

Dissect

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**A Moving
Target:
Hito Steyerl
at the
Institute of
Contemporary
Art, London**

Madeleine Stack

German artist and writer Hito Steyerl's recent exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Art consisted of five videos, presented across a variety of installation modes. Three of these: *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), *Guards* (2012) and *Liquidity Inc.* (2014) take the form of video-essays and reference contemporary ideas of surveillance and disappearance. Density and layering is ever-present in Steyerl's video work, and consequently, it is hard to shake the feeling that one is missing something vital in the viewing process. Texts flash by too quickly to catch, and the humour inherent in these videos is undercut by a current of fear, paranoia and suspicion.

The deadpan, sardonic narrator of *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* [fig. 1] opens with the line 'There are fifty-four ways to merge into a world made of images' and follows a half-humorous attempt to make physical the materiality of the virtual world using green screens, camera techniques and abandoned calibration targets. Steyerl's work draws attention to the constant and dizzying dissemination of digital imagery and the obstructed flows of capital in the worlds of finance and art.

How Not to Be Seen mocks the format of an educational video, foregrounding the total impossibility of achieving what it promises: becoming invisible. In one segment of the video, the viewer is positioned as floating above an enclosed city like a bird—or a drone—gazing down on smiling, cheerful women, as they dance among the cool digital fronds of too-green palm trees, moving to the beat of the 1960s pop song *When Will I See You Again?* by The Three Degrees. In another frame, wearing a black

kimono, Steyerl herself holds her hands up to the screen, as words scroll across to cover her face: I AM COMPLETELY INVISIBLE. Her text *Missing People: Entanglement, Superposition, and Exhumation as Sites of Indeterminacy* further expands on this imagery, her theory of digital and physical bodies, and the strategies of disappearance used by those in positions of power.¹ In the world portrayed through *How Not to Be Seen*, those ‘disappeared’ reappear as literal shadows of their former selves: greyed-out, faceless figures act as renderings of those bodies that no longer exist in either realm.



fig. 1

As part of an interview for *Democracy Now* from July 29², Alex Sinha spoke of some of the first visible consequences of the NSA revelations³. Attorneys with pockets full of quarters with which to contact their clients at payphones, and journalists ‘contriving ways to bump into [sources] in the street’.⁴ Contemporary efforts at hiding seem laughable, vintage. Steyerl’s ‘fifty-four ways’ are no less low-tech, ranging from becoming smaller than a pixel—illustrated by actors running around with boxes like Constructivist costumes on their heads—to living in a gated community, or simply (and discriminatorily) being a woman over fifty.

The constant circulation of currency, information, images and spam is linked to the unreality of the contemporary battlefield, and the way human bodies are transported, returned and 'made invisible'. As we become increasingly more visible, the most radical act of protest is to become invisible. On a steamy summer's day in New York City, for example, armed police in full regalia buzz up and down the city's beaches. One must submit to being watched in public and certain private spaces at all times. (Or learn, like Eric Garner and Cecily McMillan⁵, that you must not only submit, but submit willingly, joyfully).

In her essay *The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation*, Steyerl notes:

For a certain time already I have noted that many people have started actively avoiding photographic or moving-image representations, surreptitiously taking their distance from the lenses of cameras. Whether it's ... camera-free zones in gated communities or elitist techno clubs, someone declining interviews, Greek anarchists smashing cameras, or looters destroying LCD TVs, people have started to actively, and passively, refuse constantly being monitored, recorded, identified, photographed, scanned and taped.⁶

In this vision of the world, control networks are outsourced passively to members of the public with social media and tiny cameras, who gladly do the job of collation and dissemination of images and information⁷. The horrifying suggestion is that the truly invisible are those disappeared on purpose. Both Northern Ireland and Argentina continue

to struggle with the memory of the Disappeared in those states, who remain so named many years after the political events that caused them have faded from the public eye. This year, it is a turn of phrase that has reappeared in relation to Mexico.

