



# Art

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**Hito Steyerl**

Interviewed by Jennifer Thatcher

**Object/Self**

Francis Frascina

**Art/Write**

John Douglas Millar

**Public Movement**

Profile by Bob Dickinson

Hito Steyerl interviewed by Jennifer Thatcher

# NO SOLUTION

**Jennifer Thatcher:** *The intersection between art, the military, labour and popular culture is one to which you always return. You don't seem to have to look very far to find provocative coincidences where these areas collide, like Guards of 2012, whose protagonists are ex-military and law-enforcement personnel now working as museum guards. In the 2013 lecture Is the Museum a Battlefield? you uncover a persuasive chain of evidence leading from the Istanbul Biennial's sponsors back to the defence companies involved in producing the bullets that killed your friend Andrea Wolf on the battlefield in southern Turkey. And yet you managed to weave Angelina Jolie into the narrative. I was at the live version of this lecture you gave in Istanbul. In the questions afterwards, people really wanted to know what to do with this information: how can we in the art world operate in a way that is not tied to the military, to financial operations, to these compromising scenarios?*

**Hito Steyerl:** I'm not a good person to ask for solutions. I wouldn't recommend following them.

*That's the answer you gave in Istanbul. Because it's true.*

*That is obviously a direct contrast to Andrea Wolf, who took the opposite path and went into action as a PKK activist.*

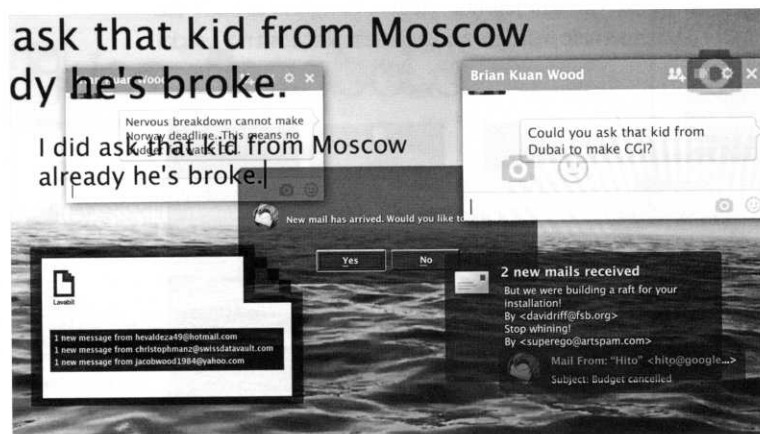
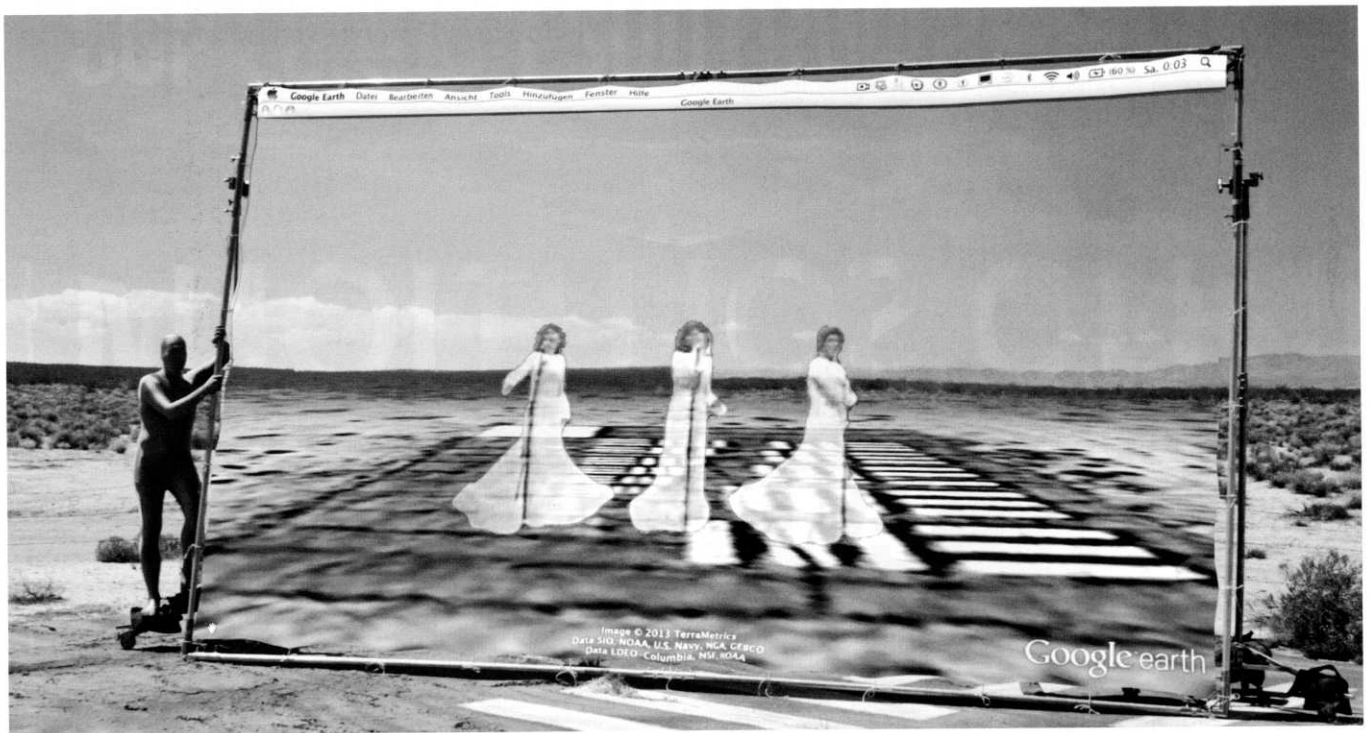
What would you know about her had I taken the same path? Actually, many people are finding solutions all the time. It is so difficult to speak about it in a general way because all these solutions have to be tied to the conditions they happen in. But look at the case of the current Sydney Biennale from which several artists have now pulled out because of its corporate ties to the company that actually runs offshore detention centres. Another case: the Gulf Labor coalition. The Precarious Workers Brigade, Raggickers, ArtLeaks and WAGE are other examples. All these people are doing wonderful work. Ask them, not me.

