

Exhibition reviews

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Too much world: A Hito Steyerl retrospective

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My visit to Hito Steyerl's first European mid-career museum retrospective at the Van Abbe museum in Eindhoven (curated by Annie Fletcher, 12 April 2014 – 22 June 2014) provided me with a plethora of impressions hard to summarise in a short review. As an artist making experimental film-essays and installations with webcam-generated found footage, I find this critically-acclaimed artist/scholar's artwork and theoretical endeavours of relevance to anyone involved with digital aesthetics. After five hours at the museum taking in the intertwinement of Steyerl's artistic practice and her writings, I realised how the articulation between these two discourses is key to decrypting the works. In order to mirror my response I have written a tripartite review of the retrospective, including a descriptive analysis of some of her writings, the exhibition dispositif, and her film-based artworks.



Fig. 1: 'How Not To Be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File' (2013).

The writings

Steyerl's writings are central to grasping the extent to which her work is part of an in-depth analysis of the post-financial crisis contemporary world, which characterises and is characterised by the networked digital culture of the Internet. Exploring feminism, militarisation, and mainstream entertainment, Steyerl (PhD in Philosophy) has developed concepts and notions borrowing from critical theory and media studies when theorising the economy of digital images – the most salient of which and of relevance to this review are 'circulationism' and 'the poor image'.

[We] have long since entered into a new paradigm – a space of no return – a free-flowing system of 'circulation' that circumscribes and influences everything from the government to love.¹

In Steyerl's view of an updated version of circulationism as a mode of production, the contemporary relations based on sharing and uploading user-generated data cross the limits of the Internet and enter the so-called material reality with direct political impact. The artist sees this as the actual revolutionary potential of a culture dominated by digital technologies, if indeed put to productive (i.e. radical) use. Moreover, like Jonathan Crary,² Steyerl claims that cultural production, distribution, and consumption as the driving forces behind the attention economy are tightly embedded in the medium aesthetics themselves; we should not analyse one while disregarding the others. In her text 'Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?',³ Steyerl seemingly borrows Steven Shaviro's notion of the Internet as *un-dead*⁴ when focusing on the shift the status of images has undergone within a simultaneously passive and omnipresent environment. Accordingly, images get altered – they modulate once they cross the screen's threshold, such as when

[a] nail paint clip turns into an Instagram riot. An upload comes down as a shitstorm. An animated GIF materialises as a pop-up airport transit gate.⁵

Borrowing once more from Shaviro's vast work, this time from *Post-Cinematic Affect*, Steyerl equates the modulating qualities of the image as active embodiments of contemporary capitalist modes of re-financing, or as she puts it when paraphrasing Shaviro: 'a blueprint for austerity infrastructure'.⁶ The Internet is thus omnipresent beyond the screen, impacting lives and the economy both as means of surveillance and as mediator for social relations. Steyerl points out that this space and time are permeated by a lack of stability that escapes a state of total control, even if created by its own infrastructures and superstructures. Paraphrasing her, they conflate organisational platforms that float on ever-updating algorithmic playgrounds, alternating order and chaos, potentially constructive and

destructive: big data modulating into art works or policies for implementation. But the maximum control society has also become a pool of possibilities since the access to the means has been disseminated across a rhizome of connectivity, allowing a seemingly endless input resource out of and into reality. As an updated form of self-propelled circulationism, Steyerl proposes to us, end-users of networked communications, '[w]hy not slowly withdraw from an *undead* Internet to build a few others next to it?'⁷

