

HITO STEYERL

by *Maya Harakawa*

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On what may have been the last cold night of a bone-chilling winter, a horde of eager art viewers filled Artists Space's Tribeca basement. The occasion was the opening of the German artist Hito Steyerl's first New York survey, and in the dark room Steyerl delivered "Duty-Free Art," (2015) a complex but cogent lecture on the post-nation-state museum. With notable protagonists Bashar al-Assad, Rem Koolhaas, Justin Bieber, and a dreaming Steyerl herself, the lecture was emblematic of her best work. As it circuitously covered the Syrian civil war, contemporary art theory, and European Freeport art spaces, it posed the politically charged question of what time and space are necessary for contemporary art to occur. Complex questions like this are common for Steyerl, but intelligible, provocative, and humorous answers are too. This survey is an opportunity to consider an artist whose enviable intellectualism only enhances the thoroughly enjoyable experience of seeing her art. It's a great show that should not be missed.



Hito Steyerl, "Liquidity Inc." (2014). HD video with sound, 30", installation. courtesy of the artist; Andrew Kreps, New York; and Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam.

Both of Artists Space's galleries have been reconstructed to facilitate prolonged engagement with Steyerl's work. Those accustomed to the large, open space at 38 Greene Street will be particularly surprised by its transformation. The four pieces on view there are given their own viewing spaces, and labyrinthine transitions between them structure movement through the now darkened and amusingly unfamiliar gallery. What's more, there are actually comfortable places to sit. Given the oftentimes-exhausting experience of viewing video, making the exhibit physically enjoyable is no small feat.

Steyerl is often described as a theorist of the contemporary image, but perhaps the best thing about this new show is that it suggests something more. It might seem overly simplistic to argue that Steyerl's films, lectures, and essays are more concerned with the contemporary itself—a moment where culture (including Steyerl's own art) is influenced by and circulating in the chunky soup of late capitalism. But the holistic consideration provided by the exhibition suggests that this is truly the case.

Steyerl's most recent film "Liquidity Inc." (2014) is a perfect example. Presented in the largest gallery at 38 Greene on a large scrim that bisects a blue padded halfpipe adorned with oversize beanbag pillows, "Liquidity Inc." is a metaphoric riff on its title. Opening with the disembodied voice of Bruce Lee encouraging us to be "shapeless, formless, like water," the film follows Jacob Wood, an ex-Lehman Brothers banker turned MMA fighter. The political and economic connotations of water are extrapolated as we see Wood working as a commentator at an MMA tournament; on a beach narrating the story of his adoption from Vietnam; and in the fictional offices of Liquidity Inc. Slippage between truth and fiction is a hallmark of Steyerl's practice, one that complicates the documentary tradition she was trained in. As Wood enacts these various narratives—some clearly more staged than others—the truth-value of traditional documentary is destabilized. The viewer is encouraged to actively engage with the material as a construction, rather than passively accept it as an absolute.

Steyerl's narrative command is astonishing and it is a joy to watch her work scatter and re-assemble. Wood's story is interrupted by a number of threads: a ski-masked man in an owl T-shirt gives a weather report in front of a Tumblr page that only features Hokusai's "The Great Wave off Kanagawa;" water itself becomes a narrator

in the form of stock images covered in subtitles that speak to us in the first person; and instructional videos teach us how to animate water with CGI. Even with all these dispersions, there is never a sense of unraveling. And while the film resists full resolution, there's a comfort—and awe—in seeing all the moving parts working together logically.

These narratives often appear on iPhones, televisions, and VLC media players, internal frames that duplicate and refocus the film's content, drawing attention to its life as a collection of circulating images. With the image of the work incorporated into the work itself, the viewer can consider the film's form and content simultaneously. It's a tactic that reduces the risk of didacticism and artistic arrogance, while increasing the possibility for critical engagement.

In yet another section of the film, we are reassured that having liquid assets means having control. Steyerl is clearly skeptical of this economic notion, but she embraces it as an artistic principle. As the social, political, and economic conditions Steyerl explores become increasingly unwieldy, her artistic example is an important takeaway. The exhibition's content is loaded, but the ingenuity of its creator gives us hope that control is possible.

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