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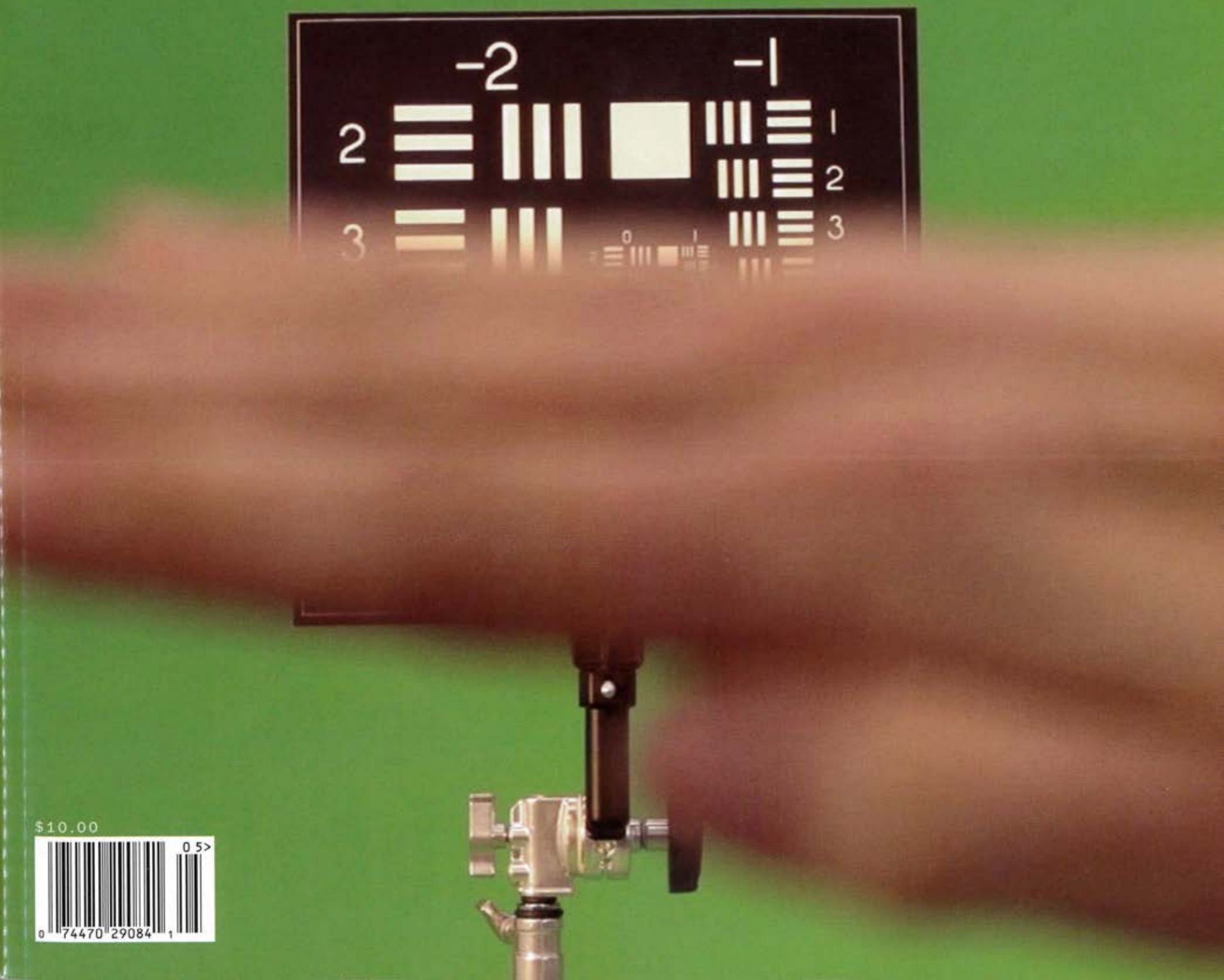
ART IN BEIRUT

