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R I T

Ibid.

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
May 3, 2021

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Abstract

Ibid. is an installation of five images in juxtaposition to each other that explores expectation and interpretation on photographic images. It is a response to my struggle in finding meaning in my creative process of making images. I disrupt the representation of the images using strategies of appropriation, photo manipulation, sequencing, repetition, and performative photo handling. Highlighting the characteristics of both indexicality and ambiguity in photography, *Ibid.* calls attention to how we develop our phycological desire to address meaning on images. Although *Ibid.* is rooted in my personal creative experience, it questions image-making under a broader context. When the images fail to bring us new excitement regarding the content, what exists beyond the representation?

Ibid.

Ibidem, abbreviated as *ibid.*, is a Latin word meaning 'in the same place'.[1] It is commonly used in footnotes to refer to the book cited just before to avoid repetition. A thing that has been done or said before constitutes a repetition.[2] My thesis work *Ibid.* is a collection of manipulated photographs that depicts vernacular landscapes. It contains photographs that are very similar in background but differ in detail. Each group of photographs, manipulated or created using digital manipulations, evolves from a single photograph which is collected from Fortepan[3], an online amateur photo archive. *Ibid.* is a response to my struggle with creating and interpreting images, a divorce from my conventional practices.

Figure 1: Installation view of *Ibid.*

[1] *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. "Ibidem."
[2] Ibid.
[3] Fortepan Iowa features curated historical photos taken by ordinary Iowans over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The photos represent the personal, whimsical, poetic, significant, and accidentally artistic moments of everyday life.

With no early photographic experience, my artistic practice began late in my undergraduate career, and I took inspiration from imitating the New Topographics style of photographs. Epitomizing a significant era in American landscape photography, New Topographics comprises altered landscapes which are omnipresent in America. Thus, ubiquitous utility poles constitute my early photography. My early practice of photography is more about the obsession with the photographic method rather than artistic realization, or to be more precise, my amateur activity that follows the art form on the structural basis. Amateur photographers are artists without pretension and have a simple faith in their medium.[4] The growing desire to make sense the photographic content led me to find meaning in photography. I start to recognize my photography as an echo of other artists' work, as I have never found an answer to the question, "Why do I photograph?" The generalized question further extends a quest for my intention and expectation of photography. To understand what photography is, I explore the 'ontology of photography.' Like church-goers following religious texts, I set off to look for my 'doctrine' and get lost in photo theories.

Figure 2: *A Diptych of Images,* 2020. Color Negative Film

[4] Julian, Stallabrass. "Sixty Billion Sunsets," In *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture* (London: Verso, 1996), 14.

The desire to explain photography led me to categorize and generalize images. I came across André Bazin's essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" and began to experiment with images (see fig.2) following his idea. He claims that people are often deceived by illusions and influenced by ideologies. Our feelings about the external world are inevitably modulated by our desires and the ideologies that shape them.[5] The emphasis on the mental interpretation shifted my focus to the models of psychoanalysis and semiology, which are studies that explain visuality with psychology and signs. I was convinced by the idea that the viewer's mental image shapes the interpretation of the photograph. Such realization prompted me to generalize photographs by visual indexes I saw, which soon developed into a mindset that there is only 'the one image,' a changeable image that lives in my mind. In the process of drawing associations within photographs, differences become less distinguishable. '*Only A Picture'*(see fig.3) is a work made in that period to manifest my ideology on photography. I lost the incentive to make more photographs, because there's always a 'type' of work other artists made that I can also fit my work into. My thesis work *Ibid.* is a reflective take on creativity and originality in the process of repetition.