Steyerl's *Guards* (2012), installed at the ICA on a vertical screen at human scale, treads similar lines of humour and horror, following two ex-military museum guards charged with protecting the public wealth of a nation. The questions posed in *Is The Museum A Battlefield?* (2013), as well as Steyerl's essay *Is The Museum A Factory?*,⁸ are addressed here less directly, as Ron Hicks and Martin Whitfield act out military operations among oblivious gallery-goers, translating lines of sight, shots, and other viewpoints of modern warfare onto the silent museum hall. The film follows the frequently invisible protectors of the most valuable relics of societies as they enact military manoeuvres in the seemingly blank spaces of the art institution, mapping the smoothly rehearsed movements of the battlefield onto the assumed neutrality of the white cube. The mostly unnoticed guard figures—designed to blend in, not stand out—mirror the links between the military, political and financial sectors and their systematic methods of oppression.

As we saw in the case of the 2014 Sydney Biennale, drawing explicit connections between the shameful behaviour of a government, and the money feeding the cultural life of a nation, is a move only the brave would dare pull.⁹ In Abu Dhabi, virtual slavery is building the next shining Guggenheim and Louvre franchises¹⁰. The culture of a nation so often serves as receptacle for its crimes—a way of turning dirty money clean, beyond reproach. Steyerl's

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focus on methods of exploitation, and a political system that frequently teeters on the verge of total farce, is here centred on the militarisation of everyday life. Amazon wants to use drones to deliver books, DVDs and laundry powder¹¹. The trickle-down of military-invented hardware to domestic use is not a new story. In small-town Missouri, the local police are outfitted in military cast-offs from the Iraq war.¹² *Guards* draws attention to systems we take for granted; the circulation of the tourist and the gallery visitor, of defense and counter-defense.



fig. 2

Liquidity, Inc. (2014) [fig. 2], the most recent of the works shown at the ICA, focuses on former financial advisor Jacob Wood, who lost his job after the financial crisis and turned instead to instructing mixed martial arts. This career equivalence—similar to the ex-military gallery attendants in *Guards*—speaks also to a climate of job insecurity, where ‘being liquid’ means becoming constantly flexible and adaptable to every change in the environment.¹³ Wood draws connections between professional fighting and a career in finance, where one must ‘become shock-proof’ to survive. Again, Steyerl draws connections between the

specialist terminology of a particular group and the daily meaning of words, conflating weather and climates, as opportunities evaporate, cash flows, reservoirs of currency exist, and of course, The Cloud is vital.

Employing the ultra-simplified corporate language of HR departments and the quasi-self help talk that borrows equally from Zen and military strategy, *Liquidity Inc.* makes fleeting reference to the stuff of contemporary life: Facebook chat and pop-up windows, gifs and warps, Google Glass, hyper-colour Hokusai on tumblr, hashtags and iPhone lock screens. It is so familiar, as this ubiquity of devices reflects the nature of the modern world. Steyerl treads lightly, so that nothing seems too high-tech, existing, conversely, within a space that is so contemporary—the clumsy interface between what technology is capable of and what we are capable of assimilating. Floating through the email screenshots and fragments of narration is the storyline behind the film—the artist has been denied funding to outsource the CGI waves she needs for the video and must learn, via YouTube tutorials, how to do it herself. Vector graphics animate waves as torrents and storms: the ancient and the hypermodern are intercut with increasing frequency. Chat windows pop up and are engulfed by others, as Steyerl seeks funding to complete the film—at one point joking about selling weapons for cash. In the context of her earlier work, this reference is doubly significant. ‘No budget for water CGI’, types Steyerl, ‘did you ask that kid from Dubai?’

Several of Steyerl’s films reference Andrea Wolf, who was a teenage friend of hers who joined the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), only to be killed by a member of the Turkish resistance. This personal narrative continues in

Liquidity Inc. In reference to The Weather Underground, an American radical group active primarily in the 1970s and directed towards social revolution, a German child in a black balaclava reads an absurdist weather report: 'Andrea Wolf moving east this evening—teargas clouds gathering after midday—the Weather Underground will bust corporate clouds using orgone cannons'. The characters in this vision of contemporaneity are constantly primed for total change, for reversing their entire worldview as the world changes around them. These tiny, cryptic homages to Wolf, as reminders of her death, linger as unstable ghosts in the machine.