HITO STEYERL AND LAURA POITRAS IN CONVERSATION



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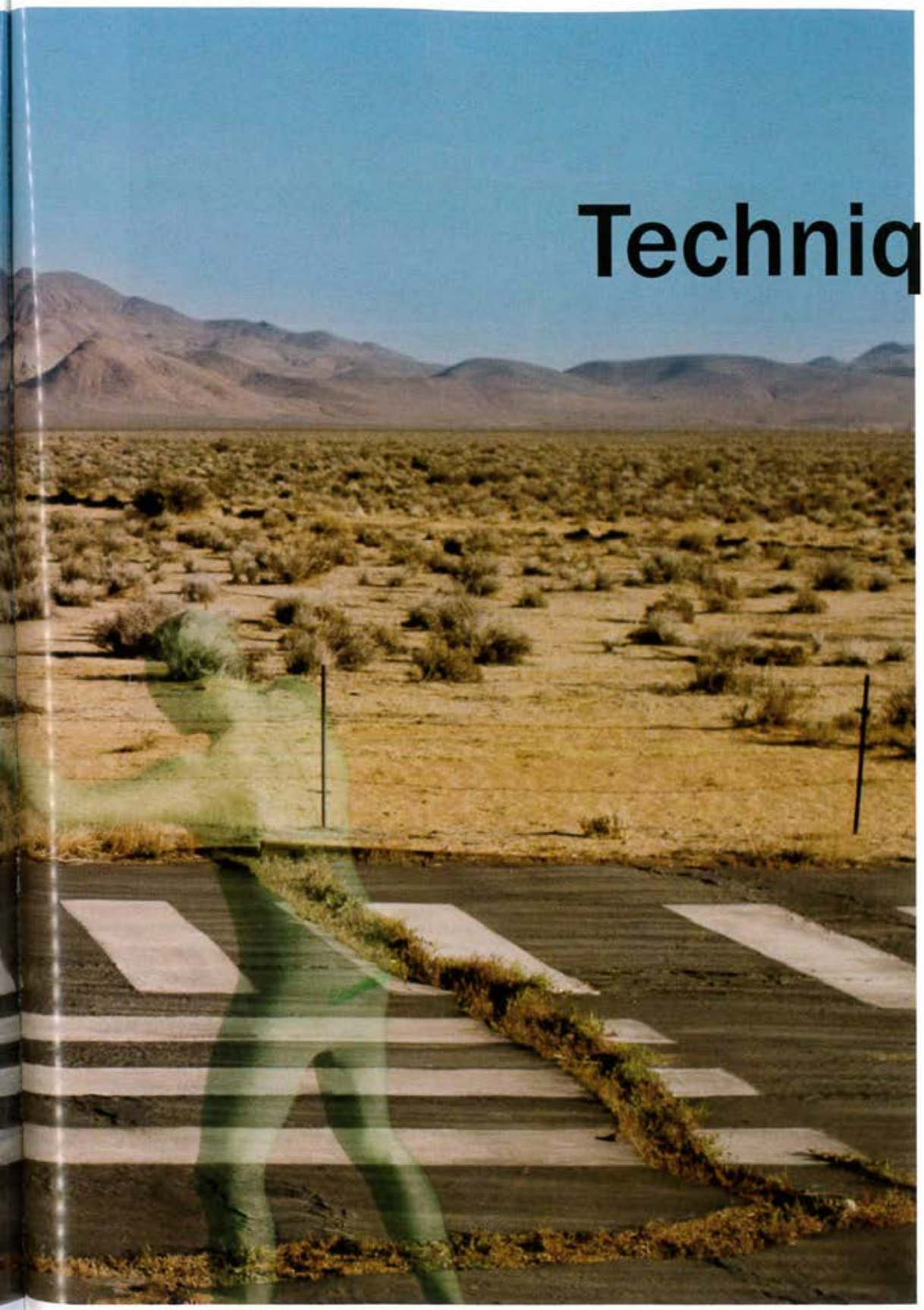
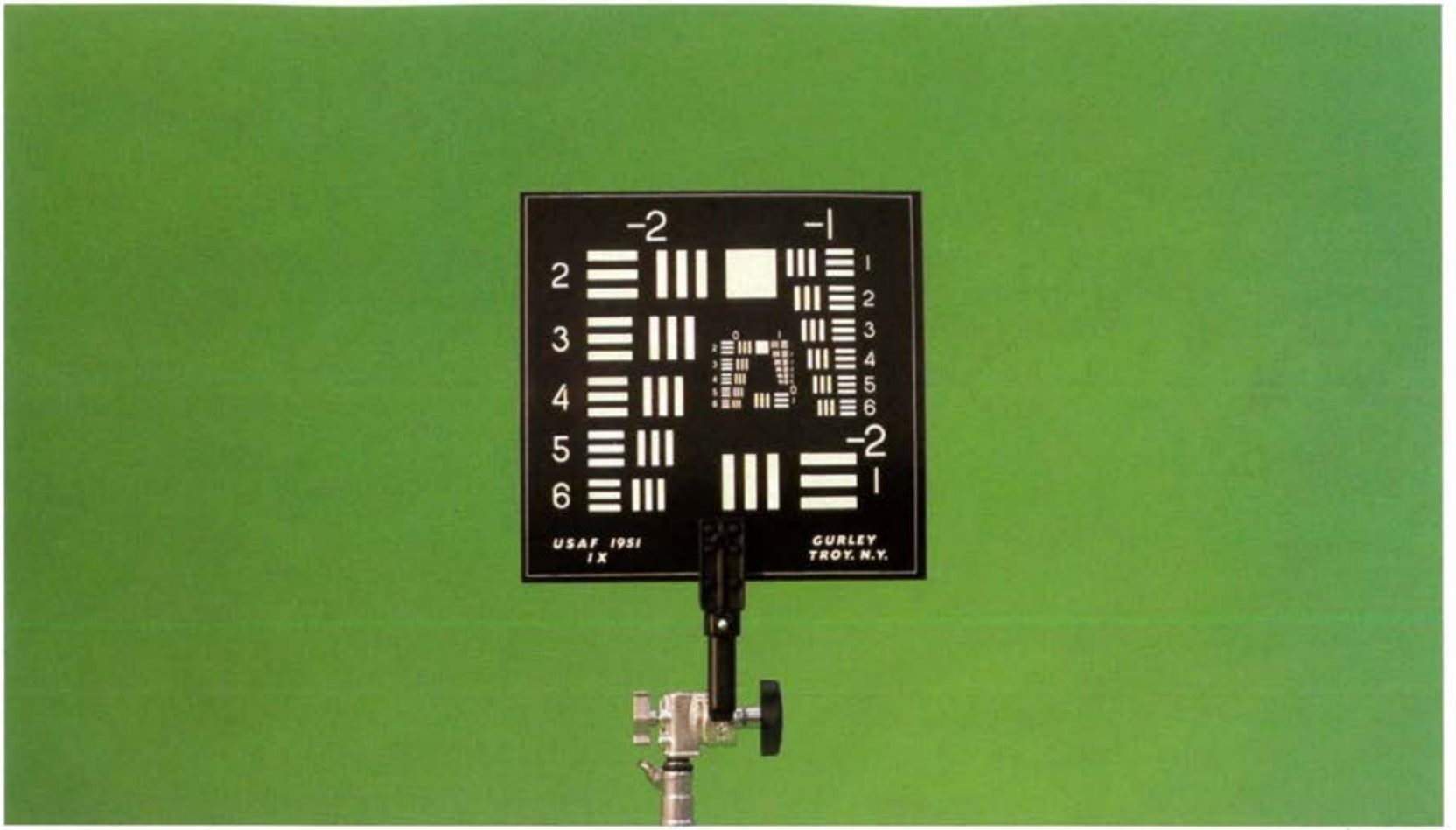
Hito Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013. HD video projection (color, sound, 14 minutes), architectural environment, dimensions variable.



