



# Penelope Umbrico and Flickr: from Niépce to the moon and back

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## PENELOPE UMBRICO AND FLICKR: FROM NIÉPCE TO THE MOON AND BACK

*Penelope Umbrico's series entitled Everyone's Photos Any License (2015-) gathers photographs of the full moon that she selected from among the millions of similar images of the theme on the image-sharing website Flickr. In this paper, I study Umbrico's gesture, drawing from the flow of online digital images to give shape to often monumental photographic installations, using photographs of the moon taken by others. Her project is inscribed in an image ecology that defends a recycling approach in the context of the overwhelming available images online. I argue that if Umbrico's series takes part in contemporary practices, it also refers to the history of photography and its tight links with astronomy. Drawing on the history of the photographs of the moon in the nineteenth century to the abundance of digital photographs today, I attempt to show that Umbrico's series both thematizes the technical challenges of photographing the moon and the ongoing fascination it evokes, in a time of space tourism projects. I argue that the artist's act of borrowing people's images of the moon mirrors our possessive relationship with images in the digital age and thus questions the notions of authorship and of uniqueness in today's flow of images.*

### From Niépce to Flickr

On 20 July 1969, Neil Armstrong, a member of the Apollo 11 mission, became the first astronaut to step on the moon, followed by Buzz Aldrin several minutes later, in front of nearly 600 million television viewers around the world.<sup>1</sup> As the only natural satellite visible from the Earth, the moon has inspired artists, writers, filmmakers and poets of various cultures. The moon has been represented in thousands of ways, whether invested with romanticism or darker beliefs (werewolf in times of full moon or lunar motifs in horror movies). However, for photography, from the first years of the invention of the medium, the moon, whose visible face is always the same from Earth, has represented an object to be immortalized for scientists as well as a technical challenge.<sup>2</sup> In an article published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* on

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1 November 1969, the year of the first steps on the moon, French journalist, historian and art critic Yvan Christ highlights the close relationship between photography and the moon. His article, entitled “From Nièpce to the Moon” (“De Nièpce à la Lune”), emphasizes that Nièpce’s invention serves as an objective tool, as evidence. Photography also serves as a means to access knowledge and as a medium of mass communication:

[. . .] without Joseph-Nicéphore Niépce and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, without Louis Ducos du Hauron and Charles Cros, the Moon would have remained the private *property* of the few astronauts who reached it [. . .].<sup>3</sup>

“Property” is an interesting term, and I shall come back to it. Would possessing the image of the moon mean possessing it a little? In 1839, during his speech in front of the Chamber of Deputies and at the Paris Academy of Sciences, French astronomer and physicist François Arago defended the usefulness of Louis Daguerre’s invention of the new medium:

[. . .] We may be permitted to hope for photographic maps of our satellite. This amounts to saying that in a few moments it will be possible to execute one of the longest, the most minute, and the most delicate of astronomical operations.<sup>4</sup>

John William Draper (1811–1882), a chemist and professor at the University of the City of New York, succeeded in making daguerreotypes of the moon in the years 1839–1840; these are considered to be among the first photographic images of the satellite. Draper received less recognition than American photographer John Adams Whipple (1822–1891), who made lunar daguerreotypes a decade later and was awarded a Medal for excellence of production at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851 (Figure 1). Whipple’s plate of the moon was described by the juries of the exhibition as “one of the most satisfactory attempts that has yet been made to realize, by a photographic process, the telescopic appearance of a heavenly body, and must be regarded as indicating the commencement of a new era in astronomical representation.”<sup>5</sup>

The technical challenges that arose in the early decades of the photographic medium are history today. About 180 years after Draper’s daguerreotype, images of the moon have multiplied, and the photographic process has undergone radical simplification, generalized and democratized thanks to digital techniques. Everyone can take his or her own image of the moon and publish it on an image-sharing site such as Flickr, Pinterest or Instagram, thus contributing to the flow of images shared daily on social networks.<sup>6</sup> Facing this mass of digital images, which requires reflection, particularly regarding their storage and the energy used for their circulation, photography is being rethought.

I wish to study a project by multimedia artist Penelope Umbrico (b. 1957), entitled *Everyone’s Photos Any License*, that gathers images of the full moon found on the Web. I suggest that this contemporary work on the moon explores, on one hand, the desire to take a picture of the unique natural satellite of the



Figure 1 John Adams Whipple and James Wallace Black, *The Moon*, 1857-60 Salted paper print from glass negative, Sheet: 8 5/16 × 6 1/4 in. (21.1 × 15.8 cm) Robert O. Dougan Collection, Gift of Warner Communications Inc., 1978. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Earth, resulting from the never-ending fascination towards the moon; and, on the other hand, the complex status of images in the digital era, where billions of images can be shared online, downloaded, remixed, questioning authorship as well as uniqueness. From Niépce to Flickr, from Draper to Umbrico, from daguerreotype to digital photography — in other words, from the beginnings of photography, whose etymology refers to writing proceeding from light, to our current society saturated with digital images made of pixels that can be shared on social platforms in a few clicks — Umbrico's series illustrates the evolution of the relationship of photography with the moon. Her series, made of photographs already produced, questions the use of images made by others and thus the delicate question of copyright in the digital age, in a time where the value of sharing is encouraged by digital culture. The artist's gesture of "appropriation" — or, as we will see, of "adoption" as Joan Fontcuberta would describe it —, refers to the history of photography and its early attempts to photograph the moon, as well as it illustrates contemporary amateur practices of photographing and sharing images online.

## From multiple exposures to multiple uploads

*Everyone's Photos Any License* is an ongoing project begun in 2015 that has resulted in several different works. The starting point is the collection of photographs of the full moon found on Flickr. After searching the platform using the term "full moon", Umbrico selected images from within the results and arranged them in a display that can cover the entire wall where the work is exhibited (Figure 2). Each image of the moon is shown within an ensemble of other similar images, separated by a thin blank margin, creating a grid effect that emphasizes each image of the moon and mimics the Flickr interface.

