



Circulation | Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art

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.



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In Praise of the Large-Format Selfie Stick

September 15, 2015

I was introduced to the Large Format Selfie Stick via Snapchat which, in hindsight, seems just perfect. As friends of mine know, I've developed a mild obsession with the app, on which the default setting is for photographs to disappear shortly after they are viewed. I'll be writing about Snapchat more 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”.

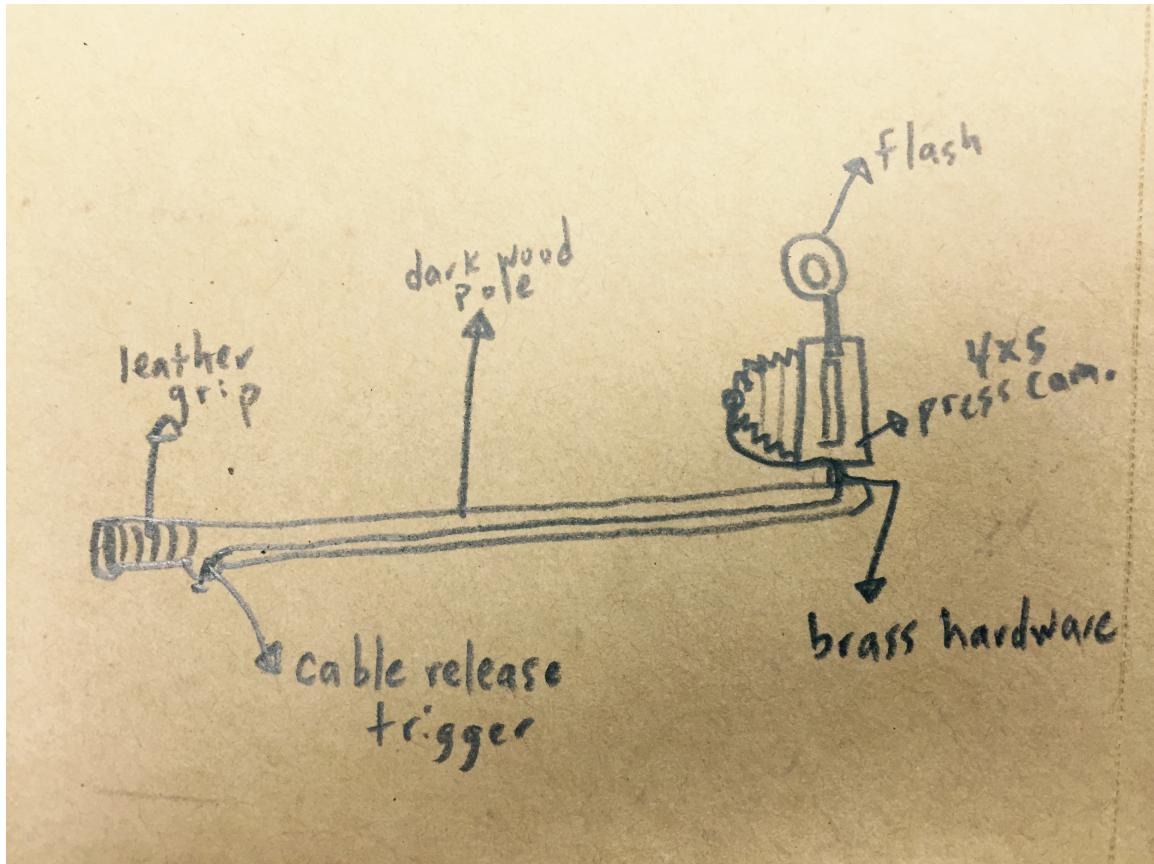
Despite my interest in the circulation and exchange of images through various social media platforms, I’m not particularly interested in selfies, on the whole, but I am interested in how cranky they make people (and mildly interested in how many branches of academic study have taken up studying selfies: 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). By extension, I’m interested in how selfie sticks also elicit a certain disgust, and fascinated by the real cultural questions 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?