Techniques of the Observer

HITO STEYERL AND LAURA POITRAS
IN CONVERSATION

"TECHNOLOGY HAS TAKEN US by surprise, and the regions that it has opened up are glaringly empty," Siegfried Kracauer once wrote. The great German film theorist was not merely lamenting the depletion or alienation of life in a mechanized world; he was also expressing elation, anticipation, about the possibilities opened up by technology and in particular by film—a space for play, for discovering extraordinary experiences and visions. The films and videos of LAURA POITRAS and HITO STEYERL conjure a similar sense of exhilaration, exploring as they do wholly new techniques, devices, and immense fields of information. And yet the secrets they uncover and the stories they investigate are often terrifying—whether they are breaking Edward Snowden's revelations of the US government's vast, clandestine surveillance of its own citizens or teaching us how to hide from drone strikes in a half- but also deadly serious way. *Artforum* invited Poitras, whose *CITIZENFOUR* won this year's Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, and Steyerl, whose solo exhibition at Artists Space in New York is currently on view, to meet and exchange thoughts about filmmaking, perception, disclosure, encryption, and the promise and peril of the image.



Hito Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013, HD video projection (color, sound, 14 minutes), architectural environment, dimensions variable.

LAURA POITRAS: The last time we saw each other was about two years ago—right before I started getting e-mails from Edward Snowden. And you were working on a project for the Venice Biennale dealing with surveillance and drone strikes.

HITO STEYERL: We were brainstorming about it together. And then a couple of weeks later Snowden contacted you?

LP: Yes. In retrospect, your project foreshadowed a lot of the Snowden revelations.

HS: I made a video called *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* [2013], which dealt with how to be invisible in the age of surveillance. It premiered, and four days later the leaks hit. It was amazing. I was seeing Snowden everywhere. And I knew you were involved.

LP: A lot of people would think that this idea of disappearing was just paranoid. But if you're living in a place that's a potential target for drone strikes, then needing to disappear visually or going off the grid are not just theoretical scenarios. They're real questions.

HS: Absolutely. Actually, your idea for how not to be seen was to create a phone app that would warn you if there were drones approaching.

And the problem was that I had no idea how I could produce such a thing. But you already had a wealth of strategies and techniques to do something like that. I was in awe, because you had this vast knowledge of encryption, having air-gapped computers that never went online, and so on.

LP: Before Snowden, I'd already had to figure out means of securing information. At that point I was filming a lot with Jacob Appelbaum, who was traveling throughout the Middle East to train activists on communication security. That was really sensitive footage—covering everything from the Egyptian resistance movement to the situation in Tunisia—and so we had to be careful, because there were people who didn't want to be identified.

But what I love about *How Not to Be Seen*, and your work in general, are the strategies that you use to combine documentary elements with fiction, with extremely playful storytelling—the threat of surveillance and this almost slapstick approach to evading it. So I'm curious: What's the progression when you're beginning to conceive of a piece? Do you know: "This is where the idea begins"?

HS: Well, in the case of *How Not to Be Seen*, it started with a real story that I was told about how rebels avoid being detected by drones. The drone sees movement and body heat. So these people would cover themselves with a reflective plastic sheet and douse themselves with water to bring down their body temperature. The paradox, of course, is that a landscape littered with bright plastic-sheet monochromes would be plainly visible to any human eye—but invisible to the drone's computers. And people were reading books underneath these sheets until the drones left. They brought them along for the occasion. It was actually a great opportunity for them to study and to take a break: The drone shadow became a sort of university.

How about you? In the case of the last film, I remember, we talked about it

Laura Poitras, *CITIZENFOUR*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 114 minutes.

being a film about whistle-blowers in general, and you already had a lot of footage. And then things started to happen and the project completely changed.

LP: Snowden contacting me out of the blue is an example of why I love doing work that is in dialogue with the world around me, because I literally could never have imagined Edward Snowden. The limits of my imagination are much less interesting than what I encounter going into the field and filming. So yes, it obviously changed the narrative. But part of vérité filmmaking, and documenting in the present tense as things unfold, is going where the story leads. It's uncertain and scary at times, but that is why there is drama. It wasn't difficult to shift the focus around something that obviously has a lot of gravitational pull, which Snowden had.

HS: And then you met Snowden and you filmed in that hotel room in Hong Kong. How did you work on it after that?

LP: In Hong Kong, I just tried to document as much as I could, not really knowing what would happen. Throughout the filming there, I was in a state of shock—shock over the top-secret documents, shock over meeting Snowden and discovering how young he was and the risks he faced, and shock over knowing we were about to anger the most powerful people in the world and that there would undoubtedly be a massive backlash.

Glenn [Greenwald] and I both had seen what had happened with Chelsea Manning and how the media had crafted a narrative that pathologized her. And we were worried something similar could happen in this context. But there was a huge difference with Snowden, because he had decided that he would come forward. He had made the decision not to conceal his identity. When he first told me that, I was terrified—I thought that this was like committing suicide. Up until then, I had assumed he hoped to remain an anonymous source. In hindsight, though, it was very smart and very risky—he knew that he wouldn't be able to remain anonymous, so he decided to preemptively disclose his identity. When I asked to meet him in person and film him, he was resistant because he didn't want to be the story, and because it was dicey for us all to be together if anyone tried to stop the reporting. But I convinced him, arguing that it was important for people to understand his motivation.

After leaving Hong Kong and returning to Berlin, I knew that I had an obligation to report on the documents. Snowden's very first e-mail to me said: Whatever happens to me, promise that you'll get this material back to the public. And so I had to do that. But I'm not a writer—I mean, I've been contributing to print journalism, but I knew that my real contribution would be as a visual journalist and filmmaker.

HS: But I don't think that's entirely correct, because you added some other very important contributions—beyond *CITIZENFOUR* [2014], of course, which is masterful in itself. I think one of your real accomplishments was figuring out how to deal with this kind of information, the way you handled the reporting, and the way the information was stored, secured, circulated, redacted, checked, and

Left: **Hito Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013,** HD video projection (color, sound, 14 minutes), architectural environment, dimensions variable. Hito Steyerl.

Right: **Laura Poitras, *The Oath*, 2010,** 35 mm, color, sound, 96 minutes.