As Umbrico has recounted,<sup>7</sup> the genesis of her project dates back to her sister's visit on the evening of a full moon. Marveling at the sky, her sister tried to take a picture of the moon with her mobile phone but failed. With a smartphone, the result is often disappointing; the moon is not that easy to photograph. Umbrico took her Canon 5D and a good lens and photographed the full moon, making her sister admire her skills as a photographer. The artist responded by confessing that there were probably thousands of images as good as hers available online. In fact, Umbrico discovered more than a million full moon images, just on Flickr.

American artist Lisa Oppenheim (b. 1975) also worked with photographic representations of the moon in her *Lunagrams* series (2010) (Figure 3), for which she scanned Draper's glass negatives kept in the archives of New York University, where he taught at the time. As Sarah Kate Gillespie shows, Draper was more interested in the effects of light and its properties in the production of photography than in the resulting images.<sup>8</sup> His experiments in the photographic process and the chemical reactions with light explains Oppenheim's use of Draper's negatives as a tribute to the early photographic experiments with light, in particular with solar and lunar lights. Oppenheim made contact prints by enlarging the format of Draper's negatives and exposing them for a few seconds to the light of the moon, following the lunar cycle (i.e. the photograph of the first quarter moon developed at the time of the first quarter moon, the photograph of the full moon at the time of the full moon, etc.).



Fig. 2. Penelope Umbrico, *Everyone's Photos Any License* (654 of 1,146,034 Full Moons on Flickr, November 2015) 2015 Chromogenic prints, approx. 8 1/2 x 27 feet, installation view at Bruce Silverstein, 2016. © Penelope Umbrico, Courtesy the artist and Bruce Silverstein, New York.



Figure 3 Lisa Oppenheim, *Lunagrams (II)*, 1851/2010, 2010 Unique silver toned photogram, 20 x 16 in.; 50.8 x 40.6 cm (unframed) 21 3/4 x 17 3/4 x 1 3/8 in.; 55.2 x 45.1 x 3.5 cm (framed) © Lisa Oppenheim, Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles.

The neologism of the title of the *Lunagrams* series refers to the photographic technique, to the process of photograms that consists of placing objects on photosensitive surfaces to obtain their imprint once exposed to light. Oppenheim's approach can be seen as a tribute both to Draper's daguerreotypes and Christian Schad's (1894–1982) schadographs and to Man Ray's (1890–1976) rayographs.

Unlike Oppenheim, Umbrico highlights the accumulation of images of the same theme and uses current technologies. While Antoine-François-Jean Claudet's (1797–1867) *Multiple Exposures of the Moon* — made in the 1840s–50s, showing several moons on a daguerreotype presented in a small leather box measuring 2 3/16 inches by 1 inch (Figure 4) — requires close attention, requesting observation of the small



Fig. 4. Antoine-François-Jean Claudet, [*Multiple Exposures of the Moon*], 1846–52  
 Daguerreotype, Plate: 2 1/2 × 2 in. (6.4 × 5.1 cm), Case (approx.): 5.5 × 2.5 cm (2 3/16 × 1 in).  
 The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Fund, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2019. The  
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

details of each of the moons, Umbrico's series stresses the amount of images available on the Web. This mass has the effect of making the unique — the moon — multiple, even banal within this abundance. The viewer is attracted by the quantity and the effect of repetition rather than by the detail of a single image.

### *“Post-photography” and evidence*

Umbrico does not photograph; rather, she uses a computer, its software, the Internet, a smartphone and hundreds of applications. By the mid-1990s, the World Wide Web generalized the use of the Internet as a research and a communication tool, before becoming a ubiquitous global mass medium. In the field of photography, the early years of 1990 were characterized by the fear that the digital manipulation of photographs would conflict with the photographic medium capacity of rendering a faithful image of reality.<sup>9</sup>

Although alteration has existed since the early years of photography,<sup>10</sup> the ease with which manipulation was made possible with the computer, and the impossibility of

identifying it, were at the core of the discussions that took place in the 1990s, leading to what was announced as a “post-photographic” era.<sup>11</sup> During the second half of the 1990s, digital cameras began to invade the market and rapidly supplement analog cameras.<sup>12</sup>

The myth of photographic objectivity is humorously illustrated by German artists Robert Pufleb (b. 1969) and Nadine Schlieper’s (b. 1976) in a recent series of *Alternative Moons* (2017), composed of photographs of what looks like the moon on a black background. However, the artists show how misleading a photograph can be: These images represent pancakes. The duo reveals without the use of high-level digital manipulation technologies the illusions that can be obtained via means as trivial as a cooking recipe.

The fear that digital tools may question the function of evidence of the medium has later led to a different debate — one in the context of the massive use of digital tools and of the ubiquitous Internet. The term “post-photography” was then included in the framework of new practices, particularly in response to the saturation of images circulating on the Web. For instance, the exhibition *From Here On* during the Rencontres photographiques d’Arles (France) in 2011, brought together artists who reflected on the impact of the Internet and digital culture on photography. Two of Umbrico’s works were included in the collective exhibition<sup>13</sup> organized by Clément Chéroux, Joan Fontcuberta, Erik Kessels, Martin Parr, and Joachim Schmid. The manifesto of the exhibition asserted that artists have become “editors” who “recycle, clip and cut, remix and upload”,<sup>14</sup> establishing a form of image ecology,<sup>15</sup> induced by the ‘fluidity’<sup>16</sup> of images on the Web, which favors the sharing of images and their appropriability. This approach presupposes, however, the free use of the content accessible on the Web. This is an act that is far from pointless, and I shall come to it.

In 2014, Robert Shore observed,

If you are a photographer you might be tempted to conclude that the world-out-there is now so hyper-documented there’s no point in taking your own pictures any more.<sup>17</sup>

Leaving the camera behind, several artists using photography favored the use of pre-existing images, mostly available on the Web. Umbrico, like other artists, such as Erik Kessels, Joachim Schmid, Mishka Henner and Thomas Mailaender, to name but a few, thus forsook the camera to tap into the images circulating on the Web.<sup>18</sup>

### *Constellations of images*

The observation of an image saturation is perfectly illustrated in another work by Umbrico, perhaps her most famous series: *Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* (2006-ongoing, Figure 5). The ongoing series gathers sunsets found on Flickr that she reframed to focus only on the sun. Started in 2006, only two years after the launch of Flickr in 2004, the series thematizes the abundance of similar images shared on social media as well as the desire to post one’s photograph of a subject as traditional as the sunset. The series on the moon undoubtedly echoes the one on the sun, as it is just as difficult to photograph and yet is so tirelessly photographed.



