

THE POLITICS OF LOOKING:
MARIA MEINILD'S CRITIQUE OF VISION
BY PAOLA PALEARI



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Maria Meinild's work unfolds in the interplay of technology, psychology, and politics. Her most recent artistic investigations unpack systems of looking, revealing how modern vision is never neutral. They explore the ways technology shapes perception, exposing the power structures embedded in the act of seeing.

At the core of Meinild's ongoing projects is an interrogation of *who* gets to look, *how* they look, and *what* is made visible or invisible. She challenges the illusion of objectivity, showing that all acts of seeing are shaped by personal, political, and technological forces. In a world where machines increasingly watch and decide for us, Meinild asks urgent questions: What happens when our most private moments become sites of extraction? When AI learns to predict human behavior, do we still own any subjectivity?

BEYOND THE HUMAN GAZE

*And we watched long enough that the body cooled
on the ground, and they called us off target.¹*

Meinild's methodology reflects her conceptual concerns. She incorporates technologies such as thermal imaging, Kirlian photography, and X-ray—tools designed to extend human vision beyond its natural limits.

1 *A Drone Warrior's Torment: Ex-Air Force Pilot Brandon Bryant on His Trauma from Remote Killing*. Published on Democracy Now! on October 25th, 2013. Last accessed on March 13th, 2025. https://www.democracynow.org/2013/10/25/a_drone_warriors_torment_ex_air

These techniques, typically associated with surveillance, medical diagnostics, and forensic investigation, are repurposed to question what it means to see in a world increasingly dominated by machines.

The history of thermal imaging recalls that of infrared technology, first developed for industrial purposes but later weaponized for military surveillance. Sweden, where this technology was pioneered by FLIR Systems in the late '70s², has long been at the forefront of thermal imaging research. Initially used for navigation and rescue, thermal cameras became instruments of war, transforming from tools that *seek heat* to tools that *seek targets*.

In her research on the topic, Meinild fell upon several interviews released by Brandon Bryant, an American whistleblower and former drone pilot under the so-called War on Terror. Bryant describes the surreal experience of watching people through a drone camera, seeing them drink tea, play with their children, and even have sex—before, in some cases, striking them down with a missile. This one-sided intimacy reveals how technology literally transforms vision into a weapon: the victims are seen, but they will never see their killers.

The artist's intention in employing imaging technologies is not merely to *represent* this reality—it's to make us *feel it*.

2 Today Teledyn FLIR. Cfr "Teledyne FLIR Company History. The Global Leader in the Design, Manufacture and Marketing of Thermal Imaging Infrared Cameras". Last accessed on March 24th, 2025. <https://www.flir.eu/about/company-history/>

Meinild had the rare opportunity to borrow a thermal camera, which she used to document a range of scenarios featuring individuals, animals, and groups engaged in everyday activities like smoking, eating, and attending a demonstration. In these recordings, woven together in the two-channel video *White Hot Iron Rainbow*, the focus is taken away from identifiable features and given to the raw elements of behavior and organic functions. What remains are the shared, universal patterns—elements that transcend individuality. In a way, the work becomes an experiment in understanding the human race.

PUPPET TALK:
WHO SPEAKS WHEN MACHINES WATCH?

They made the machines. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Meat made the machines.

*That's ridiculous. How can meat make a machine?
You're asking me to believe in sentient meat.³*

The soundtrack of *White Hot Iron Rainbow* draws from a variety of sources, including a puppet voiceover delivering a cold, detached analysis of life that speculatively mimics the way AI would observe humans. When seen through a machine's gaze, life is stripped of nuances—it becomes data points, movement patterns, heat signatures.

