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*On the difference between seeing and looking:
Daniela Rossell and Galen Jackson*
Fernández, María Emilia
Onda MX, April 10, 2020

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by María Emilia Fernández

'Sowing' at Kurimanzutto

> I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye.
> I, a machine, show you the world
> as only I can see it.
> — Dziga Vertov

With these words, the Russian film director and pioneer of the documentary, Denis Abelevich Kaufman, proclaimed the emancipation of the camera in 1923. Better known by his pseudonym, Dziga Vertov denounced the situation of the *kino-eye* that lived in "subordination to the imperfections and the shortsightedness of the human eye," enslaved by the body's weaknesses instead of harnessing its true potential and exploring "the chaos of visual phenomena that fills space."[2] Inspired by futurism, he predicted that the mechanical eye would allow us to appreciate our environment in a manner that would be clearer, omnipresent, and free from the boundaries of space and time. If the camera could decipher the world in a new way, then it could also teach us to see, to discover an image more vivid than reality itself.[3] But almost a hundred years after the publication of this text, I wonder what Vertov would say if he knew that he anticipated a society centered around visual stimulation, one that posts 95 million photos a day on Instagram and uploads 500 hours of video every minute to YouTube.[4]

The artists Daniela Rossell (Mexico, 1973) and Galen Jackson (United States, 1984) pose a similar question in their most recent exhibition, titled *La computadora de la conexión* ("Computer with an Internet Connection"). This is one of seven individual shows in the gallery kurimanzutto, which, twenty years after its founding, has decided to rethink its way of conceiving its exhibition space. Instead of seeking to expand at an ever-increasing rate, kurimanzutto recovers the agricultural metaphor of *sowing* in order to propose a different logic of production and exhibition. The idea of a fertile field serves to announce the gallery's new rhythms and priorities: an open space where different times come together and where conversations are nourished with ideas from every crop. As a result, plywood walls now divide the vessel into seven labyrinthine sections.

The work of Rossell and Jackson occupies a kind of miniature gallery within a larger one. Displayed on this room's walls are twenty-four black-and-white images: twelve pairs of screen prints that seem unrelated, but that nevertheless end up speaking with one another. In one, we can distinguish three small planes in flight, placed alongside two social media icons, fixed in the sky of an empty screen. In another diptych, the lace of a white bra appears side-by-side with the remains of a roll of toilet paper. And in yet another we witness a sea of people and lamp posts holding forth on what could be any street, which without further warning seem to transform into thousands of blades of grass standing in the sun.

In the center of the room one finds a computer. Installed on a desk meant for working while standing, the machine discharges two screens that share a single keyboard, with cables that go down to the floor and connect to the wall. The assembly invites us to get closer, to surround it as if it had a body equivalent to ours. The left-side monitor continuously projects Dziga Vertov's most iconic film, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929); on the other side, images appear and disappear at such dizzying speed that it is impossible to distinguish with certainty what one is seeing. This second film/lightening flash is created in real time—24 photographs per second, selected from images available on the internet. The show's information sheet invites the visitor to press the spacebar on the keyboard, which stops the flow and freezes an image on each side, creating a new diptych like the ones we see framed in the room.

Daniela Rossell & Galen Jackson, 'Computer With an Internet Connection' in 'Siembra' (Sowing), Kurimanzutto, Mexico City, 2020. Courtesy of Kurimanzutto

La computadora de la conexión is programmed to search the internet for images bearing shapes, gaps, and contrasts similar to each frame in Vertov's film. In this sense, the exhibition presents a systematization of the accidents and coincidences that have been offered by the computer's software. The work constantly rewrites itself, and it will continue reinventing itself so long as it remains connected to electricity and to the grid. Always the same and always different, this situation partly recalls jazz improvisations, those in which the band establishes a harmonic sequence presenting the theme upon which the soloists will improvise. By adhering to that same harmonic framework and structure, they can create any melodic line without ever clashing with the group. The same goes for the computer algorithm that follows specifications and parameters in search of certain percentages of black and white, as well as of shapes and contours, allowing it to emit a result remotely similar to Vertov's film, although the content of the images differs completely.