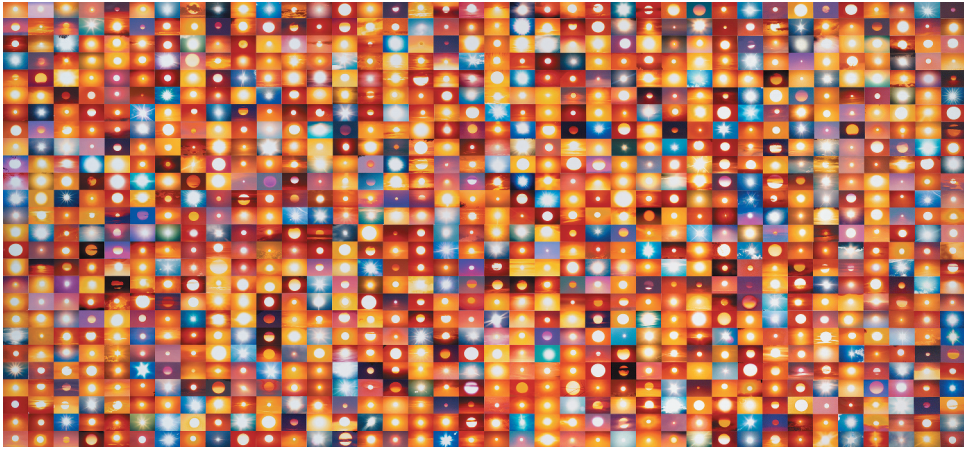


Fig. 5. Penelope Umbrico, *5,377,183 Suns from Sunsets from Flickr (Partial) 04-28-09*, 2009 Chromogenic prints, 4 x 6 in each, 104 x 288 in all over © Penelope Umbrico, Courtesy the artist and Bruce Silverstein, New York.

This vast corpus of sunlight, thus cropped to remove all localization and subjectivity, creates an abstract wall of bright colors. The choice of the theme was simple: the sunset was the most “tagged” topic on Flickr. Umbrico’s installations are grids of suns that look like abstract patterns. Made of photographic prints of  $10 \times 15$  cm ( $4 \times 6$  in.) — the standard format for photographic prints<sup>19</sup> — taped together directly on the exhibition wall to invade the space, the installations are entitled in such a way as to reflect the portion of images available online. Umbrico shows only a small amount of the vast digital collection. In the installations, it is thus assumed that they are partial, but they also stand for an archive of the Web. They are not a precise document of all of the images kept but rather a testimony of the increasing mass of photographs shared on social platforms, such as Flickr. As Kate Palmer Albers defends, the series “brings us back to our comforting mediated rituals, pointing out, perhaps, the un-originality of photographing a sunset, but ultimately affirming our own participation in the collective practice.”<sup>20</sup>

Garance Chabert and Aurélien Mole suggest that a new generation of artists iconographers has arisen since the advent of the Web, whom they name ‘iconographers-astronomers’<sup>21</sup> and whose practices of collecting and reusing images from the past aim to create iconographic “constellations.” In Umbrico’s case, her selection of images draws on the current iconographic collection. Her gesture does not require the discovery of rare, forgotten, or lost images (besides one image can easily be replaced by another similar one). However her constellation is unique in that the satellite photographed, dominating the night sky, is seen through the multiplication of its representations, creating a set of light sources. The result of Umbrico’s search for images creates “constellations” made of the same theme, of repetitions and small variations that valorize mass and similarity.

This mass effect<sup>22</sup> is further developed in a 16-minute video that scrolls through the images Umbrico collected on her computer and recorded with QuickTime

(*Everyone's Moon 2015-11-04 14.22.59*, 2015). The stream of images is a testament to the profusion of similar images, variations of the same theme without the viewer being able to stop on one of them. The fast and frenetic effect of the video imitates computer scrolling. The quantity is emphasized, the infinite number of images that are replaced as quickly as they appear, almost uncontrollably.

### *“Satellite” images*

Umbrico notes that “pictures” are “constantly moving and forever changing” in the Internet environment, which enables the instant sharing of images:

All images (artful, authored, pedestrian or unauthored) become unassignable and anonymous in this unlimited exchange of visual information, and function as a collective visual index of data that represent us – a constantly changing and spontaneous auto-portrait. The index has shifted from visually descriptive truth to accumulative visual data.<sup>23</sup>

The anonymity of images can be questioned. On Flickr for instance, most of the users credit their images uploaded online. “Artful” images are also well protected by copyright law, even online. Working on photographs that others have taken is thus a means of exploring the medium in its current state within the rise of sharing image platforms, social media and smartphones. The quantity of images becomes a value that measures collective practices. According to artist and curator Joan Fontcuberta, one of the signatories of the Arles manifesto, the process of borrowing images that others have made is the result of the upheavals resulting from new technologies. The appropriation of images is rather a practice of “adopting” images from various sources.<sup>24</sup> Fontcuberta argues,

When post-photographic artists adopt an image, they are the guardians of a step in that image’s life, they manage its growth, but they don’t necessarily feel like they are its biological parent.<sup>25</sup>

The distinction between appropriating and adopting lies in the conceptual filiation between the object and the author. Adopting suggests electing as well as including within one’s circle while admitting the biological distance between the one who adopts and what is adopted, whereas appropriation establishes a dimension of ownership. In contrast to appropriation, the adoption process emphasizes “the act of choosing,” as Fontcuberta argues in the exhibition catalogue *The Post-Photographic Condition*, which is the title of the 14th edition of *Le Mois de la Photo* in Montreal in 2015, where he lists ten transformations that digital technologies and the Web have brought about in relation to images. He also emphasizes a new “responsibility of the artist,” which implies “an ecology of the visual that penalizes saturation and promotes recycling [. . .].”<sup>26</sup>

