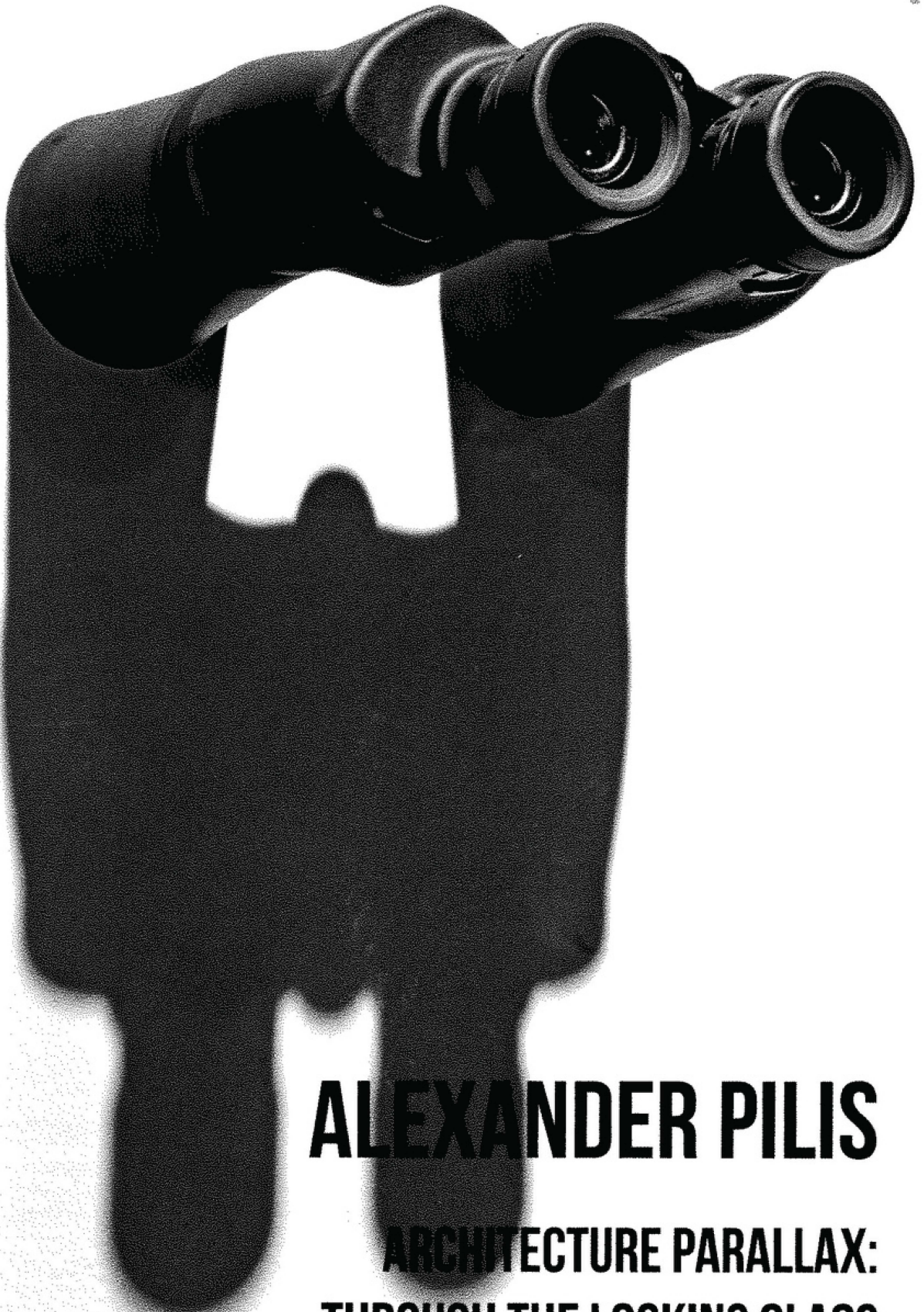
