



MEETING  
POINT #5

Dork Zabunyan  
& Sandra Delacourt

# A Walk through the Supermarket of Images

Doctor in Contemporary Art History at Université Paris 1, a specialist in American art of the 1960s, Sandra Delacourt is also a critic, interrogating the relationships between regimes of visibility of our present history and the knowledge enabling us to grasp this history. She covers a vast field of disciplinary practices – from anthropology to natural history, from philosophy to the history of techniques – and her research in art never fails to reveal the transversality running through these, as she traces their relationship in the context of globalized capitalism. With a concrete approach inspired by Michel Foucault, and in an ongoing perceptive confrontation with artworks, she untangles power structures linking knowledge to our ways of seeing, and develops a critical discourse that places our modes of both perceiving and contemplating objects and actions on hold. In this perspective, this *Meeting Point* with Sandra Delacourt sketches out a path through “The Supermarket of Images” and the issues it raises at the crossroads of disciplines, from the economic constraints it questions to the political outcomes it presents. (DZ)

# The interview



Wednesday, January 28, 2020. Dork Zabunyan and Sandra Delacourt at the Jeu de Paume. Photo A. Chevrot



**Dork Zabunyan:** Sandra Delacourt, hello.

**Sandra Delacourt:** Hello, Dork Zabunyan!

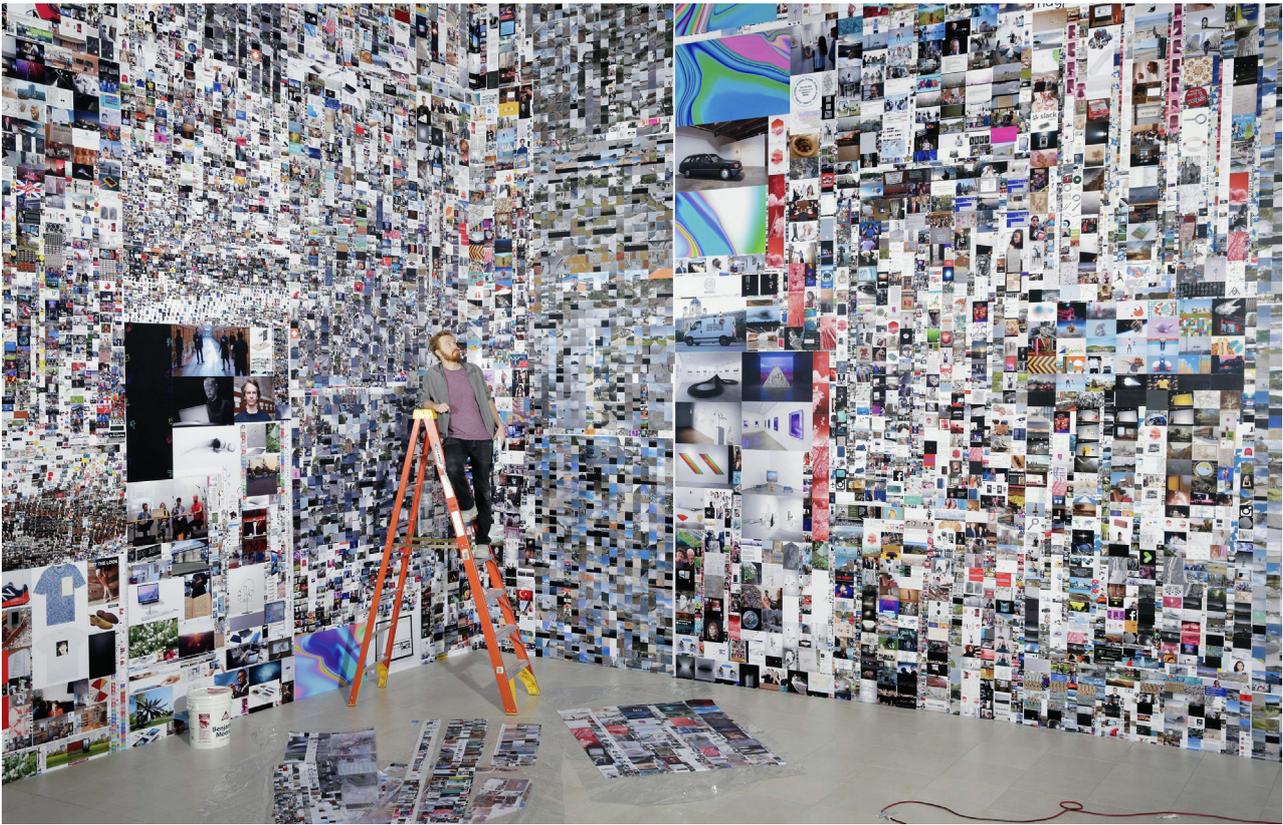
**Dork Zabunyan:** Welcome to the first *Meeting Point* of 2020. It will in part cover the exhibition “The Supermarket of Images”, and the works presented on this occasion throughout all of the Jeu de Paume’s spaces in Paris. We’ll discuss the questions it raises on our “civilization of images”, if you’ll allow this somewhat dated expression. Sandra Delacourt, you’re a historian of contemporary art, and in particular a specialist of Donald Judd, whose name features in the subtitle of an important book that you put out

