HITO STEYERL
FACTORY OF THE SUN, 2015, color HD video, 21 min. / SONNENFABRIK, HD-Farbvideo. (ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ANDREW KREPS GALLERY, NEW YORK)
Hito Steyerl’s moving-image work is often placed in the category of the “essay film,” a protean quasi-genre that is notoriously difficult to pin down. One of the most ambitious attempts to do so in recent years was “The Way of the Termite: The Essay in Cinema, 1909–2004,” an expansive retrospective organized by Jean-Pierre Gorin for the Austrian Filmmuseum in 2007, which included all manner of titles from D. W. Griffith’s narrative fiction _A Corner in Wheat_ (1909) to Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s canonical work of cinéma vérité, _Chronicle of a Summer_ (1961), to Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s feature _Mysterious Object at Noon_ (2000), which blends documentary with scripted drama. “Maybe in the end we should reconcile ourselves to the fact that the film essay is not a territory and that it is, like fiction and documentary, one of the polarities between which films operate,” Gorin states in his notes for the series: “an energy more than a genre.” If pressed for a more direct definition, one might say that the essay film puts the tracing of a conceptual line at its center, and will, toward this end, poach liberally from various other practices.

But as with other problematic terms—such as experimental and avant-garde—perhaps the most efficient way to explain this deeply impure form is to point to the achievements of its best practitioners. Thus, Steyerl’s films are frequently compared to those of three exemplary elder filmmakers: Harun Farocki, Jean-Luc Godard, and Chris Marker. This heroic male trio has been invoked innumerable times by harried journalists and pedigree-obsessed academics alike when a quick gloss is required.

Even if this tripartite genealogy largely functions as a form of praise, implying that a torch has been passed from one generation to the next, significant lines can be traced from Steyerl’s work back to these three figures. Through Godard, we might see a model of the socially engaged filmmaker who uses the formal expression of an intellectual restlessness to disrupt dominant ways of thinking. Like Marker, Steyerl has often pondered the nature of personal memory, particularly in _November_ (2004), _Lovely Andrea_ (2007), and _Journal No. 1_ (2007), in which the contemplation of a martyred friend, the search for a dimly remembered photo of the artist herself, and interviews about an old Yugoslavian newsreel lost in that country’s dissolution, respectively, supply the through-lines to each piece. Lastly, Farocki and Steyerl share an interest in exploring the political dimension of the production and distribution of images, with Farocki stressing the former half of this process, and Steyerl, increasingly, the latter.

Focusing on the Farocki-Steyerl relationship and enhancing its details is instructive, illuminating not only the similarities between the two, but, more importantly, Steyerl’s divergence from older models.
of filmmaking. From his earliest titles in the 1960s through some of his most recent, Farocki, who died last year, shot the bulk of his work on 16-mm film. He made a number of forays into electronic media, for instance, Videograms of a Revolution (1992), a compilation of television and amateur clips made with Andrei Ujica, and SERIOUS GAMES I–IV (2009–10) and PARALLEL I–IV (2012–14), two installations dealing with computer animation and the US military’s use of gaming that helped gain him belated attention in the art world. As with many auteurs of his era, the zone defined by the camera’s lens serves as his primary space of interest. Farocki’s space is, at heart, Bazinian space, often defined by deep focus and long takes, framed and edited so that we may perceive figures as they move through the world of their existence. 1) Farocki’s space is also akin to that of cinéma vérité, each shot bearing evidence of life as it might normally be lived, captured in real time by the mechanisms of cinema. Even in the all-digital SERIOUS GAMES and PARALLEL, Bazinian space retains a presence through its own negation, seen through phantom cameras and emulated via algorithmic means.

This is not to say that Farocki propounds any simple reverence for the image as pellucid mirror of reality. Quite the contrary: Farocki questions the illusory depth of his images through minimal and strategic use of narration and montage that provides a skeptical view of the power of these same images. As the title of his landmark feature Images of the World and the Incription of War (1988) implies, Farocki proposes that the technology of film provides not only a recording of the world but also a set of signs that can be analyzed, decoded, and counteracted. The force of his work lies in how he draws out these two qualities of the photographic image, at times arguing that they work in opposition to one another. Take, for example, a line of narration from his video Workers Leaving the Factory (1995), which compiles shots depicting workers exiting factories, from the Lumières’ original 1895 actuality through an international range of twentieth-century footage culled from cinema and television, in order to analyze how very similar images can be deployed to various ends. The image of workers leaving a factory, Farocki’s narrator says, is “an image like an expression, so often used that it can be understood blindly and does not have to be seen.” Here Farocki proposes a distinction between seeing an image and interpreting its meaning. The phenomenological, optical experience of the world through cinema is placed against the semiotic reading of an image as instrumentalized information; the former is part of the essential nature of the image while the latter is a contingent effect of culture.