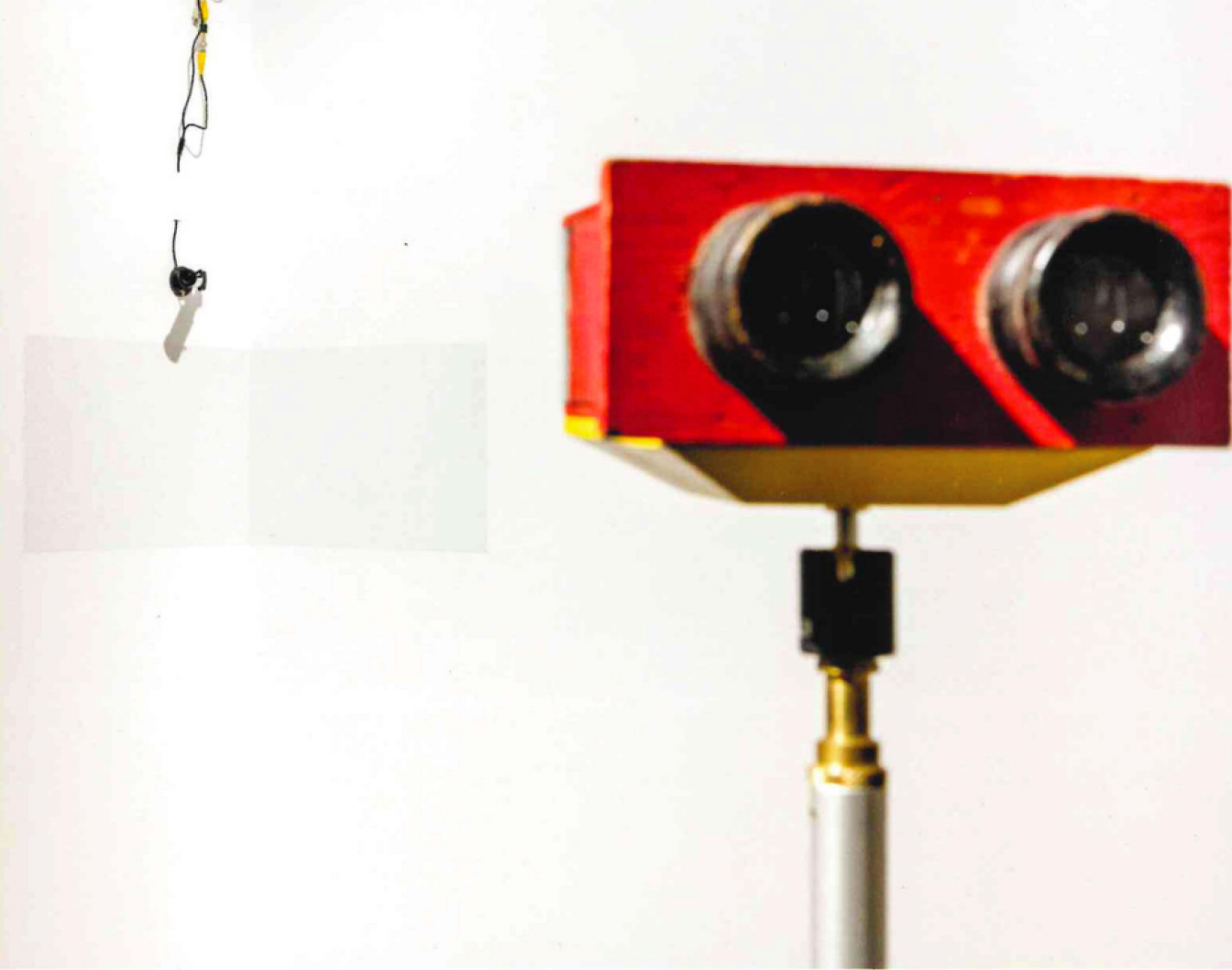


