

COULD
YOU
TALK
ABOUT

**PENELOPE
UMBRICO**

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PENELOPE UMBRICO

Interview by Joël Vacheron

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**COULD YOU TELL US
A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY?**

Well, I got my degree in fine art, not photography. I was making paintings, collage, drawing and at some point the ideas that were presented by photography were so much more interesting to me than those in the other fields I was working in. Photography became a subject I wanted to work with as well as a medium that I wanted to work in.

**HAVE YOU BEEN INSPIRED
BY ANY PARTICULAR ARTISTS
OR CURRENTS?**

When I was in undergrad in the early 1980s, all of those artists that were working with images were a big influence for me, even though at that time I was mostly painting. I remember at one point giving myself permission to make photographs. The post-modern idea of the anti-aesthetic and of de-skilling, of not thinking through craft, was very important then, and it made it possible to just make photographs. It felt like a relief, like divorcing an ill-suited partner. Photography represented something very exciting and new for me.

**CAN YOU SHARE ANY MOMENTS
THAT HAVE BEEN INTEGRAL TO
THIS TRANSITION?**

I remember realizing the indexical potential of the photograph – the greater sense of veracity it provided for an object than a painting of that object could, even though the painting was much more materially present. The flatness of the photograph, and its attendant illusionistic depth, was, and still is, incredibly seductive to

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me. At that time I was looking at how consumer corporations attempt to construct desire by the images they provide, and how we then define ourselves by the consumption of those images. Though my work is still about the image and photography, the screen has become the vehicle through which we see much of it. And the flatter it is, the more illusionistic.

**THEN WHEN THE INTERNET CAME
ALONG, WHAT IS INTERESTING IS
THAT A NEW SORT OF CONSUMPTION
EMERGED. CAN YOU SPEAK TO HOW
THESE NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND SOCIAL
MEDIA HAVE CHANGED YOUR WORK?**

Profoundly! The almost sudden multitude of shared personal and utilitarian images created a much more interesting archive to work with than the commercial and professional images previously available. And I love the collaborative aspect of searching on the web. Every image I find is the result of someone having tagged it. It is kind of a linguistic collaboration, though I am interested in unintended meaning in the images I find, which means that I am often searching for things that have not been tagged in a way that is useful for me. Someone selling a TV on Craigslist, for example, is not aware of their intimate reflection in their TV, it is not why they are taking the photograph. So they won't be tagging their image "intimacy" or "self-portrait". Yet it is here, looking through the listings for TVs for sale, that I find an intimacy that is strikingly candid. Often, the more un-aware someone is in taking a photograph, the more interesting the photograph is, for my work anyway. In these pictures there is an unintended, perhaps subconscious, reveal; individually, they are portraits of the lives of the people posting the pictures; collectively they are a portrait of the time we live in. I think of the *TVs from Craigslist*

project as a kind of new version of Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958) project. But instead of the street, I am traveling America's interior domestic spaces through my screen on Craigslist... and at a time when the screen has all but replaced the experience of exterior public spaces. On my screen, I am invited into people's living rooms and bedrooms through the images they post to sell their TVs. They don't care what else is in the picture, they just want to sell their TV.

**CAN YOU EXPLAIN A BIT FURTHER
THE TVS FROM CRAIGSLIST SERIES?**

I was working on a series of projects that had to do with personal spaces revealed in pictures of things for sale on consumer-to-consumer websites. In contrast to the perfectly clean and manicured rooms of consumer home decor websites, some of these spaces are so messy that you start to wonder what it is the sellers are trying to show you. At some point, I wondered if subconsciously these sellers were trying to express something about their individuality, or were perhaps craving intimacy and contact with other people. So the camera flash in the TVs for sale became evidence of a subconscious wish to show oneself. They are the unequivocal indication of the presence of the sellers; an individual caught in the screen, the flash representing a life, in a way.

**IN THIS SPIRIT, COULD YOU
DESCRIBE THE ORIGINAL WAYS
YOU DEVELOPED TO PRESENT AND
DIFFUSE THE WORKS OF THE
SERIES TVS FROM CRAIGSLIST?**

I cropped just the screens from the TVs and printed them to the scale of a screen. I like the sense of

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collective humanity that is evident in a large group of them so I like to hang as many as possible in an installation. When I show this work I make two print editions for each image. The first goes on Craigslist for the price of the original TV – this could be from \$20 to \$300 and some are free if you pick them up – and the second edition is sold at gallery price. Since the images in the work originate from a site of exchange, I wanted to put them back there, to point the collision of those two markets: the art market and the consumer market.

