Seeing Things: Making Sense of Life

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a reflection on the ideas and process involved in making a body of art
work which deals with singular experiences of looking and personal efforts to grasp meaning
through vision. These projects grew from my understanding that vision is subjective and
always mediated, both by technologies and by our bodies. Experientially, the theoretically
clear distinction between subject and object is confusing: the viewer is always part of the
picture, always implicated in the process of making sense. As a contemporary medium that
claims to offer direct records of the living world, digital video is both a compelling, but
inadequate, simulacra of the real thing and a fabulous realization of our dreams of visual
acuity.

Neither the written nor the visual work included here is intended to illustrate or explain
the other. Language and image work best in conversation with one another; both are powerful
and satisfying ways of playing with ideas and finding new knowledge. In Chapter 2, I explore
a number of different theories that have contributed to my thinking and to my making. This
theoretical work is not an explanation of the visual work. It is, rather, another way of thinking
through some of the same concerns.

Thesis Supervisor: Krzysztof Wodiczko
Title: Professor of Visual Studies
School is barren without good teachers.  
I am grateful that my time at MIT was rich with generous and challenging teachers:

Krzysztof Wodiczko  
Muntadas  
Allan McCollum  
Sherry Turkle  

and  

Giuliana Bruno

With their guidance I expanded my range and developed greater confidence in the process of making, and making sense of, art.

Thanks also to Natasha Myers, for sharing her love of thinking bodies and lively ideas.

And, most of all, thanks to  
Susie Nacco  
for her brilliant eyes.  
I cannot see life without them.
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Introduction
This thesis is a reflection on the ideas and process involved in making a body of work that deals with singular experiences of looking and personal efforts to grasp meaning through vision. These projects grew from my understanding that vision is subjective and always mediated, both by technologies and by our bodies. Experientially, the theoretically clear distinction between subject and object is confusing: the viewer is always part of the picture, always implicated in the process of making sense. As a contemporary medium that claims to offer direct records of the living world, digital video is both a compelling but inadequate simulacra of the real thing and a fabulous realization of our dreams of visual acuity.

Neither the written nor the visual work included here is intended to illustrate or explain the other. Language and image work best in conversation with one another; both are powerful and satisfying ways of playing with ideas and finding new knowledge. In Chapter 2, I explore a number of different theories that have contributed to my thinking and to my making. This theoretical work is not an explanation of the visual work. It is, rather, another way of thinking through some of the same concerns.
Collaboration is an important part of my work in terms of both process and intention. Collaboration requires trust, negotiation, and risk taking. It is founded on a respect and curiosity for "the other" and embeds in the work an interest in extending beyond your individual experience. My choice to work collaboratively is as much ethical as it is functional. I have worked closely with Susie Nacco on all but the very first video work considered here. While the original direction and motivation for the project may be mine, she and I develop the ideas through conversation. We produce the work together and install it together. Once we start shooting, Susie is the eyes behind the camera while I am the body in front. Susie’s role, however, is far more than cinematographer just as my role at that point is far more than that of an object to be looked at. Not only do we talk about how we want a shot to work and then look at and discuss each take as we go, while shooting there is a shared intelligence and ongoing dialogue between her words and my body, what my friend Natasha Myers calls "intra-animacy", a mutual animation between Susie and myself through the lens of the camera. Biologists use the term intra-animacy when attempting to describe the reciprocal relationship through vision between scientist and living specimen. As an artist, I take it up as a lively and instructive description of a process of collaboration, which, ideally, carries through to how a project is viewed and received.
I was never trained to make videos. In fact, I have never liked taking photographs. In my early 20's, before art school, I studied dance technique. I thought I wanted to be a professional dancer, but truly what I loved was the awareness which I was learning of my own body in movement - the craft of dancing. The technical art classes I took in undergraduate school were mostly in the fibers, which was my major. I studied complex weave structures and garment construction. Through weaving and sewing I leaned to pay attention to details and to materials. I have always loved the quality of mental and physical absorption which I can get into when doing that work. Working with textiles I also learned to think through ideas while making: projects developed in the tactile process of doing. I learned to think with both my mind and my body. This combination is still present in how I work today. For me, making videos is a both a physical and a cerebral process. Of course, I work directly with my body in front of the camera and that is very important. But the video itself is tactile: like a piece of cloth I must resolve the complex pattern of its structure and feel. The visual and the tactile come together for me not as a theory which I try to illustrate in my videos, but in the very foundation of how I experience and make art.
I was surprised one day when, during a studio visit, the visiting critic, Ronald Jones, told me that there was “very little air left” in my work. He said I was playing in a dangerous territory that he termed the “aesthetics of boredom.” This was not, he said, necessarily a bad thing; although I could tell it was not his favorite thing. He wanted more air, more stimulation. Ronald Jones went on to talk about minimalism, and developing my own iconography. He had interesting things to say but what really stayed with me was his comment about air. It helped me to articulate what is valuable to me in my videos. For me, the work is all about having space and time to think and feel- to breathe while looking. My work is not about aesthetics or boredom. It is about a very visceral experience of moving back and forth between yourself and an image of another. The rhythm of the movement is like breathing: familiar and repetitive but uniquely physical and always changing. It takes some time, and a certain willingness, to shift into the receptive mode necessary to take the work in.
My work asks a lot from viewers: it asks for a lot of time and a lot of attention. I like to think that, in return, the work gives the viewer a lot of space, room to move and room to think for them selves. Personally, I like work that gives me things to chew on but allows me to think and feel for myself. My favorite films are ones in which very little happens but a lot changes, like *In The Mood for Love* by Wong Kar-Wai (2002), *Goodbye Dragon Inn* by Tsai Ming-Liang (2003), and *Toute Une Nuit* (1982) by Chantal Akerman. The meaning in these films unfolds in space and time through the body of the viewer. Through this very bodily experience one can look and feel without being a voyeur. I experience this also in the very conceptual film work of Andy Warhol. Warhol’s film *Empire* records through one night the light changing across the Empire State Building. His film is rich with personal and cultural meanings that are tied both to the iconic architecture and to the physicality of time spent both recording and watching the image. The image and the time passing hold me in a way that allows me to feel and think in unexpected ways, to move outside of unfelt habits and into a more active habitation of the world.
Frames Of Mind