In 2003, Steyerl published “Documentarism as Politics of Truth,” an essay that likewise wrestles with the paradoxical nature of the photographic image, its simultaneous existence as truth and fiction. “On the one hand,” she writes, “the articulation, production and reception of a document is profoundly marked by power relations and based on social conventions. On the other hand, though, the power of the document is based on the fact that it is also intended to be able to prove what is unpredictable within these power relations—it should be able to express what is unimaginable, unspoken, unknown, redeeming or even monstrous—and thus create a possibility for change.”2) The “unpredictable” here can be thought of as the recalcitrant nature of photographic evidence, as a recorded image may contain visual facts that elude and even contradict the intentions of its use. It is this slippery but inherent link to prior reality that seems to give documentary forms their power, and Steyerl likens this to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the “dialectical image” whose redemptive truth, as she puts it, “is not relative and contingent.” Citing art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, she gives the example of photos taken in concentration camps and smuggled out, which were able to negate the National Socialist narrative by providing glimpses of a reality the regime had denied. However, by the early twenty-first century, we come to see how images of real human suffering can be used to justify war on a humanitarian basis. While documentary images still could be

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HITO STEYERL, GUARDS, 2012, color HD video, 20 min. / GUARDS, HD-Farbvideo, 20 min. The dizzying collages of chroma-keyed images; graphics warping and wiggling like a tripped-out PowerPoint; editing: superimposed text in a crazy array of fonts, warping and wiggling like a tripped-out PowerPoint; dizzying collages of chroma-keyed images; graphics warping and wiggling like a tripped-out PowerPoint; dizzying collages of chroma-keyed images; graphics warping and wiggling like a tripped-out PowerPoint. An image may indeed contain a redemptive fragment of reality, Steyerl argues, but its manner of use—how it is employed by dominant structures—becomes the ultimate arbiter of its meaning. Steyerl further explored these questions in a number of films made in the following years, most immediately in NOVEMBER, which traces the image of her friend Andrea Wolf from scratchy old footage of Super-8 movies they made together in the ’80s, through Wolf’s later appearance in samizdat video after she became a revolutionary for the Kurdish cause, and her subsequent assassination (in 1998) and resurrection as an icon of the ongoing Kurdish liberation movement. Steyerl of course retains her own personal memories of Wolf, as noted in her voice-over, but by NOVEMBER’s end she suggests that what is most real about Wolf’s image is not how it allows access to its referent but rather the varying effects Wolf’s image creates as it comes to bear new, new meaning with each change in context and purpose. The possibility of seeing deeply into an image, as described by Farocki, is thus bracketed out of the equation in favor of an analysis of an image’s multiple expressions through time and space. Steyerl’s NOVEMBER, LOVELY ANDREA, and JOURNAL NO. 1 all raise the question of an image’s indexical relation to a lived reality of the past, but ultimately focus on its contemporary circulation. In this sense, they provide early instances of a concept that Steyerl would come to name circulationism, defined in her 2013 essay “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” as: 

The critic potential of malleable electronic media must be teased out from the history of electronic images—rather than their more canonical chemical-mechanical cousins. From the age of analog video, one could point to Dan Graham’s Rock My Religion (1983–84), Joan Braderman’s Joan Does Dynasty (1986), Stuart Marshall’s Bright Eyes (1986), and numerous pieces by Martha Rosler and Alexander Kluge: These are videos that attempted to present their arguments via documentary, archival, and original footage altered by image-processing techniques, playing with the critical potential of malleable electronic media many times before the World Wide Web. The advent of digital editing at the end of the ’80s brought with it a slew of postproduction possibilities, ushering in the FinalCut era. The following years saw a flourishing of video essays, by such prominent practitioners as Jacqueline Goss, Steve Reinke, Elisabeth Subrin, and Walid Raad, all of whom became staples at more adventurous film festivals into the first decade of the current century. (Notably, Seth Price and Paul Chan both produced early pieces that could arguably be classified as video essays—for example, Price’s Industrial Synth [2000–2001] or Chan’s RE:THE_OPERATION [2002]—although this part of their practice has become somewhat obscured by later developments in their work. This highlights how much recent history of artists’ moving image has in fact been overlooked even as the art world embraces film and video with renewed vigor.) And Steyerl is not alone among contemporary artists in employing this form; other works include Oliver Laric’s “VERSIONS” (2009–), a series of online essays on the reduplication and reuse of images online, and Camille Henrot’s GROSSE FATIGUE (2013), which uses a dizzying array of staged and