*Is art always already compromised? Is it enough for artists to just point out what's wrong?*

But I never promised to solve any problem. It is interesting that people keep expecting me to anyway, as if I had signed a contract. But I didn't. It's fine for people to have expectations to this end, but why should I fulfil them? People also expect me to represent Japanese culture, foreigners as such, the internet or to wear size zero. Let me repeat: I am not a social



Hito Steyerl  
How Not To  
Be Seen. A  
Fucking Didactic  
Educational . Mov  
File 2013  
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Liquidity Inc. 2014  
HD video file

engineer and I don't want to be. And I don't think there should be any prescribed role for artists just as there shouldn't be any for mothers or secretaries. Why should artists be boxed into rigid templates? This is late kitsch Marxism.

*It depends on whether you split the role of the artist and the citizen. Perhaps this has a parallel with the discussions in your essays about splitting the body and the metaphorical body politic. You provocatively suggest that women should embrace their objecthood, for example, to avoid being subject-ed. Likewise, you suggest that we go on image strike and allow spam to take the place of our own representation. Where does the subject lie in these thought experiments?*

It doesn't make any sense for me to talk about object and subject as separate entities. I think that they are so intertwined that it is a continuum nowadays. Every organic body is plugged into hardware and software. Not only that, but also into infrastructure – all these material supports. So in that sense, how are we going to separate that? The new work *Liquidity Inc.*, 2014, has a dialogue about water as essential for sustaining human life. So, am I going to say that 60% of my body, which is water and fully exchanged every few weeks, is an object and the rest is a subject?

*I meant on the level of representation.*

Well, every representation is an object, right? It might be an immaterial object, or institutional body, but it is definitely mostly not a human body. So there is always a sort of, what used to be called 'alienation' involved in representation. It seems a fact to me that once anyone or anything is represented it goes into the realm of materialising differently. And by being materialised differently, it can never be a correct representation. Because there are always going to be some errors of translation, some form of displacement, something that will go wrong in that process. And I think one should look at the process instead of constantly being frustrated about representation being a misrepresentation. Whether it is political representation or aesthetic representation, it will always go wrong – and come out in the form of objects,

too. The simple answer is: I am embracing alienation, period. I am an alien just like the water that came from the depths of the universe. The question for me is not how to avoid alienation, but how to wrest control over it from various kinds of exploiters, like Hegel's slaves do. But that bunch of former slaves would not become new masters, as in Hegel's narrative, but storm supermarkets.

