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## ***Seeing Is Not Knowing: Saying Makes Us See An Essay on the Word-Work of Hito Steyerl***

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If it is an exhilarating experience to read Hito Steyerl's texts, it is inordinately difficult to write about them—the task I have undertaken as my contribution to this catalog.<sup>1</sup>

The form is inseparable from its effect. Her arguments can hardly be articulated any other way. A style of writing is a style of thought. Hers is also an action, an intervention that reveals a disturbed relation between words and our current social realities and the phenomenal form—mediated by “screenification” and its technologies that change the very concept of image—through which we live them.

Writing about the writing of an artist is always challenging. This general difficulty is increased when the artist in question is Hito Steyerl. Her texts are at once lucid and complex, crystalline and hermetic. They perform a political gesture, invoking a new community created by the style of address. Yet the essays do their own work, in that community, as *text*. To read such texts is, therefore, to witness a powerfully analytical intellect at work, and to be dragged along by the creative power of conceptual synthesis enacted through the force of language that makes us see what we did not yet know.

Synthesis is a political necessity to match the pace and form of the social and cultural changes being examined, while a playful, ironizing use of language streams the necessarily accelerated movement of Hito Steyerl's thought. Intellectual formations are indices of historically situated struggles enacted in both thought and art, which take place under the rapidly shifting conditions of different phases of capitalism and capitalist modernity. I am trained in the models of textuality that practise the close reading of each article, repeatedly, to discern its argument through its linguistic formulations, which, by being said otherwise, open up a space of understanding that may be a destructive/reconstructive translation. Such an approach is not possible here. Each Steyerl essay has

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<sup>1</sup> These include published volumes of texts written and/or edited by Hito Steyerl: H. Steyerl, *Duty Free Art. Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London and New York: Verso, 2017); *Hito Steyerl. Duty-Free Art*, exh. cat., ed. by J. Fernandes (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2015); *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012); *RICOCHET #3. Hito Steyerl*, exh. cat., ed. by M. Buhrs (Munich: Museum Villa Stuck, 2010); H. Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit. Dokumentarismen im Kunstfeld* (Vienna: Turia+Kant, 2008); *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art #1*, ed. by H. Steyerl with M. Lind (Annandale-on-Hudson: CCS Bard College and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008). In addition, there are selected articles: “Documentarism as Politics of Truth,” *republicart*, Vienna, May 2003; “The Institution of Critique,” *Transversal*, Vienna, January 2006; “Is a Museum a Factory?,” *e-flux journal*, no. 7, New York, June–August 2009; “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *e-flux journal*, no. 10, New York, November 2009; “Politics of Art. Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy,” *e-flux journal*, no. 21, New York, December 2010; “In Free Fall. A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *e-flux journal*, no. 24, New York, April 2011. There are more catalog essays.

the quality of an artwork; it is not susceptible to textual deconstruction by virtue of the way in which it produces the possibility of meaning. At the same time, Hito Steyerl's writing makes visible the structural erosion of archaic desires for meaning and understanding, lodged in the old dream of representability, by arguing that this is no longer a possibility in our post-representational present.

I want, therefore, to propose that Hito Steyerl's writing is "word-work," like art-work. I do not mean that her texts are art. Her way of thinking shares with art-making a singular process of constructing sense that is at once perfectly logical and elusively produced from layering, staging, overlaying, returning, surprising. The texts *engender* rather than *produce* meaning. Reading the writing of Hito Steyerl incites an acute sensitivity to the freight of every word because their flow is already the place of the elusive but real processes and effects that the words seek somehow to grasp.

