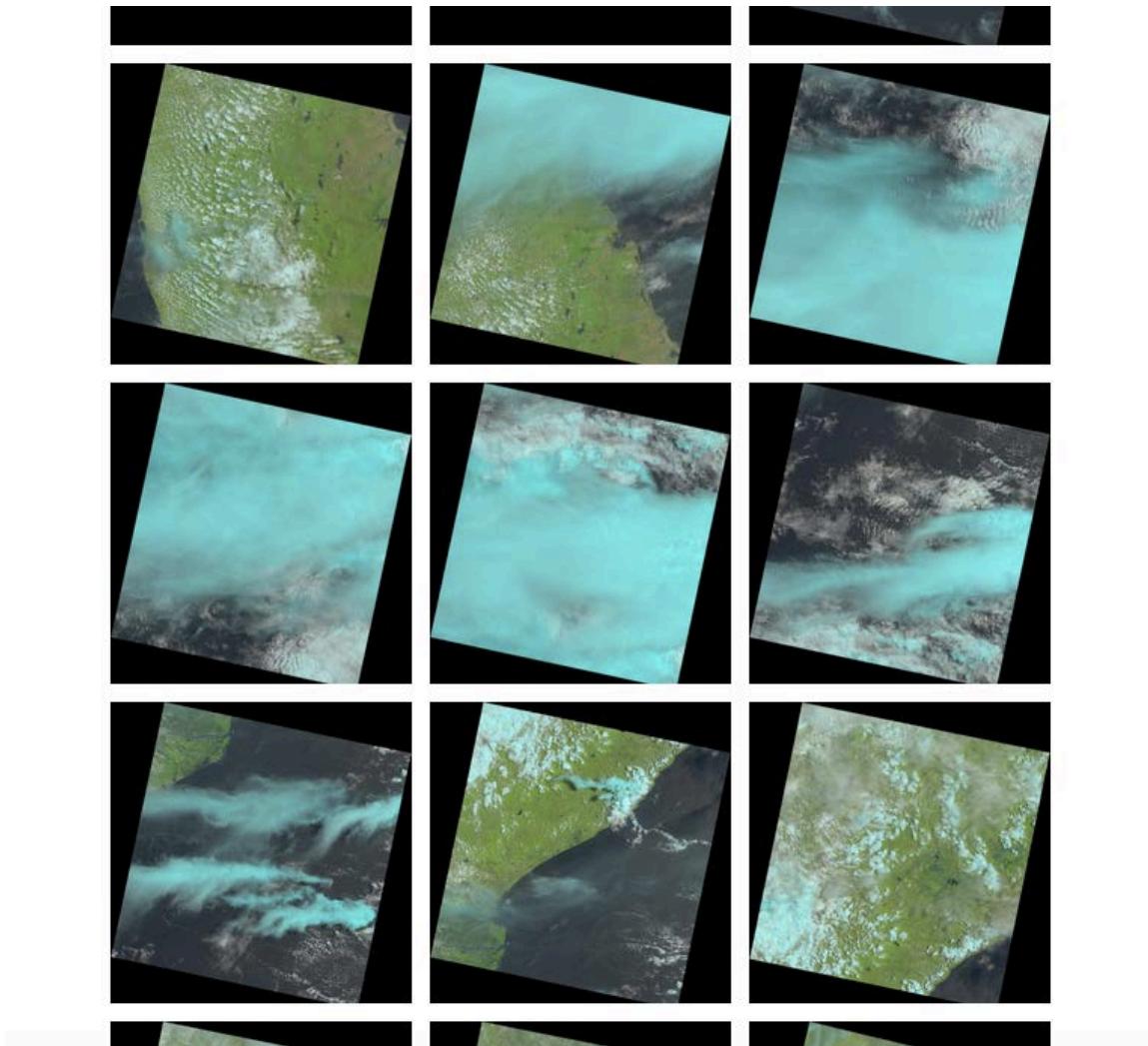
Typically, my publications are displayed as objects to be handled (like here at “Publish or Perish,” Transmitter Gallery, Brooklyn, April 2016), which sometimes feel “retail-y” but ultimately this is a very good way to experience the work. The viewer is able to engage directly with the publication. Because Printed Web publications are cheaply printed, they show the honest wear and tear of handling. I don’t mind that they bear these physical effects; this is a

kind of evidence of the publication's haecceity (its "what-it-is"), with its own material lifespan. I think of my publications as "poor media." Because Printed Web is always print-on-demand, copies are easily replaced.



Printed Web publications displayed at Transmitter Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, April 2016

Right now, *Printed Web #2* (2014) is included in a small show at MoMA Library organized by Jennifer Tobias. A single spread of James Bridle's [laaaaaandsat.tumblr.com](#) project is shown. It's exhibited as an object under glass, which works well thematically for the exhibition, highlighting a portion of a single artist's work. But the viewer has no agency to explore the publication; it's a more conventional museum display of printed matter that privileges institutional control over user engagement. I'm not against this kind of presentation but it's a less effective way to explore the specifics of the Printed Web project, like print-on-demand, tactility, assembling, poor media, etc.



Screenshot of James Bridle's "laaaaaandsat.tumblr.com"



James Bridle's "Iaaaaaaandsat.tumblr.com", in Printed Web #2, on view at current MoMA library exhibition, "Aerial Imagery In Print, 1860-Today", 2016

KPA: The phrase “poor media” makes me think of Hito Steyerl’s In Defense of the Poor Image and what she’s articulated about how we might value the qualities of degraded, corrupt, low-res, or otherwise seemingly compromised forms of images – images with which, as she puts it, “one might imagine another form of value defined by velocity, intensity, and spread.” Steyerl covers a lot in that essay, and I’m certainly sympathetic with what I take as the central impulse of it. So what I wonder is how you see the relationship between poor images (which I understand to be – within the context of Steyerl’s essay, anyway – always immaterial) and poor media, which I understand in your use above as perhaps a material extension of a related value system.

PS: My use of the phrase “poor media” comes directly from Silvio Lorusso’s Digital Publishing: In Defense of Poor Media, published on his own website

as well as in *Printed Web #3* (2015). Silvio begins with Steyerl's ideas about the poor image as loss of resolution and applies them directly to different modalities in digital publishing, like the PDF and print-on-demand. He says that poor media is "characterized by the conscious, serene renunciation of embellishments in favor of accessibility and spread." For me this is best articulated by contrasting the high-end photobook with something like a cheap print-on-demand zine. Both contain images that have been printed on paper, but the social, commercial (and perhaps cultural?) implications are radically different. Silvio's text has become a bit like a manifesto for my Printed Web project.

**KPA:** What audiences do you find are most open to and interested in the kind of work you're printing?

PS: Printed Web's territories include photobook, artists' books, zine and net art worlds. I research, teach and write about experimental publishing, so this naturally extends the project to audiences who engage with me in this work, often through Rhizome, where I write and curate, and Rhode Island School of Design, where I teach. My consistent presence at a range of art book fairs and at events like Internet Yami-Ichi means that I can build a community of fans and followers with face-to-face contact. This has become an extremely important way for me to distribute Printed Web, because it allows me to position discourse and conversational exchange at the center of the project. I also find that the artists that I work with are themselves a primary audience, each extending the project into their own networks and communities of followers.

All of this is very DIY and it's why I consider Printed Web to be "publishing as artistic practice," outside the normal structures of conventional publishing. By keeping the work a safe distance from commercial concerns I have the freedom to build community on my own terms and easily integrate real-time discourse into my practice (exactly as we are doing right now with this interview!).

**KPA:** It's somehow counterintuitively fitting that face-to-face conversation remains so key to distributing the content (intellectual and material) of

Printed Web. And I'm really glad to know about Internet Yami-Ichi—I almost can't understand why there hasn't been an iteration in Los Angeles yet.

PS: I'm sure there will be soon. In “Publishing as Artistic Practice” Annette Gilbert writes that “the places where the communities can organize, network, exchange, consolidate, and develop are of increasing importance.” She describes these as *rooms of production* (Publication Studio), *rooms of trade* (the book fairs), and *rooms of reception* (Wendy’s Subway). I believe that “publishing’s sociality as a form of artistic practice,” as she puts it, is central to my practice. I see these physical rooms of production, trade and reception becoming even more significant as communities discover and broadcast them to the *network rooms* (my phrase) that have become our new norm.

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*Our conversation took place in the shared, yet asynchronously occupied, room known as Google Docs, from June 25 – July 13, 2016.*

### **Further reading:**

- David Senior and Sarah Hamerman, “Screen life and shelf life: critical vocabularies for digital-to-print artists’ publications,” *Art Libraries Journal* / Volume 41 / Issue 03 / July 2016
  - Paul Soulellis, “The Download: sorry to dump on you like this.zip” (*Rhizome*, November 2015)
  - My *Circulation/Exchange* post on David Horvitz’s Mood Disorder (May 2016)
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Kate Palmer Albers, "A Conversation with Paul Soulellis," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (July 21, 2016). [/articles/Soulellis\\_conversation.html](#).

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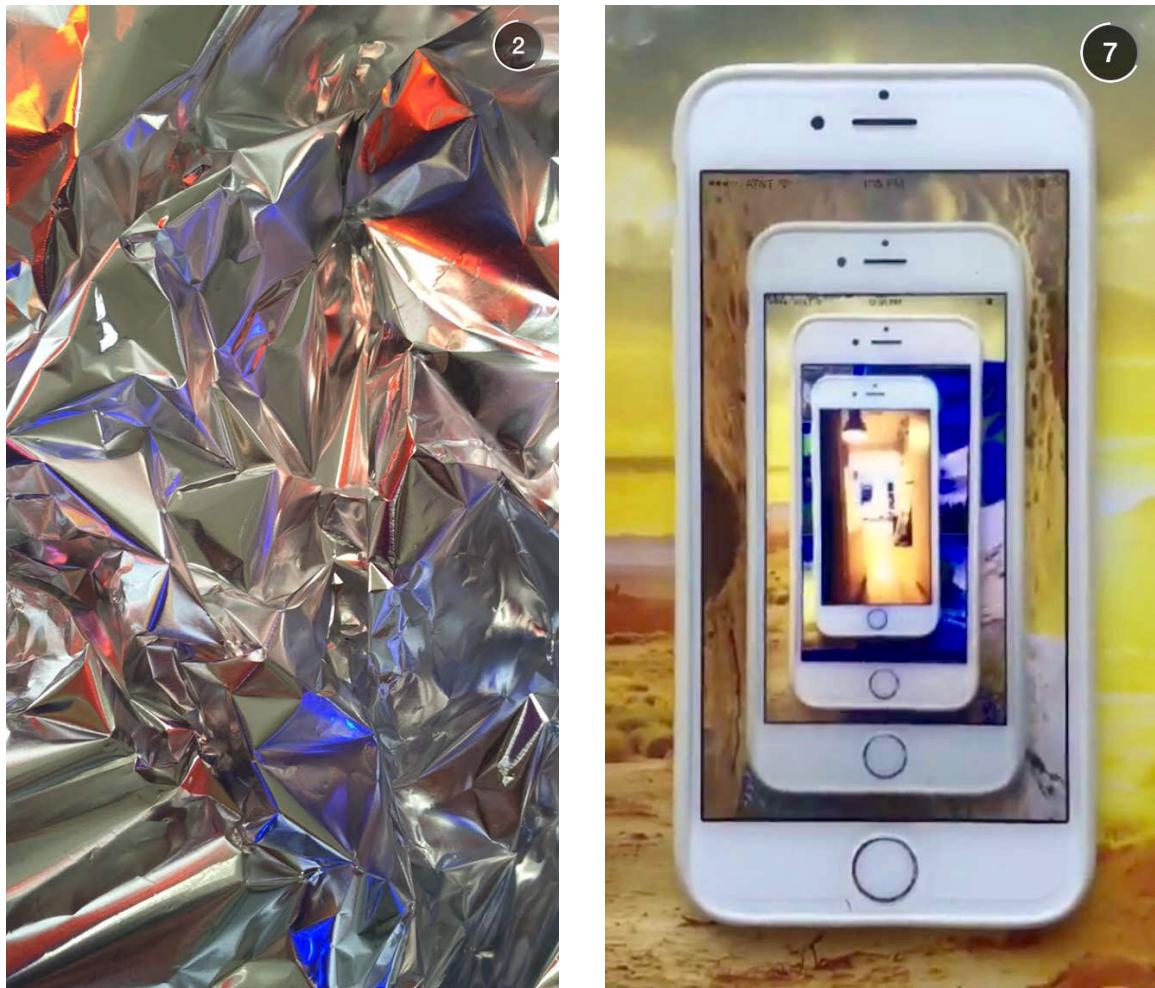
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# On Experiential Value & Digital Materiality

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July 13, 2016



Screenshot of Snapchat posts by Lonneke van der Palen (L) and David Brandon Geeting (R) for This Is It/Now exhibition, 2015. Courtesy This Is It/Now.

## I

In 2010—not so long ago, but it feels like light years in online time—I had a conversation with a photography curator about a recent acquisition she'd made for her museum. Upon purchase, the photograph she had discussed with an artist arrived at the museum, somewhat unexpectedly, as a digital image file. The museum, of course, was well equipped to receive photographic prints, but the receipt of a digital file as a work of art presented this museum's venerable photography department with some interesting questions.

For starters, assuming the image would be exhibited in material form, how big should the print be? What kind of paper should it be on? And who should decide? In the absence of an artist's choice or an obvious default solution, what was the museum's role in these aesthetic decisions? Furthermore, once the photograph was printed, what, then, should happen to the digital file? Was that the original form? Could new prints be produced from it, perhaps in different sizes, should the need arise in future exhibitions?

It should be clear that the default assumption, at the time, was to make a print: an object to accession and then exhibit and preserve in the known ways, albeit with some modifications. After all, variations of these questions are well known among collections that include negatives and slides. But this set of questions, which tracks the movement from the lived and dynamic realities of photographic images into the traditionally more restful state of museum objects has only grown more complicated in recent years.

## II Experiential Value

There is somewhat of a tendency, in certain circles at least, to think of the proliferation of immaterial images primarily in terms of loss, most notably a loss of the object, its treasured material nuances, and the particular modes of labor and skill required to make those material wonders, that exist in an expansive range of physical forms. Yet photography has always been a medium of enormous experiential complexity. We can think of the intimacy of a hand-held and mirrored daguerreotype, kept inside a velvet-lined case and revealed for each viewing; the emergence of mass media press images, viewed by millions, nearly simultaneously, on disposable pages; the collective family vacation slide show in the living room; or the elegant and aesthetically validated walls of museums. One of the beauties of the medium—a beauty that is as visible now as it ever has been—is the ability of its images to exist in a flux of shifting and adaptable forms that, in turn, carry similarly shifting experiential possibilities. And just as a range of printed forms have offered a corresponding range of experience, emerging modes of immaterial

viewing—online or elsewhere—are similarly complex and specific to particular screens, platforms, and social or personal custom.

The root of the issue the curator was navigating as she grappled with how to integrate the digital file into the museum's existing rubric of value was the result of emerging forms of image production and distribution that are decidedly at odds with the systems and values of the by now fairly well established photo museum world. With very few exceptions, photography departments in museums and institutions dedicated to photography emerged in concert with or in response to the development and evolution of the medium as a form of fine art. This began happening in earnest in the 1970s as photography simultaneously became legitimized by the broader art world and began to develop roots as a viable market. Though it's a bit of a generalization, it's fair to say that photography's viability as a legitimate creative medium was directly tied to the production of objects and the establishment of both institutions and a market that granted seals of approval that, in turn, further facilitated a desire for those objects to be collected, stored, exhibited, and preserved. Yet the value granted to individual prints and objects (itself not wrongly placed) may overshadow other worthwhile facets of the medium. There is room for more attention to the experiential nuances of photographic images, and a fuller range of value.

### III Modes of Viewing

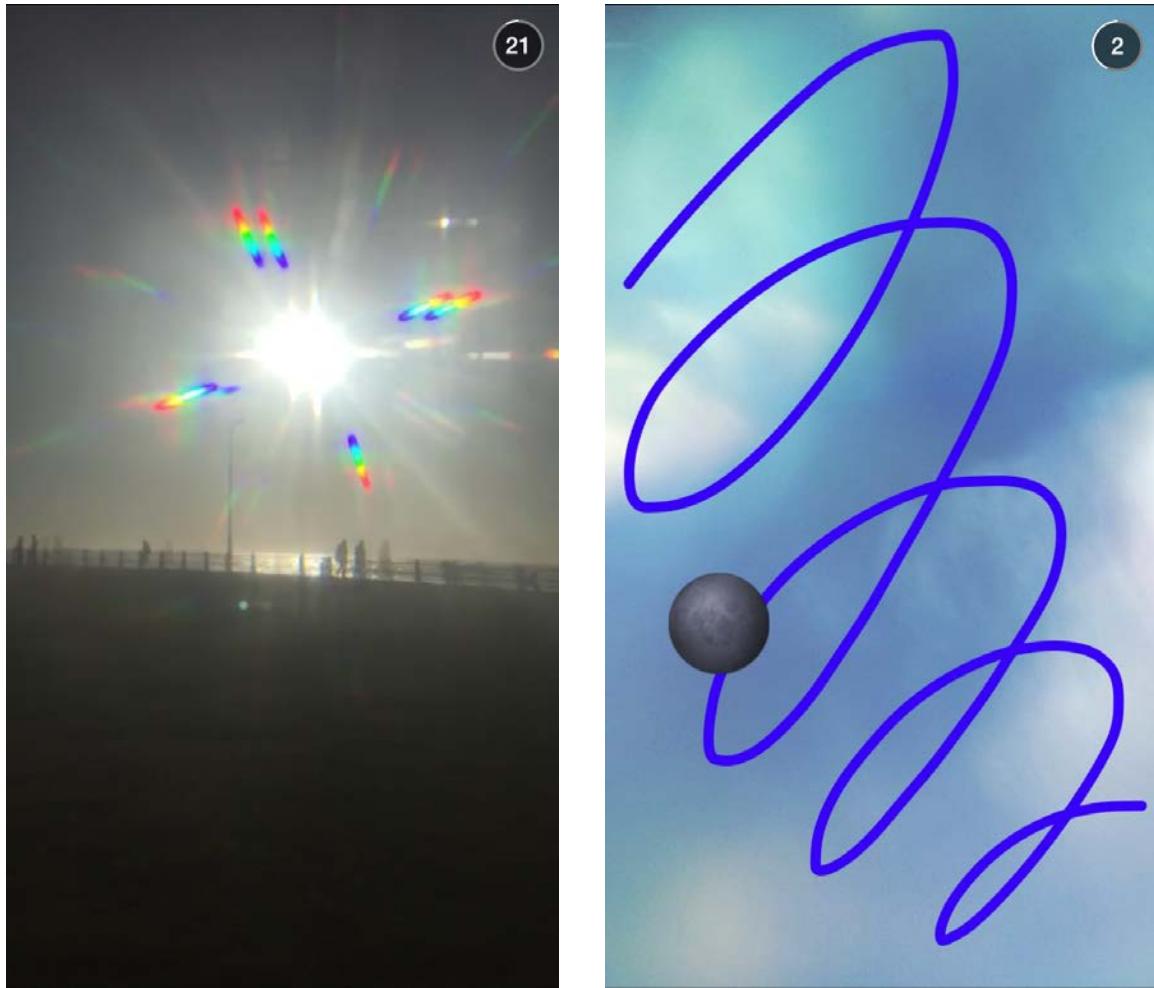
If one mode of exhibiting attention to new forms of photographic image creation and circulation might be characterized by impulses to modify new modes of photographic production to known ways of viewing (more on this in future posts), another approach is to infuse the experience of the exhibition with the experience of immaterial viewing characterized by networked space.<sup>1</sup> This latter mode seeks to disrupt habitual modes of collective viewing—whether those habits have been formed in traditional gallery spaces, or through new habits (no less engrained, for many) in online spaces that call for scrolling, reposting, commenting, and sharing. Arguably,

both types of space have become so common, so internalized, as to have become invisible.

I've been interested in the creative possibilities of disappearing photos for a few years now, particularly in relation to how we assign value. Disappearing photographs force the issue: there's no way to value them except as experiential. So last summer I was happy to hear about an exhibition that took place entirely on the app built around a default mode of image disappearance, Snapchat. Aptly titled *This Is It/Now*, the exhibition ran for 6 weeks, featured one artist per week, and was organized by the collaborative duo Max Marshall and Paul Paper. Per the restrictions of the app, the artists posted images (accumulations of still images or videos) that were viewable by followers of the *This Is It/Now* account for 24 hours.

In my own imaginary version of a Snapchat show, I had mentally featured artists attuned to what I think of as the usefully limiting parameters of the app, which creates a condition that favors immediate, direct engagement, and relationships to temporality and disappearance in a venue that offers very specific limits on time, text options, and almost a total lack of social feedback cues that are otherwise typical of social media. So in a recent conversation with Paper, I was interested to learn that their selection of artists took a different tack: while the company's general perception and self-marketing strategies suggest that the images' ephemerality allows a more unfiltered, more spontaneous, and thus more "authentic" social media experience, Paper and Marshall's selection criteria favored artists whose photographic work engages with "manipulation and mutability of the digital file," as a strategy to slow down the viewing process and thus delay the arrival of meaning.

Paper writes, "the curatorial decision was to explore a clash between the seemingly unmediated format and an apparently manipulated content. As Snapchat offered very few basic filters back then, the artists worked within - and sometimes around - the confines of the app, which presented a somewhat different experience to their normal and regular working conditions."



Screenshot of Snapchat posts by Nico Krijno (L) and Roxana Azar (R) for *This Is It/Now* exhibition, 2015.  
Courtesy This Is It/Now.

Prior to *This is It/Now*, Marshall and Paper had collaboratively organized the exhibition *Blog/Reblog*, designed “to mimic the processes of online reblogging” and presented via digital slide projection. Outside of these experimental curatorial endeavors, Paper has also spoken publicly about the need for museums to adapt to new forms of networked images, and the emergence of a “glaring gap” between how we experience photography in our daily lives and how the medium is generally presented in exhibition: “While the experience of viewing photographs online, in front of our bigger or smaller, but increasingly mobile screens, imbues it with senses of fleetingness and temporality, and a background of rich surrounding activities, the gallery space is just the opposite: the prints are solid, the noise is kept to a

minimum and the time is presented as still.” He continues, “network culture has radically changed not only how the medium operates, but also how art photography reaches us.”



**Screenshot of a Snapchat post by Ruth van Beek for This Is It/Now exhibition, 2015. Courtesy This Is It/Now.**

I appreciate Marshall and Paper's efforts (among those of many others, which will feature in forthcoming posts) particularly in this last regard: to

consciously evoke an awareness of new modes of viewing and replicate those modes as exhibition strategy, whether designed to mimic the ubiquitous activity of reblogging, or impose the fleetingness of the most disruptive viewing experience currently available as a parameter of viewing an exhibition. Perhaps counter-intuitively, in some ways, the idea of an ephemeral online exhibit is not entirely unlike any other physically realized exhibition: both exist for a discrete and self-selecting set of viewers who must opt in to the particular time and place of the show; at the conclusion of the exhibit's run, it can no longer be viewed as a discrete experience and must be understood through the necessarily incomplete nature of its inevitably partial documentation. (While it might have been more radical a gesture for Paper and Marshall to let the exhibition play out as, in fact, entirely ephemeral, it's nevertheless nice that they archived aspects of the exhibition through screenshots – which Paper characterizes as “glimpses and remainders”.)

#### IV Digital materiality

While all photographic devices have internal rules, culturally, over the last 50+ years, we've largely internalized the basic specifications of the hand-held camera, and can thus ignore the deliberate choices of manufacturers to design cameras to behave in particular ways. But the rise of apps and algorithmic photography, in particular, offers a nice reminder that—as always—any particular device or platform offers a set of human-designed possibilities. (It could be that one perceived shortcoming of snapchat among artists—beyond the obvious attachment to producing an object that will (or may) become an immortalized thought or vision—is the discomfort of coming so squarely against the app's imposed default limitations.) It's not unlike the ways that museums and photo institutions, not to mention my own field of photo historians, have internalized ways to handle, process, and write about photographic objects.

But there is, currently, an opportunity—and I would argue a need, actually—to develop a fuller and more expansive default mode that includes

what we might think of as a more nuanced collective sense of immaterial image connoisseurship. Art historians and museum professionals excel at object connoisseurship: a highly practiced skill developed through career-long attentiveness to what might otherwise be easily overlooked facets of the material production and lives of photographic objects. But there is a type of unsung close attention to the immaterial photographic image, that is largely swept aside in favor of a kind of flattening of the online image experience, as if all forms of immaterial images are experientially—or even actually—the same. And while bringing a willing attentiveness to the particular textures, contours, contexts and cues of particular modes of immaterial viewing is an unfamiliar area, the skills and attentiveness are similar.

Immaterial objects may be in constant flux, as are material objects. Beyond their rapidly shifting contexts, they degrade and age, and though they may be multiplied, they are also at risk for loss. As with the hidden backsides of prints or paintings, or the care with which an expert can assess the age of paper, or a particular studio stamp or date of a signature, immaterial images contain elusive information, albeit sometimes in the decidedly less romantic realm of metadata. But it takes a similarly attentive mode of viewing, and care about the relationship between what is being seen, how it was produced, the effects of circulation, and the experiential value to the viewer (or maker) to tease out the full spectrum of information offered by those cues.

These are details that can trace and track histories of use and channels of circulation; they can underscore shifting balances of surveillance and privacy; they can provoke questions of authorship and originality; they can illuminate the shapes and patterns of global economies and transactions; they can reveal cracks and ruptures in social politics and political power; they can mediate relationships of individuals to communities and corporations; and they can enable human communication and relationships from the most personal to the broadest demographic levels. But it is worth keeping in view that none of these are new issues in photography: the “old” ways of making and viewing photographs produced questions that were (and remain) just as complex as these new iterations. It is the experience of it—and how we access, understand, and value the meanings of that experience—that has changed.

## Notes

1. This is not to suggest that there is no material involved; certainly, the romantic and marketable notion of “the cloud” is premised on an entirely man-made and decidedly physical system of servers, wires, cables, and “off-site” storage, not to mention the copious amount of hardware involved in its distribution and reception and the breadth of human labor that produces the disposable (though toxic) stuff. I thank Katrina Sluis for pushing me to clarify this point. And, yet, despite all that stuff – which is perhaps more comparable to the chemicals and labs of the analog era than it is to the (typically) paper-based object of traditional photography, there is, still, a very distinct difference in the viewing experience when there is no comparable discrete object to hold onto, admire, collect, and become aesthetically expert about. ↵

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Kate Palmer Albers, "On Experiential Value & Digital Materiality," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (July 13, 2016). /articles/digital\_materiality.html.

Any updates or corrections to this article made after July 13, 2016, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project: ↗ [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2016-07-13-digital\\_materiality.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2016-07-13-digital_materiality.md)

*Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# Becoming a Stock Image, and other Surrogates for the Online Self

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May 18, 2016

**sur·ro·gate**

/'sərəgət, 'sərə,gāt/

*noun*

noun: surrogate; plural noun: surrogates

1. a substitute, especially a person deputizing for another in a specific role or office

I.

A year or so ago, a colleague of mine—let's call her Jane—told me how much she disliked the first photograph that appeared with a Google image search of her name. I didn't know what photograph she was objecting to so strongly, but I knew the feeling she meant. With images both of oneself and one's professional activities and interests collected through a variety of means—including direct tags, shared appearances on websites, and public archives of social media posts—it can be unnerving to confront the

algorithmically constructed photo album of our online existence. Without the editorial control we may be used to in other forms of both private and public image management, Google image search results dispassionately proclaim, “This is what you look like in public, online.”

Because Jane has professional interests in privacy and consciously cultivates a very light online footprint, rather than live with the slight unease caused by coming eye to eye with the accumulated presence of her online image, she gave herself a project. Her goal was to get the offending image removed from the search results. Though motivated by a substantial desire for online privacy, the pursuit—she readily admits—existed somewhere at the intersection of professional curiosity and personal vanity. Because the original image had multiplied online and appeared in at least three locations, their removal entailed contacting an international array of webmasters at multiple companies, and ultimately filing an image copyright claim with Google, which asserted the photographer’s right over the image (not, ironically, her own). Perhaps her greatest challenge was in seeing that her photograph had also been transferred to another person’s identity, a woman in eastern Europe who, for unknown reasons, was using it as her own profile image.

## 2.

I found myself equally interested a number of questions raised by Jane’s reaction and responses, including 1) any individual’s desire or ability to manage self-image in an online public space—as opposed to a traditional public space, 2) the easy multiplication and spread of images, from one context to the next, and the corresponding difficulty of stopping that spread or removing the image entirely 3) the relationship between algorithms and people selecting a group of images, and 4) public access to the private self.

The easy and fluid movement of images online, from one immaterial context to another, can be seen, depending on one’s perspective, as either a utopian space offering infinite contextual flexibility, or a landmine-strewn field of copyright threats and complications. It is more common to see artists’

concern about the (perhaps alarmingly) freewheeling movement of authored images through this often undifferentiated series of spaces than it is to see artwork that engages seriously with the new realities and creative possibilities of that movement. And yet, how we, as a culture, come to understand these new types of image relationships within such emerging arenas of visual consumption and forms of visual display relates closely to the broad challenge of navigating ourselves through the shifting—and perhaps unfamiliar—terrain of online public space.