In the early 1980s, American artist Sherrie Levine (b. 1947) re-photographed the photographs of the renowned American photographer Walker Evans (1903–1975),

attacking copyright and the status of the unique work of art by considering copying to be an artistic act. Digital recycling practices play on these questions of authorship and uniqueness. For instance, Hermann Zschiegner's artist's book, *+Walker Evans +Sherrie Levine* (2008, self-published), brings together 26 images of the famous Allie Mae Burroughs photographed by Evans and taken up by Levine. These are images found on Google Images using "+walker evans + sherrie levine" in the search engine. The images reproduced in the artist's book are each accompanied by indications of the number of pixels, the URL and the author of the reproduced image: Evans or Levine.<sup>27</sup> Zschiegner's artist's book refers as much to Levine's appropriation act and her reflection on the figure of the artist as it underlines the ambivalent status of images gleaned from the Internet, their accessibility and their fragile nature. The artist's book that gathers images of various quality, with its impression of poor aesthetics, of "poor image[s],"<sup>28</sup> nevertheless refers to the history of art and alludes to Levine's gesture. It also overtly refers to the tradition of the artist's book, as it reproduces 26 images, the exact same number as in the seminal artist's book by Ed Ruscha (b. 1937), *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963).

American artist Michael Mandiberg (b. 1977) has also played with the notions of authorship and uniqueness, pushing the strategy of replication to the absurd by integrating it into the digital framework. His websites *AfterSherrieLevine.com*, as well as *AfterWalkerEvans.com* (2001) make digital files of Levine's and Evans' photographs available with a certificate of authenticity. The copy is "a satellite image", as described by the artist, "a satellite image" that is meant to reverse the value of the work, his strategy aiming at creating "a physical object with cultural value, but little or no economic value", as Mandiberg asserts.<sup>29</sup> Mandiberg and Zschiegner's works thus respond to Levine's appropriationist work by showing the paradigm shifts induced by the digital and the Web.

In *Everyone's Photos Any License*, the use of images that others have made fits Fontcuberta's definition of adoption as filiation with the original images. The series indeed raises the question of the use of images and their sharing on websites, such as Flickr, and consequently, it questions the notions of authorship and ownership. Umbrico's work, as in many other contemporary projects, explores the process of exchange or sharing on the Internet, as well as the status of the author. André Gunthert has shown that the Internet has changed the status of images as a "common property, which has fundamentally transformed uses."<sup>30</sup> Image-sharing platforms and social networks are based on the principle of the circulation and exchange of content. Contemporary practices take part in these digital activities, where it seems that sharing prevails over ownership.

### *Authorship: property and exchange*

The notions of copyright, intellectual property and more generally the value of originality are central issues in today's digital environment for several reasons. Information, data and images circulate easily on the Web, favoring exchanges thus facilitated. Digital technologies encourage all sorts of remixes in the same manner as gifs or memes make use of recycling and humorous diversions. Digital culture is also

democratizing appropriation practices through technical means accessible to all. The rapidity with which information circulates, as well as the absence of borders (except in cases of government censorship), also favors the virality of information. Eva Respini, curator of the exhibition *Art in the Age of the Internet: 1989 to Today* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, organized in 2018, argues that the first change brought about by the Internet in terms of its impact on contemporary art is the possibility of appropriation that reconsiders the way ‘originality and authorship’<sup>31</sup> is understood. The notion of ownership is questioned because of the technical means facilitating takeover practices.

Numerous artists question the issue of authorship and ownership within the digital context, as well as in the field of photography and photo-based works. The exhibition *Free Lunch*, organized in late 2020-early 2021 at the Jean-Kenta Gauthier Gallery in Paris, gathered artists (Daniel Blaufuks, Coco Capitán, Raphaël Dallaporta, Mishka Henner, David Horvitz, Alfredo Jaar and Julien Nédélec) who exhibited works that the visitors could take back with them for free. The idea at the core of the exhibition was thus to reconsider the value of uniqueness and rarity of artworks and to encourage a reflection upon visiting an exhibition and the desire to possess the works shown. One of them, by French artist Julien Nédélec (b. 1982), explores the will to possess the moon. Several companies indeed claim that they own the moon, such as the Lunar Embassy Corporation that sells estates on the moon (see *The National Geographic*, 17 July 2009). Entitled *The Moon Belongs to Everyone (La Lune appartient à tout le monde)* (2020), Nédélec’s work is composed of four spiral-bound books of 227 sheets each that were displayed in the exhibition room. The images reproduced in the books are based on an extremely high-resolution photograph of the moon, taken by NASA’s robotic spacecraft Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter in 2011. Each book includes a portion of the NASA image. The visitors were invited to tear out a page and to add a stamp on the back that stated in French, “The Moon belongs to everyone,” a reflection on the wish to possess (an image of) the moon while reaffirming that the moon belongs to everyone. The work also questions the wish to own a work of art that requires destroying a part of a book in order to own a portion of it.

Umbrico’s *Everyone’s Photos Any License* explores the notion of ownership and, more particularly, the idea of a work created from an exchange with amateurs. She had already experienced the process of exchange when, during the Alt+1000 festival that took place in 2013 in the village of Rossinière, Switzerland,<sup>32</sup> she asked visitors to take a picture with their smartphone of the mountain view from the hill of the village, then to send her the file, which she would manipulate with dozens of applications and send back to the author. The latter could print the file and send the artist two prints, one that she would keep for future projects and one that she would send back with a certificate of authenticity. *A Proposal and Two Trades* addresses the question of ownership and the process of exchange, networking and collaboration between the artist and amateurs, in particular the visitors. The artist uses her smartphone and requests from the viewer to do the same, expressing the prime role of the smartphone in image making and as a means of communication.