Reading Hito Steyerl's writing is as much an experience of shock and discovery as is watching her do a performance lecture or orchestrate immersive installations or build sculptural framings of screened moving-image essays. There is, of course, continuity at the level of intellect and political thought as analytical tools. The intimacy between word-work and art-work also exists in a concerted search for modes of formulation (*formel* in Aby Warburg's sense) to grasp the implicated, compromised status of the phenomenon "contemporary art," from which she distances herself critically while inevitably being part of its complexity and possibility. Her project is to find those practices that may carry residual legacies that dialectically resist the very configurations and forces now defining and deforming this marketized, financialized, screenified phenomenon, "contemporary art," much of which is traded on markets and secured in massive duty-free storage complexes, never to see the light of day again while being traded as an alternative currency for bankers and investors moving on from their losses on prime mortgages. In her most recent book, this "duty-free art" is revealed as the site of "artwashing" and speculative investment, blatantly stated by investor Stefan Simchowicz: "Art will effectively continue its structural function as an alternative currency that hedges against inflation and currency depreciation," a quote that is used in a chapter of Hito Steyerl's essay, titled "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!," where we read a rapid-fire analysis of a desolate neoliberal, anti-feminist new order:

«Authoritarian right-wing regimes will not get rid of art-fair VIP lists or make art more relevant or accessible to different groups of people. In no way will they abolish elites and even art. They will only accelerate inequalities, beyond the fiscal-material to the existential-material. This transformation is not about accountability, criteria, access, or transparency... It will be more of the same just much worse: less pay for workers, less exchange, fewer perspectives, less circulation, and even less regulation, if such a thing is even possible. Inconvenient art will fly out of the window—anything non-flat, non-huge or remotely complex and challenging. Intellectual perspectives, expanded canons, non-traditional histories will be axed—anything that requires an investment of time and effort instead of conspicuous money. Public support swapped for Instagram metric. Art floated on some kind of Arsedaq.»<sup>2</sup>

In case we had not interpreted the terms that mark the loss of all gains for which we have struggled in terms of critiquing mono-cultural, Eurocentric, gender-exclusive, and racist art history, art collecting and art marketing, by means of richly theoretical and political interventions, she

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<sup>2</sup> H. Steyerl, "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!," in *Duty Free Art. Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London and New York: Verso, 2017), p. 185.

continues:

«Male masters, more male masters, and repeat. Art will take its place next to big-game hunting, armed paragliding, and adventure slumming... Just like institutional critique was overtaken by a neoliberal Right that went ahead and simply abolished art institutions, the critique of contemporary art and claims for an exit from its paradigms are dwarfed by their reactionary counterparts. The reactionary exit—the acceleration of stagnation—is already well underway. Algorithmic and analogue market manipulation, alongside the defunding, dismantling, and hollowing out of the public and the post-public sector, transforms what sometimes worked as a forum for shared ideas, judgment and experimentation into HNWI interior design. Art will be firewalled within isolationist unlinked canons, which can easily be marketed as national, religious, and fully biased histories.»<sup>3</sup>

If contemporary art is becoming “duty-free” in this sense, Hito Steyerl reverses the idea to ask, what is the duty of art in this situation?

The critical possibility being sought in face of the devastating analyses of our present and its defeat of radical hopes becomes, in textual form, a kind of dance of death. The dance is enacted by Hito Steyerl with an astoundingly verbal and compellingly incisive liveliness. Its effect exists in the dance itself, in the mobility of art-thought that throws down its defiance to the deadliness of neoliberal globalization engulfing the world and radically altering the spaces, practices, and subjects of this phenomenon “contemporary art,” from which she takes a critical distance through allegiance to a tradition of Critical Theory crossed with a history of documentary film and photography.

In “Documentarism as Politics of Truth” (2003), Hito Steyerl draws on Foucault to remind us that “Truth is always politically regulated.” She sets us on the road of doubt by reminding us of a scene in the Marx Brothers movie *Duck Soup* (1933). Chico, playing a spy, dresses up as Groucho in nightgown and cap, and after playing out the famous mirror scene, he concludes the following scene in the bedroom of Mrs. Gloria Teasdale (Margaret Dumont) who is confused by seeing two of Rufus T. Firefly, asking: “Who are you going to believe—me or your own eyes?” Hito Steyerl often introduces her essays with film scenes, as if we will find the thorny issue she will tackle theoretically already posed succinctly—theorized we might say—in and by an image/text. In this same article, Walter Benjamin’s “dialectical image” is invoked. She quotes Benjamin—a vital resource for understanding her writing/art project where comparison with Benjamin as a writer is the most apposite:

«When history is brought to a standstill in the flash of an image, this image is not a subjective manifestation, but rather, the pictorial expression of a real place. Subject and object coincide in the dialectical image.»

