



Liberation day: the artists fighting the power of the market – and the internet

Hito Steyerl is at war with the commodification of art and the corrupting power of the market. What's she fighting them with? Manure. Meet the new wave of artists asking us to reconsider everything from the web to war

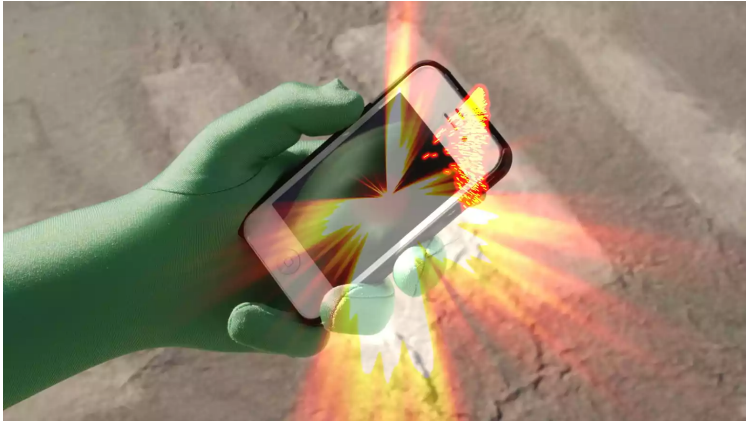
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Tuesday 17 October 2017 18.48 BST

Why make art when buyers treat works as an alternative currency, hiding them away like bullion bars in storage facilities? Can anything be done about questionable corporations and oppressive regimes using contemporary art to generate a spot of positive PR for themselves? And what links can be made between fuzzy surveillance images and abstract art?

Hito Steyerl's new book, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, poses uncomfortable questions about today's image culture and the art market. In it, the artist and film-maker builds up a picture of sickly interdependence, following a trail that stretches from battleground to bank vault to biennale and back again.

The title is a play on words: a call to divest art of the “duties” imposed on it by the market. “Art ideally needs to be valuable, right?” says Steyerl sardonically. “That’s the first duty: that it will work as an investment. Then, secondly, it has the duty to represent something: to act as a marker of some kind of wider community or culture.”



Another image from Hito Steyerl's *How Not to Be Seen*. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

But Steyerl, who is speaking to me via Skype from Berlin, has a different notion of art’s duty: she thinks it should make itself available rather than be locked away gaining in value, to exist free of duties save the duty of free art. A few years ago, one of Steyerl’s own works was stashed in a Freeport storage unit by a collector: she spoke out strongly against this on public platforms, including a conference at Tate Modern. As a retaliatory gesture, she constructed planters shaped like Freeport facilities “and filled them with manure - which of course I bought with the proceedings of the sales - to try to compost new territory from this bullshit”.

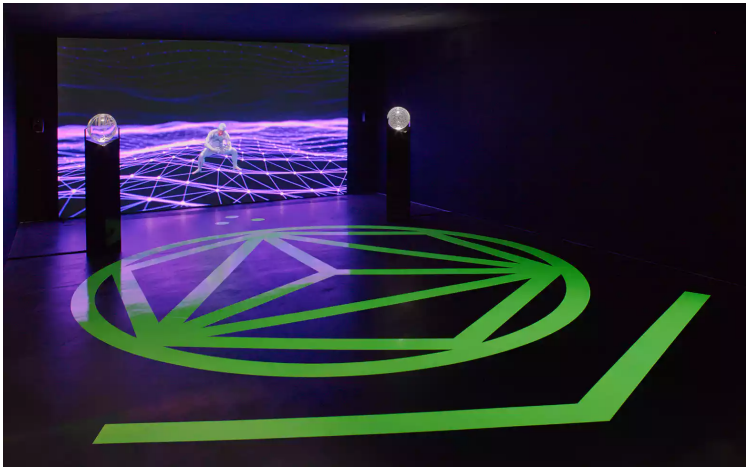
The subject of a solo show at London’s ICA in 2014, Steyerl’s work is, like *Duty Free Art*, informed by intense research and bone-dry humour. As the titles of some works show, she is also a fan of the tactically deployed expletive. Her 2013 film on surveillance was called *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, while a work on robotics and warfare had the title *Hell Yeah We Fuck Die*.

In *Duty Free Art*, the German artist is upfront about what keeps the international art system afloat: “To brutally summarise a lot of scholarly texts, contemporary art is made possible by neoliberal capital, plus the internet, biennials, art fairs, parallel pop-up histories and growing income inequalities. Let’s add asymmetric warfare, real-estate speculation, tax evasion, money laundering and deregulated financial markets.”

