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Sunsets: The Marmite of the Photography World

Following a spate of colourful winter sunsets across Britain, Jonny Weeks explores our fascination with the photographs some people love – and others love to hate

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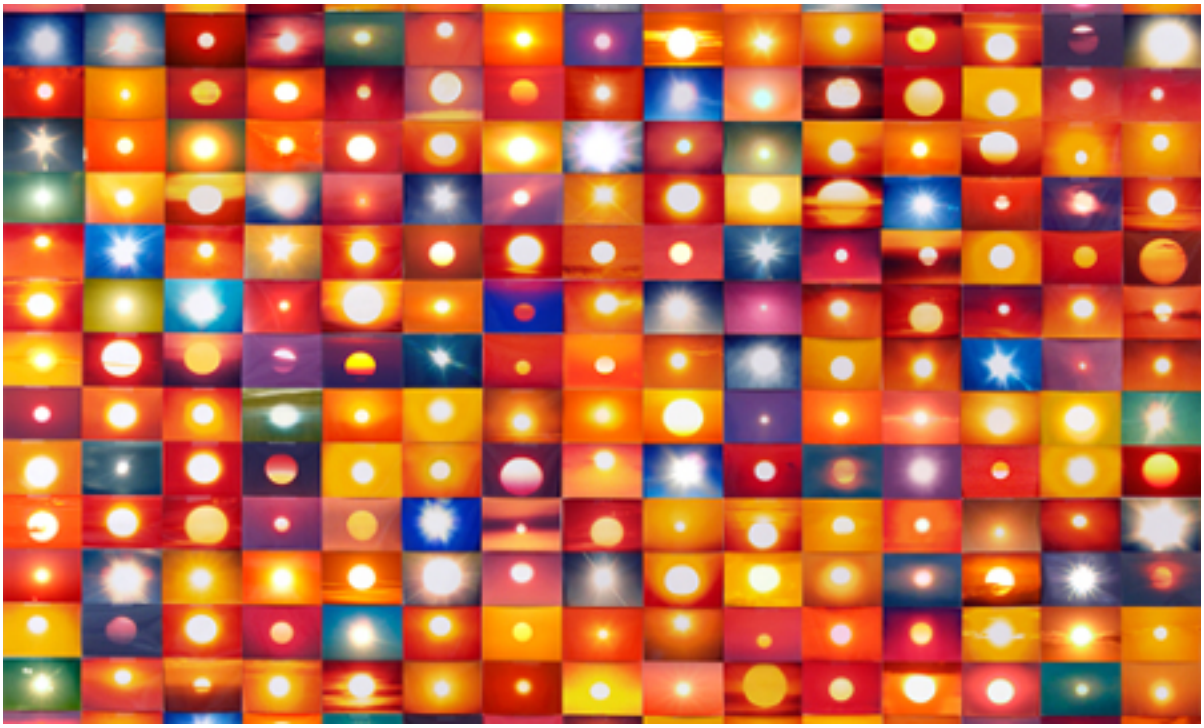

Walking through my local park last week, I noticed an especially wild sunset: the sky overhead was an electric shade of violet, and stretching out into the distance over London was an entire spectrum of colour from vermilion red to lemon yellow. It was the kind of beautiful concoction that, in Britain at least, seems to be the preserve of mild winter evenings. And there have been more than a few of late.

I wanted to take a photo of the spectacle but, at the vantage point I had in mind, another person had the same idea. I headed to the corner of the nearest street to capture the view through the terraced houses – but there was a cyclist aiming his cameraphone towards the crepuscular skyline as he paused by the roadside. It didn't seem unreasonable to assume that there would be a photographer on every street corner that evening.

Sunset photography is a ubiquitous practice; there can be very few people in developed countries who can honestly say they have not snapped a picture of one. But what is our fascination with this kind of photography? Does it say something about our collective nature?

The artist Penelope Umbrico, who has developed several works on the subject, believes the lure of sunset photography is simple. "The sun is this incredibly powerful object, and there's only one of them in our world," she says. "The sun can kill us or give us health. It's the symbol of enlightenment, it makes us happy – it's phenomenal."

Umbrico first explored sunset photography in 2006 when hunting for the most photographed subject in the world. She culled other people's sunset photos from Flickr and cropped them to remove the surrounding context, leaving only the suns themselves. She then displayed them in a vast, multi-coloured collage. The resulting work, which changes for every exhibition she does, is

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testament not only to our obsession with sunsets, but our desire to preserve these liminal moments as a social experience.

