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How Our Camera-Phone Nation is Inspiring Artists

Now that everyone is a photographer, artists are redefining what photography is

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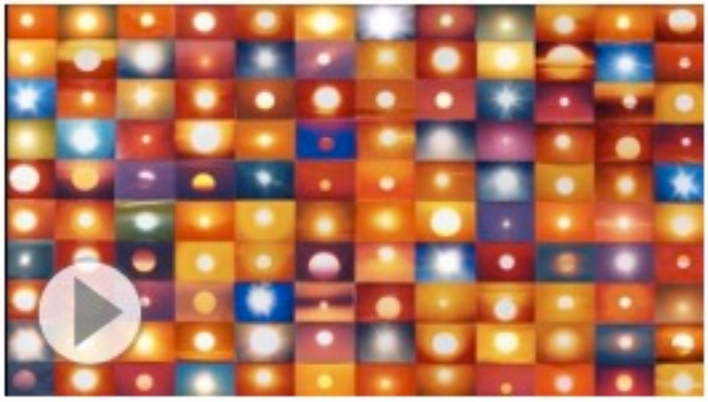

Americans now snap 4,000 photos every second. Ellen Gamerman joins Lunch Break with a look at how the explosion in digital images is having an outsized impact on the art world. Photo: Penelope Umbrico/Mark Moore Gallery.

Everyone with a camera phone thinks the sunset photo they just shot is special. Penelope Umbrico knows better.

When the New York artist searches Flickr to find photos for her art—monumental works that piece together as many as 2,500 shots of sunsets from around the world—she has more than 15 million images to choose from.

"People are taking photographs without any kind of artistic intent, and you get a fantastic index of how people are thinking," Ms. Umbrico said. "It's like an unintentional mirror."

The explosion in digital images is having an outsize impact on the art world. With 4,000 photos snapped every second in the U.S., more than four times as many as 10 years ago, photography has morphed into a second language, a form of note-taking, an addictive habit from cradle to grave.

Now that everyone is a photographer, artists are redefining what photography is—and they are finding inspiration in the multitudes of people obsessed with shooting everything.

"The practice of taking pictures with a camera phone is so much more widespread than any other form of image-making in the history of humankind," said Mia Fineman, associate photography curator at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. "That's why this is such a crucial time for photography."

Ms. Fineman has immersed herself in research about the power of camera-phone images—what some call iPhoneography—for a potential exhibit at the Met. She has tracked the artistic use of smartphones since 2008, when iPhone photos by artist Rob Pruitt plastered the outside walls and indoor exhibition space of the New York gallery Gavin Brown's enterprise.

Artists around the world are intrigued by the photo-sharing revolution. An installation by Amsterdam-based artist-designer Erik Kessels represents about 950,000 pictures posted on Flickr in one 24-hour period in 2011—not even all the images posted to the site that day. The work, now at San Francisco's Pier 24 Photography, appears as a wave of images flooding a room.

"When people had family albums they used to be private and only for the eyes of the family. Now the role of the photograph has totally changed," Mr. Kessels said. "We consume images every day. The only thing is that we don't really digest them. They go in and they go out again."

Where most people see dull shots of the same thing over and over, artists see a muse: Swiss artist Corinne Vionnet reconstructs images of landmarks with hundreds of tourist photos; the impressionistic works sell for as much as $10,000 each. She had the idea for the

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series "Photo Opportunities" after observing all the snapping from different directions at the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Joachim Schmid, a Berlin artist, produced a series of 96 books called "Other People's Photographs," a study of dozens of different pictures of the same subject, from purses to airline meals.

Constant Dullaart, another Berlin artist, is just as interested in the images that can't be found online as the ones that are everywhere. His latest work, "Jennifer in Paradise," is his take on an image used in early demonstrations of Adobe Photoshop by John Knoll, one of the program's original developers. Mr. Knoll took a photo of his then-girlfriend Jennifer that captured her topless from behind on a beach in Bora Bora and digitally manipulated it to show off different Photoshop features. Mr. Dullaart had searched for the Jennifer photo online but couldn't find it, so he constructed his own version, combining several screen grabs taken from a video that included the original shot. He encrypted his resulting image with hidden messages. Full access to the digital work, via password, costs $13,700.

