

Probe – An archeology of vernacular photography

Elisabeth Roy-Trudel

Posted on 2013/09/27 by

[No Comments](#)



The above picture is a detail of a collage currently on exhibition at the Darling Foundry and is part of *Le Mois de la photo à Montréal*. The artist transformed and assembled close to one thousand images taken from a photo-sharing website.

Sunset Portraits is a large, yet ordered and neat collage. The pictures are all the same size, similarly cropped, and were likely printed using the same devices and techniques. The background colors are well distributed, which adds to the overall sense of harmony. The images in this installation physically touch each other (isn't this a nice metaphor for surface relations?).

But of course, these images relate to each other in various ways, both on Flickr, from where the artist extracted her pictures from a pool of millions of sunset images, and in the art work *Sunset Portraits*. In both instances, they are part of a discursive practice; their production and circulation take place according to certain rules of formation that remind us of Foucault's discourse analysis.

The artist behind *Sunset Portraits*, Penelope Umbrico, is not interested in the meaning of the *individual* images that make up her collage: “[m]y focus on collective practices in photography has led me to examine subjects that are collectively photographed. I take the sheer quantity of images online as a collective archive that represents us – a constantly changing auto-portrait. ... The idea of absence and erasure is a constant theme in my work, especially with regard to the popular uses of technologies in photography and on the Internet that seem to promise visibility, community and intimacy. I question the idea of the democratization of media, where pre-scripted images, made with tools programmed to function in predetermined ways, claim to foster subjectivity and individuality” (<http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/Info/Words.html>).

Looking at a single sunset portrait would not reveal much; however, paying attention to the *group* of images, does. The origin, place and time of the photos are not essential pieces of information. Amplified by the symmetrical collage, the similarity of the images becomes almost mechanical, making each individual image redundant. “The lack of individuality that is ultimately the experience when faced with so many assertions that are more or less all the same”, as Umbrico herself says, becomes even more obvious because of the artist's selection of – technically speaking – “bad” pictures, taken against the light and showing mainly undistinguishable faces. Through her re-grouping and alteration of images in a schematic collage, she has flattened the images to bring the viewer to think about how the images relate to each other. Her method of identifying and putting together similar images from Flickr attempts to make sense of the contemporary mass phenomenon that consists of taking pictures and sharing them on the Web. In other words, as I would argue, she is looking at what Foucault calls the discourse, and she invites the viewer to consider this discourse “in the play of its immediacy” (Foucault 1998: 306).

Both Umbrico herself and the viewer of *Sunset Portraits* are likely not concerned with the question of whether photography is an interpretation of the world (Rancière 86) or whether Susan Sontag is right when she affirms that “[t]o photograph ... means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge...” (Sontag 4). How can the almost banal and individual – yet at the same time collectively repetitive – act of making sunset portraits be an interpretation of the world? How do they allow us to relate meaningfully to the world? But let’s not talk too much about “deeper” meanings – Foucault would, in any event, have rejected a psychoanalytically informed analysis of these images. It is not the act of photographing that is relevant here, but rather the fact that this act and the subsequent sharing of these images are part of a discursive practice governed by certain rules of formation and circulation.

These visual discourses therefore do not primarily exist because photographs capture experience (Sontag 3-4), but because they exercise other functions. Indeed, it appears to be more important to take sunset pictures according to particular standards and share them on the web as a means for bonding (van Dijk 62), than to create an individualized picture that functions as a memory tool.

It’s worth noting that Umbrico, just like Foucault, does not seem, in a structuralist sense, to be overly interested in the “formal possibilities afforded by a system” (Foucault 1998: 289), which could be seen here as all the possibilities of image-making and image-sharing. Umbrico rather helps us locate the “various regularities” that the formation of this kind of visual discourse obeys (Foucault 108).

How and why do these images relate to each other? Although each image posted on Flickr cannot be considered a statement by itself, the assembled group of images featured in *Sunset Portraits* represents a system. It is a system in which statements are associated with rules that govern the production and circulation of images. Foucault would argue that it is precisely this system, composed of statements that define and limit, which ultimately unites the images. These statements are to be associated “with the rules governing the particular field in which they are distributed and reproduced” (Deleuze 4).