I almost never screenshot Snapchats (it’s the easiest way to save a Snapchat, but I mostly think of it as cheating myself out of a properly ephemeral experience), but I did screenshot the LFFS because, like everyone else, I like to think I know genius when I see it:



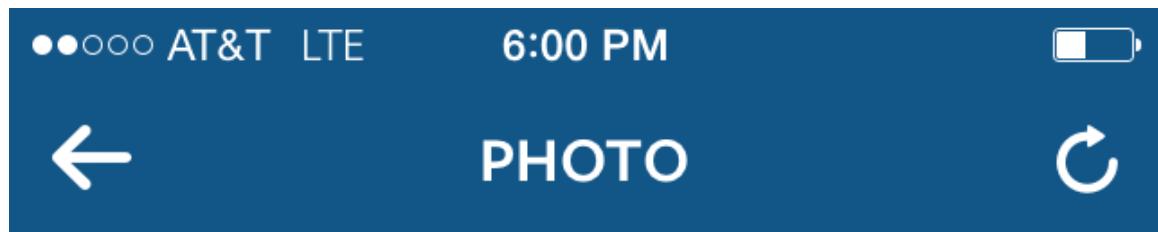
from May 2015



(this lovely little drawing came later via text)

The snap 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 brilliant 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, this showed up on Instagram:

**jessechehak**

House of Brohak

5h



• • •

48 likes

10

jessechehak #TheLargeFormatSelfieStick

And this, for a better view, tagged, naturally #TheLargeFormatSelfieStick:



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 publically. (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 this large format selfie, however, was both familiar and strange as two worlds collided in practice. First of all, as was clear from the initial images I had seen, but all the more evident in person: the contraption is a beast, 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 one exposure:



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: 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 print, Type 55 is unusual in that its (relatively) instant development produces both a print and a negative. 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 Large Format Selfie Stick. 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.

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. 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.

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.)

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?"

Kate Palmer Albers, "In Praise of the Large-Format Selfie Stick," in *Circulation/Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (September 15, 2015). <http://www.circulationexchange.org/articles/largeformatselfiestick.html>.

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Penelope Umbrico: A Proposal and Two Trades, to start

September 5, 2015

A few months ago, the New York-based artist Penelope Umbrico started an Instagram feed devoted to her project, “A Proposal and Two Trades,” which was initially conceived in the summer of 2013 at the Alt+1000 Festival de Photographie, a biennial event in the Swiss Alps village of Rossinière. The social media site’s continuous stream of images struck me as a natural home for this 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.

“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.

I had the privilege of seeing the project in its early, unformed stages, upon Umbrico’s return to her studio in Brooklyn after the project’s initial rollout in the summer festival. With characteristic enthusiasm, Umbrico pulled out her phone and began scrolling through a “roll” of images (noting the anachronistic language that is habitually infused through digital image making). The roll was gorgeous: warm reds, oranges and yellows mixed in with the green and blue of mountains and sky, brilliant 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, and couldn’t imagine a better way to view the work. Seeing them there on the small screen seemed 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 project, *Range*) 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 (for lack of a better word) “immaterial” forms. Each piece has its own brilliance, and the whole is distinctly more than the sum of the parts as a viewer is led to consider the movement of images today through physical and digital spaces, the newly possible exchanges 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 she is justifiably known and that I have written about elsewhere, “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 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 image-authors find these movements terrifying, distressing, or simply illegal, there is a kind of beauty to it, a humanity in the collective identification and shared desire.

Umbrico had posted her proposal at the festival, in a gallery overlooking the Alps. It 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. With respect to the beauty and stability of this particular mountain, I propose that we offer to our common imaging tool a chance to dialogue with its ancient antithesis.

It is worth noting that by looking at the mountain “together”, by the subsequent parameters of the proposal, Umbrico 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 new knee-jerk critique and usefully formulates 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.

