

Focus __ Catalogue Essay by Rachael Parsons __ 2013

Much can be communicated in a glance. Eye contact is deemed necessary in forging reciprocal communication and intimacy. Making strong eye contact is considered essential in establishing yourself as a strong business professional. Direct eye contact with superiors may be interpreted as insolence and disrespect. Direct eye contact is a very good sign that he is not only interested in you, but also interested in what you have to say. Women look at other women more and hold eye contact longer with one another than do men. Failure to make eye contact makes people feel ignored. With an increase in intimacy there will be noticeable increases to the amount and length of eye contact, resulting in long soulful looks. Lengthy stares at women would be considered inappropriate. My eyes are up here. A refusal to return eye contact in an erotically charged moment communicates that you are not certain or are uninterested. Men maintain more eye contact when talking and display non-verbal characteristics of high status, powerful people. If a person does not make eye contact while they are speaking to you, they are lying.

Eye contact is a complex nonverbal behaviour and cultural practice; its conventions are varied and contradictory. As such it can be difficult to determine if one is communicating attention or a challenge, confidence or seduction, respect or submissiveness. Likewise interpreting the eye contact of others is wrought with uncertainty and an infuriating tendency to over analyse and second-guess instinct. To further complicate the matter is the progressive disruption that media plays in relational interaction, diminishing our reliance on proximity and face-to-face conversation. Increasingly we don't look at people any more instead we look at screens. Computers and social media act as intermediaries for social contact, avatars and icons represent our identities within digital networks. These networks which use a rhetoric that promotes their function as 'making the world more open and connected,'ⁱ dilute intimacy through allowing us to hide, to be arbitrary in our friendships and to expect less from each other – we communicate in updates and 'selfies,' we do not need to talk to each other, we are not required to make eye contact. As Sherry Turkleⁱⁱ discusses we bend to the intimate with a new solicitude, fearing the risks and disappointments of our relationships our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered. We'd rather text than talk.

Focus takes the illusory tether of the social network and makes it material. It literally positions the audience to face one another in close proximity and focus on the act of making or not making direct eye contact. The sound component of the work focuses the individual experiences of the participants; one helmet directs attention to the act of looking, the other heightens the awareness of one's self being looked at. In doing so the work imposes a shared but contrasting experience facilitating a connection between the participants by removing their ability to avoid the intimacy that eye contact creates. This connection calls for a negotiation between the two active participants, to take the necessary time required to move past awkwardness and anxiety, to create a balance between staying connected but not being intrusive or confrontational and to move towards something genuine and meaningful. Such a balance is fine art.

The work proposes a unique opportunity that is both confronting and desirable. People want to connect with other people, we crave intimacy and sociality, but at the same time we fear the risks, exposure and possible failures of these human relationships. *Focus* strips away all the clutter and mechanisms we use on a regular basis to mimic but ultimately avoid intimacy and accommodates the uncommon opportunity to share a prolonged moment of offering and receiving eye contact.

ⁱ Facebook. Facebook: About [Internet]. [Place Unknown]; c2004 [cited 2013 Feb 20]. Available from <https://www.facebook.com/fcebook>

ⁱⁱ Turkle, S. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Ourselves*. New York: Basic Books; 2011. Xii p.