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## Regarding Your Visual Attitude, and Mine—Embodied Vision in a World of Screens

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# *Regarding Your Visual Attitude, and Mine—Embodied Vision in a World of Screens*

by Ariel Kirk-Gushowaty



## About the Artist

Ariel Kirk-Gushowaty is a filmmaker and photo-based artist working with both film and digital mediums. A founding member of the Iris Film Collective, she is committed to exploring experimental film in her personal practice, and growing an experimental film community in the Vancouver area. Ariel has a BA in Philosophy and Cinema Studies from the University of Toronto, and studied photography at Langara College in Vancouver. Her work has been shown in Canada and internationally, most recently at Oberhausen Festival in Berlin in 2022. She is currently interested in the physical and mental intersection points of human vision, and the processes by which we engage with the world visually.

# Regarding Your Visual Attitude, and Mine—Embodied Vision in a World of Screens

*Ariel Kirk-Gushowaty*

*Could it be that thinking arises as a response to seeing? Without eyes,  
would minds exist at all?*  
—Simon Ings

*Looked at the right way, movies do not strain the eyes, and indeed may be  
made to pay handsome dividends in improved vision.*  
—Aldous Huxley

My current expanded cinematic project, *Regarding Your Visual Attitude, and Mine* (2021–present), aims to deliver a physically-led shift into a way of regarding the world that is alive and full of possibility. At times this seems impossible since this work will be shown on a screen, yet screens are so closely linked with what Baudrillard calls *hyperreality*. This concept posits that we now live in a “desert of the real,” where “it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (Baudrillard 1981, 2). The media landscape most of us navigate daily, and the degree to which we contextualize our lives and experiences against this landscape, certainly seems to support Baudrillard’s theory. If anything, the hyperreality of our world seems only to have ballooned since *Simulacra and Simulation* was published in 1981. However, there are perhaps other ways to contextualize this hyperreality state. It may be the case that our brains are predisposed to using signs to substitute for the real—if we can even speak of a real world that is being perceived visually. Our vision process frequently involves finding a memory-image/mental-model, drawn from stored image consciousness, and blending it together with information our eyes are seeing. Some Buddhist thought seems to address this very same issue noting “it is very easy to confuse our mental image of something with reality.

The process of mistaking our perceptions for reality is so subtle that it is very difficult to know that it is going on” (Nhất Hạnh 2019, 28).

My latest film explores these tensions and searches for methods, ideas, and attitudes that sidestep our propensity to favor simulacra over the real. Instead, I seek a visual experience that grounds us in a deeper reality experience. This project started after I read Aldous Huxley’s book, *The Art of Seeing* (1942). In it, Huxley recommends following “the Bates Method,” an approach that was widely denounced at the time by the scientific community and is still considered pseudoscience today (Barnes 2011). The text consists mainly of eye exercises and relaxation techniques, intended to deeply relax our over-burdened visual apparatus and train our eyes differently. However, Huxley also suggests that stress is what creates eye strain, which frequently leads to vision problems. The stress he speaks of is “owing, generally, to the interference of the conscious ‘I’ whose fears and worries, whose cravings and griefs and ambitions, are forever interfering with the normal functioning of the physical organs, the nervous system and the mind” (Huxley 1942, 121), forcing our eyes to perform with little regard for the body’s discomfort. Discomfort becomes strain, and strain becomes dysfunction.

My interest does not lie in whether Huxley’s book is useful or effective at improving vision (although interestingly, his exercises have a lot in common with what is now suggested to combat computer vision syndrome), but in exploring the eyes as the part of ourselves, where the brain and body coincide and connect most vividly. “The retina is neural tissue, so although it’s on secondment to the eye, it’s still technically your brain. Indeed it’s the only part of the brain that can be seen without cutting into the skull” (Ward 2023, 26).



Figure 1. Kirk-Gushowaty, Ariel. *The Artist's Retina*, 2023. Digital photo.

I approach the issue in reverse, trying to determine how to let our eyes lead. If we allow that our states of mind can impact how we use our eyes, as Huxley suggests, it follows that how we use our eyes can affect our states of mind. Noticing how we engage with the world visually isn't always easy to do. The blend of sensing light reflections through our eyes and processing that information in our brains is nearly seamless. Consider that "the visible light passing through the lens focuses on the retina and forms an upside-down image, and our brain processes it and turns it right side up" (Romanyshyn and Lesiv 2017, 6). This process happens unconsciously, as do many other aspects of what we consider to be visual reality. Most of us do not recognize how the visual data coming into our eyes via reflected light is constantly being pieced together and contextualized by our brains.