Opposite page, far right: **Image from slide show accompanying Andy Müller-Maguhn, Laura Poitras, Marcel Rosenbach, Michael Sontheimer, and Christian Grothoff's article "Treasure Map: The NSA Breach of Telekom and Other German Firms," Spiegel Online, September 14, 2014.**

so on. It was an entire art of withholding and disseminating information and carefully determining the circumstances. And this was something new and extremely thoughtful, I think, in relation to how leaks were previously handled—by WikiLeaks, for example. How did you come up with that? How did you make the rules?

LP: You're right that there were a lot of decisions that were put in my hands and in Glenn's. We learned. Both Glenn and I had followed WikiLeaks closely. Glenn had written about it. I had filmed a lot with Julian [Assange]. And we'd seen some of the things that they had accomplished that were really extraordinary, particularly the use of media partners to publish with multiple outlets internationally. In the past, stories were suppressed because the government put pressure on US news organizations. That becomes much harder if a number of different international news organizations have the same information.

We went to multiple organizations as well, but I was very careful with the material. I didn't trust anyone. I didn't want there to be a repeat of what had happened with *The Guardian*, where they published a password that led to the disclosure of the unredacted State Department cables. That was actually the failure of the journalist, who had failed to protect a password, not the failure of WikiLeaks.

Because the NSA [National Security Agency] material is so sensitive, I felt that everything had to be developed on a story-by-story basis with news organizations and that only the sets of documents around those particular stories should be shared. And that has pros and cons. The drawback is that the reporting happens more slowly; there has been criticism about that, and I actually think that criticism is correct. I wish I could have published more quickly. But I didn't have a newsroom behind me when Snowden contacted me. I had to build these relationships as I was going, though I remained totally independent—I have freelance agreements with many news organizations, but I work story by story and I don't promise exclusivity, which keeps me flexible. After I published the PRISM story with the *Washington Post* [PRISM is the code name for the NSA's secret Internet-communication data-collection program], I started working with *Der Spiegel* in Germany and with the *New York Times*, and Glenn was working with *The Guardian*. But Glenn and I felt that Snowden had entrusted us as journalists—individual journalists. He didn't entrust *Der Spiegel* or *The Guardian* or the *New York Times*. And so we weren't going to just hand over the entire archive, because we'd seen this go badly, particularly in the case of *The Guardian*'s publication of the password.

HS: It means that you decide, OK, there is this subset of documents and I'm going to partner up with a specific organization and let's work on that topic. And that becomes a kind of aesthetic decision.

LP: No, that's just a strategy of publication. It wasn't about aesthetics.

HS: I disagree. It really is a formal decision, about how to format information, about its form. And that's important on the level of safety, of course, but also in terms of protecting your autonomy and the autonomy of the work. It is about aesthetic autonomy, too. To go back to our first meeting, it was so interesting because we began a series of conversations about Turkish jet strikes in Turkey facilitated by American drone reconnaissance, and then two years later you published the corresponding NSA documents about those strikes with *Der Spiegel*, which showed exactly the station that relayed the information to the Turkish air force to send jets to perform the airstrikes. It's like you and Snowden suddenly provided something I thought would be hidden forever: the perspective, the aerial perspective.

LP: Yes, but you're the one who built the artwork around that information, which is different.

HS: Well, one thing that is clearly part of your technique is your fly-on-the-wall point of view, which you had used extensively before shooting in Hong Kong—in

"*CITIZENFOUR* does something very effortlessly that many artists strive to achieve—it infiltrates the circuits of mass media. In fact, it is the most influential and efficient political work of art of the twenty-first century so far."
—Hito Steyerl

Yemen and so on. I always marvel about that take where you managed to film your protagonist and his little son praying at dawn. How did you even get in the room?

But there are also your skills of editing, which are being expanded by techniques of encryption—techniques of selection—and ways to keep material safe and to distribute information. Not only making it public, divulging or disclosing, but really finding new formats and circuits for it. I think this is an art that has not yet been defined as such, but it is, well, aesthetic. It's a form.

This is the major creative challenge not only in your case but in general, if you have a database. This harks back to the WikiLeaks issue, where the database is just a trove of information, and you have to create a sort of narrative in order to navigate the data. What kind of storytelling can adapt to the technological novelty and also to the vastness of the database as an archive?

Lev Manovich, the new-media theorist, wrote about databases. He goes back to Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* [1929], focusing on the editing work—navigating a database of footage—rather than the camerawork. But—and I've often thought about you when thinking through this question—how does the editor work in the twenty-first century? Especially if, as in your case, the editor is also the person with the movie camera and the Soundbeam and the encrypted hard drive; she is a writer who designs a whole infrastructure of communication. And she's a woman, not a man! Vertov's team had several film reels. That was it—that was their archive. Now it's not only about narration but also about navigation, translation, braving serious personal risk, and evading a whole bunch of military spooks. It's about handling transparency as well as opacity, in a new, vastly extended kind of filmmaking that requires vastly extended skills.

LP: Ironically, one of the unintended consequences of being put on a US government watch list and interrogated every time I crossed the US border is that it made me smarter about how to circumvent the state, and it toughened me up. I'd already reached the decision that I would not be intimidated. So, in a way, I am grateful to all the border agents who provided essential training for when Snowden's first e-mail arrived in my inbox.

In terms of the broader questions about the archive itself and how to find meaning, that's one of the things I'm thinking about for my upcoming show at the Whitney [Museum of American Art in New York]. The archive has tremendous amounts of "news" and evidence of abuses of government power, but it also opens a window onto a parallel world that operates in secret and wields tremendous global power. There is a whole culture, language, and worldview that is not just about facts. That's one of the things I'm working on now.

HS: How does the NSA even do it themselves? How do they manage their information?

LP: Creating narratives from vast amounts of data is a challenge for the NSA—they are ingesting billions of data points every day—and they're not very good at it. They use graphs and visualization tools. For instance, they have a program called TREASUREMAP that provides analysts with a near-real-time map of the Internet and every device connected to it. One of the pieces I'm doing for the Whitney will also be called TREASUREMAP, and it's a sort of subversive countermapping. I think the real core of the NSA's approach to data collection is

"Through the archive, you come to understand that everything is like a chess game. There's what we pretend is the political reality that we live in and then there are the actual moves that happen underneath." —Laura Poitras

retrospective querying—how to see narratives after the fact. That is why they want to "collect it all," which of course violates all kinds of fundamental principles of the rule of law and probable cause. These violations range from watch lists to far worse abuses, like using metadata to target people for assassination in the drone program.