**July 2 to August 30, 2015**  
**Koffler Gallery**  
**Curator: Mona Filip**



**ALEXANDER PILIS**

**ARCHITECTURE PARALLAX:  
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS**





# VISION OF DIFFERENCE, DIFFERENCE OF VISION

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Vision is a loaded concept. Sighted people may take vision for granted much of the time. We move about in our everyday worlds without stopping to consider exactly how the human body navigates space. Of course all the senses have important roles to play, but historically, Western culture has been especially concerned with sight. Consider the visual spaces of the astronomer, the biologist, the medical technician, the artist, the architect, the cartographer, the security guard, the drone operator or the Instagram user and all the technologies of vision that attend such practices. Telescopes, microscopes, cameras, canvases, blueprints, maps and screens are deeply embedded in the structures that comprise our socio-political landscapes. The ways that cultures conceive of vision have deep material impacts on experience.

Alexander Pilis examines vision critically. His works are designed to raise viewers' awareness of their own vision as an active process. The work is postmodern in the sense that it has absorbed certain aspects of modernist visuality – the grid, the cube, minimalism and self-reflexive observation – in order to reconfigure them for a contemporary point of view. Or rather, I should say, points of view. Pilis' exhibition *Architecture Parallax: Through the Looking Glass*, installed at the Koffler Gallery, reveals the underlying premise that points of view are always plural; there is no singularity of vision because parallax is always in play, even within a single body.

The Collins English dictionary defines parallax as “an apparent change in the position of an object resulting from a change in position of the observer.” The relative positions of objects seem to shift as the viewer moves in space. Parallax has been employed in architecture and astronomy since the time of the ancient Greeks, but it also inheres in sighted human bodies that correlate two sets of spatial information gathered by two eyes. Outstretch your arm and hold up a finger. Close one eye and then the other. You will likely see that the finger shifts location relative to the background, because you are looking at it from two different locations: your right eye and your left eye. Our seemingly stable world is actually comprised of shifting points of view. Parallax is the system by which human bodies produce an illusion of coherent visual space. What is most important for Pilis is that difference resides at the core of visual perception. “I am different from you,” he says, “and you are different from me, but we accept and understand that because difference is a part of each of us.”

Pilis' piece titled *ster·e·op·sis* directly reveals parallax in action. Stereoscopes make use of parallax to create three-dimensional images. This stereoscope, however, confounds expectations in order to bring the act of vision into the viewer's awareness. Because the device is explicitly pointed toward the corner of the room, one expects it to act like binoculars that will magnify the view. Instead, what one sees is an enclosed chamber. Pilis emphasizes the space inside the stereoscope; a tiny gallery within the gallery. Furthermore, while stereoscopes typically combine two-dimensional images to create an illusion of depth, this one displays two three-dimensional ball bearings that visually combine to appear as a single – somewhat monumental – solid sphere.

But what of the corner? Something subtle is there to see: two close-up images of the wall that have been magnified and installed where the two walls meet. These images reveal

the textures and shadows in the seemingly smooth surface. Says Pilis, “It becomes like a landscape, with mountains and ravines.” Viewed from behind the stereoscope, the images appear as rectangular shades of grey that demarcate the corner as an architectural space. Viewers can employ parallax to combine the spaces of the tiny gallery within the stereoscope and the larger gallery in which they are standing. Use one eye to look into the box, and the other eye to look at the wall; the sphere will appear to be floating in the corner of the room.

While all this is taking place, the viewer is on camera. Pilis wants us to take note of how we see, but also to be aware that seeing is an active performance, a contingent process that we undertake in order to construct the spaces we inhabit. In this space, viewers are actors. The four corners of the room are equipped with cameras that send live, wireless feeds to transmitters that in turn feed small monitors housed within another sculptural installation titled *anyeverything*. This piece consists of cubes within cubes, constructed harmoniously according to the architectural principle of the Golden Rule. Tiny monitors reflect on nested glass surfaces, creating a fractured, virtual space that confounds conventional points of view. The cameras capture images of viewers from behind, or from the side, as we engage the piece. “You see yourself,” says Pilis, “but it is not a day-to-day image.” People tend to interact physically with this work; moving around it slowly, waving their arms, striking poses, and trying to locate themselves and others in the disorienting, ephemeral space.