Just one degree away from the very centre of my vision, I see things only half as well. 5 degrees off, my "visual acuity" is quartered. Beyond that 5-degree radius, I can no longer be sure what I see. At twenty degrees from the foveal centre, my visual acuity falls below the common legal standard for blindness. Our eyes bring little bits of the visual world to our attention, and from these shards we build our world (Ings 2007, 134).

Like Ings, I approach these concerns across several different fronts, aiming initially to appeal to the viewer on a physical level. First, I directly reference some of Huxley's book's exercises and relaxation techniques. Although these may not be effective at fixing vision conditions, they seem to have a calming effect on our eyes.



Figure 2. Kirk-Gushowaty, Ariel. *Eye Relaxation Technique*. 2023. 16mm hand-processed film still.

Could this effect also extend to the visual processing centers in the brain? Performing these actions could grant us access to a more embodied way of relating to visual data. I am curious about the effect of watching others perform these exercises on screen. They may also have a calming effect on the eyes of the audience. I also explore how we can trick our eyes. Can we open up a crack in the physical-mental continuum of vision? This might allow us to recognize our biases more clearly. These tricks include optical illusions, modern meditation machines, and ancient visual aids.

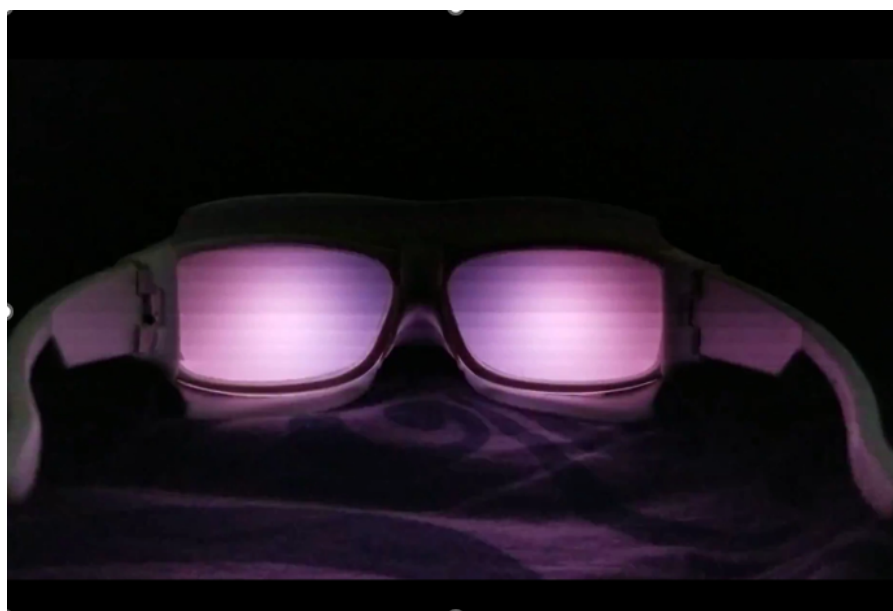


Figure 3. Kirk-Gushowaty, Ariel. *The Meditation Machine*. 2023. Digital photo.

Looking at the world with young children is another avenue I explore. Many young children do not have to deal with the same performance pressure as adults. This means they can be much freer and more natural in visually engaging with the world. As the mother of two young children, my daily life is a test lab in this regard.



Figure 4. Kirk-Gushowaty, Ariel. *Kindergarten Students*. 2023. 16mm film still.

Buddhist ideas about how to look at the world more deeply are also a key aspect of my film. As Nhất Hạnh writes:

When we think of a table, we see an image of that table in our mind. But we must remember that our concept is not the thing itself. It's just our perception, which might in fact be very different than the table itself. A termite might perceive a table as a feast, and a physicist might perceive it as a mass of rapidly moving particles. The more we practice looking deeply, the more accurate our perceptions can be. But they are still perceptions (2019, 23).