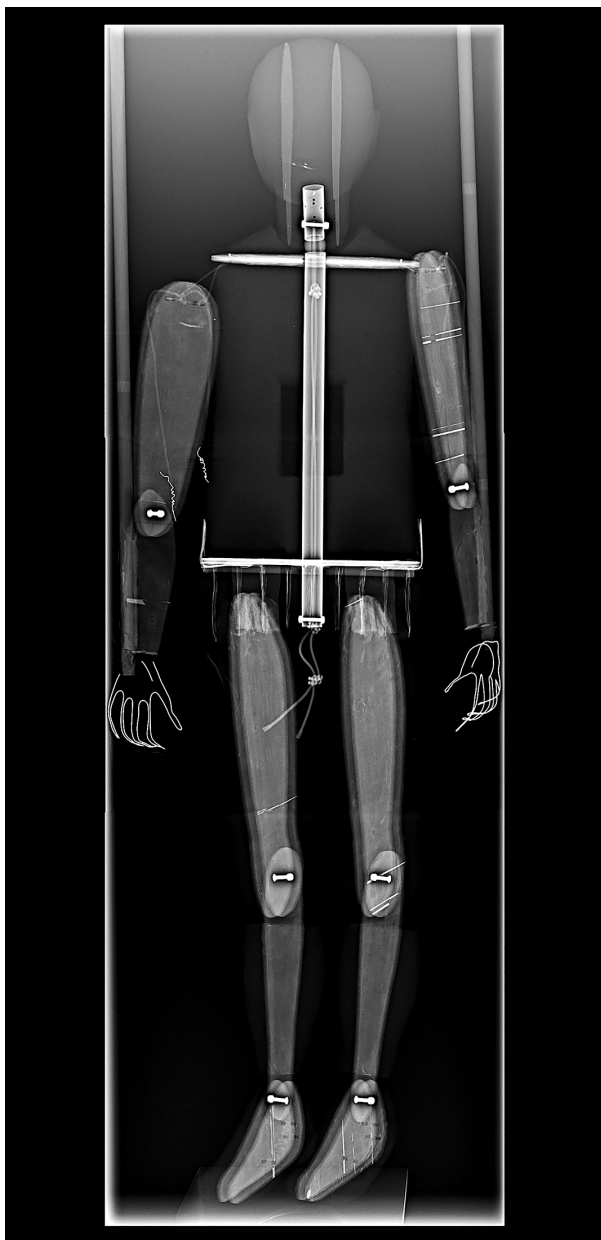
3 Extract from *They're Made Out of Meat*, a 1991 short story by Terry Bisson. Here, two extra-terrestrial beings discuss the idea (totally absurd, from their perspective) that intelligent life forms can be made of flesh.

The puppet's voice amplifies this sense of estrangement. Who is really speaking? Is it us, or is it the machine that has learnt to simulate us?

The puppet is a recurrent figure in Meinild's practice: it operates both as a metaphor for the body and as an apparatus to which we outsource a share of human functions, or even emotions.

Recently, Meinild has been experimenting with X-ray scans of the same mannequin she created in 2019 for her work *A HUM*. The result is an uncanny feeling of kinship, rooted in the recognition of the doll's anthropomorphic shape, mixed with a sense of alienation triggered by the its evident artificiality.

This alienation is crucial to Meinild's critique. Is the robot the nub of an individual that has not yet been given an identity, or conversely, an organism stripped of all its seductive layers? And what happens to our sense of self when the robot is the one observing, not the other way around?



Maria Meinild, X-ray of a rod puppet, 150 × 75 cm, 2025.

SURVEILLANCE AND THE ILLUSION OF MORALITY

Those who practice justice do so involuntarily and because they have not the power to be unjust.⁴

Meinild's work also resonates with the philosophical debate on justice and surveillance. Plato's *Republic* and the myth of the Ring of Gyges come to mind: a shepherd discovers a ring that grants him invisibility and—freed from the consequences of his actions—succumbs to corruption. This 2400-year-old story suggests that morality is dictated by external control rather than internal virtue.

The modern parallel is striking. What happens when supervision becomes ubiquitous? Scandinavian societies have historically been built on high levels of social trust—the “Nordic Gold”, as a 2017 study by the Nordic Council of Ministers has called it. But a context where every action is increasingly monitored, analyzed, and potentially weaponized doesn't seem like the optimal terrain for this form of capital to thrive.

Meinild's insistence on exploring invisibility in its various meanings is a reflection of this tension. If surveillance defines morality, then what are the implications of being invisible? Can it be a form of resistance, or does it render one powerless in a world that demands constant visibility?

