

Hito Steyerl and Ryan Trecartin: *Video Art, Noise in the Signal*

“What is the point of creating an image of the world when the world itself has become increasingly like an image”?¹ Tactical artists Hito Steyerl and Ryan Trecartin subvert the net’s open-context feedback loop through moving image metatexts exploring the socio-technological conditions of image culture. Their exotic cinema participates inside internet protocol, visualising the opacity of networks coded in overdetermined algorithm as noise in the signal.

Artist/academic Hito Steyerl mines the global circulation of images as an investigation of economic and cultural currency, rendering the network bare beyond metaphor: as materialising media borne of U.S. government and military interests. Taking control as the founding principle of the net², *How Not To Be Seen*³ plays as mock-instructional video essay, advising viewers how to appear invisible. A generic, booming public service announcement voiceover informs Bauhaus-inspired cardboard box-helmeted characters about how to become smaller than a pixel, going off-screen and hiding in plain sight. Dancing to *When Will I See You Again*,⁴ cloaked figures transposed from virtual shopping mall to photo calibration target desert landscape embody net protocol as identity jingle fed into the economies of affect, or otherwise ‘disappeared’ in the “invisible dark matter that forms most of our contemporary archives.”⁵ In broad daylight, Steyerl’s brand of DIY broadcast wants to diversify the common understanding of power relationships in control societies.

Steyerl’s moving images characterise how networked technical specifications matter ontologically and politically, while on the surface appear “relatively indifferent to the content they wrap.”⁶ Transforming “quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value... contemplation into distraction”⁷, *poor* images are their own icons, defying the sacred as a metainterpretation of the present. Toying with protocol as both art object and receptacle, Steyerl employs its logic in conceptualising her *poor* images within a high definition container,⁸ encapsulating “a post-ekphrastic image philosophy which takes images as capable of not only illustrating and describing but also theorising themselves, on their own terms.”⁹ While *How Not To Be Seen* renders protocol’s diagrams transparent in that “resolution measures the world as an image”, it’s droll narrator plain-speaks that the “most important things want to remain invisible. Love is invisible. War is invisible. Capital is invisible.”

The artist’s eccentric *Liquidity Inc.*¹⁰ regulates deeply with political consideration while floating on the surface of docudrama to the auto-tuned mantra of Bruce Lee on an iPhone, advising “Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless, like water”. A Vietnam War orphan financial advisor made redundant in the 2008 US stock market crash swims through a career change to become a martial arts hybrid fighter, in pursuit of a shock-proof life portfolio. Crude picture-in-picture cagefight boxing entertainment dissolves to fake weather reports depicted by flashing neon tumblr images of *The Great Wave*;¹¹ a pseudo terrorist child meteorologist warns of apocalyptic crises via data cloud and trade wind chart symbols, fortune-forecasting “Your feelings are affecting the weather, and you are feeling not that great.” *Liquidity Inc.* embodies the net’s highly regulated information flow protocol;¹² never open or closed, its modulation incites experimentation.

Steyerl positions *herstory* inside the collusion of art, business and war, where predatory postdemocratic capitalism run-off streams into copyleft ethics and the potential of counterprotocol practices. While *Liquidity Inc.*’s world map struggles to contain data of contested borders, conquered insurgent states and stateless, displaced peoples, news of a cancelled budget has Steyerl and a friend joking via computer chat windows about selling weapons to complete the video itself; screen-shots show her creating “gorgeous displaced animated water” with an online CGI animation tutorial. As a composite character to the protagonist who she encourages along with “Swim, Jacob, swim”, Steyerl buoys herself with “weak winds, if you finally manage to focus” while in the credit sequence she’s titled “nervous breakdown”. In its very use of the language of incorporation, *Liquidity Inc.* resists that collectivity is always inclusive whereby the decentralised network promises to cater for every ‘difference.’

Opening up critical fissures in the semantic structure of digital culture, Steyerl’s high definition *poor* images float on the surface of data oceans and in data clouds as matter in action. Her screen within your screen declares “I am liquidity incorporated...the rainbow...torrent...cloud” in that “any understanding of

social and cultural change is impossible without the knowledge of the way media work as environments.”¹³ While big data collates and conditions participant agency, tactical artists like Steyerl challenge weak technological literacy in the arts and the wider popular reluctance to hack protocol’s construction, operation and affect from within.