useful in liberation struggles, “the misery-voyeuristic picture forms developed by this ‘redemption’ idea are among the most potent documentalities of the present and legitimate both military and economic invasions.” She thus concludes that “there is hardly a visibility that is not steeped in power relations—so that we can almost say that what we see has always been provided by power relations. On the other hand, the doubt in these visibilities insists with a vehemence that is capable of constituting its own form of power.” An image may indeed contain a redemptive fragment of reality, Steyerl argues, but its manner of use—how it is employed by dominant structures—becomes the ultimate arbiter of its meaning. Steyerl further explored these questions in a number of films made in the following years, most immediately in NOVEMBER, which traces the image of her friend Andrea Wolf from scratchy old footage of Super-8 movies they made together in the ’80s, through Wolf’s later appearance in samizdat video after she became a revolutionary for the Kurdish cause, and her subsequent assassination (in 1998) and resurrection as an icon of the ongoing Kurdish liberation movement. Steyerl of course retains her own personal memories of Wolf, as noted in her voice-over, but by NOVEMBER’s end she suggests that what is most real about Wolf’s image is not how it allows access to its referent but rather the varying effects Wolf’s image creates as it comes to bear new, new meaning with each change in context and purpose. The possibility of seeing deeply into an image, as described by Farocki, is thus bracketed out of the equation in favor of an analysis of an image’s multiple expressions through time and space. Steyerl’s NOVEMBER, LOVELY ANDREA, and JOURNAL NO. 1 all raise the question of an image’s indexical relation to a lived reality of the past, but ultimately focus on its contemporary circulation. In this sense, they provide early instances of a concept that Steyerl would come to name circulationism, defined in her 2013 essay “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” as: 

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Subsequently, Steyerl’s recent films have concerned themselves ever more with the digital spaces where such circulationism now occurs, stressing the two-dimensional surface of the computer screen, where everything is the result of reconfiguring data, and the artist may arrange elements with little regard for the ontological necessities of the physical world. The title of her LIQUIDITY, INC. (2014) references the flowing, fungible nature of an existence mediated through networked systems, and the video in turn makes generous use of the cornucopia of postproduction effects made possible in the age of laptop editing: superimposed text in a crazy array of fonts, warping and wiggling like a tripped-out PowerPoint; dizzying collages of chroma-keyed images; graphics that imitate the UX design of Tumblr, Google Hangouts, and Mozilla Thunderbird; and numerous other examples of moving images stretched, repeated, inverted, sped up, slowed down, and otherwise altered. A favorite device of Steyerl’s is the superimposition of one video clip inside the larger frame of another, sometimes made to seem, in an obviously manufactured way, as if it emanates from a laptop, monitor, or a cell phone, at other times layering one or more naked 16:9 rectangles, each generating its own jittering movie loop, all within the same shot. This visual trope appears prominently in LIQUIDITY INC., HOW NOT TO BE SEEN: A FUCKING DIDACTIC EDUCATIONAL MOVIE FILE (2014), in FREE FALL (2010), GUARDS (2012), and numerous other videos. It both disrupts the simulation of three-dimensional space by providing two or more conflicting topologies (and temporalities) within the same frame and serves as a metaphorical instance of the total ingestion of all media into the vast immaterial ocean of data. Despite the fact that Steyerl has often been pegged as a maker of essay films, we might argue instead that she now works in a different mode: that of the video essay. The lineage of this genre is more fugitive, and must be teased out from the history of electronic images rather than their more canonical chemical-mechanical cousins. From the age of analog video, one could point to Dan Graham’s Rock My Religion (1983–84), Joan Braderman’s Joan Does Dynasty (1986), Stuart Marshall’s Bright Eyes (1986), and numerous pieces by Martha Rosler and Alexander Kluge: These are videos that attempted to present their arguments via documentary, archival, and original footage altered by image-processing techniques, playing with the critical potential of malleable electronic media many times before the World Wide Web. The advent of digital editing at the end of the ’80s brought with it a slew of postproduction possibilities, ushering in the FinalCut era. The following years saw a flourishing of video essays, by such prominent practitioners as Jacqueline Goss, Steve Reinke, Elisabeth Subrin, and Walid Raad, all of whom became staples at more adventurous film festivals into the first decade of the current century. (Notably, Seth Price and Paul Chan both produced early pieces that could arguably be classified as video essays—for example, Price’s Industrial Synth [2000–2001] or Chan’s RE:THE_OPERATION [2002]—although this part of their practice has become somewhat obscured by later developments in their work. This highlights how much recent history of artists’ moving image has in fact been overlooked even as the art world embraces film and video with renewed vigor.) And Steyerl is not alone among contemporary artists in employing this form; other works include Oliver Laric’s “VERSIONS” (2009–), a series of online essays on the reduplication and reuse of images online, and Camille Henrot’s GROSSE FATIGUE (2013), which uses a dizzying array of staged and
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The distinction between the essay film and the video essay is, in truth, a historical one. We now live after the full convergence of film with video, so that what we watch on our television, on the Internet, and at almost every movie theater is all made from the same digital stuff. To create moving images today entails an engagement with multiple histories of technology: film, television, and computer. Steyerl’s work reminds us that we live in the afterlife of other creative technologies as well. The writer’s word-processing software, the filmmaker’s editing software, and the visual artist’s graphic-design software have all become variants of one another; the typewriter, the Steenbeck, and the drafting table have been replaced by the same keyboard, mouse, and screen. Indeed, the confluence of Steyerl-as-writer, Steyerl-as-filmmaker, and Steyerl-as-artist is made evident in a series of videos she has made out of footage documenting live lectures: *The Museum is a Battlefield* (2013), *I Dreamed a Dream* (2013), and *Duty-Free Art* (2015). Each is augmented by clips and photos used during these talks, now edited into the body of the video itself. At Steyerl’s solo show earlier this year at Artists Space, New York, the inclusion of these works provided a bridge between video essays like *Liquidity* and *How Not to Be Seen* on the one hand, and her written essays on the other, with a nod to the visual art of the gallery space in an installation that deployed a cushioned wavelike slide, a sandbag seating arrangement, and a remarkable horizontal screen made of sculpted sand.

