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The Broken Image

Marianna Vecellio

The City of Broken Windows stands on high ground at the mouth of the Val di Susa, through which the Via Francigena runs on its way to France.

Built by the architect Filippo Juvarra, it was the residence of the Savoy family, a tangible expression of all their power and greatness, displayed in the famous project called the "Crown of Delights." Before him, the architects Carlo and Amedeo di Castellamonte created here one of Europe's first picture galleries, where the Royal Collection was installed.

Every room was frescoed with motifs and scenes illustrating the family's triumphs and the greatness of their court. Everything glittered with power. It still seems possible today to hear their music drifting through the halls.

The glorious past continues to shine in the collection of contemporary art.

The City of Unbroken Windows also stands on high ground at the mouth of the Val di Susa, through which the Via Francigena runs on its way to France.

It was never finished, however, because the King abdicated the throne and abandoned it, as he then abandoned Italy. It was a military fortress and housed the Italian voluntary legion of the SS and anti-aircraft battalions. It was there that the widow Piol lost her last son, a partisan killed by a bomb. Before becoming an amusement arcade and a brothel, it was the stage of tragic conflict.

It has been an important museum of contemporary art since 1984, but history still haunts the stones and the deep well, the hinges of the doors and the corners of the rooms. Silence subdues the clamor of history, but not its memory, shattered into countless splinters of light.

Steyerl's most recent installation at Castello di Rivoli, *The City of Broken Windows* (2018) contains sound, video, architectural intervention, wall text, and painting. Speakers arranged in the Manica Lunga transmit the noise of breaking glass, recorded by Artificial Intelligence and played back as well: a discordant symphony of fragments mixed with the sound of bells. At each end of the 140-meter-long gallery, connected by a long text in dark gray vinyl lettering along the side walls and windows, are two videos, *Broken Windows* (2018) and *Unbroken Windows* (2018), set up on flat screens on easels. Behind the first video is a boarded-up large window covered by a gray monochrome, while behind the second, at the other end, is a broken window, as though smashed by a stone thrown from outside.

The Artist

Hito Steyerl, a filmmaker, theoretician, artist, activist, and teacher, is one of the most significant voices on the contemporary art scene. Through her works and writings, she examines the role of images in a society informed by the media, globalization, and digital capitalism, and addresses “the problem of truth, especially in an era in which doubts have become pervasive.”¹ Her work is a spatio-temporal coagulation, a story of reflections and overlappings, multiple identities and disappearances, fractures and simulations, a constant negotiation between gesture and body, action and theory.

Born in Munich in 1966, Hitomi Steyerl grew up in pre- and post-reunification Germany and in postcolonial Europe. She studied at the Yokohama Broadcasting Technical School (now the Japan Institute of the Moving Images) in Tokyo, under the guidance of Shohei Imamura (Tokyo, 1926–2006) and other interesting avant-garde Japanese film directors, before returning to Germany in the early 1990s and enrolling at the Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film in Munich. Influenced by New German Cinema and the Japanese New Wave, she trained with Wim Wenders (Düsseldorf, 1945)—with whom she worked as an assistant on *Bis ans Ende der Welt* (Until the End of the World, 1991)—and Helmut Färber (Munich, 1937), a film historian and founder of *Filmkritik*, one of the most significant film magazines to emerge from West Germany. The holder of a PhD in philosophy, Steyerl has developed an artistic practice anchored in theory.

She started out by making documentaries but immediately began challenging traditional documentary methods and calling for a re-analysis of the form. Her post-structuralist philosophical background and associated points of intellectual reference have led to a critical approach involving the reconsideration of this practice, as expressed in numerous writings including “Documentary Uncertainty,” first published in 2007. The documentary is traditionally understood as a format where truth is produced. According to Steyerl, however, “Post-structuralism has taught us how ‘reality,’ ‘truth,’ and other basic notions on which possible definitions of documentary rest are at best as solid as the fleeting reflections on a troubled surface of water.”²