in 2019: *L'Artiste-chercheur: Un rêve américain au prisme de Donald Judd* [The artist-researcher: an American dream through the prism of Donald Judd], published by Éditions B42. You also published an essay in a book of photographs by Bruno Serralongue devoted to "Photographic accounts of outings by naturalists fighting on the zone to defend (ZAD) in Notre-Dame-des-Landes [western France], August 2015 – April 2017". Your essay, "Arpenter un présent sans fin" [walking through an endless present], raises a great many questions that "The Supermarket of Images" addresses in its own way.

In parallel, you are also a critic, interrogating the relationships between regimes of visibility of our present history, the knowledge enabling us to grasp this history, and the globalized capitalism that characterizes it. And in an ongoing perceptive confrontation with artworks, you examine power structures linking knowledge to our ways of seeing. Based on this thought process, this *Meeting Point* with you will put forth a path through "The Supermarket of Images", at the crossroads of disciplines including economics, history and anthropology; the economic constraints questioned; and the political outcomes sketched out.

In view of this brief presentation and to begin to approach our subject, I'd like to ask you a first question: is there a work with which you'd like to start this wander through "The Supermarket of Images", with an eye to revealing some of the major issues?

**Sandra Delacourt :** Yes, I think that a clear point of entry to start this conversation, and this wander through the exhibition, would be to take a look at Evan Roth's work, *Since You Were Born*, which welcomes us at the entrance in the Jeu de Paume. It's an immersive installation made up of thousands of images of various formats, of extremely dissimilar quality and content. The images cover the walls of the circulation and ambulatory spaces up to the ceiling. I think that this work is quite emblematic of one of the exhibition's postulates: that today, we live in a world saturated by images. This installation strikes us right from the start of the exhibition, bringing the question of saturation to the forefront. It also strikes me as interesting in how it proposes a de-hierarchization of these same images. The images are hung up on the walls haphazardly, using the principle by which they were collected: they were stored by the artist himself over a defined period of time, from the birth of his second daughter in June 2016 until today – nearly



Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born*, 2019

© Photo by Bob Self/The Florida Times-Union / Courtesy of MOCA, Jacksonville, Florida

three-and-a-half years of unsolicited or purposeful images that transited through his computer and built up in his memory cache. This work elicits a rather immediate sense of familiarity in us. At any rate, it grabs us and evokes the feeling of being submerged in an endless flow of digital images, which build up in our lives daily. Let me cite some figures, as we're not talking about just a feeling: 90% of the data available today in the world was created between 2016 and 2018, an extremely short period of time. Already in 2013, it was estimated that every minute, humanity produced 2.5 million pieces of content on Facebook, nearly 300,000 tweets, 200,000 new photos on Instagram, 72 hours of video on YouTube, etc. Content so vast in quantity that it is impossible to assimilate, at least on an individual, human scale.

This idea of the world's saturation with images is problematic in my view, or at any rate, raises a certain number of paradoxes. There is firstly the idea that the overabundance of images would guarantee a fresh plurality in terms of content, perspectives and interpretations – that there would be a

sort of end or abolition of the restriction to access to image production, as well as to their sharing. Anyone can be an author and share them freely. And on the other hand is the notion that this more egalitarian access to images would bring about an excess, an overload, a jamming of sorts, making them unreadable.

It is for this same reason that I wanted to start the conversation with this work. To me, *Since You Were Born* seems symptomatic of a way in which, in capitalist societies – based in particular on a certain economy of images, and at the same time serving as the major actors in their globalization – we find a sort of fascination at this capacity for excessive image production, and even at the fear of being overwhelmed by this. I find this somewhat dual sentiment interesting. It expresses a fascination of the era for itself, namely, a capacity to produce an all-seeing, globalized eye overhead, which would instantly translate what would be our present in the density of the world with, at the same time, the anxiety of not being able to comprehend or grasp it.