In a constant state of war, where death is an abstraction and the digital is used as a simulacrum of the real, images hover on the brink of spam, language on the brink of meaninglessness, every frame imbued with a super-serious silliness. Steyerl's insistence is on the low-resolution zones, the 'non-places' of the digital world, as an escape from the constant need to be present in high definition. From where I write this, in the shadow of the former World Trade Centre towers, a stone's throw from Wall Street, I have to pass through some of the most densely surveyed streets in the country.¹⁴ At a window, above the river and a playground, it is impossible to look up without being caught by the eye of one of the black helicopters circling where the island narrows off to a tip, a finger of land pointing into the bay.

Further, to locate a destination, one is beholden to the little blue dot winking up from Google Maps as it tracks every step: 'We are growing increasingly accustomed to what used to be called a God's-eye view'.¹⁵ The Black Bloc protestors versus the 'black box' of the iPhone; the two

fraught black boxes of Malaysia Airlines' flights missing or caught in conflict; the black box of the cinema, theatre or lecture hall; the black box of a camera, a hard drive, a universal adaptor. The black-out of media censorship; of prison cells; of global summits and power talks, are drawn together in a series of suggestions that hint at deeper connections. What does it look like when the digital becomes real, the real, iReal? Steyerl's work is pure speculation—except when it is not. As physical and digital terrains collapse into one another and bodies are reduced to collections of pixels, a high-definition gaze of constant mobility ensures that images and bodies exist equally in the real world. Her densely layered videos, rewarding still at fourth or fifth viewing, take a swipe at the phantom menace, the tyrant hiding in plain sight. The most current concerns of today—privacy, globalisation, the police state, the impossible desire of an individual to disappear—are translated through layers of incongruity on the verge of non-sense.

As well as the video essays, the ICA also presented, (almost hidden behind a screen in the back corner as a nod to Steyerl's habit of playing with circulation and movement in the gallery), *I Dreamed a Dream* (2013) and *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* (2013). These lecture-performances further elucidate Steyerl's theories, acting to complement rather than explicate her video and sculptural works. It is a worldview in which the artist is always present, always complicit. In the three films shown at the ICA, she has credited herself variously—hilariously—as 'Security', 'Educational Dummy', and 'Nervous Breakdown'. In her essay *Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life* she quotes The Invisible Committee: 'Producing oneself is

becoming the dominant occupation of a society where production no longer has an object'.¹⁶ By existing as subject and object of her work, she is fully embedded in the art world she critiques, the reframing and editing of history, and the shifting division of labour. This grey area comes into focus in *Is The Museum a Battlefield?*, where after tracing the dizzying flight path of a missile shell through galleries and munitions factories, she gazes impassively into the camera. Steyerl muses: 'Did I fire the bullet that I found on the battlefield?' If invisibility has in fact become impossible (for artists at least) Steyerl's image repeated in her films as both stand-in and protagonist takes the opposite approach: the enforced banality of constant presence.

Her work treads the path of the globalised artist: through checkpoints and airports, lectures and galleries, banks and office blocks, as the fragments of the self are kept together by Google Maps, Gmail, Google Translate, and the cellphone is 'A digital eye as your heart in hand. It is witness and informer ... Your phone is your brain in corporate design, your heart as a product, the Apple of your eye'.¹⁷ Steyerl's work sits at the exact flux point of the contemporary world, communicating between the global and the local, across borders and between the digital and the physical.

Figures

- 1 *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013. Single-channel HD video, 12 min. Courtesy the artist.
- 2 *Liquidity Inc.*, 2014. Single channel HD video projection, 30 min. Courtesy the artist.