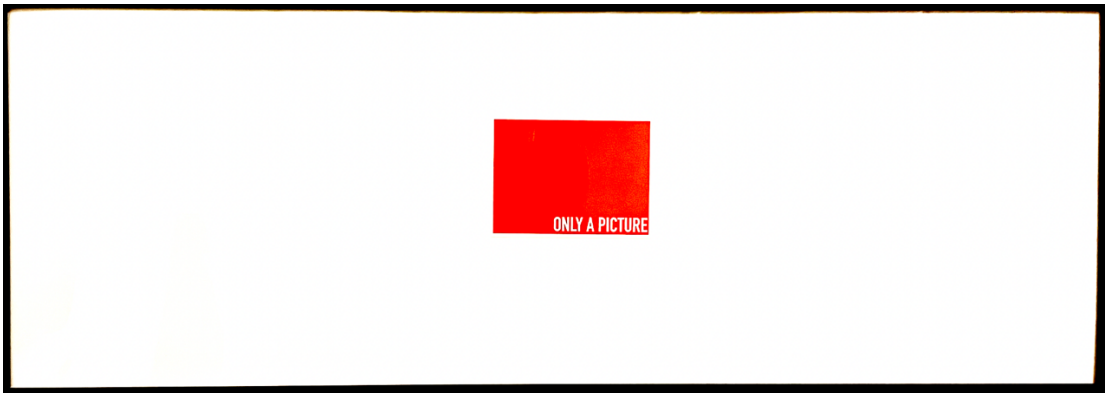

Figure 3: Framed work of *Only A Picture*

[5] André, Bazin, and Hugh Gray. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." Film Quarterly 13, no. 4 (1960): 4–9. https://doi.org/10.2307/1210183.

Creativity as the core of art signifies the conceptual and visual presentation of photography. However, artmaking does not always derive from the desire to innovate. *Ibid.* results from my experience of creative decay, the inability to address any significant meaning to the photographs I make. The artist's block stems from the inability to create satisfactory work. Spontaneous creation often relates to inspiration. Pressured by external demand and expectations, artists tend to stay within the safe boundaries and repeat the form or content they are familiar with. Although the final production might still be acceptable, it loses the appeal of original creation. *Ibid.* is a response to defy the documentary convention that I frequently practiced in photo making, a divorce from the past. It seeks to draw a borderline between my past and present art practice in a similar manner. The final presentation of my thesis and the disclosure of the mental work inside an artist resides in a similar context in which Fellini created *8 ½*; it delineates more about the creative mind behind the work than the visual nature of the photographic medium itself.

Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini's *8 ½* (1963) tells the story of his alter ego, Guido, a famous director who's suffering from the artist's block. As the equivalent of writer's block for artists, artist's block is a creative stall that stops artists from making new work. In *8 ½*, Guido receives pressure from his demanding producer and fans, which leads him to profound anxiety and disorientation. The film presents a perceptible stream of consciousness that's comprised of Guido's dreams about his struggles. What happened in Guido's dreams reflects Fellini's real-life; Fellini directed *8 ½* under the expectation of creating a new drama film on par with his previous Cannes winning film, *La Dolce Vita*. However, Fellini provided a visual presentation of the

creative process about his artistic breakdown in *8 ½*, a self-referential narrative about the struggles of making this new film.[6]

Comprised of serialized archival snapshot photographs, *Ibid.* features the strategies of appropriation, digital manipulation, repetition, and interruption. The conjunction of these approaches is not accidental; it witnesses my ongoing trial to spark creativity. Each image is an individual attempt to overcome creative stasis; the visual strategies layer and come together to form the totality. For example, I appropriated online snapshots and recontextualized them as the documentation of a nonexistent town Sugob, which became my first venture against the documentary convention of photography. Later on, I integrated more radical means such as repetition and photo manipulation to pursue an epiphany in creativity.

Psychologist Margaret Boden outlines the creative process with four stages, following French mathematician Henri Poincaré's account of how the creator's mind works. Boden calls the first stage the preparatory phase, which pertains to adopting conventional practices to solve problems under conscious attempts. "Often, there is no apparent success: the experience is frustrating, because it feels seemingly unproductive."[7] This preparatory phase provides an accurate description of my early photographic practice; the crude imitation of form with the mainstream landscape content in my early work evades my aspirations for creativity. The situation that nurtures *Ibid.* is in line with what Boden calls the second stage, an incubation phase. As Boden describes, ideas are integrated with a freedom that opposes any rationale or consciousness in a period that might last for months or years.[8] The strategies I employed in *Ibid.*

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[6] Martin Scorsese, "Il Maestro" (Harper's Magazine, February 16, 2021), https://harpers.org/archive/2021/03/il-maestro-federico-fellini-martin-scorsese/.

[7] Margaret A. Boden, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*, 2nd ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004). 29-30.

[8] Ibid., 30.

did not come to me as rational options. However, I enjoyed the destruction of clarity in photographs, and the flexibility to control visual content through appropriation. There is no logical justification for why I developed an interest in the process; adopting these approaches seems to be my escape from pursuing creativity.

