

EDITORIAL

Joyce Poot

Dear Reader,

Before you lies *On Mechanical Eyes: Seeing Machines*, an issue on the role of interactive technologies in the perception and experience of art and its influence in the field of contemporary art. Throughout the years, the entwining of art, mediality, spectacle, and technology has been investigated in multiple *Kunstlicht* issues such as examining the diverse conceptualizations of (inter-)mediality (2011), crossmediality (2012), the spectacle (2014), medium specificity (2015) and technological mediation (2017). In *On Mechanical Eyes: Seeing Machines*, we add to these thematic investigations by focusing specifically on how the interactive spectacle influences the field of contemporary art, where the experience of the spectator plays a pivotal role.

It has been an honour working on this issue as Managing Editor as well as becoming Editor-in-Chief over the past few months. It is strange to look back on last year, when Cleo Foole and I proposed the idea of writing an issue—that would become this very issue of *On Mechanical Eyes: Seeing Machines* that you hold in your hands right now—to our former Editor-in-Chief Iris Pissaride. Iris' excitement, enthusiasm, and wonderful sharp but thoughtful comments are characteristics that made her an amazing Editor-in-Chief. I speak for the whole editorial team when I say that she will be missed. She has left big shoes to fill. She shared with me the love of *Kunstlicht*: a bright, bubbly feeling that *Kunstlicht* can investigate any topic, research any source, and that there are no limits to our need for knowledge. I take this with me in my brand-new role of Editor-in-Chief. I want to learn more about subjects that I am unfamiliar with. I want to meet new artist and read young writers, as I want *Kunstlicht* to become a platform that celebrates young makers. I am thrilled that I get to continue to create amazing thematic issues that are cherished by our readers (yes, you!), working together with my dedicated editorial team, who all do this work on a voluntary basis.

We would like to thank the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, and Clue+ for their financial support. We would like to thank the Willem de Kooning Academie, Rotterdam, and Sami Hammana in particular, for hosting the launch event of this issue in their Research Station on 19 March 2020. With this issue, we also welcome Agnieszka Checka, Sofa Ehrich, Sophie Field, Alexa Simonics, and Floor van Esch on our editorial board. We are thankful that Iris Pissaride has joined our advisory board. With the completion of this issue, we say goodbye to Floor van Esch. Finally, we wholeheartedly thank all the authors and artists that contributed herein and helped us make this issue a reality.

We are delighted to now invite you to turn to the next page, and enjoy reading your new *Kunstlicht*!

On behalf of the editorial board,
Joyce Poot
Editor-in-Chief

INTRODUCTION

ON MECHANICAL EYES—SEEING MACHINES

Cleo Foole & Joyce Poot

Over the past decades, digital technologies have found their way into art and exhibition design. During the last ten years the increasing presence of 'smart technologies' (often in the shape of mobile smartphones) in galleries have changed both exhibition design conventions as well as visitors' experiences.¹ Additionally, artists have come to rely on these smart technologies to produce their work or utilize the medium as topic in their practice. Often these two go hand in hand. For institutions, new media offer possibilities for global connections and draw in new audiences. In a different but related vein, the art market is simultaneously moving towards less physicality, as more and more art works are being sold prior to any first-hand experience of the work by the buyer (solely through PDF portfolios sent by email). It is not the biggest leap from PDF files with exhibition installations to online social media platforms such as Instagram, where the spectator's experience is co-shaped through social media accounts sharing #emptymuseum to show installation shots of empty museum spaces, urging their followers to visit this space, artist, or art fair. Ultimately, these are examples of phenomena that point to the far-reaching and fluid impact of a changing medium and its effect on the experience and utilization of digital technologies in contemporary art worlds.

Kunstlicht has focused on the role of the medium in the arts before: in 2011 *Mediality* examined the complicated states of artistic media, while six years later *Mediated Imaginations* zoomed in on the impact of technology on art and mediation.² In both issues several authors discuss the rise of digital media in particular. In this issue of *Kunstlicht*, only three years after *Mediated Imaginations*, we continue this thread to explore digital media from the perspective of interactivity and spectatorship. Inspired by phenomenological theories of spectatorship—theories that focus on the individual, embodied experience of art works—the several contributions examine how the rise of smart technologies have changed the meaning of 'seeing,' 'looking,' and 'viewing.'³

The significance of digital technologies to a spectator's experience was illustrated in a recent exhibition at Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, the Netherlands. In *Rothko & I* *alone without your phone*, the museum offered its visitors the opportunity to spend an intimate hour with Mark Rothko's *Grey, Orange on Maroon, No. 8 (1960)*. The museum encouraged its visitors to "[d]o it by yourself, standing or sitting, without your mobile phone" in

¹ On the rise of smart technology in the arts see for example the issue "Internet Explorer," *Rekto:Verso*, no. 86, December 2019, <https://www.rektoverso.be/dossier/JwBFaae8grTyXvPFp>. For the role of new interactive media in contemporary art and spectatorship, see Katja Kwastek, *The Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2013).

