Seeing without a Seer
In the context of an ongoing research programme the art cooperative Radical Reversibility organises in collaboration with Looiersgracht 60, the exhibition and symposium *Seeing without a Seer*. The programme explores alternative ways of looking, thinking and image-making that evade the central position of the viewer. *Seeing without a Seer* is set up as a cooperative, imaginative and speculative exercise to grasp what is at stake in the act of seeing.

In this (post)digital era new imaging technologies call the very concept of ‘being human’ into question. In which ways will ‘machine vision’ influence our worldview? What is ‘seeing’ and where is it located? Can we imagine how nonhumans like plants, stones or bacteria ‘see’ their surroundings?

Since the Renaissance, human visual perception has been transformed into an all-encompassing mathematical structure based on the laws of optics and Euclidean geometry. The development of linear perspective established a clear distinction between viewer and viewed, each situated on opposite sides of the ‘picture plane’. This seemingly objective system of representation also constituted the technological origin of lens-based devices such as photography and film cameras.
As an alternative to this model of representation, the exhibition embraces the concept of ‘seeing without a seer’ developed by the Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945). “This idea describes a ‘place of nothingness’ which envelops not only the object seen, but also the seeing action and that in which both are established. ‘Seeing’ is not a subject’s act defined in opposition to an object, but is an event prior to the distinction between the two.”

Seeing without a Seer presents artistic strategies that playfully challenge visual representation in our post-digital era. Delving into the barely visible and the microscopic, the participating artists introduce alternative concepts of seeing: polyperspectives, machine vision, a self-seeing world, or vision attributed to nonhuman agents. They attempt to reverse the construct of anthropocentric vision, aiming at a radical expansion, if not the full reformation, of our habitual ways of seeing.

Marjolijn Dijkman’s (1978, NL) works are tied together by a quest to interlink science, technology, speculation, art and spiritualism. Prevalent in her practice are vital questions about the role of fiction in scientific inquiry, on humanity and artificial intelligence, post-human theory, and extra-terrestrial life. Both Dijkman and Toril Johannessen (1978, NO) are interested in the mediation of nature and the kind of relationships it evokes, for instance through scientific paradigm shifts.

Liquid Properties, a collaboration between the two artists, resulted from a commission by Munchmuseet on the Move in Oslo, Norway. The project consists of the film Reclaiming Vision and an installation containing glass sculptures. The film’s starting point is that seeing developed underwater (the eye, in fact, evolved from marine algae). Reclaiming Vision was filmed through a light microscope and offers a vivid choreography featuring millions of protagonists, otherwise invisible to the human eye, who live in brackish water. Some of these microbes were sampled from the inner Oslo Fjord, alongside algae, and few of these were cultivated at the University of Oslo. Brackish water conditions commonly occur where fresh water meets salt water. Due to melting ice caps and ocean levels on the rise, brackish water zones are growing around the world. These might be seen as transformative microzones, as temporary liquid archives, including different species and traces of expanded human activity on a global scale.

Dijkman & Johannessen produced a trillion images for this film, to evoke sentient empathy with otherwise invisible organisms and processes, and to explore cinematic strategies to animate speculative narratives that would remain far too abstract on a microscopic scale.

* see also: Toril Johannessen, The Invention and Conclusion of the Eye (10)

Marjolijn Dijkman & Toril Johannessen Still from Reclaiming Vision (2018)

PRODUCTION
Anouk De Clercq (1971, BE) is an artist and researcher driven by the synergy between (video) art, music, performance, and installation.

For her film work *It* she collaborated with artist-photographer Tom Callemin (1991, BE). Their respective artistic views hover in a black-and-white world, in the realm of the scarcely possible and the barely visible, fascinated by what light is able to reveal. In *It*, a blind narrator guides us through the dark, through a solar eclipse temporarily turning day into an uncanny twilight zone. The blind man apparently has to make us – seers – aware of the physical impact of this cosmic event that we seem to overlook easily, ‘blinded’ as we are by assuming this spectacle is meant ‘for our eyes only’. The blind man, equipped with a different sensory palette, detects this short-term derangement of the world by perceiving subtle changes in temperature, wind speed, heat, humidity, and the tender whistling of birds. Holding his breath, just like us, the blind man awaits the rebirth of light.