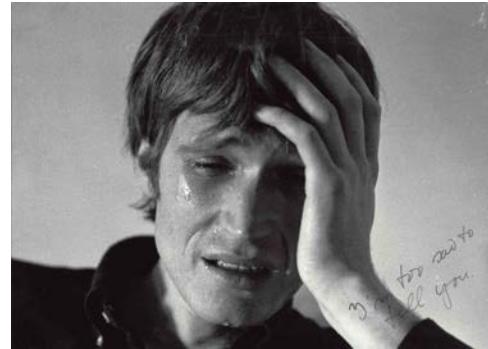
### 3.

In 2014, the artist David Horvitz made a photograph of himself portraying a visual stereotype of internal despair. The resulting image is simultaneously evocative of both a legacy of conceptual art and the banalities of stock photography. In the former category, Horvitz summons his conceptual forebearer Bas Jan Ader's most well-known piece, *I'm Too Sad To Tell You* (1970-1971), a video of the artist weeping, conveying the incommensurable space between sorrow and speech.



David Horvitz, "Mood Disorder," 2014

But unlike Ader's direct confessional, which strikes a heartfelt tone, Horvitz obscured his own face, making his self anonymous, and built in the visual clichés of depression: a lone male figure, dressed in black, lowered head-in-hands, a tumultuous sea behind him. Having created an image suitable for the generic needs of those wishing to visually signal "inner turmoil", Horvitz uploaded the image to Wikimedia Commons—a growing database of, at present, 31,595,596 freely usable media files to which anyone can contribute—and then linked that image to the Wikipedia page for Mood Disorder, an overarching psychological diagnosis classification, the most common of which is clinically diagnosed depression. (A more accurate image for this page would no doubt be a person of perfectly average appearance, but that's a separate matter.)



Bas Jan Ader, "I'm Too Sad to Tell You,"  
1971

**Mood disorder**

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Mood disorder** is a group of diagnoses in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM IV TR) classification system where a disturbance in the person's mood is hypothesized to be the main underlying feature.<sup>[1]</sup> The classification is known as *mood (affective) disorders* in ICD 10.

English psychiatrist Henry Maudsley proposed an overarching category of *affective disorder*.<sup>[2]</sup> The term was then replaced by *mood disorder*, as the latter term refers to the underlying or longitudinal emotional state,<sup>[3]</sup> whereas the former refers to the external expression observed by others.<sup>[1]</sup>

Two groups of mood disorders are broadly recognized; the division is based on whether a *manic* or *hypomanic* episode has ever been present. Thus, there are depressive disorders, of which the best-known and most researched is **major depressive disorder (MDD)** commonly called *clinical depression* or *major depression*, and **bipolar disorder (BD)**, formerly known as *manic depression* and characterized by intermittent episodes of mania or hypomania, usually interlaced with depressive episodes. However, there are also psychiatric syndromes featuring less severe *depression* known as *dysthymic disorder* (similar to but milder than MDD) and *cyclothymic disorder* (similar to but milder than BD).<sup>[4]</sup> Mood disorders may also be substance-induced or occur in response to a medical condition.

**Classification**

**Depressive disorders**

- **Major depressive disorder (MDD)**, commonly called major depression, unipolar depression, or clinical depression, wherein a person has one or more **major depressive episodes**. After a single episode, Major Depressive Disorder (single episode) would be diagnosed. After more than one episode, the diagnosis becomes Major Depressive Disorder (Recurrent). Depression without periods of mania is sometimes referred to as *unipolar depression* because the mood remains at the bottom "pole" and does not climb to the higher, *manic* "pole" as in bipolar disorder.<sup>[5]</sup>

Individuals with a major depressive episode or major depressive disorder are at increased risk for *suicide*. Seeking help and treatment from a health professional dramatically reduces the individual's risk for suicide. Studies have demonstrated that asking if a depressed friend or family member has thought of committing suicide is an effective way of identifying those at risk, and it does not "plant" the idea or increase an individual's risk for suicide in any way.<sup>[6]</sup> Epidemiological studies carried out in Europe suggest that, at this moment, roughly 8.5 percent of the world's population are suffering from a depressive disorder. No age group seems to be exempt from depression, and studies have found that depression appears in infants as young as 6 months old who have been separated from their mothers.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Depressive disorder** is frequent in primary care and general hospital practice but is often undetected. Unrecognized depressive disorder may slow recovery and worsen prognosis in physical illness, therefore it is important that all doctors be able to recognize the condition, treat the less severe cases, and identify those requiring specialist care.<sup>[8]</sup>

Diaagnosticians recognize several subtypes or course specifiers:

- **Atypical depression (AD)** is characterized by mood reactivity (paradoxical anhedonia) and positivity, significant weight gain or increased appetite ("comfort eating"), excessive sleep or somnolence (*hypersomnia*), a sensation of heaviness in limbs known as leaden paralysis, and significant social impairment as a consequence of hypersensitivity to perceived interpersonal rejection.<sup>[9]</sup> Difficulties in measuring this subtype have led to questions of its validity and prevalence.<sup>[10]</sup>
- **Melancholic depression** is characterized by a loss of pleasure (*anhedonia*) in most or all activities, a failure of reactivity to pleasurable stimuli, a quality of depressed mood more pronounced than that of *grief* or loss, a worsening of symptoms in the morning hours, early-morning waking, psychomotor retardation, excessive weight loss (not to be confused with *anorexia nervosa*), or excessive guilt.<sup>[11]</sup>
- **Psychotic major depression (PMD)**, or simply psychotic depression, is the term for a major depressive episode, in particular of melancholic nature, wherein the patient experiences psychotic symptoms such as *delusions* or, less commonly, *hallucinations*. These are most commonly mood-congruent (content coincident with depressive themes).<sup>[12]</sup>
- **Catatonic depression** is a rare and severe form of major depression involving disturbances of motor behavior and other symptoms. Here, the person is mute and almost stuporous, and either is immobile or exhibits purposeless or even bizarre movements. Catatonic symptoms can also occur in *schizophrenia* or a *manic* episode, or can be due to *neuroleptic malignant syndrome*.<sup>[13]</sup>
- **Postpartum depression (PPD)** is listed as a course specifier in DSM-IV-TR; it refers to the intense, sustained and sometimes disabling depression experienced by women after giving birth. Postpartum depression, which affects 10–15% of women, typically sets in within three months of *labor*, and lasts as long as three months.<sup>[14]</sup> It is quite common for women to experience a short-term feeling of tiredness and sadness in the first few weeks after giving birth; however, postpartum depression is different because it can cause significant hardship and impaired functioning at home, work, or school as well as, possibly, difficulty in relationships with family members, spouses, or friends, or even problems bonding with the newborn.<sup>[15]</sup> In the treatment of postpartum major depressive disorders and other unipolar depressions in women who are breastfeeding, *nortriptyline*, *paroxetine* (Paxil), and *sertraline* (Zoloft) are in general considered to be the preferred medications.<sup>[16]</sup> Women with personal or family histories of mood disorders are at particularly high risk of developing postpartum depression.<sup>[17]</sup>
- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)**, also known as "winter depression" or "winter blues", is a specifier. Some people have a seasonal pattern, with depressive

Wikipedia page for Mood Disorder, c. 2014

Safely categorized as fair use and with no fees to anyone who wished to take it, Horvitz's uploaded image followed the laws of online nature and, over time, circulated—or, “propogated,” to use Horvitz’s term—away from the Wikipedia page and became absorbed into new contexts. As Horvitz had observed in a previous project, “My photographs depict my own presence in a place and are intended to move, to circulate, to be sourced and re-sourced. Like the postcard, the digital photograph is meant to embark on its own travel. Instead of a singular object moving through time and space, its movement is defined by multiplication through copying, re-posting, forwarding, etc.”<sup>1</sup>

Horvitz’s challenge then became tracking the image—a surprisingly elusive task given the ubiquity of images online. Whether archives of material objects or networks of jpgs circulating online, large image collection sites challenge easy access for all but the most iconic of images. Though the image depicts Horvitz, it was not identified with his name. This disassociation meant that the easiest textual search term, “David Horvitz” was ineffective in tracking the image’s movement.

It was a situation curiously opposite the one experienced by my colleague who didn’t like her Google search results: where she objected to the image (of herself) that the search algorithm produced as a match for her name in text form, and wanted the terms disassociated, Horvitz, by contrast, sought to create a condition whereby his own image (made anonymous) would travel freely through online space. Yet, now disassociated from the search term of his name, tracking the proliferation of the image had to be determined through a reverse image search, a still-rudimentary process of algorithmic vision that attempts both to replicate a human’s ability to differentiate among like visual forms and recognize individual forms or places within those broader categories. The results of this search became Horvitz’s book, *Mood Disorder*.

**4.**

My first introduction to Horvitz was through an online search, in 2012, when a friend of a friend suggested I might be interested in his work. I looked him up, and while I must have found his website, all I remember from that first search is his Wikipedia page, where I was curious to find a number of obvious irregularities for a typical artist's biography. I was interested enough in that fact alone to check back on the page, and found that every time I looked, it had changed in some puzzling way—never quite what I remembered, but also never quite seeming like a usual, or accurate, artist's profile. So it seemed not entirely surprising to learn, in July 2014, that Horvitz had been banned from Wikipedia, after extensive, and now archived, discussion among Wikipedia editors largely stemming from unusual activity on the artist's Wikipedia profile and his performance/intervention *Public Access*, and coalescing around the "Mood Disorder" image, which was deemed, in short, inappropriate self-promotion at odds with the goals of Wikipedia.

Consequently, Horvitz's man-and-the-sea (self-)image was removed from the "Mood Disorder" page, and Horvitz himself was indefinitely banned from Wikipedia, which is actually to say that the name "David Horvitz" along with its associated username and IP address, was prohibited from editing Wikipedia entries. In the material world, an act of "banning" conjures legal action such as a restraining order, whereby the person's physical body is barred from entry into the designated parameters of a particular physical space, or must keep a particular physical distance from another person, both acts that would generally be prevented or surveilled through traditional visual means: the eyes of cameras, guards, or other interested parties. Yet to "ban" someone digitally is necessarily premised on establishing personhood through other categories. Horvitz was not banned from physically walking into Wikipedia headquarters in San Francisco. However, the digital extension of him, his online and immaterial surrogate, as expressed through a configuration of words, place and source code, is not welcome in that online space.

**5.**

And yet, despite his ostensible absence, Horvitz manages to perpetuate a degree of uncertainty. In the course of trying to determine which, if any, of the other Wikipedia editors who had become involved in images and edits was associated with Horvitz (one of them, for instance, shares his name, but is not thought to be him), one of his most vocal dissenters wrote in apparent frustration, in July 2014, “I’m simply doubting that if it’s even the right person. There’s no telling with this guy.”—Ryūlóng (琉璃) 13:44, 13 July 2014 (UTC)

I could relate. In my own online sleuthing trying to understand for myself the circulatory patterns of the “Mood Disorder” image, I came to feel a lot like I imagined the befuddled yet persistent Wikipedia editors who were discussing his case to be. By way of example, I came across two other photographs that struck me as potentially “authored” by Horvitz, on some level, if only as existing, by virtue of his connection, within the same image sphere. The first was another photograph of a crashing ocean, in a book by yet another (?) David Horvitz, that appeared on his Instagram feed, and the second is the current (as of this writing) image on the Wikipedia page for Mood Disorder: an 1869 illustration of a man standing by himself in the rain that already, 150 years ago, oozed self-awareness about its own status as visual cliché, a tongue-in-cheek “stock image” of its day.



The current illustration for "Mood Disorder" on Wikipedia, originally published in the satirical magazine "Punch" in 1869

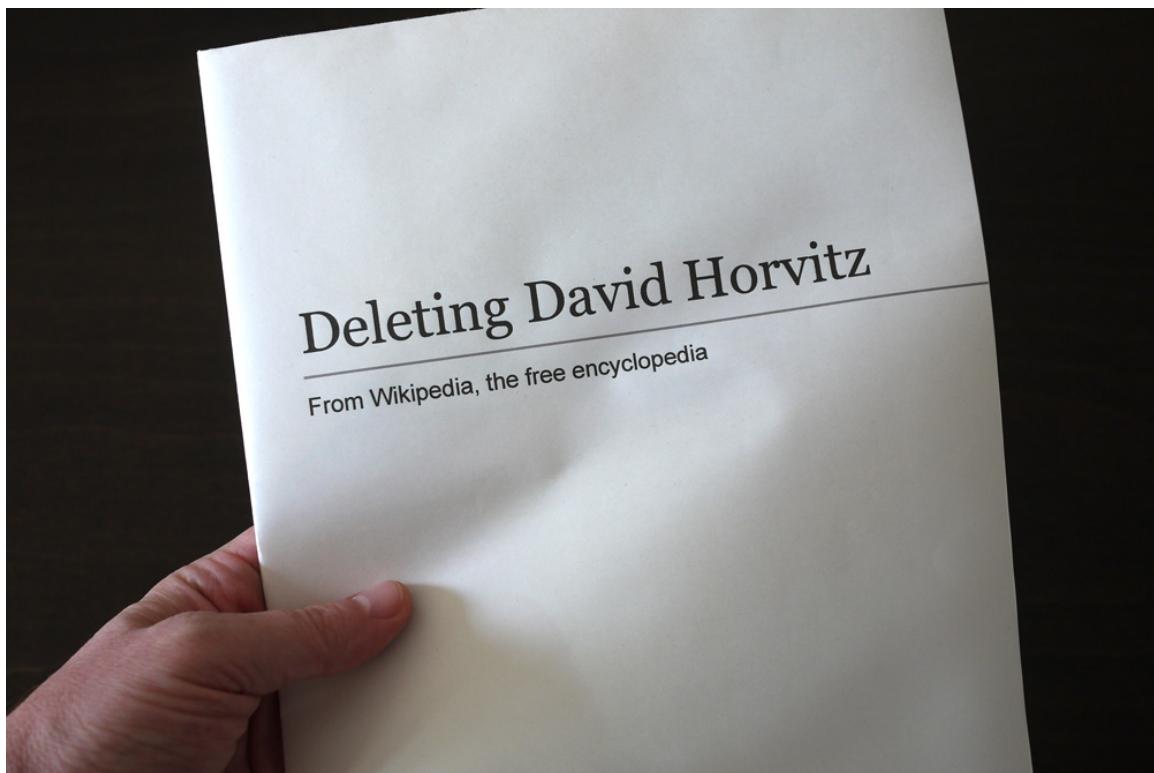
Drawing on essentially the same visual stereotypes as Horvitz, instead of the lowered-head-in-hands gesture it features a visage obscured by a rain hat and umbrella and swaps out the trope of crashing waves for the pathetic fallacy of a heavy downpour to indicate human emotion. The illustration, published in 1869 in the satirical magazine *Punch*, was captioned to indicate its own absurdity as a serious image.

Whether or not Horvitz uploaded this image as well hardly matters: the more interesting point is that I wondered if he had, if the man standing in the pouring rain could be a surrogate image for the first, now removed, crashing wave image. The idea of a surrogate for an imposter stock image is funny, or at least absurd (and so meta it hurts), but if the strategy of hiding in plain

sight fails, it is a reasonable (if also funny and absurd) extension of the same impulse.

## 6.

It is worth noting that the offending “Mood Disorder” photograph is archived on the website’s editorial talk boards. So, too, for that matter, is Horvitz’s expressed wish to delete his own Wikipedia page—a wish that has been commemorated in the form of a fixed material life by the designer Sabrina Montimurro, working with Paul Soulellis.<sup>2</sup>



**Sabrina Montimurro, "Deleting David Horvitz," 2015**

Horvitz more closely shares the goal of erasure with my colleague who worked to get her “bad” photograph removed from public online space. The difficulty of the two projects, and the differences between them, however, illuminate the complexity of online privacy rights for individuals and for individuals who also exist as public figures. In Horvitz’s case, as an individual,

he can aesthetically disrupt the typical circuitry of public knowledge production on a site like Wikipedia, in a manner that directs his audience to consider the parameters and possibilities of such an interface, but as a figure about whom a Wikipedia page exists, a page that is written by other people on the basis of previously published information, Horvitz can do relatively little to control the narrative.

In the face of the durability of online data, then, the existence of a public surrogate or, better yet, a band of surrogates all slightly different from one another, to act as a collective form of decoy, becomes an appealing possibility. It is a strategy not unrelated to that practiced by the artist Hasan Elahi, who, since 2003, has been making the aesthetic and political point that a torrential deluge of information—photographs, coordinates, records—is not unlike no information at all. This mirrors the proposals of some online privacy advocates: in the absence of the possibility of the total erasure of an online identity, adding data, and particularly misinformation, rather than subtracting it is a viable alternative.

Of course, Horvitz and Elahi are artists, so ultimately, if known, their gestures of anonymity bolster their own aesthetic authorship, refracting back through the multiplicity of online space to coalesce around their professional identities. In Horvitz's case, for example, the image that was set free through its Wikimedia Commons status, was reconstituted in all of its new permutations at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, an institution nearly synonymous with aesthetic authorship. Fittingly, at the close of the exhibition, Horvitz gave away the exhibited copies of *Mood Disorder* to friends and strangers, setting them back into unknown paths of circulation.

hi,  
some of u already know this.  
tomorrow (SUNDAY) is the last day of new photography at moma.  
from 525pm-530pm, after i sign the paperwork terminating my loan to moma, there will be a legal window in which the work will remain hung on the wall and yet be no longer insured and restrained by the museum. as i deinstall my piece i will hand it out to the last visitors.  
this is the mood disorder book.  
come by if you are around.  
there are 37 copies hanging.  
first come first serve.

dh @davidhorvitz · Mar 19  
tomorrow at MoMA



#### Text of an email from Horvitz, tweeted

## Notes

1. David Horvitz with Ed Steck, *Public Access* (2012). The self-published book emerged from a commission by San Francisco Camerawork for their exhibition *As Yet Untitled: Artists and Writers in Collaboration* (2011) and is available in modified form as a [freely downloadable PDF](#). ↪
2. Horvitz, too, produced a zine with Franklin Street Works that documented, among other things, the archived debate about deleting the page. ↪

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Kate Palmer Albers, "Becoming a Stock Image, and other Surrogates for the Online Self," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (May 18, 2016). [/articles/Online\\_surrogates.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after May 18, 2016, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project: ↩ [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2016-05-18-Online\\_surrogates.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2016-05-18-Online_surrogates.md)

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# About Writing Online: Questions from Creative Capital

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May 11, 2016

While Circulation/Exchange is about photography and art in an age of social media, it is also about my looking for new ways to write and publish as an academic. Writing the essays here over the past six months has been a rewarding departure from the kind of prose I'd gotten used to through fifteen+ years of academic papers, submitting journal articles for peer-review, and publishing a book with a university press.

This site and the kind of experimenting it has allowed me is made possible, in large part, by an Arts Writers Grant. I am hugely grateful to that program, Creative Capital, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts for supporting writing in the arts in this way. Their application's description of the kind of writing they want to see and support struck a chord with me when I first applied and is well worth citing in full (not to mention reciting as a daily reminder):

*Through all its grants, regardless of topic or project type, the Arts Writers Grant Program aims to honor and encourage writing about art:*

- *that is rigorous, passionate, eloquent, and precise;*
- *in which a keen engagement with the present is infused with an appreciation of the historical;*
- *that is neither afraid to take a stand nor content to deliver authoritative pronouncements, but serves rather to pose questions and generate new possibilities for thinking about, seeing, and making art;*
- *that is sensitive to both the importance and difficulty of situating aesthetic objects within their broader social and political contexts;*
- *that does not dilute or sidestep complex ideas but renders accessible their meaning and value;*
- *that creatively challenges the limits of existing conventions without valorizing novelty as an end in itself.*

Applications for the 2016 grant cycle are now open, but close May 18. I hope some of my peers will apply, and I look forward to seeing what new digital arts writing and publishing projects might come out from this initiative in the future.

Last month, Alex Teplitzky at Creative Capital began a series of interviews with 2014 and 2015 grantees in the blog category. You can read all of the interviewees answers, arranged by question, over at [Creative Capital's blog, The Lab](#). My set of answers to Alex's thought-provoking questions are also below.

Alex: What was the first thing you did with your grant? And/Or: What was the most important way you've used your resources?

Kate: The grant allowed me to take two semesters of sabbatical (instead of one) from my faculty position at the University of Arizona. It really went entirely to this, straight income replacement. So while the money was spent on pretty mundane things—like rent, groceries, and child care—what it really funded was those extra months of time without teaching or university service responsibilities that I wouldn't have had otherwise. The value of this is incalculable, and goes well beyond the parameters of what appears on Circulation/Exchange.

**Alex: What are some things you've learned about maintaining your own blog?**

Kate: One of the first things I learned was that it was harder than I expected to switch modes of writing, from footnoted academic journal articles to something that felt a little closer to talking, or giving a lecture. And I've had an even harder time writing anything less than about 1500 words, even though I think there is real value to expressing shorter thoughts. But old habits die hard, or evolution is slow, or something.

I'm using Jekyll to build the site, and GitHub to edit and host the content, and the process of getting here – rather than using a standard blogging site like Wordpress – has taught me something about the various options in online publishing, and also expanded my thinking about what a "blog" might mean (more on that in the next question). GitHub acts as a publicly accessible repository of any changes I make in the text after publishing. In that way, it's really different from a typical blog or publishing someplace like Medium (which I've also been experimenting with) because it preserves the original form of the piece as well as subsequent changes, if any. That kind of transparency has been interesting—if a little scary—to engage with. The site has also been configured to offer a downloadable pdf of the essays, which appeals to my material interests.

On a practical level, I've learned a little bit about things closer to the world of coding. Not coding itself, but I understand a little bit more about html and Markdown text mark-up. It's not a language I'm anywhere close to fluent in, but I'm more aware that it exists and that I can speak at least very modest versions of those languages.

I've also learned that the momentum really shifts from day to day or week to week, in terms of what I'm able to produce. But that's not so different than any other kind of writing.

**Alex: How has art blogging changed over the years? Do you see it as a sustainable media form?**

I think that calling something a blog used to mean something about community and direct engagement – blogs were a kind of public journal, a way to collect an ongoing assortment of thoughts and potentially build an online community of like-minded thinkers. But I didn't really read blogs when they were so popular in this way. That said there are several arts blogs I've read a lot of material in over the years – especially greg.org, Modern Art Notes, which is now a podcast, and Conscientious, which is now a magazine – though actually none of those foster the kind of community that I think was both possible and desirable at one point. And, in fact, those three tend a bit toward the longer form essay or interview.

With that in mind, I don't think that calling something a blog is a particularly useful distinction anymore. I think more about the continuum of what we mean by a blog in relation to an online journal or a long form essay or any of the types of regular, sustained writing people do, especially on a defined topic, that lives and can be shared online. To me it's more about writing online at all, and what that means for an academic, in particular, to have that immediate, share-able, non-peer-reviewed result rather than the years-long process of academic publishing. There is a lot that I value about the academic model of publishing, including a really invested and knowledgeable (if extremely small) audience, the ways one can be pushed by a good peer review, and the thoroughness required in an academic conversation in terms of engaging directly with a long and rich history of sources, footnoting them, etc. On the other hand, that model also often produces an extremely insular form of writing that is generally only accessible to someone with a university library account and the time and interest to comb through the scholarly journals. I find that really limiting, particularly given the current topic of my research interests.

I've digressed a bit here from your question, but it allows me to articulate what I would like to see more of, which is the level of engagement, knowledge, and passion that I see from so many of my museum and academic colleagues, but that is so hidden from a wider audience, behind scholarly journal paywalls and within museum archives. I think that's something that the AWG in particular really helped me understand, and having that support

– the validation, I suppose – fuels my conviction that there could be a much more robust level of online and easily share-able conversation within the academic and museum communities and others who are so knowledgeable about art and also often such good writers.

So to circle back to the question you actually asked: I'm less interested in seeing blogs sustained as a distinct form (whatever one understands a "blog" to be) and more interested in seeing platforms evolve to attract, accommodate, and distribute a range of voices in arts writing that are not currently well represented online.

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Kate Palmer Albers, "About Writing Online: Questions from Creative Capital," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (May 11, 2016). [/articles/aboutwritingonline.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after May 11, 2016, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project:  [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2016-05-11-aboutwritingonline.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2016-05-11-aboutwritingonline.md)

*Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# Geolocation: A Conversation

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March 29, 2016

*Earlier this year, Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman published their collaborative project Geolocation with Flash Powder Projects. As they describe the project, ongoing since 2009: “We use publicly available embedded GPS information in Twitter updates to track the locations of user posts and make photographs to mark the location in the real world.”*

*Along with the short essay I contributed to their book, we had a conversation about the series.*



These tweets have my location?

KPA You both know that I'm interested in how photographic images move through both digital and material spaces, and another ongoing question for me is how artists mediate the daily experience of regular social media use into the aesthetic realm of the art world. *Geolocation* has been such a great project to watch unfold as it's moved such ephemeral and otherwise inconsequential sentiments—thoughts expressed as tweets—into all kinds of visual and material forms. I thought it might be interesting to start by asking you about that very terminology—whether that idea of either the sentiments or the medium as inconsequential or ephemeral are fair or accurate, as you see it.

MS Twitter is absolutely ephemeral, and yet there is an archive, somewhere, if you can capture it before it disappears. The Library of Congress has said they are archiving it, and yet thinking about how this might be possible is mind-boggling. It's a new kind of watching' reading, one we and others call social media listening.

NL I also think a lot about the consequence of these Twitter interactions and many of them mean less to me as just text than when I'm on site making a photograph, imagining the headspace of the original poster. An example that comes to mind is "Pretty sure I just heard a gun shot lol." It popped up when we were photographing in Saint John, New Brunswick, and I believe that Marni originally flagged it. I thought it was kind of dumb, until I arrived at the site, which was a deserted waterfront area that was a former port. The fog rolled in and the tweet took on a much deeper resonance as a result—the inconsequential became the consequential in that moment.



Pretty sure I just heard a gun shot lol

KPA I suppose that while individual tweets are searchable—by users, words, hashtags, etc—what vanishes is the form it initially arrived in, that larger feed of aggregated posts. Which is itself distinct to any one user. Is that how you got interested in trending hashtags, the idea that there could be a collective experience of Twitter as opposed to an insistently individual one?

NL Yes, I think that's exactly right, that the hashtag gives a comparison point to be able to talk about collective experience. So far we've done #HowToKeepARelationshipWithMe in the greater New York City metro area and #5WordMoneyProblems in the capital region, NYC, and Atlanta.

It's also interesting to think about hashtags as an organizing point for social justice – how #HandsUpDontShoot united individuals after the tragic events in Ferguson. We're interested in exploring that idea of cultural organizing and have some pieces in development along those lines.



#HowToKeepARelationshipWithMe tell me not twitter

MS I think of it as ephemeral in a sense that Hasan Elahi talks about obscuring information through complete transparency. Sure you can search for the entire Twitter timeline of public tweets, but how do you know what to look for? The timeline is what is important to us... the specific moment we are “listening” to Twitter. Twitter makes the search available, but you have to know what you are searching for, and we are interested in the timeline of

Twitter, in the entirety of a conversation. You cannot search conversations, only terms, @s, #s, words, phrases, users. . . I want to see the interaction between users in a specific space during a specific time. There is one person on Reddit who has put this data together. So, it's not so much about the ability to access information, it's the ability to read it, and search it in with different terms and outcomes.

**KPA** One of the challenges it points to is how to make human meaning from this unbelievable amount of data we now have access to. I appreciate the impulse to map emotional reaction or what topics people are intensely passionate about on Reddit, but I wonder how to make those results compelling on the level of a single human being. It gets back to your point about knowing what to listen for, or how to search for particular outcomes. I'd rather read the tweets you found, and imagine those individual people. So it's this question of the individual experience within the collective trend.

**MS** Yeah, it's the old microcosm vs. macrocosm debate of sociology and anthropology.

**NL** I think that's very much in keeping with our thinking, which is that each of these photographs is an environmental portrait of this individual Twitter user. The individual is key.



I think I'm too apathetic. I need something to care about, to be on fire for...

**KPA** You've worked in an array of different forms, including photographs, murals, billboards, and now a book. With your work in particular, these seem to me like a series of possible translation points in a continuum of person to data to media to material thing in the world to viewer.

**MS** We often talk about the data we drop as digital breadcrumbs. I've never thought about the way we've been returning it to the world as being in a similar fashion. Since the book just came out, I'm thinking most about that now, and the thing that has struck me most is the photographs on Facebook of our friends holding the book. They can now sit with the work in a manner I do all the time. Nate and I always have access to the work physically, and could curl up with some Geolocations, but now our friends can. The billboards have been so fleeting, as they were digital billboards, and a bit mysterious. There was no feedback on those, so we have no clue what people saw, or thought of, but we know there were hundreds of thousands who saw

them. But what they did with the images is disconnected. It's funny, the most popular images are the most disconnected.



**Left:** Geolocation billboard in Atlanta, GA, June 2012. **Right:** Geolocation fence installed at the intersection of Prospect and Washington, Brooklyn, NY, September 2013 - September 2014.