**YOU ALSO HAVE MANY WORKS
RELATING TO THE SUN, SPACE
AND THE PLANETS. CAN YOU TELL
US ABOUT YOUR INTEREST IN THIS
TYPE OF IMAGERY?**

A photographer once said to me as a sort of challenge, that he thought it was interesting that while most photographers like to experience their subject first hand, I experience my subject in a secondary way, through other people's photographs. He was talking about the *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* project (2006 - ongoing). But in fact I am experiencing my subject first hand – that work is not about the sunset – it is about the screen and how people take and share images of familiar subjects. I started that project as an investigation in and around photography. I wanted to know what was the most photographed subject in 2006 on Flickr, the main photo-sharing website at the time, that was "sunset". I found it really fascinating that the sun, which is a fully singular object in the world, could be seen in such multiplicity through the screen. It was an indication to me of how much we've moved from being sun worshippers to screen worshippers.



COULD YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THE ONTOLOGICAL RELATIONS THAT YOUR WORKS ALLOW TO ESTABLISH BETWEEN THE FLUIDITY OF THE LIGHT AND THE MATERIALITY OF THE SCREEN?

That is an important subject in my work now and the focus of my installation at MBAL. Light in relation to technology, and the screen – how we use it, think about it, and even discard it. When you think about it, we are now closer to our screens than we are even with our own partners; we go to sleep looking at them, wake up to them, we are engaging with them all the time. They have become a prosthetic that mediates between the world and us. For me, the screen has become a metaphor of the body and mortality. I think it is interesting that most people don't actually think of screens as material objects. They are completely invisible when they are doing what they are supposed to do. But I am interested in what happens when they don't. I find them in all sorts of conditions: broken on eBay, light emanating from their compromised parts, and revealing unruly fluid guts. Still alive, the sellers turn them on to show that the parts indeed work. Or so compromised that no light comes from them at all, instead we see flash, dents, cracks, and dusty finger prints on dark dead surfaces. The latest images I have been working with are those from broken computer monitors, laptops, tablets and smartphones, where the sellers have left a history of personal touch, or the idiosyncratic drawing of arrows or other graphic pointers indicating where the flaw or damage is. In these images, the personal hand of the seller is forever embedded in the flawed screen. I find it fascinating that the breakdown of this wholly modern technology visually mimics the aesthetic of Modernist formal abstraction.

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A LARGE PART OF YOUR WORK IS TO GIVE PHYSICALITY TO THINGS THAT DON'T HAVE MUCH WEIGHT IN THE FIRST PLACE – DIGITAL FILES THAT WE CONSIDER IMMATERIAL. IS THIS SOMETHING YOU HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT?

Absolutely, but the subjects pictured in the digital images I work with do have physical weight. All of my work starts with a consideration of the object pictured. The physicality of a CRT for example or the physical presence of the sun; the seemingly invisible materiality of a flat LCD screen that becomes materially pronounced once its cracked. I am always thinking about how these images of heavy-weighted objects are circulating so easily on the web and how we experience them once they get reconfigured back into material form. Physical prints of these images are a transcription from one kind of material to another, via digital image and screen that anticipates the obsolescence of printing. I subvert the preciseness of the printing mechanism and its program in favor of dysfunctionality: in some work it is physical, adding extra ink to a printer to make a messy and fluid representation on paper of the messy fluid broken screen; sometimes the printer that prints the broken screen is broken itself. All substrates are screens in some way – they all let something through and hold something back. I have recently been disassembling and deconstructing discarded flat-screens. I am scanning some of the screens, with their fingerprints and their dot-screen patterns, and printing those onto other broken screens I have disassembled. The dot-screen patterns etched into some of the monitors' surfaces create amazing moiré patterns that I am also exploring at the moment.