What is your approach to editing and the archive in your own work?

HS: Well, I've always been engaged with editing. And I think that editing, not only in filmmaking but in a lot of different activities, is a crucial activity. Postproduction is not working on content in retrospect but *creating* the content. Editing is where the meaning is created.

Godard said an edit could be an "and" or an "or." That is how traditional film or video editing works. But now editing, with newer media and with physical reality becoming mediatized to a large extent, becomes a much more expanded activity, being able to channel and process information and to put together meaning in a much more expanded field.

Now instead of expanded cinema, it's expanded editing, expanded postproduction, and circulation across different platforms and formats. I think it's one of the crucial lenses through which to analyze contemporary activities.

LP: Do you edit alone, or do you work with an editor?

HS: I do the editing on my own, but then there is color correction, compositing, and 3-D modeling and rendering. My team does the bulk of this work. But I see the effects, too: When I'm working in After Effects, there is hardly any real-time playback. So much information is being processed, it might take two hours or longer before you see the result. So editing is replaced by rendering. Rendering, rendering, staring at the render bar. It feels like I am being rendered all the time.

What do you do if you don't really see what you edit while you're doing it? You speculate. It's speculative editing. You try to guess what it's going to look like if you put keyframes here and here and here. Then there are the many algorithms that do this kind of speculation for you.

LP: One of the most disorienting aspects of doing this NSA story is how to process all the different roles I'm occupying simultaneously. How do you identify your own position?

HS: Well, I never was trained to be an artist, nor do I aspire to be labeled as such. It's strange to me. But the art world has become a sort of sensory industry—an industry that expresses so many of the tensions that surround us, from anything connected to real estate to militarization to sponsorship to geopolitics to general working conditions and inequality, from the intern to the high-net-worth individual.

LP: I just read your recent essay about the planning of a redesigned National Museum in Damascus, which articulates these issues so beautifully. How do you navigate within institutions like the museum, the market? Do you sell your work in editions?

HS: Yes, I do editions. But the contract states that the work is free to circulate on- or off-line in any form whatsoever. It isn't restricted to editions.

LP: Have you ever thought of making a feature film?

HS: No, I know that in the places where I show my work, the attention span is just not there. It's very difficult to show ninety minutes. People are just going to abandon it. In the cinema it is different.

Opposite page, far left: **Hito Steyerl, *Liquidity, Inc.*, 2014,** HD video projection (color, sound, 30 minutes), architectural environment. Installation view, Artists Space, New York, 2015. Photo: Matthew Septimus.

Center: **Hito Steyerl, *Liquidity, Inc.*, 2014,** HD video projection (color, sound, 30 minutes), architectural environment, dimensions variable.

Right: **Laura Poitras, *CITIZENFOUR*, 2014,** HD video, color, sound, 114 minutes.

LP: One of the best things about cinema is the fact that you have a captive audience—you've got them for those ninety minutes. There is popcorn, you feed them, you give them a comfortable chair. You don't have to worry about them wandering in and out.

I think in the art world, duration is often seen as transgressive because it's somehow forcing the audience to go beyond their comfort level, to subject them to an endurance test. And yet duration is absolutely accepted within mainstream cinema. So duration is perceived very differently in those two domains. Warhol, of course, was the supreme example of really pushing that in beautiful ways.

HS: AS ART, *CITIZENFOUR* does something very effortlessly that many artists strive to achieve—it infiltrates the circuits of mass media. In fact, it is the most influential and efficient political work of art of the twenty-first century so far, without following any of the narrow doctrines of so-called political art. And even though you are independent, you released this film commercially—which helped it reach something of the magnitude of audience that the initial Snowden videos did.

LP: I released the film commercially because my work does fall within the storytelling genre of movies. And the type of storytelling that I'm drawn to, which is about understanding bigger themes through the narratives of individuals confronting conflict, happens to align itself with more popular cinema. So while I'm not bending my practice to speak to that audience, or making compromises, it does have the potential to reach a popular audience. And I love that. What's so beautiful about cinema is that it's a populist medium. *CITIZENFOUR* fits within a long tradition of Hollywood films about the individual against the state.

HS: But again, I think a lot of it is unprecedented because the film feels like the documentation of its own making. The event of reporting itself is the thing that's covered. The film is more like the documentation of a work than a work itself. But the work also seems to lie in the way all of you came together and then created the event, the story, and many of the tools to tell it while all hell was breaking loose around you. The work is, ultimately, the making of an expansive and complex process that has political, juridical, informational, aesthetic, and infrastructural levels that have not yet fully unfolded.

LP: Well, I'll agree there were some unprecedented aspects about what went down—the magnitude of the disclosures, Snowden outing himself, the anti-establishment journalist getting the scoop, and the filmmaker as participant.

It was complicated to navigate. I knew, for instance, right before we were going to break the Angela Merkel story, that it was going to be big. And, of course, I'm going to bring the camera and document that day. So there was this weird convergence between events that I could foresee having impact and then documenting them, and those I could not foresee.

Do you feel that in your own work you might create situations or be a catalyst, and could have an effect on the subject down the line?

