Cole, Teju. "A Visual Remix," ***The New York Times Magazine.*** April 16, 2015

The New York Times Magazine

When he visited the Plumbe National Daguerrian Gallery in Manhattan in 1846, Walt Whitman was astonished. "What a spectacle!" he wrote. "In whichever direction you turn your peering gaze, you see nought but human faces! There they stretch, from floor to ceiling — hundreds of them." In the seven years between the invention of the daguerreotype and Whitman's visit to Plumbe's, the medium had become popular enough to generate an impressive, and even hectic, stream of images. Now, toward the end of photography's second century, that stream has become torrential.

"Take lots of pictures!" is how our friends wish us a good trip, and we oblige them. Nearly one trillion photographs are taken each year, of everything at which a camera might be pointed: families, meals, landscapes, cars, toes, cats, toothpaste tubes, skies, traffic lights, atrocities, doorknobs, waterfalls, an unrestrained gallimaufry that not only indexes the world of visible things but also adds to its plenty. We are surrounded by just as many depictions of things as by things themselves.

The consequences are numerous and complicated: more instantaneous pleasure, more information and a more cosmopolitan experience of life for huge numbers of people, but also constant exposure to illusion and an intimate knowledge of fakery. There is a photograph coming at you every few seconds, and hype is the lingua franca. It has become hard to stand still, wrapped in the glory of a single image, as the original viewers of old paintings used to do. The flood of images has increased our access to wonders and at the same time lessened our sense of wonder. We live in inescapable surfeit.

A number of artists are using this abundance as their starting point, setting their own cameras aside and turning to the horde — collecting and arranging photographs that they have found online. These artist-collectors, in placing one thing next to another, create a third thing — and this third thing, like a subatomic particle produced by a collision of two other particles, carries a charge.

A decent photograph of the sun looks similar to any other decent photograph of the sun: a pale circle with a livid red or blue sky around it. There are hundreds of thousands of such photographs online, and in the daily contest for "likes" they are close to a sure thing: easy to shoot, fun to look at, a reliable dose of awe. The American artist Penelope Umbrico downloads such photos of the sun from Flickr — she favors sunsets in particular — and then crops and prints them, assembling them into an enormous array. A typical installation may contain 2,500 photographs, organized into a rectangular mural. It is the same sun, photographed repeatedly in the same way, by a large cast of photographers, few of whom are individually remarkable as artists and none of whom are credited. But, with Umbrico's intervention, the cumulative effect of their images literally dazzles: the sun, the sun, the sun, the sun, in row upon brilliant row.

Optical brilliance is also the key to the American artist Eric Oglander's"Craigslist mirrors" project, which is also based on found photographs. His biographical statement is deadpan: "I search Craigslist for compelling photos of mirrors." Oglander posts these pictures to his website, to Instagram and to Tumblr. A surprising number of them are surreal or enjoyably weird, because of the crazy way a mirror interrupts the logic of whichever visual field it is placed in, and because of the unexpected things the reflection might include. Photographic work of this kind — radically dependent on context — can be unsettling for those who take "photograph" to have a straightforward meaning: an image made with a camera by a single author with a particular intention. This is where collector-artists come in: to confirm that curation and juxtaposition are basic artistic gestures.

The German artist Joachim Schmid, with a gleeful and indefatigable eye, gathers other people's photographs and organizes them into photo books. For his trouble, he has been called a thief and a fraud. Schmid initially used photographs found on the street and at sales, but more recently he has depended on digital images. His typological projects, like those in the 96-book series "Other People's Photographs" (2008-11), are alert to the mystery in artlessness. They are a mutant form, somewhere between the omnivorous vernacular of Stephen Shore's "American Surfaces" and the hypnotic minimalism of Bernd and Hilla Becher's water towers. Schmid brings the photographs out of one kind of flow, their image-life as part of one person's Flickr account, and into another, at rest among their visual cognates.

Each book in "Other People's Photographs" is a document of how amateur digital photography nudges us toward a common but unpremeditated language of appearances. Photography is easy now, and cheap, but this does not mean that everything is documented with the same frequency or that all possibilities are equally explored. As is true of every set of expressive tools, digital photography creates its own forms of emphasis and registers of style. Cellphone cameras are great in low light, and so we have many more nocturnal photos. Most of our tiny cameras are not easy to set on a tripod, and so there is a correspondingly smaller percentage of soberly symmetrical photographs of monuments; the dominant aesthetic of the age is hand-held. A camera focused at waist level, as old Rolleiflexes were, is different from one held between the eyes and the chin, the optimal placement for a live digital display.

All selfies are alike as all daguerreotype portraits were alike: An image can be more conventionally an example of its genre than a memorable depiction of its subject. A plate of food, with its four or five items of varying texture corralled into a circle, is similar to countless other plates of food. But a book full of photographed meals, meals long consumed and forgotten, is not only poking gentle fun at our obsessive documentation of the quotidian. It is also marveling at how inexpensive photography has become. Things that would not have merited a second glance are now unquestioningly, almost automatically, recorded. The doors of our fridges, glimpses of cleavage, images of our birthday cakes,

the setting sun: Cheap photography makes visible the ways in which we are similar, and have for a long time been similar. Now we have proof, again, and again, and again.

The Baltimore-based artist Dina Kelberman approaches the question of similarity in a different way. She uses Google's search engines to find photographs, videos and video stills that she places into a sequence, each successive image subtly distinct from the one preceding it. Her project, "I'm Google," shows us the unexpected links that connect a zany range of inanimate and usually brightly colored objects. Seen one after another, things seem to be morphing into other things. "I'm Google," begun in 2011, is ongoing, and already contains hundreds of transformations. In one recent sequence, an egg yolk became, after a few variations, a red-hot nickel ball, and then a Ping-Pong ball; the Ping-Pong table on which the ball rested became a squash court; that, in turn, became the subfloor of a house in which radiant heat was being installed. Another sequence transforms, almost magically, plumes of fire retardant from planes into dust clouds from vehicles speeding through a dune. The effect is both funny and mesmerizing, revealing how pleasing visual analogies can be, like the slant rhymes in a poem.

The sheer mass of digital imagery was itself the subject of "24 Hrs of Photos," a project by the Dutch artist Erik Kessels (first in 2011, and other times since). Kessels downloaded every photograph uploaded to Flickr in the course of a single day, about a million in all. He printed a fraction of them, around 350,000, which he then piled up in massive wavelike heaps in a gallery. Asked to explain the project, Kessels said: "I visualize the feeling of drowning in representations of other people's experiences." But that's not art! And yet the emotions that accompany such an installation — the exasperation, the sense of wonder or inundation, the glimpses of beauty — are true of art. The shoe fits, maddening as it is.

What are the rights of the original photographers, the "nonartists" whose works have been so unceremoniously reconfigured? And how can what is found be ordered, or put into a new disorder, and presented again to give it new resonance? And how long will that resonance itself last? The real trouble is rarely about whether something counts as art — if the question comes up, the answer is almost always yes — but whether the art in question is startling, moving or productively discomfiting. Meeting those criteria is just as difficult for straight photography as it is for appropriation-based work. After all, images made of found images are images, too. They join the never-ending cataract of images, what Whitman called the "immense Phantom concourse," and they are vulnerable, as all images are, to the dual threats of banality and oblivion — until someone shows up, says, "Finders keepers," rethinks them and, by that rethinking, brings them back to life.