Ryan Trecartin's avant-garde video art celebrates a schizophrenic amplification of contemporary image-object addiction, where myth plays truth inside the net’s ubiquitous authorship celebrity spectacle. His hyper-sensory “art of conspicuous consumption”¹⁴ renders the once-existential trauma of authentic identity as a banal, absurdist gameshow battle over genetic, informational and pictorial code.

In exploitation of the world wide web spectacle, Trecartin’s work is driven by radical exhaustion; the term Steyerl employs to describe the “widespread standard of the contemporary condition.”¹⁵ His compressed, glitched, images are overtly manhandled and bruised, sensitive to rhizomatic tensions, forces and hidden powers.¹⁶ Meme ennui pervades *I-Be Area*¹⁷ where orphan characters rehearse adoption pitches for the camera-as-mirror while in *Item Falls*¹⁸, a character called “audition item” claims “I audition better, faster, further, and more complicated than a horse”. Animating the bond between human corporeal reality and the social technique of corporation,¹⁹ *image-bodies* of flesh, makeup and post-production toolbox mask and morph character, actor, avatar and director alike. Rejecting staid cinema tropes, Trecartin’s images perpetually shed skins within a viscous realm post-class, ethnicity and gender in an attempt to elude control.

The *Not Yet Titled*²⁰ multichannel installation presents as an anarchic fever dream with rapid-fire spoken word narrative interrupted by superfluous text overlays and multiple-exposure visuals, while *Junior War*²¹ immerses manically paced low-res characters in the night-vision vortex of a modular office/carpark home studio set. *CENTER JENNY*²² stages a cast of self(ie)-obsessed, paranoid reality show doll “Jenny” replicants performing for their fascistic minders, rambling in net jargon mimesis about consumer protocols to which they submit themselves: “Jenny rules, yeah Jenny rules!”, “You’re gonna wanna buy one”, “Peace wherever the war is, don’t bring it home”, “I’m stuck on something and I don’t know what I’m stuck on”. Human vessels possessed by the normalised spirit of neo-capitalism manifest as compulsive, psychic “packet-switching” modems through lurid feedback-loop performance. With Trecartin’s hysterical realism, it’s “as if information is speaking the characters rather than the other way around”²³; his vision reconciles cognitive dissonant play and paranoia where data provider bodies oscillate as noise compression artifacts within the signal.

*Post-internet*²⁴ art critiques the internet as less of a novelty than a banality, informed by *context collapse*: the “flattening out of multiple distinct audiences manifest by integrating social dimensions.”²⁵ Reproducing the network’s disposition as fiction-science critique, it is savvy to how algorithms operate by separating signal from noise and therefore can’t render even a fragment of the *real* objectively.²⁶ Exhibited online and off without bias, post-internet art positions systematic conscious creativity or *cognitive surplus*²⁷ as alibi for capitalism’s increased automation, interpreting human as cross-platform labour functionary within political, industrial, military, cultural and administrative domains. Resisting the metaphorical “collectivity” of networks as inherently inclusive, the no- or good-place of net utopia is premised on assaulting historical norms anchoring art to its status as property, revealing unchallenged protocol as layered, stratified, often blatantly hierarchical.²⁸

Sculpting control in the name of desire, Steyerl and Trecartin queer protocol by mutating questions of body and identity, human, technology, machine, nature. Revealing algorithmic identity as but a clustering of anonymous, descriptive information like *user likes*, hacktivist art in fact develops protocol’s immunity and as protocol rises, patriarchy declines.²⁹ The naturalisation of drone-like network participation in postdemocratic society underscores protocol’s concern with *disconnection* – when it most forcefully displays its political character³⁰ – as much as with connectivity, just as Steyerl’s *How to Disappear* depicts the opting out of easily accessible distribution networks. Adopting the role of interpreter, curator, architect, post-internet art refuses the normalising power structures of the commercial net, inspired by and inspiring alternatives such as mesh networks, darknets and surveillance evasion devices³¹ as well as the open source paradigm Buckminster Fuller envisaged³²: “the chance for a new aura.”³³ Steyerl and Trecartin embrace the danger of protocol, critiquing how while a reticent public adapts to global capital control structures, there emerges a new set of

social practices that inflects or otherwise diverts protocological flows toward the vision of a less alienated network.³⁴