Then she glosses the passage:

«According to Benjamin it is “identical with the historical object.” It takes place in an inbetween space, which is blasted out of the homogeneous empty time and the power

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

relationships constituting it. The abrupt, revolutionary bursting open of dominant time in the dialectical image, the moment of danger, and the other form of temporality that flashes in this interval, allows a gate to emerge, which Benjamin interprets as the possibility of the appearance of the Messiah and thus of redemption.»<sup>4</sup>

Her texts lucidly render our current historical and political condition into words that function as so many flashes. While devastating as they tear away willful blindness to the Real of our history, her words seek a gate, not for a Messiah but for us to realize how to act, even if deprived of the grand narratives that once generated a political concept of art's place in possible social transformation.

The textuality of Hito Steyerl's writing practice does the work. Indeed, I could argue that "writing"—*écriture* in the sense that we inherited from both the feminist polemics of Helene Cixous and the politico-philosophical deconstruction of Jacques Derrida—is a possible term for all of Steyerl's work, in text, performance, and installation or moving image. Yet her "writing," like Cixous's, is gloriously free of the encumbrance of the traditional—dare I say it—masculinist and colonial theoretical apparatus, while being utterly at home and confidently aligned with some of the toughest critical thinking of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Theory thus becomes a figure in the dance.

So, what does she write about? Labor, Space, Image, War, and Struggle. But there can be no list. These are entangled and structurally related. As a materialist thinker, Hito Steyerl considers labor as the working human body caught in the social relations of production. She shows us how the art sphere itself is symptomatic of the now post-Fordist conditions of labor while its actual spaces—museums and exhibitions—overlay the general shift from Fordist to post-Fordist conditions of work worldwide, with its specific gender and minoritarian reconfiguration to form a now precarious labor force. If we have complained of a lack of women in the canon of art history or on show in or running the institutions of art, what sense do we make now of an art world pervasively staffed and reliant on the hopeful, grateful overwork of underpaid and, probably, harassed women?

Can we see this shift/reversal or must we track it allegorically? For instance, in "Is a Museum a Factory?" Hito Steyerl refers us to a founding image of cinema, *La Sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* (*Workers Leaving the Factory*), filmed by Louis Lumiere in 1895 outside his factory. She uses it to recall a Fordist—factory-based, segmented, regimented production line—organization of industrial labor with its divisions between work time and home time that is "gone." Gone where? As industrial production in the West/North is either outsourced to poorer countries or so-called developing nations and competitors, a reversal has occurred, signaled by images of visitors in the West entering former industrial sites that have become art centers and museums (or built in the industrial architectural idiom). She writes of this shift broadly at first:

«The typical setup of the museum-as-factory looks like this. Before: an industrial workplace. Now: people spending their leisure time in front of TV monitors. Before: people working in these factories. Now: people working at home in front of computer monitors.»<sup>5</sup>

But production versus art/consumption/leisure/entertainment is not so clear-cut when the switch has

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<sup>4</sup> H. Steyerl, "Documentarism as Politics of Truth," *republicart*, May 2003.

<sup>5</sup> H. Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory?," *e-flux journal*, no. 7, June–August 2009.

occurred. Labor and production now take place in the museum, which is at the same time an entertainment leisure space, creating a hybrid subject.

