

value and obsolescence

Penelope Umbrico's Haunted Screens

by michael dirisio

Value can seem like a rather nebulous concept. It can, however, simultaneously appear quite obvious; that which is costly or revered is clearly valuable. But what is it that determines the way value changes when things become obsolete, and how can we understand the construction of value more broadly?

Value is a fundamental component of any society, but its apparent contradictions and ambiguity make it difficult to understand, let alone attempt a discussion of developing more equitable forms of value than that of the global capitalist system. In *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value* (2001), David Graeber argues that historically, value has been approached from the entirely wrong direction. He writes that commonly, investigations of why things do or do not have value and how that value is assigned occur without looking much further than the thing itself. Graeber argues that we must look not at the object, but at the actions it represents and the context within which these actions occur: “what is ultimately being evaluated are not things, but actions.”¹

The value that a thing is said to have is primarily derived from those actions with which it is associated. Whether it is significant past actions, or a potential for future action, it is these actions that give a thing meaning. In a sense, value is actions made manifest; the object is a representation of a field of action existing in a broader social context.

This more nuanced conception of value is found in the figures haunting Penelope Umbrico's images of TVs, posted for sale on Craigslist. In her series, “Image Collection: TVs from Craigslist,” (2008-), Umbrico lifts images from Craigslist posts of TVs for sale and installs them in large grids on the gallery wall. The black screens of the television sets reflect the home or private spaces of the TV's owner, occasionally reflecting a distorted image of the

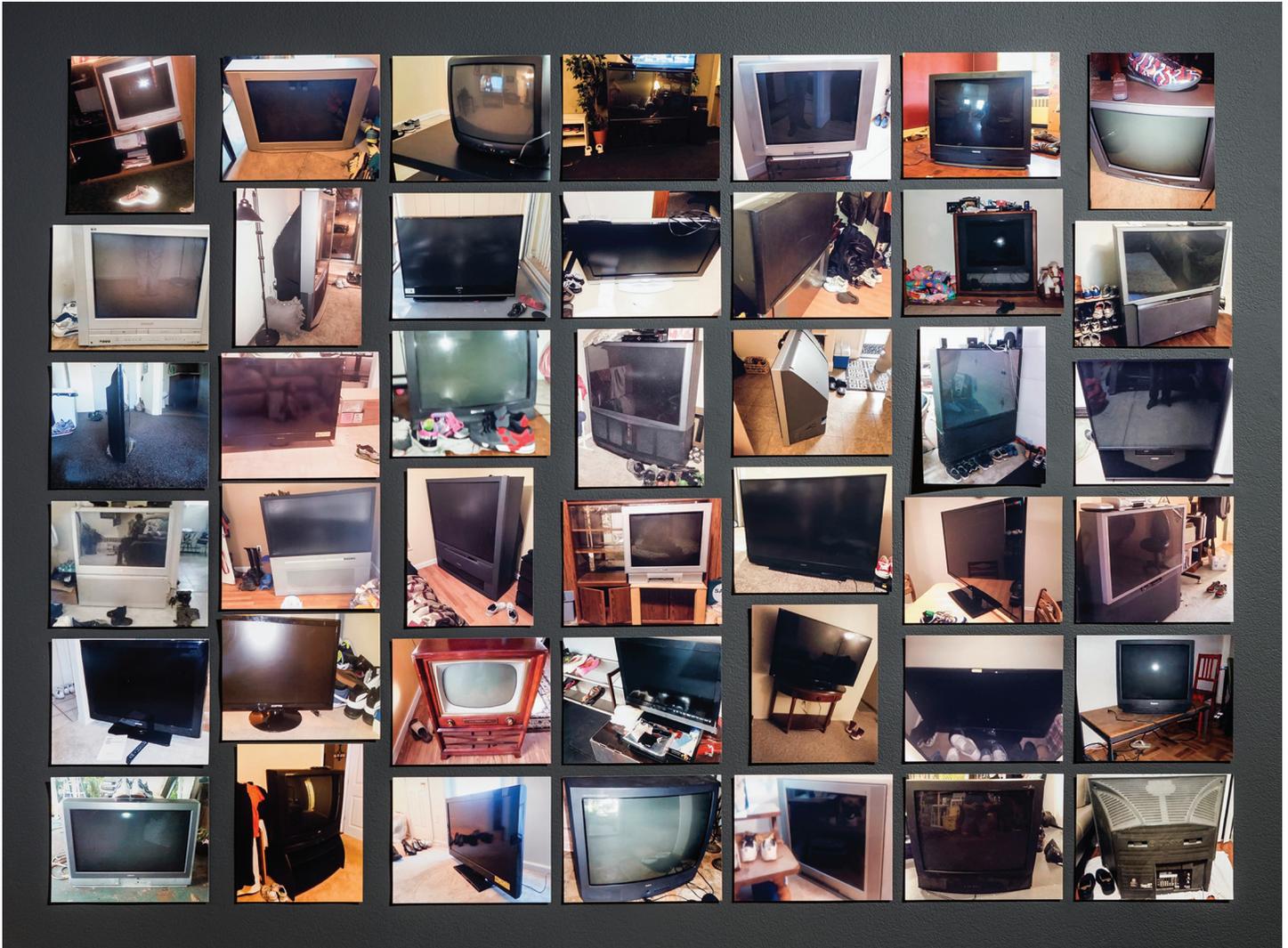
owner with camera in hand, apparently unaware of their inclusion in the image. The lingering image of the owner seems to attest to Graeber's theory of value, as the object's ownership is made visible. Much like value, property is a social construct which requires specific actions: the communicated understanding that one has exclusive use of or access to something, and a social context that acknowledges the ownership.