This is the case in some of the most poetic coincidences, those that escape anthropocentrism and present comparisons between macro and micro, and in which scale does nothing but blur the supposed limits between human and non-human beings. For example, on the left side we see a group of bathers participating in a stretching class on the beach, while on the other side appears a series of spermatozoa, much more elongated and flexible than their neighbors. In another pair of photographs one sees the face of a woman almost in profile, carefree and smiling, with her hair tied and some strands in the air, and who encounters her double in a portrait of a flea seen under a microscope—a translucent organism that seems to laugh through its oral system. It is as if nature, like ourselves, repeats and copies itself, either from carelessness or in search of an echo lost between species and objects.[5]
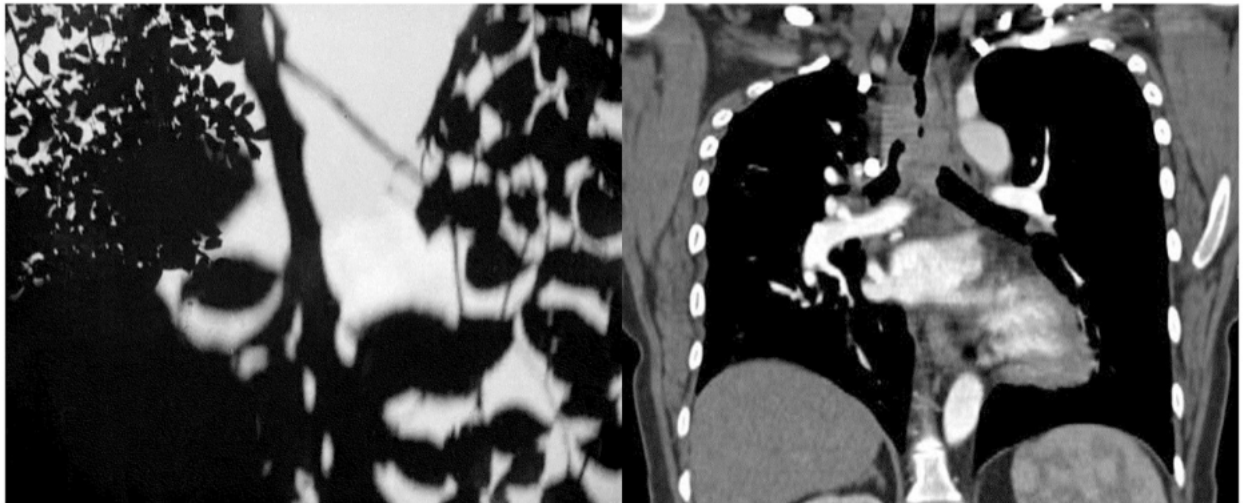
Daniela Rossell & Galen Jackson, 'Computer With an Internet Connection' in 'Siembra' (Sowing), Kurimanzutto, Mexico City, 2020. Courtesy of Kurimanzutto

One could easily envy the computer's unlimited access to the "boundless corpus of photographs available online in the present moment," as Rossell and Jackson describe it, as well as long for its ability to find all those accidents and combinations. But what belongs to the computer is just that: a torrent of images, presented in an unrepeatable montage while also disconnected from any view that could spin them together. It would be useless to ask the machine about what lies in the space between the two images. What is there between the lace of a bra and the remains of toilet paper? Between the smile of a young woman and a flea?

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This is the sense in which the work points to the difference between seeing and looking, between the Vertov *Kino-Eye* or the Rossell and Jackson program, which "sees —just like someone who has become addicted to images and never tires of seeing,"[6] and the human gaze that seeks to fill in—or, rather, that cannot avoid filling in—the gap between two pictures. We have learned to decipher, read, and interpret, to chronicle similarities and differences, affinities and discrepancies. When we see two photographs we also begin to look between them, and we are tempted to listen to their dialogue, to project onto them tensions and polarities. If we add to this the memory that introduces different temporalities, that archives traces and relationships between images, words, and affections, then it is understood that whenever we look at something we miss something.[7]

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These reflections on the human gaze and the endless images that exist on the internet accompany the visitor to the show in kurimanzutto. Nevertheless, *La computadora de la conexión* also awakens a more sinister side of our relationship with technology. Although recognizing it may be trying, the algorithm that searches for poetic coincidences between internet images and the film of a pioneer of Russian cinema is not so far from one that monitors the exchange of content on the internet. Rossell and Jackson omit exhibiting the fine wiring, as well as the human part of the piece that designs and perfects the machine's task, leaving only a redemptive scenario for the computer, one that does not in any way problematize the design of this type of program. Without a doubt, any similarity between the technology used to find patterns in the composition of a photograph and facial recognition software is a mere coincidence, but it is difficult to ignore. Before leaving the gallery, a question may arise: a virtual surveillance program that today has learned to see; will it tomorrow learn to look?

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[1] Dziga Vértov, "The Council of Three," 1923, in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. California: University of California Press, 1984. p 17.

[2] Dziga Vértov. *Op. cit.* p 14, 15.

[3] "Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them...My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you." Dziga Vértov, *Op. cit.* p 17, 18

[4] The most recent official Instagram figures were published in 2016, so it can be assumed that the number of photos that are daily uploaded to this platform is much larger today. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-instagram-users/instagrams-user-base-grows-to-more-than-500-million-idUSKCN0Z71LN

Susan Wojcicki, Executive Director of Youtube, mentions this datum in a speech published September 24, 2019 on YouTube's official blog: https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/09/appealspeech.html

[5] In addition, the screen prints are so large that when one gets closer the images decompose, and the points constituting them become labyrinths and starry skies. It is often forgotten that prints are also made from something akin to ones and zeros, a binary code that shares a great deal with computer bits and screen pixels.

[6] Daniela Rossell and Galen Jackson, *La computadora de la conexión.* Exhibition text. kurimanzutto, 2020.

[7] What emerges between a photographer and the camera is a rather porous relationship, in which the limits between them are characterized by both complementarity and blurring. A *kinok-pilot*, as described by Vertov, "controls the camera's movements," but also "entrusts himself to it during experiments in space." (Dziga Vértov. *Op. cit.*p 19). This is one of the factors that makes it difficult to put into words in what way our gaze is different from that of a machine.

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