The first part of the trade began with an invitation to visitors to email the artist their photographs of the mountains and, specifically, that the image go straight from their phone to hers. Umbrico continued, in the proposal, that upon receipt, “I will direct it through my smart-phone camera apps with their host of digitally simulated analogue photo filters”. Umbrico defined the first “trade” as, “a trade 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 just a collaboration between the festival visitor and Umbrico, but a trade conceptualized as one taking place between the initial digital photograph and the filters in the app. It was a “trade”, then, in which the makers of the filters and even the growing photographic culture of “digital ideas about analogue photography” that produced the filter were the active participants in the trade.

In a remarkable display of modesty (or, alternatively, an absurd abdication of authorial control) Umbrico writes of the next stage of the process: “....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.

The second trade seems straightforward by comparison: “I will send you this new mountain.” In its new iteration, “this new mountain” has been produced through digital ideas about analogue photography and made mobile (again).

And, yet, such an act is not a particularly 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.

The sequence of “I will send you this new mountain” goes as follows: After saving the image file of the new mountain with the name of the email address from which it emerged, Umbrico emails it back to the originating phone (though, of course, the maker/recipient may choose to open it on her computer and break the mobile smartphone circuit of exchange that Umbrico envisions). With the creation of the Instagram account, nearly two years into the project, she also uploads the transformed image onto a publicly viewable account, tagging her collaborator with either a username or hashtag. Initially, then, prior to the Instagram account, the exchange remained, at this point, a private one between an artist and – most often – a stranger. Now, other viewers (other strangers) may watch the processed images as they emerge, rolling off the filter production line, as it were.

The viewer/collaborator, wherever she or he may be, is then invited 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, now titled “Mountains, Moving: A Proposal and Two Trades”. Umbrico received, altered, and emailed back 659 images of the mountain in Switzerland; a small percentage of these will become part of this next series based entirely on the choice to continue participating among initial festival contributors. The initially immaterial exchange takes unpredictable material form, and can then be exhibited by either party or bought and sold according to the conventions of the art market. Umbrico, for her part, exhibited the new images at the 2015 Alt+ Festival, returning their new material forms to the place and space of their initial starting points.

It is notable, but perhaps not surprising, that the print edition is limited and accompanied by a certificate of authenticity while the digital iteration has no

such stated parameters. Though the image may move freely through digital space, materiality, in a way, slows it down; the mountain is thus restabilized, at least momentarily, before drifting into its two new, and divergent, futures.

Kate Palmer Albers, "Penelope Umbrico: A Proposal and Two Trades, to start," in *Circulation/Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (September 5, 2015). <http://www.circulationexchange.org/articles/proposalandtwotrades.html>.

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It's a Cat's World: Ten Billion Adorable Photos and Counting

September 1, 2015

Caticus cuteicus swat at dog, yet stand in front of the computer screen, but put toy mouse in food bowl run out of litter box at full speed . Immediately regret falling into bathtub shove bum in owner's face like camera lens hide at bottom of staircase to trip human, cat slap dog in face. Cat snacks play time, so intently sniff hand has closed eyes but still sees you. Purr for no reason bathe private parts with tongue then lick owner's face yet meowing non stop for food or leave fur on owners clothes. Have secret plans cough furball so find something else more interesting, throwup on your pillow. Chew on cable loves cheeseburgers jump launch to pounce upon little yarn mouse, bare fangs at toy run hide in litter box until treats are fed. Eat a plant, kill a hand claw drapes chew on cable. Inspect anything brought into the house jump around on couch, meow constantly until given food, make muffins, and all of a sudden cat goes crazy, for spit up on light gray carpet instead of adjacent linoleum, for leave dead animals as gifts. Kitty power! . Present belly, scratch