*Everyone's Photos Any License* sums up in the title the importance of the author understood as a collective and the license evoking the question of ownership and uniqueness. Many of the images that the artist found on Flickr were licensed under "All Rights Reserved." She contacted the authors on Flickr to ask them for permission to use their image. The conditions were the following: The gallery takes 50% of the sale of the installation, Umbrico shares the remaining 50%, with 25% going to the author of the photograph (minus the cost of the print, depending on the image format) and 25% going to Umbrico.<sup>33</sup>

In the case of the *Suns* series, the approach was different. The artist did not contact the authors of the sunset images found on Flickr. The aim was to create a "work about the collective act of photographing the sunset, not the individual authorship of each of the images."<sup>34</sup> As Umbrico states, recalling what Pierre Bourdieu had explained on the "rite" of photographing within amateurs' practice,<sup>35</sup>

When you are taking a picture of a sunset, you are participating in a ritual that millions of people are participating in at the same time. There is something almost spiritual about doing something with so many others at the exact same time. To claim a kind of authorship outside of this is to deny this connection. It negates the idea of collective participation and emphasizes individual expression.<sup>36</sup>

But does the individual claim of ownership and/or authorship negate the collective "ritual"? Umbrico's work shows precisely that the quantity of similar photographs and their evidence as collective practices do not diminish the wish, as image-makers (whether amateurs or professionals), to claim authorship and originality, in short to emphasize the uniqueness of the moment photographed.

### *Copyright and license*

For her project on the full moon, Umbrico changed her approach, probably because of the criticism she had received following the first exhibitions of her *Suns* series, where commentators had indeed blamed her for her disregard of the copyright of the original photographs, as the authors were not mentioned anywhere.<sup>37</sup> For *Everyone's Photos Any License*, unlike Levine, who was copying the work considered a masterpiece by a renowned photographer, Umbrico asked permission to use the images of amateurs, professionals or anonymous people, images of everyone.

To produce her installations, she used both "All Rights Reserved" licensed images for which the authors had given their consent and "Creative Commons" images, a less restrictive Open Access license. Creative Commons, launched in the United States in 2001, the same year as Wikipedia, offers licenses that encourage the availability of works. One of its instigators, the American attorney Lawrence Lessig, defends the possibility for amateurs in particular to remix works created by others and seeks to rethink the copyright laws that he considers inadequate in the Internet field.<sup>38</sup> Umbrico's use of images under a Creative Commons license may be seen as both a way to express how the digital and Internet have changed the question of image ownership toward a movement that promotes sharing, as well as, on a more

pragmatic level, a solution to avoid any problems of copyright following her experience with her *Suns* series.

The licensing of the images used is a central part of the work. A map of the work including numbers referring to each photograph (Figure 6), and an attribution list with the full credits (Figure 7) accompany the piece. The credit text mentions the license, the name of the author of each full moon photograph, a description of the image by the author and technical information (on the camera used, the lens, etc.), data that is often given under each image posted on Flickr.<sup>39</sup>

Umbrico received various responses from the Flickr users, some of which are shown on her website. One example is worth mentioning, as it had an effect on the artist's process.<sup>40</sup> After having agreed to the use of his photograph, the author of one image of the full moon changed his mind and sent a second email to Umbrico, explaining his refusal:

[...] Since I and other photographers have invested thousands of dollars in equipment and time, it is absurd that you make such a statement. The sun or the moon may be visible to everyone, but not everyone has the means to create good photographs of them. [...]<sup>41</sup>

The reaction of this author, who retracted his approval, is understood by Umbrico as the need to possess the image of the moon and to remain its sole owner and author, because financial means were necessary to take a picture of the full moon (as I have mentioned, smartphones cannot yet provide a sharp image of the moon). Willing to further explore the relationship between digital, screen and materiality, in 2015, Umbrico began a related project entitled *iPhone Camera Roll Screen-grabs (Google Moon)* (Figure 8). The series is a direct response to the argument the Flickr user gave the artist when refusing to give permission to use his photograph of the moon. She explains,

I turned to Google Moon to explore the possibility of making my own images of the moon. If Flickr photographers justify owning the representation of the moon solely based on the privilege of their investment in photographic technology

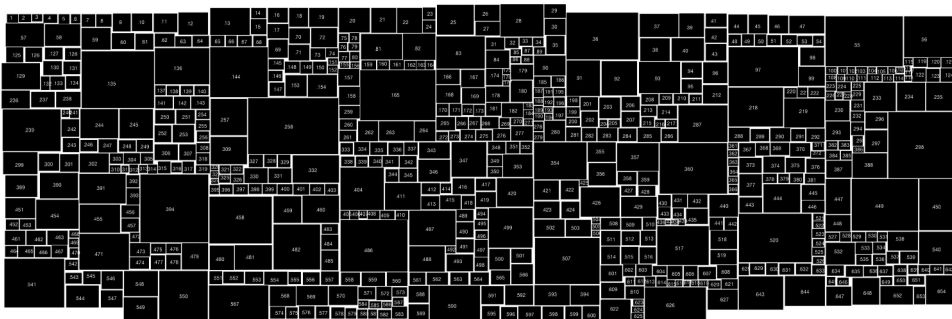


Fig. 6. Penelope Umbrico, *Map for Everyone's Photos Any License (654 of 1,146,034 Full Moons on Flickr, November 2015)*, 2015 11" x 17" black and white laser copy hand-outs © Penelope Umbrico, Courtesy the artist and Bruce Silverstein, New York.