**Dork Zabunyan:** You've pinpointed a rather palpable aspect of the exhibition, and an idea that is dear to its inspirer, Peter Szendy. In the exhibition catalogue, in the introduction of his text, he writes: "There are so many images. So very many images. Their number is immense. Their mass, their stream is literally immeasurable." I would like to touch back on this deluge of images and look at it against the paradox that you raised, between hypervisibility and unreadability. It's true that we often forget that these images are unseen or unlooked-at, and that perhaps the work of the artists in the exhibition, namely "The Supermarket of Images", consists in making visible or perceptible what escapes our vision given this circulation, and given these exchanges of images that you evoked.

Have you pinpointed works in the exhibition – I myself think of Trevor Plagen's photos – that are likely to make visible what escapes our vision regimen, while these images are right in front of our eyes?

**Sandra Delacourt:** Yes. What strikes me as a one of the great strengths of this exhibition is how it starts out by grabbing us with a familiar feeling, while inviting us to quickly detach from this. We are in a space with the mission of reflecting on images, their status, their economy and their production, and the exhibition voices the ambition of denaturalizing the relationship verging



Trevor Paglen, *NSA-Trapped Undersea Cables, North Pacific Ocean*, 2016  
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

on stupefaction that we generally have to the mass of images, by proposing a highly meticulous and detailed interpretation of them, down to the elements of fabrication and the life of these images. By calling upon our cognitive habit of comprehending images in different ways, we distance ourselves from a conception of the mass of images as a natural phenomenon that would be characteristic of a logical progression of capitalist societies, and that would ultimately require the adaptation of individuals in a globalized future.

You quite rightly mention the works of Trevor Paglen, which strike me as extremely interesting in how they reveal the shadow economy mentioned by Peter Szendy in his text "*Les Voiries du Visible*" [the road networks of the visible]. These underwater photos, nearly abstract and monochromatic, show the undersea cable systems connecting and powering 98% of the flow of communications and images being exchanged around the world today. I find this work particularly interesting because it brings us back to the materiality

of the industry and economy of the visible, which always claims immateriality and only considers itself as a flow or management of intensities, emotions, attention, etc. To the contrary, here we get back to a really strong anchoring: this work illustrates not only a relationship between this industry and a territory, but more specifically, with expansionist territories: as Paglen shows, these are network cable systems that were created in the early 20th century to connect different points across the entire British Empire. That's to say, there is a colonial, or at least imperial, history playing out at this location, via these same networks, with a new form of capitalist industry that might be referred to as cognitive capitalism. The question of work is also raised—of all of the shadow workers, and of our relationship to ecology. We often forget that information and communication technologies represent pollution equivalent to aviation in terms of carbon emissions. Paglen's work shows what this industry of the visible hides or dissimulates about itself...

**Dork Zabunyan:** This denaturalization of vision that you bring up implies rethinking materials. Furthermore, one of the lines structuring the exhibition is titled "raw material". This leads me to what might be referred to as a "material turn" in the approaches of artworks—Trevor Plagen being an example of this. On this topic, I was also thinking of the works of Julien Prévieux, particularly his *Anthology of Looks*, which uses woolen yarn to attempt to recreate how our eyes move over artworks. Another project by the same artist comes to mind, which would have involved producing a sculpture using Jérôme Kerviel's internet cable, with which the trader reaped and transited 4.9 billion euros... So here too, there is a material dimension heightened by a humorous dimension – i.e. this material turn is certainly making visible what is not visible, but is doing so in comical manner. I would be curious to have your view on this aspect, which adds to the denaturalization of vision that you were discussing earlier.

**Sandra Delacourt:** This desire to show the infrastructure of the visible, not only as a material construction but also as a social construction that leads to a construction of the gaze, strikes me as one of the essential points of this exhibition. Indeed, Julien Prévieux does this with a great deal of humor. There is a fundamentally political dimension to these examinations of what is revealed through the gaze – whether considering, in the field of the visible, what is present but unseen, or rather what is not present because it is

unseen. Here we touch upon questions of representativeness. I think this is a point worth lingering on. Our contemporary regimen of images, beyond the phenomena of saturation and proliferation that would seem to illustrate diversity on all continents, strikes me, to the contrary, as monosemous. Its vocation – and herein lies the turn brilliantly charted by the exhibition – would be the representativeness of a present time, a universal present time that would simply document and inform, collected like so many snapshots. This situation is problematic and creates extreme uniformity. It above all raises the question of the transformation of images when they are incorporated into the supermarket of the visible, when they are managed like stock, like merchandise. Their added value would be given to them as informative value on what is seen. There is a shift in the relationship of seeing to knowing that I find extremely interesting, shown in a way that is indeed very funny and terrifying by Julien Prévieux.