Three Essays
On Mediated Vision
Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and My Own Body
Psychoanalysis has been taken up effectively by many theorists of film and video art as a powerful tool for understanding the complex set of relationships between moving images of people and the audiences who watch them. As an artist working with images of my own body, psychoanalytic theory has been useful in unfolding the emotional, sexual and social pulls and implications at work in the visual experiences I create. It is one way for me to look beyond my own intentions and experiences in making an image and get at some of the subtler dynamics of how another person might experience the work. Psychoanalysis helps me to think about the relationships between the audience, the camera person, and myself as both performer in and director of the visual experience. Of course, like any powerful theory, psychoanalysis can be used carelessly. It is easy to throw around psychoanalytic terms and, in the process, suck all of the life and joy out of a work of art. Having experienced first hand the life-sucking potential of poorly applied psychoanalytic theory, I am compelled to understand it better for myself and see how it might serve me rather than oppress me as an artist. In that spirit, this essay will look at my work, and the work of a few other video artists, through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, in particular the important writings of Laura Mulvey and Rosalind Krauss.

In 1975 Laura Mulvey wrote her powerful, and often referenced, essay regarding the voyeuristic gaze in Hollywood cinema: “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. In this essay Mulvey argued that the formal structure and erotic codes of popular narrative cinema of that time reflected and reinforced the patriarchic gaze of male desire. As Mulvey sees it, film offers both the voyeuristic pleasure of watching another from a safe and removed distance and the narcissistic fascination of identifying with the image on the screen. The film image offers either the object of the viewer’s desire or the viewer’s idealized ego image. In either case the “object” on the screen is distinctly separate and other from the viewing “subject”. Further more, Mulvey argues, the viewer is given no chance to experience an “objective” view. Within the cinematic language of desire the viewer is always passive, while fed the illusion of being active, while the image on the screen is objectified. To make matters worse, the woman’s body, as object of desire, is most often captured and objectified by the frame of the camera and offered up to satisfy male desire.

No doubt Mulvey’s analysis of narrative Hollywood cinema was smart and timely. However, her specific critique of Hollywood cinema and her compelling description of the voyeuristic experience of a person watching images of a woman’s body framed and followed by a camera has been applied to both narrative and non narrative moving images alike, produced both within Hollywood and beyond. The specificity of Mulvey’s analysis was important and
the critique begins to fall apart when applied elsewhere. Still, the voyeuristic gaze which she described struck a powerful chord in the popular imagination and, for that reason alone, her writing can not be ignored when producing moving images of a woman's body.

So does any image of a woman's body offer a voyeuristic experience for the viewer? Does the female subject of a film or video necessarily become fantasy object to the viewing subject? Is the viewer of a moving picture always passive? The answerer, of course, to each of these questions is emphatically no. Desire is a compelling part of any lively, dynamic relationship, including the relationship between a work of art and an observer. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Mulvey argues for a "new language of desire" (p. 59) She is not denying or condemning visual pleasure, instead she is calling for a visual experience in which the pleasure in looking does not exalt the voyeuristic objectification of the female body. What I take from Mulvey's essay is not that moving images of women's bodies, whether in film or video, narrative or non narrative, are inherently or exclusively voyeuristic for the audience. The camera always offers a partial and subjective view of what ever it is framing. The power of the voyeur to see it all is a seductive illusion based on a 19th century ill-placed faith in vision. An image certainly can work to support that illusion and give the viewer the impression of being in control. But an image can just as well work to humor or challenge that illusion. Seduction and pleasure are always some part of good art. In video art, the camera certainly plays a crucial role in constructing the language and experience of desire between image and viewer. The more interesting question is not whether the viewer gets to be a voyeur, but whether he or she is made aware of his or her own desire and, at the same time, reminded of the inherent (and wonderful) subjectivity and partiality of any visual experience. This very experience of subjectivity is what enables the viewer to be engaged and responsible for what they see.

Images of my own body have been a central, visible subject in all of my video work. The first videos I made were recordings of odd, but simple, repetitive actions which I performed for the camera. In truth, I performed the actions first for myself, second for the camera person, and third for the camera. The action of slowly and carefully navigating the transition of my own body from one bathtub to another, or down a set of stairs, or around the circumference of a table absorbed me completely and was deeply physically and emotionally gratifying and meaningful. The actions were deliberately physically challenging. I could not think about anything else while I was controlling the momentum of my own weight to keep from cracking my own head on the concrete steps or lifting myself backwards onto the lip of the tub. I felt
vulnerable stretched out upside down on the stairs or crouched, butt-in-the-air, between two tubs. At the same time I felt strong and confident in my own physical ability and pleasantly focused by the effort. My absorption in my own activity prevented me from thinking much about how my actions looked through the camera. Since then I have become much more able to be both engaged in the doing and thinking about the framing. I have also, since then developed a very fruitful working relationship with Susie Nacco. Her part in the work and our communication together has made it more possible for me to be both "subject" and "object", and to question that all too neat divide.

From the beginning, the presence of the camera has also helped me to focus my attention and take my actions seriously. The camera, and the camera person, help to define a social space for my action and give it a significance that is outside my own personal experience. I feel that I can communicate something, even something interesting, through my own physical movement that I can not through any other means. Over years of practice I have developed a way of working with my own body that is a language of its own. I do not, however, want people to watch me directly. I understood my movement work as a way of producing material which I can then use to construct art out of. I want to make work which can be removed from the time and place of my physical being, that is not dependant on my

physical presence. I understand now that I want more control over the whole visual experience then I originally felt I had performing live. I want to make work that is about stepping back and looking, that includes contemplation as well as feeling. I needed to be able to frame and reframe the image of my body in action, to have more influence over the reception of the image. For me this required a certain distance and video has provided that distance. Rather then objectifying my own body, the camera gives me a visual tool with which to construct my own material language.

