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Natalia Hug hosting WAAP / Vancouver

Steven Cottingham
Suspended Animation
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Sophisticated image manipulation tools have done for photographs what the printing press did for the written word. Images no longer have any pretense of objectivity; instead documentary practices collapse once more into the realm of illustration. Now is a time when the image is a literary device, whose verisimilitude hinges on belief rather than reality. Neural networks and render engines may summon any number of photoreal depictions, freed from the time and space constraints of camera apertures. But technology alone is not to blame for the fact that “disinformation”, once a coordinated military tactic, is now a daily aspect of political discourse. Every form of representation has always necessitated paring down the noise of real life, choosing what to include and what to exclude. Such value systems, rather than reality itself, produce the effects of realism.

Suspended Animation explores some of the grammars of this “postphotoreal” condition, both novel and ancient in scope. Images are peeled back, showing layers of wireframe scaffolding and shader passes. Disparate camera technologies augment and obscure the empirical gaze. Omniscient surveillance fulfills the role left vacant by a watchful god. But as long as conviction rules representation in both aesthetics and politics, then some things will remain unseen, will never be captured in the panoptic eye, if no one knows what they are looking for.

Steven Cottingham (b. 1989) is a visual artist based in New York and Vancouver. His work concerns the politics of visualization, surveillance, and policing. He has recently exhibited at Artists Space (New York, 2022), The Polygon Gallery (North Vancouver, 2021), Catriona Jeffries (Vancouver, 2021), Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art (Kelowna, 2020), and Wil Aballe Art Projects (Vancouver, 2020), and is currently an artist-in-residence with the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program (New York, 2021–2022). Cottingham received an MFA from the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, 2017), and from 2018–2021 he co-edited QOQQOON, an art theory webzine.