The television sets in “TVs from Craigslist” are almost exclusively older boxy models; and while no prices are listed in Umbrico's installations, one imagines the owners must not be asking much. The age of the television relates directly to its value—but we should recognize how odd it is that these objects become so harshly devalued in a relatively short period of time. Historically, older objects in good working order could easily increase in value, as they were understood to have endured the test of time. With the continual march of obsolescence in modern media, the opposite tends to be true.

Umbrico's series “Broken Sets (eBay)” (2009–2011) brings this devaluation into focus: each photograph pictures only the fragmented, multi-coloured distortions that appear on television screens that no longer work. As with much of her work, the images are pulled from image databases, though cropped here to feature only the distortion on the screens. While the images verge on abstraction, they are anything but: in reality they are acutely aware of their materiality, drawing attention to the screens that we often look at, without really seeing.

229 Mini Photo Labs for Sale on the Internet (2011) similarly draws our attention to a commonly overlooked dimension of the imaging process, featuring the bulky machines used for developing photographs. Like the aging TVs, however, these dated machines

★ Image Collection: TVs from Craigslist, 2008-ongoing



Penelope Umbrico, *Image Collection: TVs from Craigslist*, 2008-ongoing. Digital c-prints. Images of used TVs posted for sale on Craigslist. Courtesy of the artist and Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, CA.

• Photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid

“What is so powerful about the figures that haunt Umbrico’s “TVs from Craigslist” is that her work does not allow the images to be completely divorced from their original context. The place in which the photograph was taken lingers in the image, the anonymous photographer often lurking in the background; the person taking the photograph and responsible for this framing is literally made visible.”

★ Broken Steps and Haunted Screens



[above](#)

Penelope Umbrico, *Broken Steps and Haunted Screens*. Installation view, University of Toronto Art Centre.

• Photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid.

[right](#)

Penelope Umbrico, *Image Collection: TVs from Craigslist*, 2008-ongoing. Digital c-prints. Images of used TVs posted for sale on Craigslist. Courtesy of the artist and Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, CA.

• Photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid.

Penelope Umbrico, *Pirouette for CRT*, 2009/2014. Digital video animation presented on LED monitor.

Images of used TVs posted for sale on Craigslist. Courtesy of the artist and Mark Moore Gallery, Culver City, CA.

• Photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid.

★ Image Collection: TVs from Craigslist, 2008-ongoing



★ Pirouette for CRT, 2009/2014





BROKEN STEPS AND HAUNTED SCREENS

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Curated by David Winter

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★ Image Collection: TVs from Craigslist, 2008-ongoing



are not worth what they once were, as less people seek to have photographs developed. Their drab office aesthetic makes them resemble old photocopiers more than the sleek new media we see emerging in their place, and their cumbersome size only dates them further.

From broken television screens to aging photo labs, the devaluation of once-new media becomes apparent and even overwhelming when encountered in a gallery installation that stretches almost from floor to ceiling. But this devaluation is not caused solely by the accelerated pace of new media production. In a recent essay, Graeber argues that the rate of development of new technologies has in fact slowed overall, while technologies focused on simulation—special effects, visual projections and other information technologies—are some of the few truly novel advances that continue.² The television is certainly one of these latter technologies; its devaluation is not caused solely by the creation of new media, but in large part by the fundamental medium of exchange. Here, social context is key.