It’s enough to stop anyone wanting to exhibit. Even an artist as switched on as Steyerl can get caught out from time to time. Not so long ago, she was included in a group show in China organised by a respected curator. Only when she received the invitation to the opening did she realise it was sponsored by one of Germany’s biggest defence companies. Her response has been to work with colleagues to create a standard agreement for artists to use when negotiating their participation in an exhibition, shifting some of the responsibility for due diligence on to curators and institutions.

For Steyerl, and other artists exploring similar territory, the imperative to continue making work becomes even stronger when a system starts to appear insurmountable. In *Contra-Internet*, currently showing at Gasworks in London, Zach Blas addresses the internet as “a totality, like capitalism: a totality with no outside”. He asks viewers if they can still imagine an alternative.

Blas recalls studying with “cyber feminists” who saw the internet of the 1990s as “a possible site of feminist liberation”. In the exhibition, this becomes a paradigm for imagining an alternative to the internet of control, oppression and surveillance we have ended up with.



Anarchy ... Contra-Internet, 2017, a video installation by Zach Blas.
Photograph: Andy Keate/Courtesy of the artist

Contra-Internet centres on *Jubilee 2033*, a glossy film that draws some of its structure from Derek Jarman’s 1977 film *Jubilee*, which imagined Queen Elizabeth I transported to 1970s London, where she meets a nihilist called Amyl Nitrate. In Blas’s film, the Canadian performance artist Cassils plays a genderless update of Amyl Nitrate, now neither hero nor heroine, in an anarchic future. In place of Elizabeth I visiting modern Britain, Blas brings the American novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand to Silicon Valley to witness what her thinking helped set in motion.

“Some people think Contra-Internet is technophobic,” says Blas, “but it’s not.” Rather, it raises questions, in particular about the extent to which the internet and social networks have become enmeshed in our self-image. It also examines the philosophies that inform Silicon Valley culture, and by extension much of the software we use today.

Steyerl is fluent in the many languages of the internet, from the stilted come-ons of a chatroom scammer with a “Photoshopped stock photo” ID, or the “political bot armies on Twitter” spewing out political hashtags and fragments of philosophy. As the victims of scammers and oppressive regimes can testify, it would be a grave mistake to regard this world as “virtual” and entirely separate from a “real” world. Everything, as Duty Free Art reminds us, is enmeshed.

Steyerl cites film-maker Jean-Luc Godard’s commitment to talking “weirdly” about conflict - as a counterbalance to the version of truth offered by news media. “I think art’s role,” she says, “is to investigate the way things are comprehended - the lenses through which people see. In conflict, these lenses tend to be very standardised, very stereotypical.”

Steyerl writes about a phenomenon she calls “junktime”, meaning the contemporary state of constant distraction, which adds its own filter to our reading of current events. Junktime commitments - emails, Instagram, Snapchat - keep our eyes flicking between images, never resting long enough to question things properly.

This state is addressed in works by Alfredo Jaar that use images of conflict in ways that force viewers out of their jittery, junktime disengagement. *The Sound of Silence*, from 2005, and the more recent *Shadows*, both currently at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, create context around works by the photojournalists Kevin Carter and Koen Wessing.



Composite: a photograph by Koen Wessing from Nicaragua, left, is blown into a silhouette in Alfredo Jaar's *Shadows*, 2014. Composite: Courtesy the artist

In *Shadows*, Jaar, who was born in Chile, manipulates a single photograph Wessing took of the 1978 Nicaraguan civil war, darkening the background to absolute black, illuminating figures in distress to absolute white, and then throwing blinding light through their silhouettes, searing the image in place for viewers, even in the subsequent darkness. Jaar thinks it is an artist's duty "to try to see better and to help people to see better. We do not offer many answers - we just focus better on the questions."

Steyerl, like Jaar, has first-hand experience of the impact of surveillance, online propaganda and the rest. In 1998, she was notified that her childhood friend Andrea Wolf "had gotten killed as a member of the PKK in Turkey". Steyerl has since paid frequent visits to southern Turkey and the north of Syria. She made several works related to Wolf's story, but soon began seeing the situation as more a symptom of global developments.

In *Duty Free Art*, she discusses the psychological devastation caused to people caught up in the conflict in Diyarbakir, the city in southern Turkey, and describes watching the bombardment of Kobani in Syria. Can only artists who experience conflict make work about it? She laughs. "I don't think anyone has to walk into shellfire," she says. "Being shot at does not make people more intelligent. But the main point I'm trying to make is that conflict is not somewhere else. The difficult thing is making it visible in the places where you can't see it."

Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War by Hito Steyerl is out now, published by Verso

Alfredo Jaar, *The Garden of Good and Evil*, is at Yorkshire Sculpture Park until 8 April

Zach Blas, *Contra-Internet*, is at Gasworks, London, until 10 December

Topics

- The art market
- Video art
- Internet
- Collecting
- Corporate sponsorship
- Art
- features