4 Plato, *Republic*, 360b–d (trans. Benjamin Jowett).

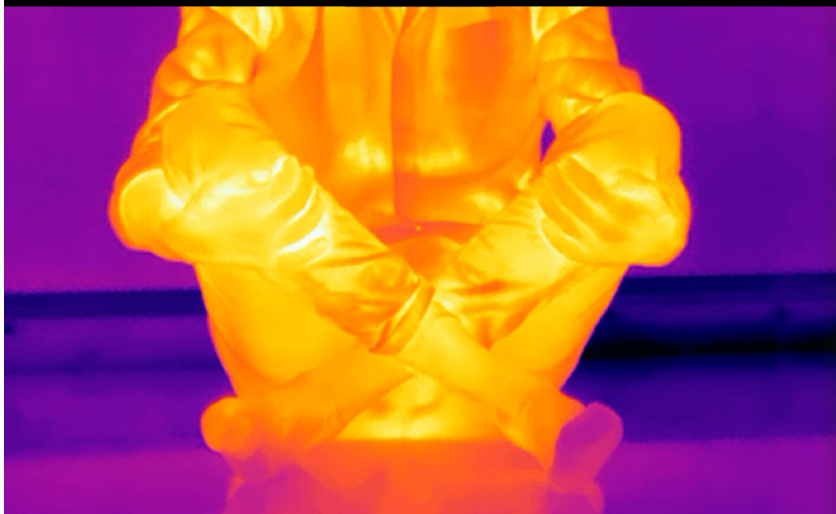
Her experiments with Kirlian photography add another layer to this inquiry. Long associated with the mystical idea of an *aura*—a supposed energy field surrounding living beings—Kirlian photography has often been misinterpreted as capturing an immaterial essence.

In reality, it records coronal discharge, an electrical phenomenon reacting to moisture and conductivity. But this is a misconception that speaks to the ancient human longing to see beyond the visible; to reveal something as elusive as spirit.

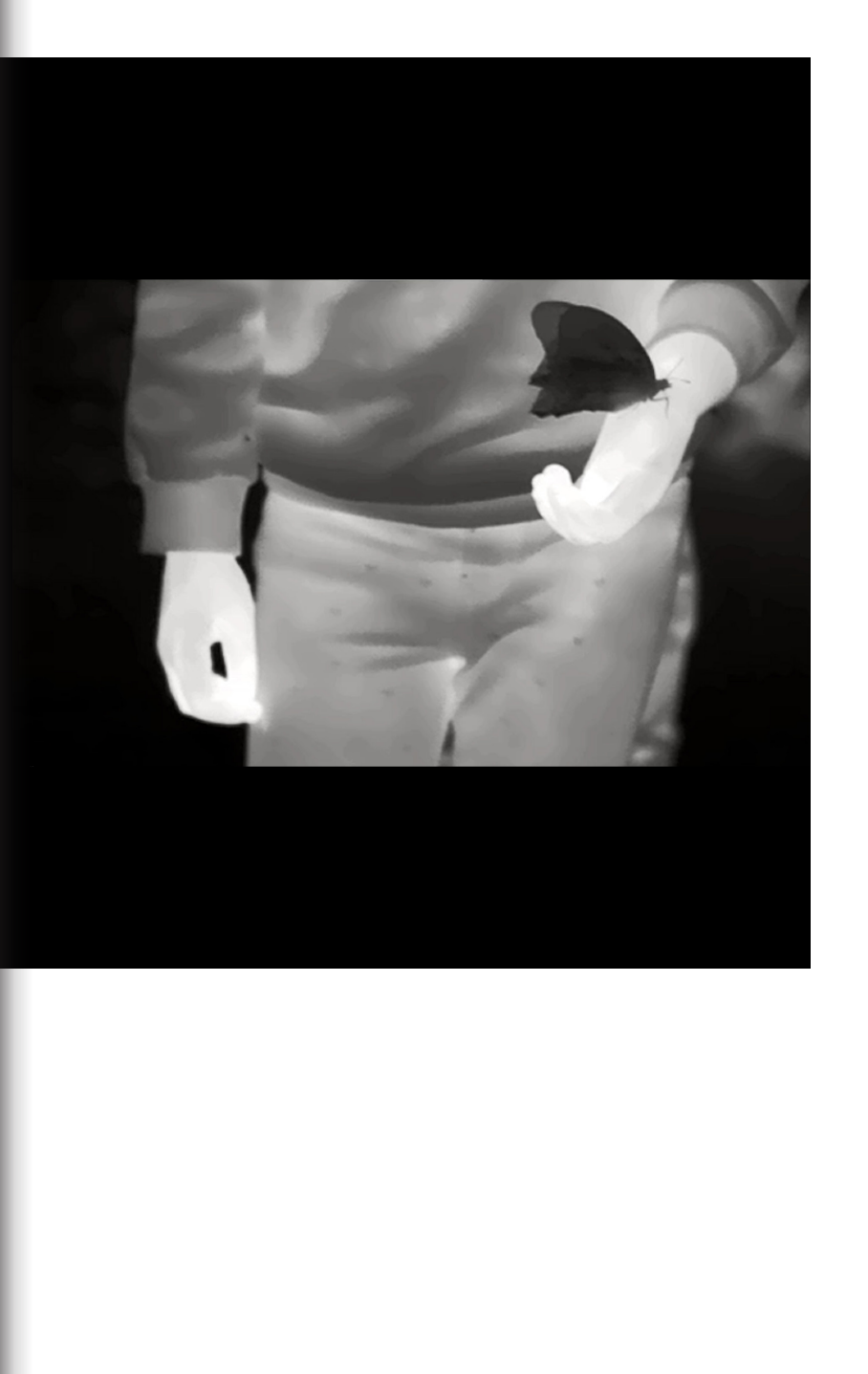
By incorporating this technique, Meinild blurs the line between scientific observation and speculative interpretation, echoing the way imaging technologies profess objectivity while shaping the lives of those they capture.