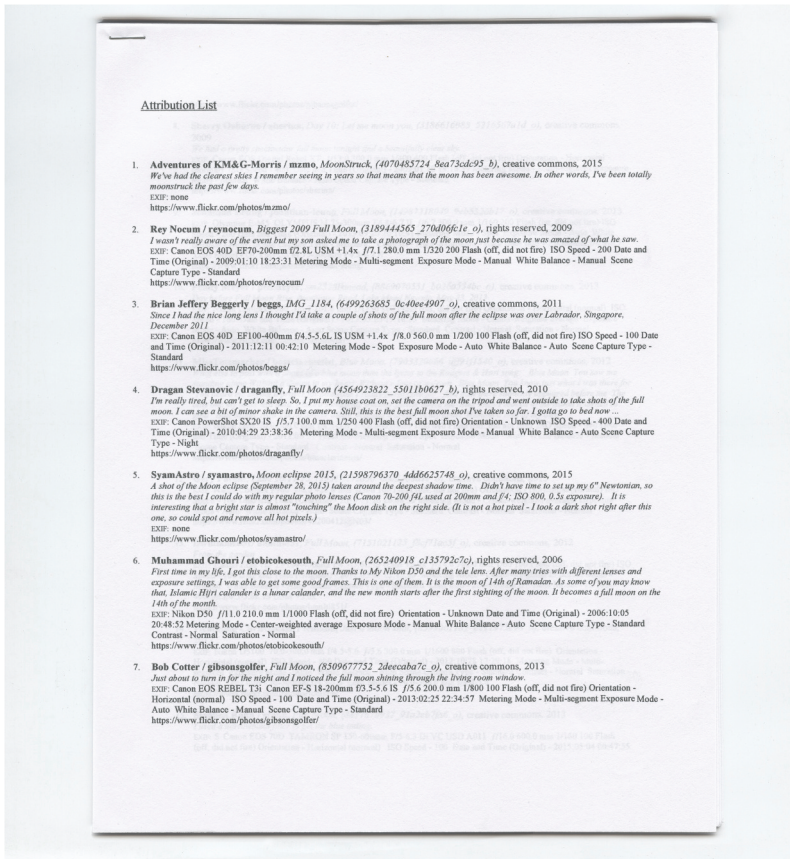


Fig. 7. Penelope Umbrico, *Attribution list for Everyone's Photos Any License (654 of 1,146,034 Full Moons on Flickr, November 2015)*, 2015 (detail) 8.5" x 11" laser copy © Penelope Umbrico, Courtesy the artist and Bruce Silverstein, New York.

[. . .], then Google is the epitome of this kind of colonialism, with Google Earth and now Google Moon, having a near monopoly on how we view the world today.<sup>42</sup>

The artist photographed her computer screen with her iPhone while displaying images on Google Moon, the interactive three-dimensional atlas of the moon that allows Internet users to explore the lunar landscape. However, the result is far from a precise document of the moon — quite the opposite. Umbrico, who is aware that such a file is provided in one click on NASA's website (free to download among other documents),<sup>43</sup> examines the “new era in astronomical representation” — to quote the *Juries' Report* on Whipple's daguerreotype on the moon already mentioned — that is today accessed via technology companies such as Google that provide several services, among them exploring the moon with

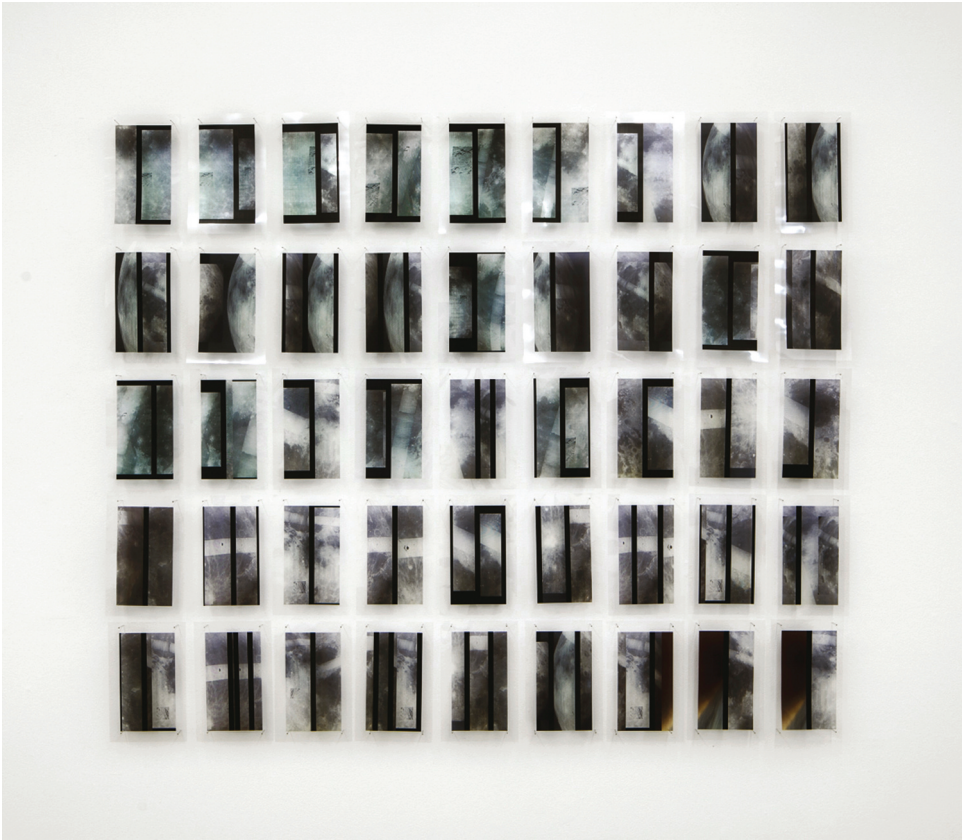


Fig. 8. Penelope Umbrico, *Google Moon iPhone Screen Grabs of Screen Grabs*, 2015 45 laser prints on acetate, each 7 x 11 in Installation view at Children's Museum of the Arts, New York, 2016 © Penelope Umbrico, Courtesy of the artist.

satellites images. Umbrico's series is laser-printed on acetate, giving a transparent appearance that makes the images appear to be floating between screens, thus deconstructing the scientific aspect of the images found on Google Moon. As in *Everyone's Photo Any License*, the artist questions our common desire both to get a picture of the moon and to own the image. Ownership in legal terms, the license, is also associated with the possessiveness that Umbrico interrogates in the context of massive posting of similar images on a digital platform aimed at sharing. As Daniel Palmer states, Umbrico's works are "driven by shared desires that no individual can own, and to which single photographs can only hint."<sup>44</sup>

### *From Niépce to Flickr and back*

To conclude, I wish to return to Yvan Christ's text that I mentioned in the introduction, particularly to the sentence "without Niépce and Daguerre, Ducos and Cros, the Moon would have remained the private property of a few astronauts."



