



NEW BOOKS

ARTIST PAGES **BRUCE MCCLURE**
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REVIEWS **HITO STEYERL, MARK LEWIS**
PEGGY AHWESH, MALCOLM LEGRICE



HITO STEYERL

Artists Space, New York
March 8 – May 24, 2015

It would be a feat of endurance, but a pleasurable and worthwhile one, to watch all of the pieces by Hito Steyerl in this exhibition occupying both venues at Artists Space in NYC. Steyerl is an eloquent narrator of the current conditions of image circulation, media flows, globalized geopolitical spaces, and a host of other interconnected and urgent zones of discursivity. To spend time with her work is to be drawn into shifting and theoretically complex spaces spun from media fragments, radical political sympathies, and pop-culture mash-ups with a sometimes absurdist aesthetic.

Stowed in the basement of Artists Space Books and Talks was the earliest of this body of work—video essays that more directly emerge from Steyerl's training as a documentary filmmaker. Incorporating investigative strategies and associations built through montage, they address ways in which meaning is fluid while images circulate through disparate spaces. In the widely seen

November (2004), Steyerl weaves together recollections of her friend Andrea Wolf, who was killed in 1998 when she joined the Kurdish Liberation movement. Wolf's image, which the movement appropriated to portray a martyr in a poster, is played against scenes from a Russ Meyers-inflected feminist fight film she and Steyerl made together during their early years, TV footage of Steyerl posed as a mourner at a political event, and other fragments that together fashion an unstable space of documentary representation.

In *Lovely Andrea* (2007), the name of Andrea Wolf is appropriated as the stage name for Steyerl during her short stint as a Japanese bondage model over 20 years ago. Seeking to locate and reclaim her single bondage image she takes us along on her sly and somewhat comical encounters in the Japanese bondage industry. Her translator, a bondage performer herself, claims bondage makes her feel free and, after several scenes intercut with Spiderman, we learn she is also studying



Hito Steyerl, *PREVIOUS PAGE Liquidity, Inc.* (2014), installation view. **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** *November* (2004), *Duty-Free Art* (2015), *I Dreamed a Dream: Politics in the Age of Mass Art Production* (2013), *Lovely Andrea* (2007), *In Free Fall* (2010), *Guards* (2012). Installation views. All images courtesy the artist with acknowledgement to Artists Space. Photos © Matthew Septimus.

web design. Through this playful portrayal of a sex industry and added texts—i.e. “Bondage is Work” and “Work is Bondage”—the dodgy morality and kitschy aesthetics of the porn world are sutured deftly to noble questions of labor, freedom and agency.

At Artists Space Exhibitions three videos articulate themes and push the envelope of montage, even bringing the work into three-dimensional installation through expertly designed, inhabitable spaces. In *Guards* (2012), Steyerl interviews guards at the Art Institute of Chicago, who have previous experience as police or military, and playfully invokes a sense of crisis in the typically bourgeois space of aesthetic contemplation. Set in painting galleries of the museum we watch one guard perform his tactics for securing a space (“safe, soul engage, scan, home...”), and navigate the galleries with ninja stealth.

The video *In Free Fall* (2010) is shown in a space modeled after the first class cabin of an airplane. This free-ranging documentary spectacle centers around an interview with a dealer at an airplane graveyard in the California desert, but also incorporates a young Israeli describing the lives of a Boeing 77 jet, the international trade in aluminum, references to three films depicting the 1976 hijacking by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the DVD as an unstable commodity in the digital revolution, among other things. Here ‘the crash’ is an economic crash or an airplane crash and the overall meditation on the materiality, circulation and lifespan of objects is delivered with a show biz song and dance affect. In *Liquidity, Inc.*, a video shown in a vast room bathed in blue light, Steyerl pushes montage a step further: stories about investment banker turned MMA fighter Jacob Wood slip and slide into water references and collide with various media forms conjured together in the same space—superimposed type, chat windows, hash tags and 3D motion graphics—to demonstrate a kind of savvy excellerationism.¹

The three pieces located on the main floor at Artists Space Books and Talks, *I Dreamed a Dream* (2013), *Is the Museum a Battlefield* (2013) and *Duty-Free Art* (2015) are all previously documented lectures, presented here with a second monitor for displaying texts, web browsers and related images. Two are accompanied by a FEMA sandbag barrier fashioned into uncomfortable seating. All three address the museum as a site of conflict in some way and further attest to Steyerl’s knack for juxtaposition and association or even what you might call ‘idea recursion.’ While in most of the works, Steyerl’s performance as an interviewer or an investigator is somewhat visible,

here, in the lecture pieces, Steyerl’s presence as a performative body is made explicit. A lecture is not merely an intellectual discourse but an apparatus to be made transparent.

Duty Free Art, the newest piece, draws heavily upon the work of Keller Easterling and her concept of infrastructural space—the virtual engineering, at a global scale, of buildings, cities, and spaces so they might accommodate a well-greased flow of global capital.² This concept is primarily manifested in Steyerl’s invocation of Freeport zones, the tax-free interstitial zones where multi-million dollar art is stored (and which could possibly be the greatest museums in the world). As Steyerl delivers the talk, addressing emails from Syrian government accounts about the construction of a new museum leaked by Wikileaks, Rem Koolhaas, a dream about a target-like symbol, and a cultural center turned temporarily into a refugee camp; the second monitor allows us to watch her interact with a web browser. Observing her click through to another tab and highlight text reveals that the process of researching is also an apparatus—one drawing on rootless vectors of information—and the browser is an infrastructural space. In *Duty Free Art* the two-monitor configuration is accompanied by a sandbox, onto which animations and diagrams are projected from above. The sandbox is—according to Steyerl in her recent conversation with Laura Poitras (*Artforum*)—not only what soldiers use to “plot a terrain and analyze lines of sight,” but also “sandboxing is also a term in computer security, where you basically fence off virtual environments.” Even the physical trappings of Steyerl’s exhibition are fluid and dynamic in their signifying duties.

Whatever we can say about the work of Hito Steyerl, she has already said in writing, lecture, video essay, or conversation, in a better and more complex, speculative, urgent and playful way. We remain energized by her self-excavating real-time media archaeology and look forward to more sweeping views of our post-production world.

RACHEL STEVENS

¹ For Steven’s detailed analysis of *Liquidity Inc.* (2014) with reference to Lev Manovich’s *In the Language of New Media*, see the “Notes and Supplements” section (under “News & Commentary”) on the MFJ website: <http://www.mfj-online.org/stevens-steyerl/>.

² See Keller Easterling’s book *Extrastatecraft*.



Hito Steyerl, *Duty-Free Art* (2015), installation view. Courtesy the artist with acknowledgement to Artists Space. Photos © Matthew Septimus.



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