«In the museum-as-factory, something continues to be produced. Installation, planning, carpentry, viewing, discussing, maintenance, betting on rising values, and networking alternate in cycles. An art space is a factory, which is simultaneously a supermarket, a casino and a place of worship whose reproductive work is performed by cleaning ladies and cellphone-video bloggers alike.»<sup>6</sup>

What is the qualitative difference when what is in the museum is “cinema”: an image culture with an affinity to Lumiere’s initiating gesture? The film still *Workers Leaving the Factory* is not invoked only for its content: cinema started with an image of factory workers. Instead we must notice its medium and institution: cinema, which itself has moved into, and been changed into, the museum. Hito Steyerl is not talking about a museum of cinema. The museum is the place where we now encounter “post-cinema,” i.e. Moving-image essays as part of “contemporary art” that are, sometimes, inheritors of the political documentary tradition.

«But this type of production is much more intensive than the industrial one. The senses are drafted into production, the media capitalize upon the aesthetic faculties and imaginary practices of viewers. In that sense, any space that integrates cinema and its successors has now become a factory and this obviously includes the museum. While in the history of political filmmaking the factory became a cinema, cinema now turns museum spaces back into factories.»<sup>7</sup>

The museum-as-factory is kept afloat by labor—of women, artists, and indeed viewers/spectators. In a classic Hito Steyerl turn, having established and inverted symmetry—factory/cinema/cinema-museum/factory—she undoes its simplicity to distinguish between the Foucaultian disciplinary society of the Fordist factory and cinema production and spectatorship that massified the workers, and the post-industrial society of “the multitude” identified by Negri and Hardt.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Italian philosopher Paolo Virno, Hito Steyerl writes that “The museum does not organize a coherent crowd of people. People are dispersed in time and space—a silent crowd, immersed and atomized, struggling between passivity and overstimulation.”<sup>9</sup> What they encounter in the contemporary museum (the signifier for all contemporary art spaces rather than the traditional collection-based survey museum) is a new form of the cinematic that is radically different. Durational, yes, but multi-screened installations are addressed to the wandering and inattentive visitor and not the riveted, seated viewer. “While cinema is a mass medium, multi-screen installations address a multitude spread out in space, connected only by distraction, separation and difference.”<sup>10</sup> This distinction raises a question: could the cinema-factory-contemporary-art-museum become a new

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> A. Negri and M. Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> P. Virno, *Grammatica della moltitudine: per una analisi delle forme di vita contemporanee* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2014); referenced by Hito Steyerl as *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, transl. I. Belloti, J. Cascaito, and A. Casson (New York and Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Steyerl, “Is a Museum a Factory?” cit.

form of public space? On one side, the presence of cinema-like artworks, often seeking to be political cinema in some way, solicits gazes that might simply reinforce types of the bourgeois sovereign gaze: expressions of the artist's vision, or the curator's power in arranging the artworks, or the critic's gaze of judgment and so forth. In the dispersed space of museum-as-factory, however, such sovereignty on anyone's part becomes impossible, soliciting instead a multiplicity of gazes and fragmented attention.

«Without notice, the question of political cinema has been inverted. What began as a discussion of political cinema in the museum has turned into a question of cinematic politics in a factory. Traditionally, political cinema was meant to educate—it was an instrumental effort at “representation” in order to achieve its effects in “reality.” It was measured in terms of efficiency, of revolutionary revelation, of gains and consciousness, or as potential triggers for action. Today, cinematic politics are post-representational. They do not educate the crowd, but produce it. *They articulate the crowd in space and in time.* They submerge it in partial invisibility and then orchestrate their dispersion, movement, and reconfiguration. They organize the crowd without preaching to it. They replace the gaze of the bourgeois sovereign spectator of the white cube with the incomplete, obscured, fractured, and overwhelmed vision of the *spectator-as-laborer*. [my emphases]»<sup>11</sup>

*Workers* have left the factory; *visitors* enter the museum. *Cinema* moves into the museum to encounter visitors, not massed viewers. The subjects thus created as a “crowd” *produced* by the conditions of this space and the time of the moving-image work are now the *workers*.

