

PACE/MACGILL GALLERY

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Art and the internet

When the virtual is more real than the physical



THE first impression I had on entering the Pace Gallery in New York's Chelsea district was, "Wouldn't this all be better on the web?" One wall is given over to Penelope Umbrico's giant array of photographs of people in front of sunsets (above), produced by searching for the tag "sunset" on the photo-sharing site, Flickr. Elsewhere, David Byrne's "Democracy in Action" is a cluster of screens showing photos of scuffling parliamentarians in different countries. Emilio Chapela Pérez's "According to Google..." is a set of thick-bound volumes with titles such as "Art", "Communism" and "Money", each containing the pictures that the word conjures up on a Google Image Search. Then there is Christopher Baker's "Murmur Study", in which 25 small thermal printers affixed on the wall spew out a continuous stream of tweets containing emotional signifiers, like "grrr", "ewww" and "argh". The paper spools pile up on the floor like giant tagliatelle.

At first blush, you lose a lot more than you gain. Many of the works feel rather like hesitant, jolly, ho-ho-look-at-what-those-online-folk-are-up-to experiments. Also most are compilations of material from the web, which means that each one could be a website, probably already is a website, and certainly would work better as one.

There are, for instance, already websites devoted to pictures of sunsets and to people fighting and to tweets about any subject under the sun. You could generate Mr Chapela Pérez's encyclopaedia on Google itself, and it would be both a lot more extensive and a darn sight more portable. Even the works that are not merely the products of automated search results, such as [Miranda July](#) and Harrell Fletcher's "Learning to Love You



More" (right), a compilation of pictures sent in by users in response to various assignments (the one on display here asked them to pick a person who was in the news that day, and take a picture of themselves acting as that person at another moment in the day—one young man is Dick Cheney staring morosely into the fridge after mixing up Venezuela and Peru at a press conference), lose much of their point when they stop being an open-ended, participatory experiment online and become a fixed series of images on a gallery wall.

But that's a superficial criticism. The point here is not the content, which requires little or no artistic judgment to generate, but the way it's presented. So what is gained in that presentation? Ms Umbrico, well aware of this problem, argues that her sunset pictures act in a very different way on a wall than on a computer screen. The sheer size of the wall, which allows so many pictures to be displayed together, mocks the uniqueness and sense of place that all of the photographers were trying to bring to their sunset moments. "Now they're all nowhere," she says. Likewise, the relationship between the viewer and the viewed, which on the web is egalitarian—we're all just nodes on a network—becomes much more hierarchical in a gallery.



One could make similar arguments for all these works. Rendering online content in a physical way makes for an interesting contrast. An encyclopaedia's-worth of knowledge feels trivialised when it can be generated with just a few strokes on the keyboard, just as the live chatter of the world becomes so much waste paper. In this way, each artist establishes a different relationship between viewers and content, and alters our perception of what we are seeing.

But is it enough to recreate web content in a different medium and let the contradictions and shifts in perspective speak for themselves? I don't think so. And to their credit, the artists on the panel seemed to agree that this type of art is still feeling its way. Just as art online can be many things that art in a gallery usually cannot (interactive, global, evolving, user-generated), physical art has yet to work out what it can say about the online world that the online world cannot say about itself.