NL When we did the billboards in Atlanta and fence in Brooklyn, I was very much thinking about it as a translation point, translating this meta-layer of information from the surrounding area for the people that inhabit the neighborhood. This is what your neighbor thinks about, this is how this location is used differently by your neighbor, that kind of thing. And secretly hoping that people could use the public artwork as a connection point. But as Marni mentioned with Atlanta, we put this thing out there and the billboard company tells us that it was seen 600,000 times a week, but we didn't end up hearing anything one way or the other from members of the public.

With the fence in Brooklyn, there was also something interesting about the physical object at ground level. When I first saw it installed, one of the first interactions was seeing a dog lift their leg and pee on it. There were also various things written on it after it had been installed – someone took it upon themselves to add a commentary to our artist statement. That to me

seemed an especially poignant translation point, online chatter to physical object to anonymous chatter written on a physical object. I rather enjoyed dropping in on the piece on different trips to NY, and just observing people stopping to look (or not) as they went about their daily routines.

KPA That's a pretty interesting connection between tweets and what sounds more like graffiti. Marni, I like this idea of art you can curl up with. That's a good category. I know you mean in the sense of curling up with a book, but I think we also curl up with our phones. I would be happy to see more art on my phone that I could curl up with—it would be way more satisfying than scrolling through Twitter. To me this gets at a question of thinking about the spaces we have to view art, or to encounter meaningful visual content—so it's useful, for me, to think about your work in terms of how public and/or collective that viewing space is, in relation to how private and/or individual the originally expressed thought may have been. I suppose that thinking about any tweet as "private" is a little absurd, and yet there's a real sense, as a viewer and, presumably as artists, of an invasion of privacy in this work.



Amy is Dying @HighlandHospital

**MS** It is strange how this work brings up such privacy issues, when it is completely public timeline and information. I think it just eloquently exposes data and its tie to the actual world. I rarely think about what I put out on FB, and how it affects others or how it situates in my daily life. I am careful about some things, and those are the moments when I stop and remember this is archived, public information. Our project just compiles them in a way you can't look away.

**NL** For me, the question of privacy is central to our work. I frequently think about the shifting norms – these days the norm is to share rather than not share. Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* proposes a new Orwellian precept that "privacy is theft" and to not share is to "steal" your experiences away from the community. When I was a kid and we went out of town, we had to put the lights on timers and no one would know from the outside that we were not home. Now we all post about it publicly on social media without a second

thought and it's almost like it didn't happen if you don't post. It becomes a part of the cultural record only when you share.

KPA I really liked that book, and I'm glad you brought it up. At one point the company in the book develops a program that, through facial recognition, can search a vast archive of online photographs—from historic sources like newspapers and county records—to create an album of family photographs, including from generations back, that you never knew existed. We're probably not too far from that reality. That idea of producing an unedited visual family history is fascinating, in a terrifying way.

I've also seen you mention Clive Thompson's essay "I'm So Totally, Digitally Close to You" many times. I have to say, it's funny to re-read that 2008 essay now, since some of it seems so quaint, just eight years later. But the idea that seems to have really stuck with you is about ambient awareness, or ambient intimacy, where, over time, these tiny snippets of information—about either friends or strangers—coalesce into a picture or a story about that person. This is an immaterial, time-based, internal experience that happens in the mind of the viewer (or, the person following the tweets/posts/etc). So I'm interested in that idea of knowledge (or awareness, or intimacy) built up over a period of time, and how it relates to what you do in *Geolocation*, which is much more about these emotional or political core samples, extracted from Twitter like a kind of public consciousness.

MS Ok. . . what's stuck with me from Clive's article is that we haven't even noticed how things have changed. I hear so many people say "Oh, Facebook is ruining friendships and relationships" (imagine this said by my mother) and yes, in ways it has, but we have to recognize the good it is bringing. We talk so much about how our heads are stuck in phones, how we're disconnected, alone together (thank you Sherry Turkle) but for me, the sheer noise we've never heard is how many of us are lonely and just want to be heard. The Internet is the loudest place for this. It was with iVillage, with blogs, and now FB and Twitter. That is what has built up over time, and over reading hundreds of thousands of tweets. We're flip about the tweets, and the poignantly sad ones don't come around as often as I think about them, but

the sheer noise to me is sad. Just seeing my neighbor tweet about wishing a girl would listen to him is heartbreaking, or how much he hates his job at Jimmy Johns.

One of the most influential experiences I had in grad school was housesitting/dogsitting for my parents in their beautiful Atlanta suburban house. I hadn't lived in Atlanta since I was a child and didn't know a soul. I remember spending my days luxuriously reading in their pool. And yet it was tragically sad. I would go to the grocery, to movies, to book stores, and lived three weeks in a bubble where I rarely talked to anyone. I grew up in the suburbs my whole life, so I was very comfortable in the surroundings. But I began watching my parents' neighbors those few weeks. And really thinking about how we live very separate lives in such proximity. This was in 2002, so way before the Internet. But I began thinking about how this life would be so lonely. Working, not working, staying home, having a family in a tiny capsule. But I think about this too now when I got to NYC each year for a month. How we are just tiny pods stacked upon each other. There really is a lack of listening in today's culture, and the Internet is exposing that need, that craving for connectedness that has been waning for years.



About 50 people waiting to get healed. @ The Rock Church

KPA And yet I know from Instagram that you've just built a house in what looks like a pretty isolated area, and you seem to really love it. That seems kind of nice to me, that I can know that.

I'm curious, do you know that neighbor who works at Jimmy Johns? I've been reading the Missed Connections in Craigslist recently, and it's a similar thing—I've felt like I've become privy to all of these desperately poignant attempts at connection that are veiled in a sense of foregone futility—because who reads Missed Connections? How would you ever actually connect with someone that way? But one of them—it was really long—was written by a guy to his neighbor, and chronicled his longing for her, and his fantasies about her, concluding with him wondering if he was just projecting all of this onto her. Of course he was. But I like how you've phrased this "the noise we've never heard"—and on some level I wonder if it's not so much sad, as just the human condition.

**MS** It absolutely is the human condition. I was just talking to a class and the kids asked “Since so much of your work is based on Twitter, what’s going to happen now that it’s dying?” And I said, “There will be something else”. We talked about how we all have our heads in our phones and I said it isn’t new; it is just a new symptom of the human condition. It’s one we can see more readily, and easily. Because it has been so fast. We’ve only had iPhones for 9 years!! 9 years! So we’re seeing a generation jump a little faster.

Regarding the neighbor, it was more hypothetical . . . I watch my neighbor leave for his job, and wonder what he’s tweeting about, but never really see his Tweets/ Facebook posts. But I like to imagine what they say. It goes back again to harsh time in the suburbs - and again Sherry Turkle’s awesome title *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* — sadly the book did not move me as much as her title does. I used to read Missed Connections. Small town ones are the best, because sometimes you can figure out who they are talking about. It’s been a while though. I am embattled in my own online life, keeping up with FB, online dating sometimes, ugg.

One thing to add here is my interest in boredom and its relation to trauma theory. Boredom/ repetition has the exact same symptoms as trauma in some sense, outside of language, you lose track of time, forgetting. I think about the task I do everyday, taking one pill that I sometimes cannot remember if I did. And it operates on a similar theoretical plane to me as traumatic events. I could go way more into this, but I’ve always been interested in boredom, and I think mobile devices are functioning in this manner. Games are moving more towards what they call “in line, waiting ones”. Things you can do in five minutes while in line at the grocery. TV, Facebook all that is now geared towards those times. I can’t even watch a commercial anymore; I just go to my phone.

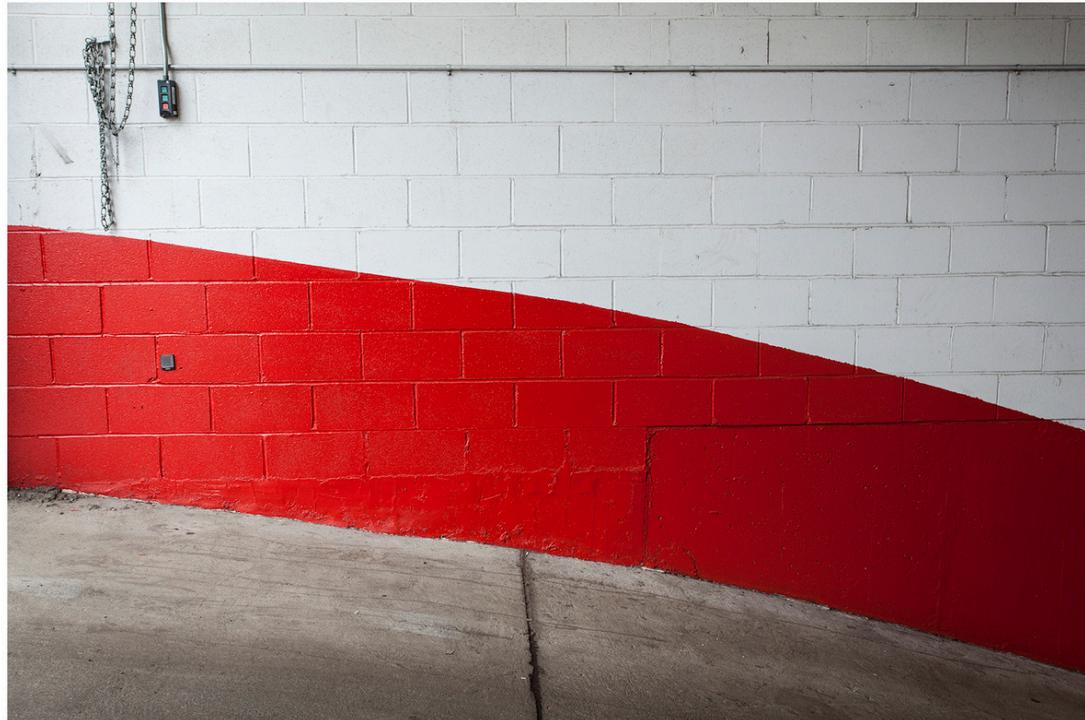
**KPA** Tell me about your new project *Safe Trade*.

**NL** We started photographing for the project in the fall, after the University of Georgia set up a parking lot with surveillance cameras for people to conduct Craigslist transactions. I sell a lot of odds and ends on Craigslist, so I

could appreciate this—I usually meet people at fast food restaurants because I'm not comfortable having strangers in my home. We kept thinking about these sites as a very peculiar way that the Internet intersects real life—that moment when you sell a ten-year old vacuum filled with lint from your home to a stranger in a Dunkin' Donuts parking lot. For ten dollars. Thinking about the strangeness of this led us to start this new series. A small selection of them are on our website as a “soft launch” but the project is still developing and leading us to some interesting sites and interactions.



I miss how things were



It was all a dream.

[Read my short essay for the book \*Geolocation\* here.](#)

This conversation took place over email from January through March 2016. Unless otherwise noted, all images are by Larson and Shindelman, from their series [Geolocation \(2009-present\)](#).

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Kate Palmer Albers, "Geolocation: A Conversation," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (March 29, 2016). [/articles/geolocation\\_conversation.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after March 29, 2016, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project: [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2016-03-29-geolocation\\_conversation.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2016-03-29-geolocation_conversation.md)

*Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# wish you were tweeting about me: on Nate Larson & Marni Shindelman's "Geolocation"

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March 29, 2016

*Earlier this year, Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman published their collaborative project Geolocation with Flash Powder Projects. As they describe the project, ongoing since 2009: “We use publicly available embedded GPS information in Twitter updates to track the locations of user posts and make photographs to mark the location in the real world.”*

*Along with a conversation we had about the series, I contributed this short essay to their book. I’m happy to share it here, along with a selection of the images I was asked to write about.*



i just put on that location thing for Twitter. i'm not sure how i feel about it though.



Does anyone else have a fear that their life is actually like the Harry Truman show or is that just me?



Reconnaissance (@ The place where no one sees me)

Uncertainty, hesitation, confusion, fear, vanity, lack of control, yearning... desire to connect, ambivalence about connecting, desire to disappear. All of these emotions and states of being appear in Nate Larson and Marni Shindelman's series *Geolocation*, forming, in this sequence, an experiential core of the still-nascent reconfiguration of our human relationships in an age of Twitter and, more broadly, geolocated social media. "Where are you?" we ask, when we call someone on a mobile phone. But more and more often, our phones already know, and broadcast—or at least record—our location, our perpetually updated place of existence.

The constant state of being found, or findable, is extremely useful: we can receive the local weather, route directions, choose a nearby movie or café or gas station; we can install apps to find nearby people with shared interests, eavesdrop on the chit chat of nearby strangers, and map nearby sex offenders, real estate opportunities, or our morning run. Yet how we use the new tools

at our disposal to communicate with other human beings—whether friends, acquaintances, or strangers—is new territory.

*I'm not sure how I feel about it though*

Photographs, while not inherently tied to place, tend to be connected in some significant way to the visible site of their production. But are our word-based thoughts similarly connected to place? Does it matter where someone is when they think something, have an idea, or write something? On the other end of the equation, does it matter where the viewer or reader is when she looks at an image of another place, or reads a thought written elsewhere? This sequence of images dwells on the strangeness of how we communicate, the collision of old and new technology, and the meta-state of self-consciousness embedded in these tweets about tweeting and geotagging, land lines and missed messages, and the unsettling sensation of navigating a newly merged digital and physical space.

*or is that just me?*

I imagine Larson and Shindelman combing through geolocated tweets by the hundreds, mining the data stream for the string of a stranger's words that sparks some kind of curiosity. Then traveling to that location, always well after their original muse has left, and finding themselves in a very particular place, the most notable feature of which may be that, at some earlier point, a stranger tweeted something interesting. Then the challenge of photographing that place where a fleeting moment, perhaps unseen in the first place, has long since vanished.

*(@ The place where no one sees me)*

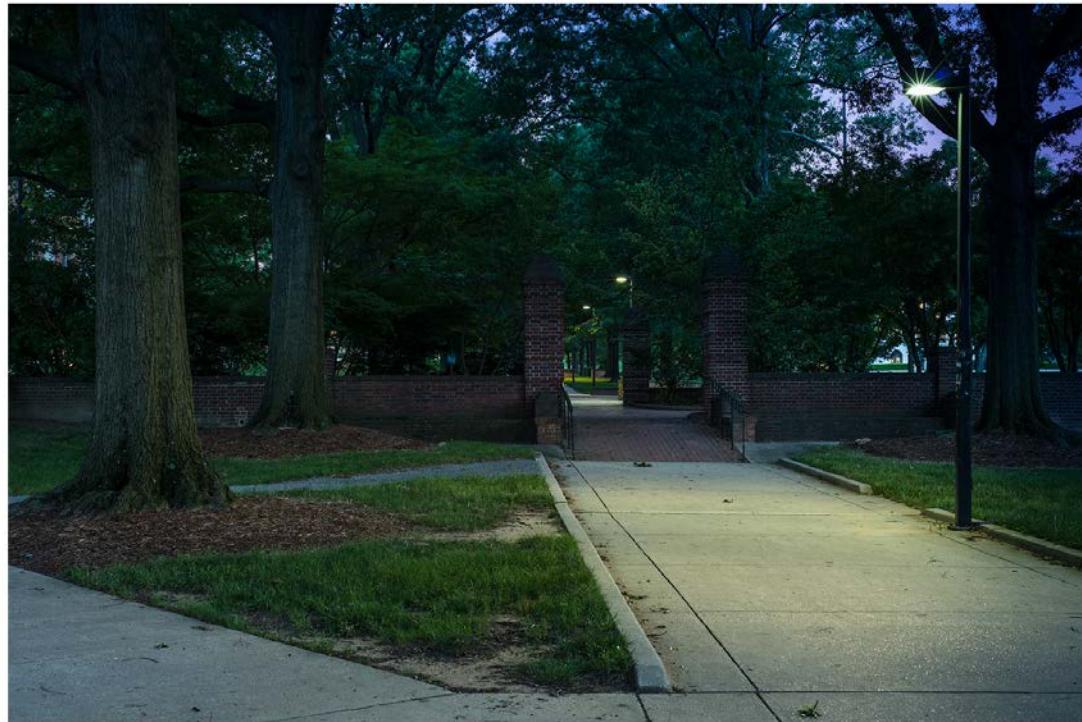
We, the viewers, are brought to an empty walkway, lit in the twilight hour by a solitary streetlamp; to a bleak field of snow-covered asphalt, punctuated by a lone Emergency phone; to an empty welcome table in a broad expanse of unpeopled sand; to the shrubbery and red siding of a suburban home; to a walled-off desert oasis, from which, the artists have suggested, someone believes himself to be hidden and yet can't resist publicly declaring his location.

Was that stranger imagining he couldn't be seen? Did he know his tweet was geolocated? (Though the artists don't track gender, the tweet strikes me as distinctly male.) Would he ever see the photograph Larson and Shindelman would make? Would they have shown us, the viewers, a place that initially resonated with the person who had since vanished? Or is it only in the photograph that the connection occurs?

*Haha I have lost followers today*

In a series of otherwise unremarkable places, day after day, at all hours, we wonder, we muse, we judge, we exclaim, we ask, we confess and we reveal... out loud and in a strange combination of publicly and anonymously. It's easy to get lost in a sea of numbers, in the patterns and statistics that emerge from the data stream that Larson and Shindelman evoke as worthy of tribute in their series subtitle. Metaphors of floods and rivers of information—much of it in the form of images—occlude the very thing the artists point to: the individual humanity that persists in that overwhelming data stream.

*wish you were tweeting about me*



Wish you were tweeting about me

[Read our conversation here.](#)

All images are by Larson and Shindelman, from their series [Geolocation](#) (2009-present)

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Kate Palmer Albers, "wish you were tweeting about me: on Nate Larson & Marni Shindelman's "Geolocation", " in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (March 29, 2016). [/articles/geolocation\\_essay.html](#).

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[Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art](#) is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# Materiality & Circulation: Three Museum Views

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March 8, 2016

On a visit to New York last month, I was struck by the different ways in which three major museums—MoMA, the Guggenheim, and the Met—were addressing the relationship between physical and immaterial photographs, their modes of circulation, and artists' responses to a contemporary experience of multiple modes of photographic imagery. Given the variety of work on view (and a few notable overlaps), the curatorial frameworks grappled with similar themes. Below, I've transcribed the exhibition titles and wall texts, as well as exhibiting artists, as a snapshot of the varied current artistic and institutional response to an “ocean of images” (MoMA), the “sea of photographic images” (the Met) or “photography at a moment when the medium seems poised to evaporate into digital oblivion” (the Guggenheim).

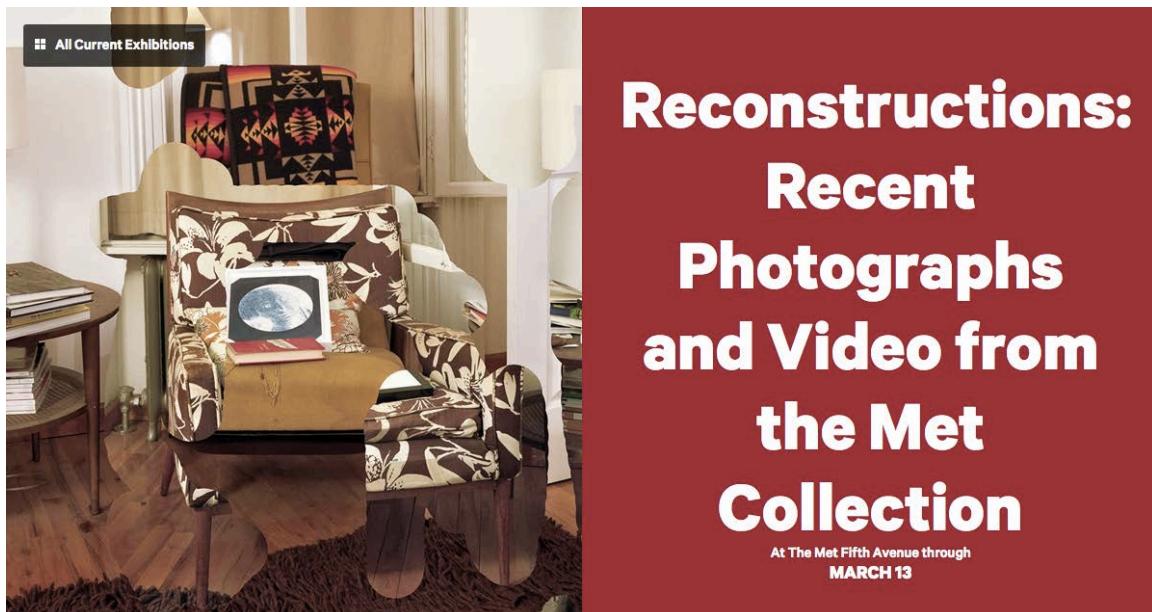
Artists and curators alike are grappling with the relentless movement of photographic images in and through these multiple forms—whether that is conceived as “complex negotiations between the old order and the new networks that silently and invisibly shape individual and collective experience” (the Met); an argument that “‘real-time looking’ is closer to reading than the cursory scanning fostered by the clicking and swiping functionalities of smartphones and social media” (the Guggenheim); or that

photography is “a field of experimentation and intellectual inquiry, where digital and analog, online and offline, virtual and real dimensions intersect” (MoMA).

It’s difficult not to sense a degree of temptation to draw allegiances. But I remain most compelled by work—curatorial or artistic—that manages to set the seemingly contradictory modes of the photographic image into productive dialogue with one another, rather than disavowing one for the other.<sup>1</sup>

## Reconstructions: Recent Photographs and Video from the Met Collection

On view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art through March 13, 2016



Introductory exhibition wall text:

*This installation, the thirteenth since the Joyce and Robert Menschel Hall for Modern Photography opened in 2007, is a snapshot—not comprehensive, but representative—of the collecting interests of the Department of Photographs through recently acquired works made by artists during the last seven years. The concept of reconstruction chimes with many of the works that may be seen, at least in part, as indirect responses to how perception and cognition are being remapped to accommodate our newly bifurcated existences—online and “in real life.”*

*The notion that we swim in a sea of photographic images that shapes how we see ourselves and the world felt new in 1989 and prescient in 1968, but with the rise of the Internet and social media, this condition is so obvious as to be useless. With one foot in cyberspace and the other on an unstable terrain of accelerated change, our daily lives and our deepest subjective recesses—our relationship to ourselves, to one other, and to things—are constantly being reconstructed along digital lines, with cameras serving as almost bodily appendages to interface between these two realities. In this context, the seamless digital “restoration” of dazzle camouflage to a World War II battleship, the viral spread of Photoshop mishaps in an interior view, or the simple folding back of a book page can be seen as complex negotiations between the old order and the new networks that silently and invisibly shape individual and collective experience.*

### Exhibiting artists

- Thomas Bangsted
- Erica Baum
- Shannon Bool
- Lucas Blalock
- Sarah Charlesworth
- Michael Clegg and Margin Guttmann
- Miles Coolidge
- Moyra Davey
- Roe Ethridge
- Adrià Julià
- Matt Keegan
- Owen Kydd

- Luis Úrculo

Organized by Doug Eklund

## Photo-Poetics: An Anthology

On view at the Guggenheim Museum through March 27, 2016



### Introductory exhibition wall text:

*This exhibition features the work of ten contemporary artists who explore the medium of photography. The photographs, slide shows, videos, and film on view—poetic in form, concept, and tone—collectively document a development in art of the past decade.*

*These artists are fascinated by the material manifestations of photography and pursue practices that center on the creation of images as objects. Each artist contemplates the nature, traditions, and magic of photography at a moment when the medium seems poised to evaporate into digital oblivion. They rematerialize the photographic image through meticulous printing, using film and other disappearing technologies, and by creating photo-sculptures, installations, and artist's books. While these artists are invested in exploring the processes, supports, and techniques of photography, they are also deeply interested in how photographic images circulate. That is, in a sort of "photo-social." For the self-contained circle of photography, these artists are deeply interested in how photographic representation, reproduction, and the photographic object, "travel."*

*circulate. Theirs is a sort of “photo poetics,” an art that self-consciously investigates the laws of photography and the nature of photographic representation, reproduction, and the photographic object.*

*Drawing on the legacies of conceptual as well as vernacular photography, these artists document still-life arrangements created in their studios. They play with the genres of commercial and amateur photography, and often include representations of image-bearing printed matter, such as books, magazines, postcards, record covers, and snapshots. Their motivations for appropriating these items are complex, ranging from the cultural and historical significance of the photographs to the personal associations they evoke.*

*Photographs animate the present through their unique, visceral connection to the past. They are memory machines, inherently elegiac, and some of these artists harness this quality to reflect on the passage of time, and to find the sublime in the mundane aspects of daily life. Others use found text to create concrete poems, or are inspired by a specific author’s words. Ultimately, when artists juxtapose archival images in new configurations, the resulting photographs provide a syntax or meter to be parsed. The works in this exhibition, rich with detail, reward close and prolonged regard; they ask for a mode of looking, in real time, that is closer to reading than the cursory scanning fostered by the clicking and swiping functionalities of smartphones and social media.*

### Exhibiting artists

- Claudia Angelmaier
- Erica Baum
- Anne Collier
- Moyra Davey
- Leslie Hewitt
- Elad Lassry
- Lisa Oppenheim
- Erin Shirreff
- Kathrin Sonntag
- Sara VanDerBeek. (and kudos to the curators for not pointing out the gender balance as a part of the exhibition’s organizational logic)

Organized by Jennifer Blessing and Susan Thompson

## Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015

On view at the Museum of Modern Art through March 20, 2016



Introductory exhibition wall text:

*Since its inception in 1985, the New Photography series has introduced the work of one hundred artists from around the globe early in their careers, presenting some of the most creative practices and urgent ideas in contemporary image making. Celebrating the series' thirtieth anniversary, this year's expanded exhibition, Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015, focuses on connectivity, communication models, and the branding and circulation of images.*

*Ocean of Images examines various forms of photographic mediation: images that are born digitally, made with scanners or lenses, edited and filtered, presented as still or moving pictures, distributed as zines, uploaded to the Web, or morphed into three-dimensional objects. The exhibition's title alludes to the Internet, as a vortex of images, a site of piracy, and a system of networks. Ocean of Images probes the effects of a post-Internet reality and the questions it raises about virality, image ownership, digital editing, and information sharing.*

*The exhibition's participants—eighteen artists and one artist collective—critically redefine photography as a field of experimentation and intellectual inquiry, where digital and analog, online and offline, virtual and real dimensions intersect.*

### Exhibiting artists

- Iilit Azoulay
- Zbyněk Baladrán
- Lucas Blalock
- Edson Chagas
- Natalie Czech
- DIS Collective
- Katharina Gaenssler
- David Hartt
- Mishka Henner
- David Horvitz
- John Houck
- Yuki Kimura
- Anouk Kruithof
- Basim Magdy
- Katja Novitskova
- Marina Pinsky
- Lele Saveri
- Indrė Šerpytytė
- Lieko Shiga

Organized by Quentin Bajac, Roxana Marcoci, and Lucy Gallun

## Notes

Relevant reviews:

- Martha Schwenderer in the *New York Times*
  - Loring Knoblauch in *Collector Daily*
  - Kathleen Caulderwood in *American Photo*
  - Holland Cotter in the *New York Times*
  - Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa on the *Aperture* blog
1. That said, it's worth noting that the object—among all three shows—that literally stopped me in my tracks and left me slack-jawed with visual appreciation was one that has almost nothing to do with this set of themes—and would be pointless to try to reproduce in print or on a screen: Miles Coolidge's *Coal Seam, Bergwerk Prosper-Haniel #1*, a 2013 ink-jet print. (And it's smart work, to boot.) ↵

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Kate Palmer Albers, "Materiality & Circulation: Three Museum Views," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (March 8, 2016). [/articles/NY\\_museums.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after March 8, 2016, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project: ↗ [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2016-03-08-NY\\_museums.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2016-03-08-NY_museums.md)

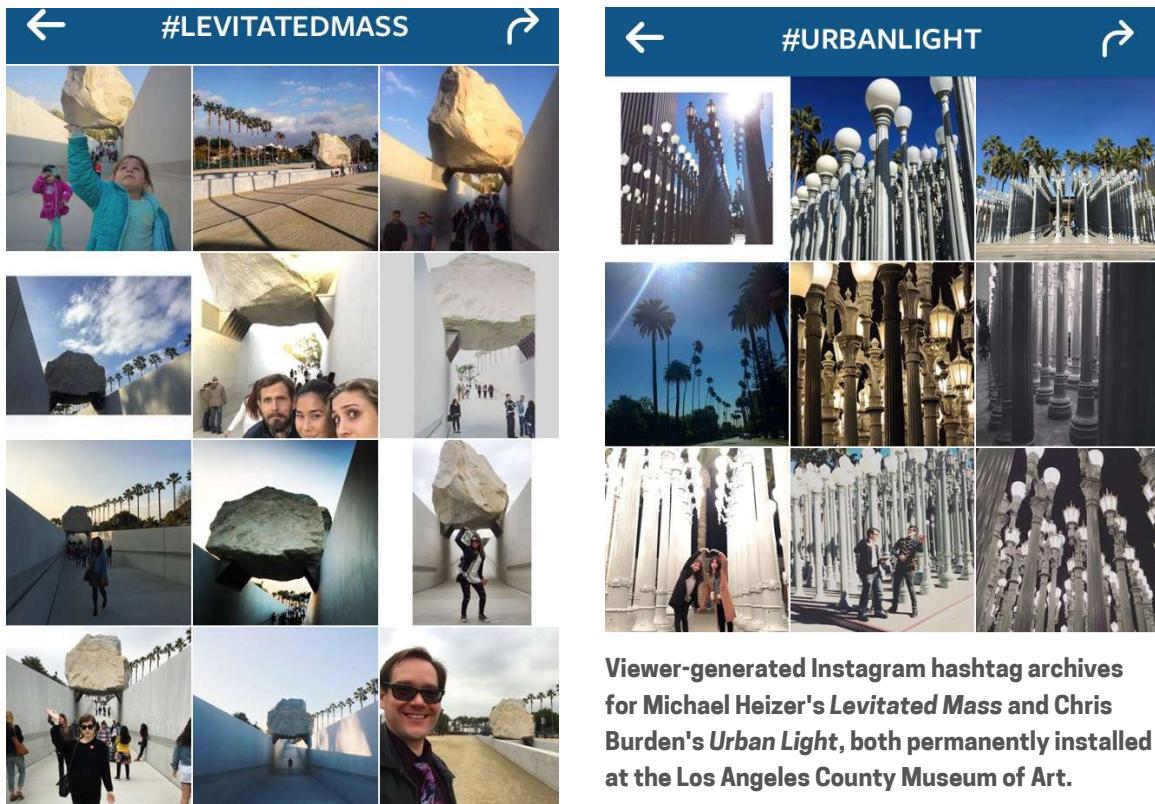
*Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# Becoming an Image: Amanda Ross-Ho's *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things*

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February 24, 2016

One of the things I enjoy about living in Los Angeles is the ample opportunity for observing art that at times appears to exist largely for the purpose of generating photographs to post on social media. Local examples include Chris Burden's *Urban Light* (2008) and Michael Heizer's giant rock *Levitated Mass* (2012), both at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the more recent Yayoi Kusama *Infinity Mirrored Room* (2013) at the newly opened Broad museum.