*It* (2017) [Video, 13 min., b/w, 16:9, stereo & 5.1, English]

**Anouk De Clercq & Tom Callemin**

PRODUCTION
Sound: Kwinten Van Laethem / Soundmix: Rémi Gerard, Empire Digital / Animation: Thomas De Brabanter / Produced: Auguste Orts / Production Assistant: Jana Coorevits / With the support of: Flanders Audiovisual Fund, School of Arts Ghent & Herculeslab

It is little known outside Sweden that in the final years of the nineteenth century the famous playwright August Strindberg (1849–1912) engaged in painting, photography, and (pseudo)science. Driven by his wish to express the all-encompassing cohesion of the universe, Strindberg experimented with alternative methods and technologies. Against the tide of the dominant realism of his time, Strindberg initially painted a radical view of the Swedish landscape as metaphor for his turbulent emotions. His paintings, showing rogue waves, heavy rock masses, and subdued cloud formations, can be seen as the ‘automatic writing’ of his inner life.

Strindberg believed that coincidence plays a decisive role in creation, so he invited chance to determine every level of his artistic process. In his 1894 essay ‘Chance in Artistic Creation’, Strindberg describes his methods: “The arts of the future (which will pass away, like everything else!) imitate nature closely; above all, imitate nature’s way of creating!” Strindberg’s method was to start more or less randomly, thereby trusting nature’s inherent desire for form, so that eventually a picture would almost automatically grow out of the paint. One of the most intriguing examples of this ‘method’ is his series of ‘celestographs’, photographs captured without a lens or camera. Instead, he exposed sensitized photographic plates directly to the night sky. This automated process excludes the viewer (as subject), the lens (as medium), and a concrete motif (as object), but opens new registers of abstract, speculative looking and thinking.


**August Strindberg**

*Celestographs (1893-1894)*
[4 duratrans prints 21×29cm on lightbox 36×28cm]

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**August Strindberg**

Celestograph / [back side] (1893-94)
From: National Library of Sweden, Collection of Manuscripts
Juuso Noronkoski (1983, FI) makes mixed-media installations in which he combines photography, video, sculpture, and text. He experiments with expanding the flatness of photography into the plasticity of a sculptural object or installation. Fascinated by interspaces between images, objects, and texts, Noronkoski combines individual means of expression with different temporal and material qualities and brings them together into a conversational space. By showing objects together with photographic images, the artist bridges the gap between here and there and now and then. Photographs function not only as windows to another time and place, but also as mirrors reflecting actuality. Through this visual mindset we are made receptive to imagine a reversed gaze, one that looks from object to subject.

In *To See How the Moon Sees*, a lyrical description of a photograph of the Earth taken from the moon unleashes a stream of magic recollections of how it used to be the reverse. If Noronkoski’s artistic practice would provoke only one question, this would be: Where is an image situated? Noronkoski’s images seem to float between the actual and the imaginary, between the known and unknown, and between the seen and unseen.

Taisuke Koyama (1978, JA) studied Biology and Environmental Sciences in Tokyo and is a self-taught photographer. He is interested in the relationship between the organic world and technology. In his work he explores the possibilities of photographic expression in the (post)digital era. His aim is to provide room for audiences to experience ‘environmentalized’ images in the shape of tangible objects and data created by devices such as the digital camera, the handheld scanner, and the digital microscope.