Trecartin's and Steyerl's image-bodies exist fluidly in relation to the object, in that an object without a subject can be taken as "a thing that feels."³⁵ Steyerl asserts, "Whoever is an image is an object... All of my protagonists... the crew and myself are both image and agent"³⁶ while Trecartin's film crew are implicit in the morphing lens loop, in one instance appearing in glow-in-the-dark sweatshirts emblazoned with "Witness 360". While the biopolitical dimension of protocol reiterates the notion of biomedical intersubjectivity as amenable to a database³⁷ (DNA), there's the gamut of 'wrapper' processes such as environmental organism plasticity and epigenetics³⁸ reprogramming evolution. The transcendental-technical in Trecartin and Steyerl celebrates this "resolution of the subject into an object"³⁹, extending identity "into different planes of reality as a becoming-empirical 'mixed reality.'"⁴⁰ The subject-object envisages science "as an intersubjective fiction, art as an intersubjective discipline in the search for knowledge."⁴¹ creative protocol as an affective, aesthetic force over life itself.⁴²

The art of Trecartin and Steyerl embodies a contemporary, nomadic and fluid model of protocol seeking "to undermine the symbolic order with more ephemeral, process-oriented methods."⁴³ Absurdist visualisations of masking and cloaking mirror current drone and nano-mediated networks producing both informational and physical fields of non-access, in the realm of disappearance of the forbidden and forgotten and the absolute, ethereal, ontological.⁴⁴ Beyond the digital, hybrid nanomedia enable flows of mediation in liquid environments to circulate through matter itself,⁴⁵ reprogramming, reproducing it. In distilling the forces of social control, hacktivist art entertains that total accessibility of dark mediation could collapse into total inaccessibility like dark matter, uniting medium and message to the extent that one continuously morphs into the other.⁴⁶

Inspired by the development of attention as currency, context collapse and the infinite reproducibility and mutability of technological materials, artists like Trecartin and Steyerl inspire the freeing of "material culture from the grip of its dominant logic",⁴⁷ inquiry of access to information, civil liberty and the nature of information itself. Steyerl reasons that art could be less baffled and mesmerised by the "not-so-discreet consumer friendly veneer of new and old oligarchies, and plutotechnocracies"⁴⁸ of digital politics. As the networked image's underlying data-gathering mechanisms become increasingly transparent, noise appears to maintain a paradoxical complexity in that "the amount of information received can be greater than the amount transmitted."⁴⁹ Embodying the radical power of critical, dialogical recalibrations of the net's regulated flow, Steyerl and Trecartin motion the continuing maturation of protocol and the development of inclusive, nomadic networks as noise in the signal.

ILLUSTRATIONS





NOTES

¹ Massimiliano Gioni, "The Encyclopedic Palace", review of *The Encyclopedic Palace, Venice Biennale 2013*, La Biennale di Venezia (2013), accessed January 24, 2014, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/archive/55th-exhibition/gioni/>.

² Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralisation* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 142.

³ *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*. Video. Hito Steyerl. (2013).

⁴ *When Will I See You Again?*. Music Recording. The Three Degrees. (1974).

⁵ "DO YOU SPEAK SPAMSOC?", Hito Steyerl interview by Francesca Boenzi, *Mousse Magazine*, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://moussomagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=540>.

⁶ Galloway, vii.

⁷ Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 32.

⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964, quoted in Galloway, 212.

⁹ Marisa Olson, "PostInternet: Art after the Internet". *Foam Magazine*, 2011, 62.

¹⁰ *Liquidity Inc*. Video. Hito Steyerl. (2014).

¹¹ Katsushika Hokusai, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, Color Woodcut, 1829-32, 25.7 cm×37.8 cm.

¹² Galloway, xx.

