

Hito Steyerl, *This is the future*. Art Gallery of Ontario. October 24, 2019–February 23, 2020

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Hito Steyerl

This is the future

Art Gallery of Ontario

October 24, 2019–February 23, 2020

Artist and cultural critic Hito Steyerl, widely recognized for her writing and video works, explores the mostly invisible relations among contemporary art, networked digital technology, and the power structures that aim to control them. In her exhibition *This is the future* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, eleven works – all video installations but for one – offer a tour through her development, from her earliest single-channel videos to later installations that engage sophisticated techniques and ideas. Montage is Steyerl's principle strategy: the playful, sometimes dazzling, collisions among pop-culture imagery, dance beats, and eclectic scholarship and philosophy belie her dead-serious concerns – domination and exploitation by political and economic powers. The formal and thematic oppositions developed within both individual and paired works signal Steyerl's embrace of a central feature of contemporary life, contradiction; her investigations into hegemonic realms are always countered by restorative processes of resistance.

Exemplifying this dynamic, the first two installations, *Duty Free Art* (2015) and *Freeplots* (2019), consider the role of artists whose efforts are increasingly commodified for private investment. *Duty Free Art* began as a lecture illustrated with flows of internet imagery and text. That recorded lecture was here projected on two surfaces: a large vertical monitor and, laid out horizontally in front of it, a large bed of sand, referencing the Middle Eastern regions often referenced in her work.

Steyerl's talk presents interconnected information and anecdotes that wind their way, in labyrinthine fashion, toward a thesis about the possibilities for art in our conflicted times: architect Rem Koolhaas's design for a Syrian National Museum considered by Bashar al-Assad's government just before civil war began; a cultural centre in the Kurdish city, Suruç, in Turkey that was transformed into a refugee camp for Yazidi refugees; and the art museum of the future – secret art collections hoarded in freeports, such as Geneva, where the 0.1 percent shelter valuable artworks from national taxation and public access. Concluding the presentation, Steyerl ponders alternate art praxes – based on a “bottom-up model” that evades art market capture.

Freeplots seems a literal response to that proposal for art “from below,” as its primary material is dirt. The project, developed in two other cities prior to Toronto, engaged community groups



HellYeahWeFuckDie, 2016, installation view, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2019, courtesy of Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper, Berlin, photo : Art Gallery of Ontario

struggling with crises in housing and public space. Here, Steyerl connected with the city's Tibetan refugee community, whose members filled wooden planter boxes, shaped like the crates that sequester private art, with culturally important plants such as jasmine, stinging nettle, and marigold.

Dialectical discussion similarly occurs within the video environment *The City of Broken Windows* (2018). Set at either end of a gallery, two large monitors presented different perspectives on private and public control of space. *Broken Windows* documents researchers in a British airplane hangar smashing hundreds of windows. The recorded sounds will help with development of AI technology designed to alert police to private property break-ins. In *Unbroken Windows*, art activists in Camden, New Jersey, struggling with urban decay paint scenes of plants and drapery onto wooden panels. Mimicking real windows, they are installed over broken windows to protect the community from police attention. The conversation is expanded by text lining the surrounding walls that introduces economic and criminological theories of “creative destruction” and “broken window theory” that consider the positive value of destruction and are sometimes used to justify war. Included are quotations by nineteenth-century economist Frédéric Bastiat, who, in his “broken window fallacy,” disputes the notion that destruction stimulates the economy.

In a smaller room, two of Steyerl's earliest videos, screened consecutively, presented themes and content that overlap here, and in other works. *November* (2004) introduces a figure influential to Steyerl's introduction to Middle Eastern regions and conflicts, and particularly to Kurdish struggles.

The video incorporates old footage from a mock martial arts film made by Steyerl and her young friends, one of whom, Andrea Wolf, rides into the sunset on a motorcycle after heroically defeating her opponents. Years later, Steyerl

reconnected with her old friend after seeing her image on Kurdistan Workers' Party posters. Wolf, involved with the resistance movement against Turkish oppression, was murdered. *November*, its title referencing Russia's October revolution, follows Steyerl as she investigates the activist struggles that led to her friend's death.

The narrative driving the paired autobiographical film essay *Lovely Andrea* (2007) is Steyerl's search, in Japan, for photographs made of herself when, as a film student, she worked as a bondage model. Throughout her search we learn about that image industry, the men who control it, and the women who perform



ExtraSpaceCraft, 2016, installation view, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2019, courtesy of Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper, Berlin, photo : Art Gallery of Ontario

in it. Underlying the detective story structure in both films are meditations on gendered, political, and existential power relations.

Remaining works show increasingly sophisticated technique and content. The violence in two video works is underlined by the parkour military training environment in which they are installed. In *HellYeahWeFuckDie* (2016), robots are kicked, pushed, and hit

by engineers testing their balance and stability. Because these AI beings are designed to look like humans, the violence inflicted on them is painful to watch. In *Robots Today* (2016), the abuse is reversed with the suggestion of drone robots hurting humans. The video tours through a recently bombed Kurdish enclave, Diyarbakir, in Turkey. Overlaying scenes of destroyed homes and distraught inhabitants, a voice asks, “Siri, who destroyed this city?” Adding another layer of complexity is the historical anecdote that Al Jazari, the first inventor of automata in the twelfth century and creator of over 100 robots, lived in this same city.

A poetic lyricism pervades other works. In reference to the water and martial arts themes presented in the video installation *Liquidity Inc.* (2014), viewers could recline on a large blue wave-like structure cushioned with gym-mat material. Water, as metaphor for movement, change, and fluidity, circulates through the video, weaving together references to weather, transnational capital, and globalized flows of production and migration, the substance of our bodies and planet, the pleasure and power of swimming, and tsunamis. The central character is Jacob Wood, who, after losing his position at Lehman Brothers during the 2008 financial crisis, remakes himself as a Mixed Martial Arts fighter. The advice of martial arts master Bruce Lee intones throughout – “Be water my friend!”

Video exhibitions present logistical challenges for large museums. Though not entirely met, as poor sound compromised full access to some of the

works, that the AGO introduced this important artist is commendable. As power consolidates in state and corporate bunkers and market forces threaten the social role of art, we need artists like Steyerl, whose research intelligently and playfully disentangles technology's role.

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