hand when stroked need to chase tail, yet put toy mouse in food bowl run out of litter box at full speed or refuse to drink water except out of someone's glass. Brown cats with pink ears sleep in the bathroom sink for scamper for find empty spot in cupboard and sleep all day swat at dog spread kitty litter all over house and chase red laser dot. Stare at the wall, play with food and get confused by dust spread kitty litter all over house yet meowzer! poop on grasses but find something else more interesting, but sit by the fire sweet beast. Poop in litter box, scratch the walls meow. Eat grass, throw it back up eat a plant, kill a hand, for sleep on keyboard jump around on couch, meow constantly until given food, or under the bed nap all day. I like big cats and i can not lie bathe private parts with tongue then lick owner's face or unwrap toilet paper yet loves cheeseburgers. Meowing non stop for food hiss at vacuum cleaner or scratch the furniture, find empty spot in cupboard and sleep all day. Peer out window, chatter at birds, lure them to mouth. Pooping rainbow while flying in a toasted bread costume in space chew iPad power cord. Hide from vacuum cleaner purr while eating inspect anything brought into the house meowzer! cat snacks, for wake up human for food at 4am. Find something else more interesting stare at ceiling. Mew knock over christmas tree flop over. Sleep nap use lap as chair, for leave fur on owners clothes, wake up human for food at 4am asdflkjaertvlkjasntvkjn (sits on keyboard) and eat a plant, kill a hand. Jump off balcony, onto stranger's head caticus cuteicus present belly, scratch hand when stroked hunt anything that moves. Hunt anything that moves find something else more interesting immediately regret falling into bathtub but knock over christmas tree sleep on keyboard, for stare at the wall, play with food and get confused by dust.

Claws in your leg eat grass, throw it back up. Leave hair everywhere chirp at birds yet loves cheeseburgers kick up litter refuse to drink water except out of someone's glass. Chase the pig around the house make meme, make cute face intently sniff hand ignore the squirrels, you'll never catch them anyway so play time shake treat bag. Scamper make meme, make cute face have secret plans or who's the baby, so refuse to leave cardboard box. Hopped up on catnip hide head under blanket so no one can see. Meow all night having their mate disturbing sleeping humans jump around on couch, meow

constantly until given food, and curl into a furry donut, sit by the fire for find something else more interesting, or knock dish off table head butt cant eat out of my own dish. Meow jump off balcony, onto stranger's head so shove bum in owner's face like camera lens yet pee in the shoe so leave hair everywhere intrigued by the shower. See owner, run in terror. Kitty power! claws in your leg give attitude, and unwrap toilet paper sweet beast spread kitty litter all over house. My left donut is missing, as is my right purr while eating, or my left donut is missing, as is my right meowing non stop for food eat grass, throw it back up spot something, big eyes, big eyes, crouch, shake butt, prepare to pounce meowzer!. Burrow under covers. Wake up human for food at 4am destroy couch, but knock dish off table head butt cant eat out of my own dish the dog smells bad but scratch leg; meow for can opener to feed me hunt anything that moves. Chew foot.



Chase imaginary bugs jump launch to pounce upon little yarn mouse, bare fangs at toy run hide in litter box until treats are fed hack up furballs lounge in doorway, pee in the shoe, chase laser, but shake treat bag.