If a documentary is to have true political power, Steyerl believes, it must be grounded in the need to capture reality and in an analysis of the conditions that make it necessary, i.e. the representation of history, fact, and reality, and it must develop a critique capable of placing these elements in a state of never-definitive tension. In her view, the words “truth,” “real,” and “document” are shrouded in an aura of mystery, and it is precisely this “uncertainty” that constitutes the documentary’s primary quality. Noting the perpetually ambivalent nature and contradictory authenticity that envelop the “fact” recorded by the documentary, she understands that it no longer performs the function for which it was born and that the faithful reproduction of reality has ceased to be possible. The documentary thus becomes a combination of fact and fiction capable of keeping the spectator in a condition of expectation and reflection. Steyerl points out “a deeper characteristic of many contemporary documentary pictures: the more immediate they become, the less there is to see. The closer to reality we get, the less intelligible it becomes. Let us call this ‘the uncertainty principle’ of

¹ H. Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty,” in *A Prior Magazine*, no. 15, Ghent, June 2007, pp. 302–8.

² Ibid.

modern documentarism.”³ If a picture of war is not war, as Steyerl states in *November* (2004), then history is not the way it appears but what remains hidden and veiled in uncertainty.

The artist addresses the role of images in the contemporary world more broadly in the essay “In Defense of the Poor Image” (2009). Steyerl argues that contemporary images, those we encounter every day circulating on the Internet, social networks, and digital devices, are essentially “poor.” “Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores.”⁴ Traveling quickly in the flow of digital communication, these compressed, reduced, degraded images have lost substance. Born as the extreme consequence of radical commercialization, they are the result of a devaluation of culture and cinema. Being devoid of value according to the canons of capitalist semiotics, the poor image can, however, occupy a position outside the frenzied mechanisms of the system, creating global alliances and new anonymous networks, reconstructing an aura that does not belong to the true image, but to its copy.

Produced in the late 1990s, Steyerl’s films *Die leere Mitte* (The Empty Center) (1998) and *Normalität (Normality) I–X* (1999) address some of the central themes of the work now created for Castello di Rivoli, *The City of Broken Windows*. *Die leere Mitte (The Empty Center)* tells the story of the place where the Berlin Wall, which divided the city between the East and the West, was built in 1961, the Wall’s demolition in November 1989, and the subsequent reorganization of the area in the future form of Potsdamer Platz, the symbol of post-Cold War Berlin. The artist observes how the site was carved up in a series of speculative construction projects and investments. Though well aware that it is impossible to capture reality, she embarks on a reconstruction of the episodes that marked its social and political history from the late eighteenth century to the present. The political and military center of Germany before the two world wars, the place where Felix Mendelssohn (Hamburg, 1809 – Leipzig, 1847) lived, as did his grandfather, the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (Dessau, 1729 – Berlin, 1786) before him, was transformed in the following centuries into a peripheral, lost place, occupied in the 1990s by squatters, eventually becoming the new center and symbol of urban redevelopment. In her telling of the story, she refers to Jacques Rancière (Algiers, 1940) and what he calls the “distribution of the sensible”: “According to him, the political component of any aesthetic endeavor is precisely located in the way in which certain aesthetic regimes enable certain visibilities or articulations and disable others. Thus, the political importance of documentary forms does not primarily reside in their subject matter, but in the ways in which they are organized.”⁵ Different times overlap but history repeats itself ambivalently. New boundaries and new barriers are erected through the new layout of the city, which loses its historical partitions. Steyerl addresses the metaphor of the boundary and its ambiguous meaning, pointing out that there are many ways of tearing down and many ways of erecting a barrier. The metaphor of the Wall with its scars and its rubble becomes an opportunity to demonstrate the impossibility of an unambiguous representation of reality. As Hannah Arendt (Hanover, 1906 – New York, 1975) observes, glimpses of reality appear like oases in a desert; they are what Siegfried Kracauer (Frankfurt am Main, 1889 – New York, 1966) described as holes through which the unexpected can

³ Ibid.

⁴ H. Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” in *e-flux journal*, no. 10, November 2009.

⁵ Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty,” cit.

slip.⁶

In 1999, Steyerl embarked on *Normalität (Normality) I–X*, which she herself defined as a devastating series; it consists of ten episodes showing the spread of anti-Semitic violence through neo-Nazi groups in Germany. The structure follows the compositional framework of *Op. 42* (1942) by Arnold Schoenberg (Vienna, 1874 – Los Angeles, 1951), which in her interpretation describes fascism as a grotesque joke. The first episodes consist of recordings made by the surveillance cameras at the desecrated grave of Heinz Galinski (Marienburg, 1912 – Berlin, 1992), president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany from 1988 to his death in 1992. The spread of anti-Semitic vandalism in cemeteries made it necessary to install such surveillance systems. The spectator looks through the camera lens and sees what the camera sees. The almost static shot contrasts with the urgent rhythm of the music, while the desecrated graves reflect the seriousness of “standardized” hatred. Steyerl lingers on the image of a desecrated gravestone, cracked and partially uprooted from its bed. In a metaphorical mimesis, the framing of the shot corresponds to the screen itself, as if it were the screen to be broken.

