

English

Exposition PhotoforumPasquArt Biel/Bienne

Penelope Umbrico

“Out of Order: Bad Display”

pendant les 20es Journées photographiques de Bienne

30.04.2016 – 12.06.2016

An MS Word conversation passed back and forth in the cloud, for which the curator Nadine Wietlisbach and the artist Penelope Umbrico speak of had no preplanned idea of where it would end, nor how long it would take to get there.

On Apr 5, 2016, at 12:48 PM, nwietlisbach@photoforumsquart.ch wrote:

Part of what I love about my work as a curator is that it enables me to deliberate on the changes in our society. Post-internet is affecting our culture, not only the arts. I wonder what terms will describe the profound transformations affecting us and how language will be impacted. As an artist you have been deliberating this for years, even though you belong to a generation which doesn't seem to be troubled by questions surrounding big data as much as my generation is.

Speaking of big data, we've been discussing that your work via Skype bridges a distance of roughly 6247 km as the crow flies. If I open Google maps and type in Biel/Bienne to New York, USA, I promptly see the flight time and costs. It looks very simple: You type in two destinations and they are connected with a curved blue line. I am thinking about this in relation to the idea that the reflections in the screens of the broken TV's sold on Craigslist. Your images are ghostly apparitions of everyday objects that people invested money in, used and are now casting-off. Google maps doesn't show me a distance in km's, it shows a monetary figure, a contemporary (maybe abstracted is better than contemporary?) idea of how ghostly space can be when it is measured by a price. Our global culture is driven by consumerism and it seems interesting to me that platforms like Craigslist embody material exchange, not necessary in a critical way though. You, on the other hand, are highlighting a very particular facet of the state of a system.



Am 08.04.2016 um 23:37 schrieb Penelope Umbrico <penelopeumbrico@mac.com>:

Wow, I didn't know Google Maps does that! It's remarkable that such a distance can be equated to a value, or, rather, that the value of traversing such a distance, at 35,000 feet above the earth no less, is reduced time and money! I would never have thought of this in terms of those ghostly apparitions I find embedded in failing or unwanted technologies. I think maybe we're talking about an element of abstraction that drives the system... and my work. Nothing is ever what it seems on the surface. Time and money as mathematized abstract models for something you can't evaluate in any concrete way - it's not unlike how we experience flight. I mean, we can't possibly understand flight in a physiological way - you could tell me the distance in kilometers, but I've never experienced that kind of distance in a concrete physical way, so the distance is already abstract... I'm thinking about this in relation to the financial crisis, which was, I guess, a result of the abstraction of value - the numbers and speed of transaction were too large to humanly conceive of or evaluate in any concrete way. And in fact that's all they are: numbers - there's no there there. Perhaps that's the condition of the ghost?



TVs for sale from Craigslist

I'm thinking of this in contrast to all these dead objects people are selling on Craigslist and eBay... and the owner's attributed value to these objects, regardless to any corresponding to market value. Big bulky CRT TVs, leaking chemicals like rotting bodies in basements, or remote controls, like secrets stuffed into drawers that we can't get rid of (because we're not sure what they control and for fear the possibility of their usefulness someday), old electrical cords and chargers (for who knows what) all arranged in caring formations waiting for someone to buy them on eBay or Craigslist.... it's like they are in purgatory... just waiting to be wanted.



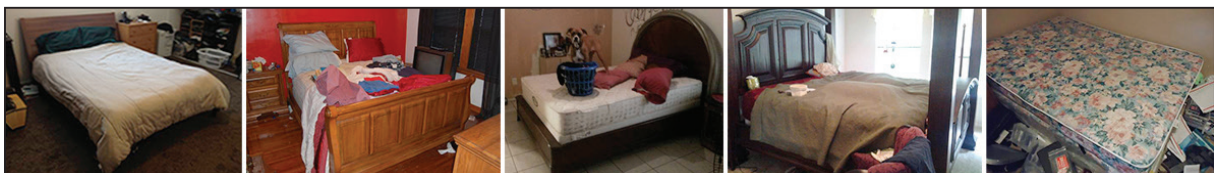
Wires on sale on ebay

On Apr 9, 2016, at 7:36 AM, nwielisbach@photoforumsquart.ch wrote:

There is a certain carefulness in those arrangements and it doesn't seem apparent if you think about the amount of technical gimmicks, accessories and devices of all sorts people buy these days. When I look at those formations I wonder what the sellers think: I wonder, if those exact people stumbled across your work. If I do a google image search of your work - images which have been contextualized by you - I end up experiencing a "pasticcio": a composition of work by different people who may or may not have been working together an adaptation or localization of an existing work that is loose, unauthorized. The web re-contextualizes roles: A lot of pictures being taken do have an author, and the subject being photographed is the subject of that particular image, but then the subject changes as well as the role of the person who took the picture. The shift is still more dramatic than if we think about photographs being taken by devices which are controlled or operated by a computer, guided via algorithms. Last week I read an article about a system, that attempts to pinpoint the location of where a photograph was taken by analyzing the image. Google is experimenting further with advanced "machine learning" technologies. The ghosts might be visibly connected to their castles.

Am 09.04.2016 um 20:08 schrieb [Penelope Umbrico <penelopeumbrico@mac.com>](mailto:penelopeumbrico@mac.com):

The dispensable body! It's interesting how consistent this fantastical conception is – brain in a vat; utopian and dystopian fantasies of AI – interesting as a reflection of anxieties around digital/immaterial vs organic/material states of being, and Google experiments in advanced "machine learning" technologies. What's interesting to me here is the attendant erasure of the subject. There is no subjective authorship in the images made by the Google cam - the author here is an "all-seeing" corporation. By comparison the images I am working with in the Out of Order project are subjective, mundane, and un-authored in a different way - that the person taking the picture is not thinking about making a picture at all; he/she is thinking about selling an object. And therefore, there's a certain kind of personal anonymity about them. Those images of wires – there's millions of them on eBay – I have a collection of more than couple thousand. What I like about them is the human touch, despite the photographer's disinterest in the 'photographic' – the human compulsion to organize things, and what that organization says about who we are. It's specifically because no one cares about these banal utilitarian images, that they can reveal something.



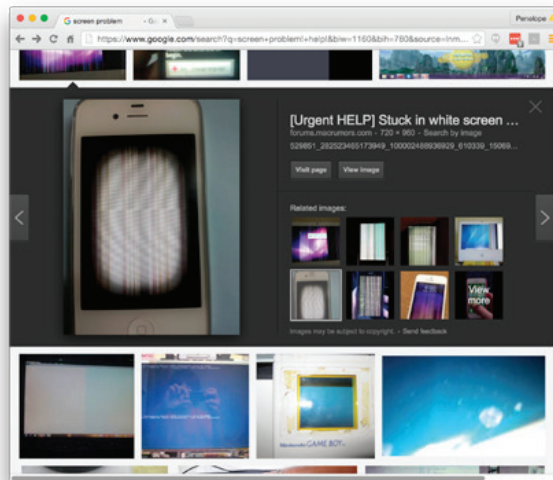
IMG Collection #32: Beds for sale on Craigslist

On Apr 10, 2016, at 7:22 AM, nwietlisbach@photoformpasquart.ch wrote:

I am very interested in the question of the origins of images, where they have been taken and under what circumstances. I am interested in exactly what you are mentioning: the idea of how we as human beings/bodies relate to technology. The outcome of what we invent might be rather dark and unexpected, I don't think technology is threatening as such – but I believe we need to find a more conscious way of developing it further.

Am 10.04.2016 um 17:04 schrieb Penelope Umbrico <penelopeumbrico@mac.com>:

I agree. In relation to the idea of the body and technology, we are hardly aware of our bodies or our technologies until something goes wrong. The screen is a perfect example of this. It's an object we all interact with and rely on, and the better the quality, the more invisible it is. Until there's a flaw in it... and then we're acutely aware of it.



On Apr 13, 2016, at 08:19, nwietlisbach@photoformpasquart.ch wrote:

For me, TVs from Craigslist functions very well as a representation of the concept of a single individual in an anonymous crowd. Individuals who would be otherwise undetected become visible as figures, due to TV reflections. If we think about photography in relation to the past and future, we must consider time as an important factor.