² See Daniel van der Poel and Jesse van Winden (eds), "Mediality," *Kunstlicht*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2011. The issue can be found online: <https://tijdschriftkunstlicht.nl/vol-32-2011-no-3-mediality/>; Bas de Boer, Sam Edens, and Jonne Hoek (eds), "Mediated Imaginations," *Kunstlicht*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2017. Online: <https://tijdschriftkunstlicht.nl/vol-38-2017-no-4-mediated-imaginations-technologies-touching-upon-art/>

³ See, for example, Roberto Diodato, *Aesthetics of the Virtual*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012); Tim Markham and Scott Rodgers, *Conditions of Mediation: Phenomenological Perspectives on Media*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2017).

order to be moved by the painting in 'solitude'. Reading further however, it turns out that the viewer is "of course welcome to make pictures. Some moments you just wish to immortalize."⁴

From the spectator, equipped with a smartphone with access to social media, the possibilities for capturing every moment and sharing it seem to change the experience of art works: the smart technologies allow us to 'immortalize' a moment, yet according to Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, they also interfere with the actual experience. This brings up the question of what an 'experience' entails and how a small device, so omnipresent in daily life, influences that 'experience.' We might for example, simply due to the technology's ubiquity, see with the dimensions of the camera in mind. An art work that is likable, interesting, thought-provoking — that work is also photographed. Moreover, when researching this issue, we noticed how machines themselves seem to become spectators, able to observe their user/wearer and report on their observations, almost to the extent that the device itself becomes a kind of seer. Moreover, our online activities are co-shaped by algorithms. What users see is based on data collected from the same user. If smart devices look at and for us, as well as regulate what is shown to us, is there still any direct perception possible? Can the spectator still wander, when their movements are observed, regulated, stored, and then anticipated upon?

Furthermore, the exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam poignantly discloses a juxtaposition in contemporary art and exhibition design: while smart technologies and social media can be distractions in the gallery, they are also vital in order to attract new audiences to the museum space, and for artists they have become almost indispensable to get work out into the world. There is a political dimension to these questions, and whereas smart technologies are highly interactive, we would be hard-pressed to call them reciprocal. Do we find ourselves in an interactive spectacle, or rather, a digital playground? In a recent iteration of Guy Debord's notion of the 'spectacle,' scholars and artist problematize digital media as 'interactive spectacle,' where genuine participation and subversion are at stake.⁵ In other words: mediated screens activate spectators and make them more involved, yet perhaps only to appropriate what the spectator looks at, ultimately functioning as a kind of "playbour."⁶

Beyond the politics of spectatorship, we wondered if the intuition that the presence of digital media affects the aesthetic experience was pointing towards a deeper change in the understanding of human perception. Central to our inquiry into perception in the digital age, was the concept of 'machine vision.' To what extent can we speak of seeing machines, and will the mechanical eye affect the dominance of the human eye? Departing from this question and the more concrete introduction of smart technologies in contemporary art, we wrote a

⁴ See *Rothko & I*, Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, stedelijkmuseumschiedam.nl/tentoonstelling/Rothko-me/

⁵ See Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano (eds.), *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2017); Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of the Spectacle," *Illuminations*, 1999, <https://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell17.htm>.

⁶ See Julian Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," *Fibre Culture*, issue 5, December 2005, http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/kucklich_print.html.

Call for Papers looking for perspectives that would go beyond dichotomies to highlight the actual embodied experience propelled by the friction between the analogue and the digital, the human and the nonhuman.⁷

When researching the inherent agency of humankind and machine, the intertwining of both became a crucial aspect in the response of the contributing writers of this issue. The writers give deliberate attention to the human-ness in technology — is it possible for a camera to look with kind eyes? — and the relation that both technology and humankind have to AI. This intertwining had not occurred in the previous two issues of *Kunstlicht* and made us wonder: if the rise of new media art is undeniable, if the mediation between art and spectatorship is inherently impacted by technology, can the human position stretch to include technology? Or might technology come to accommodate human perception within its machinal logic?

This issue is divided in two main sections: the first one brings the complex nature of the human-nonhuman into focus, unpacking the interconnected nature of human and nonhuman vision. The second part turns to the introduction of the digital realm in the gallery, through case studies of art works that span multiple decades.

Confusion of the human and mechanical eye also inspired Corine van der Wall's *Dizzyness in blue, pink and gold* (2020) — seemingly referencing Rothko's painting — which you will find on the cover and spread throughout the issue. The moiré that makes human eyes dizzy does not affect the riso printer's eye in any way. If the moiré does not appear, what does the printer see?