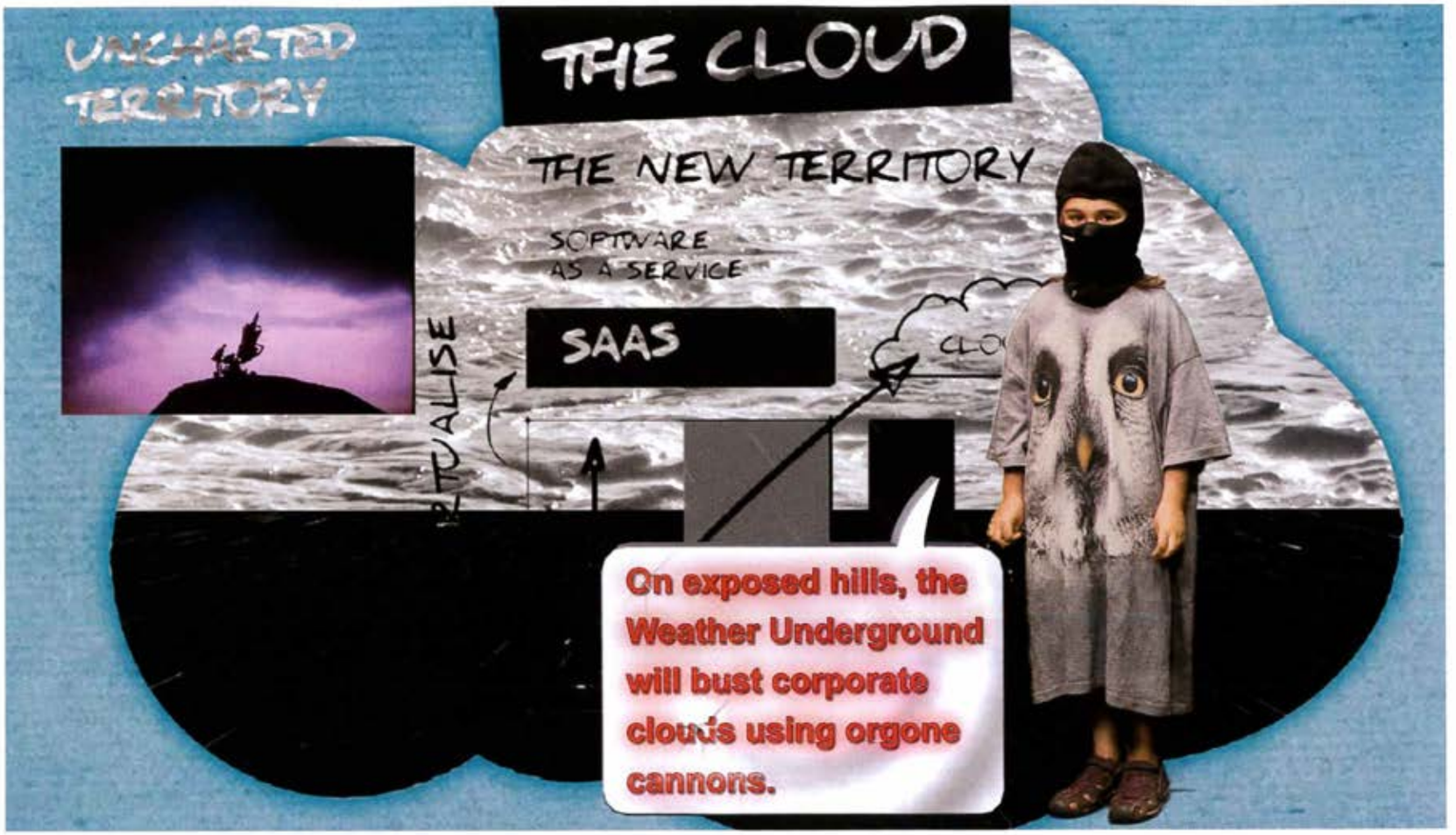
HS: I don't think so, no.

LP: But your own approach to storytelling plays with time and cause and effect.

HS: Well, one of the main questions for me is in the genre of dealing with real life: how to deal with it formally. There is a standard set of formal expressions that are used in traditional journalism. And some of them are really necessary, like fact-checking. But my conviction is that, now more than ever, real life is much stranger than any fiction one could imagine. So somehow the forms of reporting have to become crazier and stranger, too. Otherwise they are not going to be "documentary" enough, they are not going to live up to what's happening.

LP: What kinds of forms do you think are commensurate with this new subject matter?

HS: For me, the whole issue of the relationship between, let's say, image life, what we used to call representation, and so-called reality. The thing formerly called



Hito Steyerl, *Liquidity, Inc.*, 2014, HD video projection (color, sound, 30 minutes), architectural environment, dimensions variable.

"My conviction is that, now more than ever, real life is much stranger than any fiction one could imagine. So somehow the forms of reporting have to become crazier and stranger, too." —Hito Steyerl

real life has already become deeply imaged. And it is about finding different forms of circulation, even physically altering the infrastructure, since existing circuits are controlled by governments and corporations.

LP: I went to Artists Space today and had a look when you were installing, and this tense relationship between representation and reality was palpable. I was surprised to see the Weather Underground, for instance, channeled in a very funny, surreal way. Do you know the film called *Underground* [1976], about the group? Emile de Antonio, Mary Lampson, and Haskell Wexler made this film at the time the group was in hiding, which was a piece of really bold filmmaking.

HS: I saw it maybe twenty years ago and loved it. Of course, today, the Weather Underground is the name of a corporate weather-forecasting website. At one point it stated explicitly that they took the name from this radical organization.

In my video, reporters supposedly from the Weather Underground—played by a young girl and two adult performers—come onstage to announce the weather, but the weather is a strange mixture of man-made weather, political weather, affective weather, all sorts of catastrophes, going crazy: climate change, financial, geopolitical. There are storms brewing everywhere, different bits and pieces mixed up in one continuous tsunami.

LP: It's a great metaphor. It hit me when I walked in—I was surrounded by all this blue. And I had a very emotional reaction; I felt like I was descending into something.

HS: I was actually trying to evoke the sensation that the whole space is underwater. There are blue gels on the window to flood the whole space in blue.

LP: It's really beautiful. And the curved seating area—is that a wave?

HS: Yes, there's a recurrent motif in the film, which is the Hokusai wave—*The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, I think it's called. It's the quintessential Japanese woodcut from the nineteenth century. Mount Fuji is in the background, with boats precariously dangling under the wave. And that scene repeats in the film.

