Penelope Umbrico
Some notes on *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, 2006 - ongoing, and related projects

Photography is as much a subject of my work as it is the medium in which I work. I study how we make and use images, and the ever-increasing use of photo-sharing websites. My focus on collective practices in photography has led me to explore subjects that are collectively photographed. Along with traditional photographic techniques, I employ methods of appropriation, extraction, multiple production, and intervention, often utilizing details of images that I feel point to a deflation or a rupture in idealized fictions. The work is an accumulation that navigates between consumer and producer, materiality and immateriality, the individual and the collective.

I started the project *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* in 2006 when, looking for the most photographed subject, I searched the photo-sharing web site Flickr and found that “sunsets” were most present (541,795 in 2006). I thought it peculiar that the sun, the quintessential giver of life and warmth, constant in our lives, symbol of enlightenment, spirituality, eternity, all things unreachable and ephemeral, omnipotent provider of optimism and vitamin D... and so ubiquitously photographed, is now subsumed to the internet, the most virtual of spaces equally infinite but within a closed cold electrical circuit.

I collected those sunsets from Flickr that had the most defined suns in them, and cropped just the suns from these images. To date, I have made a total of 2500 4x6 images of suns from these sunsets, which I have uploaded to Kodak, and order 4" x 6" machine c-prints for each installation. The title reflects the number of hits I get searching "sunset" on Flickr at the time – for example, the first installation was *541,795 Suns From Flickr* in 2006; an example of subsequent installation titles is:

541,795 Suns (from Sunsets) from Flickr (Partial) 01/23/06
2,303,057 Suns (from Sunsets) from Flickr (Partial) 09/25/07
3,221,717 Suns (from Sunsets) from Flickr (Partial) 03/31/08
5,911,253 Suns (from Sunsets) from Flickr (Partial) 08/03/09
7,626,056 Suns (from Sunsets) from Flickr (Partial) 07/17/10
8,730,221 Suns (from Sunsets) from Flickr (Partial) 02/20/11
10,291,373 Suns (from Sunsets) from Flickr (Partial) 01/12/12

- the title itself becoming a comment on the ever increasing use of web-based photo communities and a reflection of the collective content there. And since this number only lasts an instant, its recording is
analogous to the act of photographing the sunset itself.

Perhaps part of the beauty of taking a picture of a sunset is that while you are doing it it’s likely that a million other people are doing it as well – at exactly the same time. I love this idea of collective practice, something we all engage in despite any artistic concern, knowing that there have been millions before and there will be millions after. While the intent of photographing a sunset may be to capture something ephemeral or to assert an individual subjective point of view—the result is quite the opposite—through the technology of our common cameras we experience the power of millions of synoptic views, all shared the same way, at the same moment. To claim individual authorship while photographing a sunset is to disengage from this collective practice and therefore negate a large part of why capturing a sunset is so irresistible in the first place.

Related projects:

I’ve made various iterations of this project, such as: "Sun Burn (Screensaver)", comprising 365 of these suns. As a screen-saver, the implied danger of burning a whole into your screen is not a real threat, thanks to the better technology of our newer screens. Our screensavers now function purely for entertainment and use more energy than if the computer were allowed to “sleep”. Another iteration puts them in sun-less public contexts, such as the box offices at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and on “Second Life” where I also “filmed” a never-ending sunset, a 24/7 screen-view of an ocean horizon with the “world” environment set on “sunset”.

79 Moons From Flickr - 51 Visible” and “87 Suns From Flickr - 29 Visible. (diptych) variable sized editions: 11x14, 16x 20, 20x30 (27.94cm x 35.56, 40.64cm x 50.8cm, and 50.8cm x 76.2cm) ink-jet on archival rag paper:

A print edition with Aperture and 20x200 in which multiple un-cropped Flickr "sunsets" and "moon-rises" are superimposed in various opacity (as indicated in the titles). The resulting aesthetic is rooted in a history of abstract visual form (from Klee and Kandinski to Star Trek and black-light posters), where the images move away from a reality we know, towards an abstraction of that reality based on fiction and psychedelic cosmic fantasy.
Suns from Sunsets from Flickr / Travels, 2010-2011, Kodak EasyShare machine c-prints, postage stamps, ink from postal stamp, each 4” x 6” (10.16cm x 15.24cm):

One of a number of iterations of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr, this is a sampling of a collection of left-over “sun” photographs from installations that I have asked curators, friends, colleagues, visitors, etc to mail to me as postcards – the digitally sourced “sun” physically travels through the skies via airmail, crossing countries and borders, and registers on its surface a record of time and place, beginning and end, of its destination.

