

## In a Captivating Show, Hito Steyerl Vivisects the Veracity of Video

See What You Believe

By **Jennifer Krasinski** Wednesday, Apr 22 2015



*Photo by Matthew Septimus*

Eye truth: Cozy up in a beanbag chair and take in Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.* (2014)

In an interview with *Time* magazine last year, Ramsey Orta, the man who recorded Officer Daniel Pantaleo's fatal chokehold on Eric Garner, encouraged viewers not to be afraid to bear witness to violence. "Pull out a camera," he advised. "Once you have proof, there's nothing can go against that." Earlier this month, Feidin Santana, the man who recorded Walter Scott being shot in the back by Officer Michael Slager in South Carolina, sat across from Matt Lauer on *Today* and explained why, despite his fear of police harassment, he came forward with his footage. "If I were to have a family member that

would happen [to]," he said, "I would like to know the truth." But despite Orta's video, and despite a medical examiner's ruling that Garner's death was a homicide, a grand jury failed to indict. The case against Officer Slager would seem stronger, but the jury, as it were, is still out.

Possessing proof, capturing the truth — are these false hopes for an image in the face of the powers that be?

German film/video artist and writer Hito Steyerl has long immersed herself in the question of who's in charge of seeing. In the tradition of moving-image essayists Chris Marker, Harun Farocki, and Jean-Luc Godard, Steyerl's constant subject is the veracity of images, the false productions and distorted documentations inherent to photographic media. In her 2003 essay "Documentarism as Politics of Truth," Steyerl lays out the problems of power and interpretation, quoting Chico Marx's infamous line from *Duck Soup* as he tries unsuccessfully to pass himself off as Groucho: "Who are you going to believe — me or your own eyes?" Currently on view at Artists Space Exhibitions and Artists Space Books & Talks is a sharpshooting survey of her videos and recorded lectures from 2004 to the present. The show is potent — grave in moments and giddy in others — each piece delivering its own detonation to an understanding of how and why and what moving images can produce. It is also a show not to be missed.

Steyerl is a sharp, rigorous thinker, eloquently plainspoken, whose craft never comes second to her critical and philosophical inquiries. The earliest video in the exhibition is the personal and affecting *November* (2004), a meditation on the fate of Steyerl's adolescent friend Andrea Wolf, whom Turkish authorities executed in 1998 as she fought alongside the leftist Kurdistan Workers' Party. Wolf's body was never found, but there are other remains: Steyerl's first film, in which her friend played a rogue feminist fatale; a video interview recorded when she was entrenched with the rebel forces; a political poster that declared Wolf a martyr. "Revolutionaries are immortal," it read. In this odd afterlife, Wolf circulates freely yet circuitously in what Steyerl refers to as "the labyrinth of traveling images," once a woman, now a political icon. "And not 'I am telling the story,' " the artist explains of her own appearances in *November*, "but 'the story tells me.' "

Throughout her work, Steyerl maintains that we do adopt the shape of the frames we fill, that the self achieves a particular kind of presence, a resilience, a fluidity. "Be formless, shapeless, like water," Bruce Lee's voice instructs in her 2014 video *Liquidity Inc.* Reclining on beanbags and immersed in blue light in the main space at Artists Space Exhibitions, viewers can take in the loopy, kaleidoscopic narrative that parallels the story of water with that of Jacob Wood, an MMA fighter and former financial adviser who lost his job in the 2008 economic crash. Are these subjects, in fact, connected? Yes and no. The porous borders of words allow certain affinities to pass between disparate worlds: Water is liquid; liquidity is the sign of a healthy economy; "Be water, my friend," Lee incants as a call to power. But what's in a pun?

The center always holds thanks to Steyerl, a deft storyteller who aligns the velocities of her footage so that the elements spin apart together, making their overlaps as obvious as their differences. Her videos are built like webs rather than in three-act arcs, luring the

viewer into their ever-expanding layers. The effect is that one is watching a very real concoction, or a surreal documentation, or both. Such is the slippery nature of speculation, Steyerl seems to be saying, reminding us never to forget that there is an artist at work between us and these videos. She's present in all of her pieces, like Hitchcock without the hide-and-seek gimmick. Throughout the exhibition, you'll see her in various forms: sitting bright-eyed on a museum bench; goofily dance-miming in a pilot's costume and cap; having a nervous breakdown via instant message about imploding budgets and computer-graphics tutorials. She is at once creator and character; she tells the story and the story tells her in return.

*In Free Fall* (2010) also explores the effects of a crashed economy, this time via a study of an airplane graveyard. "These are all ghosts," the owner says, referring to the gutted crafts, which he either sells for scrap to Chinese buyers or leases to Hollywood for use as props. "Matter lives on in different forms," we're told. Reuse and recycle what's left behind. As we watch cinematic footage of plane crashes, interviews, and in-studio commentary by artist Imri Kahn, the question that confronts us throughout is: How can something fail, how can it fall so far, when at one time "it felt so real"?

As we're all beginning to understand, the economy isn't *in* crisis, it *is* crisis. The strength of one can't be measured without the other appearing in the equation. There is no *there* there, and not even art can provide solace. In *Guards* (2012), Steyerl films a video portrait of Ron Hicks and Martin Whitfield, two museum security guards with military and law enforcement backgrounds, respectively. Their priority, should violence strike the museum? Save the art before saving a human life. If you're there when that happens, pull out your cameras and see what you capture — though there's no guarantee what that will prove.

## ***Details***

### **Hito Steyerl**

Artists Space Exhibitions  
38 Greene Street, 3rd floor  
and

Artists Space Books & Talks  
55 Walker Street  
212-226-3970, [artistsspace.org](http://artistsspace.org)  
Through May 24