"Brontosaurus" (1995) by Sam Taylor-Wood and "Climbing Around My Room" (1993) by Lucy Gunning are both stunning works which, in different ways, undermine the voyeuristic experience of watching another’s moving body. In "Brontosaurus" we see a man dancing completely naked, probably in real time listening to some pounding dance club beat. In the video his movement has been slowed down to an intense undulation and set to classical music. The result is riveting. The dancer is completely absorbed in an almost ecstatic state and, even though he is facing the camera, you do not feel that he is performing for your pleasure. The open and unselfconscious display of his body together with the man’s complete absorption in his own physicality eliminates any opportunity to stand back as voyeur. Instead, his image pulls you in to a
powerful and unavoidable awareness of your own physicality. The fixed frame of the camera holds your gaze and your attention steady. The intensity and intimacy of the image leaves you vulnerable rather than voyeuristic.

In "Climbing Around My Room", the camera follows a woman in a red dress as she navigated and demarcates the perimeter of a room with her own body. The camera does track the woman's movements but the angle of the camera is strange and awkward: looking up from the floor at As the spectator you have no desire to identify with it's viewpoint. The woman's physical act of claiming the space feels far more dominant and powerful than the action of the camera. The spectator is left in awe of this woman's agility and resourcefulness. The camera angle in both videos leaves the spectator's viewpoint compromised while indicating that the performer cares little who is watching and has nothing to hide. In addition, the complete absorption of both subjects in their respective physical activities rejects any possibility of seeing either of them as passive subjects of our voyeuristic gaze.

Working with video has required that I work with another person. I can not get the shot I want by simple placing the camera and turning it on myself. Some artists have resolved this issue of control of the image by working with a video monitor which plays back in real time the image which the video camera is recording. Joan Jonas' "Vertical Roll", for example, involves her performing live in front of a camera (and an audience) and at the same time manipulating the live feed of her image on a video monitor. This piece effectively exposes the roll of the artist and the camera in constructing an image and calls on the audience to consider all of these layers of intervention and mediation. It is a way of challenging voyeuristic desire and asking your audience to be more actively engaged with what they are watching. I admire this work and share those concerns. But I can not watch a video monitor while rolling up-side-down or doing headstands. Besides, I have wanted to work with movement that is about being completely absorbed in all of my senses, not distracted by looking at and responding to an image of myself.

Artists who work with their own experiences or their own bodies are vulnerable to being seen as self absorbed or narcissistic. Video artists working with their own bodies have been particularly subject to this criticism. In fact, in 1975, Rosaline Krauss wrote an influential essay condemning the entire medium of video as "narcissistic". Like Mulvey, Krauss takes up Lacan's psychoanalytic "mirror stage" to explain the dynamic she is critiquing, this time the dynamic between artist and image. Lacan's "mirror stage" is a compelling model for the experience of a person gazing at an image of themselves, or even an image of another person with which they identify. According to Lacan, the
mirror represents the stage in a person’s psychological development when they form a sense of self by the simultaneous acts of looking at an image of themselves in the mirror and saying “I”. At this point the reflected/projected image is misrecognised as the “true” self and articulated through speech. The person’s ego is therefore founded on an experience of alienation, on a painful split between the image and the real. The split is particularly painful because the image of the body in the mirror always appears more perfect, more complete, than the lived body. Not surprisingly, the mirror image becomes the ideal ego projection, the person’s self image. With maturation, and psychoanalysis, the person undergoes another painful process of learning to perceive the rupture between image and self. That rupture can not be healed, according to Lacan, as the very self which we articulate through language is founded on that rupture. Instead, the person must grow from this very awareness of their own internal alienation.

Lacan’s analysis of alienation, especially as it is reframed by Julia Kristeva in “Strangers To Ourselves” (1991) is a powerful tool for understanding how we move out of narcissism and into an awareness of the other. The mirror, in his analysis, is not simply a passive screen for self absorption. It is a provocative tool for moving to the next stage of awareness. In my experience, images with which we identify are never that comfortable and the mirror, or camera image, can certainly function as a tool for critical self awareness. I explored this possibility in Personal Surveillance Practice where I inserted video monitors in place of mirrors in a public women’s bathroom. Two monitors screened prerecorded videos of myself practicing headstands and looking at myself in the mirror. The third monitor screened a live feed of the audience looking at the video monitors as if they were looking in the mirror. In this piece I was establishing a link between physical practices of self awareness, as in the headstand, and more optical practices like looking at yourself in the mirror. I was also interested in the pull between looking at another and looking at yourself. I chose the bathroom because of the inherent, but taboo, physicality and intimacy of the space.

In Krauss’ analysis, the artist who positions herself between video camera and video monitor is part of an endless narcissistic loop between the lived self and the ideal ego projection. Vito Acconci’s attempt to seduce his own image in his 1973 video “Air Time” is Krauss’ prime example of the downfall of video art. Without some rupture of the loop, as in Joan Jonas’ manipulation of the sync between camera and monitor in “Vertical Roll”, the artist and the viewer are caught, unawares, in a “collapsed present”.

1 Julia Kristeva’s reading of Lacan emphasizes the experience of alienation from the “other” as mirrored in our experience of alienation from our self.
(Krauss, p. 54), unable to perceive the unconscious rupture between subject and object. Krauss insists that an awareness of the finite experience time must enter the picture. The artist must exchange the “atemporality of repetition for the temporality of change” (Krauss, p. 58). I question Krauss’ refusal to see the potential for change within repetition. Repetition is, in my experience, a powerful, and very physical, means to perceive change over time. I suspect that Krauss, in her attachment to Formalism and Modernism, was reluctant to give any credence to registers of the body.

Krauss’ view of video art was limited even in the 70’s and a lot has changed since then. The medium certainly can not be categorically termed “narcissistic”. To do her justice, Krauss does offer 3 ways out of the narcissistic loop of video art, one of which she sees in the work of Joan Jonas. These positive exceptions, however, are not the bulk of her essay. Still, her point that some mechanism needs to be in place where by awareness of time or change can enter the picture is an important one.