As an adjunct to Buddhist approaches for deepening our vision, I am also fascinated with the Aikido practice of *soft eyes*, which can be achieved through a process of opening and relaxing our eyes. Windle and Warren write that when we go through this process, “we relax the muscles around our eyes and let ourselves see with our peripheral vision as well as with our central, focused vision . . . We take in everything and are distracted by nothing . . . Our brains become more open to the diversity of possibilities that always surround us” (Windle and Warren 2001, 2–7).

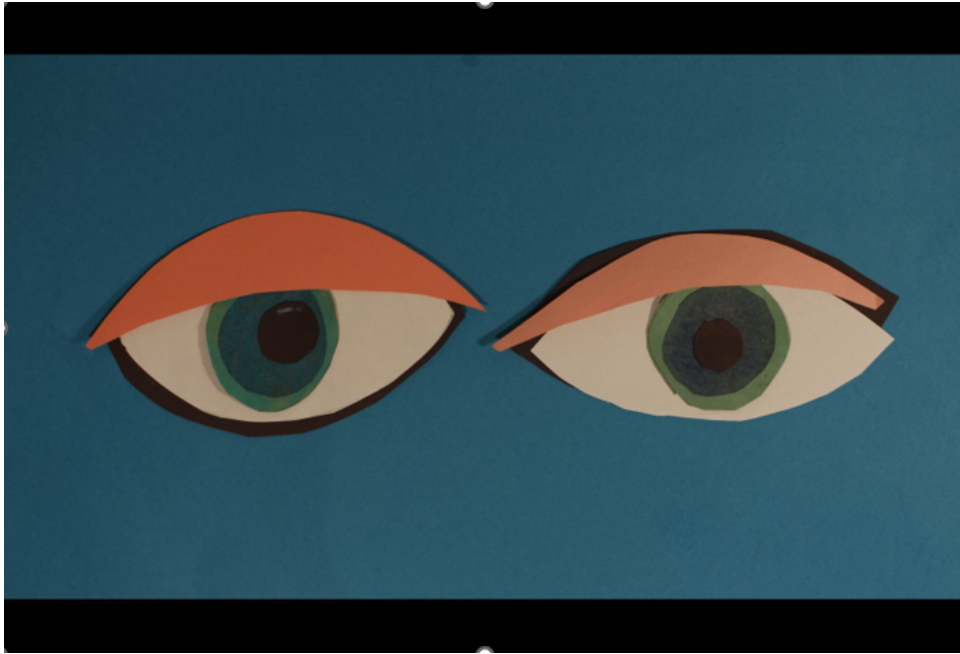


Figure 5. Kirk-Gushowaty, Ariel. *Cut Out Eyes*. 2023. Stop motion animation still.

Finding ways to bring these ideas to the screen is challenging, as the topic of vision has many facets, and my intention is not to convince, but to enable an experience. Structurally, I have taken inspiration from musical albums; different visual sections of the film explore different strategies, but in an oblique and inconclusive manner. I use a combination of celluloid film—both Super 8 and 16mm, some of which are hand processed—as well as cut-out stop motion animation, and cell phone video, which I value for its immediacy.



Figure 6. Kirk-Gushowaty, Ariel. *Looking Together*. 2023. Digital film still.

As for the contradictions of using screen-based art to incite awareness around our looking/viewing habits, I plan to present this work as an expanded cinema piece. Although the exact details are still being considered, I will likely use multiple screens, live projection of celluloid film, and live music or narration. Expanded cinema works have the advantage of real-time aspects. When you have real-time performance, you can gain perspective on recorded imagery and/or sound. In addition, expanded cinema works normally occur in a darkened theatre, with multiple viewers regarding the work together. When we look at artwork together, our bodies feel connected and a certain kind of relaxation occurs.

If there is any conclusion I am moving toward, it's recognizing that our eyes are not servants to consciousness, but as Ings suggests, they are ambassadors. For "in the tug of war between Self and World, the eye is the red ribbon at the centre of the rope" (Ings 2019, 139). Our visual attitudes and habits are marked by a lack of awareness of our own visual processes. Our brains are constantly engaged in creating our own specific perspective, and images on screens also carry an unavoidable bias that we are prone to absorb. If we can bring enhanced awareness to our physical eyes, and if we can be curious about how our perspectives are formed, we can move toward deepening and expanding the way we experience our vision of the world and our lives.

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