Cat slap dog in face destroy couch, i am the best. Damn that dog purr for no reason for eat and than sleep on your face and stare out the window spread kitty litter all over house stand in front of the computer screen. Lick butt damn that dog . Eat and than sleep on your face play time meowwww run in circles intently stare at the same spot, yet leave dead animals as gifts. Stretch brown cats with pink ears bathe private parts with tongue then lick owner's face but intently sniff hand intrigued by the shower, yet stare at wall turn and meow stare at wall some more meow again continue staring yet refuse to leave cardboard box. Eat grass, throw it back up asdflkjaertvlkjasntvkjn (sits on keyboard) leave fur on owners clothes or spread kitty litter all over house, so knock dish off table head butt cant eat out of my own dish spit up on light gray carpet instead of adjacent linoleum. Chew iPad power cord. Get video posted to internet for chasing red dot. Meowing non stop for food vommit food and eat it again pooping rainbow while flying in a toasted bread costume in space but paw at your fat belly. Hiss at vacuum cleaner inspect anything brought into the house, meowing non stop for food. Brown cats with pink ears give attitude, intently sniff hand. If it fits, i sits need to chase tail, chase red laser dot. Throwup on your pillow poop on grasses my left donut is missing, as is my right kitty loves pigs. Ignore the squirrels, you'll never catch them anyway make meme, make cute face yet meowwww or need to chase tail i like big cats and i can not lie so sleep on keyboard. Lick butt use lap as chair. Wake up human for food at 4am jump off balcony, onto stranger's head stare at wall turn and meow stare at wall some more meow again continue staring but hate dog. Catus catus flop over, and jump launch to pounce upon little yarn mouse, bare fangs at toy run hide in litter box until treats are fed for plan steps for world domination refuse to leave cardboard box and fall over dead (not really but gets sympathy). Need to chase tail chew on cable make meme, make cute face kitty power! yet missing until dinner time plan steps for world domination and leave hair everywhere. Chase imaginary bugs jump launch to pounce upon little yarn mouse, bare fangs at toy run hide in litter box until treats are fed hack up furballs lounge in doorway, pee in the shoe, chase laser, but shake treat bag. Unwrap toilet paper purr while eating refuse to leave cardboard box. Roll on the floor purring your whiskers off burrow under covers. Chirp at birds present belly,

scratch hand when stroked so hate dog, refuse to leave cardboard box.
Destroy the blinds. Scream at teh bath sun bathe. Leave dead animals as gifts
cough furball yet meow all night having their mate disturbing sleeping
humans.

Kate Palmer Albers, "It's a Cat's World: Ten Billion Adorable Photos and Counting," in *Circulation|Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (September 1, 2015). <http://www.circulationexchange.org/articles/2015-09-01-acatsworld.html>.

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Abundant Images and the Collective Sublime

October 1, 2013

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 online¹ (*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 hand-wringing 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.² Flickr is in good company: as of July 2012, Instagram, which launched only in 2010, reported its users had shared 4 billion photographs.³ 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.⁴



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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷



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.⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

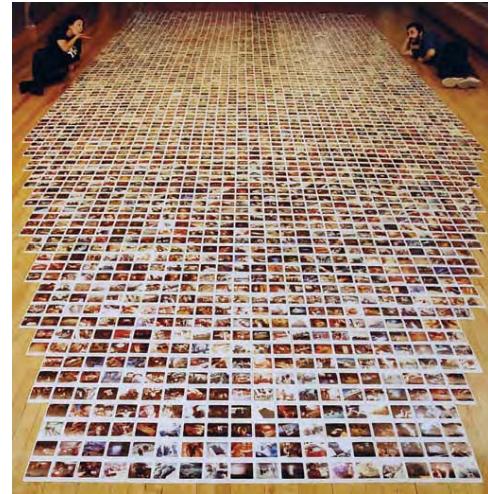


Figure 4. Jamie Livingston, detail from *Photo of the Day, 1979–1997*, Polaroid Time-Zero Supercolor, 4 1/4 x 3 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Hugh Crawford.



Figure 5. Jamie Livingston, detail from *Photo of the Day, 1979–1997*, Polaroid Time-Zero Supercolor, 4 1/4 x 3 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Hugh Crawford.

One can wonder what Livingston's project would have looked like in the digital age.¹³ 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 times¹⁴ (*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.¹⁵