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2 I will attend more to the question of time and repetition in the following essays.
Personal Surveillance Practice, 2004
Time, Deep Focus, and the Surveillant Gaze
While the fixed viewpoint presented by an artist or filmmaker should always be questioned, and the viewer should consider why this shot in particular is being presented, it remains up to us to make our own observations within the frame. To be left alone with a depth of field shot of a scene in which nothing conventionally exciting occurs might be said to be empowering given how we naturally attach meaning to our own observations. Such a viewing experience may require some adjustment on our part, especially as the eye is being put to work in different ways then called for by narrative film. Being encouraged to make our own observations and to become more observational in our reading of the images defies conventional narrative structures, or, as some may argue, rejoins it on another level, a more cerebral one.

Gregor Muir, 2004
“Chronochromie”
Since early in the 19th century, vision has held the dubious, although unrivaled, position as the most important and powerful of the senses. Vision, as symbolized by the “all seeing” eye, has represented everything from the power of god, to government, to science. Michael Foucault, in his greatly influential book *Discipline and Punishment*, developed compelling arguments about the systemic and authority driven desire to “see it all”, the relationship between the power to control another and the real, or imagined, power of vision. His theories were inspired, in part, by the structures of prisons, where guards are positioned centrally so as to be able to see everywhere while the prisoners are subjected to the impression of being constantly watched. Since then, great deal of interesting artwork and critical writing has been produced around the very important social and political aspects of the power of vision. In response to the dramatic increase in the use of surveillance equipment by authorities of all kinds, video surveillance has been a particularly hot topic. Surveillance cameras extend the scenario of power through covert vision beyond prisons and into everyday life of business, shopping and travel. In the last 20 years or so, numerous artists have used surveillance cameras to expose and critique this technology’s extensive and invasive use within our culture. This important work runs parallel to my work and the work of other artists who have picked up on the visual language of surveillance cameras in order to think about how this language influences how we make sense of both how and what we see.

In the late 1800’s early filmmakers made the first surveillance style films. Folks like the Lumiere brothers and Edison focused their cameras on the movement of modern life. Classic short films from that time like *Leaving the Lumiere Factory* and *The Arrival of a Train*, both made by the Lumiere brothers in 1895, recorded, un-staged, the busy movement which characterized the newly industrialized times. These films were called “actualities” and were among the first documentary films. They were also among the first to explore the rich territory between observation and surveillance. *Leaving the Lumiere Factory* documents the daily event of workers leaving their factory building. As they exit the factory they move towards and around the still camera, seemingly oblivious of its presence as they go about their daily life. *The Arrival of a Train* records the moment of a train arriving into the station. The short begins with the train coming into the station, moving almost directly towards the still camera. The position of the camera emphasizes the forward movement, and speed of the train. As the passengers disembarked from the train, the camera frames their busy and unselfconscious movement.

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1 See Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt's essay “The All-Seer: God’s Eye as Proto-Surveillance” in *CTRL [SPACE]*, p.16.
Both of these short, single take films record the spectacle of daily life. There is no editing, no character development, no climactic narrative, only the movement and activity involved in the event framed by the camera over a given period of time. Even the titles of the films to not specify who is leaving or what train is arriving; it is the action that is important, the verb not the noun. Neither the factory workers nor the train passengers are performing for the camera. They are simply going about their business, seemingly unaware that the camera is even there. Watching the films, your eyes move freely from someone’s gesture here to another’s over there. The still camera does not direct your gaze nor does it track the movement of a particular person. An individual’s departure from the frame is no dramatic moment, rather the inevitable result of their movement through life. The films are, as film theorist Tom Gunning describes it, the “cinema of instants, rather than developing situations” (Gunning, p.826). Part of the attraction of audiences to the “cinema of instants”, both then and now, is in the very physical pleasure of both watching and feeling life, in all of its familiar and mundane movements, unfold on the screen in front of you. You notice individual characters and events, a woman waves to a person off camera, a couple greet, but these human moments are short lived. The camera does not focus on them and the action moves off screen. Instead, the fixed frame of the camera focuses your attention on the overall activity and movement of time that is the background for the passing interactions. The interest and pleasure in watching actualities is in seeing and feeling the very physicality of life, and in knowing that, even as the camera has recorded that moment, life has moved on.

Actualities have, certainly, been an important inspiration in my own video work. I love watching them, especially those that focus on movement- crowds of people, speeding cars and trains. This movement is about the messy, busy spaces in-between, the transitions full of possibilities. I am less interested when the films settle into narratives. The stories distract me from the abstract visual interest and the films lose their wonderful quality of being at the same time cerebral and physical, philosophical and engaged with life as such. Ironically, I only wish the films were longer so I could have more time to look and get absorbed. I especially like how the cameras are right in the activity they are filming- in a crowd, on an open car, or under a moving train. I imagine that these early filmmakers were incredibly excited to test the limits and capabilities of their new technology: they did not hang back at a safe distance. Like much later artists in the 1960’s and 70’s, early film makers were experimenting with the medium and pushing the limits of the visual language, not to tell stories but to get more fully into life. I cannot watch the early actualities, in fact, without looking through the lens of conceptual film and video like that of Andy
Warhol and Michael Snow. In Warhol’s *Empire* (1964) I see a similar preoccupation with framing the movement of time, with asking the viewer to take the time to really look at everyday life. Warhol uses the long fixed frame of his camera to bring the Empire State Building alive as a cultural icon. His film employs active looking as a way to reflect on contemporary life. Michael Snow does not rely on a fixed frame in his films. He does, however, emphasize a single function of the camera with the effect of highlighting competing registers of time. The camera in *Wavelength* (1966), for example, is committed to a long slow zoom regardless of the narrative action. *Empire* and *Wavelength* also share a certain disregard for individual human experience. The cold, iconic rule of time is what I experience in these films. There is almost a mockery of human physicality and feeling. Time in these works is less something you live then something you think about.