Umbrico’s collage thus makes the viewer think about “the rules put into operation through a discursive practice at a given moment that explain why a certain thing is seen (or omitted)” (Foucault 1996: 52). What is typically included in such images, and what or who is excluded – what is part of the discourse, and what is not? Elderly people, babies, people with disabilities, and families are not associated with the typical sunset picture. There are not many (none at all?) black people in Umbrico’s work. Is the heterosexual couple the ideal subject for a sunset portrait? In other words, are these images, and more generally our individual freedom, pre-scripted?

We therefore have to ask what are the statements at play that make millions of people take and post strikingly similar pictures. Is it the widespread impulse to share one’s life on the web, combined with the ongoing importance of romantic love in the ‘Western’ world? Sunsets are perceived as beautiful and romantic, ideally experienced on vacation with a loved one by the ocean. Romantic sunset pictures hence also become marketable. Some discourses thus get sidelined because of a dominant discourse, as illustrated by *Sunset Portraits*. Foucault would probably echo Umbrico’s critique of this form of power that installs itself unconsciously and unintentionally.

“Finding” images on the web and creating a new sign system out of them, as Umbrico does in her work, also raises the question of originality: who produces this discourse? The assembled images acquire, in Umbrico’s words, “meanings different from those intended by the photographer or the original publisher of the image” (http://www.moisdelaphoto.com/umbrico_en.html). Where do we begin our inquiry? Should we at all be concerned with locating the origins, the source?

When writing about photography, it is quite common to talk about the development and evolution of photography, from the daguerreotype in the first half of the 19th century to digital photography in the early 21st century. Over time, the uses of photographs have changed, and nowadays almost anyone can take and collect pictures and share them on the Web. We might wonder, methodologically speaking, what the point is of going back, of trying to “retrace the discourse to the remote presence of its origin” (Foucault 1998: 306), to find the ‘absolute beginning’. Are we reluctant to speak of ‘relative beginnings’ because we have to position ourselves in relation to them, because we believe that we must justify the choice of such a relative beginning?

According to Foucault, there are always multiple points of origin. This might explain why Umbrico does not necessarily attempt to reveal the continuity or discontinuity over time of taking and sharing pictures, choosing instead to emphasize the here and now. Another collection of photos she made also illustrates this and adds another layer of complexity. Here, people are photographed while standing in front of her collage *Suns*, which was also created from photos posted on Flickr.



Not knowing or being concerned with the precise history of an image or a written text may represent an opportunity rather than a shortcoming. It allows one to appreciate the present, describe surface relations, and understand the formation and functions of discourses.

—

Note: Flickr is “a collaborative experience: a shared display of memory, taste, history, signifiers of identity, collection, daily life and judgment through which amateur and professional

photographers collectively articulate a novel, digitized (and decentralized) aesthetics of the everyday” (Murray 149).

Works cited:

Deleuze, Gilles. “A New Archivist,” “Strata or Historical Formations: The Visible and the Articuable”. Foucault. Trans. Hand, Seán. London: Athlone, 1988. 1–22; 47–69.

Foucault, Michel. “The Archeology of Knowledge.” *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961–1984. Semiotext(E) Double Agents Series*. Ed. Lotringer, Sylvère. New York: Semiotext(e), Columbia U., 1996. 45–56.

—. “The Order of Things,” “On the Ways of Writing History,” “On the Archaeology of the Sciences: Response to the Epistemology Circle”. *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*. Vol. 2. New York: New Press, 1998.

Murray, Susan. “Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics.” *Journal of Visual Culture* 7.2 (2008): 147-63.

Rancière, Jacques. “Notes on the Photographic Image.” *The Visual Culture Reader*. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London: Routledge, 2013. 86-95.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador, 1977.

Van Dijk, José. “Digital Photography: Communication, Identity, Memory.” *Visual Communication* 7.1 (2008): 57-76.

http://www.moisdelaphoto.com/umbrico_en.html

<http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/Info/Words.html>