Plotting the change, the text makes a Benjaminian turn to reveal the unanticipated effect of the way in which art in a museum explodes the historical qualities of cinema—duration and spectacle—to generate a dispersed attention. This does not generate a *collective* experience, but potentially a *common* one: “incomplete but in process, which is distracted and singular, but can be edited to do various sequences and combinations,”<sup>12</sup> which is not a

«product of common labor, but focuses its point of rupture on the paradigms of productivity. The museum-as-factory and its post-cinematic politics interpellate a missing, multiple subject. But by displaying its absence and its lack, they paradoxically and simultaneously activate a desire for this subject.»<sup>13</sup>

I have done injustice to the flow of the argued case about political cinema (understood in its widest sense of moving image, duration and viewing, which now has its major home in contemporary art practice and art spaces). I am translating the dialectical structure of the analysis that does not arrive at a conclusion. It makes visible the work that a cinematic politics might be called upon to do in knowledge of the novel conditions thus exposed by the *work* of this text. The *work* of the text teases out from a historical analysis of multiple shifts representing the transition from industrial to consumer-labor epitomized by the *spaces* of practice of contemporary art. These shifts are equally enacted in the organizational logic, media structure and sensory and imaginative *experience*, the *aesthesis*, of those spaces and the practices they exhibit. Yet in that changed condition, different

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

possibilities arise, which, in turn, are not to be inverted again or just disrupted. They reveal what we, the potential subjects of a commons, might now desire to become *in our absence*, an absence that, once recognized, might be actively reworked to change our status as workers into subjects.

Desire is traditionally defined as a longing for the lacking object that might make us whole again. In psychoanalytical terms, this was always an imagined unity that preceded the catastrophic severance of the subject signified as castration and enforced by the entry into language, hence the social and culture. Political desire for what is missing is not psychologically regressive, but imaginatively virtual, activating, mobilizing what is not yet. So out of the bleakness of Hito Steyerl's anatomy of the condition of contemporary art (with political cinema as a resistant element within it), a defiant desire, hence a political possibility of difference surfaces, or rather, is called into virtual being.

In a more explicit essay titled "Politics of Art. Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy" (2010), Hito Steyerl states: "Contemporary art is no unworldly discipline nestled away in some remote ivory tower. On the contrary, it is squarely placed in the neo-liberal thick of things." Given this, she asks: "what is the function of art within disaster capitalism?" Even as it is at the interior of a world composed of post-democratic oligarchies, advancing semio-capitalism, post-democratic forms of hypercapitalism, post-democratic government, and globalization, she can assert:

«The art field is a space of wild contradiction and phenomenal exploitation. It is a place of power mongering, speculation, financial engineering, and massive and crooked manipulation. But it is also a site of commonality, movement, energy, and desire. In its best iterations it is a terrific cosmopolitan arena populated by mobile shock workers, itinerant salesmen of self, tech whiz kids, budget tricksters, supersonic translators, PhD interns, and other digital vagrants and day laborers. It's hard-wired, thin-skin, plastic-fantastic. A potential commonplace where competition is ruthless and solidarity remains the only foreign expression. Peopled with charming scumbags, bully-kings, almost-beauty-queens. It is HDMI, CMYK, LGBT. Pretentious, flirtatious mesmerizing.»<sup>14</sup>

"This mess" is "a hive of affective labor under close scrutiny and controlled by capital, woven tightly into its multiple contradictions."

«Art is not outside of politics, but politics resides within its production, its distribution, and its reception. If we take this on, we might surpass the plane of a politics of representation and embark on a politics that is there, in front of our eyes, ready to embrace.»<sup>15</sup>

I see her point in this text. Yet its sense cannot be pinned down. I can trace a movement from what we might call the classic formations of modern society with its sites of labor: domestic labor, cultural labor, artistic labor. In the sphere of art/culture but also in the sphere of politics, modernist art and thought worked with the notion of representation. Art showed the world, or someone's private imaginative world. Politics involved our voting for representatives. Those under-represented women and minority identities campaigned for representation both as citizens and as part of the

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<sup>14</sup> H. Steyerl, "Politics of Art. Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy," *e-flux journal*, no. 21, December 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

system of cultural representation. If we have to recognize a set of “post” conditions—post-representational, post-democratic—the way we conceptualize artistic practices and artistic spaces must of necessity understand these changed conditions of existence and practice. Disastrous as they are, and many of Hito Steyerl’s more recently published writings are heavy with warnings about our failure to see the threats (an example is “Let’s Talk About Fascism” in *Duty Free Art*), there is a defiant pursuit of understanding of these conditions in order to tease out, by argumentation as much as analysis, the possibility of action: what we can do.