Both *ster·e·op·sis* and *anyeverything* present spaces within spaces, chambers that draw awareness to the larger chamber of the gallery and one’s own perceiving body moving about, always in relation to others. This perceptual awareness is extended in *passe-murailles*, for which binoculars have been embedded in the north and south facing walls of the gallery. When peering into the binoculars, the viewer’s gaze literally passes through the walls and one is presented with live views outside the building. Each “image” has been carefully composed. On the north side, a series of overlapping grids appears, produced by layers of chain-link fencing and the front-yard gates of nearby houses. People and cars sometimes pass through this view, moving along the street that runs parallel to the north face of the building. On the south side, the binoculars point toward a brick wall, bisected by a strip of flashing. As the sun moves across the sky it casts angular, mobile shadows across the stable, architectonic features of the building. The world is never static, and these seemingly fixed, formal views are comprised of constant change and motion.

In a sense, Pilis has turned the white cube of the gallery inside out. All the objects in the space point to the structure of the gallery as an object. While modernist forms abound, the aesthetics of the exhibition are not located in the objects, so much as in the viewers’ own sensorial acts of observing. Political and philosophical reconfigurations of Western visuality emerge through this embodied engagement, and the difference inherent to parallax challenges modern notions of vision that date back to the Renaissance.

Art historian Caroline Jones describes a postmodern understanding of the Renaissance roots of Western optical theory, “[T]he vanishing-point perspective system that was developed in Italy during the Renaissance is itself seen as an abstraction, a ‘disembodiment’ to the extent that a single mastering view is substituted (as ‘real’) for the complex, situated, scanning, sampling, body-bound physiology of binocular vision.”<sup>1</sup> The illusions of spatial depth produced by linear perspective rationalized vision by presupposing a single viewer, standing at a fixed vantage point. This technique emerged along with the Humanist notion of man’s mastery over the natural world and