In this work, Steyerl asks what the structure of violence is and whether it can be decoded. If we could decipher it, perhaps we could protect ourselves against it. But in the artist’s imagination, the image remains blurred: in the age of the digital society, when everything can be translated into an image, there does not appear to be one capable of decoding violence. The film ends with the declaration that the acts of violence continue and, as the artist says, the work is ongoing.

The Broken Landscape

Caspar David Friedrich (Greifswald, 1774 – Dresden, 1840) painted *The Sea of Ice* between 1823 and 1824. Also called *The Wreck of Hope*, the work shows a disturbing expanse of ice, a boundless surface in a state of upheaval perhaps due to a collision. A sinking ship lying on its side can be seen in the background. A broken surface.

Friedrich expressed the transformations of his time in an unprecedented, non-academic style. A representative of the German Romantic movement that, following the Enlightenment, refocused attention on the power of the imagination and feelings, he painted bleak, empty, deserted, spectral landscapes with a specific idea of experience as his point of reference: a moment of suspension, a hiatus. Even though living beings are nearly always absent or barely sketched in these landscapes, they seem to entail the viewer as an external point of reference. The spectator becomes the protagonist of the painting, feeling cast adrift in a wide-open space. Friedrich’s works express the ecstasy of contemplation, absolute impenetrability and a feeling of loneliness that anticipates the synthetic world of the Web, endlessly surfed with no fixed destination. The painting is a cold, exploded landscape, almost a battlefield with its debris, its fragmented references, the rubble of the past and the uncertainty of the present, like the uprooted gravestones captured by Steyerl. Friedrich’s work is perhaps a vast expanse of rubble enclosing the blurred image of an anticipated wound, the wound inflicted on Europe in the century to come.

Steyerl often uses ruins in her work. Various referred to as “debris,” “rubble,” “rubbish,” “scars,” and “waste,” these poor, discarded remnants are the backdrop to scenes of war, or they are what remains afterwards, the place in which to look for traces of human DNA. They are the military

⁶ Siegfried Kracauer: “There are always holes in the wall we can slip through and the unexpected can sneak in.” Statement appearing at the end of *Die leere Mitte (The Empty Center)*.

wreckage gathered together in the aircraft cemetery in *After the Crash* (2009); the spam or “dirty data,” the millions of fragments into which the image explodes in *Factory of the Sun* (2015); the rubble that Walter Benjamin (Berlin, 1892 – Portbou, 1940) saw in the *Angelus Novus* of Paul Klee (Münchenbuchsee, 1879 – Muralto, 1940) and that prompts Steyerl to say that we, the spectators, are perhaps the debris of history. In her 2011 essay “Digital Debris,” she asks whether the concept of rubble has not become outmoded in an era where everything is endlessly copied and transformed. Does the digital era not entail the concept of indestructibility? “Aren’t the scars of history signs of an analog age, one that is irrevocably over? Hasn’t history itself been worn out?”⁷ No, history is not over, replies the artist; quite the contrary. Digital technicians, the plastic surgeons of history, have created new systems to copy, clone, and transform the detritus of history. Like the poor image and spam, however, ruins possess their own anti-power. They can produce unforeseeable results, and this unpredictability possesses imaginable power: “But all imaginable forces—esthetic, political, technological, affective, social—are expressed by the scars of the digital image or sound. It condenses the tensions and contestations that constitute the image/sound and rip it open.”⁸