Urgent and breathless, the art field is surgically anatomized. Yet Hito Steyerl’s texts are never defeatist, despite detailing the grim contradictions of the realities we inhabit under the triumphant neoliberal morphing of uncontested and unbounded globalizing capitalism, clearly defined as the major force eroding the very possibility of democracy. It is the unfinished possibility of the democratic as we have yet to realize it (signaled at once by communication technologies like HDMI, and voices of dissident new visibilities such as LGBT) that emerges ironically from the recognition of the transfer—actually but also allegorically—from factory to museum, from cinema to art space. If we have to learn to see “the politics of the space of art as a place of work,” we can also see this place of work as the unexpected site of the virtuality of a democratic politics. This, of course, will rely on the kind of work by which we, with our multiple, distracted gazes, might be solicited to learn to see ourselves in difference, and thus outside the terms of the capitalist reality embodied by the very space—the museum and its technologies— used to offer us something to see *distractedly*.

In Hito Steyerl’s writing-qua-writing, thought acquires a form by creating in language a critical lens through which to perceive the opaque and dangerous, the violent yet common sociality that we now inhabit, variously named post-democratic globalization, post-Fordist, global economy, disaster capitalism, shock capitalism, neoliberal event-economy. Any of these insist upon a materialist analysis of our situation that has at its heart a sense of the political. The political refers to neither program nor allegiance, but a critical stance toward knowing where we are and thinking how we, and art, can act within it, when it cannot escape its conditions of existence in any of the above forms of contemporary capitalism. Hence it is no surprise to find Hito Steyerl explaining “what makes art intrinsically political nowadays: its function as a place of labor, conflict and... fun, a site of condensation of the contradictions of capital and of extremely entertaining, sometimes devastating misunderstandings between the local and the global.”<sup>16</sup>

Any sentence I fashion falls lumpenly to earth in contrast with the speed of Hito Steyerl’s thought, which carries the reader of her texts headlong into a verbal labyrinth with a thrilling sense of getting close to grasping something vital about our current situation, whose morphing forms and rapid unsettlements seem almost out of our analytical reach. Her startling combinations bounce the catchphrases of the media-saturated world and fast changing techno-jargon of the piercing analytical insights of twentieth-century Critical Theory—Kracauer, Adorno and Benjamin are resources and interlocutors—alongside more current filmmakers, film theorists, philosophers, and political thinkers who form a community of theoretical-political debate. Piercingly accurate, her word-thoughts illuminate the darkness of our world, while always seeking to salvage from such terrifying analysis the contradictory forces that co-inhabit digital capitalism and the fragile elusive commons that its networks make unexpectedly possible—always, but never completely, at the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



user's expense.

If the form of this writing mirrors and exposes the conditions in which it, along with the artmaking, takes place, we must ask, what is the image? Image is not exclusively visual. An image can be textually evoked in figurative language. Image has, however, become for us profoundly technological. We write of technologies of the so-called image, the ubiquitous screen-images on smartphone, tablet, and computer. They are, however, now language: binary and algorithmic, while the indexical relation between machines (like analog cameras) that produced images is utterly replaced by surfaces displaying computational languages that few of us bother to understand.