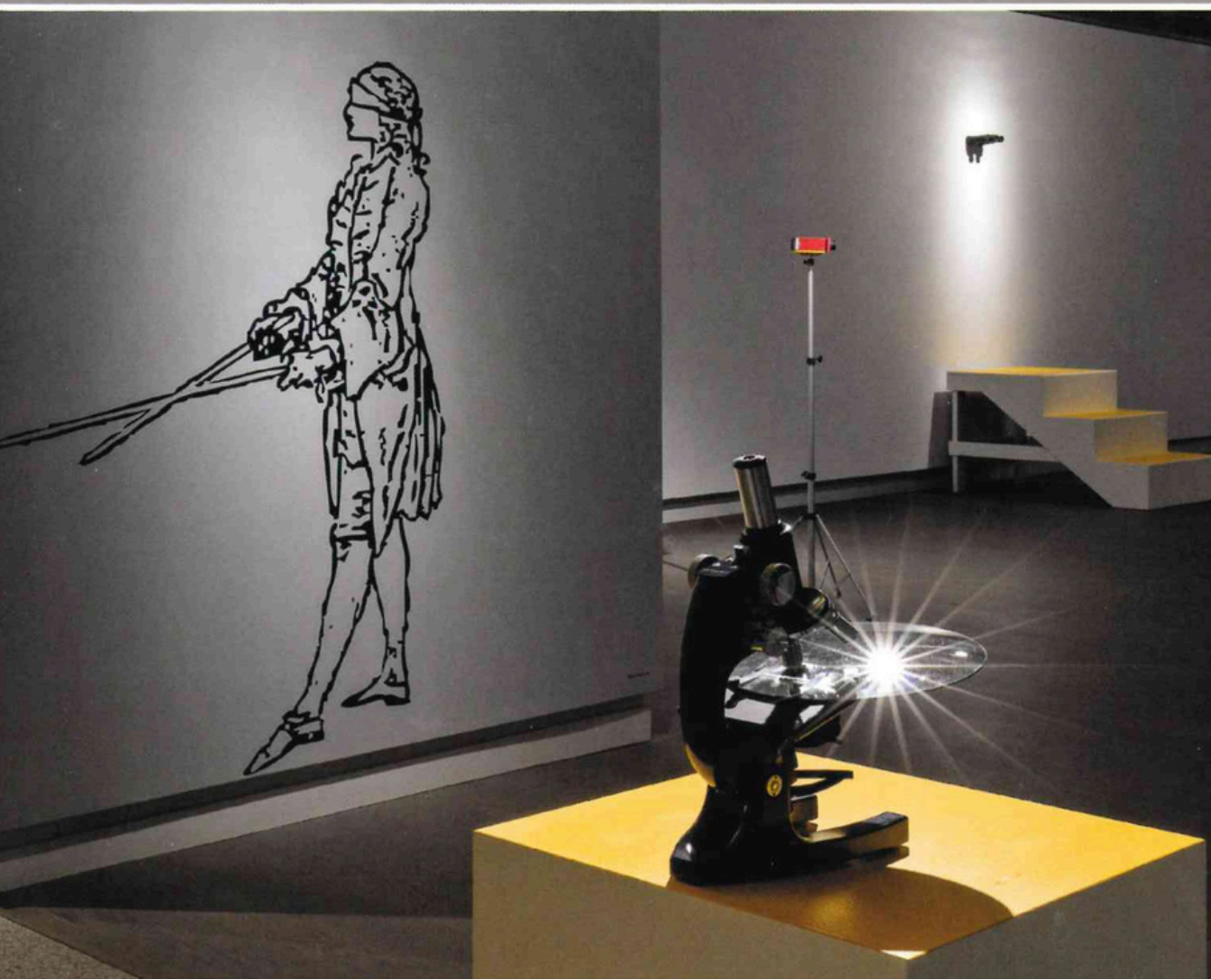














it fed into the Enlightenment's objective visibility of the scientific observer. Clement Greenberg's twentieth-century modernism further abstracted vision as a timeless and transcendent phenomenon. Feminist art historians such as Jones and Rosalind Krauss have challenged such modern notions of vision by re-situating sight within the messy, temporal, lived contingencies of bodies interacting in space and time. Pilis' approach to vision intersects with these postmodern, feminist critiques.

Pilis cites two key influences on his practice: the patriarchal authority of architecture school, and his experiences living in the metropolis of São Paulo. "When I went to architecture school" he explains, "it was a man's discipline. That's changing now." Pilis notes that at his school, women entering the program tended to draw from their own, situated perspectives, but their drawings soon conformed to the omniscient and elevated viewpoints reinforced by the discipline. The city of São Paulo, by contrast, confounded any sense of a detached, objective point of view. "Built without a master plan, the city offered no familiar orientation. As you moved about the city the depth of field collapsed and you were always in the frame. You couldn't go further than the immediacy."

Pilis went on to embrace the notion of parallax in his practice as a means of critiquing authoritative notions of vision in Western culture. His works, which he refers to as "mediators," facilitate visual experiences enacted through the bodies of viewers, and everyone's vision is different. Pilis notes that in his exhibitions people are often drawn to share their optometric experiences. As a public space, the gallery becomes a context for relational understandings of perception through difference.

The self-reflexive function of the art gallery was brought into cultural awareness by Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades in the early twentieth century. A urinal placed in a museum makes the viewer think about how the gallery functions as a special kind of space for visual contemplation. Pilis' works *(dis)appearing* and *step of two* both reference Duchamp; specifically, Duchamp's interest in chess. For *(dis)appearing*, Pilis constructed a small chamber in which models of chess pieces designed by Duchamp appear and disappear before the viewer's eyes. *step of two* consists of a microscope through which one may examine a blurry negative of Duchamp moving chess pieces on a glass table, shot from below.

