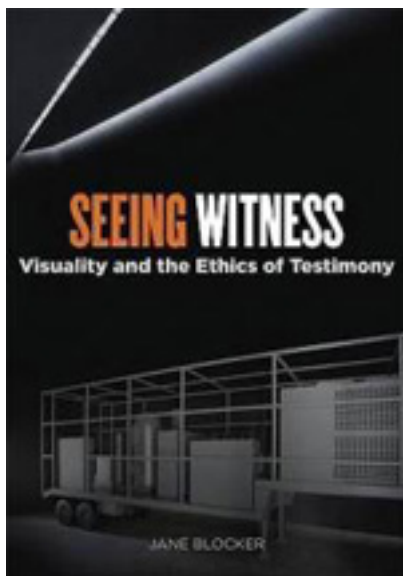


***Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* by Jane Blocker**

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Blocker, Jane. *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009; pp. 192; 30 black and white illustrations. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.



Blocker's work is an eclectic meditation on witnessing and the ways in which the figure of the viewer is performed in art, everyday life, and scientific and political discourse. Like Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked* (1993), Blocker is attuned to the dynamics of seeing and representation as acts of reckoning with blind spots and loss. Also drawing upon trauma and witness studies, most notably Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) and Kelly Oliver's *Witnessing* (2001), Blocker differentiates her subject by focusing on who is the witness rather than how to witness. She dynamically draws upon literary theory, philosophies of science, performance studies, history, and psychoanalysis in her analyses of contemporary works of visual, installation, and performance art. As an art historian, Blocker is especially interested in works that stage or enact their own reception. Those that ask a viewer "to see how seeing takes place" are useful to her because they estrange the viewer from becoming a witness and instead draw attention to the very conditions of witnessing (xxi). Her work radiates from a central claim that the techniques and ethics of witnessing are a key problem for life in the visually mediated 21st century.

The book is organized into three sections that contain essays of varying lengths: "History", "Technology", and "Biopower." Relying upon Phelan's definition of performance as disappearance, Blocker first situates her own act of art historical witness at two degrees of

separation from both Marina Abramovic and Ulay's ephemeral work *The Lovers* (1983) and its first-person documentation by art critic Cynthia Carr. Blocker makes visible the strangeness of her own particularly invested and professional form of witnessing. The art historian both repeats and re-enacts the performance in a kind of devotional act of saving—in the double sense, Blocker reminds us, of preserving and spiritually redeeming. This intertwining of theological language and witnessing emerges as a prominent, though largely latent, claim in the book.

The theoretical ground then shifts to intercultural spectatorship and display in the second chapter's analysis of Native American performance artist James Luna. Blocker reads Luna's parodic installation of the drunk Indian as an embodied enactment of native stereotypes and as a vivid metaphor for "history's tendency to pass out and forget the past" (17). Luna, as witness to a long history of ethnographic and everyday constructions of Indian-ness, stages the surplus of invented and authentic imagery that comes to stand for native memory. Whereas the first chapter alluded to the ethics of art historical witnessing, this chapter situates the performance artist as historian.

Blocker's last exploration of the historical witness focuses on the wedding ceremony and anti-gay-marriage laws that prevent homosexuals from such legitimated forms of social witnessing. She elucidates the politics of a queer witness and a queer understanding of history via the analysis of visual artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres and a documentary film by Ross McElwee. After setting up her terms in a self-referential style that is reminiscent of Amelia Jones and Rebecca Schneider's performative writing, Blocker's analyses gain gravity in the "Technology" section.

In a succinct central chapter on photography as a primary technology of witnessing, Blocker compares the work of Alfredo Jaar and Gilles Peress, whose work on the Rwandan genocide uses photography in the expanded context of installation to turn attention to the viewer's own acts of witnessing atrocity. While conventional photojournalistic images allow the witness to remain invisible, these works confront the spectator with the difficulties of imagining not only atrocity, but one's own ability to see oneself as a witness to that atrocity. Blocker's study then boldly leaps into the ontological terrain of changing experiences of selfhood, and thus witnessing, as a result of "memory machines" or contemporary computer technologies through which memories are stored, mediated, and made.

Blocker asks, if subjectivity is dependent upon an active witnessing of self and other, how do such technologies enable and endanger stable subjectivity and, hence, ethical forms of engagement? In rich comparative analyses of a mid-century proto-computer, a performance piece by the group Dumb Type and new media forms, Blocker navigates the space between the promise of a technologically enhanced "superwitness" and the disembodied loss of human memory capacity to machines. Putting Paul Virilio, Amelia Jones, and Andreas Huyssen into conversation, Blocker writes about the paradox of a necessary ethical witnessing amidst the radical disorientations of individual selves as a result of such technologies.

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Alba, a genetically engineered white rabbit who happens to glow green in the dark because of fluorescent jellyfish DNA, is one of the most provocative performances among the ten total that capture Blocker's attention. Created by Brazilian-born artist Eduardo Kac in collaboration with French scientists, Alba (alongside Kac's own statements on transgenic art) illuminates for Blocker the power of artists to re-imagine, and in this case literally to create new life forms as witnesses to the unseen. Blocker aims to show how biology configures subjectivity, thus changing the nature of witness.

In conclusion, Blocker returns to the theological language of witness: "the movement from the real to representation is inherently lapsarian; that is, it is marked by the Fall" (126). For her, contemporary artists stand in crucial contrast against this backdrop of theology, which often figures the witness as disembodied, omniscient, and invisible. While the central terms of the project: art, witness, and ethics, constellate unevenly and in unexpected ways across the collection, the project itself bears witness to an art historian's decade of passionate, ethically engaged, and self-reflexive looking. Blocker's work is a richly associative collection that progressively intensifies her ethical concerns with witness as a central condition of contemporary subjectivity. The book insists that with careful attention, the kind that Blocker models in these pages, it cannot be doubted that art stages new modes of witnessing and makes a vital contribution to existing studies of traumatic seeing, testimony, and spectatorship.

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