In the same way Yayoi Kusama relieves her oppressive feelings through painting dots in repetition, I found temporary salvation in repetition, destruction, and interruption of photographs. Boden concludes the third phase of creative process as the eureka moment, which refers to the experience of solving a problem or realizing new ideas. The fourth and final stage is the takeover of the deliberate problem-solving again, where new ideas are tested in upcoming work.[9] For me, the eureka moment was when I realized that I do not seek for a resolution or explanation in art making; I strive for the spirit to keep making it. *Ibid.* is a process of incubating this eureka moment. Nevertheless, my thesis work also becomes the product of the philosophy it nurtured, the compelling desire to keep creating and thinking.

The approach I employed in *Ibid.* does not involve a camera. I appropriated vernacular photographs from an amateur photo archive of mundane moments that I think might be relatable to everyone. My selections from the archives were mostly vernacular photographs taken by 'snappers.' Julian Stallabrass distinguishes 'the snapper' from the professional, the amateur, and the artist. Snappers take photographs for particular social occasions; they document family or friends on holidays or special events.[10] Snapshot photography could be said to lack its own aesthetics, the value of these photos is dependent on their subject matter and relies on the proper

[9] Ibid., 30.
[10] Julian, Stallabrass. "Sixty Billion Sunsets," In *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture* (London: Verso, 1996), 14.

identification of the subject matter by its viewers.[11] As a result, I collected photos of common landscapes and normal people where the locations are unidentifiable. The appropriated photographs do not represent any distinctive geological features. For example, the images I used for *Ibid.* are developed from a family snapshot of two kids playing by the lakeside in Iowa. However, the visual indexes in these photographs are commonly seen in lots of other places.

In addition to reducing the influences of context through the selection of common snapshots, I apply a blurring filter over the images for additional ambiguity. The image loses its original meaning in the process and becomes more uncertain. The level of vagueness on the images is enough to cover the details but the images are still discernable. The employment of filter is an effort to disrupt the meaning of the original photo, leading the focus from the image itself to the differences between adjacent images and the form of repetition. The resulting photos are blurry and appear to be poor quality images.

Hito Steyrl refers to the bad quality and substandard resolution image as the poor image. It could be a thumbnail, a preview, compressed, reproduced, or ripped images. Quality, realism, and resolution have long been valued in photos, poor images can be also valued by their uniqueness and unpredictability. They naturally display the paradoxes of the modern world; Hito Steyrl describes poor images with qualities of "opportunism, narcissism, desire for autonomy and creation, its inability to focus or make up its mind, its constant readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission."[12] I became addicted to the unsharp images instead of reflecting on what in the image creates the meaning. Rather than remaining faithful to any original, these images defy, appropriate, conform, and exploit. They accumulate their significance through the

[11] Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).
[12] Hito, Steyerl. "In Defense of the Poor Image." https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.

process, and sometimes even come with the loss of its visual validity.[13] The digital era brings photography lots of issues on its credibility in presentation. The supposed objectivity of the photographic image, developed based on the limited ability in earlier photographic apparatus, gets challenged continuously alongside the documentary tradition. The coming of digital photography and photoshop eradicates the indexical quality that film photography enjoys. When archival film photographs get digitized and circulated online, I wonder if any photographs we see nowadays matter and what we want from them? Thomas Ruff has produced a series of work called jpegs using the compressed image he collected from the internet without using a camera. In this series, Ruff printed low-resolution pixelated images at a monumental scale. These images include natural disasters, calm landscapes, and scenes of wars. These images are asking the viewer: Is this what we see, or is it what we think we see? Does the image in the digital era give us what we want, or does it make us want more of those we have seen before? The images I used in *Ibid.* existed in a material form, and then got transformed into 0s and 1s through digitization. I manipulated these 0s and 1s and printed them out into the material form again. I asked viewers to think, do we still see what we wanted to see through these family photos? Do we still feel the same? If so, how do we define what we are looking at?

Ibid. is a discourse on the interpretation of images and form and, more importantly, the incubation of my artmaking philosophy. In the process of making, thinking, and repeating these pictures, I've liberated myself from generalized concepts and images, aesthetics defined through an embrace of psychoanalysis and semiology. As an artist who has tried to create by following the art trend and by rallying against it, I have become more aware of my pursuit regardless of the social influences. As a spiritual transcendence, *Ibid.* exceeds mere visual representation, it

[13] Ibid.

denotes my struggle with creativity and attempts to rehabilitate my understanding of images. The strategy of employing repetition as art and the critique of the repetition of images are not new. As I practice the similar process, I enter a stage where I feel and create art with pure intuition, an epiphany that other artists never delivered to me with similar strategies in their works. In making *Ibid.*, I have no intentions to undermine the values or significance that people attach to images, I want to invite people to explore how they develop their psychological desires to impose meanings on photographs.

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