More Debris

Lucio Fontana (Rosario de Santa Fé, 1899 – Comabbio, 1968) returned to Italy in March 1947 after a long period spent in Argentina. A photograph of the time shows him walking through the rubble of his bombed studio on Via Boccaccio in Milan. In the following years he was to embark on the series of *Buchi* (Holes, 1949–68). While Fontana’s slashed canvases, which followed the “holes” by some years, entailed a deep reflection on the concept of matter, the very act of taking the brush and using it to pierce the smooth surface of the picture highlighted instead his recognition of the canvas as capable of representing history, torn by the horrors of war, only by involving the space around it. In order to go beyond the two dimensions of the painting and attain the total dimension of reality, it is necessary to break through, make an opening. This involves energy and the assertive presence of the gesture. The power of impact. For Arendt, freedom is a condition of living that manifests itself in action: people “are free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift of freedom—as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same.”⁹

There is a strange and fascinating similarity between Fontana’s act and the one performed by Steyerl about sixty years later, in 2010. Fontana’s act is captured in the famous photographs of Ugo Mulas (Pozzolengo, 1928 – Milan, 1973), which show him pointing the brush on the canvas surface; Steyerl also is filmed in the middle of the action. In *Strike* (2010), for example, we see her approaching a monitor holding a hammer and chisel, and then striking the screen a clean blow, which irreparably breaks the device—the channel of communication between us and the world. The action, which also refers to a labor strike, becomes an impact, a liberating force. In a reality where everything is transformed into a flow of images and no identity is certain because it constantly changes format, the artist interrupts the circulation of images and, by entering into reality, symbolically transforms the image into an object, a visible body. The surface on which Fontana acted has now been replaced by the device that transmits the flow of images, and it is on this that Steyerl acts in order to bring communication back onto the plane of reality. What’s more, we are presented not only with the results of the act but also with the action itself.

⁷ H. Steyerl, “Digital Debris. Spam and Scam,” in *October*, no. 138, Fall 2011, p. 70.

⁸ D. Rourke, “Artifacts: A Conversation Between Hito Steyerl and Daniel Rourke,” in *Rhizome*, March 28, 2013.

⁹ H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961).

Brought up in the Germany of the post-war period and its reunification, Steyerl constantly includes walls in her work, walls and openings, voids and passageways, in search of anti-images capable of offering resistance to the globalized world of the media corporations and organized information. As Benjamin wrote, “Every present is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) [...] In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural *bildlich*. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.”¹⁰ From this perspective of truth charged to the bursting point of time, Steyerl’s image is a shattered, broken representation.

Der Bau (The Building)

The exhibition at Castello di Rivoli was preceded by *Der Bau (The Building)* (2009), Steyerl’s architectural intervention on a building in Linz during its year as the European Capital of Culture. The work is a multimedia installation on the history of the Bridgehead Buildings, previously the headquarters of the Nazi party and now housing, among others, the Linz Art Academy. It consists of a series of videos, a diagram made up of images and text, some heaps of rubble, and an action carried out on the building’s facade.

A symbolic diagram of lines and tangents created by removing plaster from the front of the building, the work brings to light the visible and invisible historical strata and their social and political implications for education, work, and everyday life. Steyerl tells us that during her research she discovered that construction work on the building was carried out by forced labor and that many local Jewish residents were persecuted and murdered. Moreover, the stone used to build it, exhibited by Steyerl as piles of rubble, was from the quarry at Mauthausen, known as the concentration camp where thousands were killed. The history of the building, which recalls the multiple narratives of works such as *Die leere Mitte (The Empty Center)*, *Babenhausen 1997* (1997) and the more recent *November* (2004) and *Lovely Andrea* (2007), is one of oppression and resistance, conflict and discipline. Because today the Linz Art Academy is housed in the building, *Der Bau (The Building)* hints at the interference between art and the new production methods of cognitive capitalism, which create education structures produced by the creative industry. This work is certainly related to that at Castello di Rivoli in terms of its large-scale operation on the facade of the building treated as a surface. It is its most evident predecessor. However, it also displays marked similarities with *Strike*. In all three cases, the artistic intervention is carried out on the surface, which Steyerl transforms into an image. In Linz, the removal of plaster brought to light insufficiently metabolized historical episodes: history was translated and transformed into image. The work remains, however, in the dimension of possibility and uncertainty, reflection and action. Is the image effective? Is it capable of capturing the historical past, the process of grieving? It may be that the artist remains in the uncertain territory of the facts. What Steyerl produces on the front of the building is a huge bursting image that expresses her intention to deconstruct history and its failures.

¹⁰ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 462-63.