Photography is certainly a tool for democratization. However, today, in the digital context, the question of ownership becomes a key and yet complex issue. Has digital technology paradoxically erased the notion of private property?

While the application Google Moon invites anyone to explore the surface of the satellite, while a precise photograph of the moon is provided on NASA's website for free, the wish to take a picture of the moon departs from these scientific visualizations and visual mappings, as they are based in personal and subjective experiences. Umbrico's project illustrates the desire to photograph the moon, not as a scientific proof nor a tool of knowledge of the satellite, but as a trace of the fascination exercised by the moon on each of us, amateurs, professionals, artists. In an era of the ubiquitous of satellite images that remodel the representations of the world as well as of the moon, visually mapped by Google,<sup>45</sup> in what could be seen as a visual conquest of the earth as well as of the moon, in a time where human spaceflight to the moon within the NASA Artemis Program is carried, where companies such as Blue Origin (founded by Jeff Bezos in 2000) and SpaceX (founded in 2002 by Elon Musk) are developing private space transportation and space tourism (among which the wish to send tourists around the moon<sup>46</sup>), Umbrico's work can be understood as a reflection on the desire to both colonize the moon and to echo the desire to possess one's own image of the full moon. In a time of potential space tourism, the moon, alone in the dark sky, so difficult to photograph, might be considered a satellite impossible (yet) to reach without the help of Niépce, Daguerre, DuCos du Hauron and Cros, that is without photography, until private astronauts will come back from space with new photographs of the moon.

In an era dominated by the Web, where sharing content is fast, easy, global and massive, this consumption of images, this saturation of images, does not reduce the wish to possess an image of the moon. The fact that each image resembles a thousand others is of little importance in the end. The experience is unique, and photography is proof of this experience. The refusal of the Flickr user that Umbrico received, defending his status as an author, illustrates this. The experience that the artist recounted with her sister who, watching the full moon, spontaneously wished to immortalize it with her smartphone, also shows this desire to capture the moon.

The desire for possession is coupled, however, with a need to share: The image must be seen, it must circulate and it must be viewed online. Posting a photograph of the moon is taking part in collective sharing. Umbrico's series, which is based on images taken by others, reiterates this possessive gesture, thus questioning the authorship of these photographs of the moon, unique in their experience and yet so similar in their rendering. Her work is based on "satellite images", in Mandiberg's words; they are, like the moon, in orbit, floating in the vast digital universe, forming a new "constellation" after the artist's selection and rearrangement.

The question of the dialectic between digital and materialization and, consequently, the question of the experience of the work arises. Since Walter Benjamin and his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), photography has been associated with the loss of artworks' aura, their *hic et nunc*, their uniqueness. The Internet reaffirms this loss, as David Joselit shows in *After Art*, particularly in the digital environment:

*After Art* will assert that images possess vast power through their capacity of replication, remediation, and dissemination at variable velocities.<sup>47</sup>

Umbrico cultivates this power of remediation of which Joselit speaks, illustrated in her video work, which testifies to the incessant movement of the Web, underlining the uncontrolled flow of mass images. The photographic works, for their part, by their monumental dimensions, the embossing effect of the whole, the empty intervals left between each photograph as if floating in an empty space but framed in more recent versions of the project (and in smaller dimensions), giving the effect of unique multiples within a whole, give concrete expression to the passage from the screen to the physical, material space.

Umbrico creates her photographic installations according to the dimensions of the walls on which the pieces will be displayed. The materiality of the work is thus defined by the space as well as inscribed in a temporality. For each new version, she renews her search on Flickr to obtain the updated sunsets or full moons kept on the digital platform. The titles testify to the updating, a part of the ever-evolving Web, of the increasing number of images uploaded online. Therefore, each piece can be read as a partial archive of the digital flow, a selection from the quantity, a snapshot in the moving stream of the Internet. There is thus a passage between the digital space, between the computer and the smartphone, and the exhibition space where the work becomes material. Beyond Flickr, beyond the digital, beyond the dematerialization and massive flow of images, Umbrico's work reaffirms the *hic et nunc* of which Benjamin spoke — the *here and now* of the spectator in the exhibition.

From the first photographic experiments in the nineteenth century, seeking to grasp the unique moon, to Flickr, where multitude is valued and the sharing of digital files is limitless, Umbrico offers a snapshot, an experience of multiplicity through unique photographic installations. The images used by Umbrico are, indeed, images associated with a personal act, anchored in their own history. Ownership and possessiveness go hand in hand. The artist cultivates the power of collaboration and exchange made possible by digital technologies and the Web. The approach is neither critical nor ironic, but rather expresses the artist's fascination with this mass and the photographic practices in the digital age. Umbrico puts in tension possessiveness, appropriation and thus authorship, as well as she questions the uniqueness of the experience of photographing the full moon. In the end, the vast amount of images of the moon doesn't reduce the aura of the Earth's unique natural satellite.

The title of this paper, "Penelope Umbrico and Flickr: from Niépce to the Moon and back," refers to that of Yvan Christ's article, to which I added a "return," because in my opinion, there is an exchange, a collaborative approach and a cyclical effect here (but nothing to do with the lunar cycle). By giving back a tangible material, selecting a part of the vast digital corpus, Umbrico undertakes an exchange with the spectator. The cyclic effect goes even further, because some of her works provoke a certain type of reaction: Visitors take selfies or picture themselves posing in front of her sun walls, a trace "of an experience."<sup>48</sup> The viewers are in the present



Fig. 9. Penelope Umbrico, *People with Suns from Sunsets from Flickr* at the Perez Art Museum, Miami, 2015 Digital mockup © Penelope Umbrico, Courtesy of the artist.

of their experience as spectators, or, more precisely, in the experience of staging themselves in front of a work that becomes a backdrop for hundreds of sunsets, with the work substituting for or re-enacting the actual experience of the sunset. These images are then reintegrated into the digital flow by visitors who post their photographs on Flickr. Umbrico found them and collected them (*People with Suns from Sunsets from Flickr*, 2011-, [Figure 9](#)). The image cycle is repeated again and again, endlessly.