The seismic event of the ‘Great East Japan Earthquake’ (2011) had a profound effect on Koyama and became a catalyst that shifted his attention to the unpredictability of images. Koyama’s recent series *Light Fields* presents abstract photographic works for which he experimentally employed digital sensors. Light reflecting off wrinkled sheets of aluminium foil and beamed onto scanner sensors resolves into unique abstract colors and patterns. Koyama embraces the concept of self-generating images by using devices resulting in ‘indeterminate’ images, whose optics lack any sense of a traceable subject-object relationship. Releasing photography from its material origins is an ongoing area of interest for Koyama, contrasting with his desire to build installations that provoke a strong physical experience.

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**Juuso Noronkoski**

*Device No.5 (The Third Sun)* (2017)

4. + 7. + 8. + 9.

**Taisuke Koyama**

*Light Fields* (2018)

**4. + 7. + 8. + 9.**

Juuso Noronkoski

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Taisuke Koyama

*Light Fields* (2018)

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Artists and researchers Elodie Hiryczuk (1977, FR) and Sjoerd van Oevelen (1974, NL) aim to create a sense of space-time beyond the immediately visible. Their simple but all-decisive position holds that our visual capacity differs essentially from that of the camera lens. This view addresses the limitations of the monocular vision that has come to dominate our worldview.

In several photo series, comprising multi-perspectival diptychs and other polytychs, Hiryczuk/Van Oevelen strive for a detached gaze, in which a resynthesized viewing experience encourages the viewer to expand and enlarge the capacity of his vision. Within the framework of their long-term research project The Detached Gaze and in response to the topic of Seeing without a Seer, for their new series One Moon in a Thousand Seas, Hiryczuk/Van Oevelen photographed the reflection of moonlight on the surface of the ocean as if it were an abstract piece of calligraphy. Inspiration for the title comes from the age-old Asian philosophical idea of ‘the moon reflected in a thousand ponds’. Looking at the moon reflecting on water, we will perceive this single reflection as reality without realizing that at the same moment countless reflections mirror the moon beyond our visual field, each of them just as real. This notion stems from the knowledge that there is always friction between what we see on the one hand, and what we experience and know on the other. This conception prompts us to question our narrow personal perspective and to see the world, instead, as a dynamic, ever-changing whole of which we are only a (small) part. The series One Moon in a Thousand Seas shows the ‘spatialized’ interplay between abstraction and figuration, subject and object, and photography and philosophy.

Tuula Närhinen examines the visual potential of natural events. She constructs numerous visual interfaces enabling us to move beyond the obvious and to trace invisible and unimaginable natural phenomena. She presents her works as installations comprising photographic series, drawings and/or sculptures. Närhinen has also built various (pinhole) cameras that record what she imagines the world might look like for animals.

For her installation Baltic Sea Plastique, Närhinen explores the complexities of plastic waste as an environmental pollutant. This work combines the plasticity of visual arts with the creative and resilient capacity of marine life. Using plastic waste she gathered at Harakka Island (near Helsinki), Närhinen assembled odd marine creatures that she recorded underwater with a self-made instrument called ‘Water Colour Scope’. This resulted in eight 5-minute videos in which the plastic sculptures are featured as quasi-organic art works. Furthermore, the installation contains analytic drawings of sections and elevations of the hybrid objects on a 1:1 scale. Despite her employment of an empirical and experimental methodology, allowing for natural phenomena to manifest themselves, in Baltic Sea Plastique Närhinen’s intervention playfully navigates on the edge of imag(in)ing the non-human condition.

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For her installation Baltic Sea Plastique, Närhinen explores the complexities of plastic waste as an environment
11. Hans Gremmen

Graphic designer, publisher and artist Hans Gremmen (1976, NL) has a special interest in the grandeur of the American landscape. For the contemporary explorer that he is there is plenty of space left to discover, especially the sense of romance of the mid-nineteenth century expeditions expanding westwards, whose reports about railway construction resulted in a near-tangible ‘historical sensation’. Seen in this light it comes as no surprise that Gremmen focused on an exemplary painting by Thomas Moran, for his project Lookout Point, The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone.