With the rise of the market, as the dominant force in society, value becomes determined less by actions or meanings attributed to things, and more by the dictates of the market. “This value consists solely in the esteem of the public realm,” writes Hannah Arendt, “where things appear as commodities, and it is neither labor, nor work, nor capital, nor profit, nor material, which bestows such value upon an object, but only and exclusively the public realm.”³ In reducing everything to a commodity, what is sold is increasingly disconnected from its origin; from the labour required to produce it, to the material from which it is produced. The meaning attributed to an object becomes less a product of its history and more a basic equivalence between other, similar commodities.

As Graeber writes, “value is inherently contrastive” and as such, always depends on a public context.⁴ With the rise of the market

this context becomes primary.

Graeber argues that confusion tends to arise when the medium is seen as the source of the value,⁵ as is the case with money (considered the modern source of value rather than a medium of exchange and commodity in its own right). The source of value is not money, therefore, but the public sphere in which it emerges and depends upon.

Umbrico’s focus on Craigslist serves to highlight this social context. The website’s ordered, stripped-down posts convey little meaning or history but categorize each post into a larger series of products and prices. In rejecting this order, Umbrico disrupts the context. She composes grids of images with common features, where one grid includes people standing in the frame next to their TVs, and another has the owners visible only in their reflections. One of the larger grids she installed at the University of Toronto Art Centre included reflections of the owner’s bed in each screen; a feature that appeared almost invasive. But why does this seem so invasive? Is it not true that if one were to purchase the TV in person, that one would possibly visit the seller’s house and see that same bed? Again, this appears to relate to the fundamental difference with each medium of exchange, where Craigslist amplifies the isolation created by impersonal commercial transactions.

The ownership of images is also at issue in Umbrico’s work since her sourced images bear no acknowledgement of their original creators. The figures that haunt the television screens end up being projections of not only the TV’s ownership, but of the ownership of the sourced image.

If value is increasingly determined in the public sphere, the context of photographs takes on greater significance. This appears to be especially so in works that involve appropriated imagery, where the re-contextualization of the image determines the authorship: the artist’s role lies not in making the image but in collecting and curating found, often vernacular or anonymous images,



with the meaning derived from this curation.⁶

Umbrico's image collections are emblematic of this process, but she has stated that she is less interested in drawing attention to her own authorship than that of the original images' anonymous creators.⁷ Vernacular photography of the sort that accompanies website posts tends to keep the photographer as anonymous as possible, operating in stark contrast to the intentions of the practicing artist. Thus the intentions become inverted as the context changes.

Umbrico argues that a heightened awareness of context is not only present in appropriation but is rather inherent to the practice of photography itself. In a 2011 interview, she stated:

All photography is a de-contextualization. And as soon as it can be viewed—by anyone, in any way, place or form—it's a re-contextualization. As photographers, the first thing we learn is how to frame the world. And when you put a frame around anything, you de-contextualize it. To not see the re-contextualization at this point is to normalize that framing, to make it invisible—in some ways, I'd say my work calls attention to this invisibility—makes it visible.⁸

What is so powerful about the figures that haunt Umbrico's "TVs from Craigslist" is that her work does not allow the images to be completely divorced from their original context. The place in which the photograph was taken lingers in the image, the anonymous photographer often lurking in the background; the person taking the photograph and responsible for this framing is literally made visible. This is not to say that the images have a greater value because of this. In being posted on Craigslist, any significance this might have had is lost, and a figure caught in the frame would likely be seen as an awkward inclusion that betrays a carelessness on the part of the seller. It does not increase the value of the image

but rather seems to draw attention to the way that this medium of exchange operates: it emphasizes the coldness and distance that is presupposed in these postings.

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Endnotes

1. David Graeber, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 49. See especially Chapter 3: Value as the Importance of Actions.
2. David Graeber, "Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit," *Baffler* 19 (2012), accessed online (September 15, 2015): <http://thebaffler.com/salvos-of-flying-cars-and-the-declining-rate-of-profit>.
3. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 164.
4. Graeber, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value*, 70.
5. Graeber, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value*, 81.
6. Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, Second Edition (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 208.
7. Hidenori Kondo, "Interview with Penelope Umbrico," *artwurl* webzine (Spring 2003), Accessed online (September 16, 2015): <http://carlosmotta.com/artwurl/fs3.html>.
8. Christina Labey and Elizabeth Bick, "The Digital Sublime: A Dialog with Penelope Umbrico," *Conveyor Magazine* 1 (Spring 2011), accessed online (September 16, 2015): <http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/Info/Words.html>.