A notion central to circulationism is the aesthetics of digital visuality, which arises from the constant circulation of deficient imagery. In her text 'In Defense of the Poor Image',⁸ Steyerl describes the aesthetics and political status of a digital image as it decays across platforms through numerous copies and transfers – a result of the process entailed in circulationism. She calls the result a poor image since it seems to occupy a hierarchically lower position in relation to other higher-resolution versions, with the cinematic image at the top of the scale. Characterised by very low resolution, poor images are not considered as important as those with guaranteed high rates of visuality. This makes them passive of all sorts of treatments, from cut-ups and paste-ups to mash-ups. She proposes we consider the political potential of using such images within the context of Julio García Espinosa's 'For an Imperfect Cinema', which refuses the mainstream elitist means of production and instead creates a more realistic 'people's cinema', with the aesthetics of the poor image as a form of content⁹ – an artistic and political statement. As Steyerl notes:

[t]he poor image – ambivalent as its status may be – thus takes its place in the genealogy of carbon-copied pamphlets, cine-train agit-prop films, underground video magazines and other nonconformist materials, which aesthetically often used poor materials.¹⁰

As she further develops her thoughts on what the economy of these low-resolution, high-speed sharable visuals may become, Steyerl indulges in her customary conceptual jump cuts, stating that the use of such means for artistic output

is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.¹¹

The exhibition dispositif^{d2}

For this exhibition, Steyerl worked together with Studio Miessen to devise a specific architectural space created in the ten galleries of the Van Abbe museum's old building, intentionally challenging pre-existing notions of a ten-year retrospective. This dispositif embodies her theories of a renascent circulationism – a new productivism – in which the digital crosses the threshold of its platforms, invading external locations to impact on social relations. Presented as a loop due to the architectural layout in the space of the museum, the exhibition leads the visitor through a linear corridor that encircles the room, with the installation *Adorno's Grey* (2012) at its centre. Surprised by new spatial realms that seemingly match the unfolding chapters around which the retrospective is organised, the visitor is first filmed by CCTV cameras and immediately digitally erased within the installation *Surveillance: Disappearance* (2014) in the lobby, before encountering blown-up Japanese porn pictures in *Shunga* (2014) and actually vanishing within an architectural framework hosting all other interventions, projections, and installations. These works are sometimes grouped in a single space, as in the room housing *Is the Museum a Battlefield* (2013) and *Lovely Andrea* (2007), or distributed along the passageway giving access to individual works like *Guards* (2012). Her most recent film *Liquidity* (2014), where the main character is water, is presented in a wide-open space – an amphitheatre of sorts, or walk-in cinema – where we can watch a big projection while comfortably lying on beanbags sprawled across the floor. Other more conventional exhibition spaces house the installations *The War ac-*



Fig. 2: 'Liquidity' (2014).

ording to Ebay (2010), with censored images made by soldiers, and *Strike* (2010), where the artist hits a screen to reveal its materiality as display platform.

Part of the actual visual material is made up of poor images intertwined with imagery derived from higher resolution/compression rates. Visual languages ranging from those of Hollywood cinema, independent film, experimental documentary, and television advertising colourfully clash and noisily overlap, stimulating a dazzling excitement in the viewer. Besides blending uneven audiovisual materials Steyerl also provocatively intermingles all matters of presentational methods, from DVD players displaying images within standard video projections to hanging flat monitors. All of these choices are closely related to the differing audiovisual materials on display – as in other forms of post-expanded cinema, we witness the presence of a literal yet very conscious self-reflexive form of content. As Thomas Elsaesser writes about Steyerl:

here is a documentary filmmaker very much aware of the increasingly difficult status of the documentary as genre and practice, especially in the digital age, especially when poised between cinema and television on one side, and art space, museum or gallery on the other.¹³



Fig. 3: 'Shunga' (2014).

The artworks

Focusing on digital technology, feminism, and militarisation as themes, Steyerl amalgamates pop culture and documentary traditions to bring forth a political

discourse that is as complex as its images. To propose an idea of how theory pervades the works, I will specifically focus on highlighting three experimental films that form the backbone of her practice dealing with the construction and limitations of documentary filmmaking: *November* (2004), *Lovely Andrea* (2007), and *In Free Fall* (2010).

