

The Empty Set: Penelope Umbrico

In the story *Tlon, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius*, Jorge Luis Borges proposes an alternative world, complete in every detail, even in its cosmology and philosophies, and their sects and disputes. Composed by the like-minded down through the centuries, its records are salted through the archives and encyclopedias of the past, where they work like a spell, soliciting newer and bolder contributions and more prominent placement, until the invented world begins to displace the actual world in the discourse of the present.

A proliferating empire of pure discourse, unmediated by actualities other than the physical channels of communication technology – it almost seems that Borges had a premonition of the internet. Our *Orbis Tertius* is flat, non-hierarchical, infinitely expanding (and disappearing), abstract even in its particularity, atemporal, placeless, dimensionless, bodiless, traversable across all formal boundaries (all boundaries within it are merely formal), overpopulated yet completely empty, the province of each individual alone, an autistic ocean.

Penelope Umbrico is a traveler in that flat landscape. It would be a mistake to call her a photographer or even an artist using photography, just as it would be a mistake to call Marcel Duchamp an appropriation artist or Andy Warhol a painter. In *Orbis Tertius*, genres do not exist. She is looking for traces of that other, formerly real world, the one being digitally superseded, looking for evidence of anterior life exposed on the internet and beyond that of the forms of desire that animate that life. There is no romance involved in this quest, no discovery of secret places untouched by discourse, for what she finds is already mediated, clichéd, stereotypical. But not without paths. Like a character from Borges, she uses this evidence to create works that can themselves be inserted back into the digital world, adding to its peculiar topography, confusing and supplementing its self-referentiality.

This description makes her approach sound more programmatic than it is. Even the series *Broken Sets* (eBay) (2009), her most theoretically expansive, is intuitive and empirical at heart. Her widely reproduced series *Suns* from Flickr (2006-7, ongoing) springs from a recognition provoked by cruising the internet about the prevalence of the sunset in vernacular imagery. Umbrico had already identified this field of sun related imagery in online hotel and travel advertisements, which participated in the romantic vocabulary of boundless desire. For *Honeymoon Suites* (2002-5) she extracted the element common to these advertisements, images of horizons at sunset, emphasized their strong horizon lines and lurid colors, and printed them as large fine prints and as postcards. Reference to Hiroshi Sugimoto's seascapes, with their Zen-like attention and optimistic reverence for nature, is unavoidable, albeit misleading. These sunsets alluded to a poignant impossibility, an unattainable horizon that also implies the certainty of death. The irony of such a honeymoon ideal was concealed by the sentimentalized rhetoric of commodity experience, with its promise of sexual ecstasy (sunsets herald the erotic night). With the postcards, Umbrico chose a method of display that further emphasized the impossibility of gratification. She stacked them in two equal piles, in the style of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, but wrapped them in plastic, offering them and denying their availability at the same time.

Umbrico's investigation of advertising imagery signals her participation in the critique of images that began in earnest with the artists of the so-called 'Pictures Generation', coined by critic Douglas Crimp in reference to works by Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince and others in the 1980s. But she is less concerned about the ubiquity of brands or media than about the psychic role of certain generalized types of imagery. At any given time, Umbrico will be archiving a wide variety of internet image groups, from home décor catalogue interiors to armchairs from Craigslist. Again, the process of selection seems to be intuitive, as it often takes time for the artist to decide how to intervene with the images, and what they mean. For *Sale/TV's* from Craigslist (2008-09), for example, evolved out of a discovery that photographs of televisions for sale on the popular site often contain reflections of the rooms where they are photographed. The empty, dead screens, which of course can tell nothing about the functionality of the set, nevertheless yielded ghostly traces of the situations they occupied, as if the televisions were no longer receiving but broadcasting. Umbrico cropped them to show only the screen, then experimented with combinations of prints and came up with the idea of displaying them in uniform frames in sizes proportional to the screens' actual dimensions. Her closely packed wall installations have the look of an electronics store. Yet they comment just as incisively on the internet itself, where individuals are indeed broadcasting the details of their lives and reversing (at least apparently) the broadcast relation of image production and consumption. Umbrico underscored this by posting the prints on Craigslist as if they were themselves televisions, at prices corresponding to those of the original sets.