I also think of Harun Farocki, who made a film, *The Creators of Shopping Worlds*, showing architects and engineers tasked with routing the gaze, figuring out how it is struck and constructed in shopping centers. This film also raises a series of comical questions on the fantasy (in which questions of overload also lie) of being able to encompass the world and being able to control the gaze to the point of influencing its reading and interpretation.

**Dork Zabunyan:** Exactly. The reference to Farocki is important, and is also a way of emphasizing a form of instruction on perception implemented by the different artists in the exhibition, taking into account the diversity of materials they use. I also wanted to get back to the critical dimension that characterizes your work, but a criticism – and it's also an important element of the exhibition – that bypasses a recurring grievance relating to the saturation of images. I am referring to a pessimism that characterizes major

thought systems including those of Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, for example. But it's also a question of avoiding – and the exhibition succeeds in doing so, in my opinion – the sanctification of a confused flow of images, and not falling into the trap of a celebration in response to a post-modern murk where everything is jumbled together. Between these two obstacles, I feel that the exhibition charts out a rather shrewd path that furthermore intersects with what we were saying before about the fact of making visible



Harun Farocki, *Die Schöpfer der Einkaufswelten* ("The Creators of Shopping Worlds")  
2001, Video, color, sound, 72 min, courtesy of Antje Ehmann

what was previously not visible, or bringing out of the shadows an economy that remains in the shadows. Here I think of the work of Martin Le Chevallier on clickworkers. He highlights the entire chain transiting across an internet infrastructure and that remains unseen. I wanted your thoughts on these two obstacles and this shrewd path laid out by the exhibition, perhaps getting your point of view on this work by Martin Le Chevallier, or another if you prefer...

**Sandra Delacourt :** Yes of course, this work really grabbed my attention. This piece, in its image regimen and narrative regimen alike, proposes something other than an ambition for immediate readability. The video is made of static shots of interior spaces, over which a highly monotonous, synthetic voice-off is heard. It tells inaudible stories, which prove to be those of workers of the digital sector, or clickworkers. Behind these images presented to

us as automatic, as taken over time and put into circulation just as freely, there are hidden stories. The clickworkers recount their highly precarious and extreme working conditions: their work consists in viewing all images circulating through digital networks, which they must name and then index. They are thus exposed to violence, as they are constantly confronted with illicit, pedo-pornographic, terror-related content, etc. Their role essentially consists in naming these images by tagging them, to produce lexicon and encoding from what they already know, or from what they recognize as belonging, or not, to a field itself designated as visible, or not. What I find interesting is what this reveals about the relationship of these images to language. They are already constructed, referenced, indexed to appear according to a certain hierarchy of content, searches, desires for buying and consuming that are found on the internet. And to touch back on the question of grievance, just as vital, this exhibition and the participating artists are indeed seeking out a third path. We are not witnessing the denunciation of a system of overproduction so much as a questioning of the credit given to this system. For me, questions of belief are what are really at work here: how is it possible to adhere, without discrimination, to the idea that this extremely abundant flood of images would come to represent what we refer to as a globalized society? This is where something starts to allow for the subjectivization of the self, the rethinking of the self as a subject, but also as an observing subject, and ultimately to escape the essentialist positions that I feel are always at work in this economy of images, in particular as we see it, through this relationship to indexing and lexicon that sticks yet another label on an observed subject.

**Dork Zabunyan:** I would add that this grievance has a long history, well-illustrated by Jacques Rancière in his book *The Emancipated Spectator*, when he says that authors like Hippolyte Taine were already complaining about this glut of images in the mid-19th century. Over the eras, this type of reaction to hyper-visibility has lingered, while media and forms of circulation have changed. Image flows are constructions and must always be accompanied by reflection on the infrastructures, as well as the texts, commentary and language that accompany them... This is why I wanted your opinion on this space of coexistence between images and texts tending to accompany them. I had the works of Martha Rosler in mind—her piece *Cargo Cult*, on display in the exhibition. She's an artist who accompanies