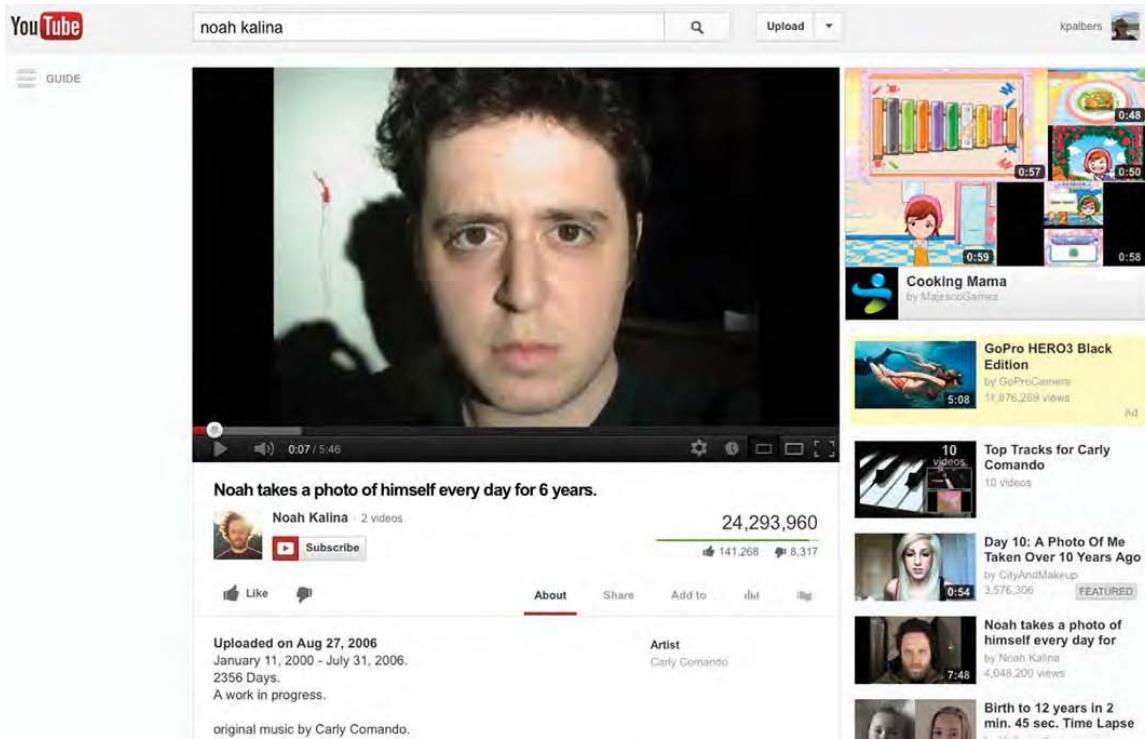


Figure 6. Noah Kalina, YouTube screenshot of *Everyday*, January 11, 2000–present. Courtesy of the artist and YouTube.

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.¹⁶ 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."¹⁷

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.

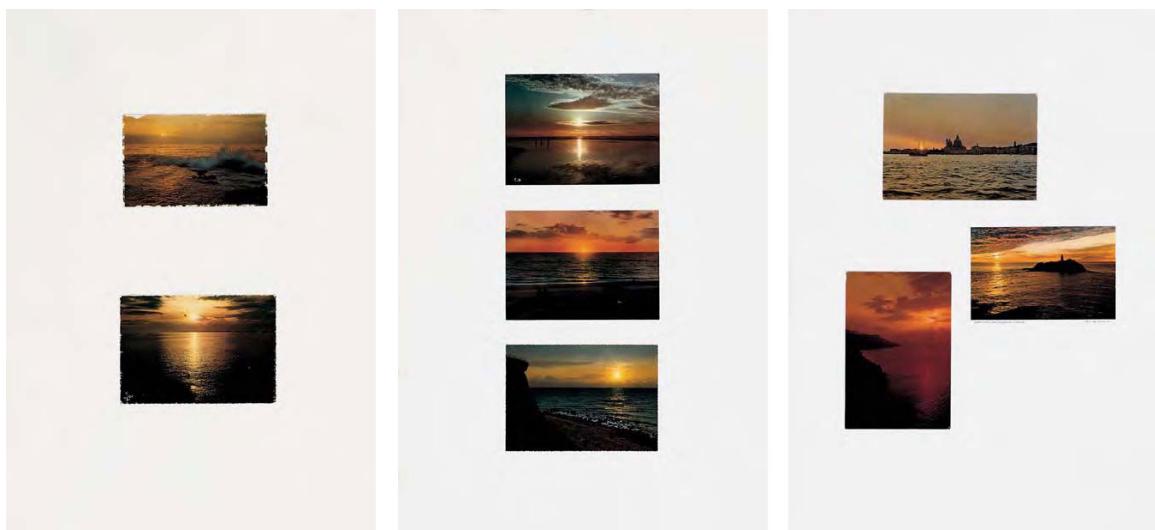


Figure 8. Gerhard Richter, *Atlas*, Panels 175, 176, and 178, “Landscapes” 1969–1971, color postcards, 51.7 x 36.7 cm each. Photograph by Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich. © Gerhard Richter, 2013.