In the first article, Esther Scholtes explores Belgian artist David Claerbout's HD animation *Olympia - The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years* (2016-ongoing) as a complexly entangled image by moving away from representational understandings of screen-based art and technologies. One of the observations she underlines is that the concept of the art work will not be supported by the technology in which the art work has been made — simply because the work cannot be rendered anymore. The technology that is inherent to the work, thus also limits the duration of the work.

Juliette Huygen also considers the interplay or collaboration that occurs in networks in which human and nonhuman players intermingle their agencies. Huygen uses the visual regimes that are practiced by HAL 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* to analyse the (non)humanized perspective on machines when approaching seeing, viewing, and experiencing from the position of science fiction.

A drawback of AI, a relatively young field of *data science*, is its roots in a retroactively Cartesian dualist logic (the separation of the 'mind' from the 'body' or 'world') which enables the intuition that the information/world or hardware/software divisions are real.

⁷ We borrow the term 'friction' from a conversation with philosopher of art and media Thomas Crombez, who stressed the importance of accounts that go beyond dystopian visions of technology and artificial intelligence. See also Thomas Crombez, *Kunnen machines kijken?* (Antwerp: Letterwerk, 2018), and *De Steenhouwer en de robot*, (Antwerp: Letterwerk, 2019).

Sonia de Jager takes her reader with her into this dualist world, as she questions these intuitions, as well as plenty of other strict dualisms which dominate the AI discourse. Also, this article comes with a disclaimer:

This text is an experiment, a merger between fiction and theory. Sometimes it may appear incongruent, but please don't feel put off by the inability to make sense of things, sometimes that is the point. Rather, when something feels discordant, use your apparent free will to fill the gaps with your own intuitions. This way, a real kind of *double entendre* can emerge, as we write this text together.

In a related vein, Sebastian Scholz approaches a similar position to De Jager's: under contemporary, highly technological conditions, it is hard to tell where human agency ends and machine logic prevails. Scholz looks at experience as a 'sensation,' where vision is entangled in call for an operational onto-epistemology, suited for comprehending the material-discursive configurations from which mediated visibilities emerge. It is in the spaces between the comprehensive infrastructures, that human as well as nonhuman sense perception takes place.

Opening the second section, Arnon Ben-Dror turns back to interactive art made during the 1990s by Dutch artists Ivo van Stiphout, Bill Spinhoven, and Bert Schutter. Ben-Dror analyzes how these works functioned, what their intended aim was, and whether they have been able to stand the test of time. In doing so, Ben-Dror discerns a move from a technophile approach to a critically-oriented approach; in later works, technologically mediated interaction became a critical tool to deconstruct the power dynamics that underlie dominant spectatorial structures.

Delany Boutkan moves beyond the individual spectator or the individual artist when she looks at the way new building extensions of museums have started to address the necessity to adapt displays and interior design to their visitors — and their phones. Referencing Bauhaus graphic designer and exhibition innovator Herbert Bayer, she takes the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam) and the Museum of Modern Art (New York) as contemporary examples in order to consider the impact that the changing interior designs have made on visitors' experiences.

Last, but not least, Christopher Williams-Wynn focuses on the art spectator and their phone, examining artist Adelle Mills' video performance *Moving through phone* (2015). Incorporating improvisation, recording, and re-enactment, this work distils aspects of spectacular subject formation. By examining Mills' performance next to works by Yvonne Rainer, Dan Graham, and Bruce Nauman, Williams-Wynn considers the changing forms of the spectacle and argues that *Moving through phone* offers a succinct exploration of interactive spectacle.

Spread throughout this issue, you find protocols made by Stephan Blumenschein. These protocols are an ongoing series of exhibition documentation as an alternative to the prevailing installation shot and its

inherent ideology. We would like to challenge you to consider the alternatives these protocols offer while reading this issue *Kunstlicht*.

On behalf of the editorial board,
Cleo Foole & Joyce Poot

Cleo Foole recently graduated from the MA Philosophy of Humanity and Culture at Tilburg University (cum laude), with a thesis on spectatorship. She obtained a BFA in Costume Design at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp, where she is currently enrolled in the part-time fine arts programme. Her philosophical and artistic research explores perception and intimacy in the relation between spectator and artwork. She is a founding member of Antwerp based TIM magazine and editor at the *Kunstlicht* board. For this issue, she managed the editorial process together with Joyce Poot.

Joyce Poot is responsible for the public program at the Jewish Cultural Quarter, Amsterdam. Previously, she has held positions at Wiels, Brussels, the University of Leiden, and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam. In 2018, she obtained a ResMA in Contemporary Art Theory/World Art Studies (cum laude) and a MA in Film and Photographic Studies, both from the University of Leiden.