**Viewer-generated Instagram hashtag archives for Michael Heizer's *Levitated Mass* and Chris Burden's *Urban Light*, both permanently installed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.**

Farther flung instances of this type include Kara Walker's brilliant and wildly popular *A Subtlety*, installed last fall at the defunct Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn; the initial installation of *Rain Room* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2013; or Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* in Chicago since 2006 (and more commonly referred to as the Bean). Whether or not one sees these installations in person, they are nevertheless impossible to miss as their viewer-made representations have oozed across social media platforms, permeating the consciousness of virtual art world viewers.



Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate*, in Chicago's Millennium Park. By Flickr user dgphilli.

Even if you like the art itself, it's easy to become cynical about viewer response to these kinds of large-scale installations, when the primary shared characteristic is to produce a reflexive gesture among their viewers to 1) reach for a camera, 2) determine the best hashtag, and 3) add a unique view to the vast collective, and publically produced, archive. The impulse to make the photograph in the first place taps into a wealth of literature on vernacular travel photography—to declare one's location in a particular place via the miniature souvenir of the iconic thing (see Susan Stewart's *On Longing* for more on this), while the impulse to share it widely speaks to a more recent form of self-identity construction. And, as a result, we now have a mode of public art that, through its own physical form meeting the unstated yearnings of individual viewers, can now succeed in a manner of Darwinian adaptation to reproduce itself as endlessly as possible, seeping into public awareness well beyond the physical geographical limits of any individual

viewer. If an artwork can be thought to survive based, to some degree, on the collective memory bank of those who have seen it—and think of it, and remember it—these artworks are evolutionary superstars, ensuring their own survival by adapting into the reproductive networks of today's culture. These artworks want to be shared and, outsmarting us, seduce viewers—who are weakened by their own individual wants—to oblige in large numbers.

Ultimately what interests me in these examples, perhaps even more than the object on display or its image being shared, are the new configurations and possibilities of photographic scale, and the relationship between material objects and their image-based counterparts. By extension, I'm curious about the effects on how viewers—who are also implicated as producers—are learning how to look, how to see, based on these conceptualizations of materiality and scale. Though none of the projects named above are specifically photographic in the basic form of their physical manifestations, they are all deeply photographic as the response of a viewer is activated, and as they spread virally through immaterial (but entirely real) space.



Amanda Ross-Ho, *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2013-2014

### The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things

Los Angeles-based artist Amanda Ross-Ho's 2013 piece *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things* strikes me as an exemplary manifestation of the aesthetic possibilities presented by these new ecologies of scale and materiality. And its investment in the relationship between past and future models of learning to see speaks to the ongoing desires of the everyday/amateur photographer to speak a visual language.

*The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things* has had two distinct physical iterations, and these iterations share a common (and ongoing) immaterial life. Ross-Ho initially realized the piece in 2013 as a public sculpture commission for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in the artist's hometown. In the large-scale sculpture, Ross-Ho materialized a photographic illustration from a 1980s how-to instructional manual that sought to teach its readers about photographic lighting. It was presented as three separate

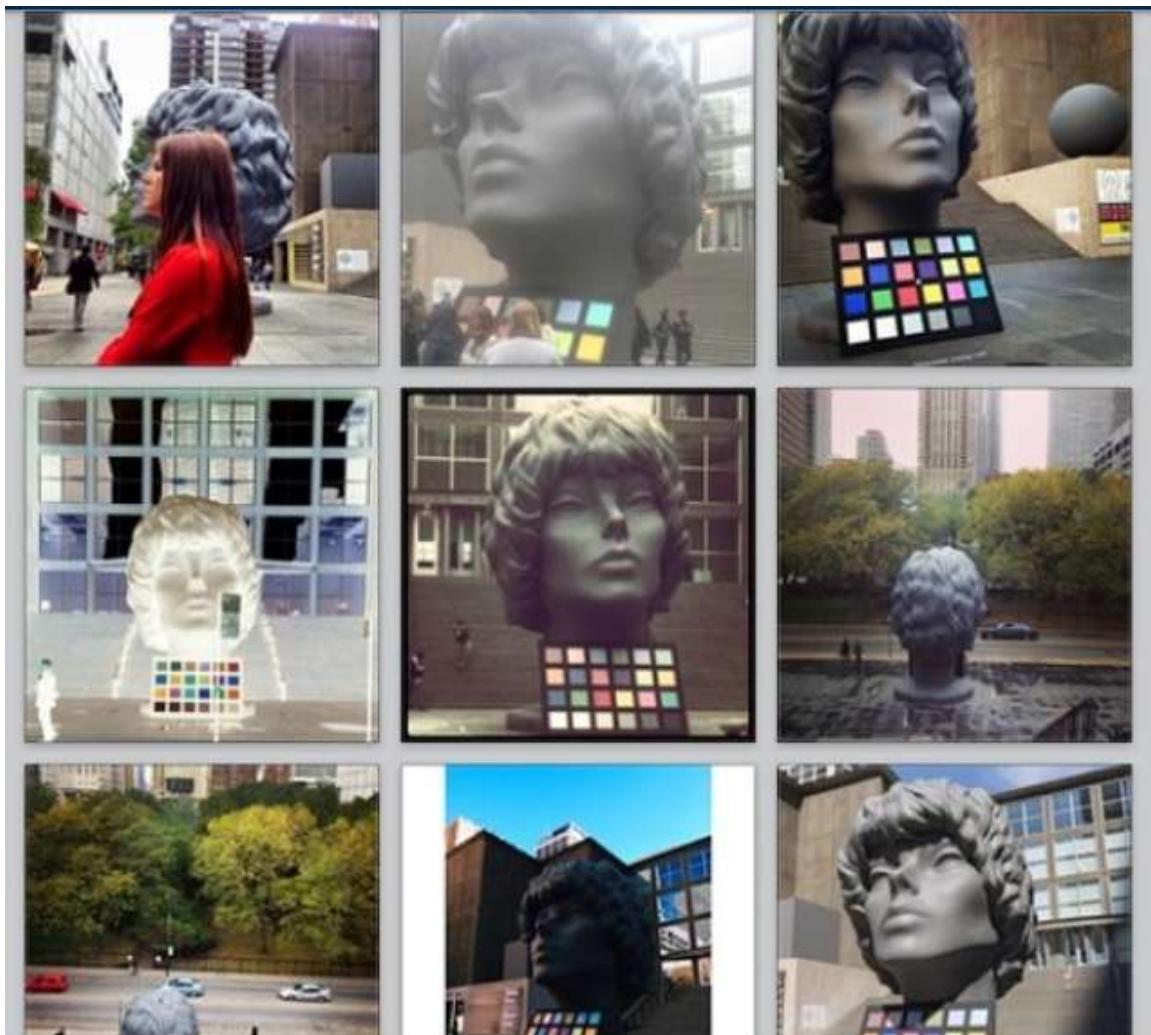
sculptures accompanied by an oversized color correction card on MCA's front plaza, the tallest component measuring some 25 feet in height. In 2015, the trio of sculptures was re-materialized (the original was destroyed upon de-installation) at a smaller scale in New York's City Hall Park, as part of a Public Art Fund commission for the exhibition *Image Objects*. The color card nod to an analog era was replaced in this version with a green neon element referencing the facial recognition software installed on many smartphone cameras.



Amanda Ross-Ho, *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2013-2014. Courtesy the artist.

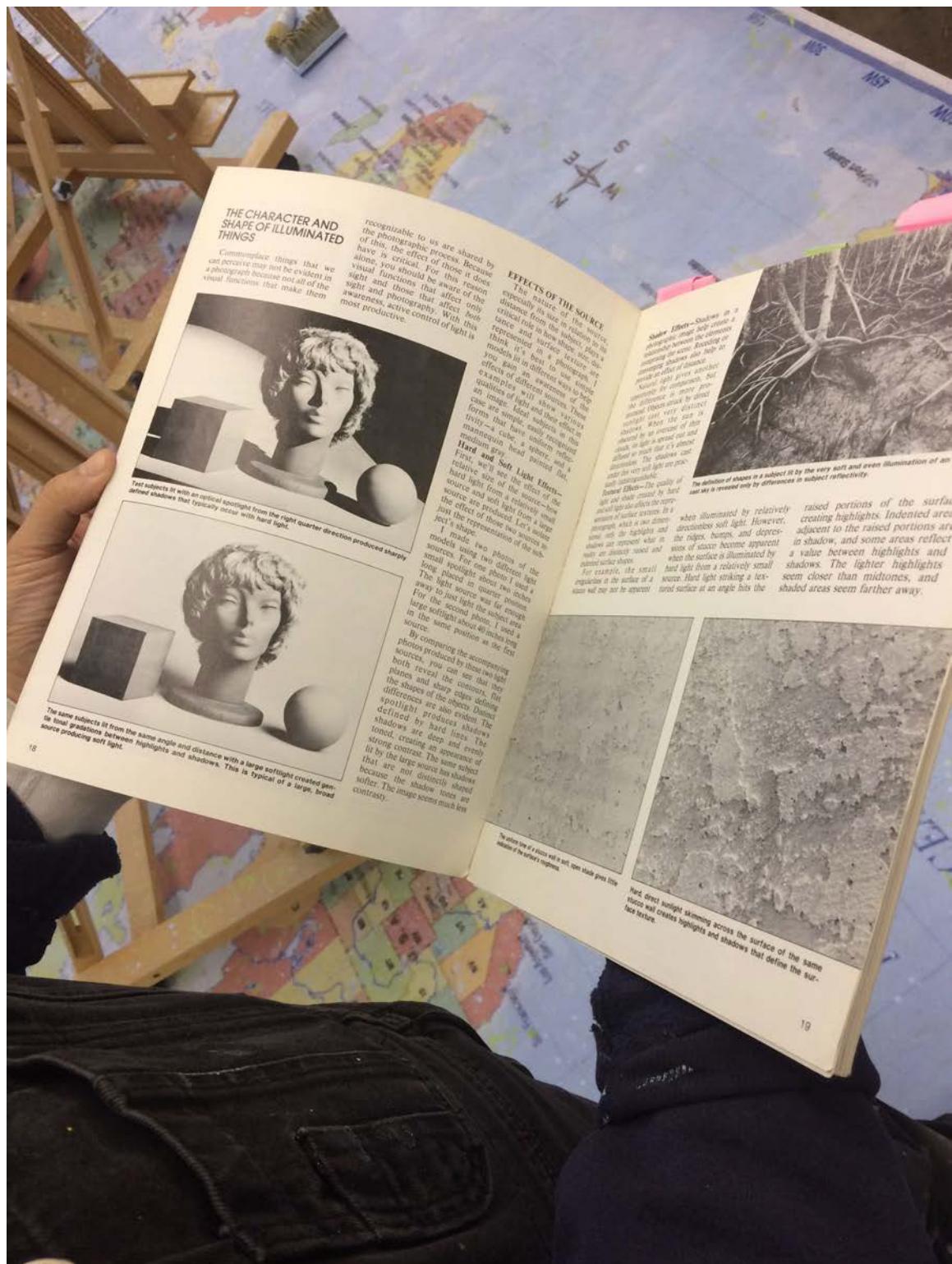
In both cases, the physical forms of the sculpture lived parallel lives online, largely via the shared hashtag #illuminatedthings, where an ongoing stream of individual viewers digitally enacted the premise and promise of the instructional photograph in the first place: as a blank slate of possibility for all the conditions of lighting and filters a photographer might encounter.

Indeed, in both locations (Chicago and New York), the sculpture was subject not only to the naturally shifting outdoor lighting conditions of time of day and weather, but to the readily-at-hand filters and in-camera lighting and color effects available on all smart phone cameras. In other words, it was the viewing public that tested and produced the conditions set forth initially by the instructional manual, thereby moving a set of skills that once had to be explicitly learned by serious and aspiring photographers, into the vastly more ubiquitous province of any passer-by with an in-camera filter.



**Audience submitted views to #illuminatedthings, illustrating the effects of light and filters on Ross-Ho's sculpture**

Correspondingly, viewing *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things* meant one thing on site (the opportunity to absorb its physical scale and contribute to the collective archive of its form) and another thing online (an appreciation of the degree to which the hashtag organized and served up the premise of the visual effects of light on form and color). Unlike other public sculptures whose reach extends photographically, in Ross-Ho's hands, the socially-produced component was integral to the overall reception, adding texture and dimension to the tremendous historical shifts currently underway in the photographic medium. Or, as the artist put it, the social media reception was a pre-condition of the piece; the "metabolism of viewership" today was built in to produce a live aggregation of subjectivity that ultimately completed the work. It is an aesthetic gesture at once generous and sophisticated, and an enactment of the "social contract" of viewing today that Ross-Ho speaks about and encourages.



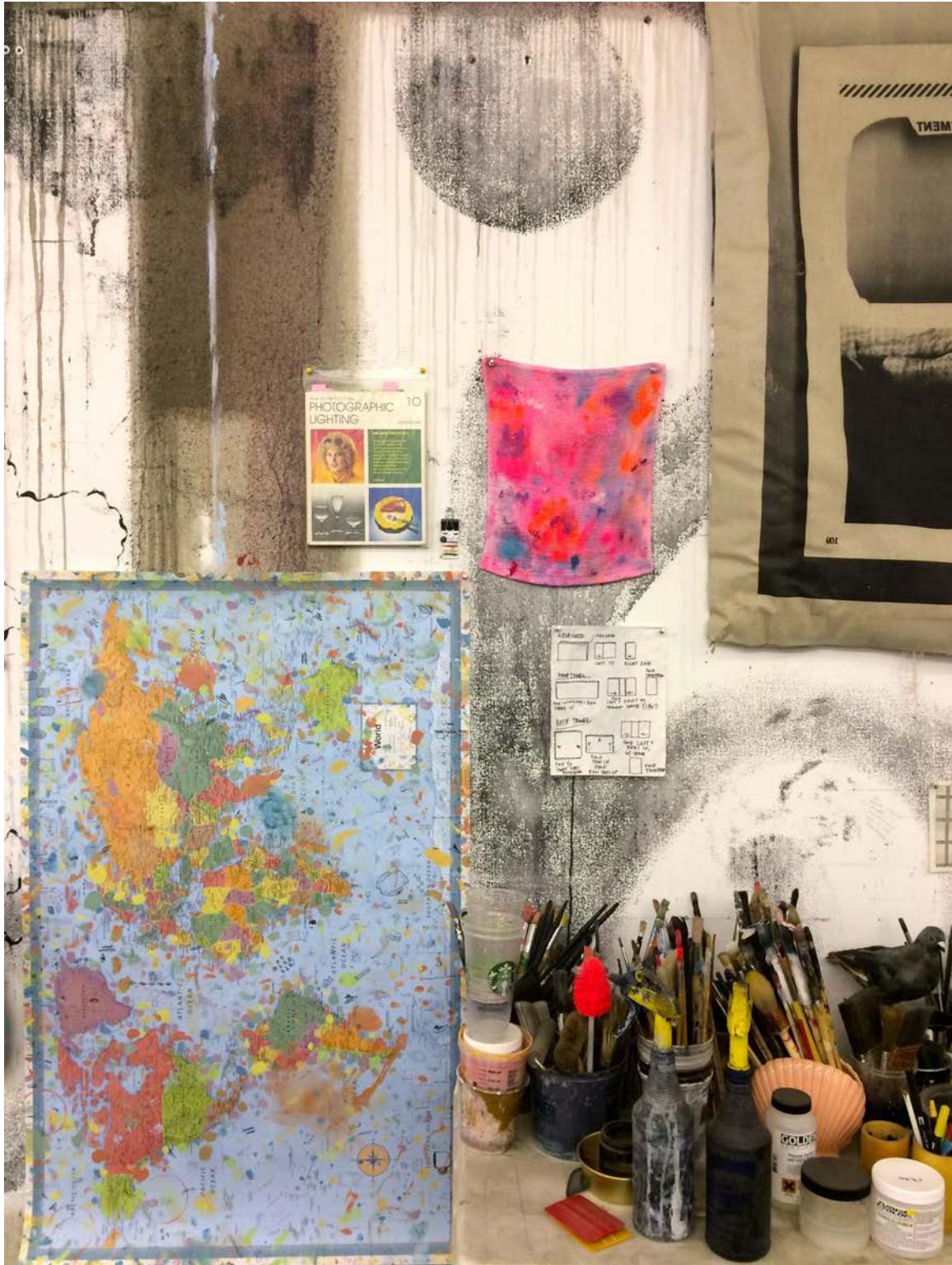
Ross-Ho with David Brooks's essay, "The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things"

## The Source

Written in 1987 by professional photographer and writer David B. Brooks, the essay “The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things” serves a clear purpose and is model of transparent instruction. All how-to books trade in aspirational zones of self-improvement that exist just at the edge of possibility, whether the topic is closet organization, learning HTML, or folding origami. Photography, with its elusive balance of artistry and technical know-how, has been inspiring such instructional manuals since its earliest days. It is a medium that may be mastered in multiple ways, and the technical geek-out possibilities can serve as a handy surrogate for other forms of accomplishment. (One fairly reliable way to assess how seriously a photographer takes him or herself as an artist is how much they flinch when you ask what kind of lens they used.) True to its genre, in Brooks’s *How to Control and Use Photographic Lighting*, the aspiring photographer is empowered through reading, gaining step-by-step knowledge of something considered elusive, yet tantalizingly enough within reach that its mysteries might, after all, be learned. A verbal language—in this case, contrast, shadow, texture, filters—helps corral this enigmatic power into understandable terms and categories. Soon, the mysteries and poetics hinted at by the title alone—*What is the shape of an illuminated thing? Does it have a character?*—are quickly distilled into a series of functional directives by which the reader may master the transformative effects of light on a subject.

Though Brooks’s words were meant to instruct, it was his accompanying photo illustration that, nearly thirty years later, migrated off the page into Ross-Ho’s installation. With utilitarian intent, Brooks’s photographed model offers three physical forms—ideal forms, even—on which to practice new skills. Brooks writes, “Ideal subjects in this case are simple, easily recognized forms that have uniform reflexivity—a cube, a sphere, and a mannequin head painted flat, medium gray.” No worry that the incidence of such ideally formed, flat-gray objects in the lived world are so rare as to be virtually non-existent. These objects represent, more than anything, possibility. Ross-Ho, for her part, felt the appeal of the objects, in her words, as “an approximation of everything you might see”—an offering, perhaps, of the representation of

everything, in one easy stage set. They could be seen as scaled down and simplified core samples of a much larger and more complex visual world. And yet it is not just the objects themselves that held interest for the artist, rather, it was their subsequent becoming into a photographic image.



**How to Control and Use Photographic Lighting tacked to the wall at Ross-Ho's Los Angeles studio**

Ross-Ho's initial question of scale was perhaps the most abstract, and stemmed from an intuitive attraction to Brooks' photographic illustrations. As she put it, "I knew those photos were special for a long time." For an artist deeply invested in materiality, scale, and the relationship of parts to a whole through systems of production and seeing, the question then becomes: how to translate the scale of her own personal affection for "the sensitivity and care seen in the anatomy of the picture"? How can physical or conceptual scale be invoked as a metaphor for the scale of feeling one holds for such a seemingly utilitarian photographic image?

Historically, the discussion of scale in photographic terms is somewhat anemic. Photographic objects are, for the most part, circumscribed by the limitations of available commercial paper sizes and standard printing capabilities. The long-standard sizes (in the U.S.) of about 8"x10" or 11"x14" were so ubiquitous through the development of the medium as mode of a fine art as a mode of fine art that the relatively recent disruption of new printing possibilities, particularly out of Düsseldorf, Germany in the early 1990s, sparked a collective hand-wringing in the field over the meaning of the new "big" photography.

Meanwhile, the quantitative scale of reproduction through print media (as opposed to the dimensional scale of a single print) is both profoundly temporal and geographically disparate: a single photographic image published in LIFE magazine in the 1940s, for example, would reach a weekly circulation of over 13 million viewers, and yet largely vanish with the next week's trash.

The collectively produced online life of Ross-Ho's *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things* takes up newly configured iterations of both of these types of photographic scale. First, it clearly recognizes the vast experiential difference between engaging with a physical object in material form of fixed size and engaging with the more amoeba-like organism of an immaterial image moving through online spaces, at once the diminutive size of the palm of your hand and the nearly incomprehensible scale of its simultaneous existence on vast numbers of other screens. And it does this without

devaluing either experience as less worthy than the other. On the contrary, both are essential. Finally, it addresses a reconfigured scale of time, as the images are collated together, by disparate viewer-producers, into a series of archives organized by hashtags and stored on external servers.

### How-to, take 2

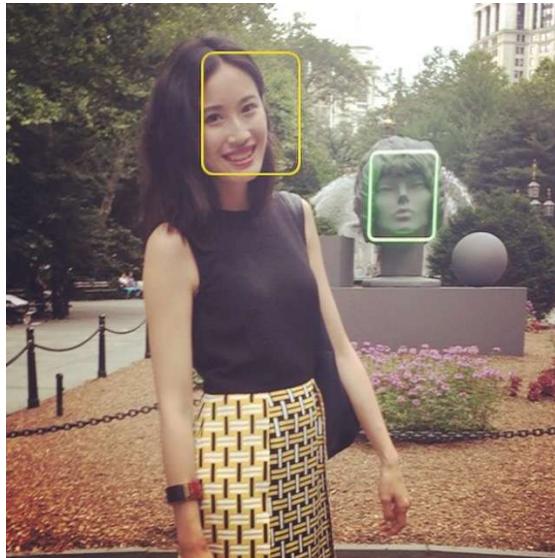
Artists John Baldessari, Piotr Uklański, and Thomas Vanden Driessche among others have done parodic send ups of the how-to instructional model so prevalent in photography. In 2012, the Museum of Modern Art Library exhibited a history of photo how-to instructional manuals. And there is a growing body of literature in photographic history about the ways in which we've learned to see, photographically, based on cues—not to mention overt instruction—that come to us in a variety of ways, from road-trip driving maps to Kodak picture spots (now Instagram spots), whether at National Parks or Disneyland (including the Center for Land Use Interpretation's 1998 critique, The Photo Spot Project). Throughout the twentieth century, if you weren't sure where to point your camera, how to point it, or what type of picture to make, helpful guides were plentiful.

Despite the general perception that photography is getting easier with every passing software update, this same type of guidebook is as prevalent as ever. And now, as the smartphones we use get smarter and more responsive with each generation, the camera itself can teach us how to use it, can anticipate what we want to see and what we want to record. These machines know, for the most part, that what we people like to photograph is other people's faces.



Amanda Ross-Ho, *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things (Facial Recognition)*, City Hall Park, New York, 2015. Courtesy the artist.

The 2015 iteration of Ross-Ho's sculpture, in New York's City Hall Park, points us to a discrete form of this instruction: the automated facial recognition software built into most smartphone cameras. Our cameras can light up upon recognizing a human face, and automatically focus and determine the correspondingly suitable overall exposure for the image, knowing that what the photographer probably cares about most is seeing that face again later. Here, in full-circle effect, passers-by could enjoy the meta-experience of watching their cameras instruct them both to photograph their own faces alongside the sculptural ideal face—its character and shape now a literally illuminated thing—that had appeared on the page as its own instructional aid decades prior.



Instagram posts collected by the artist.

Like other large-scale artworks that produce an automatic impulse in viewers to perpetuate the immaterial image of those very physically-based works through the current networks of social distribution, Ross-Ho's piece consciously participates in, and is enacted by, its audience—in a logical extension of the goals of public art. And yet it also does something more. *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things*, through its multiple iterations, at once enables, produces, reflects, and reveals the reconfiguration of the habits and patterns of image creation, consumption, exchange, and storage, all while nodding both to the medium's past and present popular appeal.

### Notes

All quotations are from a conversation with the artist, Los Angeles, January 12, 2015.

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Kate Palmer Albers, "Becoming an Image: Amanda Ross-Ho's *The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things*," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (February 24, 2016). [/articles/illuminated\\_things.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after February 24, 2016, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project:  [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2016-02-24-illuminated\\_things.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2016-02-24-illuminated_things.md)

*Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# At My Desk and In My Hand: 10 Ways I Enjoyed Photography in 2015

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December 18, 2015

There are really a lot of year-end top-ten photobook lists. One reason for the relatively recent surge in popularity of photobooks and their attendant year-end lists is certainly their accessibility: they bring photography into the hands of viewers, with fewer geographic and temporal constraints than an exhibition. But another way for photography to come into your hands—to find you where you are and offer a unique viewing experience—is to arrive on a nearby screen, like the ones in your pockets and on your desks. These closely held, frequently-accessed, and arguably highly personal viewing spaces are often overlooked as viable creative realms. This list is a shout out to a few of those moments of meaningful content and engagement that found their way straight to me in 2015.

## 1. Library of the Printed Web, #3



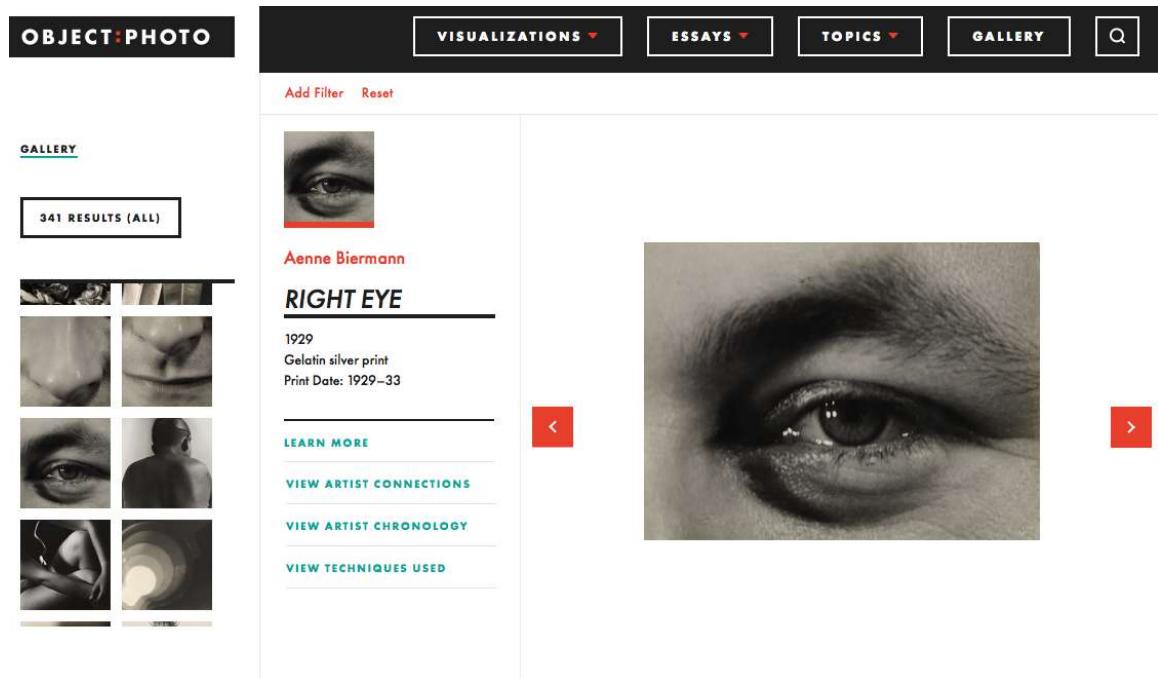
*Library of the Printed Web* Tumblr archive screenshot

2015 saw edition #3 of Paul Soulellis's *Library of the Printed Web*, a material archive and Tumblr devoted to, as Soulellis puts it, "web culture articulated as printed artifact". *Library of the Printed Web* is not entirely about photography, but more fully embraces the fluid movement between material and digital realms that characterizes our age than just about anything else. #3 was available in a crazy number of formats, including:

- 8 ½" x 11" full-color, print-on-demand or downloadable pdf zines featuring curated selections of artists' work
- a 388-page collection of texts and index of open call contributions, also available as unlimited print-on-demand paperback or downloadable pdf
- a 538-page hardcover, foil-stamped limited edition of 10 with hand-stitched cover and neoprene skin, with contents featuring every file received in the edition's open call
- a limited edition of neoprene fabric printed with pdf pages (24" x 31")
- a digital archive in the form of a downloadable 1.5GB zip
- a 147-frame GIF in an "endless edition"

Though the range of formats could be read as an extreme form of indecision, their multiplicity instead conjured for me the very sense of overwhelming possibility merged with discrete selection—available both endlessly and hardly at all—that characterizes the heart of the *Library of the Printed Web*.