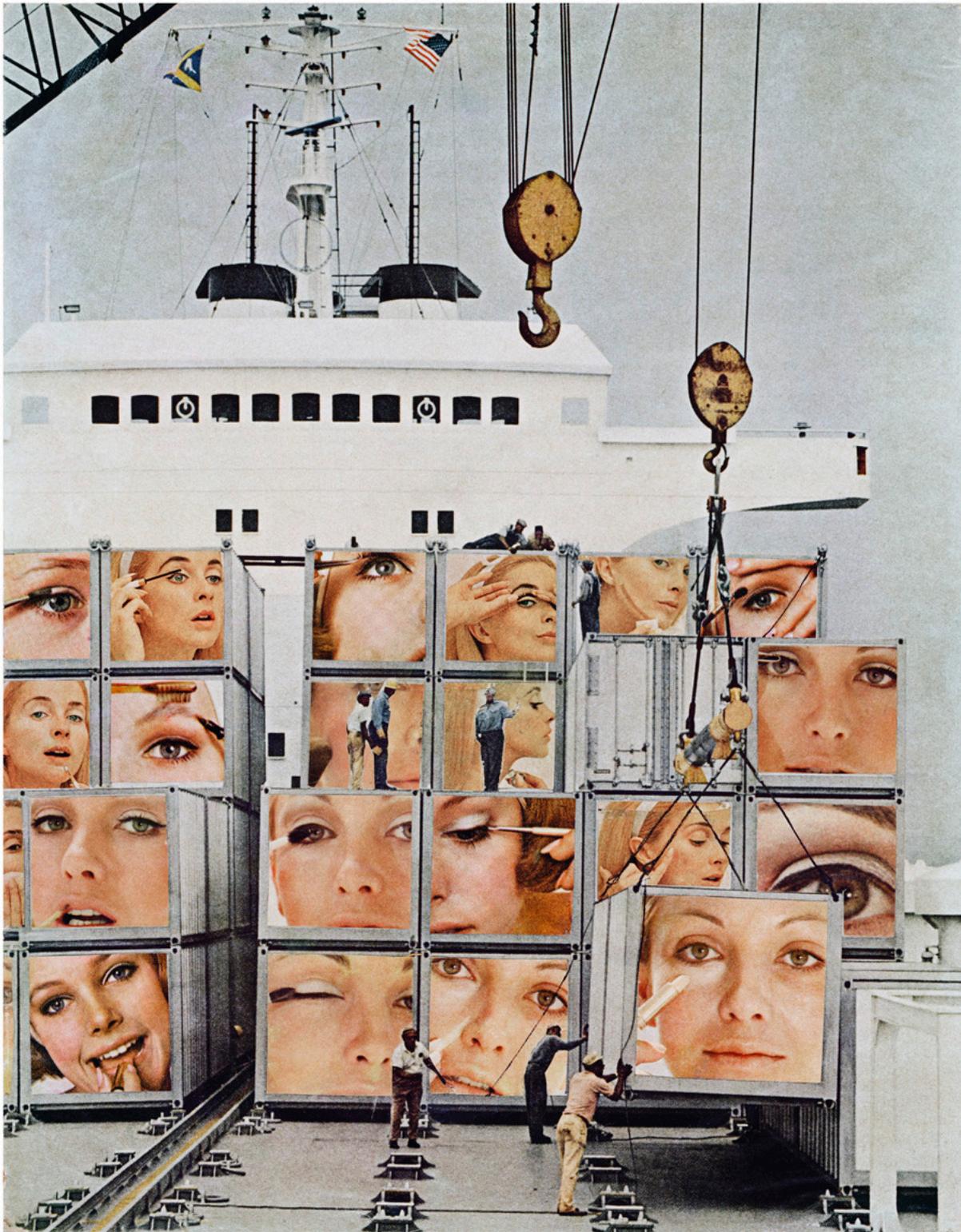


Martin Le Chevallier, *Clickworkers*, 2017. HD video, color, sound, 8 min 23 sec  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Jousse Entreprise, Paris

her work with a discourse on globalized capitalism, on the misadventures of neoliberalism, and I'm curious about your thoughts on this coexistence between images and texts. We often speak of image flows, but we forget that these are most often accompanied by writings that orient our perception.