In his 2004 essay “Chronochromie”, art critic Gregor Muir also loops back to the early work of 19th century actuality films and to the films of Andy Warhol when writing about the experience of time in contemporary video art. Muir writes about contemporary video artists who “through the removal of narrative in favor of fixed static shots that in many ways recall actualities” encourage the viewer to engage with the work through a form of “retinal surfing” (Muir, p.38). I like that term “retinal surfing”. It brings attention to a fluid and improvisational way of moving embedded in the act of looking. Muir sees influence for this way of working with moving images in the work of cinematographers who use long depth of field shots to draw a viewer into the frame. I myself have been powerfully influenced by the work of filmmaker Tsai Ming-Liang who uses long still shots of incredible depth and interest. His shots give me lots of time to get into the space and feel of the frame. There is not a lot of action in his films, but they are full of thought and feeling. There is always an important and meaningful narrative in his films but it does not drive the movement of the camera or dominate the visual experience. Tsai Ming-Liang’s framing of time gives space for individual life to un-fold; it does not negate the value of that life. Films like *What Time is it Over There* (2001) and *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003) leave me in a heightened state of awareness, an awareness that encompasses both the forward movement of time and the more unpredictable unfolding of an individual life.

Muir also suggests that the proliferation of surveillance footage has influenced artist’s tendency to work with deep focus and long still shots. “Abstract surveillance footage filters through our daily lives with increasing regularity. Artists in particular continue to acknowledge the connectivity between lens-based media and surveillance, as well as the ability of moving images to survey matters of the artist’s choosing.” (Muir, p.41) Surveillant style video is a way not only to focus on the unfolding of a particular
event, but, also, to look at the way we look. In Surveillant style video a viewer’s awareness of time and place is cognizant of both their own subjective interest and the limits of their visual range. While surveillance cameras are used extensively to extend the range of authority, the very form of the fixed frame undermines the illusion of the all seeing eye, which the camera is intended to emulate.

There are interesting similarities between the visual experience of watching an actuality and that of watching the video feed from a single surveillance camera. In both situations the cameras are fixed: unable to track a particular subject they frame indiscriminately whatever life happens to pass in front of their lens. The spectator of a still frame is able to visually wander within the limits of the frame and follow his or her own subjective interest and curiosity to engage in a kind of deep focus which takes in the physical depth and breadth of the screen space. In this way the viewer’s experience of looking is more active: they must engage their own curiosity and powers of observation in order to make sense of what they are seeing. They must literally enter the space of the frame rather then passively sit back and let the camera do the work. Like the actualities, surveillant video feed, be it real or stylized, inhibits the development of a cohesive narrative. The viewer cannot follow a story when the actions continue off screen, unseen and unrecorded. The visual field of the surveillant image is accessible but unquantifiable and uncontainable. The panning, zooming camera tricks the viewer into thinking you can see everything, or at least everything important. With a fixed frame you are continually reminded that your view is both subjective and partial. As Aruna D’Souza observes in her essay “Candid Camera” on the work of Lorna Simpson, the viewer is more likely to become aware of his or her own visual curiosity and desire when the camera does not do the looking for them. “Here, the lack of narrative continuity across the thirty-one screens compels viewers to acknowledge their own desire or curiosity as motivating their mobile glances across the monitors.” (D’Souza, p.89)

In 31 Simpson arranges 31 small TV screens in the pattern of a calendar month. Each screen plays video footage from the daily life of a single woman shot, surveillant style, with multiple fixed cameras. Aruna D’Souza considers in this essay the difference between the voyeuristic gaze and the surveillant gaze.
“Simpson replaces the voyeur’s gaze with the surveillant gaze, such that the fixed frame can be read as a kind of mechanized security camera, which picks up activities indiscriminately and surreptitiously.” (D’Souza, p. 89) Simpson rejects the classic film techniques of close-ups and tracking shots that allow the viewer to identify with the gaze of the camera for a more anthropological frame that does not prioritize one image over another. The fixed camera refuses the conventional aligning of the viewer’s gaze with that of the camera that Laura Mulvey critiqued in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. The multiple screens. This is a technique shared by neorealist and feminist filmmakers, most notably Chantal Akerman in her fixed frame, extended takes of everyday life in Jeanne Deitman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975) filmed by Babette Mangolte. D’Souza suggests, however, that Simpson’s surveillant language of multiple fixed views arranged like a calendar highlights the impersonal logic of time, which dictates the rhythms of all of our lives. In brief, unexpected, breaks in the established visual pattern, D’Souza sees Simpson “pointing out the way in which our lives exceed, in those rare moments of pure sociability, the discipline that otherwise structures our everyday existence.” (D’Souza, p.31) The woman in 31 is seen to break free from the overarching rhythm of everyday life, or to find her own rhythm within it. The work of both Akerman and Simpson offers a feminist, and even heroic, view of subjectivity within the daily structure of time. Their work also emphasizes the fundamental physicality of embodied life.

3 See Ivoile Margulies’ Nothing Happens, 1996, for a full discussion of the work of Chantal Akerman.
**Objects in the Mirror are Closer then they Appear** is a single channel video projected large, like a film, and shares the visual language of both standard surveillance cameras and of early "actualities". The images are black and white and relatively low resolution. The video itself is a montage of the footage from four cameras shooting simultaneously and edited together in a regular sequence: three seconds each of camera 1, then 2, 3, and 4, then 3 seconds of all four images in a single frame. The editing is the direct result of an industry standard quad mixer and is immediately recognizable as such. Occasionally, there is a brake in the switch from one camera feed to the next and the image flickers. The automatic and rhythmic switching from one image to the next has the effect of a metronome, marking time with a regularity that is both mesmerizing and disconcerting. The constant changing of the image undermines any desire to follow a particular image; your eye is continually trying to catch up to the new visual information. The four surveillance cameras frame views through the 3 car mirrors and out the front windshield. The cameras are fixed in their respective positions on the car and record whatever street activities the car happens to pass by as it moves through city. There is no tracking, no zoom. Activities appear for a time in one or another of the frames and then move out of view. Periodically a person seen through the front windshield will reappear in the side view mirror. None of the activity, however, is given any particular importance by the driver or the cameras. The driver is clearly following a familiar rout, not looking for any one or any place. In two frames you can see the driver, complicating any desire to identify the viewpoint of the cameras with the viewpoint of the driver. The cameras appear to function alternately as extensions/reflectons of the driver's vision and of the car itself. After 7 minutes the video, at a seemingly arbitrary point, loops back to the beginning in an endless projection. The dominant impression from the video is a surprisingly physical one of marking time and of vision mediated and framed by layers of technology.
Diagram of Camera Positions for *Objects in the Mirror are Closer Than They Appear*
Turning To Biologists
For A Model Of Vision
Objects in the Mirror are Closer Then They Appear grew out of time I spent in my car commuting from my home to my studio at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The rout I took each day was the same, with occasional deviations for errands, and wove through the tight maze of Somerville and Cambridge streets. It took approximately half an hour to get from my house to MIT, depending on traffic. While driving I passed through an increasingly familiar urban landscape of closely built multy-family homes, clusters of shops, and industrial areas. I drove to MIT in the morning and back home in the late afternoon or evening, following a common commuter pattern. The traffic was often dense and hectic, moving at an infuriatingly slow pace. The tension and frustration of drivers, myself included, was often palpable. At other times the familiar rhythm of the drive could lull me into a reverie.