Universal Sunsets (of 6,922,112 on 2/18/10), 2010, detail, Toronto Contact Festival, Installation Pearson International Airport, 77 total, each 60” wide by varying heights (152.4cm wide) commercial vinyl banner prints:

For this installation I focused on images with the sun on the horizon, just before it starts to disappear (the crops here are determined by the height of the sun in relation to the horizon, and the length of unobstructed view or reference to place). Installed along the moving walkways at Pearson International Airport, they suggest global travel, but through multiple collective points of view. And while the horizons point to the hope of escape that travel promises, they also remind us of the illusory nature of this escape.
Taken from stock photography sites, Copyrighted Suns / Screen-grabs, points to an absurdity in claiming ownership of the sun. The work also summarizes the collective narratives we weave around its setting - I use the descriptive tags of each of the images on the stock site as the titles of each “water-marked” sun: "Beautiful Young Woman Running on a Beach at Sunset Real Shot Background", "Beautiful Young Couple Relaxing Near the Sea at Sunset", "Travel Bedtime Emotions Feelings", "Leisure Red Beach Emotions Feelings Water", "Meditation Under Sunset Zen Concept".

**Documentation of installations of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr with people taking their pictures in front of it:**

Whether by cognitive association, or the result of a perceptual adaptation to images, our irises involuntarily contract when looking at images of the sun in a similar way they do looking at the actual sun. Perhaps there’s a similar physiological response to the visual warmth of the images that is analogous to the actual warmth of the sun. Whatever the case, it turns out that people want their pictures taken in front of it, as though they are in front of the sunset itself.
As I became aware that people were taking their pictures in front of my work as though they are in front of the sunset itself, I started to search online for the resulting portraits.

**People in Front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr**, 2011 – ongoing, 25 Inkjet on 8.5” x 11” paper, and 15 5” x 7” framed c-prints, for the exhibition, *Art that Iterates*, at Teacher’s College Columbia University, 2012.

Row 1: People taking pictures of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr.
Row 2: The pictures people took of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr.
Row 3: People taking pictures of people in front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr.
Row 4: The pictures people took of people in front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr.
Row 5: People taking pictures of the pictures of people taking pictures of people in front of Suns from Sunsets from Flickr.
Above: an installation image I found on Flickr of the exhibition “Iterations” (I no longer need to make my own documentation images of exhibitions I am in – I can almost always find them by someone else online)

**Screen Shot 2012-07-26 at 5.29.54 PM of 16 Screeshots of People Holding the Sun at Sunset.** 2012, single 4” x 6” digital c-print for the drug-store mini-lab distributed exhibition _An Impossible Distance: 24 works by 24 artists_, a project of David Horvitz.

**Sunset Portraits from 9,623,557 Sunset Pictures on Flickr 8/22/11.** 2011, installation Pace Gallery, NYC; 1,058 Kodak Easy-Share machine c-prints, each 4in x 6in, photo: Scott Lynch (found on Flickr):
Sunset Portraits from Sunset Pictures on Flickr is a continuation of the Suns from Sunsets from Flickr project, and partly a response to the images of people I found in front of my installations. They are un-cropped sunset photographs from Flickr where the technology of the point and shoot camera reads, and exposes for, the sun not the subject. I was thinking of the relationship between the individual assertion of “being here” in the photograph, the lack of individuality ultimately experienced when faced with so many assertions that are more or less the same, and the power of the collective ritual we all participate in.

Sunset Portraits from 9,673,302 Sunset Pictures on Flickr 8/31/11, 2011, machine c-prints, each 4in x 6in /10.16cm x 15.24cm

Some relevant links:

Movie: Neverending Sunset, (a machinima made on Second Life):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SsKFLFRHs

Screensaver:
Sun Burn / Screen Saver, free downloadable screensaver:
http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/SunBurnScSvr/Installers/ScSvr2.html

Or view the screensaver here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPnUn6eCJ6w

My Suns from Flickr Flickr Page:
http://www.flickr.com/photos/sunsfromflickr-umbrico/

Website: www.penelopeumbrico.net