Am 17.04.2016 um 01:43 schrieb Penelope Umbrico <penelopeumbrico@mac.com>:

And stopping time. Which is actually what happens to the sellers caught in the reflection of the TV – I think of those images as *Memento Mori*: the last picture of the TV before it goes onto to the dump (why would anyone want a used heavy old TV when you can get a thin light new one for almost the same price), the ghostly figure of the seller forever caught in the photograph if it.

But more importantly, and what I find fascinating, is a sort of paradoxical inversion of how people think of subjectivity and authorship in this context. The most utilitarian image of a TV for sale on Craigslist reveals the seller, it is intimate and personal – it is actually subjective. But the images most people care about, and therefore would have some claim to authorship are in fact not personal at all. Those images are the most scripted, the most conditioned by the market, the most responsive to the market and also the most useful to the market.

On Apr 17, 2016, at 2:49 AM, nwietlisbach@photoformpasquart.ch wrote:

I have another example of a presumably intimate image you can find everywhere: a lot of hospitals in Switzerland have a photo-gallery online where you can find the newborn babies. It struck me when someone sent me a pic of their daughter a couple of years back, why would you choose such an intimate portrait to be publicly accessible? I never found out what happens to the archive of those images, but I am sure that a lot of people believe it magically disappears after they return home with their baby, move on with their lives, and forget about the public display of this very image. This is quite a strange juxtaposition: human beings like to memorialize important moments using particular platform and then assume afterwards that the resulting digital files are ephemeral because they seem to disappear.

Am 18.04.2016 um 02:59 schrieb Penelope Umbrico <penelopeumbrico@mac.com>:

Ha, that's crazy. One of the things I am focused on right now is how the screen is a threshold between the individual experience of here and now, and the collective experience of there and always. What happens to our sense of subjectivity when we cross that threshold - for instance when we knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unwittingly, share personal information and it becomes but one of a million similar or same bits of information? If the understanding that the most valuable aspect of our lives in this consumer culture is the anonymous data we generate by participating, I imagine this is affecting us in a very deep way. I can't help thinking that our manic selfie culture is the result of a kind of existential anxiety, not so much related to FOMO, but to a fear of erasure. As though we all need proof of our own existence. I am fascinated by the individual need to assert a presence online, when in fact the very condition of this presence is a kind of individual erasure. On the other hand, there is something oddly democratic about the selfie script. If you do a search on Google Image for selfie you get all sorts of people showing up: old and young, un-known and famous, all mixed together.

On Apr 18, 2016, at 7:25 AM, nwietlisbach@photoformpasquart.ch wrote:

The idea of having fifteen minutes of fame by Marshall McLuhan! Although I doubt the democratization of Google searches... To me it's the same misconception as everyone around the globe supposedly having access to the Internet at some point in the near future. In 2015, 57 per cent of the world's population remains offline.

Am 19.April 2016 um 02:00 schrieb Penelope Umbrico <penelopeumbrico@mac.com>:

... and the idea that photography is now a democratic medium, just because everyone (or perhaps only 57%) has a camera. For that 57%, the idea of democratization doesn't take into account the fact that all image authoring tools, viewing platforms and search algorithms are controlled by corporate entities. Our tools are designed to create the scripts we're told we want to live.

On Apr 19, at 6:30 AM, nwietlisbach@photoformpasquart.ch wrote:

You are mentioning our participation in the gathering of anonymous data and therefore a need to prove our existence. If we now ask, how many images are currently in Google's index, it is impossible to determine. In 2013 there were more than 1 trillion images. I cannot grasp a number like this! Billions of those images are duplicates, many of them anonymous.

Am 20.April um 1:30 schrieb Penelope Umbrico <penelopeumbrico@mac.com>:

That is the digital sublime, right? For my project Suns from Flickr, I searched the word "sunset" on Flickr in 2006 and got 54000 returns. The next year I made an installation of the suns cropped from 2000 of these images and did a new search: there were 2,000,000. I was astonished! Every time I install that work I title the installation with the result of a new search and the current date. The