While driving I began to get interested in the layers of images and variously mediated views I could see through my windows and mirrors. I began to see the images in the side mirrors as small movies embedded in the view ahead. Watching actual movies I began to notice how frequently car mirrors are used as a montage technique. I also became increasingly aware of the complex of perspectives I
needed to assimilate in order drive safely. City driving is full of unexpected cars and people and bicycles cutting into traffic from all sides. I am constantly checking my mirrors. This effort struck me as a rather mechanized metaphor for the psychological effort of trying to make sense of diverse points of view and come up with a way forward... The experience of driving felt to me both automatic and highly demanding of my attention and physical sensitivity. I had felt this combination in other more physical and very repetitive activities. But in driving the sensation was pretty much all originating in my eyes, in what I was seeing.

Thinking there might be a piece here Susie and I began testing some ideas with our good 3-chip video camera. I drove while Susie tried out different shots. This arrangement was awkward as looking through the camera, or at the camera display, while driving made Susie sick. Also this camera was too large and cumbersome to fit where we needed it and I wanted to take multiple simultaneous shots. After a series of unsatisfactory results we decided to try little surveillance cameras fixed in place. They were relatively inexpensive so I bought 4 cameras and a quad to mix the 4 video feeds into a single image. These cameras were crude and certainly not designed for what we were going to use them for. The irises could not hold steady in varying light so the images were constantly going in and
out of focus. We also set the cameras very close to what we wanted to focus on, much closer then they were designed for. The result was that the images the cameras produced were grainy and flickering. All of these “glitches” were welcome interference. We did not want a slick, seamless view. The texture and the erratic movement of the video image gave a palpable physicality to the video that resisted the mechanical nature of the whole viewing apparatus. The quad further complicated and the image, adding another layer of interference and rhythm you could feel as well as see. The quad also simplified the task of maintaining the simultaneity of the 4 video feeds.

We attached the cameras inside the car using clamps and Velcro straps. On an earlier project we had worked out a similar method for fixing multiple cameras in a rowboat. The complete system for the car included the 4 cameras, the quad, a small video display, and a power converter to change the car's DC electricity to the AC the equipment needed. And then there were all the cables. The car was a mess with wires and components. You could not open the side door or move around too much without disrupting one or another of the cameras. I drove around for weeks with my car outfitted this way.
At first I did not want to record the images I was gathering while driving. I wanted people to watch the images live on the small display. But after testing that idea I decided the result was not what I was looking for. Having people in the car was far more social and far less controlled then I wanted. I was more interested in constructing a video that was about the physicality of time and of mediated vision then in the whole live interaction with me and with the hybrid car/camera/display. So we replaced the video display with a video recorder and began recording the images generated by the cameras and the quad. Each day when I left for MIT and when I returned home I would turn on the system and adjust the cameras. Once I started driving I would just leave everything running and not mess with it. Afterwards I would watch the tapes on my computer. Gradually I got a feel for the more interesting parts of my rout and for the different effects of time of day and weather. Sunny days produced images that were too overexposed and lacking in detail. Heavy traffic meant I moved too slowly and the images were too static. I found I liked the speed of traffic in the mid afternoon. School buses and trucks were out on the street then too, which I liked.
I decided not to alter the editing of the surveillant quad. I wanted to retain all of the marks of that system. Instead I chose one continuous length of tape with details I liked. I selected a length that was long enough to get a feel for but short enough to remain a fragment. I did not want to viewer to get the sense that they could “see it all” if they watched long enough. And yet everything important was also there in 7 minutes.
I want a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision again, because we need to reclaim that sense to find our way through all the visualizing tricks and powers of modern sciences and technologies that have transformed the objectivity debates. We need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate colour and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name. So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment, and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibilities. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. This is an objective vision that initiates, rather than closes off, the problem of responsibility for the generativity of all visual practices. Partial perspective can be held accountable for both its promising and its destructive monsters. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies of the relations of what we call mind and body, of distance and responsibility, embedded in the science question in feminism. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. In this way we might become answerable for what we learn how to see.

Donna Haraway, 1991
"Simians, Cyborgs, and Women"
I hear Donna Haraway's words as a call to visual artists as much as they are a call to scientists. The understanding that vision is always partial and always subjective is at the very core of a responsible feminist and critical approach in both practices. Recently, I have begun to notice how deeply scientists, and biologists in particular, are concerned with vision. If what we are able to see, and how we make meaning of what we see, is fundamental to what we think we "know", then the very usefulness and validity of the study of biology depends in a large part on how we understand the relationship between vision and knowledge. Not only do biologist's data and theories often rely on both human vision and all sorts of tools for enhanced seeing, but also biologists constantly grapple with the limitations of vision. Biologists have a very compelling reason to try to make sense of the tools and practices of vision. The theories, which they are forming around vision and the relationship of vision to other senses and to knowledge, are enormously valuable to me as a visual artist. I expect this to be a very rich area of exploration and inspiration to me for years to come. In this essay I will touch on a few of the approaches to vision put forward by biologist that have informed me while making Sight Line.