The work is inspired by Jacob Wood, a financial adviser turned MMA [mixed martial arts] commentator. He links different types of liquidity to one another: a risk-based financial liquidity that could at any moment morph into a perfect storm, and the graceful fluidity that Bruce Lee described: "Be formless, shapeless, like

Laura Poitras, *CITIZENFOUR*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 114 minutes.

water . . . water can flow, or creep, or drip, or crash. Be water, my friend." The video is installed inside a half-pipe/wave/gym structure, where kids can play or people can fall asleep if they want to. I have a feeling they should take off their shoes and bow to the mat, but that's probably asking too much in a Western context.

LP: I WANT TO SPEAK to you about writing something based on the Snowden archive for the Whitney catalogue I'm working on—not from a news perspective but rather from a theoretical and artistic perspective.

HS: Yes, I'd want to look into what was happening in Turkey. In your *Der Spiegel* article, you also detailed the internal cooperation of the NSA with the Turkish secret police and the way in which all cell-phone communications, basically, are being monitored.

And I met the people whose cell-phone communication transcripts were read in court: journalists, politicians, all facing years of prison for writing articles or communicating on the phone. This was being construed as terrorism. Turkey has a notoriously abysmal record when it comes to the freedom of press and of speech. But now we see the chain of surveillance: The NSA provides the data for another country's accusations. Now we know how it works, thanks to Mr. Snowden.

LP: Through the archive, you come to understand that everything is like a chess game. There's what we pretend is the political reality that we live in and then there are the actual moves that happen underneath, the realpolitik beneath the stage politics. We've seen that with the WikiLeaks releases. And it's just incredible to be able to look inside and see how the deep state works.

HS: The case of Turkey proves how their state is supported by Western surveillance infrastructure, a deep state par excellence, upgraded by corporate collaboration. I have always been convinced that this would never be revealed. I grew up in Europe, and many of my friends—all Eastern European—have been able to see their Secret Service dossiers, because they were declassified after the fall of Communism. But those of us who lived in the West never got a chance.

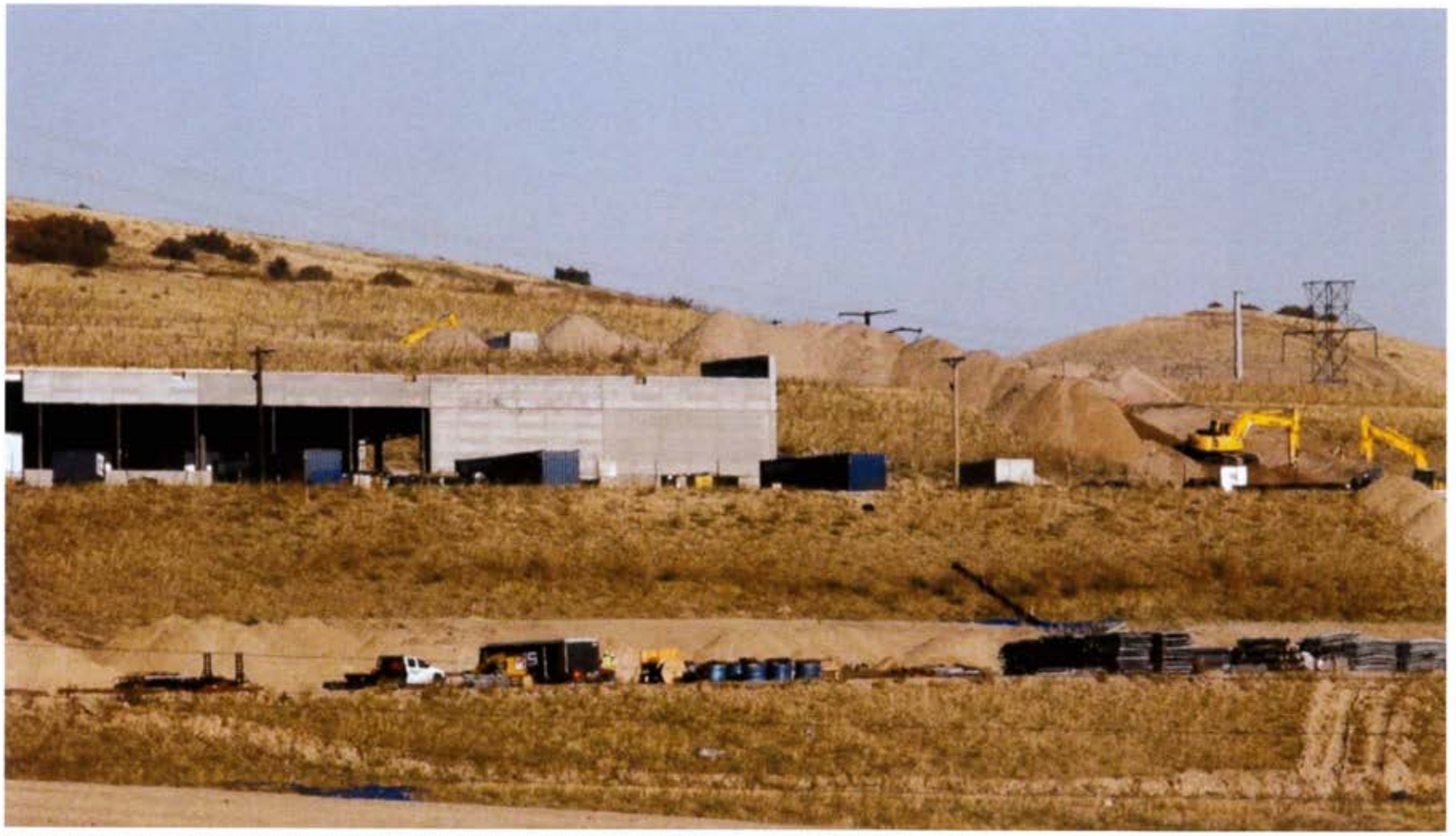
There is a real "before" and "after" the Snowden leaks.

LP: The narratives you build, these primary documents you're riffing off of, remind me of Alexander Kluge, his writing as much as his films—his insistence on posing oppositional or alternative public spheres, his use of primary documents as jumping-off points for narratives and critiques.

HS: Yes. There is a lot of carryover from Kluge and his collaboration with Oskar Negt.

