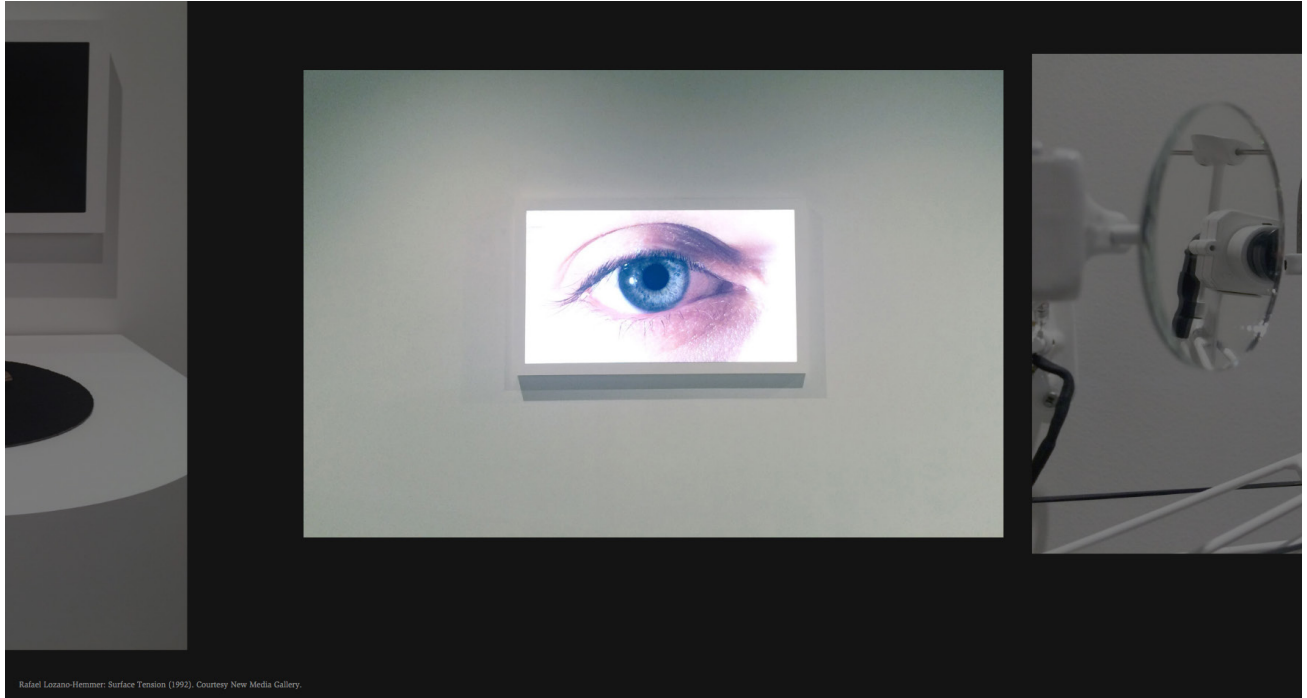


Witness

by Helen Wong



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New Media Gallery

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Central to the appreciation of art and its criticisms is the act of looking. The gaze is the primary way in which we can distinguish ourselves as viewers. It enables us to locate ourselves in relation to a work of art as we initially discern form, shape, and theme. Curators Sarah Joyce and Gordon Duggan of the New Media Gallery contemplate the history of the gaze in their group exhibition *Witness*, featuring Bjorn Schulke, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, France Cadet, Adam Basanta, and Stanza. Initially denoting knowledge, the definition of the term 'witness' has evolved over time. Each work contemplates the "seeing machine" in our technologically consumed society, presented though five distinct works questioning what it means to not only be perceiving bodies, but to be perceived bodies as well. This interplay sets up an interactive exhibition that not only gives us power through our ability to navigate and observe the space, but also strips away this power as we become instilled in a space that is not afraid to look back.

Through encountering each work, we are asked a different question about the gaze as we navigate new modes of seeing. In Lozano-Hemmer's *Surface Tension* (1992), we are confronted by what could be described as an Orwellian eye. Created at the time of the Gulf War, this work is imbued with themes surrounding the military and surveillance. *Surface Tension* projects an image of a single eye that unnervingly follows you around the room. The work is set up using an infrared camera attached to the ceiling, as a result the viewer becomes trapped in the territory of the work as the gallery floor parallels that of a war zone. Similarly, Stanza's *The Agency at the End of Civilization* (2014) refers to similar notions of surveillance by displaying a city grid constructed of LED monitors and wires. The monitors display footage obtained from CCTV cameras in the south of England, alongside a digital recording of the Internet of Cars Project, which recites license plates from the UK car number plate recognition system. Both Lozano-Hemmer and Stanza question the ubiquitous gaze of surveillance through technology's ability to control a public space. We are forced to confront our trust in technology through how we become perceived bodies in social settings under the guise of the government and security.

Conversely, France Cadet and Adam Basanta play with the lover's gaze. Cadet's piece *Do Robotic Cats Dream of Electric Fish?* (2007) identifies the unrequited gaze between a manipulated robotic cat and the digital projection of the Disney protagonist Nemo presented on a screen. Cadet looks at empathy and what it means to be human. Is the cat really watching and desiring Nemo? This gaze provokes a familiar feeling of longing and yearning. Adam Basanta's *A Truly Magical Moment* (2016) invites two viewers into an awkward video chat. Basanta's work addresses the requited lovers gaze as his work mimics the cinematic moment in which two lovers lock eyes across a crowded room. Two iPhones face each other on two angled selfie sticks, and as a stranger's face appears on the phone in front of you, you are asked to stare directly at each other for an unwavering minute. This absurd moment highlights our relationships with our handheld devices, the objects of our affection for so much of our day.

The gaze and its association with technology is brought to the forefront in Bjorn Schulke's *Vision Machine #3* (2014), which sums up the exhibition through its self-reflexive nature. A delicate anthropomorphic work, Schulke's machine hosts a tiny camera that swivels around, observing not only its surroundings, but also itself. This machine addresses the process of making as it has the ability to display its creation while simultaneously being a part of it. Operating similarly to the rotation of the planets in a solar system, we might think of the camera as a representation of ourselves and our perceived notion that we are the center of the universe. Schulke implicates the viewer in his work through momentary glimpses of our reflection in the mirrors captured on camera. We stare back at ourselves depicted on the screen and ponder how much control we have in regards to our gaze and just as quickly, the camera swivels and we are removed from sight.

These five 'seeing machines' are completely operational on their own; we become absorbed into their world, distinctly addressing the changes in the relationship between viewer and object. In a sense, by creating a retrospective of the gaze, Joyce and Duggan also acknowledge the future and how our sight is changing. As I exit the gallery under the Lozano-Hemmer's watchful eye, I am not so sure I am excited to be a part of this prospect.