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Cover
Still from Community Action Center (2010) by A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner; photo by A.L. Steiner

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displayed on two high-definition television screens, Hito Steyerl’s work *Abstract* (2012) vies for the viewer’s attention, even as it severs it. On one screen, Steyerl herself comes into focus wearing a Ramones T-shirt. Within the frame, Steyerl holds another screen: that of a smartphone, the logo of its American super-corporation tugging at the center of a shot framed, in turn, by the Brandenburg Gate and a Berlin office building belonging to weapons manufacturer Lockheed Martin. The words “Shot/Countershoot” light up a black transition across both screens: “one opens the door to the other.” The references *Abstract* makes are instantly manifold. On the one hand, “shot/countershoot” refers to the filmic technique of characters looking at each other across distinct frames, and on the other, to the sentiment of counterattack in battle. *Abstract* is about Andrea Wolf, a childhood friend of Steyerl turned radical activist and Kurdish militant, who was murdered in 1998 by Turkish forces. *Abstract* is about the ways in which “the grammar of cinema follows the grammar of battle,” including the inherent violence of the cut and the edit, carried out by filmmakers in pursuit of their craft. At the remote desert location where her friend was murdered, Steyerl is guided through a taxonomy of detritus by a local Kurdish man. “This is a piece of cloth. This is a jacket. This is an ammunition container.” On the opposite screen, film, battle, and conceit flicker white on black once more: “This is a shot. This is a hellfire missile.”

The attention granted video works projected onto white canvases or left to repeat, indefinitely, on freestanding high-definition televisions, chimes between three main subjects: artist, artwork, and viewer. But in an era of multiplicity, arguably brought on by our submersion in the internet and the web, the stasis of the video exhibition—i.e., “this work is thirty-one minutes long and will repeat at five minutes past each hour”—says nothing of networked subjectivities. Video is inherently a broadcast medium, for even if its consumers can walk in and out whenever they please, they may never be “prosumers,” capable of producing as they consume; each mutating act an equivalent of its other. Although this “digital,” “networked” mentality has caught the tongues and pens of the art establishment, because art objects still sit on plinths and numerous art videos still play from beginning to end without audience participation, it often feels as though the “digital condition” has not been directly translated through old means to new artistic ends.

According to Claire Bishop in the beginning of a recent *Artforum* essay, “the appearance and content of contemporary art have been curiously unresponsive to the total upheaval in our labor and leisure inaugurated by the digital revolution.” Bishop goes on to make some valid assertions about the ever-burgeoning digital condition, even as she recants “new media art” as “a specialized field of its own,” not worthy of consideration within the logic of her own argument. Her comments, which sent ripples of dissatisfaction through MFA seminars and new media webzines alike, exemplify the very disavowal of the digital about which she warns:

> While many artists use digital technology, how many really confront the question of what it means to think, see, and filter affect through the digital? How many *thematize* this, or reflect deeply on how we experience, and are altered by, the digitization of our existence?

Steyerl may be such an artist. Both her video work—which is essayistic in content and approach—and her written essays are emblematic of the transcriptions the art world has undergone in the past two decades. The poetic collapse of signifier and significified performed by *Abstract* attests to these pursuits in Steyerl’s work. Although not immediately obvious in a gallery context, most contemporary video work is digitally generated. The once physical acts of cutting film and splicing frames is now done through software interfaces that, as theorist Lev Manovich attested in the late 1990s, metonymically fabricate the conditions of film. As Olga Goriunova and Alexei Shulgin have suggested, “computers do not have a recognizable or significant aesthetic that possesses some kind of authenticity and completeness,” but that very lack is not an absence, for the digital is anything it can be made to stand in for. Aesthetically, perhaps, there is nothing to distinguish finely encoded video, music, or images from their material precursors.

Yet at the level of code, artworks produced digitally are also indistinguishable from one another. Writing about the continued
detachment of currency from commodity, Jean-Joseph Goux points out what might be the most authentic condition of the digital: “the detached, abstract, divested, and even—why not?—inaconvertible mark” of the desemanticized zero and one. The “completeness” of the digital, then, appears to be located at infinite distance from any affective experience, whether that be the hardships wrought by collapsing stocks and shares, the repeated “ping” of an SMS message, or the intellectual impact of a gallery-based video work. Zeros and ones do one thing very well indeed: they appear to move at the speed of light. Across circuit boards and TCP/IP networks alike, the inconvertible mark exerts its power in what N. Katherine Hayles has called a “flickering” metamorphoses: “Information technologies do more than change modes of…production, storage, and dissemination. They fundamentally alter the relation of signified to signifier.”