In a film made in 1963, Duchamp explained that it was not the mathematics of chess that interested him but the "logic and mechanics. Mechanics in the sense that the pieces move, interact, destroy each other; they're in constant motion and that's what attracts me. Chess figures placed in a passive position have no visual or aesthetic appeal. It's the possible movements that can be played from that position that make it more or less beautiful."<sup>2</sup> As with Pilis' art, Duchamp's chess set is not an object displayed for admiration so much as a mediator for revealing cognitive structures. In challenging Greenberg's modernist visibility of transcendence, Krauss analyzed Duchamp's work, claiming that while his objects addressed the intellect of the observer they did so in a way that engaged the entire body, revealing thought as a corporeal function implicated by desire.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Pilis' works refute any simplistic Cartesian dichotomy between body and mind. Rather, they indicate the imbrication of perception, thought and social interaction.

Situating vision as a negotiation of difference within individual and social bodies, Pilis' works also resonate with emerging research on embodied aesthetics and new materialism. While scientists tend to focus on isolated organs and process, such as the



vision centres in the brain, embodied aesthetics situates perception as a function of the entire body, a social organism constituted through ongoing interactions with the world. These areas of study reflect a sea change in Western philosophy of consciousness: the self is not a singular, isolated entity; the mind and body are not distinct.

While René Descartes is noted for introducing the mind/body split in Western culture, he also emphasized the fundamental contingency of vision. In his treatise on optics, Descartes described how embodied parallax constructs visual impressions, “just as the blind man does not judge an object to be double even if he is touching it with two hands, so likewise when both our eyes are disposed in the right way to carry our attention to one and the same place, they need only make us see one object, in spite of the formation of a picture in each of them.”<sup>4</sup> The text was illustrated with an engraving of a blindfolded man, navigating the world by means of two crossed sticks. Pilis has fittingly chosen this image to introduce the exhibition.

Descartes’ blinded man welcomes us to the gallery and salutes us as we depart, inviting us to set down our everyday assumptions about vision and engage, with self-awareness, in our own, active, visual explorations.

**Sally McKay**

<sup>1</sup> Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Duchamp, speaking in a film by J.M. Drot, *A game of chess with Marcel Duchamp* (L’institut national de l’audiovisuel direction des archives: RM Associates/Public Media, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MASS & London: The MIT Press, 1998, c.1993), 138.

<sup>4</sup> René Descartes, “The Optics,” in *Descartes, Philosophical Writings*, Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach, eds. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 249.

**Alexander Pilis** was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and currently lives and works between Montréal and São Paulo. He is an un-disciplined architectural investigator, artist and curator working under the aegis of *Architecture Parallax*, a methodology that displaces sight as the singular verification of reality. Furthermore, Pilis instigates multi-media projects exploring issues and questions raised by “the blind architect” as a critique of the modernization of vision and the collapse of the depth of field. He is a seasonal professor in the MFA department at Concordia University, Montréal and was previously Director of the Global Architecture São Paulo Program in the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design, University of Toronto. Pilis has exhibited, taught, lectured, delivered workshops and published internationally, in Canada, USA, England, Spain, Germany, Italy and Brazil. He is represented by Galeria Virgilio in São Paulo, Brazil.

**Sally McKay** is a curator, art writer, artist and assistant professor of art at McMaster University. She completed her PhD in Art History and Visual Culture at York University in 2014. Her dissertation, *Repositioning Neuroaesthetics Through Contemporary Art*, argued that artworks can facilitate embodied knowledge about perceptual cognition. Recent publications include a chapter on Omer Fast in the anthology *Aesthetics and the Embodied Mind* (2015), an essay on Kristin Lucas in the spring issue of *RACAR* (2015), and an essay on Olafur Eliasson in the exhibition catalogue for *Are You Experienced*, curated by Melissa Bennett at the Art Gallery of Hamilton (2015).

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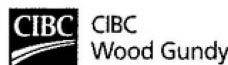


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