"I think we take photos of it for the sense of collectivity," says Umbrico. "We love to participate. That's why we go to concerts, and still go to movies when we could watch them at home – we like to enjoy the same things that other people enjoy."

Moreover, the fleeting spectacle of sunset, like a solar eclipse, a meteor shower and the auroras borealis and australis, seems to remind us of our place in the solar system. It rouses a primordial sense of wonder.

In the book Ways of Seeing, John Berger wrote: "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight." Perhaps, then, our desire to photograph the setting sun shows a desire to understand the spectacle and, in turn, our place in the greater scheme of things.

Even a manufactured sun has the same power as the real thing. Olafur Eliasson's The Weather Project at Tate Modern in 2003 and 2004 attracted more than two million visitors. The Turbine Hall became a transfixing vault in which the sun, it seemed, had been encased. Eliasson's work traded on the power of artificial light to mimic the soothing effect of sunlight.

But while sunsets are generally considered wonderful, the ubiquity of sunset photography is, to many people, nauseating. Susan Sontag opined that "photographs create the beautiful and – over generations of picture-taking – use it up". Thus, "the image-surfeited are likely to find sunsets corny; they now look, alas, too much like photographs". But surely photography's value can never be expended, regardless of how hackneyed it is?

In an enlightening essay, Annebella Pollen acknowledged that sunsets were among the most cloying of photographic subject matter. "Equivalent, perhaps, to images of kittens or thatched cottages, sunset photographs have a low cultural status: they are characterised as sentimental visual confectionery indicative of limited aesthetic vision and an undeveloped practice; as childlike pleasures." In Immanuel Kant's terminology, they represent "barbarism" of taste. No wonder, then, that the acronym NABSS (Not Another Bloody Sunset) is now used on social media platforms.

Despite this, the internet is also awash with tips for amateurs on how to take the perfect sunset photograph and where to go to see the most beautiful examples. Lake Kariba in Zimbabwe and

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Atacama desert in Chile are among the top tips, while the isle of Skye is often considered the best place in Britain.

Of the current Guardian Witness assignments, Share Your Sun has more than 1,000 contributions – four times as many as any other. "I love the fact that when I go on to Flickr, there are thousands more images of sunsets than there were a week ago," says Umbrico. "When I started there were 500,000, then a year later there were two million. That's when I decided to use the number as the title for my work, because I was so floored by it. Today, there are 15 or 16 million. This is what the digital sublime is: a number that's so large you can't even really conceive what it means."

One of several sunset photos submitted to Guardian Witness's 'Share Your Sun' assignment by Leguth Edson

But who is taking and sharing these pictures? Pollen's essay references an intriguing study conducted in the 1960s by the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, who tested the reactions of various sections of French society to a number of photographic stereotypes, including sunsets, and found that certain people were more inclined to perceive them as beautiful. The lower classes and least educated were, according to the survey, most likely to acknowledge the potential beauty of sunset photography (88% responded as such).

But the situation was more complicated than that. Bourdieu noted: "The proportion who declare that a sunset can make a beautiful photo is greatest at the lowest educational level, declines at intermediate levels [...] and grows strongly again among those who have completed several years of higher education and who tend to consider that anything is suitable for beautiful photography."

In the 21st century, almost all of us are susceptible to the desire to take sunset photographs, and it should not necessarily matter if we are unoriginal in doing so. The results, however cliched, remain unique and meaningful.

"Sunset photography is the biggest cliche," says Umbrico. "That word has a pejorative implication, but I actually think a cliche can be really useful. It can tell us something about who

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we are. When you're taking a picture of a sunset on the coast, there could be 1,500 people doing the same along the same stretch at the same time – that's kind of spiritual."

Of course, a sunset is only a fleeting experience for an individual. In a project called Constant Setting, conceived in 2008, Alexandra Deschamps-Sonsino celebrated the true, perpetual nature of sunset by setting up a website that pulls in the latest sunset images from Flickr and posts a new one every minute. The website (which is briefly offline for maintenance work) is a real-time account of our obsession with the earth's rotation in relation to the sun.

"Sunset is a fluid, ongoing experience – it's being constantly lived by someone else somewhere else around the world," says Deschamps-Sonsino. Wherever the sun is setting right now, you can be sure there will be at least one person taking a picture.

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