**Sandra Delacourt:** Concerning the historicity of this grievance relating to a saturation and an overabundance of images, I think that we need to consider the place from which this grievance is voiced. As we can see in the exhibition, the vast majority of artists represented come from advanced capitalist societies, and so it's rather striking, if only in the produced forms, to see that ultimately, this grievance is generally voiced on the side of societies that are producing this excess. And I think that the fascination for a power to produce shared narrative strengthens the ever-growing rift between information-rich societies and information-poor societies. Yves Citton has produced remarkable work around these questions. Today, the utopia proposed by neoliberalism would be to allow every society access to a shared future, in which time would be counted in proportion to our capacity to observe it, but also to predict and control it. There is thus a substantial social and geopolitical divide, which for me justifies quick detachment from this grievance. I don't think that the world is saturated with images, and I even find it surreal that a world presented or described as immaterial could feel threatened by images that would be overly material and abundant. Next, if there is an excess of images, the question – rarely raised – would be to know which images should be removed, which should be erased, by which authors, preserving or dismissing which content, using what criteria and what hierarchy? I think that these questions are rarely subject to debate at any rate, in particular when we see that this economy associating regimens of production and circulation of images and content does not reveal the criteria used to hierarchize and index them...

**Dork Zabunyan:** Okay. Maybe one final question on the Jeu de Paume's spaces and how to move through them. Are visitors transformed into *flâneurs*? Can we adopt Dominique Païni's hypothesis, by which 20th – and 21st – century *flâneurs* are museum visitors, and no longer those passing by shop fronts in cities? It now plays out within museum walls. Or might we image another figure, that of the surveyor, a figure that interests you and that you evoke



Martha Rosler, *Cargo Cult*, 1966-1972, after the series "Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows no Pain"  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler Berlin/Cologne ©Martha Rosler

in your work, for that matter. The surveyor is no longer interested in micro-events emerging as features of reality, but rather in a form of investigation within the immense field to which we refer as immaterial, and which is in fact brimming with materiality. I just wanted to have your thoughts on this last figure, which is also our own, those of us who visit and revisit the exhibition.

**Sandra Delacourt :** The figure of the surveyor particularly interests me. In the wanderings or in the reappropriation of its relationship to the visible, involving body and gaze, this figure seeks to look at what escapes globalized capitalism. With it, all tools and sensors, everything allowing for observation, go through another filter, in particular that of walking. This doesn't entail crossing the world, but simply a relationship to space able to set off to seek out what escapes the radar of instantaneousness, while remaining sensitive to what is happening over time, what is appearing and disappearing. These are in fact the principles of visibility, i.e. something moving, something ephemeral, all the time. The surveyor is perhaps involved in the search for new connections between what we see and what we say. To get back to the idea of the museum as a space almost exclusively reserved for walking, or as a space offering strolls allowing to organize or frame the gaze, I find that there is something rather daring in this exhibition's proposal. We are aware that cultural institutions are led to transform themselves into attention banks, i.e. they have to take in ever greater visitor numbers, have a program that can be immediately grasped, that is attractive. Starting to embark upon this reflection in a space such as the Jeu de Paume can only be fruitful for us as subjects.

**Dork Zabunyan:** Very good, thank you so much for this *Meeting Point*, Sandra Delacourt.

**Sandra Delacourt:** Thank you, Dork Zabunyan.



A historian of contemporary art, Sandra Delacourt is a researcher associated with the HiCSA research unit (Université Paris 1 Pathéon-Sorbonne) and a professor at ESAD TALM-Tours. Concerned with emerging phenomena in the field of art, her work deals with processes of artistic recognition, political regimes of visibility, as well as the construction of knowledge and historical narratives. Her publications include: *L'artiste-chercheur, un rêve américain au prisme de Donald Judd* (B42, 2019), "Arpenter un présent sans fin" in Bruno Serralongue, "Les Naturalistes en lutte sur la ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes" (GwinZegal, 2019), *Le Chercheur et ses doubles* (B42, 2016). Publications available at the Jeu de Paume bookstore: <https://bit.ly/2S0FEZS>

Dork Zabunyan is a professor of film studies at Université Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis. He contributes to various periodicals, including *Trafic*, *Critique*, *Les Cahiers du cinéma* and *Les Cahiers du MNAM*. He recently published *L'insistance des luttes – Images, soulèvements, contre-révolutions* (de l'incidence éditeur, 2016), translated into English: *The Insistence of Struggle – Images-uprisings-counter-revolutions* (trans. Stefan Tarnowski, IF Publications, 2019), alongside *Foucault at the Movies* (with Patrice Maniglier, trans. Clare O'Farrell, Columbia University Press, 2018). He is currently preparing an essay on images of Donald Trump. Publications available at the Jeu de Paume bookstore: <http://bit.ly/2DTS1k9>

Translation from French : Sara Heft, 2020  
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