One of Steyerl’s more widely disseminated essays, “In Defense of the Poor Image” (2009), explicitly confronts the aesthetic conditions of digital images. In a twist indicative of her work, Steyerl defines an image’s value by its ease of flow and distribution. The highly compressed, deteriorated “poor image” “mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all.” The aesthetic affect of digital images thus stands in metonymically for the networks they navigate and the means by which those networks are exposed. Built on the derelict protocols and centerless infrastructure of the 1970s military communication network ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), the content of the internet is manifest today on more screens than there are human eyes to view them. Steyerl offers the poor image as a metaphor for dissemination itself. Our capacity to wallow in images is enhanced by those images being dilapidated and bruised, forced through bandwidths far slighter than their display potential would seem to allow. Images are not valuable because of an originary aura; instead it is their transience, the likelihood they will be copied and re-disseminated in ever-mutating forms, which marks them out as significant. This association of replication with the apparent failure of verisimilitude chimes for both the commodity fetish and an appeal to digitization.

In Walter Benjamin’s The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (1936), mechanization and mass production begin at the “original” and work to distance the commodity from the form captured by each iteration. For Benjamin, copies reduce the aura of the original, but as poor images propagate, not only does their aura remain intact, that aura is actually heightened in a system of ever-poorer repetitions and redisplays.

The internet exemplifies its own democratic potential because every bit and byte is treated equally by the TCP/IP protocols that drive its traffic. Thus, slick HD advertisements fall short of the potential of lossy JPEG spam to be seen, and government propaganda is drowned out by the shout of viral videos. Messages from the perverted environs of culture make their way to our eyes and ears more readily as wrecked and ruined impressions, their signifiers flickering with each act of recompression, copy, and display. The poor image affirms Hillel Schwartz’s observation in The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles (1996) that it “is within an exuberant world of copies that we arrive at our experience of originality,” offering, perhaps, a final affirmative answer to his query:

Practical distinctions between the unique and the multiple have historically been entrusted to theologians, notaries, connoisseurs, and curators. None of these now seems to be able to keep the One apart from the Many. Can we still uphold—or is it time to abandon—any distinction between original and replica?

Poor images, seeming to proliferate independently from the sinuous optical cables and super-cooled server banks that disseminate them, are absolutely reliant on the process of copying. Copying is a fundamental component of the digital network where, unlike the material commodity, matter is not passed/parsed along. The digital thing is always a copy, is always copied, and is always copying. Abstracted from its material context, copying is “a universal principle” of digital dissemination, less flowing within the circuits as being that circuitry flow in and of itself. Enabled by over-used compression software, digital copies escape atrophy as they navigate multiple bandwidth streams. Hiding in the random access memory of a user’s personal computer, the coded image waits patiently for browser software to determine which type

Above
Installation view of Abstract (2012) by Hito Steyerl; © Hito Steyerl; photograph by Ray Anastas
of decompression will best suit its visual demonstration, before, in microseconds, it emerges as a fifty-nine frames-per-second flicker on a dirty, regularly fingered, poorly maintained computer monitor. Expressed at the level of the digital, it is the glitch—the coding artifact—that signifies the potential of the network. We encounter the “digital condition” in the perceptual slip of a visual glitch, or the auditory pop-hiss that sometimes results from the compression of audio. Yet the glitch evades us, dissolving away as soon as it appears resolved.

In her essay “A Thing Like You and Me” (2010), Steyerl calls for us to “tap into” the power of the bruise and the glitch, in order to participate in the forces that compel contemporary digital capitalism. In the case of digital copies, error-managed at every stage of their transmission, it is only within the event of the encounter that Steyerl’s “bruises” become manifest. Codesavvy artists do not see a glitch as an aesthetic abhorrence, but as a signal of the kinds of errors that copied-copying may have been subjected to. Once an error, perhaps resulting in a glitch or a bruise, is allowed to creep into an image file, that error will itself be reproduced accurately by the systems it navigates. Error management will maintain the conditions that produced the glitch just as readily as it maintains the “intended” image. Crucially, there is no distinguishing between the two at the level of the digital copy. As these boundaries between digital things and their flow are blurred, the market forces that bind the networks to us are partially exposed: a mutual encounter that flattens interrelations; that brings seemingly distinct beings together. For Steyerl, autonomy emerges from a participation, not in the error, but in the “bruises of images . . . its glitches and artifacts, the traces of its rips and transfers,” outer marks signalling “a constellation of forces” petrified within:

In the commodity fetish, material drives intersect with affect and desire, and Benjamin fantasizes about igniting these compressed forces, to awaken “the slumbering collective from the dream-filled sleep of capitalist production” to tap into these forces. . . . Things are never just inert objects, passive items, or lifeless shucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, all being constantly exchanged.

Copies, being copied, forever copying, exert an unruly behavior that exposes the material world.