In her recent book Making Sense of Life Evelyn Fox Keller examines the implications of contemporary methods within biology to image, model, and otherwise make sense of the living world. Of particular interest to me is her analysis of video microscopy. Keller points out that direct observation has long been an essential tool for learning in the life sciences. The microscope, developed in the 1800's, dramatically extended scientists' range of vision. Nowhere was this more important than in the study of cells and embryos. Through microscopes scientists were able to observe the movement of live cells. In fact, some of the earliest films made were of the movement of cells seen through microscopes. Film enabled scientists to record, study and share their observations of cellular movement.¹

There was, however, a clear limit to the visual capacity of early microscopes. "Particularly for animal cells, the cell membrane marked the edge of visibility. This impasse arose in part from the limits of the microscopes resolving power, in some cases from the opacity of the cell membrane, but more seriously by far from the fact that the interior structures of the cell are inherently colorless, translucent, and hence all but invisible. Seeing beyond the membrane of animal cells required hardening the cell, cutting it into thin

¹ See Hannah Landecker's essay "Cellular Features: Microcinematography and Film Theory" for an excellent look at the history of early film and the study of cells. See also her fabulous video News About Cells on the same subject.
slices, and immersing it in dyes and stains that would heighten the contrast of the internal structures so as to render them visible.” (Keller, p.214) By fixing, slicing, and staining cells biologists could look at them increasingly closely. However, even electron microscopes, developed in the 1950’s, did not help scientists to watch cellular life in motion. In fact, Keller argues that the incredible detail of these fixed images possible with electron microscopes drew cellular biologists away from the practice of looking at living things and away from what they could learn from observing living things. Scientists were not able to observe cellular process or change over time, which is foundational to life. “Biologists could see more but they could no longer watch.” This is a very important distinction. Watching involves time and active change, liveliness, on the part of what you are looking at. It also involves a different commitment of time on the part of the watcher and a different set of visual and interpretive skills than looking at still images. The return of biologists’ interest to live movement is exciting and gratifying to me. The effort on the part of scientists to find an effective and responsible way to watch and record the movement of another living body reflects my own efforts and concerns.

Both Landecker and Keller argue that the move away from observing live cell function was a great loss. In order to begin to really make sense of embryonic development and cellular function biologists need to observe living cells. Recently, as a result of new developments in technologies in both visual enhancement and digital recording and processing biologists have a renewed interest and ability to observe living specimens. In the last 10 years scientists have developed technologies that have enabled them both to observe live cells and record these observations for study and for others to witness. These imaging techniques are fascinating to me for the issues they raise about the practice and implications of observing living bodies.

With recumbent DNA techniques and photosensitive molecules, scientists can introduce markers into areas of live cells they want to highlight. Live cell function can then be observed for a limited period of time through video enhanced confocal microscopy and other more sophisticated methods which are being developed. Computer and digital video technologies are then used to make these images “readable”: computers amplify differences in light, reduce visual “noise”, and then stack all the information to produce a three-dimensional or time lapse image of the specimen. The short video clips image cellular life in visual depth and time. However, what the scientists and others ultimately watch is a video made up of a series of highly enhanced digital still images taken at regular intervals over a period of time. The stills may cover a period of 40 minutes compressed into 40 seconds. The images are intensely mediated and that is what interests me.
about them. In her essay “Reconfiguring Vision in BioImaging” Natasha Myers suggests that perhaps these images tell us more about the system of visualization then about the subject. Reading Donna Haraway, Natasha writes: “Biological images might be said to reveal less about their objects of interest, then the complex web of agencies involved in their production. Instead of providing objective, straightforward data, biological images might be more useful as tools to locate researchers on a map of their relationships with biologically defined objects”. (Myers, p.22) The same could be said about images of bodies in an art context: the images I produce are less about the subject, then the “complex web of agencies involved in their production” and in their visual reception. The layers of mediation are what form the image and inform the viewer. In order for the viewer to become aware of the complexity and potential voyeurism in watching another body, the viewer must feel all of those layers of mediation.

Keller is convinced that for biologists watching living cells is vital to the understanding of cellular development. She notes that “observations of living systems have contributed to a move away from a perspective of strict genetic determinism” (Keller, p.231). She quotes scientist Roger Tsien as saying “When you can see their individual biochemical signals, you find that different cells are often very individualistic, almost like wild animals, or people” (Keller, p.226) Her argument that in order to understand something living you must see it in action is compelling. Apparently, cells do not all function alike regardless of a shared DNA sequence. Not surprisingly Keller’s attitude resonates with my own experience. Much of my own video work is founded on the belief that individual movement is uniquely expressive and meaningful. The subtleties and differences of processes of change can certainly be best understood through observing moving images of a live body. Non the less, the faith that seeing is believing needs, again, to be questioned. Keller reminds us that the experience of watching a video of a living cell is not at all the same thing as watching a “real” live cell. The images are compelling and it is easy to forget all of the processes of mediation which have gone in to making this cell visible to the human eye. “Even though the image actually seen by human viewers (whether by those looking through the microscope or by those who have access to it only in its recorded form) is the result of an elaborate system of computer processing and reconstruction, it can be so compelling that viewers have the impression they are looking directly at the specimen in its naked reality.” (Keller, p.223) Through DVD’s and Quick Time video software, scientists are able to share their video clips of inter-cellular dynamics with both specialists and non-specialists alike. People like myself, who have no background in biology, can visit a web site and watch these video clips on their personal computers. According to Keller, we can watch a video of a cell during mitosis and feel
as if we are directly observing the real thing. Actually, in all of the videos I have watched I have always been acutely aware of the lack of continuity of the image and of the very limited range of my vision. Through the rhythm of the spliced, still images I am very physically aware of the technology that has filled the gap of time and distance between me and the cell. And I am glad for that. I do not want the image to be smoother or better. The honest roughness of it is a welcome change from the ever more polished images of high definition video. I like these cell clips because they remind me of early film actualities. Audiences both then and now don’t actually think the films are the real thing, but they are moved by them.