*Suns* from Flickr bypasses the intermediary framework of advertising for a more direct confrontation with the imagery of desire. Tracking the photo-sharing site for all images tagged with the word sunset, Umbrico has access to a constantly expanding repertoire of this primordial form. Each iteration of prints for exhibition is titled with the number of suns currently tagged at the time of printing. Like prototypical minimalist art, the suns illustrate a principle of same-but-different, or an infinity of variations on a visual theme. Umbrico isolates the sun element, often little more than background information, from the images she searches and makes 4" x 6" Kodak prints of them. A grid of these suns such as that recently exhibited in Pingyao, China, has unusual optical properties (a pulsating rhythm) that lift it out of the realm of standard cultural critique, with its textureless, anti-object bias.

To what realm then? Surely not the classical sublime, in spite of the direct reference to the natural world, and definitely not the realm of neoconstructivist perceptual investigation. A better description might be the Disneyworld sublime or the second-hand sublime. The sheer number of sunset images shared on Flickr testifies to an inexhaustible fascination with the solar body, one that in a secular age has vanished from ritual but has resurfaced as autobiographical reflection, a generalized symbol of pleasure or longing for the primal state. In her various installations, Umbrico seems to be playing with magnitude. She won't let us forget that the wholesale consumption of nature through the camera is a form of mass hysteria, which leeches memory and meaning from experience and turns our inner lives into inert things. And yet the wall-size scale of several versions, surprising but comprehensible, keeps the work in touch with a more persistent not to say primordial source of attraction to the form, something genetic, transhuman, original.

In texture, then, the recent series *Broken Sets* (eBay) lies at the opposite end of the cultural and historical spectrum, describing not a pre-but postmodern condition. It posits the emptying out of history via an inventory of failed utopian/technological aspirations. *Broken Sets* (eBay) are cropped images of broken LCD TV screens for sale on eBay. The sets themselves are not the main object of buyers' attention but rather the parts these sets contain. The auction images – distorted, dispersed into scanning lines of various colors – are meant to demonstrate only that the sets are still operational and their components functional. Like the artistic lineage they allude to, they are there to be cannibalized. These abstract formal compositions conflate the breakdown and failure of new technology with the aesthetic formalism of utopian Modernist abstraction, specifically the geometric abstraction pioneered by the Russian constructivists, the Bauhaus, and its later epigones in the concrete art of Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela. There are hints here as well of other aesthetic modes including color field painting, Op Art and animated cartoons. Umbrico makes explicit the connection between technological and cultural aspirations by printing the images as 30" x 40" landscape-oriented photographs, aesthetic objects to be hung like paintings. We are constantly aware that the beautiful images are in part electronic artifacts, and, formally speaking, artifacts of a dead language.

Dead but living still. This series takes the pulse precisely of abstract painting after the collapse of all paradigms for painting. In contemporary practice, the forms of the past, from Malevich to Ellsworth Kelly, recur with a shocking frequency and fidelity, but leached of their historical content. The wheel is constantly being reinvented, as obsessional investigations of process, language or neurobiology. Such painters as Tori Begg in England and Tauba Auerbach in the United States show clearly how the visual innovations of Minimalism and Bauhaus formalism, to name just two avant gardes, are reconvened under new agendas.

But Umbrico's works are not paintings. They are resolutely photographs, and they represent photography's ability to assimilate everything to its surface, even the internet, or especially the internet. The internet is widely promoted for its dynamism and interactivity, for its ability to democratize content, reduce barriers, and bring people together in self-convened arrangements (its thoroughly corporatized interfaces notwithstanding), but there is an equally vehement group of critics who decry what they see as its profoundly static, two-dimensional quality. They deplore its erosion of dialectical experience and direct, face to face social interaction, its responsibility for a decline in civility and a growing psychic investment in fantasy alternatives like *Second Life*. The disregard towards other minds and the importance of control and routine also suggest an autistic component to digital life. Stripped of its nostalgia and primitivism, the current critical arguments sound like something Adorno might have mounted.

No wonder Umbrico's *Broken Sets* (eBay) is oddly melancholy in the face of this evolution of sensibility. Borges never suggests that the creators of *Orbis Tertius* imagined what would happen after the imaginary world took dominion everywhere. Umbrico's series does. It appears thoroughly memorial and elegiac. It embodies an instant interment of a technological advance (the LCD television) and a spectacular celebration of decay. The photographs also seem to memorialize the enthusiasm for the internet itself as yet another version of the future that was. The future that is, the future that has arrived for us, is one in which the dream of perfect connection is replaced by a bazaar of damaged screen patterns and scrambled communication, scanned by scavengers who (like the artist) are sifting through the ruins of an economy based on consumption, exploitation, isolation and waste.