In 1869 Moran was asked to illustrate for the public one of the early expeditions to Yellowstone. He made drawings on the basis of descriptions without having ever been to Yellowstone himself. His idealized depiction of Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone (1872), painted in his hometown of Newark, nevertheless proved decisive in the designation of Yellowstone as national park, by the authorities who had no doubts about the authenticity of this picture. Gremmen’s project, in line with this infectious form of falsification of history, playfully comments on Moran’s apparent contempt for a true-to-life rendering and the way in which he seduced his audience.

[Series of paintings and a publication. 7 works in 3 sizes: 1 of 187.5×101cm, 1 of 110×70cm, 5 of 77×43cm. Total size of the block of 7 pieces: 350×205 cm. Reproduced by Painghere.com and Pinting SunBird]

Employing a far-reaching reproduction process — commissioning various commercial Chinese oil painters to repaint reproduction upon reproduction —, Gremmen brings into sharp focus questions surrounding fiction and reality and the ‘seeing’ and ‘seen’.

Thomas Moran
Grotto Geyser Yellowstone National Park (1871)

12. Martine Stig

“Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. [...] To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong? Having taken a voluptuous pleasure in it, I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of ‘seeing the whole’, of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts.” In his text ‘Walking in the City’, from The Practice of Everyday Life (1984), Michel de Certeau makes a distinction between ‘Voyeurs’, with their view from above, and ‘Wandersmänner’ (walkers), the practitioners of the city, whose movements, in the eyes of the voyeur, describe some sort of ‘urban text’, yet who are unable to read their own text.*

In line with her autonomous film experiments employing ‘scripted reality’, Martine Stig (1972, NL) started an artistic research project named Vertigo, set in urban spaces comparable to the one sketched above. Stig examines how new technologies influence perception and representation of space by using film and photography. Inspired by contemporary developments around the satellite, the drone and other forms of ‘machine vision’, Stig first and foremost wonders to what extent our horizon-oriented field of vision could be augmented with the vertical dimension.

For the dynamic montage of Walking in the City, Stig superimposed her own images of the streets in metropolitan São Paulo with spatial counterparts in the form of satellite images she had retrieved via GPS coordinates. For Stig, this film work is no technical exercise toward the natural reconstruction of a new virtual spatiality, but an analysis of our mode of perception by focusing on dichotomies such as horizontality/verticality, man/machine, science/fiction in an unprecedented, hybrid composition in which a narrator reads the new ‘urban text’ (that was written by Basje Boer based on Stig’s research).


PRODUCTION:
Toril Johannessen (1978, NO) engages in methods and source material from ‘specialist fields of knowledge’ such as science, visual perception studies, linguistics, and the occult. By combining scientific fact with fiction with her own investigations, she applies a critical, subjective and speculative view on the impact of modern science on various forms of knowledge production. Her special interest in ways of (not) seeing is expressed through the audio play *The Invention and Conclusion of the Eye*.

“We see with our brains, not with our eyes (…),” goes the opening sentence of the audio play. This 38-minute long piece proclaims a vision of the future around the development of the eye — a premise that, propelled by technological innovations, will apply to all of humanity. The play’s female protagonist, a certain Mx, is working on a scientific paper about this issue and regularly consults with an image editor per telephone. Mx hints at a paradigm shift leading to a post-visual world, in which we might only perceive internalized, mental images — directly via the cortex — the eye having become a redundant organ. These mental images would be managed by algorithmic predictions, enabling us to see the ‘unseen’, as witness the meaningful remark that “[…] the world we live in is overwhelmingly invisible.” In the long run an all-seeing Eye might evolve without the mediation of ‘vision’.

**The Invention and Conclusion of The Eye (2017)**

*[Audio play, 38:40 min., multi-channel playback, stage light, diagram, paper sculptures]*

**PRODUCTION**

English: 38:40 min / English translation: Richard Simpson / Actor: Maggie Nagle / Studio recording and sound design: Ken Gregory / Light design: Thomas Bruvik and Pablo Castro / Produced with support from: Hordaland Art Centre, Plug In ICA and OSL Contemporary.

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