¹³ Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Massage", 2008, quoted in Stephanie Bailey, "OurSpace: Take the Net in Your Hands", in *You Are Here: Are After the Internet*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Manchester & London: Cornerhouse & SPACE, 2014), 131.

¹⁴ Olson, 63.

¹⁵ "Hito Steyerl, Politics of Post-Representation", Hito Steyerl interview by Marvin Jordan, *DIS Magazine* (2014), accessed June 29, 2014, <http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned-2/62143/hito-steyerl-politics-of-post-representation/>.

¹⁶ Hito Steyerl, "A Thing Like You and Me". *e-flux* (2010), accessed June 4, 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-thing-like-you-and-me/>.

¹⁷ *I-Be Area*. Ryan Trecartin. Lizzie Fitch, Ryan Trecartin. Video. (2007).

¹⁸ *Item Falls*. Ryan Trecartin. Lizzie Fitch, Ryan Trecartin. Video. (2013).

¹⁹ Brian Droitcour, "Societies of Out of Control: Language and Technology in Ryan Trecartin's Movies", edited by Omar Kholeif, *You Are Here: Are After the Internet*, (Manchester & London: Cornerhouse & SPACE, 2014), 46.

²⁰ *Not Yet Titled*. Video. Ryan Trecartin. Lizzie Fitch, Ryan Trecartin. (2013).

²¹ *Junior War*. Video. Ryan Trecartin. Lizzie Fitch, Ryan Trecartin. (2013).

²² *CENTER JENNY*. Ryan Trecartin. Lizzie Fitch, Ryan Trecartin. Video. (2013).

²³ Massimiliano Gioni, "We Are Too Many", *NewMuseum.Org* (2009), accessed March 8, 2014, http://mediaspace.newmuseum.org/ytjpressmaterials/PDFS/WHAT_THE_CURATOR_ARE_SAYING/04_Gioni_Essay.pdf.

²⁴ "We Make Money Not Art", Marisa Olson interview by Régine Debatty, (2008), accessed January 7, 2014, <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/03/how-does-one-become-marisa.php>.

²⁵ Michael Wesch, "Context Collapse", *Mediated Cultures* (July 31 2008), accessed 6 August 2013, <http://www.mediatedcultures.net/projects/youtube/context-collapse/>.

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²⁷ Clay Shirky, *Cognitive surplus: Creativity and generosity in a connected age* (2010), quoted in Bob Hanke "Vilém Flusser's Digital Galaxy. Review of Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images and Vilém Flusser, Does Writing Have a Future?*" (Nancy Ann Roth, Trans.). *International Journal of Communication* 6, (2012): 30, accessed July 13, 2014, <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/1458/676>.

²⁸ Galloway, xvi.

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- ²⁹ Ibid., 188.
- ³⁰ Ibid., xvi.
- ³¹ Zach Blas, “Contra-Internet Aesthetics”, edited by Omar Kholeif, *You Are Here: Are After the Internet*, (Manchester & London: Cornerhouse & SPACE, 2014), 89.
- ³² Richard Buckminster Fuller, *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1969).
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- ³⁴ Galloway, 16.
- ³⁵ Mario Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, trans. Massimo Verdicchio (New York: Continuum, 2004), 1, quoted in Hito Steyerl *The Wretched of the Screen*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 50.
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- ⁴¹ Vilém Flusser, “Memories,” in *Ars Electronica*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 206, quoted in Galloway, 83.
- ⁴² Galloway, 81.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 33.
- ⁴⁴ Renata Lemos Morais, “Sky High, Skin Deep: dark technologies of mediation”, *CTHEORY*, accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.ctheory.net>.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Jan Verwoert, “Living with Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation,” *Art and Research*, Vol 1, no. 2 (2007): www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/verwoert.html, quoted in Martine Beugnet, “Firing at the Clocks: Cinema, Sampling, and the Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Artwork”. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, Vol. 54, No. 2, (Wayne State University Press, 2013), 203, accessed 17 January 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/framework.54.2.0192>.
- ⁴⁸ Marvin Jordan, “Hito Steyerl, Politics of Post-Representation”.
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