Notes

- 1 Hito Steyerl, 'Missing People: Entanglement, Superposition, and Exhumation as Sites of Indeterminacy', in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 138.
- 2 *Democracy Now!*, 'Mass U.S. Surveillance Targeting Journalists and Lawyers Seen as Threat to American Democracy', aired 29 July 2014 on [democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org), video file, accessed 29 July 2014, <http://www.democracynow.org/shows/2014/7/29>.
- 3 In June 2013, The Guardian reported the extent of the National Security Association's surveillance data after information was leaked by whistleblower Edward Snowden. See Joshua Eaton and Ben Piven, 'Timeline of Edward Snowden's Revelations', *Al Jazeera America*, accessed 12 October 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/multimedia/timeline-edward-snowden-revelations.html>.
- 4 *Alex Sinha in Democracy Now!*, 'Mass U.S. Surveillance Targeting Journalists and Lawyers Seen as Threat to American Democracy', aired 29 July 2014 on [democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org), video file, accessed 29 July 2014, <http://www.democracynow.org/shows/2014/7/29>.
- 5 On 17 July 2014, Eric Garner died after being put in an illegal chokehold by a New York City police officer. He was being arrested for selling single cigarettes in Staten Island. See Jessica Glenza, 'Eric Garner: grand jury to weigh NYPD charges in chokehold case', *The Guardian*, 19 August 2014, accessed 12 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/19/grand-jury-eric-garner-chokehold-nypd>.

Cecily McMillan was recently released after being jailed at Rikers Island for 58 days after being convicted of assaulting a police officer in Zucotti Park during the 2012 Occupy Wall Street protests. McMillan elbowed the officer after she alleges he sexually assaulted her. See Jon Swaine, 'Occupy activist Cecily McMillan released from jail after two months', *The Guardian*, 2 July 2014, accessed 12 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/02/occupy-activist-cecily-mcmillan-released>.

In both of these cases, widely publicised over the Northern summer, it became clear that citizens reacting to unlawful brutality,

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are expected—unlike the police arresting them—to show monk-like restraint in high-pressure situations; never reacting, never fighting back.

- 6 Hito Steyerl, 'The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation', in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 165–166.
- 7 Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 80–116.
- 8 Hito Steyerl, 'Is the Museum a Factory?', in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 60–76.
- 9 For discussion of Transfield's involvement in the Biennale of Sydney, see Discipline, 'Biennale of Sydney 2014 and Transfield: A Discussion', accessed 12 October 2014, http://www.discipline.net.au/Discipline/Biennale_of_Sydney_2014.html.
- 10 Ben Mauk, 'Abu Dhabi's High Cost of Culture', *The New Yorker*, 28 January 2014, accessed 12 October 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/abu-dhabis-high-cost-of-culture>.
- 11 Amazon.com, 'Amazon Prime Air', accessed 12 October 2014, <http://www.amazon.com/b?node=8037720011>.
- 12 Lyle Jeremy Rubin, 'A Former Marine Explains All the Weapons of War Being Used by Police in Ferguson', *The Nation*, 20 August 2014, accessed 12 October 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/181315/catalog-ferguson-police-weaponry>.
- 13 'We live in an age of heterogenous anarchism. Contingency is king. Fluidity and flux win over solidity and stasis. Becoming has replaced being. Rhizomes are better than trees. To be political today, one must laud horizontality.' (Alexander R. Galloway, 'The Reticular Fallacy', *Culture and Communication*, 6 October 2014, accessed 30 October 2014, <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/the-reticular-fallacy#more-54>). On 'new' forms of networked, variable and contingent capitalism, see Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2005) and Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
- 14 Surveillance in Lower Manhattan is carried out both by high numbers of CCTV cameras and a very high police presence, post-9/11. See New York Civil Liberties Union, 'Who's Watching? Video Camera Surveillance in New York City and the need for Public Oversight', accessed 12 October 2014, http://www.nyclu.org/pdfs/surveillance_cams_report_121306.pdf.

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- 15 Hito Steyerl, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment in Vertical Perspective', in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 18.
- 16 Hito Steyerl, 'Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life', in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 119–120.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 117.