## 2. Object: Photo



Object:Photo website entry for Aenne Biermann, *Right Eye*, 1929

The product of a four-year Mellon-funded grant project, the Museum of Modern Art's *Object: Photo* appeared at the tail end of 2014 as an exhibition, book, website, and symposium that uniquely championed and modeled intersections of object-based study and new possibilities for online scholarship and engagement. With contributions by dozens of scholars of the inter-war period and the expertise of photographic conservators, the strength of the multiple iterations underscored the flexibility institutions have (but rarely leverage) in producing and disseminating knowledge about the medium. This type of endeavor requires time, organization, funding, and the collaborative expertise of many, and it is heartening to see substantial institutional support for the advancement of this type of scholarship.

### 3. “What’s Yours is Mine”: Appropriation redux

What a great online to-do about Richard Prince’s Instagram Portraits, which were seen in person at Gagosian galleries around the world (starting in 2014) and—arguably also “in person”—on small screens everywhere. In a way, it was all of Prince’s old questions, updated for our social media age, and it pressed all the buttons the old work did, too. (see Prince’s [lovely writing on the series](#), recounting its meandering origins, and while you’re at it, read his words [on the Cowboys and Spiritual America](#), too. The whole internet frenzy was good to get everyone talking about the legacy of photographic appropriation. I’m glad, also, to [know more about the Suicide Girls](#) and to have had opportunity to think not just about appropriation in the digital age, but new ways that pushback and subversion transpire.



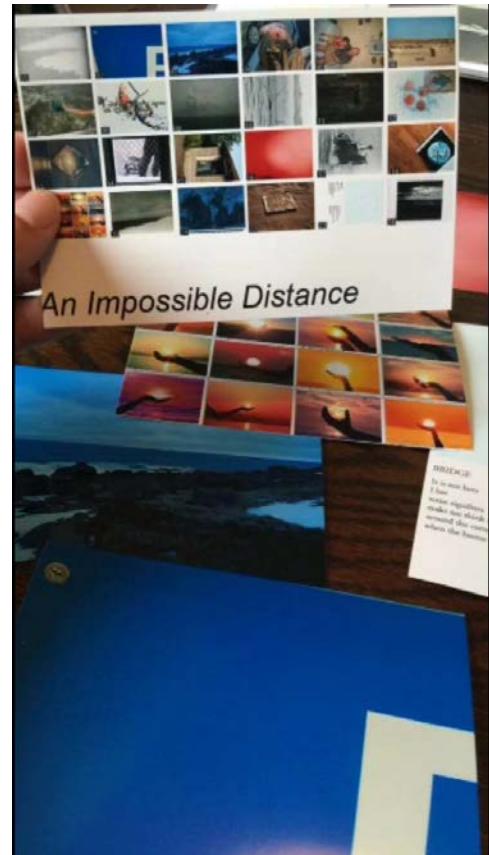
Richard Prince, *New Portraits* on view at Gagosian Gallery, New York

#### 4. “An Impossible Distance”, a photo exhibit at your local CVS

I learned about this photo show on Twitter: a few years ago the artist David Horvitz had curated a selection of images by two-dozen artists, and it was re-issued in July. Like many of Horvitz’s endeavors, it puts physical distance and online distance into experiential proximity, and the project moves through digital and material space. To see it, the viewer (from wherever she is) emails her address, and the artist (from wherever he is) locates the closest drugstore that prints 4” x 6” photographs, and sends them the file of images—all of which relate to distance—to be picked up by the viewer. The price of the exhibition is the price of the printing: in my case, \$8.22 at a Los Angeles CVS, and I viewed it on my kitchen table.

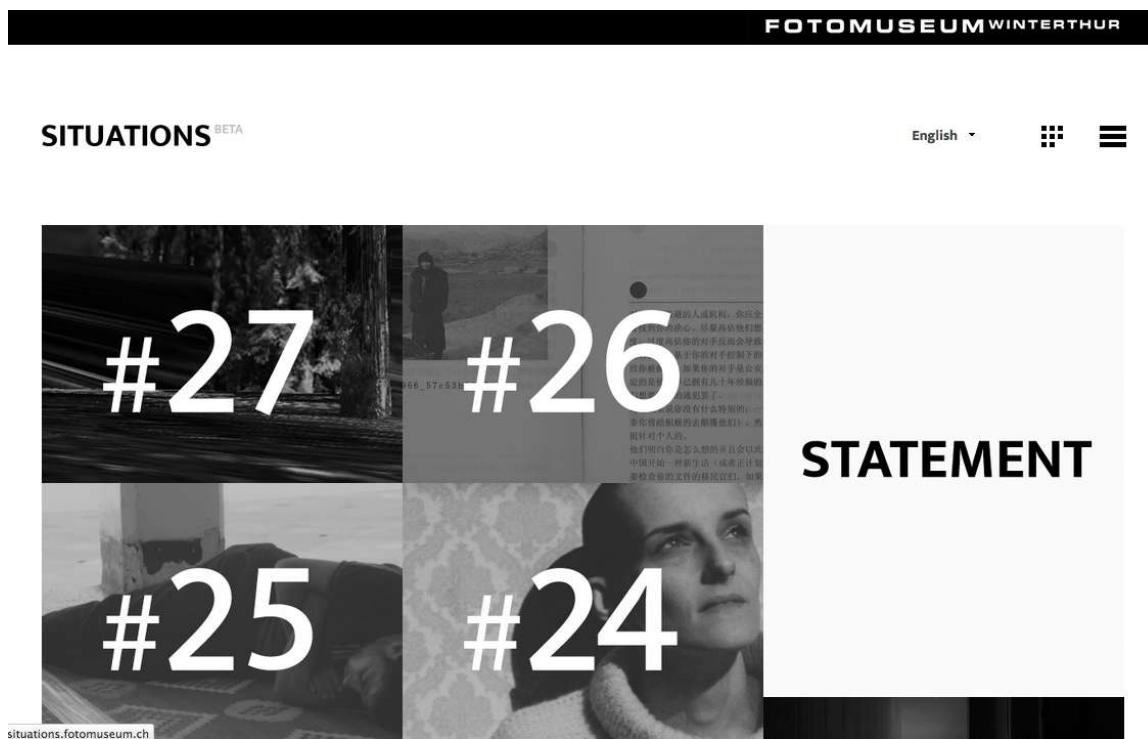
*Honorable mention in this category:*

Everything else David Horvitz did, including my new favorite (non-photographic) app, *The Space Between Us*, available for download on the iPhone app store.



Prints from "An Impossible Distance"  
curated by David Horvitz

## 5. Fotomuseum Winterthur *Situations*



[Fotomuseum Winterthur Situations website](http://situations.fotomuseum.ch)

Museums, almost by definition, have a hard time figuring out how to handle the new developments in photography, which often insist on immaterial forms as key components of process, circulation, and meaning. Hats off to Fotomuseum Winterthur for creating an institutional space—that exists both online and in physical space—for thinking through how museums can collect, exhibit, and support new modes of photographic thought and production (and you can read the curator and director Duncan Forbes’s bracing critique of what he’s up against here). I hope more institutions begin to support these types of endeavors, so crucial to the forward movement of photography as a creative field of practice.

5b.

While you’re on Fotomuseum Winterthur’s website, take a look at the always-compelling multi-authored blog of ideas about photography, Still Searching

and, in particular from 2015, Melanie Bühler's series of posts which include her observation,

*When we look at a photograph, we look at an amalgam of light that has become data, data that has been layered with code, code that has been transformed by software, an image that has been visualized and formatted on (touch) screens and that may or may not be printed on any number of physical materials.*

## 6. Tanja Hollander and Jeff Sharlet

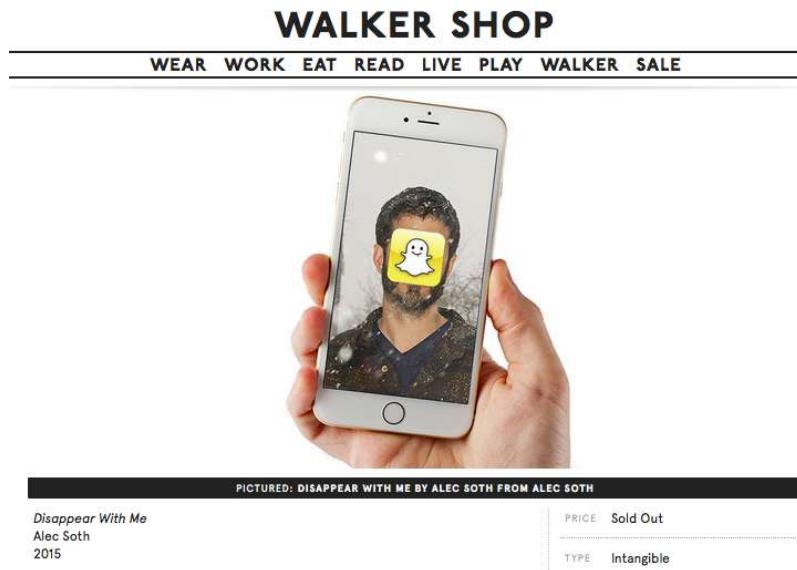
For the most part, the photographic response to the Paris attacks underscored the difficulties both photojournalism and social media have in grappling with how to visually respond to or represent the complexities of terror. I've been interested in the collaboration developing between Jeff Sharlet and Tanja Hollander, he a journalist and writer based in New Hampshire and she a fine art photographer from Maine. By chance, they were in Paris working together at the time of the attacks, and close by. They posted together on Instagram for the next several days, jointly grappling with honesty and insight about the situation they had found themselves in; the collection of posts was subsequently published here.



Screenshot from Jeff Sharlet's Instagram posts

## 7. Artists Try Snapchat

I've been on Snapchat for a few years now, and think its temporal constraints offer untapped creative potential. This year, a few artists gave the app a whirl.

**Alec Soth's Disappear With Me, a Walker Intangible**

- In March, the artist Alec Soth collaborated with the Walker Art Center gift shop on their Intangibles line with the seductively-titled *Disappear With Me*, experimenting with how to create value in an ephemeral exchange. The edition of three sold out, but Soth posts publicly as littlebrownmush (more on that here). I recommend following him; you never know when a little bit of Snapchat magic will appear in the palm of your hand.

- In August and September, curatorial collaborators Max J. Marshall and Paul Paper staged a Snapchat exhibition under the handle *thisisitnowshow*, showcasing the work of six artists over a period of six weeks. Once the posts had had their 24 hours, they were gone. I only caught the tail end of this show as it featured work by David Brandon Geeting, but hope to see more projects like this, seeking, as the organizers wrote, “to extend boundaries of exhibiting spaces and reflect on the changing definitions of physicality and mutability”.

- In November, the photographer Steve Giovenco put on a month-long solo Snapchat show of his images of his father, experimenting with the app’s themes of impermanence and loss, and its capacity for contemplative looking. The show is over but you can follow him at [stevegiovenco](#).



Screenshot from David Brandon Geeting's posts on *This Is It / Now*

## 8. Critique My Dick Pic

### critiquing your dick pics with love

This is not new in 2015, but a dear colleague turned me on to the many charms of the Critique My Dick Pick tumblr earlier this year. The site has changed my understanding of this widespread photographic genre, and issues a thoughtful appeal to raise the common visual denominator. Madeline

Hobson, a London-based writer, knows her way around a concise and effective visual critique: the prose is funny and smart, and her tone shows great warmth toward the fragile and sometimes clueless male psyche. Hobson frankly wants to see better dick pics, and she is open-hearted and welcoming of all body types, a combination that results in exchanges of surprising humanity and tenderness.

### 9. iPhone Selfie Album update

I don't consider myself particularly interested in the conversation around selfies, and yet, it was hard not to pay attention in 2015 (and I did write this on selfie sticks). In the latest iPhone update, Apple canonized the selfie category and made it unavoidable by automatically sorting out an album on your phone titled Selfies. I'm not quite sure how this works, but my guess is that it uses facial recognition technology in combination with knowing a photo was made using the back-facing camera. I found this by surprise one day recently when I was aimlessly looking through old photos, and was wowed by how happy it made me to see all the people I'd made selfies with.

Despite all the talk about selfies primarily fulfilling a narcissistic impulse to be publicly shared, I was surprised to realize I hadn't shared very many at all (just one from this screenshot). Score one for the algorithms.



Auto-generated Selfie album on my iPhone

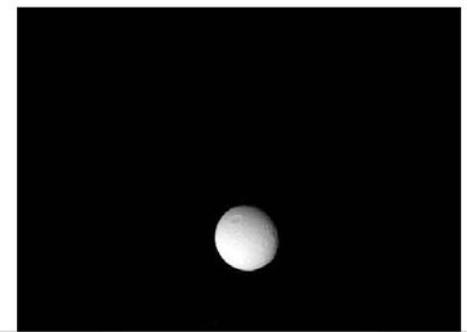
## 10. The Ephemerides (@the\_ephemerides)

As may be evident from #9, I'm fascinated with how algorithms are programmed (by people) to produce our individually felt photographic experience. I also like Twitter bots. The Ephemerides is a photographic Twitterbot, created by the bot wunderkind Allison Parrish (@aparrish). It's designed to pair images from NASA's OPUS database of outer planet probes with computer-generated text in verse form. It's almost never good poetry, but every now and then a gem comes through and, paired with black and white space imagery, makes me think about the magnificent odds against just about anything, and the subsequent wonder of everything.



The Ephemerides  
@the\_ephemerides

Time represents us that  
he stood on a gale for  
ships listening intently  
but could hear nothing.



Algorithm-generated text+image tweet  
from @the\_ephemerides

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Kate Palmer Albers, "At My Desk and In My Hand: 10 Ways I Enjoyed Photography in 2015," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (December 18, 2015). [/articles/tenthings.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after December 18, 2015, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project: [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2015-12-18-tenthings.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2015-12-18-tenthings.md)

*Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# Public Life and the Private Screen: Mishka Henner’s No Man’s Land

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December 3, 2015

Recently, I Googled a friend’s name, and the first search result was the public record of her salary. This was not information I wanted to know: I felt awkward, and like I had crossed a line in our relationship by asking an inappropriate question—no matter how inadvertently it had happened. I tried to forget, I remembered when a student had told me she didn’t want to become a professor because she’d looked up *my* salary, I read some other stuff about her to distract the issue.

What do other people know about us today, and how do they learn it? What does Google know? What friend knows more than I realize? What do they get right, and what do they get wrong ... whether “they” is the NSA, a close friend, or a prospective student? Mostly, the incessant collection of metadata about each of us, every day, is blissfully abstract, coming into focus only in brief and forgettable moments as we go about our online business.

But sometimes it appears in sharp relief: I viscerally recall the moment on a family road trip that my then-7-year-old had my phone and, from the backseat, somehow found and started reading aloud my search history. Though there was nothing damning in his announcement, it was nevertheless startling to hear, out loud, the record of my recent train of thought, now archived for family consumption. Today it sometimes seems that it's our browsers and search histories that know the most—no matter the private conversations and public presentations, there is always another story in the cache, one that reveals the paths of a wandering mind, unselfconsciously following a rabbit hole of links and searches.

The abstraction, and the sometimes strangeness of squaring private knowledge with lived, public behavior, is hard to represent. In some ways, photography is at a real disadvantage in this arena: how do you make a photograph of something that can't quite be seen? Of thoughts and exchanges that may leave few traces and are ultimately happening in some non-physical, immaterial space that can only be gestured at through physical traces and forms?

One recent trend in contemporary photography has been to represent the material, physical stuff of the internet: the fiber optic cables, the satellites, the data servers. These photographs are nearly always soulless, and necessarily so: they have to be in order to deliver a sense of the deeply dehumanized hardware that we, collectively, have passively entrusted with an extraordinary breadth of transactions, from the mundanities of scheduling appointments to the most private email or text exchanges. Alternatively, one can picture people with their devices, individuals (usually teenagers) illuminated by a cool glow or moving through life unaware of their surroundings (and immediate surroundings are always meant to read as obviously much better). Both types of image leave me cold: in the former, who really wants to look at rows of data servers? And in the latter, the implicit scolding judgment underscores a distressingly pervasive tone in our culture. Ultimately, neither visual strategy represents any kind of human complexity or a curiosity about how our internal experiences are shaped by those visible pieces of hardware, whether small and nearly attached to our bodies, or the massive

actualizations of “the cloud”. How are those non-physical abstractions represented?



Mishka Henner, "SP227d, Cislano Milan, Italy," from *No Man's Land*. Courtesy the artist.

### “No Man’s Land”

Mishka Henner’s series *No Man’s Land* (first published in 2012, and ongoing) has some basics in common with other artists making Google Street View-inspired art ([greg.org](#) is a good place to start, and [Pete Brook](#) has nice updates). The massive online archive of semi-automated imagery, constantly refreshing, and relentlessly recording the publicly accessible visual world (streets, alleys, trails, museums, shopping centers, etc), is an irresistible and seemingly endless source of raw photographic material. I’m interested in all

of these projects, generally, as they dovetail with a history of mapping, knowledge production, and human navigation and wayfaring, and they collectively seem to me the natural and obvious extension of the great tradition of road trip photography. But each of the projects has its own aesthetic and conceptual valence, and Henner's uniquely addresses the uncomfortable collision of public and private space and experience that now characterizes much of our collective lived experience, and wades, too, into the grim realities of the commerce and commodity of physical bodies in the 21st century.



Mishka Henner, "Strada Provinciale Binasco Melegnano, Carpiano, Lombardy, Italy," from *No Man's Land*. Courtesy the artist.

The series came about through the artist's own dissatisfactions with the possibility of creating a visual story about the deeply complex, fraught, and contradictory experience of sex workers in Manchester (where the artist and his partner live), while also squaring the profound power imbalance between photographer and subject. Abandoning his frustration as a documentary magazine photographer and with the circulation of photographs on the image market, he made a decision "to work within the spectacle".<sup>1</sup>

In its simplest description, *No Man's Land* isolates and re-presents Google Street View (GSV) stills of women who may be sex workers, in areas of southern France, Spain, and Italy. But it quickly becomes more complex: Henner learns the locations of the women by virtually eavesdropping on men in online forums who share information about the locations of sex workers in their areas. The artist then cross checks with other sources such as NGO and UN reports, and "goes" to the locations via Google Street View's camera. Henner saves the views made by the automated cameras, embracing a certain surrender of photographic control.



Mishka Henner, "Via Rigosa, Bologna, Emilia-Romagna, Italy," from *No Man's Land*. Courtesy the artist.

Though *No Man's Land* may best be known as it initially appeared, in its book form (or, let's be honest, more likely just through viewing fragments online), the project also came to include a video animation, an audio track of bird calls and other sounds recorded by local amateurs, and large prints that magnify the photographs back to 1:1 scale. Henner does not travel to the locations to photograph his subjects personally, as conventional documentary practice would dictate, because his subject is arguably neither primarily the women nor the places themselves but the relatively more abstract scaffolding through which they are discussed, located, seen and encountered.



**No Man's Land** installation, The Photographers' Gallery, London, 2013. Photo: Kate Elliott. Courtesy the artist.



**No Man's Land** installation, The Photographers' Gallery, London, 2013. Photo: Kate Elliott. Courtesy the artist.

### Visibility and the Unseen

Modes of personal exchange—direct and mediated—are referred to in multiple ways in *No Man's Land*, but physical human bodies are only seen once: per the conventions of western art traditions, it is the surveilled female subject who is offered up to viewers. Each image in the series shows a woman, typically on the side of the road, maybe with a cheap plastic chair or sun umbrella, amid the “almost idyllic” landscape—as the artist puts it—of generally rural areas of Spain and Italy (in the first published volume).

Without a human eye to filter out the literal debris, the automated GSV cameras offer a view of the natural landscape that gestures towards the beauty typically associated with those countries, especially photographically, but invariably precludes a romanticized view. The potential of endless volumes of the series (Brazil and Eastern Europe are forthcoming) “mirrors the insatiable appetite of the drone for creating imagery and of the insatiable

cultural appetite for sex and exploitation,” Henner says, and speaks to his impulse to give over outright personal poetics to the ambiguities of scale and volume, both in terms of the numbers of images he had access to, and in terms of the magnitude of the social issue. As he points out, “The images had already been taken, but they hadn’t necessarily been seen; there are too many.”

But aside from the conceptual apparatus and implicit critique of conventional documentary practice, and aside from the women we see and the landscapes they occupy, what really got me about *No Man’s Land* was thinking about the other human bodies gestured to in the series. First, the men in the online forums, on whom Henner (another body) was eavesdropping, and later, just as affectively, the citizen-scientist bird call recorders, earnestly uploading their homemade audio tracks to a publicly accessible and geolocated database. And, together, the various mediated modes of accessing each group of individually distinct yet always physically separated and isolated people (chatroom eavesdropping, Google Street View screen capture, amateur birders) and subsequently bringing them together in the space between the artist’s work and his viewer, strikes me as an apt method of getting at the strangeness of navigating some of the ways we can know things, or think we know things, about other people today.

Regarding the unseen men, I both wanted and didn’t want to peer over their shoulders and watch them in the chat rooms. I imagined them collectively alone, in a dark room, in front of those illuminated screens, individually filled with anticipatory imagination about what (who) their future selves would encounter in the locations they were sharing among strangers. Or was it less filled with longing, and more calculated: with logistical considerations about distance, time and money. Or was the nature of the calculation worse: predatory rather than logistical. Perhaps, realistically, it is some shifting combination of all of it. Henner himself characterizes the online forum conversation as bluntly akin to the ratings and reviews left on Airbnb, but for women rather than places to stay. Either way, those missing figures spoke volumes, and their absence offered an uncomfortable, yet open, space in which to reimagine them.

A hallmark of recent art projects that investigate the terrain between material and physical realms is their manifestation in multiple forms. It is as if the process of physically setting the still images into a range of material forms more efficiently and effectively orients viewers toward the movements of those images: as we see them play out in multiple venues, the shifting contexts becomes a key piece of the content. It might seem curious, for a project that is largely about the condition of *not* being there, that Henner so clearly wanted his viewers to feel as if *they* might be there: particularly through the video, which sets a viewer into the position of a car driving by the women to the audio track provided to make a place more real. Stills are sequenced together to create an effect of leering at the women as the driver passes by, and then dispassionately moving on to the next body offered on display, who is again passed by. The repetition underscores the already dehumanizing effect of the GSV cameras while simultaneously asking viewers to inhabit, and, in a way, even empathize with, the automated camera's point of view: the discomfort ante is raised. The experience is accompanied by audio files made by strangers who have geolocated sounds from the same or nearby locations and uploaded them to a sound-sharing website. The cues, then, locate a viewer within a range of mediated representation that began in similar locations, were recorded for different reasons and different audiences, then distributed onto the open space of the internet, and brought back together by the artist for a viewer in yet another physically distinct location.

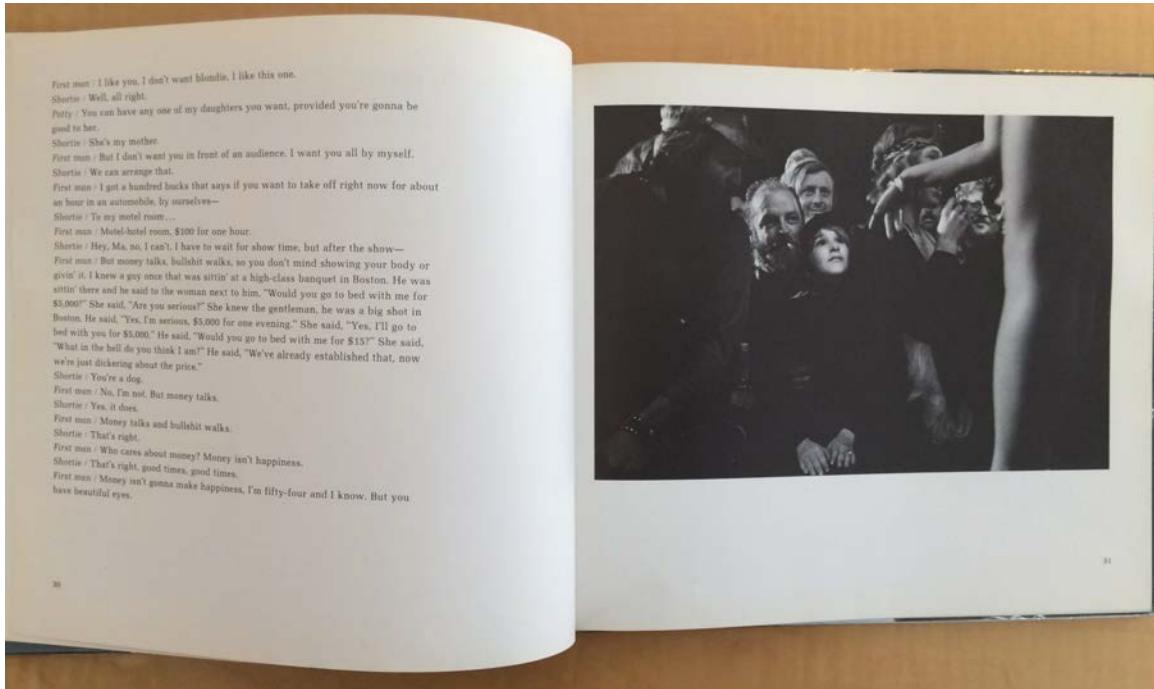
## Distance and Connection

*No Man's Land*, like some of the other Google Street View work, has had a remarkable degree of success, but it's not without its detractors. (See a brief summary and Henner's robust rebuttal.) To generalize, the primary complaints about it have been 1) the very notion of a photographer "just" sitting at his or her computer all day rather than physically going to the places shown, and 2) that the women are depicted in an objectifying and dehumanized fashion, and assumed without proof to be sex workers. These reactions are linked in an interesting way: a solution to both would be for

Henner to have traveled to the sites, spent time with the women, heard their personal stories, and translated this lived experience in a visually compelling way to his viewers so that we, too, could feel we better understood the life experiences—perhaps the personal challenges, small triumphs, economic realities, and surprising insights revealed through casual anecdote—of the subjects. In other words, it could have operated within the accepted rubric of a documentary photography project. But its departure makes plain both that there is something of a formula to the way documentary photography is supposed to work, and the effect it's supposed to have on its viewers.

As points of comparison in the history of photographic representations of sex workers, I think first of Susan Meiselas's *Carnival Strippers* (published in 1976) or the later Philip-Lorca diCorcia's *Hustlers* (1990-1992, exhibited first as *Strangers*, as both particularly effective and even groundbreaking proposals of an affective documentary practice that seeks to bring a distant audience closer to the interior worlds of men and women negotiating money and sex; beyond their extraordinary aesthetic pull, their power stems from the commitment of the artists to spend time, to care, to go there, and from the subjects' willingness, or apparent willingness, to participate, to share, to open up—even just a little—about the emotional, economic, and physical complexities and contradictions of their lived realities.





Page spreads from Susan Meiselas, *Carnival Strippers*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976

I think, too, of Larry Sultan's *The Valley* (published in 2004), which lets viewers in on the boredom and mundanity, the domesticity, of the pornographic film industry that occupies the edges of Los Angeles and reflects the development, in photography generally, of an interest in unraveling the distinctions between art, artifice, and reality that collectively consolidate around the film and sex industries.





Page spreads from Larry Sultan, *The Valley, Scalo*, 2004

Henner offers a more historical, and perhaps more fitting, comparison: to E.J. Bellocq, the somewhat mysterious photographer who left a cache of glass negatives of women in New Orleans's red light district—also now unknown by name, many with obscured faces, and having been exhibited and “made known” by a male photographer who knew nothing of the women’s stories: in their case not Bellocq but Lee Friedlander, who re-printed and exhibited Bellocq’s work at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970, within its own thick stew of authorial and institutional complexity.