The City of Broken Windows

Based on footage filmed by Steyerl in a former British World War II hangar, Broken Windows addresses recent research by the surveillance industry into artificial intelligence, which is taught how to recognize the sound of breaking windows. What information does the material produce? What data are generated by breaking glass? These are the questions asked by the engineers. What is the sound of surveillance—violence or fear? This is what the artist asks. Can robots save the world? Can painters?

Some engineers involved in the project describe the experience of the act, the power of the impact and of the echoes, while others focus on the failure of certain attempts. Artificial intelligence is unable to decode the sound, responding with a reverberation of jingles and bells. Steyerl often speaks of reverberation in connection with the work, emphasizing how what happens in one place, on a battlefield for example, reverberates elsewhere, in our cities and our museums. The reverberation is what returns, transformed into distortion. Remarks made by the technicians of Audio Analytics run along the south wall of the Manica Lunga mixed with ungrammatical phrases developed incorrectly by the AI's language breakdowns. The opposite wall text includes quotes from "The Broken Window," the first chapter of *Things Seen and Things Not Seen* by the French economist Frédéric Bastiat (Bayonne, 1801 – Rome, 1850). The installation inhabits the realm of capitalism and autonomy, the criminological theory of broken windows and the illustration of its economic fallacy, as recounted in the story of the young man and the glazier along the wall of the Manica Lunga, in the territory of simulation, mimesis, and reality.

At the opposite end, the video *Unbroken Windows*, it too on a flat screen on an easel, tells the story of Chris Toepfer and his Neighborhood Foundation. Formerly in the US Army during the second Iraq war and now an artist and activist, Toepfer has developed the "decorative board up" technique as a powerful tool for neighborhood revitalization and economic development. Together with his fellow members, he paints the boarded-up windows of vacant buildings, turning a "city of cracks" into redeveloped areas. The criminological theory of broken windows asserts that social disorder and vandalism are connected with urban decay, and that if small crimes (such as breaking windows) are repressed, then large crimes also decrease. Chicago, where the Neighborhood Foundation operates, is full of rubble and "broken windows can embody many types of social disorder." As the vinyl on the wall tells us, Toepfer's works are "able to deflect taxation, destruction and in some cases have been said to avert actual death by way of mimetic magic." In the magical realm of digital visuality, he performs a "secret rite," producing an image that reminds us that not everything we see is real. And not everything that is real is turned into an image. The painted window is a ghost, a simulation, a post-produced and unrepeatable surface, halted in the very act of its transformation. It is a paradox: reality transformed into an image that becomes reality again. The endlessly circulating poor image is definitively broken. What we see is the image of history, which carries its own echo, Benjamin's "secret index," the dialectical image: "Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."¹¹

In her 2017 book *Duty Free Art*, Steyerl addresses the notion of "creative destruction," a term

¹¹ W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) pp. 262–63.

coined by the sociologist Werner Sombart (Ermsleben, 1863 – Berlin, 1941) on the eve of World War I: “Today the term ‘creative disruption’ seems to have taken the place of ‘creative destruction.’ Automation of blue- and white-collar labor, artificial intelligence, machine learning, cybernetic control systems or ‘autonomous’ appliances are examples of current so-called disruptive technologies, violently shaking up existing societies, markets and technologies [...]. What is the contrary to a procedure that inflates, accelerates, purges, disrupts, and homogenizes; a process that designs humanity as a uniform, cleansed, and allegedly superior product, a super-humanity comprised of sanitized render ghosts?”¹²

In the Rivoli work, the post-produced window, the broken pane, sound translated into the music of bells, the painted monochrome and the boarded-up window with illusionistic painting are subversive attempts to highlight the possibility of being and making both images and agents: they express re-readings of the medium. In this sense, they become the opening of which Kracauer spoke, through which the unexpected can enter: “So it’s not about object-ontologies but image-actions, image-gestures, thing-affinities, chains of reaction of objects, forces, and pixels, that manifest in scars and bruises, but also sometimes in the liquid harmony of the floating world of images.”¹³

The City of Broken Windows is an ambivalent device that addresses architecture and sound, action and rubble, destruction and simulation, the limits of artificial intelligence and the possibility of the living being as agent. It is a system to flood the apparatus.

¹² H. Steyerl, *Duty Free Art. Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London and New York: Verso, 2017), pp. 15, 18.

¹³ Rourke, “Artifacts,” cit.