

## Liselot van der Heijden: DISSONANCE

LMAKprojects 139 Eldridge Street New York, NY 10007

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by **Chris Kasper**



Liselot van der Heijden, *Dissonance*, Installation view, 2008, courtesy LMAKprojects

Multiple channels of video projections and monitors are visible towards the back of the narrow exhibition space, through the door at LMAKprojects. Opening the door, I enter the exhibition space, one single corridor like room. There is a staircase on the right that drops sharply to a floor below, and is surrounded by a guardrail. Above the staircase hang two c-prints. Next to the stairwell is a makeshift desk with the gallery owner, Louky Keijsers and her assistant Catherine Thompson sitting behind it. The narrowness of the space is cause to feel a little self-conscious entering it in front of the gaze of the two women. This self conscious feeling, the awareness of their gaze, is highlighted when looking at a single-channel video playing on a flat monitor to my left which depicts a museum diorama, with a painted landscape, mounted deer, and spectators looking at the static scene. I am watching a video of people watching mounted deer, and am aware that I am being watched, having just entered the gallery, by the two women running the space. The c-prints above the stairwell are two clever images of spectators looking into dioramas, at what appears to be the Natural History Museum. The photographs capture the back of gazing viewers, but focuses more on the painted background. The photographs, with depictions of painted backgrounds, are tricky and read like a small painting at first. It becomes clear fairly quickly that this exhibition is about looking, the act of looking and the presence of the gaze in varied spaces of exhibition.

The video installation (*Dissonance*, 2008) consists of five channels, two monitors on the floor with their backs to the door, one flat screen monitor face up on the floor directly across from the first two, a large projection on the wall just beyond the flat screen, and a slightly smaller project on the rear of the right gallery wall. Across the gallery on the wall from this projection is a mounted deer head, with a close-circuit video camera behind it. The camera is somewhat discreet in the field of all the videos. All of the videos feature footage of the mounted, multi-point buck head. The footage features the deer's head being moved around in what appears to be the gallery I am standing in. The two monitors with their backs to the door are side by side. The one on the left shows the deer head being moved around, the one on the right shows the mounting-plaque resting on the floor, with the neck extending upward. The head of the deer is not visible in this monitor. At first it appears like some fuzzy elephant foot. It is a strange image, and takes a moment to figure out that it is the deer head. The video camera to the right of the room is positioned in such a way, that when you situate yourself to look at the pair of monitors, you unwittingly get caught in the gaze of the camera. You are unwittingly caught because it is a live circuit, one in a field of five channels, which depict the deer head being moved around in this space in a different time. It is disorienting at first to find your own image within the gaze of the stuffed deer, in the gaze of anyone in the room, and within your own view. The deceptively simple installation sets up a structure where the hunter (the viewer) becomes the hunted (on display, subject to the gaze).



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The deer head on the wall is a trophy, a souvenir from a hunt, as are the whole mounted deer in the first video to the left when entering the space. The mounted deer on display at the natural history museum, and the single deer whose head is now mounted to the wall, were subject to one act of violence, likely by gunshot, but were first caught in the line of their hunter's gaze. The gaze is the first step in an act of violence, and therefore and act of violence in itself. After the deer have been killed and mounted, their fate lies in being the subjects of countless other gazes, in a natural history museum and in an art gallery. Museum and gallery spaces are places made for the gaze. To use mounted deer as the primary subject of the videos is to call attention to the inherent violence in the gaze. It is an interesting problem to address in an exhibition. It is revealed in the configuration of videos in the rear of the gallery when the viewer realizes he/she has been caught in the line of fire of the camera, in the line of the gaze of the mounted head on the wall. The viewer has fallen prey to the work, as the gaze has been reversed and directed back to him/her.

The single channel video in the front of the gallery (*Natural History*, 2008) illustrates this almost immediately. It is an anthropological sort of video, a documentary with museum goers as the subject. It is very matter-of-fact without any manipulation. We realize very quickly that we are not watching a video of mounted deer frozen in the diorama, but a video of people gazing upon the scene. There is a parallel drawn between the spectators in the museum and the deer on display, although it isn't engaging, as the parallel is drawn immediately. It illustrates the situation that the installation in the back of the room lures viewers into. It spells it out upon entering the gallery and prepares the viewer for what to expect. The c-prints (from the *Natural History* series) on the other hand, depict the same situation as the video in a way that is quite engaging. Because of their intersection with the history of painting, they do not come across as illustrative as the *Natural History* video does. They feature the images of spectators at the Natural History museum, gazing into the diorama depictions of the sublime. The landscapes, which are painted, cause the photographs to appear as small paintings on first glance. They evoke Caspar David Friedrich, with a tongue subtly implanted in the check. The situation depicted in the photographs presents an anthropological examination of museum goers engaged in the act of looking, while also being a formally beautiful meditation on the history of the gaze in painting.

The exhibition presents work, which holds up a mirror to the gaze. The work is not merely on display in the passively showroom-like manner we usually expect from gallery exhibitions. The c-prints present a reflective experience for the viewer and cause for him/her to consider the back of his/her own head as he/she gazes upon the representation of the back of the figure's heads in the work.

*Dissonance* looks back at you, and puts you in the line of fire. The work calls into question what is usually taken for granted in the act of looking.



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