In these other projects, the prevailing view of sex workers is one of a sympathy and openness (and, not coincidentally, in the last few decades, in parallel to the rise of the sex workers’ rights movement). And yet now, in an age awash in Chatroulette and apps like Tinder and Whisper, which might be characterized broadly as an age in which encounters with strangers, whether sexually charged or not, have never been easier, how do the relationships to

and between these physical bodies fare now? *No Man's Land* offers an update both on what sex workers "look like" today—in the broadest context of how the visual operates—and on the intertwined question of what documentary photography "looks like" today—also in the broadest context of how the visual operates. But, ultimately, its emotional core is the shifting space between the human bodies invested in the work's components and production and, by extension, the ambiguous relationships enabled and facilitated by our many modes of connection today.

## Notes

1. All quotations are from a conversation with the artist, November 10, 2015. ↵

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Kate Palmer Albers, "Public Life and the Private Screen: Mishka Henner's *No Man's Land*," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (December 3, 2015). /articles/nomansland.html.

Any updates or corrections to this article made after December 3, 2015, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project:  [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2015-12-03-nomansland.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2015-12-03-nomansland.md)

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# The Value of Ephemeral Photographs, or, Everything I Know About Alec Soth I Learned on Snapchat

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October 22, 2015

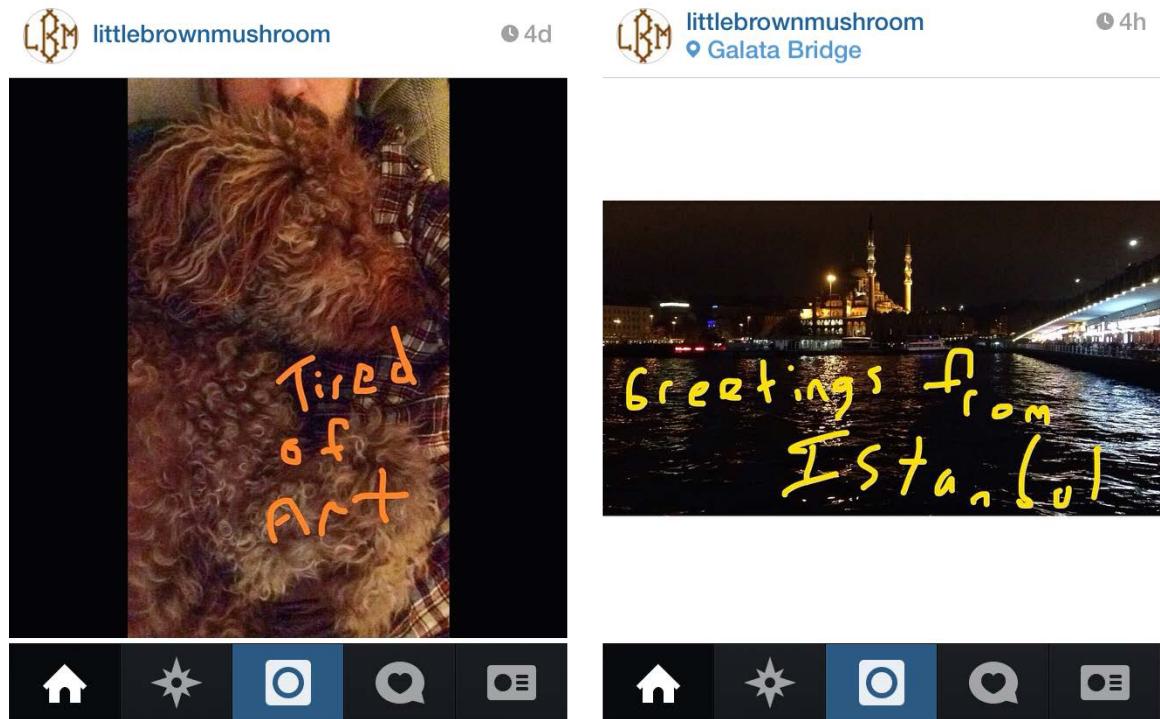
There is no shortage of short biographies of Alec Soth. Most of them follow standard art world protocol for any artist biography: brief personal background; significant bodies of work; notable exhibitions and publications; awards, fellowships, and accolades; and institutions that have collected the artist's work. Some seek to provide an overarching thematic arch, others aim to humanize with a short anecdote. They're necessarily brief, and meant to provide an overview of a career to ground the reader, listener, or viewer to whatever fraction of that career is presented to them at that moment.

In my roles over the last twenty years as gallery assistant, label-writer, researcher and lecture series organizer, I've written plenty of these short bios for others. And, a few months ago, I was asked to write one about Soth, to contribute to a forthcoming edition of a scholarly art encyclopedia. But as I thought about the dozens and dozens of short biographies that already exist

about Soth, the assignment came to feel both more daunting and more redundant: couldn't there be an art history bot that could aggregate the best of all the existing biographies to produce what I had been asked to do?

Soth has become an unusually public and prolific artist, and is also sufficiently beloved by a wide enough audience that anyone with at least a passing interest in contemporary American photography has had opportunity to become familiar with the basic contours of his career. The predominant storyline begins in 2004 with the twin origin stories of his inclusion in that year's Whitney Biennial and the acclaimed publication, by Steidl, of his first major book, *Sleeping By the Mississippi*, and follows his subsequent major projects (including *Niagara*, 2006; *Broken Manual*, 2010; the Dispatches, and now *Songbook*, 2015); notes the influential role of his bookmaking and independent publishing venture, Little Brown Mushroom, in the contemporary photo book boom; and his membership in the esteemed photojournalism collective Magnum. Also, he lives in Minnesota.

I (or anyone) can know all of this without paying any particularly close attention to his career. It's a biography of major and documentable accomplishments and a shorthand for calculating artworld value. But rather apart from these projects of obvious credibility, I had been following Soth on the ephemeral image app Snapchat for a few months, after he posted a series of musings on Twitter about the app along with his username, littlebrownmush. We'd had a phone conversation as I prepared a conference paper on ephemeral photography, but had never met: he was essentially a stranger to me. I began to wonder what a biography, culled only from his Snapchat posts, would look like. Emerging from an accumulation of fleeting images, it would be an alternative form to the conventional artist biography, certainly, but might it have a value of its own?



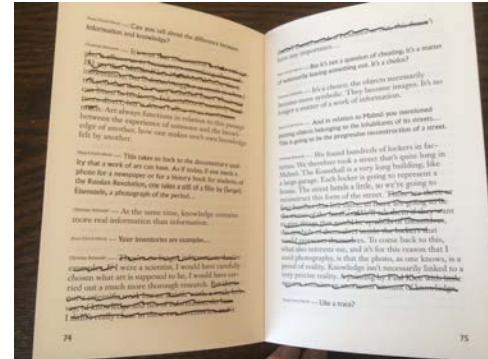
Snapshots archived in Alec Soth's Instagram feed, 2014

### Biography as a fraught enterprise

The practice of writing artist's biographies is a common one for art historians, to be sure. It was, in a sense, the foundation of Art History as a discrete field of study: Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (published in Florence in 1550) established a set of expectations for how to look at an artist's life and distill it in such a way that the life and the art were inextricably intertwined. But, of course, there is a certain hubris and absurdity to the idea of summarizing a life—any life—in a biography, particularly a 300-word one. (As a counter to this, think of the six-volume, 3,600 page autobiography of Karl Ove Knausgard which itself no doubt still omits the vast majority of the author's lived experience, or the community of enthusiasts for extreme lifelogging, a clear recipe for failure.)

I've long been a fan of the French artist Christian Boltanski's early works in which he proposes various challenges to the conventional artist/art historian relationship. This traditional relationship might be defined as one in which the art historian, at some point after the artist's death, carefully reconstructs the artist's life from remaining archival material. Boltanski has enacted these challenges in a range of activities and objects, from proactively dispersing his own archival materials to unusual locations, such as to a museum in Munich dedicated to, as Boltanski puts it, "a German clown"; to conducting a year-long serial interview with the curator Catherine Grenier in the form of Freudian psychoanalysis, the results of which were published in a 200-page "confession"; or his heavily redacted interviews with Hans Ulrich Obrist. But my favorite is his 1989 installation, *Les Archives de C.B., 1965-1988*, which is comprised of 646 closed metal boxes, stacked high against a wall, ostensibly containing the artist's archives (or are they the archives of his alter ego, C.B.?) Seeing these high stacks of boxes on display in a museum, what is the inquisitive art historian, well trained in non-disruptive museum protocol, to do?

Boltanski, when I had the opportunity to ask him about *Les Archives de C.B.*, said that his dream for the piece is that an art historian write his biography based solely on the contents of the boxes—as if Boltanski had died—and not consult any other material or contact him personally. (He had tried a similar experiment in 1988 with the curator Didier Semin, who was writing a



**Pages from Christian Boltanski in Hans Ulrich Obrist's Conversation Series (Walther König, 2009)**



**Christian Boltanski, *Les Archives de C.B., 1965-1988*, 1989 on view at the Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, 2006**

monograph on the artist.) At the time I posed the question to Boltanski, I was in graduate school and considered doing it myself; ultimately I didn't, but the proposal planted a seed for how I would subsequently think about the process of an art historian's biographical reconstruction of an artist. Not just what, but *who* would I have found in Boltanski's boxes? What traces would be left behind and have the honor (or bear the burden) of speaking for a life?

## Social Media Identity

Unfolding separately from this somewhat academic interest in what it means to participate in the biographical reconstruction or representation of an artist, is the altogether pedestrian and largely unconscious activity of parsing the various identities under rapid and fluid construction by friends, relatives, and strangers on multiple social media platforms. In a manner not unrelated to the many historical ways people have used photograph and caption combinations—in cartes-de-visite, family albums, and holiday cards—to produce and circulate particular social identities, social media enables this practice—as it ranges from a hobby to a professional level—on a greater scale of magnitude and in a far more public way. There is an equal magnitude of sociological interest in just how these identities are constructed and a corresponding degree of doubt that there is, actually, much correlation at all between the real self and the social media construction. While not belaboring the point that the notion of a “real self” for a “social media self” to subsequently correspond to has been outdated in many circles for decades, it’s worth pointing out that, on the other hand, it would be the atypical social media profile that really reveals nothing about the person creating it.

Because of the way Snapchat works, it’s hard to find people unless you know them personally or come across their username in some public context. There are no listings of who other people are connected with and, because images disappear quickly, there is no archive of previously posted images by which to check someone out. Of people I’m connected with on the app, I have no idea, in most cases, of who else sees their posts. These conditions call for an extra leap of faith in connecting with someone and a subsequent sense of privacy

even in viewing images that have been posted to all of someone's followers (as opposed to the direct message version of the app which sends a photograph or video to a single person). Without knowing who else is looking, or whether they "liked" something, often images feel as if they've been delivered to you, personally. To me, it's one of the most successful illusions of the app, and one I fall for again and again.

### Imagine a Snapchat Biography

Of my Snapchat contacts, Soth was a bit of an outlier: while the others were friends, former students, or celebrities (I can tell you that Rihanna has a remarkably boring Snapchat feed), Soth seemed like someone I could know, but just didn't.

So I gave myself an assignment to imagine—and write—a Snapchat biography. Channeling Boltanski's directives, the assignment had rules: I could only write about what I had gleaned, whether through a specific image or my own interpretation of multiple images, from Soth's Snapchat posts alone; I would need to suspend any knowledge of his career otherwise. Furthermore, the biography would have to be constructed from memory as posts on Snapchat disappear after 24 hours. From October 2014 through May 2015, this is what I learned:

*littlebrownmush lives near the airport. He is a sports fanatic, favors brightly colored sneakers, and enjoys spending time with his son, who doesn't mind being photographed. He wakes early to meditate, and works in an environment with several people who drink coffee. When photographing at night, he prefers subjects such as sirens and emergency personnel.*

*On his frequent travels, he partakes in coping rituals that include listening to Christian radio (in the car) and making emoji-enhanced selfies (on planes). At diner breakfasts, littlebrownmush elaborately and competitively stacks jelly containers. Train travel is a bit of a reprieve, allowing time to write, make friends, listen to live music, and bunk with Billy Bragg. Travel by*

*helicopter or speedboat is more unusual. Though he finds it daunting, he speaks regularly to large crowds.*

*In late 2014 littlebrownmush traveled to Istanbul, where he was involved in printing a book of photographs. Among his artistic interests are Peter Doig and Douglas Huebler, and he enjoys ping pong in the company of Rothko. When he's tired of art, he lies down with his dog.*

Despite the obvious silliness, on some level, of all of this, I couldn't help but wonder if Soth's Snapchat biography revealed something about the "real" him. And if it did, how would I know? Had I even accurately remembered the images (or correctly perceived them in the first place)? Would an Instagram biography—publicly archived and cross-verifiable—be better? Are either more or less useful than a typical artist biography? Acting off-script, does a Snapchat biography reveal too much? Or, conversely, does it reveal only what I think I saw?

I can't say that I know. But I can say that the exercise had the effect of lifting a certain flattening effect of hearing the same story line over and over. And with regular (sometimes daily) infusions of watching Soth work his way through this new form of photographic language, the narrative arc of Soth's biography that focuses on sheer breadth of visual and material photographic experimentation emerged into prominence. Over the past decade, there have been large format color photographs, of course, but also road-trippy Polaroids, photographs taken with a disposable camera in the language of "bad" photography, projects with found vernacular photographs, a discovery of the languages of Instagram, and a mid-century black and white photojournalism flash aesthetic. Those modes have, subsequently, been funneled into a correspondingly rich range of distribution: fine art books, yes, but also newsprint, pop-up exhibitions, quirky publications, slide shows, posters, billboards, and t-shirts, as well as the more expected prints in museum and gallery exhibitions.

I am hard pressed to think of an artist more fluent through the spectrum of visual languages of 20th century American photography, or who more visibly leverages the movement of multiple forms of photographic images through

digital and material spaces, into their consequently contextually contingent meanings. And, this, ultimately, while all the while exploring the capacity and failures of a photograph or photographs to reveal human connections and disconnections.

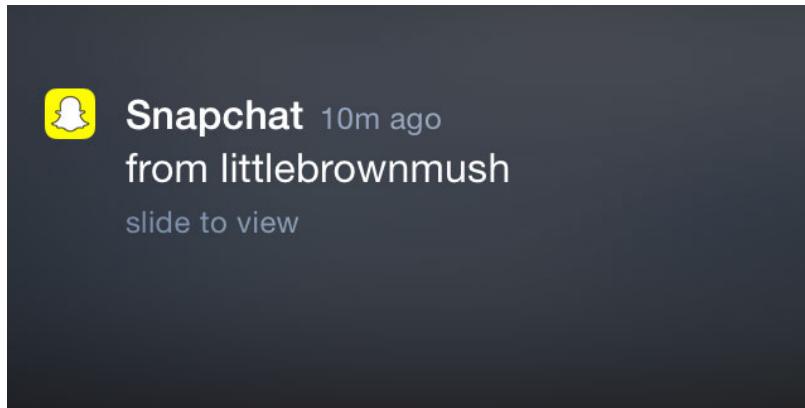
### What I've Learned About Photography

It may be obvious to point out that in the accumulations of images seen over time, posted on social media platforms, the ways we can learn about another person are changing. As opposed to still images—that is, photographs that hold still— fleeting photographs register a different temporality both as they are viewed and as they are remembered.

Consciously and regularly engaging with photographic images one knows to be ephemeral necessarily entails both an intellectual and emotional reconfiguration of understanding the value of those images. In both tradition and culture, whether that of the museum or the family photo album, we generally—if unconsciously—understand photographs under a rubric of value that stems from the sustained capacity of those images and objects to deliver a shifting and yet continually relevant meaning to their past, present, and future audiences. Under this rubric, photographic images move forward through time if they can adapt, if they continue to be invested with material, cultural, and emotional value and are seen anew as they move into their futures.

Ephemeral photographs trade on a radically different kind of value, but it's not no value at all. Rather, it is a value that privileges immediacy and exchange, and the place of accumulative drift in memory as a powerful indicator of future relevance. Like spoken words, which we all intuitively understand to be fleeting (and yet value without question) ephemeral photographs can strike a range of emotional notes: they may be direct, impulsive, lovely, funny, or sweet nothings, they may disappear too quickly or even not quickly enough. These are the ways in which photographs are moving more and more in our contemporary image ecosystem, and rather than write them off as inconsequential or inherently less meaningful than

objects that stick around, change hands, are cared for and evolve according to the expectations we hold for them, we can be more attuned to the experiential shifts these other kinds of photographic images have to offer.



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Kate Palmer Albers, "The Value of Ephemeral Photographs, or, Everything I Know About Alec Soth I Learned on Snapchat," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (October 22, 2015). [/articles/ephemeral.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after October 22, 2015, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project: [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2015-10-22-ephemeral.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2015-10-22-ephemeral.md)

*Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# In Praise of the Large Format Selfie Stick

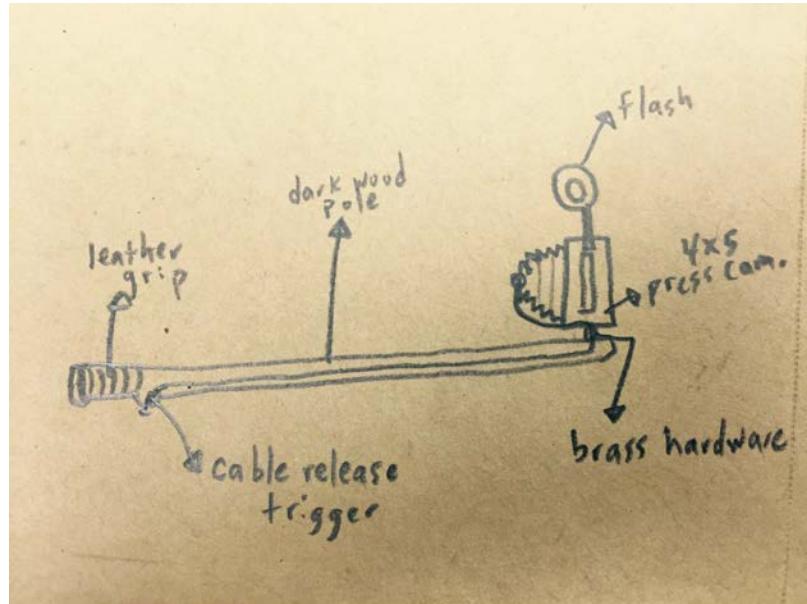
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October 8, 2015

I was introduced to the Large Format Selfie Stick via Snapchat which, in hindsight, seems just perfect. I almost never save Snapchats, but I did screenshot the LFSS because, like everyone else, I like to think I know genius when I see it:



Snapchat screenshot, May 2015



(this lovely little sketch came later via text)

As friends of mine know, I've developed a mild obsession with the Snapchat app, on which the default setting is for photographs to disappear shortly after they are viewed. I'll be writing about that mode of ephemerality in posts to come, but for now I'll say that the alternative it proposes to our cultural captivation with the promises of the archive has been irresistible to me. And so, it was fitting to find a sketch for the Large Format Selfie Stick in that conceptually charged viewing setting because it offered a glimpse—but just a glimpse—at an idea that seemed to simultaneously resist and embrace one of the most popular, and popularly-loathed, contemporary photographic manias: the selfie. It also seemed to address the heart of that loathing—at least that part of it which might be summarized as the large format photography community—while gently mocking its pretensions to superiority over the “common” photographers of daily life, people who have in the past been disparagingly referred to as amateurs, shutterbugs, hobbyists, or, my favorite, “enthusiastic Button Pressers”.<sup>1</sup>

Despite my interest in the circulation and exchange of images through various social media platforms, I'm not particularly interested in selfies, on the whole, but I *am* interested in how cranky they make people.<sup>2</sup> By extension, I'm also interested in how selfie sticks elicit a certain disgust, and

fascinated by the real cultural issues that have come up for museums and other institutions that must now navigate not just the rules of photography in their cultural spaces but also the rules governing selfie sticks.

The idea alone prompted a number of questions: Was the Large Format Selfie Stick the key to ameliorating the disdain many serious photographers seem to naturally feel for the selfie, a form whose casual populism flies in the face of values that hold craftsmanship, careful composition, and thoughtful intention of purpose, so dear? Would people who hated the very idea of selfies, made on the fly with smartphone cameras and uploaded onto social networking sites to garner likes and comments, feel differently if they could make selfies with a “real” camera? Would it parse out which aspects of selfies and selfie sticks people hated most? (was it the little mobile camera? the awkward stick? the seemingly narcissistic subject? the instant circulation?) Did the Large Format Selfie Stick, in fact, address the root of the anxieties of serious photographers in today’s age of photographic ubiquity?

The sketches came from the photographer Jesse Chehak. Chehak is a “real” photographer, by which I mean he takes the medium very seriously, has produced several bodies of work (mostly made with large format cameras), knows his way around a range of photographic equipment, knows his photographic history, and identifies with the world of photography. He’s also conceptually-minded, experimental, and willing to engage with photography across the spectrum, from its most populist expressions to its tightest community of insiders. But the question of how, exactly, to engage with a cultural phenomenon while still retaining one’s artistic credibility is, I think, a very real question and a nuanced territory to tread.

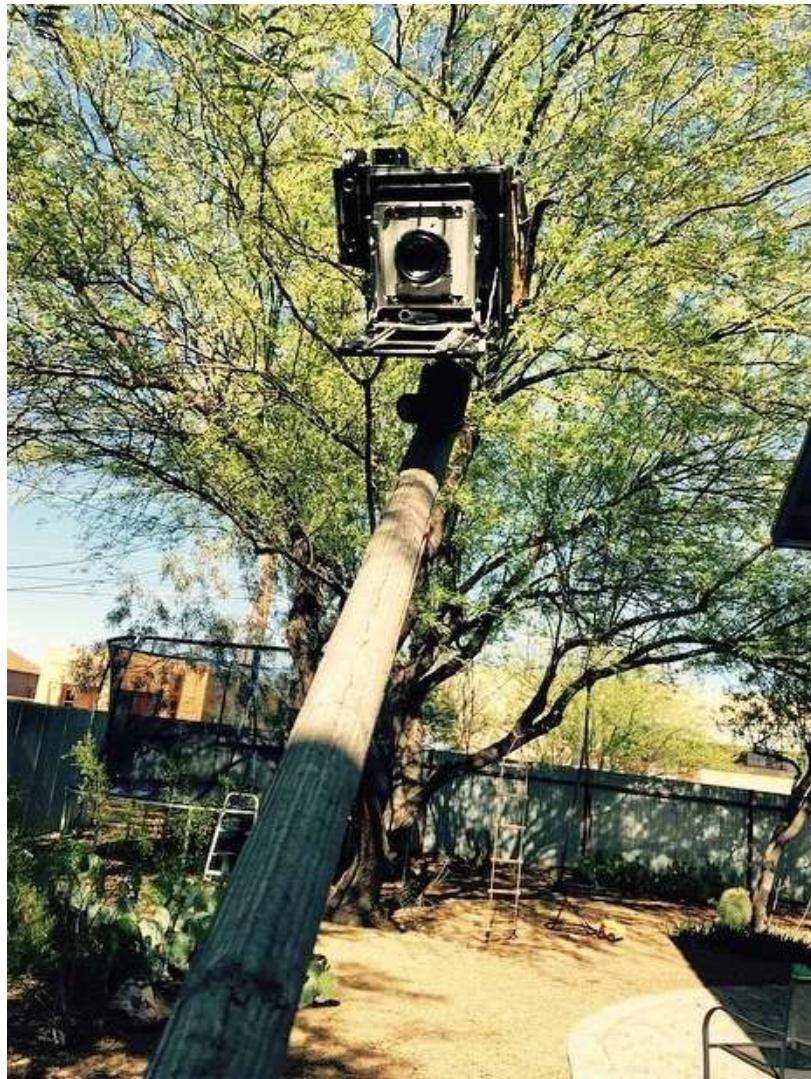
I’ve seen enough lively and playful ideas sketched out in his studio that it somehow didn’t occur to me that Chehak would go to the trouble of actually fabricating the thing, and, anyway, it existed provocatively enough just as an idea and a sketch. But a few weeks later, these showed up on Instagram, tagged, naturally #TheLargeFormatSelfieStick:

 **jessechehak** House of Brohak 5h



  ...

♥ 48 likes  
jessechehak #TheLargeFormatSelfieStick



Instagram screenshots from Jesse Chehak @jessechehak

Clearly I had to try it myself. So the next time I was in Tucson, where Chehak was living at the time (he's since moved to Milwaukee with his family), we made a date. And I should be clear here: I'm not opposed to selfies and I've made plenty of them myself, whether or not I've posted them publicly. (This [2012 essay by Jerry Saltz](#) covers most of what I think is interesting and notable about selfies, and [this recent article](#) is a nice supplement for any ongoing confusion about what a selfie is.) The process of making—and then sharing—this large format selfie, however, was both familiar and strange as two worlds collided in practice. As was clear from the initial images I had seen, but all the more evident in person, the contraption is a beast. It is made

particularly unwieldy by the physics of extending a heavy object out a pole and trying to hold it from the other end. It was a two-person job: Chehak wrangled the 8-foot pole and camera and I had the honor of holding the shutter release cord. As there was one sheet of film in the camera, we made just one exposure:



Jesse Chehak, from the series *#TheLargeFormatSelfieStick*, 2015

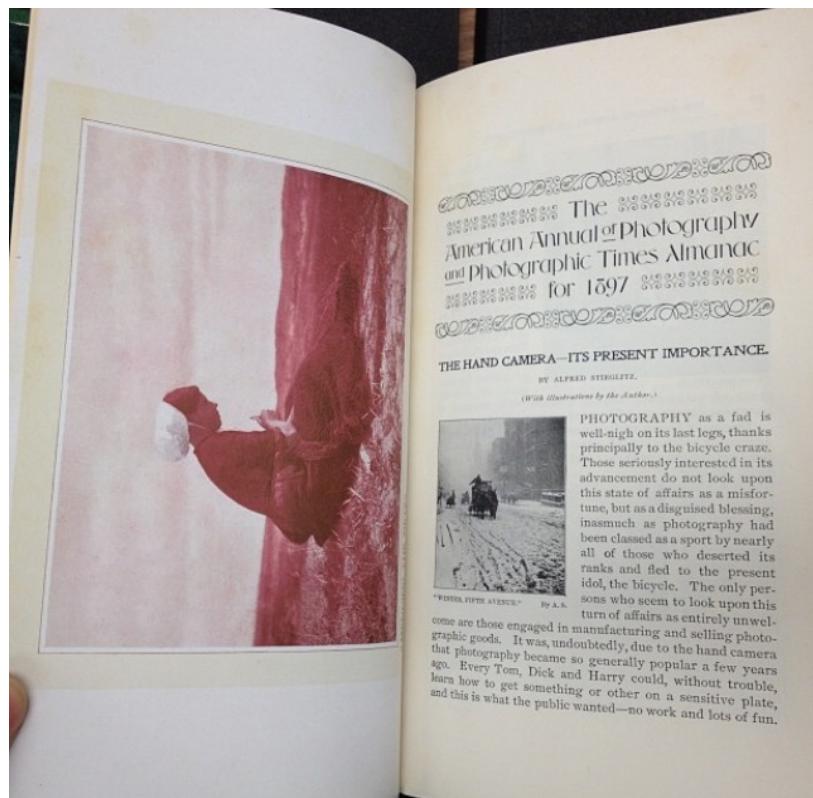
It wasn't until later that I started wondering if we'd really made a selfie, after all. If we had, wouldn't it be simpler to post on Instagram? Instead we had a negative that required its chemicals to be carefully washed off, and a print that had to be hand-coated in a fixing agent, to protect its soft emulsion. We'd have to re-photograph it for it to exist outside of that moment and place and fulfill its selfie promise. But by the time I'd had that thought, we

had both already made new photographs with our phones, compelled to digitally document our non-digital selfie because we knew it to be a singular occasion. I was even sure to document the print before Chehak pulled it out of its paper development housing to better preserve the object quality of the process.

Choosing a large format camera typically signals that a serious project is underway: its use today—when a panoply of other options are available to capture photographic images—is, more than ever, an expression of desire for a photographic experience that is anything but casual. The Large Format Selfie Stick was, in this case, outfitted with a 4x5 Graflex press camera. And the choice of film is as significant as the camera: Chehak was using Polaroid Type 55. This particularly beloved film was discontinued in 2008 when the troubled Polaroid company ceased production of all instant film. Unlike typical Polaroid film that quickly produces a unique print, Type 55 is unusual in that its (relatively) instant development produces both a print and a negative, allowing for later reprinting and enlargement. Since being discontinued, it has become highly sought after; boxes currently command several hundred dollars on eBay. It turned out that this particular exposure was one of 13 sheets of Type 55 film Chehak came across several months ago, each of which he intends to use with the LFSS. It is fairly common, now, for photographers to collect discontinued and expired film, but I think it's reasonable to assume that most of them are putting that paper—now perceived as precious and rare—to more seemingly serious ends.

Ultimately, I can't think of protests against selfies and selfie sticks without thinking of Alfred Stieglitz's essay, "The Hand Camera and its Present Importance", which he wrote in 1897 as he and his friends were grappling with what to make of all the amateur shutterbugs they saw as devaluing the craftsmanship of serious photography as the masses got their grubby mitts on handheld cameras. Photography had, at the time, recently been made appallingly easy by George Eastman's newly launched Kodak camera, and the photographers who had been treating the medium as a potential art form were suspicious, at best. It's an essay I include in my classes almost every year, and—I confess—it always makes me laugh: in a nutshell, Stieglitz—known as

the father of American fine art photography—expresses that he has decided to embrace the pedestrian hand camera considered so lowly by his photographic peers, but only because he's found a way to make it difficult: by standing for hours on a street corner in the blinding snow and howling wind, enduring the elements to get the perfect “snap”. (Serious photographers have always been gluttons for punishment.)



