Stereo
Curated by Otto Bonnen

Alongside the new technology of photography, stereoscopy became widely popular in the nineteenth century. Viewed through a stereoscope, two photographs taken from slightly different viewpoints merge into a single scene with depth. The effect felt magical: a flat card seemed to open onto an almost tangible space. Photographic development itself can seem magical, its chemistry taking on an alchemical quality as a previously invisible image comes into view. Stereoscopy offers another kind of emergence, as a spatial image takes shape through the act of looking itself. The autostereograms later popularised by the *Magic Eye* books, whose name already evoked the wonder of the experience, condense this encounter into a single printed pattern. Without the aid of an apparatus, a spatial figure emerges from the page through the coordination of the eyes alone. The image reveals something that had previously eluded the gaze.

Technique, effect and illusion are closely connected. Artistic processes give a work its material form and establish the conditions for its effects. These unfold as the arrangement encounters light, space and perception. An illusion arises where what we perceive diverges from the material conditions. In this process, a peculiar virtuosity is attributed to the perceiving eye. The work prepares an appearance that takes shape only in the encounter with a viewer: perceived depth or movement need not correspond to physical depth or movement in the surface itself.

The presentation of an effect can have a theatrical quality, drawing attention to the conditions under which something appears. We may recognise the presence of a trick while its workings remain elusive. Understanding the method need not diminish the illusion's appeal. Even as we see how it is produced, we may still wish to surrender to its magic. Its staging may be evident, its artifice part of the pleasure. Looking carries an expectation that a surface might disclose something further, or that an appearance might resolve. Much as in a *Magic Eye* image, a change in attention can bring either the material construction or its perceptual effect to the fore. A fragment can betray the presence of an image without allowing it to be seen as a whole. Concealment invites the expectation of a reveal, holding our attention on what remains out of view. What we know can sustain the desire to look, without settling what we see. As Wizzy Nodwig says: "What you see is not what you get!"