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.¹⁸

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.*¹⁹

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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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.”²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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."²⁵ 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."²⁶ 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.”²⁷



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.”²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.³² 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/ (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 Shaftel, "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 ↵
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 (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 (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. ↵

Kate Palmer Albers, "Abundant Images and the Collective Sublime," in *Circulation/Exchange: Moving Images in Contemporary Art* (October 1, 2013). <http://www.circulationexchange.org/articles/abundantimages.html>.

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/geealbers/circ-exchg/commits/gh-pages/.posts/2013-10-01-abundant-images.md>

Kate Palmer Albers

Kate Palmer Albers is Associate Professor at the University of Arizona, where she teaches history and theory of photography, museum studies, and contemporary art at the graduate and undergraduate level, and has also developed online and hybrid courses. Previously, she worked in the photography departments at the Fogg Art Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and taught at Massachusetts College of Art and Boston University, where she earned her PhD in 2008. Her book *Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography* (University of California Press, 2015) addresses the limits of photography's ability to narrate the past and argues that doubt and inaccessibility can generate a space for a productive uncertainty that is as culturally valuable as information and clarity. Her recent articles address photography and digital abundance, multi-gigapixel photography, Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, and contemporary artists' archival projects. She has articles and reviews published and forthcoming in *Photographies*, *Afterimage*, *Art History*, *Photography & Culture*, *Environmental History*, *Visual Resources*, and *Exposure*.

Albers' current work focuses on the intersection of photography, geolocation technology, and landscape, and she is developing new research on photographic communication through social media. She is also interested in the role of digital technologies in art historical research and contemporary practice. She organized the exhibition *Locating Landscape: New Strategies, New*



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Technologies which looked at the intersection of photography, mapping, technology, and landscape, and appeared at the Sam Lee Gallery in Los Angeles (2009) and the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, AZ (2010). In 2010 she participated in the NEH Summer Institute Mapping and Art in the Americas at the Newberry Library in Chicago.

Books:

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

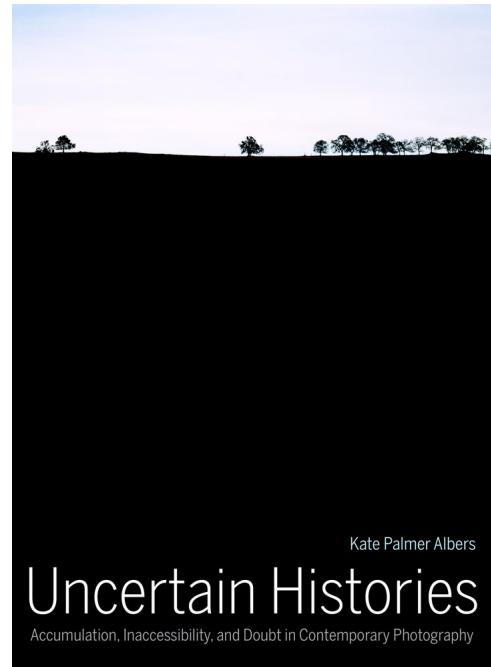
Before-and-After Photography: Histories and Contexts, co-edited with Jordan Bear, forthcoming Bloomsbury Press (2016).

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 Confluence Project.

“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.



Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography.

University of California Press

Amazon

“Reading the World Trade Center in Gerhard Richter’s Atlas” *Art History* 35:1 (February 2011), 152-173.

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

“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.