LP: In a way, we've lost that intimate, critically intertwined relationship between art and cinema. Often, when I go to see contemporary art and I'm looking at moving-image work, I'm disappointed because it seems very rudimentary. Sometimes I look at a video in a gallery and I just think, Wow, the production values are so low.

HS: That's fine. If the production values are low, it's not a problem. But how can people get away with being so boring?



Laura Poitras, *CITIZENFOUR*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 114 minutes. Still from footage shot by Trevor Paglen.

What about image quality in your own work? What kind of production values do you seek?

LP: My work has gone from 16 millimeter to digital standard definition to high definition. But I don't really subscribe to the idea of some big difference between digital and analog. My work is much more driven by people and narratives, even as I want the image to be cinematic.

HS: But you shot most of your work on small, handheld cameras, no? And you did most of the work yourself. In Iraq and Yemen you did it all by yourself. And this defines your special relation to the people you film—the relationship that you build in order to be able to film them. I think that would dramatically change if there were more crew, bigger gear, lights.

LP: Yes, that's true, in the case of both Iraq and Hong Kong. They were both dangerous situations, so working alone made more sense. I'll take the risks because it's my work, but I don't want somebody else taking the same risks.

LP: THE NEXT PROJECT I'm doing is the one at the Whitney, and I don't quite know what it means yet. What is the relationship between that museum context and the public? How is political content contained in a museum context? How is it different from a movie theater?

HS: I think in terms of political context, you don't have to worry. You could go on to abstract painting for the rest of your life. You're covered. You have street cred.

LP: I'm not so sure that's true or if I can count on that.

HS: The other question is, of course, entirely relevant. I think that needs to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. And it depends on the content that you're going to place in there and how it communicates with this precise location.

LP: I'm excited about doing installation-based work because it doesn't have the same constraints as long-form narrative filmmaking, where you have to choose *only* those three minutes of footage that are what you need at that point in your narrative. I'm looking forward to being liberated from that, to let the audience participate more in the narrative experience—to hand over some of the choices. I won't abandon narrative—there will be a beginning, middle, and end, with reveals and turning points—but how the work is navigated by the viewer will be more dynamic.

How did you come up with the configuration of the display at Artists Space, all the different elements?

HS: There are five video works. And behind the bookstore, there is an event space where I installed three of my lectures. All these lectures deal in some way with the museum as battlefield. In one of them, I speculate about a stage set consisting of a barricade where unpaid art-world interns pitch their projects to posh juries. So we actually built a barricade with FEMA sandbags. You could use it to prevent flooding or to take cover from enemy fire. But in the bookstore, the structure also doubles as a couch for watching TV. One of the lectures has slides and animations projected into something that looks like a military sandbox, which is what

Hito Steyerl, *November*, 2004, digital video, color, sound, 25 minutes.

soldiers use to plot a terrain and analyze lines of sight. I learned that *sandboxing* is also a term in computer security, where you basically fence off virtual environments. So this is more like the playground part of the exhibition where, since it's not art, you're allowed to play around and experiment.

LP: I thought it was the other way around. Since it is art, you get to play around and experiment.

HS: But you know, it's much better if it's not considered art, because then you can really do whatever you want.

LP: And what's the lecture you're doing tomorrow?

HS: It's called "Duty Free Art," and it's about the phenomena of freeport art storages, extraterritorial zones of a kind, in tandem with the initiative to redesign the National Museum in Damascus and other building projects in Syria. On WikiLeaks, there are actually e-mails presumed to be exchanged between the administration of the Syrian ruler, Bashar al-Assad, and none other than Rem Koolhaas's studio, OMA. When I asked OMA to confirm the messages' authenticity, their reply was genius: "We are not able to confirm the authenticity of [these e-mails]." Just imagine this as a template for certificates of art editions: "I am not able to confirm the authenticity of this artwork." The art world as we know it would come crashing down!

People tend to think of these types of lectures as performance, but they're totally not. It's not theater. It's not even a lecture. It's more like a talk. It comes from my activity as a teacher.

For me, giving a talk is what I do when I have no budget, since it's so cheap. I like it. It's like an austerity form. You can always fall back on that. You're left to your own devices. That—"Left to Your Own Devices"— was actually going to be the title of the show at Artists Space. An homage to the Pet Shop Boys. Unfortunately I forgot about it!

LP: That's a great title—you need to use that someday.

HS: It would also be a wonderful way to describe your work: left to your own devices!

LP: Your talks seem in line with the way you constantly develop and redevelop pieces—there's a spontaneity, a provisional aspect to your work. How do you continue the research from one project to the next?

HS: With *November* [2004], for example, I constantly revisit the material. This is the film about a friend who was killed in Kurdistan; more or less every two years I do another update, because things change so dramatically.

In your case, it's not a coincidence that Snowden contacted you. In my case, I was faced with this situation out of the blue. I had a teenage friend, Andrea Wolf, who went underground and joined the women's army of the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] around 1996. She was eventually extrajudicially executed after a battle with Turkish armed forces. I didn't have anything to do with it, and it took me a long time to understand anything about this situation. But it came to define a lot of my work and also life right now.

LP: What are those unanswered questions you have around that, or unexpressed feelings?

HS: Well, the case has not been clarified yet, and it may never be. But I think politically the situation is different. As you wrote in your article in *Der Spiegel*, the PKK is now part of an American-led coalition against Daesh [ISIS], more or less. Those same female militants who used to be killed as terrorists have now become role models in the fight for gender equality. They fight with tremendous courage and still face death. The situation keeps shifting all the time, but the most fascinating aspects are the real changes within parts of Kurdish society, the turn toward basic democracy and experiments with autonomy. In the middle of an extremely violent civil war, it's a daunting, admirable, and constantly endangered project.

LP: And you want to continue researching and updating the work?

HS: It's not that I want to; it's that it has not set me free yet. The situation is still ongoing and changing, and I feel I haven't learned enough yet. Maybe one day. □

"Hito Steyerl" is on view at Artists Space, New York, through May 24. "Laura Poitras" will be on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Feb. 5–May 15, 2016.