Alfred Stieglitz, "The Hand Camera and Its Present Importance," as printed in *The American Annual of Photography, 1897*

Stieglitz optimistically but mistakenly predicted that the “photography fad” was on its last legs in 1897, which he argued would be a blessing for anyone who considered himself a “champion of the tripod” (though he realized it would not be a blessing for camera manufacturers). He was wrong about the “fad” ending, but another point he makes continues to be relevant: manufacturers don’t always either know or market the possibilities of the technology or equipment they are using. Just because “hand cameras” (I put it in quotes because Stieglitz was using a 4x5 as a hand camera, which, in

relation to an 8x10, it was) were typically associated with the craftless work of unthinking amateurs didn't mean they had to be. And while it is perfectly obvious to point out that photography is an evolving medium, it's a little bit harder to know what to make of the changes as they are happening. Maybe someone can do something interesting with a regular selfie stick—I'd like to think so. Instead of scorning their presence—or, at least, in addition to scorning their presence—I'd like to think there is room for a thoughtful or subversive or (gasp) disruptive approach to how we think about this new development. And that that possibility—that question—is, in fact, serious. As Chehak put it, "Isn't that what serious photographers are always trying to do, understand what photography is?"

## Notes

1. Alfred Stieglitz, "The Hand Camera and Its Present Importance," *American Annual of Photography*, 1897 ↵
2. I'm also mildly interested in how many branches of academic study have taken up studying selfies: there are scholarly study groups in selfies; conferences and panels devoted to selfies; and, certainly, many dissertations in progress, all from a range of academic fields including sociology, media studies, communication, and literature. ↵

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Kate Palmer Albers, "In Praise of the Large Format Selfie Stick," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (October 8, 2015). [/articles/largeformatselfiestick.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after October 8, 2015, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project:  [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2015-10-08-largeformatselfiestick.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2015-10-08-largeformatselfiestick.md)

*Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* is supported by the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

# Penelope Umbrico: A Proposal and Two Trades, to start

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September 30, 2015

Earlier this year, the New York-based artist Penelope Umbrico started an Instagram feed devoted to her project, “A Proposal and Two Trades,” which was initially conceived two years ago for the 2013 Alt+1000 Festival de Photographie, a biennial event in the Swiss Alps village of Rossinière. The continuous stream of images struck me as a natural home for this ongoing project: a perfect example of an artist taking seriously both the possibilities and parameters of a currently popular platform, and, in a particularly mobile manner, extending the project’s commitment to moving images through material and immaterial spaces, touching a range of strangers and audiences along the way.



Penelope Umbrico, images from “A Proposal and Two Trades”, 2013–present. Courtesy the artist.

### Part 1: Material becomes immaterial

The project began with Umbrico posting her proposal at the festival, outdoors, on a tree overlooking the Alps.



Penelope Umbrico, “A Proposal and Two Trades” proposal, Rossinière, Switzerland, 2013. Courtesy Alt+1000 Festival.

She addresses a visitor directly:

*I propose that we look at the mountain in front of us together. Not as individual authors making unique pictures (that may or may not be printed), but as a collective group looking together, acknowledging that we use the same common smart-phone image technologies, and are acquainted with the same iconic images—some of which, probably, are of this very mountain. Images taken with smart-phone cameras, live between devices, between material, between people—forever migrating from one place to another, they are no place.*

It is worth noting that by looking at the mountain “together”, as Umbrico defines it in subsequent parameters of the proposal, she means what many people would consider “apart”. There is, currently, a cultural uncertainty about what constitutes “together” and “not together,” a seeming contradiction evoked by Sherry Turkle’s book title, *Alone Together* (2011), which suggests a sad condition of our culture’s state: imagine the recent (but already tired) photographic trope of a family all sitting together, each member focused on his or her individual screen (laptop, tablet, phone, etc). But Umbrico’s formulation thankfully rejects this knee-jerk critique and counters that easy visual reduction with a more nuanced version of what happens on those screens, formulating instead the state of being distant and the state of being together as one and the same when joined by a communal process of shared looking.

Later in her proposal, Umbrico invited visitors to email the artist their photographs of the mountains, specifying that the image go straight from their phone to hers. She continued, that upon receipt, “I will direct it through my smart-phone camera apps with their host of digitally simulated analogue photo filters”.

I was lucky to see the project in its early, unformed stage, upon Umbrico’s return to her studio in Brooklyn after the initial rollout in the summer festival. With characteristic enthusiasm, Umbrico pulled out her phone and began scrolling through a “roll” of visitors’ images that she had begun putting through a multitude of filters (noting the anachronistic language

that is habitually infused through digital image making). It was gorgeous: warm reds, oranges and yellows mixed in with the green and blue of mountains and sky, brilliant simulated light leaks and sun spots adding to the saturated warmth, as images that were inverted, broken into geometric sections, and repeated scrolled past. The whole and seemingly endless scroll was illuminated with the particular glow of today's omnipresent iPhone, the backlit glass screen enhancing the sunny glow of the images. I was smitten. Seeing them there on the small screen seemed to me the perfect venue for a project about mobility, exchange, and the visual, emotional, and psychological effects of our intimately handheld devices on viewing images today. Of course, Umbrico is smarter than I am about how her images should be viewed, and watching the series unfold (itself part of her larger and ongoing project, Range, 2012–present) over the past two years has shown the on-the-phone-feed to be just one iteration of a many-faceted series that appears in multiple venues and multiple material and “immaterial” forms.<sup>1</sup>

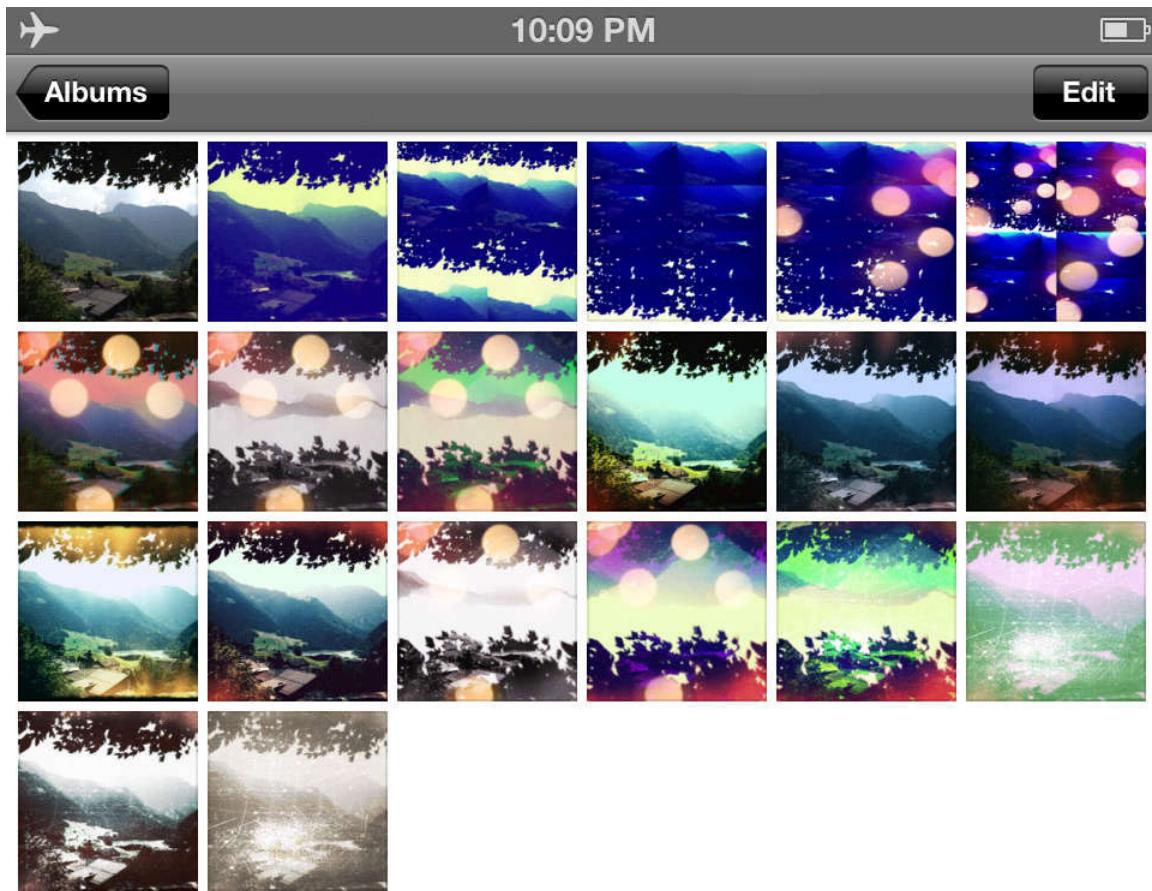
In “A Proposal and Two Trades”, Umbrico defines the first “trade” as one “between the original photograph of a mountain and a new construct of that mountain produced through digital ideas about analogue photography.” The production, in other words, of this first trade was not the collaboration between the festival visitor and the artist, but a trade conceptualized as one taking place between the initial digital photograph the viewer made and the filters in Umbrico’s apps. It was a “trade”, then, in which the technology of the smartphone camera, the makers of the filters, and even the growing photographic culture of “digital ideas about analogue photography” that produced the filter were the most active participants.



Screenshot of an image as it moves through 33 filters on Umbrico's phone. Courtesy the artist.

In a remarkable display of modesty (or, more likely, a provocative abdication of authorial control) Umbrico writes: “The camera app will give me back its

digitally infused mountain". With this line, Umbrico references an entire history of debate about the relationship in photography between, on the one hand, mechanized and automatic production and, on the other, an artist's authorial control. The very questions that animated the confused beginning of the photographic medium are summoned here, but rather than pointing to a nineteenth century rift between the painter's labor vs. a photographer's lack thereof, the viewer must consider the authorial contributions of not just artist and unknown human collaborator, but the app makers, filter designers, and automated algorithmic patterns necessary for the subsequent image production.



20 Photos

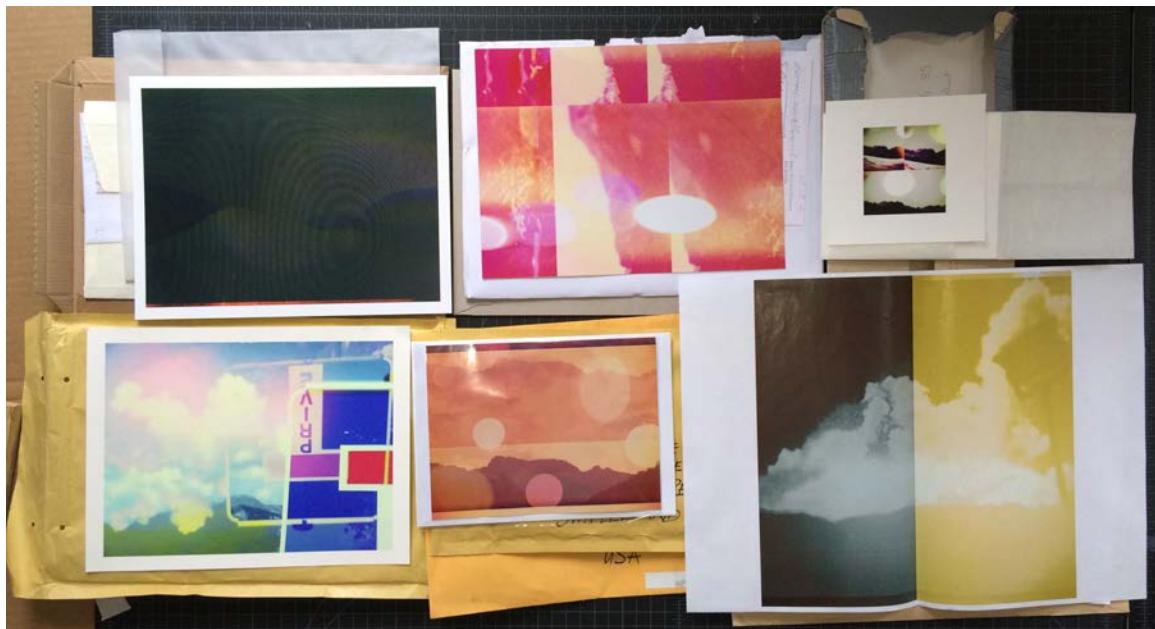


Screenshot of an image as it moves through 19 filters on Umbrico's phone. Courtesy the artist.

And, finally: “I will send you this new mountain.” In its new iteration, “this new mountain” has been produced through digital ideas about analogue photography (that have become visible through filters) and made mobile (again). And, yet, such an act is not a straightforward gesture when it comes from an artist to a viewer. Indeed, it brings up a multitude of questions about the status of the digital versus the printed image, and the market for an image now authored (or at least co-authored) by a respected contemporary artist.

## Part II: Immaterial becomes material, again

Umbrico received, altered, and emailed back 659 images of the mountain in Switzerland. Upon completion of the first trade (after the “new mountain” has been emailed back to the festival viewer), Umbrico invites her viewer/collaborator, wherever she or he may be, to print out two copies of the new file, in any material form they choose, and mail one back to the artist along with a self-addressed and stamped envelope in which to receive a certificate of authenticity for this new print edition of 2.



The first six prints Umbrico received from her collaborators. Courtesy the artist.

This set of transactions, currently in process, transforms the initially immaterial exchange into a new iteration of unpredictable material form—a form that can then be exhibited by either party or bought and sold according to the conventions of the art market. It is notable, but perhaps not surprising, that the collaborative print edition is limited and accompanied by a certificate of authenticity while the digital iteration has no such stated parameters.

While the material return of this second trade is underway, Umbrico is currently exhibiting a uniform suite of 119 new images (their print formats

determined, in this case, solely by the artist) at the 2015 Alt+1000 Festival, returning their new material forms to the place and space of their initial starting points. Though the image may move freely through digital space, materiality, in a way, slows it down; the mountain is restabilized, at least momentarily, before drifting into its new, and divergent, futures.



Umbrico's intial iterations of the images, installed at the Alt+1000 festival, July 12–September 21, 2015. Courtesy Alt+1000 Festival.

“A Proposal and Two Trades” is as elegantly simple as its title suggests yet the project reveals the complexity of how we read, make, exchange, consume, and circulate photographic images today, both as everyday practice and into artworld circles. It is a complexity that largely goes unnoticed as our habits slowly shift to accommodate the vast changes in casual image making over the last decade. But by breaking it down into collaborative components that appear over time in a variety of viewing venues, “A Proposal and Two Trades” neatly embodies the particular nuances of our contemporary image-scape. Its various iterations evoke the movement of images today through physical and

digital spaces, the newly possible connections among strangers that our culture's technologies allow and suggest, and the uncomfortable edges of the art world market and the less-commodifiable exchanges these deeply corporate devices and platforms enable.

Like the “Suns (from Sunsets) on Flickr” series (2006-present), for which Umbrico is justifiably known, “A Proposal and Two Trades” is a project that is endlessly mutable in a way that enhances, rather than detracts from, the overall impact of the work. Extracting a bit here, inserting it there, printing more or less, adding as the supply grows and grows—it is an artistic process that mirrors the way photographic images move through material and immaterial space today: multiplying, retracting, becoming aligned, unaligned, or realigned with old and new contexts, occasionally drifting off into digital space and sometimes becoming harnessed again, while other times becoming forgotten, slumped into the massive caches of photographs seen-and-forgotten. While many may find this new image ecology terrifying, distressing, or simply illegal, “A Proposal and Two Trades” underscores a certain kind of beauty to its movements, a humanity within the collective identification and shared desire that is facilitated by algorithms and digital networks.

## Notes

1. The larger project *Range* itself exists in multiple forms, including: as filtered photographic print reinterpretation of Aperture's *Masters of Photography* series, exhibited in 2012 in Aperture Remix at Aperture Foundation in New York; as billboards in Rossinière, Switzerland, site of the 2013 Alt+1000 festival; as an artist's book, including a special limited print edition (Aperture, 2014); as a series of prints and as 3-D printed from Google Earth data (2015); and as a list of filters, in print on paper and as exhibition installation at the California Museum of Photography in Riverside (both 2015). ↵

Kate Palmer Albers, "Penelope Umbrico: A Proposal and Two Trades, to start," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (September 30, 2015). [./articles/proposalandtwotrades.html](#).

Any updates or corrections to this article made after September 30, 2015, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project:  [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2015-09-30-proposalandtwotrades.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2015-09-30-proposalandtwotrades.md)

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# Abundant Images and the Collective Sublime

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October 1, 2013

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This past November, the Dutch artist Erik Kessels printed out every photograph that was uploaded to the popular photo-sharing website Flickr in a twenty-four-hour period. The resulting installation, appropriately titled “Photography in Abundance,” made literal, both visibly and viscerally, what is in fact only an infinitesimal fraction of the digital photographic images circulating online<sup>1</sup> (*Figure 1*). One day’s haul on Flickr—about a million individual images—is clearly a staggering and incomprehensible quantity of photographs from which to draw a clear meaning. This digital deluge, underway for more than a decade now, has caused considerable handwringing among photographers and photography theorists, including concerns about the potential meaninglessness of such a profusion of images, the demise of craftsmanship, and the loss of editing skills within contemporary photographic practice.



**Figure 1.** Erik Kessels, *24HRS IN PHOTOS*, 2011, installed at Foam Photography Museum, Amsterdam, 4 x 6-inch photoprints, dimensions variable. Photograph by Gijs van den Berg. Courtesy of the artist.

But the abundance of imagery in the digital era is also grounds for a critical and aesthetic investigation of how social media and digital technologies enable the making, storage, and distribution of vast quantities of photographic images. From the breadth of this cultural sea change, this essay focuses on artists for whom abundance, quantity, and accumulation present a compelling conceptual challenge, and one, I will argue, that has substantial roots in the pre-digital era. Rather than bemoan the loss of editing skills and the move away from the singular fine photographic print, I will begin with the assumption that volume and accumulation can be their own productive subjects of aesthetic inquiry, ones that are indeed highly relevant to the contemporary photographic discourse. Presenting the viewer with thousands of photographs in an installation, mining online digital photography databases, and referencing social media are some of the strategies artists have employed to engage viewers with the issue of volume in photography.

## Abundance, Past and Present

Kessels's Flickr extravaganza is just one example of several recent photography projects that are predicated on the meaning not of the singular print but on the comprehension—or at least presentation—of staggering quantities of images. His attention to Flickr is not misguided: indeed, the company reports that as of December 2012, more than 8 billion photographs had been uploaded to the site since its launch in 2005, almost eight years ago.<sup>2</sup> Flickr is in good company: as of July 2012, Instagram, which launched only in 2010, reported its users had shared 4 billion photographs.<sup>3</sup> Yet, both pale in comparison to Facebook, which as of January 2011, reported 200 million photographs uploaded *per day*, and 90 billion total photographs on its site. For each company, growth has been exponential.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 2.** Penelope Umbrico, *2,303,057 Suns from Flickr (Partial)* 9/25/07, 2007, installation detail, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, 1,638 Kodak EasyShare C-prints, 4 x 6 inches each. Photograph by Huw Porter. Courtesy of the artist.

Flickr, in particular, has captured the interest of several artists. Notable among these is Penelope Umbrico, whose popular series *Suns from Flickr*

(*Partial*), underway since 2006, effectively encapsulates several of the seemingly contradictory aspects of digital abundance and accumulation in the realm of aesthetics (*Figure 2*). Like Kessels, Umbrico uses Flickr as her source. To create the works, she types the word “sunsets” into the site’s search engine, and culls her imagery from the millions of user-submitted photographs of sunsets. Umbrico does not reproduce the images she chooses in their entirety, but rather, carefully crops them so that the setting sun is the dominant and central feature, and the specificities of particular locations are eliminated. She thus extracts a common core from this collective image database. Umbrico then uploads the images to Kodak’s website, and orders 4 x 6-inch prints online through the company’s EasyShare system.<sup>5</sup> Umbrico assembles the small, commercially printed photographs into a grid that typically takes up at least the full scale of a museum or gallery wall, engulfing the viewer in an expanse of sunsets. Ultimately, each individual image is displayed in what emerges as a remarkably tactile installation, given its highly mediated virtual origins. While the installation conveys a sense of sublime endlessness, the few thousand individual images that make it up are really just a small sample of the now more than 10 million sunsets available on Flickr.

The collaborative team of Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe has also worked with the Flickr data stream. Though they also mine the site for images of suns, both rising and setting, their approach is distinctly different than Umbrico’s. Klett and Wolfe’s work is distinct to place, in particular, to the Grand Canyon. Their 2011 piece, *One hundred setting suns at the Grand Canyon arranged by hue; pictures from a popular image-sharing web site*, measures 82 inches in width (*Figure 3*). Their process begins in a similar way to Umbrico’s, searching Flickr’s site for particular terms. Yet because of the specificity of location, the project begins to address the artists’ notion of “image density,” tracking locations and views that tourists and visitors to the Grand Canyon repeatedly photograph.<sup>6</sup> This image density of a place tells us what people look at and what they choose to record, often in extraordinary numbers. Viewers may already be well aware that the Grand Canyon is one of the most photographed landscapes in the United States, but the project presents the

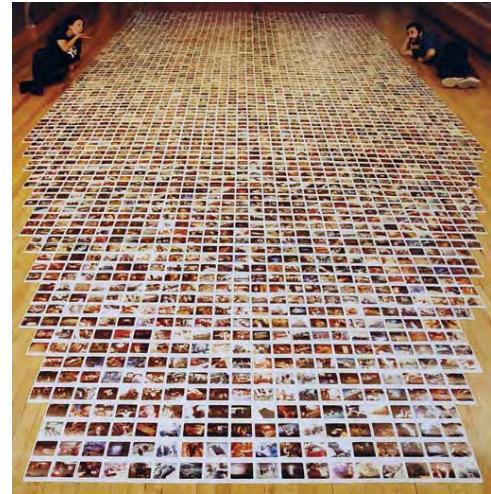
specific photographic views that are made time and again by many different visitors. Wolfe refers to this as “quantifying the sublime,” an idea to which I will return at the end of this essay in a case study of aesthetic approaches to both quantity and sunsets.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 3.** Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe, *One hundred setting suns at the Grand Canyon arranged by hue; pictures from a popular image-sharing web site*, 2011, digital inkjet print, 17 x 82 inches. Courtesy of the artists.

These recent photographic projects indicate a profound shift in how we make, share, and consume photographic images in the twenty-first century, but the aesthetic emphasis on the fact of accumulation and quantity as emblematic of the photographic medium is a pre-digital phenomenon. This is evidenced by the massive storehouses of photographs that exist, including the Smithsonian archive of more than 13 million photographs and the Bettman Archive of 17 million images, to name just two examples. The accumulative impulse is found within fine art photography as well: Garry Winogrand, upon his death, famously left more than 400,000 images he took but never saw.<sup>8</sup> Other artists, too, have considered the aesthetics of presenting large volumes of photographic images. Conceptual works by artists such as Douglas Huebler, Hanne Darboven, and Robert Smithson in the late 1960s established the visual and conceptual foundation for today’s cornucopia aesthetic.<sup>9</sup>

Also, some established modes of photography function, through a gradual accumulation of imagery, as markers of time. In this vein, the gold standard may well be Nicholas Nixon's extraordinary series *The Brown Sisters*, a suite of annual portraits made since 1975 of his wife and her sisters. The work, still in progress, consists of thirty-eight portraits of the sisters documenting their relationship for as many years.<sup>10</sup> Four years after Nixon began his project, the photographer Jamie Livingston began another time-based project, with starkly different aesthetic results (*Figures 4 and 5*). In 1979, he began to take one Polaroid photograph per day, recording an accumulation of moments that ultimately spanned eighteen years. The project ended upon Livingston's death in 1997, composed of 6,697 Polaroids, dated in sequence.<sup>11</sup> Despite its longevity, *The Brown Sisters*, photographed annually, exists within the fine print tradition, each year's portrait adding to the project's contemplative and poignant regard for the passage of time. Livingston's project, by contrast, speaks to photography as a medium both of voracious consumptive and accumulative tendencies, and though it is marked by a far higher degree of repetition throughout its imagery and a far lesser degree of craftsmanship, it is no less poignant a cumulative document.<sup>12</sup>

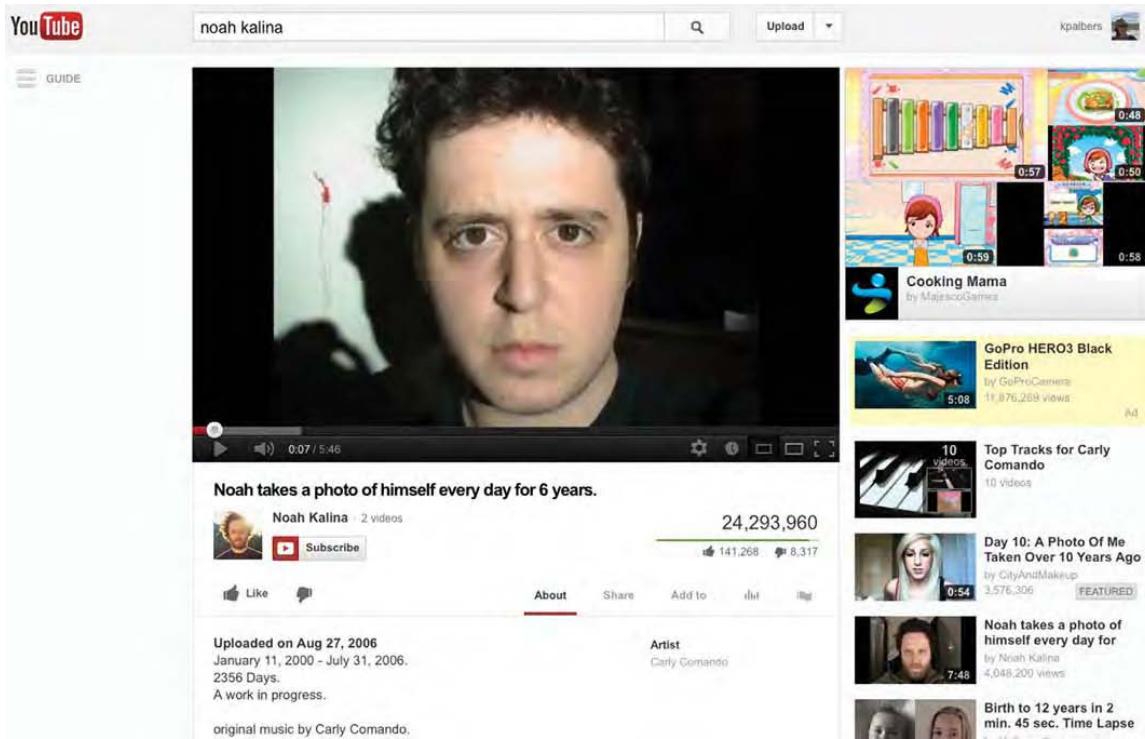


**Figure 4.** Jamie Livingston, detail from *Photo of the Day, 1979–1997*, Polaroid Time-Zero Supercolor, 41/4 x 31/2 inches. Courtesy of Hugh Crawford.



**Figure 5.** Jamie Livingston, detail from *Photo of the Day, 1979–1997*, Polaroid Time-Zero Supercolor, 41/4 x 31/2 inches. Courtesy of Hugh Crawford.