Presented as a sort of (staged) autobiography, the self-reflexive *November* plays with the fictional constructs and artefacts of documentary filmmaking by reflecting upon the becoming of an image. As a film reference the title refers to November, the month that comes after (Eisenstein's) *October* – a time emerging after the possibility of revolution, internationalism, and universal idealism. However, the temporality of *November* is determined by its own production modes and material conditions: a fiction of a past that determines the present of the film and its actual conceptualisation. The film also brings forth a compression of space by highlighting the recycling of GDR guns used by the Turkish army against the Kurds after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The storyline of the film is that of Andrea Wolf, Steyerl's best friend at 17, with whom she shot her first Super 8 short in 1983 that was inspired by martial arts (Bruce Lee) and fighting pin-up girls (Russ Meyer). Her combative friend later changed her name to Sehîr Rohani upon joining the Kurdish Liberation Movement in Northern Iraq, where she was shot dead in 1998. Her body never came back to Germany, Steyerl's narrating voice tells us. She is posthumously hailed as a martyr in street protests in Germany, where posters with her photo are held up by demonstrators. Andrea became an image – of martyrdom. Steyerl films the screen showing her last interview on Kurdish television, so close as to reveal the texture of the display. She later finds Andrea's poster in a movie theatre hanging among those of (other) pin-ups. At the end of the film, revealing the constructed aspects of *November*, the filmmaker lets her own image be recorded by another director during protests against the Iraq war, where his off-screen voice suggests she should look as if 'thinking about Andrea' while holding a candle – thereby further exposing the mechanisms of the documentary apparatus.

In *Lovely Andrea*, Steyerl films herself looking for a picture allegedly taken when, as a young film student in Japan, she posed as a model for *Shibari* (bondage photography). Chased by her producer, who repeatedly asks her what the film is all about, Steyerl meets rope masters, editors, and photographers who search among thousands of photos and nostalgically evoke the 'good old days' when police restriction made business thrive. Signs of contamination between being restricted as image and actually bound on a physical level are further emphasised by the cross-editing of images of bondage models and those of prisoners. In Guantanamo Bay detainees in orange overalls are on their knees with their hands tied behind their backs, while in Abu Graib they are shown bound to each other with their heads covered by black bags.

During a discussion about the lure of voyeurism originated by the depiction of submissive poses, the Japanese editor of bondage magazines claims that 'shame is the libido of the brain'. Regularly returning to images of Spiderman both in animated and live action versions, the rope is equated with a web, something stringy that bounds and frees at the same time. We are offered an image removed from the film's trailer in 2001 – a helicopter is caught in a spider web and weightlessly floats between the Twin Towers. As an alleged result of the detective-like search, a picture finally emerges from the sex archives that is agreed to be 'the one' – captioned 'Lovely Andrea', as Steyerl used her friend's name as a pseudonym. This sequence is restaged a few times for the camera. However, even when the conclusive tone has been achieved we feel as if some pieces of the narrative elude us – there is a prevalent *untold* residing somewhere between real live action and fictional construct. The narrative further develops when Ageha, a 'self-suspension' model that acts as Steyerl's translator in the film, plays her floating bondage act for the camera. These images are edited in parallel with a 1980s video clip in which Donna Summer repeatedly sings the line 'she works hard for the money'. Ageha's voice tells us of the pleasures of being bound: 'in the air I'm really free, and on the other hand I am bound with the rope to the centre of something ... maybe I cannot live without this feeling anymore'. During this interview the words 'bondage is work' and 'work is bondage' appear as informative title cards. Right at the end of the film, when asked whether she is a feminist, Steyerl vehemently replies, 'definitely!', challenging stereotypes of gender-oriented artists avoiding the appropriation of pornographic representations of the feminine that are primarily intended for the male gaze.