*In Lovely Andrea from 2007 you went back to Japan to find a physical, paper representation of yourself as a bondage model – a photo in an S&M magazine – 20 years earlier. Was it a surprise to find it after only three days?*

It was quite a surprise. Everyone told me that it wouldn't happen. But this started a very important shift in thinking. It began during a discussion in Paris with Elisabeth Lebovici. I think it was something she said about precisely the relationship between object and subject and representation, and it became completely clear to me that this representation of myself had an existence in its own right. It was a piece of paper. It was printed – something produced within certain modes of production. I couldn't control it ultimately. It was a version I didn't want to control either. I just followed its trail.

*What did you do when you found it?*

You know the first thing I thought was, OK, could I just pretend never to have seen it, just close the book, put it back in the row of S&M magazines and keep on pretending to look for it. But there were all these eager people I had enlisted to help me and they were so overjoyed that I had found it. It would have felt like cheating.

*One might have imagined that people would be nervous about being involved in your project, especially given the dodgy circumstances in which these types of photographs are taken – the coercion, lack of payment, Mafia connections – but they appeared to be supportive of your mission and accepted your filming.*

Oh, I think some of them found it really strange. Some of them were puzzled by the idea that anyone would come because bondage is hugely associated with shame. They were so puzzled that they went into an enthusiastic mode irrationally.

*Lovely Andrea was considered one of the highlights of Documenta 12 in 2007. For many of us it was also the first time we encountered the name of Andrea Wolf, who continues to crop up in your work in unexpected ways. You reward your followers in the way that clues as to why you insert her in the various films often appear in previous works. For example, in your 2004 film November you discuss the disturbing scenario of seeing a martyr poster of Andrea, following her death, next to posters advertising erotic movies. This, then, gives us some understanding as to why you might have chosen her name as your alias when making the S&M photos in Japan. What was the reason for using her name in Liquidity Inc. in which it appears as a weather front?*

In Germany, low-pressure fronts are named after women. First, it was going to be Ulrike Meinhof, and then I changed it to Andrea Wolf. Also, seriously, this is not about a reward system for anyone. I am going to keep mentioning this case because it is not solved, and probably cannot be solved.

*You mix elements of ambiguity and fiction into your representations of Andrea. Is this due to a fear of being seen as a 'sensitive' director, in what you describe in your writing as 'the pose of the sensitive director'? Is this one way of defending against an easy empathy with the horrific events that led to her death – one that could take over all readings of your work?*

This is certainly one reason. You know, I have never claimed to have done a film about her. But I deal with the images of her that continue to circulate, and these are very different from what she might have been. In the case of *Is the Museum a Battlefield?*, it is not the images but the objects. It is about the circulation of objects from the battlefield: of a bullet flying in circles from the battlefield to the museum and back. The longer I have been following this issue, the less I know that person at all – she disintegrates.

*Even though the story keeps evolving? In the way, for example, evidence was recently found regarding her remains?*

It was very important for me to go to the location where she was presumably killed because this forever changed my perception of who she could be, or who she is

now. Because she is there in a mass grave with about 40 other people, and those bones are all over the place. It is a pretty interesting feeling because the standard impulse is to reconstruct the skeletons and assign them identities and so on, but I realised that this wasn't what these people wanted. They went into that situation together and if we want to reconstruct a body it would be a body with five legs and seven arms, a couple of skulls maybe: a collective future body, nothing that would fit into any category of personalised identities and humanitarian kitsch any more. Oh really, you are handing me a fully reassembled skeleton of Andrea? And you think this solves the problem? It was very important for me to realise that the veneration of Andrea Wolf as a martyr is something truly disgusting. I mean, 12,000 women died in that conflict and nobody is talking about the vast majority of the other ones. So, Andrea Wolf as a person is not my concern, it is about what to do with the debris, how to see through all these fragmented bodies-as-objects, how to see all of them in the first place.

*Were there any issues about showing *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* in Turkey? You also chose to present a lecture rather than an artwork. Was there a reason for this?*

The issue for the whole Istanbul Biennial was time pressure and political volatility. This is why I did a lecture because I was able to change it up until the last minute.