"Every piece of the visual territory seems to be claimed by all the amateurs," Mr. Dullaart said. "It becomes special when something is not documented."

Such works occasionally catch subjects off guard. Mr. Knoll said he never heard from the artist requesting access to the photo—a shot with "great emotional significance" taken the day before he proposed to his now wife. He said he would have granted permission had he been approached. Mr. Dullaart said his initial attempts to track down Mr. Knoll and his wife were unsuccessful and he stopped trying when the idea of a disappeared image became more compelling to him than the shot itself.

John Baldessari, the 82-year-old California artist, has mixed feelings about photography's digital era. Mr. Baldessari, whose works combining printed images and circles of colored paint have sold for upward of $500,000, still uses found photographs but rarely takes his own now, despite spending previous decades doing so. "I have this attitude that if it's so available, it's not interesting to me anymore," he said.

Some trace the first shared camera-phone snapshot to Sonia Lee's 18-hour labor in 1997. The wife of French-American software engineer Philippe Kahn was having contractions in a maternity center in Santa Cruz, Calif., while Mr. Kahn was tinkering with a method he'd been developing to share pictures over a wireless network. He sent an assistant to buy spare parts so he could connect a camera wirelessly using a cellphone to a web server at home. Shortly after the birth of his daughter, Sophie, Mr. Kahn was holding the baby in one hand and the camera phone in the other. The image went out to 2,000 contacts—including a work acquaintance named Steve Jobs, who never wrote back, Mr. Kahn said. He recalled thinking, "Wow, what if Mr. and Mrs. Everyone can have one of these?"

About 1.6 trillion photos are taken annually with smartphones and other cameras, compared with roughly 100 billion photos a year in 2000, according to Fujifilm. In the U.S. alone, about 125 billion photos were taken this year, said Ed Lee, a director at the market research firm InfoTrends. If all those shots were turned into 4x6 prints and laid out end to end, Mr. Lee said they would stretch to the moon and back 25 times.

Some social observers question whether all this activity encourages people to just click at experiences instead of actually think about them.

"Do we try to make our life exciting so it looks good for our friends or do we really get to live our life?" asked Fred Ritchin, a photography professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. "Without this sense of almost continuous performance, what does that do to the ability to be bored, to be alone, to reflect, to have an interior life?"

"Pix or it didn't happen," a popular phrase in Internet forums, suggests people can't be believed without an image to back them up. "Pictures are more sexy than words," said Joshua Chuang, associate curator of photography and digital media at the Yale University Art Gallery. "You can absorb information from a picture faster, you can transfer images faster, you can get your message out there faster."

The smartphone itself has become a popular tool for artists, allowing them to work anywhere and providing far more cover than an obtrusive camera and bags of equipment.

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Nina Katchadourian has been shooting pictures on airplanes without any trouble: After taking photographs on more than 120 flights, only three people have ever asked what she was doing, and none of them were TSA agents.

Her series of pictures, "Seat Assignment," grew out of a challenge she gave herself three years ago on a flight from New York to Atlanta. Frustrated about losing time in her studio to work trips, she pushed herself to keep creating art on the plane using only what was in her purse, the contents of her seat pocket and the camera on her cellphone. The result: landslides rendered with smashed pretzels over pictures of lush destinations from the in-flight magazine, or self portraits in the style of Flemish Old Masters arranged in the airplane bathroom with props like a paper toilet-seat cover or a neck pillow.

She has now taken thousands of pictures. "The project tries to say even in a boring situation like an airplane you can make art—and the cellphone camera is enough to do something interesting," she said. "It's not so much about being alone in the studio with fancy, expensive paint. I'm interested in the everyday tool and the everyday situation."

When it comes to cellphone photography, few subjects are more popular than sunsets. In 2006, when Ms. Umbrico was researching what people chose to shoot most often, photos tagged "baby" and "mother" didn't yield the most hits—"sunset" did. The shots were unique to the people who took them, she said, but transformed into something even more moving when viewed all at once.

The sunsets used in her photo installations, which sell for $6,000 to $12,000, just keep multiplying—as do her ideas about what to do with them. In one spinoff series, she culls through online pictures showing men and women standing in front of her installation of brightly burning snapshots. It is an unusual sight: People posing like tourists on a beach, treating an Internet sunset like it's the real thing.

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