**IN TERMS OF THE KNOWLEDGE
THAT YOU GAIN ABOUT DIFFERENT
MEDIA PLATFORMS, THE CIRCULATION
OF IMAGES, DO YOU FEEL PART OF
A WORLD CLOSE TO MEDIA ARCHEOLOGY?
A SENSE OF DIGGING INTO THINGS
OR THAT YOU CAN OFFER A GLIMPSE
INTO ANOTHER STATE OF TECHNOLOGY?**

I hope that I offer another view, yes. I think of the archeological aspect of what I do as a means to that view. That is to say, I am not a collector or an archeologist; I use such strategies to work with materials that they become something else. I have been thinking about this idea of the black box, how I use all of these technologies and rarely have any idea of how they really work. In some ways, technological transparency is only available to an elite few. The break in the screen is a way to think about that medium with a bit more transparency, but at the same time I am also preserving a bit of that opacity. I have been thinking a lot recently about what it means to “know”, the difference between transparency and opacity, and thinking about surveillance and personal rights. Should we be transparent or should we be opaque? It may sound like a stretch to make this comparison, but I see the screen in many ways as a surrogate of our bodies. We sit, and the world moves by our screens. We are experiencing the world in this vicarious, prosthetic way.

**HOW DO YOU ENVISION THE FUTURE
OF YOUR PRACTICE? WILL YOU CONSIDER
DIGGING FURTHER INTO ARCHIVES OR
THE CONSUMPTION OF IMAGES?**

Right now, I am thinking about e-waste; about the weight of all the electronic crap we create. One reference

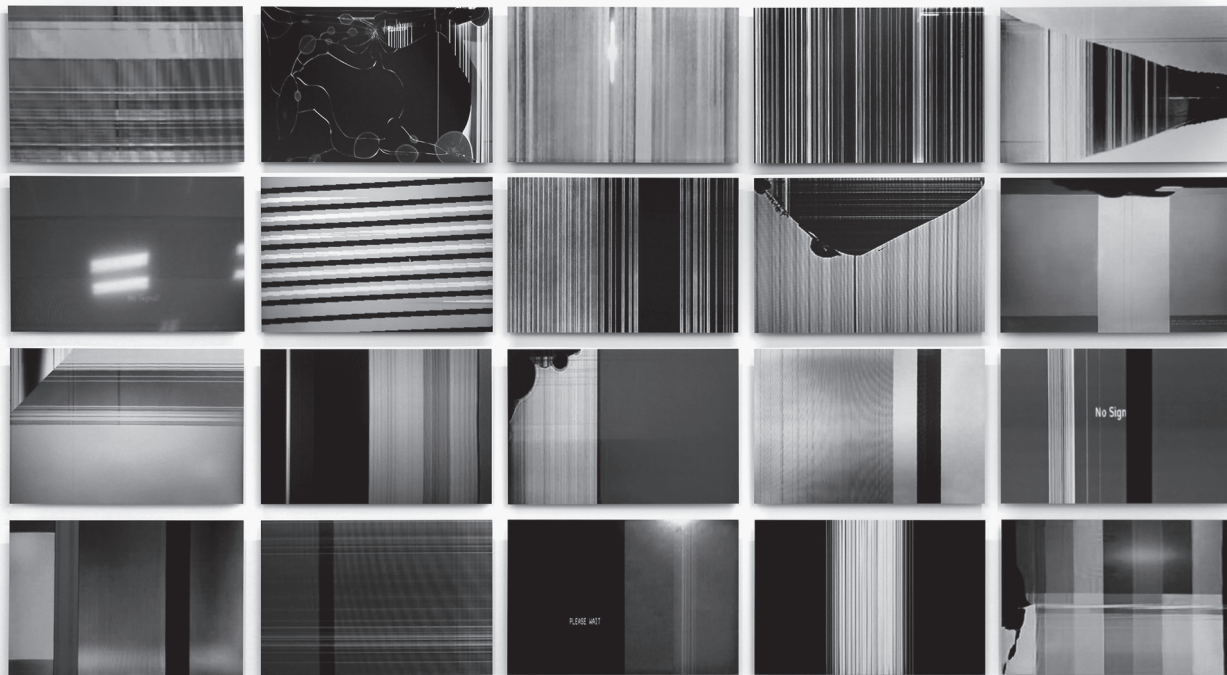
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that I seem to always circle back to is William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930). This story, told through multiple family members, begins with a dying wife/mother who watches her son build her coffin, and then upon her death the family travels many days across the country with her non-embalmed body in the back of a carriage, to bury it. It is very morbid. I think of these broken TVs, and all e-waste, as types of morbid objects; corpses. So that's what I am thinking about right now – I am looking at it, speaking to it as I am participating in it; trying to navigate the physicality of the screen, and all its component parts. Trying to get inside it and understand what it means to live inside this thing that replaces daylight, and paper, and ink.

Interview by Joël Vacheron

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*Broken Sets (group 005),
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