We must acknowledge the material substrate of image in the technologies of production, its bond with social and substantive materiality, and visible and invisible labor, whether we are talking about painting or sculpture, photography, video, or digital technologies. Now we are forced to recognize the qualitative transformations effected by digital technologies through their technical specifications. In "Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise," Steyerl examines the implications of her discovery of the operations of digital photography on a smartphone, for instance. While we imagine that we have a magnificent if tiny camera-machine lodged inside our smartphones, in fact we have a very impoverished camera plus software transforming the mere visual noise information that the camera registers. Algorithms enable it to perform rapid comparative computations with its database of stored material to arrive at, and produce, a fictional resemblance. "Computational photography is, therefore, inherently political—not in content but in form. It is not only relational but also truly social, with countless systems and people potentially interfering with pictures before they even emerge as visible."<sup>17</sup> Because of all the parameters and rules, she writes—and here is a classic sentence layering the processes at work—"You could end up airbrushed, wanted, redirected, taxed, deleted, remodeled, or replaced in your own picture."<sup>18</sup> Her investigation opens on to "who decides what the camera will 'see'?" if what it collects is noise.

The distinction between noise—as the unintelligible utterances from those not deemed to have anything to say—and intelligible speech has been used by political philosopher Jacques Rancière in his thesis on the struggle for democracy, where what he calls the *demos* stands for those who make sounds that the social order does not recognize as speech, and hence who cannot represent themselves, and be represented in the political arena.<sup>19</sup> Thus the battle in democratization is a struggle over audibility and visibility, introducing the aesthetic into the political in relation to the distribution of who can be heard, known, understood, and what can be said. The French term "*partage du sensible*" (the distribution of the sensible) captures the delightful ambiguity in that language between the sensation and sense, binding the aesthetic to meaning.

Hito Steyerl evokes Rancière's theory of the struggle to expand the democratic sphere of audibility and visibility to expose the menace of the proxy to the political scene, particularly in the form of the armies of bots on Twitter. Bots are machine-generated proxies impersonating someone, "an algorithm wearing a person's face," which have become weapons in political struggles in many

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<sup>17</sup> H. Steyerl, "Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise," in *Duty Free Art. Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London and New York: Verso, 2017), p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> J. Rancière, *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Paris, 1995), transl. J. Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 9.

countries, and “A bot army is a contemporary *vox populi*, the voice of the people according to social networks. It can be a Facebook militia, your low-cost personalized mob, your digital mercenaries, or some sort of proxy porn.”<sup>20</sup> The bot danger has necessitated some governance of the field, but who determines this? Is there a Bigger and Bigger Brother somewhere, or might the system itself become its own Leviathan (her term)? At the same time, avoiding the governance of this media field—slipping under the radar—is necessitated precisely in cases of resistance to political systems where authoritarian governments actively control social media.

The challenge that Hito Steyerl discerns is the confrontation between an old political methodology and the current algorithmic technology, itself always scripted by someone but at the level of writing a specification that can become unauthored via its distribution. It operates with a perpetually renewed and stored-up flood of noise-like information in which the danger is clearly that bots acquire the status of “semi-autonomous actors.”<sup>21</sup> What is, therefore, *proxy politics*? One of her examples concerns the problem of the pixel that faces those employed to scan social media for images that are disallowed: body parts, which, when naked and pixelated, look a lot like faces. Thus in a typically finessed ending, Hito Steyerl allows language to do its work:

«Body is added to bodies by proxy and by *stand-in*. But these combinations also subtract bodies (and their parts) and erase them from the realm of never-ending surface to *face* enduring invisibility.

In the end, however, a *face* without a butt cannot sit. It has to take a *stand*. And a butt without a *face* needs a *stand-in* for most kinds of communication. Proxy politics happens between *taking a stand* and using a *stand-in*. It is in the territory of displacement, stacking, subterfuge, and montage that both the worst and the best things happen [my emphases].»<sup>22</sup>

Wordplay becomes the only way to catch something of what is actually happening.

To read Hito Steyerl’s writing, and indeed to write through it, is to experience the contemporary social realities in which we are living as if refigured by language. Thus we are solicited to be the *subjects* who care about doing something to solve it. Once you have read her work, you cannot ignore that something must be done, even when the picture she creates identifies what feels like a global defeat for critical, democratic hope.

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<sup>20</sup> Steyerl, “Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise” cit., pp. 39–40.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 45.