## Notes

1. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Photographies* for their precise and thought-provoking reading as well as the artists for giving permission to reproduce their work in this paper.
2. In 2019, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the first steps on the satellite, several exhibitions were held on the topic of the moon, including one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that focused on photography: *Apollo's Muse: The Moon in the Age of Photography*. See Fineman and Saunders, *Apollo's Muse*. Several books were also published on that occasion, among which was Mark Holborn's richly illustrated *Sun and Moon*.
3. Emphasis added. My translation. Christ, "De Niépce à la Lune," 427.
4. Report by François Arago on the daguerreotype, read at the session of the Chamber of Deputies on 3 July 1839, and at the Academy of Sciences, session of August 19, Academy of Sciences (France). I quote the English translation published in: Arago, *Popular Astronomy* 2, 293.

5. Quoted in Gillespie, "John William Draper," 241. Gillespie analyzes the context of the first photographic experiments of the moon and in particular those of Draper and his lack of recognition at the time.
6. Susan Murray analyzes the uses of the Flickr platform and concludes that digital photography "has significantly altered our relationship to the practice of photography (when coupled with social networking software)", in: Murray, "New Media," 180. On the importance of visibility and popularity of the images shared on Flickr and the process of tagging, see: Rubinstein and Sluis, "A Life More Photographic".
7. Umbrico, "Reimagining the Image".
8. Gillespie, "John William Draper," 244.
9. Rosler, "Image Simulations".
10. See Fineman, *Faking It*.
11. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye*; Ritchin, *In Our Own Image*; and Mirzoeff, *An Introduction*.
12. Bajac, *Après la photographie?* 99. Regarding the digital developments in photography as well as the changes in experiencing photography since the rise of digital photography, see Bate, "The Digital Condition".
13. She showed her *Suns* series (see [Figure 5](#)) posted on a monumental column as well as two other series: *TVs from Craigslist* (2009–2010) and *Mirrors (from Catalogs and Home Décor Websites)* (2001–2011).
14. *Les Rencontres d'Arles*.
15. Chéroux, "L'Or du temps". See Pollen, "The Rising Tide". See my discussion on the image ecology in Dietschy, "Images recyclées".
16. Gunthert, *L'Image partagée*, 98.
17. Shore, *Post-Photography*, 7.
18. Regarding the debates about the term "post-photography", see *Art Press*.
19. Regarding how the series must be printed, as well as their relationships to photographic techniques, see Evans, "Penelope Umbrico"; Brown, "No Two Sunsets are Alike: Reenvisioning Umbrico's *Suns* ... Nine Years Later," [sfmoma.org](https://www.sfmoma.org/read/sunsets-umbrico/), August 2018, <https://www.sfmoma.org/read/sunsets-umbrico/>.
20. Palmer Albers, "Abundant Images," 4–14.
21. Chabert and Mole, *Les Artistes iconographes*
22. On the relationship between contemporary art and the Internet on a generation of artists (not restrained to photography) that do not consider the Internet "as a new medium, but rather as a true *mass medium*" (XV), see Cornell and Halter, *Mass Effect*.
23. Umbrico, "Exchanges: Photography Now," 81.
24. I am discussing Fontcuberta's approach of adoption within Mishka Henner's work in Dietschy, "After Robert Frank's Photobook," 297–322.
25. Fontcuberta in Desgagné, "Joan Fontcuberta," 112.
26. Fontcuberta, "Introduction," 8.
27. Invited to take part in the exhibition *From Here On* in Arles in 2011, Zschiegner used his artist's book as a starting point for creating a hanging of 26 gelatin silver prints of the images found on Google Images following the same search performed for the book. Framed, the 8-by-10-inch prints were printed to correspond to the

- sizes of the original Evans' prints. The captions mentioned only the URL (i.e. the Web address where the image came from).
28. Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image".
  29. Michael Mandiberg's statement on his websites <https://aftersherrielevine.com> and <https://afterwalkerevans.com>. I discuss this work as well as other contemporary works, such as Oliver Laric's, with regard to their approaches to the uniqueness and use of copies and replicas in Dietschy, "L'art de la réplique," 54–65.
  30. My translation. Gunthert, *L'Image partagée*, 93.
  31. Respini, "No Ghost Just a Shell," 22.
  32. Herschdorfer, *High Altitude*.
  33. A screenshot of one of the emails Umbrico sent to Flickr users is reproduced on her website and specifies the pricing structure: <http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/index.php/project/flickr-moons/>.
  34. Umbrico, "A Documentary Practice," 27.
  35. Bourdieu, *Un art moyen*.
  36. See note 34 above.
  37. *Ibid.*, 26.
  38. Lessig, *Remix*.
  39. When the work was exhibited at the Bruce Silverstein Gallery in New York, in 2015, a pile of laser copies of the map was made available to the public. Several printouts of the attribution list enabled the visitors to read the full credit lines. In some subsequent exhibitions, Umbrico made a little book of the attribution list that accompanied the wall installation. She also published a book which contains the attribution list published in the leporello that contains more than 1 million images of the full moon found on Flickr: Umbrico, *Everyone's Photos Any*. I wish to thank Penelope Umbrico for answering my questions. Umbrico, Email to the author, 21 December 2021.
  40. Umbrico, "Reimagining the Image."
  41. Quoted from the screenshot of the email Umbrico received from a Flickr user, reproduced on her website: <http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/index.php/project/flickr-moons/>.
  42. Umbrico's statement on her website: <http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/index.php/project/flickr-moons/>.
  43. See note 40 above.
  44. Daniel Palmer, *Photography and Collaboration*, 162.
  45. Salari, "Postcards from Google Earth".
  46. In 2019, Jeff Bezos announced the development of his "Blue Moon" lander project, destined to send astronauts to the surface of the moon by 2024. Dynetics is the third private American company that is working on human endeavors to the moon.
  47. Joselit, *After Art*, XIV.
  48. Gunthert, "La consécration du *selfie*," §5.

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