

[Review](#)

Anonymous Front

By [Ellen Tani](#) February 15, 2012

In the catalogue of his 1976 exhibition *I am Not Blind: An Information Environment About Unsighted People*, the conceptual artist Les Levine wrote: “It is a misconception to assume that unsighted people want a different life experience from those who are sighted. It also seems unnecessary that unsighted people be excluded from those kinds of experiences we normally consider to be purely conceptual.”¹ Unwittingly, the Los Angeles–based artist Gina Osterloh channels this philosophy in the photographic series and documentary film currently on view in her exhibition *Anonymous Front*. By reconceptualizing notions of camouflage and blindness, Osterloh addresses vision as a state of mind. Camouflage, framed as the psychological control of vision, has anchored the artist’s photographic practice for the past five years. However, the documentary film *New Vision*, which features testimonials of the blind in the Philippines, establishes a new focus for Osterloh’s work and explores the philosophical and phenomenological issues surrounding blindness. In the space between the abstract and the documentary, these concepts breathe life into broader questions of social belonging, cultural literacy, foreignness, racial colorblindness, blending in, and standing out.

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Osterloh's colorful photographic series depicts staged figures that often appear camouflaged or with missing faces or truncated limbs. She manipulates the surface condition between body and room to create a shifting *mise-en-scène*, questioning the structural integrity of our field of vision and calling up what she describes as the "horror and ecstasy of identification."² When her figures emerge from their patterned environments, it's clear that our perception of what is real depends fundamentally on the identification of difference, which is both a physiological and psychological act: ascertaining figure from ground, self from other, and individual from group.³

Installed on one side of the gallery, Osterloh's photos present variations of a wallpapered stage, the images flattened by the camera lens and by the wallpaper's camouflage print. A full-scale camouflage stage in the gallery mimics the one pictured in Osterloh's images and serves as a fourth wall and a physical seam linking the photographic set to the cinematic space behind it: the film, *New Vision*, is projected on the back of the stage. Taking its name from the cooperative massage-therapy school for the blind in Manila where Osterloh conducted interviews, the film captures the sense of place that Osterloh witnessed on a 2007 trip to the Philippines—her mother's homeland—and that lured her back repeatedly. For Osterloh, the Philippines is a site of perpetual return, a place



Anonymous Front, 2010; archival pigment photograph; 40 x 50 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.



Installation view of *New Vision*, 2011–12; high-definition video. Courtesy of the Artist and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.

both specific and obscured, mediated through the memories of her mother and the fantasies of Western colonial history.

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The film explores the corporeal consciousness of the blind and seeks, with the testimonials of real people, to give voice to blindness not as a static state of being but as a continual process of transformation and acceptance. When asked how they identify themselves, interviewees speak in phenomenological terms: they describe feeling and hearing the wind in order to orient oneself and the impossibility of doing so in an enclosed room, navigating the world kinesthetically through the body language of a guide, and finding non-optical interfaces for apprehension and registration, such as touch. As one interviewee reports: “Senses never disappear; they just transfer. You transfer your sense of seeing to a sense of touch.”

Osterloh’s framing of this reality suggests that the flattened spaces of the photographs may be unlikely ciphers for the *mise-en-scène* of the blind, which, as Jacques Derrida writes, “is always inscribed in a theater or theory of the hands.”⁴ Struggling to read Osterloh’s photographs in purely optical terms, viewers may be reminded that blindness ruptures depth perception and that discerning figure from ground, or fixing something in one’s vision, becomes a task of tangibility (from *tangere*, “to touch”). Physical touch registers what is spatially immediate while hearing, described by R. Murray Schafer as “a way of touching at a distance,” extends beyond the body.⁵ Osterloh’s film, which attends to the lush textural and sonic environment of its subjects, brings the blank and mute qualities of the studio photographs into focus. Their hermetic *trompe l’oeil* aesthetic invokes disorientation, something most people don’t often experience in

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a closed space unless, as articulated by one interviewee, one is without vision:

“In an enclosed space, the sound is deafening. You can’t feel the wind. You won’t hear a thing because the door is closed.”

Osterloh presents blindness as an alternative consciousness rather than a disability and pulls back the curtains of fantasy that have mediated our view of the Philippines; she sheds light on an experience and a place that seem perpetually foreign. Osterloh asks the interviewees to summon their last memories of the visual world and links these to the mediated present of the blind and to her inherited connection to the Philippines in order to propose a set of philosophical questions: How do you make a body whole again? Do the ties that bind individuals to a group reside in the body or in the mind? The artist’s oscillation between the real and the abstract registers a renewed vision of self and other and of how we identify ourselves as bodies. *Anonymous Front* is a conceptually rigorous exercise in focus and registration. It is not for the impatient; in fact, viewers may strain to bridge the myriad dialectical spaces of artistic labor that Osterloh has set up. But precisely in that straining between abstraction and reality, concepts of form take on philosophical import, most fundamentally in the process of understanding difference.

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Gina Osterloh: *Anonymous Front* is on view at [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts](#), in San Francisco, through April 8, 2012.

NOTES:

1. Les Levine, *I am Not Blind: An Information Environment for the Un sighted* (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1976).
2. From a conversation with the artist, January 21, 2012.
3. The concept of the figure-ground relationship, a central theory of perception in gestalt psychology, refers to a cognitive ability to separate elements based upon contrast. In the 1960s, the media theorist Marshall McLuhan extended this concept to society, exploring how perception can alter our consciousness of the surrounding world: technology, for example, brings different social elements into focus and causes others to recede into the background. This concept was one of the underpinnings of his theory that “the medium is the message.”
4. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 26.
5. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and The Tuning of the World*(Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994, reprint), 11.