With *In Free Fall*, Steyerl's narrating voice reads from Sergei Tetryakov's 'The Biography of the Object', in which the object itself describes its life-cycle, including its mode of production and underlying social relations. The image is that of an airplane crash. Against the background of the California Mojave Desert a man with a cap appears – the Captain – who tells us about his business selling airplane shells and scraps during the economic downturn. The exploding aircraft is shown on a portable DVD player lying on the ground amidst wreckage. Specifically, the film looks at the half-life of an airplane commissioned by Howard Hughes for TWA that later was sold to the Israeli air force and ended up in flames in a Hollywood blockbuster. This is the biography of the Boeing 707-700 4X-JYI that spectacularly explodes in *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994) when Keanu Reeves' bus collides with it, before having its remnants subsequently sold to China for aluminium production. 'You're making money no matter what you sell', the Captain says, as we are made to conclude that the end of an object propels the existence of another. The screen of the DVD player shows the assembly line transforming the airplane shrapnel into a melted paste that will finally emerge as DVDs. We witness how an aircraft



Fig. 4: 'Lovely Andrea' (2007).

becomes the prime matter for building the platform upon which the image of its death will be stored. As sizzling aluminium flows Steyerl concludes: 'matter lives on in different forms, this does not apply to humans', still reading from Tetryakov's book. More than rehabilitating a proto-object-oriented ontology, the filmmaker brings to our attention the literal shift from representation to modulation as materiality transubstantiates into image and back, eluding all physical boundaries.

These three experimental films show us that images have gone beyond depicting pre-existing conditions and in the process have acquired a temporal dimen-



Fig. 5: 'In Free Fall' (2010).

sion of their own – a continuous present, as they are *ongoing*. They have crossed the threshold of our screens and invaded the physical world – and moved offline. In doing so they shape our social environment, creating and influencing events in a constant flow of modulation. The images will at some point move back to the screen before taking on other spaces. As seen before, this form of circulation could work to our advantage should we develop it as a new mode of production. We could then shift our perception from what an image is depicting to what it is actually doing and where it is going. This means we should not neglect the inherent revolutionary potential of pop culture but instead use it as a form of expression and multiply it – not merely bending but also creating other circuits.

As a case in point, beyond the voyeurism inspired by bondage imagery (its primary function), Steyerl alerts us to the underlying strength of women who, even if reductively depicted as sex symbols like Russ Meyer's full-breasted leading character in *Faster, Pussy Cat! Kill! Kill!* (1965), can emerge as ideological and strategic tools from within cultural junk. Unlike the Dutch art critic Hans den Hartog Jager, who has criticised the alleged homogeneity of 'political art',¹⁴ I believe Steyerl's artworks propose a less than simplistic approach to political or engaged art, rather than producing yet another 'repetitive' (leftish) form of discourse. Instead, in the tradition of Marker, Godard, and Farocki, her work may actually provide the viewer with functional knowledge of potential forms of action that extend beyond the screens, even if initially born amidst the mass proliferation of trashy mainstream culture.

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Images

The images are views of the exhibition Hito Steyerl: A retrospective.

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Curator: Annie Fletcher (curator exhibitions) in cooperation with Nick Aikens (guest curator)

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Notes

1. Aikens & Fletcher 2014, p. 8.
2. Crary 2014.
3. Steyerl 2013.
4. Shaviro 2003.
5. Steyerl 2013, p. 4.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 8.
8. Steyerl 2009.
9. Deleuze & Guatari 1988, pp. 43-44. 'Hjemslev was able to weave a net out of the notions *matter*, *content*, and *expression*, *form* and *substance*. These were the strata, said Hjemslev. Now this net has the advantage of breaking with the form-content duality, since there was a form of content no less than a form of expression... *the first articulation concerns content, the second expression*. The distinction between the two articulations is not between forms and substances but between content and expression, expression having just as much substance as content and content just as much form as expression.'
10. Ibid., p. 8.
11. Ibid., p. 9.
12. Steyerl 2009.
13. Elssaesser 2013.
14. Den Hartog-Jager 2014.

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