One can wonder what Livingston's project would have looked like in the digital age.<sup>13</sup> There is no question, however, that digital photography now makes accessible to a far broader spectrum of photographers the kind of photographic accumulation that once was isolated to somewhat unusual cases such as Garry Winogrand or Jamie Livingston. To accumulate even tens of thousands of photographs fazes no one. But the impulse to obsessively mark time via photography is enabled in a new way, with yet again different, and decidedly more mundane, aesthetics. Starting thirteen years ago, on January 11, 2000, Noah Kalina began making a digital picture of himself every day: his video, tracking six years of progress and 2,356 images, is a viral hit on YouTube, having been seen more than 24 million times<sup>14</sup> (*Figure 6*). Notably, the aesthetics of presentation have shifted. Nixon's thirty-some gelatin silver prints require at least a large wall to exhibit, and Livingston's 6,000 Polaroids required 120 linear feet of exhibition space, with the small prints arranged frameless and touching one another, stacked seven feet high. Kalina's project, by contrast, exists only digitally and is presented as a time-lapse sequence on a monitor. Though his work is certainly seen most often as a YouTube video, Kalina has also presented it on a freestanding video screen in a gallery space.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 6. Noah Kalina, YouTube screenshot of *Everyday*, January 11, 2000–present. Courtesy of the artist and YouTube.**

As cultural observers begin to catalogue the aesthetic strategies of presenting such accumulation, it is worth noting that according to rapidly shifting data storage standards, even Kalina’s obsessiveness is relatively mild. Every individual’s capacity to self-archive is rapidly expanding in our digital age. In 1999, for example, computer scientist Dr. Gordon Bell began to archive his own life, correspondingly designing the technology that allowed him, and the world, to do so.<sup>16</sup> Bell gathered emails and family photos, tracked phone calls made and web pages visited, and digitally stored memos, health records, home movies, voice recordings, and books. No detail was too mundane: he saved canceled checks, peeled off and scanned the labels of the bottles of wine he drank, and archived his airline boarding passes with the care typically reserved for precious family photographs. Bell was the experimental subject of Microsoft’s *MyLifeBits* program, the goal of which is to develop the technology to produce a personal archiving program that is, as the company puts it, “a lifetime store of everything.” Bell’s project is emblematic of an age in which the human desire to keep cherished mementoes from the past

intersects with extraordinary and agile storage technologies. Indeed, a prototype for a new life-logging camera was just released by the Swedish company Memoto, which automatically records one photograph every 30 seconds around the clock. While hung around the life-logger's neck or attached to his or her clothes, the camera can record 1.5 terabytes of geotagged visual data over the course of a year. The company cheerfully claims that the device will "give you pictures of every single moment of your life," adding, "This means that you can revisit any moment of your past."<sup>17</sup>

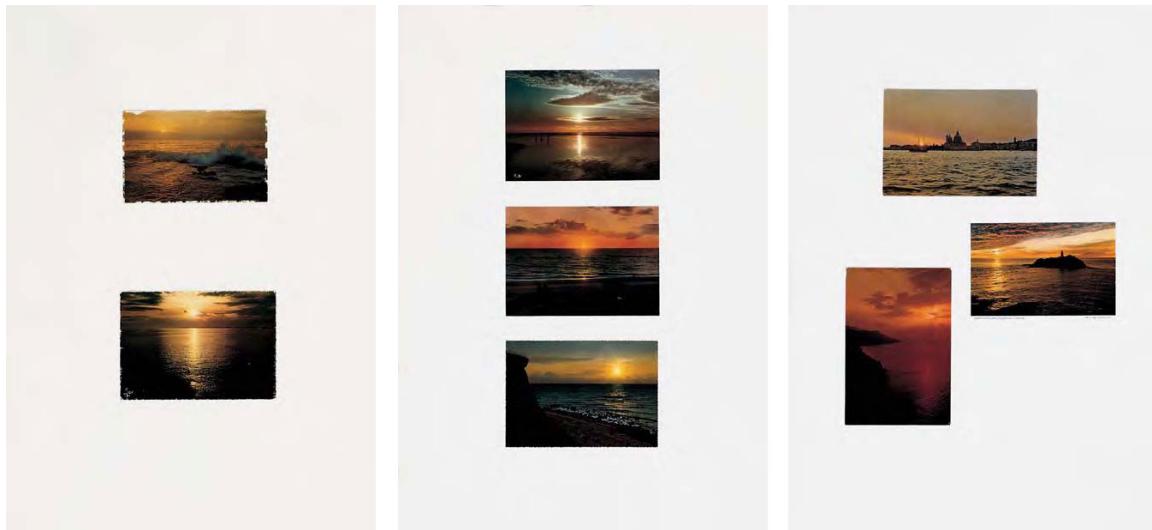
## Case Studies: Suns

Many more photographic examples could be cited here, yet the selection I have introduced highlights a range of both artistic and cultural practices of image production in a time of great accumulative possibility. The rest of this essay outlines a series of case studies—both pre-digital and digital—of artists whose work addresses accumulation and volume in photography practice, considering the intellectual and organizational structures through which everyday users of photography make meaning from such volume, from historical atlases to digital databases.

German artist Gerhard Richter's massive and ongoing *Atlas*—a now monumental work that was first exhibited in 1972 with a "mere" few thousand photographic images—is a cornerstone of accumulative aesthetic and photographic practices. Some forty years in the making, *Atlas* is now composed of upwards of 8,000 individual images: a number that, while admittedly a far cry from Kessels's one million images, still evinces volume on a scale that resists easy consumption or interpretation (*Figures 7 and 8*).



**Figure 7.** Gerhard Richter, *Atlas*, installed at Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich, 2005. Photograph by Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich. © Gerhard Richter, 2013.



**Figure 8.** Gerhard Richter, *Atlas*, Panels 175, 176, and 178, “Landscapes” 1969–1971, color postcards, 51.7 x 36.7 cm each. Photograph by Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich. © Gerhard Richter, 2013.

The content of *Atlas* interweaves both a personal history and a larger political history, incorporating fragments of national and international events with personal family snapshots, as well as images from the artist’s professional work, in the form of sketches, proposals, and source photographs for many of his paintings. *Atlas* begins with hundreds of family photographs and mass media images, and moves on quickly to encompass images from a broader political world. But throughout, and often for long stretches at a time, *Atlas* is strikingly banal, offering up hundreds of photographs the artist took and had commercially printed of landscape, scenery, domestic life, and even sunsets. Viewers see places, such as Sils Maria, that Richter visits frequently, and intimate photographs of his wife, Sabine, and the birth and babyhood of his children, Moritz and Ella. Additional photographs of Richter’s friends and acquaintances, the artist’s home, trains, flowers, architectural studies, and other ephemera are included, among much more.

Scholarship on the spatial dimensions of Richter’s *Atlas* has focused on the whole, digesting the generalizations of groups of images rather than dissecting the particularities and specificities of individual photographs within the panels. To a large degree, this is simply a practical critical response to such a massive undertaking. Faced with upwards of 8,000 individual

images in *Atlas*, a minimum of three and a half hours are necessary to look at each individual image for a mere two seconds.

The structure of *Atlas*, both in name and in mechanics, allows viewers to dwell on the important differences between ways of assembling knowledge. An atlas is different from a database, a repository, an archive, an album, or any other number of accumulative arrangements. Atlases—whether in the sciences or in terms of maps—are compendiums of knowledge in any given area or field. Indeed, the very category “atlas” directs the reader to a particular consumption of *Atlas*’s peculiar accumulations. While an album is a well-recognized and understood form, and archives have been the subject of intense artistic, curatorial, and scholarly inquiry for more than a decade now, the atlas genre is less distinct. To complicate matters, Richter’s *Atlas* has most often been analyzed as a kind of archive, albeit a very public one.<sup>18</sup>

Art historian Dorothea Dietrich, however, has gone farthest in reading *Atlas* as, actually, an atlas. An atlas, Dietrich writes,

*is an instrument of control ... [in which] the unfamiliar is brought under control by the ordering eye and hand of the cartographer, the distant territory neatly charted and represented in readable form as a two-dimensional abstraction. It holds at bay the terror of the unknown and is relentless in its pursuit of order. Its agenda is all-encompassing, its goal the charting of each and every area of the globe so that even the last remaining pocket of chaos will be tamed and made available as ordered space. And once the space has been charted and the map drawn ... the atlas may become the road map for the developer.*<sup>19</sup>

Dietrich puts Richter in the role of the controlling cartographer charting his territory, holding the unknown at bay, pursuing order, and taming chaos. In this view, Richter is in a clear position of power, deftly organizing his barrage of otherwise unwieldy photographic imagery—and personal history—into a controlled area, fit for presentation, much like a mapmaker. Far from neutral, atlases of maps have always been constructed to communicate and circulate a specific world-view through their particular spatial arrangement of visual information. The atlas-maker’s job is to assemble a view of the world from the

best available sources: an atlas seeks to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>20</sup>

Historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison recount that it was by the eighteenth century that the term *atlas* came to designate not just illustrated volumes of geography—maps—but also astronomy and anatomy. By the nineteenth century, these picture books were produced as guides throughout the empirical sciences, covering topics as varied as snowflakes, diseased organs, clouds, and crystal structures.<sup>21</sup> These atlases, whatever the field, purport to be a totalizing view, the final word on any given subject. Atlases both define and claim knowledge of discrete subjects, whether that subject is topography or botany or world history. Atlases, Daston and Galison write, “are the guides all practitioners consult time and time again to find out what is worth looking at, how it looks, and, perhaps most important of all, how it should be looked at.”<sup>22</sup> They are made to instruct, expected to do no less than teach us to see. Looking at Richter’s *Atlas* in fact, then, as an atlas, yields an understanding of his project within a specific cultural structure, and as one that guides us, as the viewers, to understand its wide-ranging accumulations as a complex editorial venture—far from the neutrality any “archive” might suggest.

## The Flickering Sun

What do Richter’s pre-digital accumulations have to do with their digital counterparts? Where might *Atlas* find continuity within the digital realm, and where does it diverge? In order to address these questions, I will look at Richter’s many photographs of sunsets contained within *Atlas*, reading them alongside Penelope Umbrico’s *Suns from Flickr* and Klett and Wolfe’s Grand Canyon suns. Both projects move away from the structural specificities of the atlas form and insist instead on a consideration of more current accumulative apparatus: the digital archive, database, and image stream.

From as early as 1969, Richter collected postcards of sunsets. He has continued to add his own commercially printed photographs of sunsets to *Atlas* over the ensuing decades.<sup>23</sup> While a few images in *Atlas* do stand out, the sunsets do not. Rather than grabbing a viewer's attention, they more typically fade into the march of more or less routine landscape photographs that characterize much of *Atlas*, repeating, for the viewer, the experience of looking at someone else's pretty vacation pictures. And, at least in the early iterations of *Atlas* sunsets, Richter is mining a kind of pre-digital data stream: choosing images that already exist in the world. That recycling of images marks a distinctly different working process than the majority of the work discussed thus far. Whether working with fine gelatin silver prints, Polaroids, or digital capture, Nicholas Nixon, Jamie Livingston, and Noah Kalina each produce their own photographs. However, *Atlas*'s early tendency to dwell on the already-photographed is picked up in the database-mining of Umbrico, Kessels, and Klett/Wolfe.

Penelope Umbrico's anonymous sunsets in *Suns from Flickr* are more distinctly depersonalized than those in *Atlas*, but as a result are more easily read as emblematic of a universal experience. The effect of Umbrico's installation depends on its materiality: despite each individual photograph's digital origins, the visual experience of seeing a wall full of sunsets is aesthetically closer to the presentation of Livingston's daily photographic project or to Richter's *Atlas* than the video monitor presentation of Kalina's years of self-portraiture. Its accumulations are viscerally felt: the viewer can soak up a field of sunsets en masse.<sup>24</sup> The sameness of Umbrico's sunsets is due in large part to her choice to crop and, thus, generalize the visual information. Whatever the source of the original images, Umbrico's editing of them creates a homogenized visual totality that thwarts any comparison of these many iterations of the sun. Despite her editorial hand, then, *Suns from Flickr* refers much more pointedly than any image in *Atlas* to collective photographic production.

Umbrico resists calling her sunsets an archive, saying that the piece "uses an archive (all the sunset pictures on Flickr) which is made up of data ... as the means (not an end) to make art."<sup>25</sup> But, as with Richter's *Atlas*, the

categorical tension between her accumulations and a known cultural structure—Flickr—proves productive, provoking an analysis of the archival qualities of the Internet. Both photography and the Internet, Umbrico suggests, “function as indexical records of our collective culture—a visual index of data that represents us: a constantly changing and spontaneous auto-portrait.”<sup>26</sup> Unlike Richter’s sunsets, operating as the product of one individual’s thought process, Umbrico’s sunsets engage the implications of an anonymous social and technological collective of accumulation. What may have started as a deeply personal moment—the contemplation of a sunset—becomes, as the experience is photographed and subsequently uploaded to Flickr, a participation in a decidedly routine collective cultural ritual. As Umbrico has noted, photographing sunsets, “is something we all engage in, despite our better artistic judgment, knowing that there have been millions before and there will be millions after.”<sup>27</sup>



**Figure 9.** Penelope Umbrico, *People in front of Suns (From Sunsets)* from Flickr, 2011–ongoing, digital C-prints, 5 x 7 inches each. Courtesy of the artist.

While Richter’s *Atlas* can be off-putting to its viewers, appearing in installation as an imposing and overwhelming edifice that is difficult to access, Umbrico’s sunsets have proven to be decidedly user-friendly. In a

fantastic display of aesthetic circularity, viewers routinely photograph themselves in front of this panoply of sunsets, almost as they would a real sunset. Better yet, they upload these photographs back onto Flickr, and Umbrico finds them, prints them out, and arranges them in an installation titled *People in front of Suns (From Sunsets) from Flickr*, just as she does with the “original” suns (*Figure 9*). One appeal of having one’s picture taken in front of Umbrico’s *Suns from Flickr* is, as the artist suggests, “a similar physiological response to the visual warmth of the images that is analogous to the actual warmth of the sun.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, her installation makes viewers feel good. To this I can testify. When I encountered Umbrico’s installation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I joined a cohort of happy lingerers milling about and collectively basking in the warmth of the piece. My husband photographed the installation himself and used the image as the wallpaper on his iPhone for a couple of years—a way, I suppose, of getting away with having a corny sunset image as a screensaver that reads nevertheless as art.

Another point of appeal with Umbrico’s *Suns from Flickr* installation may be that we recognize ourselves, or a memory of ourselves, and feel invited to re-perform the collective ritual of posing in an echo of what we have done before. In this way, *Suns from Flickr* is distinctly un-atlas-like. It does not address us from a position of authority, presenting us with a body of knowledge and teaching us to see. Rather, it brings us back to our comforting mediated rituals, pointing out, perhaps, the un-originality of photographing a sunset, but ultimately affirming our own participation in the collective practice.

The role of collective ritual appears as well in Klett and Wolfe’s Flickr investigations of the Grand Canyon. The image I began with, *One hundred setting suns at the Grand Canyon arranged by hue; pictures from a popular image-sharing web site*, 2011, differs in presentation from both Richter’s and Umbrico’s sunsets: the cropped Flickr images are arranged by hue and then recombined into one digital file and produced as a single (albeit very large) print. In this aesthetic, the physicality of the individual prints is elided in favor of a uniform visual presentation.

The artists' long-term collaboration has grown out of their work in the realms of re-photography, and years worth of literally re-tracing the footsteps of photographers who had come before them.<sup>29</sup> The Flickr work is a clear departure from their established practice of a precise and historically based view of the contemporary landscape. And yet, at the same time, Klett and Wolfe continue to investigate the views of other photographers, but rather than following Timothy O'Sullivan or Ansel Adams, their guides are the legions of amateur photographers who have shared their work on Flickr. And it is the collective ritual of these visitors to photograph the canyon that provides Klett and Wolfe with a repository of views of this particular and deeply iconic place. Wolfe has referred to their practice as "quantifying the sublime," which strikes me as a concept precariously balanced on the brink between sincerity and cynicism.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, camera-toting tourists are an easy and fun target for critics, seemingly mindlessly recording the same obligatory souvenir shots, over and over. They are suspect of not really seeing a place and thus, by extension, not really experiencing it.<sup>31</sup> But Klett and Wolfe's project is not cynical, rather it is deeply human: an investigation that recognizes and appreciates, rather than mocks, the routine viewing and photographic habits of Grand Canyon visitors.

The artists' interest in the idea of image density—of quantifying how many photographs have been made of a particular view—in fact began with an interest in how many photographs had been made *from* particular locations. That is to say, Klett and Wolfe first began with the problem of how to visualize where photographers had stood (and they made topographic studies of photographic viewpoints in Yosemite in this regard) but evolved into the problem of how to visualize what people had looked at most and where they pointed their cameras.<sup>32</sup> Their conceptual way of approaching Flickr, then, differed markedly from Umbrico, whose sunsets are of anyplace, recording the broad propensity of people to take a photograph of the setting sun no matter where they are, until every specific sunset becomes a totality of the concept "sunset."

A second piece by Klett and Wolfe, *Fifty sunrises at Mather Point arranged by a shared horizon; pictures from a popular image-sharing web site*, 2011, gets at this

point more directly (*Figure 10*). In this case, Wolfe mined Flickr for literally overlapping photographs of the same site and graphed them onto one another in a kind of “average” view of a Grand Canyon sunrise. By lining up familiar topographic features and adjusting the opacity of the overlaid images, Wolfe could virtually “stand,” from the comfort of his home in northern California, where the fifty Flickr photographers had stood to watch the sunset. Unknown family members and friends appear as ghostly forms, their images not quite strong enough in the composite layering of separate photographs to be recorded for posterity in this iteration. Nevertheless, their forms humanize the Grand Canyon pilgrimage, the ritual of rising early to watch the sunrise, and its subsequent photographic capture.



**Figure 10.** Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe, *Fifty sunrises at Mather Point arranged by a shared horizon; pictures from a popular image-sharing web site*, 2011, digital inkjet print, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artists.

To end where we began, Erik Kessels's response to the volume of photographic imagery available on Flickr seems to be the equivalent of throwing his hands up in the air and declaring a kind of hedonistic defeat: none of us stands a chance in this deluge, the best we can do is roll with it, gorging ourselves on the overload of imagery. Despite its radically different temperamental and aesthetic sensibility, this approach has something in common with the pre-digital accumulative idiosyncrasies of Richter's *Atlas*, in which the artist collects a tremendous range and variety of photographic imagery, but resists producing a narrative. Umbrico and Klett/Wolfe's projects function more as core samples, forgoing any attempt at capturing range in favor of dwelling on the same subject, seen again and again, either from vantage points around the world, or vantage points within a few feet of one another. As such, instead of documenting the accumulations of a single individual, they tap into shared photographic experience (and, via Flickr, shared experience shared).

Umbrico has underscored the exponential growth of Flickr by changing the numbers in the titles through the ongoing installations of her work. In 2007, the title was *2,303,057 Suns from Flickr (Partial) 09/25/07*. In 2008, it was *3,221,717 Suns from Flickr (Partial) 03/31/08*. By 2011, it was *8,730,221 Suns from Flickr (Partial) 02/20/11*. Ultimately, it doesn't really seem to matter whether there are 2 million or 8 million suns on Flickr, whether the Smithsonian archives 10 million or 13 million photographs, or how quickly Instagram will surpass the 5 billion image mark. In this scenario, where the singular print might seem to be beside the point, not even part of the equation, in fact each and every sunset photograph becomes emblematic of the whole, of the entirety of 8 million sunsets: cosmic rather than banal. The artist's intervention is finite; even Flickr, in its boundlessness, is finite. One photograph is no match for the relentlessness of the totality of the photographic enterprise or for the experience everyone wants to capture: day after day the sun comes up and the sun goes down. And yet, each photograph is a microcosm of this endlessness. Whether or not Umbrico continues to add installations to the ever-growing accumulations of sunsets on Flickr, people will continue to photograph and share their photographs of sunsets without

her, just as they will continue to rise before dawn at the Grand Canyon, capturing their ghostly figures at sunrise to share with friends and family. The sublime marches on.

## Notes

1. The piece was installed at the FOAM exhibition *The Future of the Photography Museum*, in Amsterdam, November 5 to December 7, 2011. ↵
2. Matt Brian, “8 Billion photos later, Flickr finally gets a new look” *The Next Web*, December 12, 2012, <http://thenextweb.com/insider/2012/12/12/8-billion-photos-later-flickr-finally-gets-a-new-look/> (accessed March 31, 2013). ↵
3. Emil Protalinski, “Instagram passes 80 million users,” C-Net, July 26, 2012, [http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023\\_3-57480931-93/instagram-passes-80-million-users/](http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-57480931-93/instagram-passes-80-million-users/) (accessed March 31, 2013). Recent data (January 2013) reports that Instagram users post 40 million photographs per day. Rebecca Greenfield, “How Many Users Does Instagram Really Have after the Ad Scandal?” *The Atlantic Wire*, January 12, 2013, <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2013/01/how-many-users-does-instagram-have/61139/> (accessed March 31, 2013). ↵
4. According to Facebook engineer Justin Mitchell on the company blog, January 25, 2011, <https://blog.facebook.com/>. It is worth noting that Facebook bought Instagram in 2012 for about \$1 billion. ↵
5. Penelope Umbrico, email correspondence with the author, November 22, 2011, to February 12, 2012. ↵
6. See Rebecca A. Senf’s essay in Klett and Wolfe’s recent publication, *Reconstructing the View*, for a discussion of image density with regard to the artists’ broader oeuvre and its implications as a replacement for “then and now” picture pairs. Senf also details the crucial position of online database searches in their Grand Canyon work particularly as it pertains to research on prints made by individual photographers within a fine art or commercial history. Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe, *Reconstructing the View: The Grand Canyon Photographs of Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). ↵
7. Byron Wolfe, in telephone interview with the author, November 28, 2012. ↵
8. Winogrand left more than 2,500 rolls of undeveloped film, 6,500 rolls of processed film, and 3,000 rolls of contact sheets that evidently had not been looked at: a total of 12,000 rolls, or 432,000 photos. His archive

is held at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, AZ. See John Szarkowski, *Winogrand: Figments from the Real World* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988). ↵

9. I am thinking of Hanne Darboven's *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983*; Douglas Huebler's *Duration Pieces*, in which he claimed to be trying to photograph "everyone alive"; and Robert Smithson's now-lost *400 Seattle Horizons*, 1969, in which he sent Lucy Lippard instructions for a work consisting of 400 photographs to be taken of deserted Seattle horizons with a Kodak Instamatic camera. ↵
10. The series has been published twice in full, most recently in Nicholas Nixon, *The Brown Sisters: Thirty-Three Years* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007). ↵
11. The entire group of Polaroids was shown in the exhibition *Photo of the Day: 1979–1997, 6,697 Polaroids, Dated in Sequence* at Bertelsmann Campus Center at Bard College, New York, in 2007. See David Shafel, "The Days of His Life," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2008. Figure 4, illustrated here, shows Jamie Livingston on the left and his girlfriend Betsy Reid on the right. According to Hugh Crawford, Livingston intended the exhibition to be titled *Some Photos of That Day: 1979–1997, 6,697 Polaroids, Dated in Sequence*. I am grateful to Hugh Crawford for his email correspondence with me about this work.  
[hugh@hughcrawford.com](mailto:hugh@hughcrawford.com) ↵
12. Many more projects could be discussed in this context including Andy Warhol's massive quantities of Polaroids and snapshots; Nancy Floyd's daily self-portraits in her project *Weathering Time* (1982–present); Karl Baden's daily self-portraits *Every Day* (1987–present); Suzanne Szucs's daily Polaroids, *Journal, In Progress* (1994–2009); Roni Horn's 100 portraits of the same woman in *You Are the Weather Part I* (1994–1996) and *Part II* (2010–2011); Alfredo Jaar's *100 Times Nguyen* (1996); and Betsy Schneider's daily portraits of her daughter in *Quotidian* (1997–2009). ↵
13. The practice has moved well beyond a practice within a fine art context, indeed Flickr now has several groups dedicated to so-called "365" projects in which participants take one photograph every day of the year in subgroups from self-portraits to pictures "around the house," and daily photographs of beloved pets to iPhone-specific users. To date, the 365 Flickr pool has more than 21,000 members and more than 1 million photographs. ↵
14. In September 2012, Kalina posted an updated video of 4,514 photographs, tracking 12½ years. As of November 2012, it has been seen more than 4 million times, for a total of more than 28 million views of both videos. ↵
15. [www.noahkalina.com](http://www.noahkalina.com) (accessed April 1, 2013). ↵

16. See Microsoft's research page, <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/projects/mylifebits/> (accessed April 1, 2013). ↵
17. See [www.memoto.com](http://www.memoto.com) (accessed April 1, 2013). It is curious that even with the extraordinary volume of data that actually is recorded, the company still feels the need to exaggerate the claim for "every single moment" and "any moment" from your past. A darker side to the commercial optimism of the *MyLifeBits* and Memoto projects is seen in the work of Bangladeshi-born American artist Hasan Elahi and the Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal. Mistakenly added to the U.S. government's terrorist watch list in 2002, Elahi has since digitally self-tracked and archived the minutia of his own daily comings and goings. Elahi takes up to 100 digital photographs a day as a record of his meals, his locations, and his encounters, and uploads them to his website, *TrackingTransience.net*, making them available for anyone—including the FBI—to view. A GPS device continuously tracks his location, and the information is available in real time on his website. Bilal made a more extreme entry into self-surveillance by having a digital camera surgically implanted in the back of his head, which is programmed to take one photograph a minute. The camera was in place for one year, 2010 to 2011. Its images were livestreamed, along with geocoordinates, to Bilal's website, *3rdi.com*, where ultimately more than 500,000 time- and location-stamped photographs were archived. ↵
18. Arguably the most prominent and authoritative reading of *Atlas* is Benjamin Buchloh's, from his 1999 article "The Anomic Archive." Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive," *October* 88 (Spring 1999): 117–45. I have elaborated on the structure of *Atlas* in my article "Reading the World Trade Center in Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*," *Art History* 35:1 (February 2011): 152–73. ↵
19. Dorothea Dietrich, "Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas': One-Man Show in a Shipping Crate," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* XXVI, no. 6 (January–February 1996): 204. ↵
20. Ibid., 26. ↵
21. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 23. ↵
22. Ibid. ↵
23. Though he has not, to my knowledge, painted a sunset. ↵
24. The layout and design of Umbrico's recent monograph, which functions effectively as an artist's book in this regard, achieves a transposition of this visual effect. Penelope Umbrico, *Penelope Umbrico (photographs)* (New York: Aperture, 2011). ↵
25. Penelope Umbrico, email message to author, February 1, 2012. ↵

26. Ibid. ↵
27. Penelope Umbrico, email message to author, February 11, 2012. ↵
28. Ibid. ↵
29. For a discussion of their working process, see especially Rebecca A. Senf, "Reconstructing the View: An Illustrated Guide to Process and Method," in Klett and Wolfe, *Reconstructing the View*. ↵
30. Byron Wolfe, in telephone interview with the author, November 28, 2012. ↵
31. An early critique of tourists' unthinking reiteration of famous shots they have seen before can be found in Pierre Bourdieu's *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), originally published in French as *Un art moyen: essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* in 1965. Variations of the critique are widespread: Susan Sontag took it up in her essays from the 1970s compiled in *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989); the protagonist in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (New York: Viking Press, 1985) visits the most photographed barn in America and meditates on the impossibility of any longer seeing the barn itself. ↵
32. Byron Wolfe, in telephone interview with the author, November 28, 2012. ↵

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Kate Palmer Albers, "Abundant Images and the Collective Sublime," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (October 1, 2013). [/articles/abundantimages.html](#).

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Any updates or corrections to this article made after October 1, 2013, are tracked in full in the GitHub repository for this project:  [https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/\\_posts/2013-10-01-abundantimages.md](https://github.com/katepalbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/_posts/2013-10-01-abundantimages.md)

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## Kate Palmer Albers

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Her current research outside of this writing project focuses on the role of ephemerality throughout the history of photography and proposes that the range of ways and reasons photographs disappear offers a counterpoint to the predominant theoretical modes of understanding the medium.

Albers has an ongoing interest, as well, in the intersection of photography, geolocation technology, and landscape representations. In this area, she organized the exhibition *Locating Landscape: New Strategies, New Technologies* at the Sam Lee Gallery in Los Angeles (2009) and participated in the NEH Summer Institute Mapping and Art in the Americas at the Newberry Library in Chicago (2010).

## Books:

*Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography* (University of California Press, 2015).

*Before-and-After Photography: Histories and Contexts*, co-edited with Jordan Bear, forthcoming from Bloomsbury Press (2016).

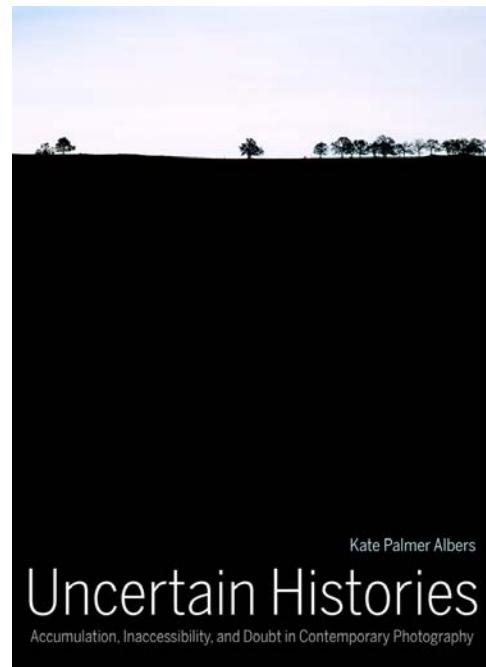
## Related Articles and Chapters:

"Accessing the Landscape: Photography, Technology and Place Today" in Hans Hedberg, Gunilla Knape, Tyrone Martinsson, and Louise Wolthers, eds., *Broken: Environmental Photography* (Gothenburg, Sweden: Photography at Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg / Hasselblad Foundation and Art and Theory, 2014), 15-33. Projects include Nate Larson & Marni Shindelman, Bruce Myren, and the Degree

“Unseen Images: Gigapixel Photography and its Viewers,” *Photographies* special issue on “Surveillance and Place” (published online April 7, 2014; print edition followed)

"Abundant Images and the Collective Sublime," *Exposure* 46:2 (Fall 2013), 4-14. Artists include Penelope Umbrico, Gerhard Richter, Erik Kessels, Noah Kalina, Jamie Livingston, Nick Nixon, and Mark Klett & Byron Wolfe.

**“It’s Not an Archive”: Christian Boltanksi’s *Les Archives de C.B. 1965-1988***  
*Visual Resources* 27:3 (August 2011), 249-266.



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"Cartographic Postings: GPS, Photography, and Landscape" *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* (March/April 2010). Artists include Andrew Freeman and Frank Gohlke.

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