In one of her longer video works, Lovely Andrea (2007), Steyerl travels through Tokyo’s pornographic subculture in search of lost bondage images of herself. We are never told why, as a student in the 1980s, Steyerl came to be photographed—whether her likeness was captured for artistic, monetary, or other, more subversive, ends. Rather, the search for the images in the vast erotic archive emphasizes the effect of the photographs on the Hito Steyerl of today: the filmmaker, artist, and theorist of images. The whole affair feels too perfect, too coincident with the works and words Steyerl would make in the twenty interceding years. Fictional and factual incidents are left equally fractured in their collision with one another—a montage intertwined with clips from old Spider-man cartoons and live bondage performances. The dissemination of Steyerl’s own image has left signalling marks on the questionable subculture the film navigates, but rather than trace those marks to a political or ethical
In another profile piece, this time of the Boeing 707 jet plane, Steyerl is more explicit in her depiction of imagemaking, dispersion, and reappropriation. As with Abstract, viewers of In Free Fall (2010) are necessarily confronted with the conditions of digital video stock. Accompanied by pristine surround sound, and displayed as an enormous projection onto a specially prepared, high-definition surface, the film is an obvious foil to its poorer namesakes. Treating the Boeing 707 as a quasi-subject, worthy of its own biography, the film traces the economic and political conditions that accelerated the plane toward deterioration. Beginning as a glamorous embodiment of the American dream, a 707 is used in an Israeli military hostage rescue operation at Entebbe Airport in Uganda in 1976, is subsequently the subject of several movies about the terrorist plot, and is eventually ploughed into and exploded for the penultimate scene in the film Speed (1994, directed by Jan de Bont). The final twist comes at the expense of the Hollywood studio that paid for the 707 to be destroyed, as its warped and charred remains are shipped to China to be recycled into DVDs. Steyerl uses this narrative arc as a metaphor for the repeated rise and crash of world markets. Human subjects are sent reeling by the waves of economic forces that are, at base, materially traceable. The plane object, having been liberated from its status as mere thing, echoes the concerns of Sergei Tretyakov's text The Biography of the Object (1929), liberally quoted in the film. As it moves along the assembly line, the object plots a constellation of forces, its lines of flight intersecting with subjects as “producers,” rather than the heroes of their own (illusory) narratives. Reusing the film's title for a written essay, originally published in the same year, Steyerl stretches the conditions of the fall and the crash yet further: “Pilots have even reported that free fall can trigger a feeling of confusion between the self and the aircraft. While falling, people may sense themselves as being things, while things may sense that they are people.”

The essay alludes to the history of perspective in the visual arts, and the illusion of distance, and more explicitly height, made palpable on the two-dimensional surfaces of canvas or paper. As if to contemporize John Berger's comment that the “invention” of perspective made “the single eye the centre of the visible world,” Steyerl invokes the critical function of the visual arts as a symptom of a wider perspectival shift. Digital technologies allow new ways of seeing, as well as being seen. We inhabit a reverse panopticon, where each of us co-regulates the structures that mediate our control, zooming in to our own abodes on Google satellite maps, allowing portable universal devices to track our every move, and sharing across social networks built as much to regulate our consumer subjectivities as to convince us of our freedom from those regulations. “Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered,” and “[n]ew types of visuality arise,” which are not to be taken as they appear. We are falling, Steyerl suggests, over a new landscape, through corrupted images, untraceable copies, and complex material forces that buffer us on our way down. The pilot and plane things are sensed as one object, mutually falling to earth. Without an anchor, perspective itself should not be trusted.

Here, perhaps, the re-emphasis on human subjectivity is one of Steyerl's most surprising joints in perspective. Apart from Steyerl herself, the mutually falling human figures in the works I have highlighted here often seem too interchangeable to warrant closer inspection. Even Andrea Wolf, Steyerl's childhood friend, has her image torn and tugged across a series of narrative arcs until we are unsure of the realities she inhabited. The earliest work on show at e-flux gallery, November (2004), attests to this, setting up the conditions for Wolf's appearance across other works. Is Wolf a friend, a hero, an icon, or merely a name? Serendipity finds Steyerl face to face with a poster depicting Wolf as rebel hero Sehit Ronahi, a pin-up martyr tackled to the same wall as a series of pornographic film posters. The identities of Wolf and the “producer” Steyerl may be the anchors our free-falling perspectives are looking for; images aware of, but no more complicit in, the processes of their subjectification. In a new work, Guards (2012), we are introduced to two security guards who work for the Art Institute of Chicago. Tracing the path of an imaginary foe around works by Bruce Nauman and Eva Hesse, ex-policeman and gallery security guard Ron Hicks describes his thoughts in neat sentences that could have been plucked, whole, from the middle of a Steyerl essay: “Museums can be considered soft targets. I am engaged on my subject.”

As one of Steyerl's more expressively human-centric works, Guards is also a personal profile of the art world as economic force. As with other works, the film can be twinned with an essay, Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life (2012), in which Steyerl argues for a reconsideration of the terms of occupation. Each of us carries with us potential anchors for perspective—mobile phones hooked to the web, replete with digital eyes, ears, and other sensory prostheses. Rather than consume in the blind favor of our own heroic narratives, we should render these surveillance technologies in the production of new critical territories, making space and time, once again, the subjects of our occupation—or, to echo the words of security guard Ron Hicks: “I run my walls, not missing anything. No threat. Nothing changes about me but my location.”

DANIEL ROURKE is a writer, artist, and researcher based at Goldsmiths, University of London. His work finds itself in print and online, never straying too far from territories his website, machinemachine.net, maps and navigates.