So what does all this about biology and live cell imaging have to do with art making and my art in particular? For me the answer is simple. The questions that biologists are asking about the practice of visual observation of live cells are very relevant to my own practice of making and presenting videos of moving bodies. I too feel that it is very important to look at life in motion. And the concerns about how an image is produced and mediated by various technologies is of as much concern to me as it is to biologists. The fixed frame of the biologist’s lens is not unlike the fixed frame of the surveillance camera or of my video camera. The visual similarities of these different kinds of images and the ways in which they demand that the viewer become physically and intellectually engaged in order to make sense of them. Biologists are asking important questions about how to tease apart the twist of vision and knowledge, how to make full use of our partial and subjective vision, and most of all how to be responsible for how we make sense of what we see. As an artist I am also asking these questions and am glad for the company. I am also struck by the shared fascination and desire to look at moving living things. But part of what drives them, and me, is simply the desire to see: to see more and see better. As if that would make it any easier to make sense of life, when in fact, life is in the effort, in the difficulty of grasping subjective and partial vision. According to Donna Haraway, “optics is a politics of positioning”. It is therefore deeply connected to the physical location and sense of our embodied selves. Video images of other bodies are dislocated and respatialized. Through engaging in the physical/ optical effort to make sense of them, we situate ourselves more fully in life. This practice of watching is what I am interested in developing with my own video work.
The word *trope* comes from the Greek word *tropos* and means both a figure, or turn, of speech and a physical turn. A heliotrope is a plant which turns towards the sun. Following the intertwining of the physical and the lingual, Deluze has offered the compelling possibility of understanding a trope as a figure which pulls us in, literally turning us towards an idea. Considered this way, a trope is a physical engagement as much as it is a linguistic and intellectual one. Whether in the form of a word or an image, a trope acts on our minds, and our bodies, as a lure, drawing us around to a new and unexpected perspective.

Imagine for a moment the physical feeling of dancing a waltz with someone you love. The rhythm is lovely, but the turns are exhilarating. The turns are the figures of seduction: every turn draws you closer together, pleasantly disorienting and disarming. Everyone falls for the sweeping, fluid turn: it leaves you open to feeling. Biologists' images of live cells have been just such a trope for me: a visual metaphor which has pulled me to consider seeing in a whole new light. *Sight Line* positions the viewer between the trope of the eye and the trope of the cell, turning them back and forth in a visual and conceptual dance between the two images. The woman's voice and her words offer a path for this dance until the viewer has found their own voice and rhythm in the looking.
Sight Line consists of two equally sized videos playing opposite each other in a dark room. The images are back projected onto freestanding screens. The screens are made of theater scrim supported by a delicate steel frame. The images are each 3’ high by 4’ wide and are positioned 6’ apart, facing each other. A visitor can stand in the space between the screens and look back and forth from one image to the other. You cannot see both images at the same time. The space between the two screens quite intimate and is comfortable for only one or two people at a time. The video image on the left is of a single human eye. The eye fills the screen and the frame of the camera cuts off the rest of the face. The image of the eye is in full color and all of the details are readily visible. This is clearly an active, working, eye, not posing for the camera or pretending to be all seeing. Between regular blinks the pupil moves back and forth, looking for or at something: watching. Reflected in the black of the pupil is some interior space. You can make out depth, a figure, and possibly a camera. The video plays in a continuous loop.

The video image on the right is a split screen of two almost identical images of cells during mitosis. The images are black and white and pixilated. The video is not fluid but jumps rhythmically from one still image to the next. This video is also looped but is much shorter then the other so they are not in sync. Independent of both videos is a sound track of a woman’s voice, carefully modulated, describing first one and then the other video. Often it is ambiguous which video she is referring to.
Iain Mattaj produced the video of live cells used in this piece while working with Peter Askjaer at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg, Germany. The video is of c. elegan cells during mitosis and was uploaded on the web in conjunction with their scientific research paper: “Ran GTPase Cycle and Importins α and β Are Essential for Spindle Formation and Nuclear Envelope Assembly in Living Caenorhabditis elegans Embryos”. I found this video clip on the web site www.cellnucleus.com and subsequently asked Peter Askjaer and Iain Mattaj for permission to screen it in the context of my art installation. Both scientists were very receptive and helpful. The video in this installation is exactly as I found it on the web. I made no alterations. I am deeply grateful for both Peter Askjaer and Iain Mattaj’s generosity and interest.
Blurring the Boundaries, Literally
In *Mimesis and Alterity* Michael Taussig develops a concept of “optical tactility” where in the body and visual perception are together involved in making sense. Taussig suggests that our mimetic ability is “the nature that culture uses to create a second nature. The faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other”. (xiii) Understood in this way mimesis is a coming closer, a resembling. It is a movement that loops and entangles and obscures the distinction between self and other. The miming involved in learning a new dance movement is like this. Through repetition and mimicry you assimilate and transform a movement gesture, finding a resonance between the source of the movement and your own body, your own self. Your eyes and your body work together to reflect and refract the other, to become something new. I seek this visual and physical movement in both the making and viewing of my video work.
I am reluctant to analyze the mouth images at this point as they have yet to unfold and take form. Susie and I shot this material relatively quickly, one evening when the light was beautiful in our studio. We had been arguing about how to start a new piece. Finally, I said I wanted to try something with her reading glasses. She wanted to work with my mouth. I went to get the glasses, sat down in front of the camera and we started shooting. We were sitting very close with the video camera between us. I showed her my mouth through the lens layers of the glasses and the camera. It required a lot of care and concentration to hold my head still and move the glasses slowly across my mouth. Susie adjusted the focus and gave my directions: head up, glasses down. At one point we decided to try shooting with Susie moving the glasses. When we reviewed the video on the computer we were both struck by how incredibly different the sequence looked when I was moving the glasses then when Susie moved them. In the first my mouth looked active and engaged as I unconsciously shifted my mouth in concentration. In the sequence when Susie moved the glasses my mouth was still, unexpressive. You could see that that mouth was not part of a body engaged in making the image but passively being looked at. The two images looked and felt completely different and
the primary difference was in how active the "subject" was. We were amazed, and gratified, by how visible this was.

My friend Natasha called the mouth video "monstrous" when she watched it. Knowing her I understood her comment as a positive one. The mouth made her uncomfortable. She could recognize it but still it had a life of its own that could not be controlled or reduced by her gaze. The image resisted both objectification and identification. By blurring the boundaries between self and other the mouth became monstrous.
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