

HYPERALLERGIC

Mining Flickr for 1 Million Moons

by **Claire Voon** on February 11, 2016



Penelope Umbrico, “Everyone’s Photos Any License (654 of 1,146,034 Full Moons on Flickr, November 2015)” (2015) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

In terms of things we photograph the most, the moon probably ranks pretty high, especially when it floats in the cosmos as a full-bodied orb. According to photographer [Penelope Umbrico](#), 1.1 million images of the full moon existed on the photo-sharing website Flickr alone last November. A sample of those are on view in her solo exhibition, [Silvery Light](#) at Bruce Silverstein, which fills the gallery with such lunar photographs, of which not a single one she originally captured. Compiled from Flickr, with some color manipulated slightly by Umbrico, the different moons represent the efforts of photographers around the world — amateur and professional alike — brought together as an archive that contemplates why we continue to produce images of the same things and how we consume their digital representations.

Over 600 of the images Umbrico found on Flickr last November constitute the largest work on view, “Everyone’s Photos Any License (654 of 1,146,034 Full Moons on Flickr, November 2015)” (2015), and it immediately relays the moon’s unfailing ability to captivate us. Shown at different scales, some moons are vividly colored, suggesting they were captured at an especially special point of the star’s orbit; still, none seem particularly unique. Umbrico, though, treats them as such: she has printed and

taped each one individually as part of a sprawling collage that spans the majority of one wall. The sheer volume of the result is overwhelming; I started to search for nuances, but my eyes mostly brought together images with similar patterns of shadows and planetary pockmarks, and the celestial satellite lost its magnetism — that mysterious appeal that likely led to someone taking a picture of it in the first place.

Umbrico's moonscape also introduces questions over the authorship of these images. She chose only moons originally published by their photographers under the "All Rights Reserved" license, requiring her to receive permission from each person before she could include them in her show. The repetition of subject firstly begs you to ask why the photographers thought it necessary to protect their images, but the sameness also gives the 654 pictures an overall sense of anonymity. While each does not have its own wall label, Umbrico has actually catalogued every one of their original sources in a dense stack of papers available nearby, which lists not only the photographers' names and links to their Flickr pages but also all the corresponding [EXIF data](#). Her painstaking efforts to highlight the contexts in which the photographs were first made highlight their creations as individual experiences of singular moments. Curiously, it is the banal textual footprint of these pictures, rather than their gleaming visual selves, that make them unique in this sea of moons.

Echoing this printed patchwork is a long work that hangs on a wall and stretches across the floor, gathering over itself around its middle. Dancing between photograph and sculpture, it shows Umbrico's screenshot of the total 1,146,032 images as she had seen in grid-form on Flickr. It gives the torrent of information presented on a screen a physical trace: the furling of paper suggests a palpable weight; its absurd length — a screenshot is usually limited to the height of your screen — recalls the action of scrolling, adding a sense of fatigue to the visual overload. This motion is realized in a video looping on an opposite monitor, where screenshots of moons zoom through the frame like end credits, at a speed so dizzying I couldn't watch them for more than ten seconds. In both these works, Umbrico is less concerned with individual images than with the seemingly never-ending amount of digital real estate similar information overtakes. And remember, this is only on Flickr — lest you forget, Umbrico has included the browser bar in her lengthy screenshot.



Penelope Umbrico, detail of "Everyone's Photos Any License; Screenshot 2015-11-04 14.22.59" (2015)

The title *Silvery Light* refers directly to Umbrico's gleaming subject, but it also alludes to the role of light in shaping our understanding of an image. A number of her works are collections of screenshots she took of images found through Flickr's filter-by-color tool, presenting all pink and all blue moons. Another collection, "Screenshot 2015-11-24 / Dark as Light" (2015), where images are shown like specimens in thick-framed boxes, consists of screenshots of moons, whose colors she inverted, with each false moon easily passable as the real deal. These series raise questions over how faithful the images we encounter are to reality, not just due to post-production changes but also because of how technology and the screen define our experience of color.

There is one series on view that is grounded on Earth: 15 pictures showing the famous views of Grand Central's concourse streaming with light. These are sourced as well, albeit from stock photo websites such as Getty Images, Poster Revolution, and Corbis, which all watermark the works even though they were taken by four photographers (who rarely receive attribution). Different filters also overlay the images, showing once more the scope of image manipulation that can color our understanding of place. These also differ from Umbrico's moon series since they are available commercially; in terms of brands of ownership, the copyright licenses imposed by Flickr users seem more like marks of personal possession.

Umbrico suggests that even if a photographer acknowledges that thousands of the same image exist, there is value in having taken it and owning a physical trace of that specific moment. More than showing that some things, such as the moon, continuously captivate us, Umbrico is probing how we deal with these fascinations: in this image-based culture, we gravitate to framing the images we take as one would an artifact, and the personal satisfaction we receive may be all we need.



Installation view of 'Penelope Umbrico: Silvery Light' at Bruce Silverstein

[Silvery Light](#) continues at Bruce Silverstein (535 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 20.