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Ulrich Gebert, Penelope Umbrico, and Zoe Crosher Sail Through A Sea of Photography

Three shows try to sort through it all

By Martha Schwendener

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Courtesy Winkleman Gallery and the artist



Pig and a poke: Gebert's *Life among beasts G* (2009)

Details:

Ulrich Gebert: 'This Much Is Certain'

Winkleman Gallery
621 West 27th Street, 212-643-3152
Through February 13

Penelope Umbrico: 'Leonards for Leonard & 5,537,594 Suns From Flickr'

Brooklyn Academy of Music
30 Lafayette Street, Brooklyn, 718-636-4100
Through March 14

Zoe Crosher: 'The Unraveling of Michelle duBois'

DCKT
195 Bowery, 212-741-9955
Through February 14

Photography is the world's filing cabinet. Or database. What other medium claims to effectively catalog plants, indigenous people, criminals, mental illness, emotions, physical movement, remote landscapes, and decaying urban neighborhoods?

Art generally functions the opposite way: The unique image is more important than accumulating evidence. But somewhere in the mid-20th century, the archiving impulse took hold. Bernd and Hilla Becher photographed "families of things"—industrial relics like blast furnaces, gas tanks, and water towers—emphasizing their boring regularity over their heroic power. This was the postmodern project: thinking about systems and codes.

The generation coming up sees things differently. Here are three photography shows that raise a number of questions about the urge to catalog and classify.

At Winkleman, German artist Ulrich Gebert considers the natural world in "This Much Is Certain." Traveling to different botanical gardens in Europe, he photographed coniferous trees and arranged the prints alongside a printed list of "valid" and "invalid" names. The backstory is this: In the 19th century, enterprising

botanists started "discovering" trees and naming them after themselves. Conflicts arose,

naturally, as different people put their names on the same tree. The confusion led to a re-evaluation of attribution, not unlike what happens in art history (such as shows at the Met like "Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt" or the current one devoted to a "Velázquez Rediscovered").

In addition to trees, Gebert also rephotographed images from books of animals—dogs, pigs, horses—being handled by humans, then arranged the framed fragments in tableaux. Despite its rationalizing, scientific basis, all of this ordering and manipulating, he points out, has an incredibly subjective bent. Once humans start messing around with the natural world, mayhem ensues—and works its way up the food chain, eventually heading into sinister areas like eugenics. And Gebert is German . . . need I say more?

Then there's the Internet, which offers seemingly infinite cataloging capabilities. Penelope Umbrico helps herself to this bounty, downloading images of banal objects such as remote-control devices being sold in lots on eBay, or creating wacky motifs like *Instances of Casually Flung Clothing (from home-decor and home-improvement websites and catalogs)* (2007). In doing so, she both highlights and sends up photographic typologies, from what you see in the Bechers' work ("art") to mail-order catalogs that stoke consumer fetishism.

5,537,594 Suns From Flickr is an ongoing project in which she downloads images of sunsets from the photo-sharing website. BAM's is a partial installation, somewhat underwhelming compared to larger versions that have appeared elsewhere, like at the Pulse art fair last year. But it still demonstrates how serial images of over-photographed subjects function. Forget nature, romance, spirituality, science, landscape, beauty—all the things photographs of sunsets have been historically meant to signify. In Umbrico's hands, the images become a design motif, evidence of photography's weird power to reproduce itself, like a virus rather than a cure.

But if the sun is everywhere in the digital realm, Umbrico's research for a different, site-specific project at BAM produced opposite results. Her Internet search for "Leonard Natman" (an installation in the building's Leonard Natman Room) turned up "There are 1 or fewer people in the U.S. named Leonard Natman." Unlike the sun, Natman has no presence on the Internet. (He was a house manager at BAM and died of AIDS in the pre-Internet era, in 1986.)

To make up for this, as a kind of "mournful compulsion," Umbrico downloaded images of other Leonards, mostly ordinary citizens, but with a few celebrities thrown in, like Leonard Nimoy and Sugar Ray Leonard. Heavily pixilated and arranged in a grid, the project provides an absurdist catalog of images that suggests identity might just as easily be sampled, borrowed, or fabricated.

Establishing and documenting identity has always been one of photography's main projects, of course. The undisputed postmodern master of the genre is Cindy Sherman, who used her own body and visage to create a catalog of types a woman could embody in American culture. (Less remarked on is how the art world responded, like the rest of the culture—that is, with unmitigated enthusiasm—to pictures of beautiful, sexualized women.)

In tweaking Sherman's paradigm, Zoe Crosher has hit the mother lode with her show "The Unraveling of Michelle duBois" at DCKT. For the past half-decade or so, she's been sifting through and exhibiting pictures acquired from an old family friend who was a call girl in the Pacific Rim during the '70s. An earlier iteration of the project displayed here includes an arrangement of several rephotographed snapshots titled *Cindy-Shermanesque (But She's the Real Thing)* (2005).

But, of course, what's "real"? Crosher's subject went by a series of aliases: "Cricket" in Tokyo,

"Kathy" in Hokkaido, "Mitchi" in Okinawa, and "Michelle duBois" in Osaka. By manipulating her appearance with wigs, makeup, and wardrobe, she looks, at times, like a number of '70s sex bombs: Cheryl Tiegs, Debbie Harry, sometimes even Sherman in her "Untitled Film Still" guises. The fact that she was an actual call girl adds another layer, since the photographic burlesque was performed to make a living, the safe cushion of art removed.

So, how does photography contribute to archiving and controlling the world with beautiful, rational systems? You sense a shift. The Bechers went for objects isolated from their contexts and rigorously standardized. Their famous students—Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, and Candida Höfer (a/k/a "Stuffsky")—turned that organizing aesthetic into a Technicolor exegesis on globalization and late capitalism. Now, randomness and subjectivity rule. It's like returning to the era of Goya and *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (1799), or Géricault's frenzied *Mounted Officer of the Imperial Guard* (1812).

Photography, like art in general, is a decent barometer. Powerful enough to have created a global crisis? Probably not. But it's pretty good at reading the weather.