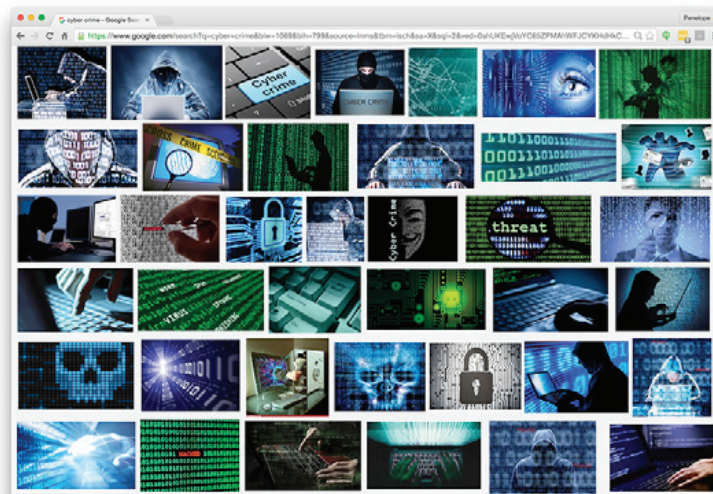
last installation had 30,000,000 images tagged “sunset”. Somewhere around 10,000,000 the growing number became predictable - not at all surprising. Maybe it’s no longer sublime, because these kinds of figures have become normalized. I wonder if the idea of anonymity is changing as well - when we know we are constantly being recorded, watched, do our performances mean less and less as we’re aware of a million others’ performances? We have always had surveillance, but with the web, drones, Google 9-eyes, Big Data, we live and breath it. Maybe selfie culture is not just an attempt to insist on presence, but also a collective psychological attempt to control the gaze: a subconscious resistance to the controlling gaze of corporate market culture.

On Apr 20, at 3:00 AM, nwietlisbach@photoformpasquart.ch wrote:

What would resistance look like? I love stories about cyber crime and although a lot of novels tell fictional tales about cyber pirates I am impressed by those author’s ideas. Many were programmers, or hackers, or did in-depth research before writing. Often I am stunned by how people imagine the internet working. “I can’t see my images anymore, they’re gone!” It reminds me of Plato’s Cave Allegory. I am interested in how we could start a dialogue about our awareness of systems, or lack thereof? And how we can intersect with the shadows that come to us across wires or on screens and formulate major aspects of perception.

Am 21.April um 2:55 schrieb Penelope Umbrico <penelopeumbrico@mac.com>:

Yes, it’s also interesting how the web is visualized – I was looking for images of anonymous, or cyber crime in response to your image... and really there’s nothing except really hokey illustrations that include numbers laptops, hands, and masks.... With mostly male figures of course.



It’s interesting to think of this in relation to the material world where actual material things, like bodies or geography, are at stake.

How can we be resistant to something that we (most of us) can’t see.

One of the things I think about a lot in terms of my own work is the shift between the material object and immaterial form on the web. What does it mean to say you’ve seen something when you’ve only seen it on the web.... when most of the information we get about the rest of the work is through our digital devices. Can we really say we understand anything of what we see there? For me the world feels more and more abstract. I actually really like this - the anonymity this affords and access to information that wasn’t there before. But I am also constantly aware of the limits, and lack of accountability. These are real issues, right.

On Apr 22, at 4:00 AM, nwietlisbach@photoforumpasquart.ch wrote:

Yes, but I find it striking how, in your work, you are able to represent bodies, owners of products, and human beings through an accumulation of objects.

Am 23 April um 3:00 schrieb Penelope Umbrico <penelopeumbrico@mac.com>:

Well, I find it completely fascinating how people share images, and why – in some cases with an inflated sense of authorship, and in others with an almost naïve sense of anonymity. In the context of the web, of course, all images (artful, authored, pedestrian or un-authored) become un-assignable and anonymous. For me, this unlimited exchange of visual information is invaluable as a resource – as an archive, it's a collective visual index of data that represents us. I often say my practice is akin to being a documentary photographer – I could wander broadly in this abstracted world in quest of meaningful subjects and find more material than I will ever be able to make work about in my life-time. My challenge is to go, not wider, but deeper into the information I find. And there, in the images, I find emotional and psychological inferences that point to various underlying cultural anxieties. I have begun to see the unwanted, discarded, deflated, obsolescent objects pictured there for sale as the aftermath and by-products of Modernism. These objects register the disparity between the optimism of Modernist ideologies and the dystopic result.



CONVERSATION - TIME IS FLYING -
Penelope Umbrico and Nadine Wietlisbach

PhotoforumPasquArt