Consider, then, how Steyerl’s videos now not only develop her concept of circulation but have themselves become nodes within their own distributed network, which is Steyerl’s body of work in its many variations. This matrix consists of various instantiations of the essay form, whether published as texts, articulated in lectures, or distributed in films. At some points the artist insists upon the role of the individual producer as the means to connect together a disparate, multiplatform output. This context is significantly different from the field of cinema that produced and supported Marker, Godard, and Farocki for most of their careers. While Steyerl trained as a filmmaker and worked in feature film production and journalism early in her career, most of her moving-image output now appears primarily in galleries, museums, and other art spaces, although many titles are also available online. In this regard, she provides a significant example of a larger change that has transpired in the past decade: the movement away from an independent social space for artists’ cinema, which for decades had only tangential relationships to both commercial filmmaking and art institutions, and toward a situation in which many of the twenty-first-century heirs to this lineage now make and exhibit their films primarily in the context of fine art.

The question is whether the circulation of Steyerl’s filmmaking through the contemporary art world has significantly altered its potential effects, and what role the image of the artist herself has come to play within this system.

1) In the study of film, the ideas of André Bazin are often counterposed to those of Sergei Eisenstein. Bazin stressed that meaning is found in the cinematographic image itself while Eisenstein insisted that meaning is created through montage. This distinction could also be read as production (cinematography) versus postproduction (editing) as well as as immanent meaning versus constructed meaning. Notably, Steyerl has suggested that the current shift toward postproduction calls for a new consideration of Seton montage theory. See, for example, her analysis of Vertov’s ideas in the essay “The Language of Things” (2006) and her conversation with filmmaker Laura Poitras in the May 2015 issue of Artforum, or her use of Eisenstein in the video *The Museum is a Battlefield* (2013).
3) Documentarism is a neologism introduced by Steyerl in this essay. She defines it as “the pivotal point . . . where forms of documentary truth production turn into government—or vice versa.”
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6) The term video essay is here employed in a slightly different sense from the way in which it is nowadays encountered, when it is often used to describe more journalistic efforts that do not contain the artistic or poetic aspirations of the essay film as traditionally understood. And by making a distinction between the essay film and the video essay, I don’t wish to imply a crude medium-specific argument that only celluloid can produce “deep” images and electronic media produces “flat” ones. Digital video can be used to evoke various types of space, flat or deep, and the advent of HD seems to have even encouraged the latter tendency. Consider, for example, the Batain qualities of a high-definition video piece such as Amie Siegel’s *Provenance* (2013), which employs a documentary idiom (in this case, observational rather than essayistic) to trace the global circulation of furniture from the city of Chandigarh, India.
7) Steyerl herself has expressed ambivalence about talking on the mantle of “artist.” In 2014, she stated in a video interview for London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts, “I am a filmmaker and a writer . . . it just sort of happened that people started calling me an artist. But I consciously try not to rely on it too much.”
8) This quote appears in a listing on Artspace, the art auction and sales website, promoting a benefit edition Steyerl created for the ICA entitled *Is the Internet Dead?* (2014). The edition mimics Steyerl’s roles as writer and artist. It includes a print made from a distorted jpg of an erotic ukron-wok work by Kinogna Umaturo as well as a free download of the same image’s source code, which reveals that Steyerl has inserted her own lines of text—e.g., “Was the internet recently shot by a sniper in Syria”—in order to create the visual glitches. See www.artspace.com/hito-steyerl/is-the-internet-dead?features=false.

Hito Steyerl, *In Free Fall*, 2010, color HD video, 34 min. / HD Farbvideo; e-flux journal #49

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