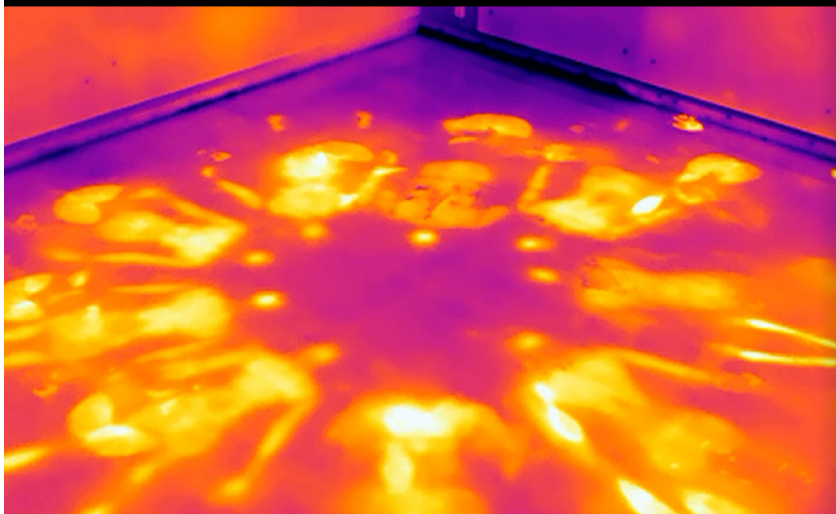
Maria Meinild dismantles the illusion of neutral vision, revealing how seeing is always a site of power. In an age where machines see more than we do, Meinild forces us to reflect upon what happens when the act of looking is no longer our own, and whether we can still claim to control our narratives when we no longer control our gaze.

Her art reminds us that looking is never innocent. It is always, inevitably, political.

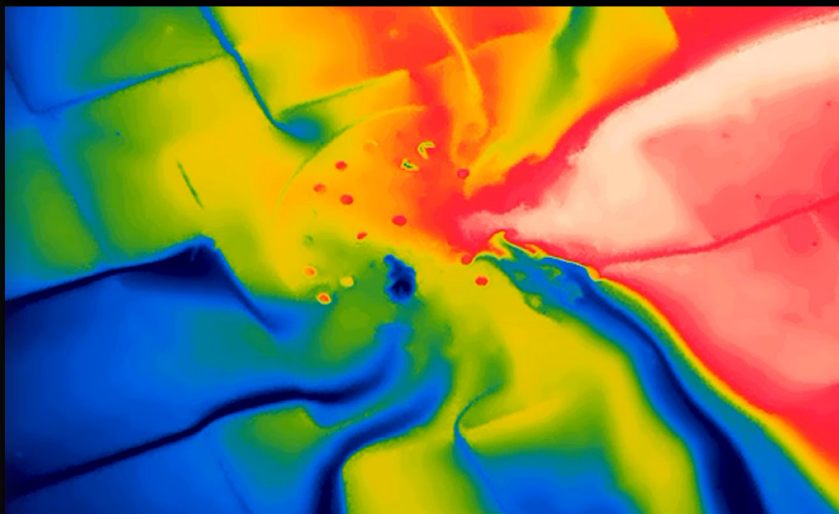


Maria Meinild, *White Hot Iron Rainbow*, video still, 2025.





Maria Meinild, *White Hot Iron Rainbow*, video still, 2025.



MARIA MEINILD

is a Danish/Swedish artist based in Copenhagen. She explores social behavior and political undertones in everyday life through video installations, photography, and sculpture. Her work explores the socio-psychological interplay between objects, technology, and human beings, examining how these relationships shape systems of power, social dynamics, and surveillance mechanisms. Meinild's work has been exhibited at Kunstraum Innsbruck, Post Territory Ujeongguk in Seoul, the National Gallery of Denmark, REDCAT in Los Angeles, Künstlerhaus KM in Graz, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, and Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art in Copenhagen, among other institutions. Maria Meinild holds an MFA from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and has also studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm.

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