*I am interested in your ideas around mass art production. Like Susan Boyle, whose rendition of 'I Dreamed a Dream' you include in a 2013 lecture of that same title, everyone seems to have a life dream, and that dream is an art project. It wasn't so long ago that being an artist was an exception, not a mass occupation. Now we are constantly being fed the idea that the creative industries are the fastest growing sector of our economy, in the UK at least. Students are willing to pay huge fees for arts degrees.*

The art-education industry is a huge Ponzi scheme. The fantasy of the art career has become very similar to the fantasy of doing an MBA 20 or 30 years ago. This idea of striking rich quickly, the pyramid-game fantasy, bankers behaving like mad creative geniuses creating an apocalyptic Wagnerian-type *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

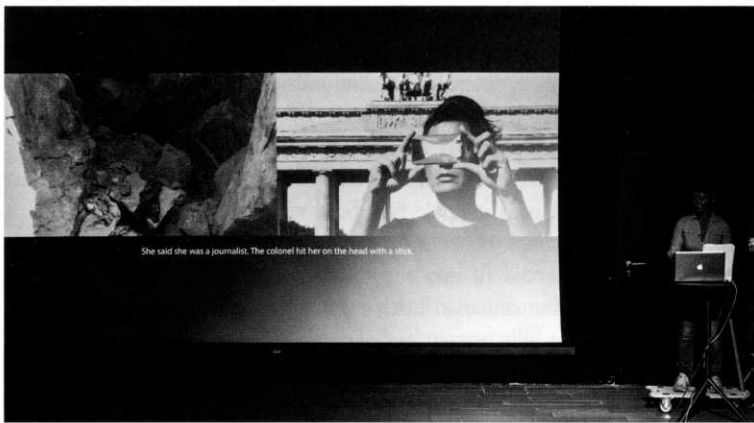
*You studied film originally. At what point did you realise that you were more involved with the art world?*

Well, that's not a decision I made. I wanted to be a film director but the industry was changing so dramatically and radically that it was just not possible.

*Changing as in becoming more commercial?*

Oh yes, absolutely. I mean the lack of funding for independent, documentary filmmaking, the cutting-down of television sponsorship. I found myself in limbo because I was doing work that wasn't going anywhere on that circuit. Then people from the art world started showing it and at first I was bewildered. And people were talking about philosophy and theory, and I had no idea what the fuck they were talking about. So I got really angry and started reading up on philosophy.

*Your essays are filled with philosophical references. For example, you frequently mention Walter Benjamin's reading of Paul Klee's 1920 print *Angelus Novus, the Angel of History*, and the image*



Is The Museum a Battlefield? 2013  
lecture and video

often comes up as a motif in your films, as it does in *Liquidity Inc.* Do you still feel that we are hurtling towards the future, unable to turn away from the horrors of the past?

*Liquidity Inc.* suggests that the poor creature has been thrown into some kind of wind tunnel, blown all over the place. The wind has turned – perhaps because of climate change – now the blast is coming from a future hell and the poor thing is being blown in the other direction, towards the past, eyes wide open. I think that is where we are at right now. We are no longer hypnotised by a past we can't change and which is a sort of trauma. The real task is not to be engulfed by that past again. I was so happy to leave the 20th century.

I think it is strange for my students, for example, to appreciate the paranoia of the end of the last century. The fact that we thought the world might end when the clocks changed. That we talked about an 'end of history'.

I am trying to write a new essay about the temporalities of the present that Sven Lütticken called 'Junktime', which is basically imploded time, a time of the impact of Hellfire missiles on time and space. Is there anything left?

Like Rem Koolhaas's 'Junkspace'?

Yes, it is epitomised by these microloops, by a lack of duration, lack of attention, things going on simultaneously all the time.

I was interested in your relation to psychology and psychoanalysis. Your writing does seem to have some Lacanian influence, particularly in your thought experiments: the way you are able to flip ideas.

Oh really? I hope not. He's such a dickhead. I mean, Sigmund Freud is a terrific writer, lucid in communicating as well as having all these fantastic anecdotes. Having said that, I don't think that this idea of the psychic apparatus holds any longer for contemporary people. I think the psychic apparatus is an iPad nowadays with standard-issue backdoors, not a magic writing pad. We should think of it in terms of a wired contemporary technological object, basically. The dreams and case studies in Freud's writing are so tied to the European bourgeoisie of the fin de siècle. To take this as an ahistorical template that would apply to anyone at any time is an unlikely idea at best, no? I think even now the ways that people's sensory apparatuses are hardwired across the world are very different. On the other hand, technology definitely acts as a connecting factor. You know, I don't want to use the terms 'psyche' and 'psychology' any longer, because I'm not really sure what they mean and if they still apply to what is going on inside people's minds.

Except perhaps that the longer we are living, the greater the chance of developing psychological or nervous malfunctions.

That is true. The way the nervous system – my nervous system – is being wired into wider networks of course causes all sorts of physical effects.

This is why you chose to give yourself the role of 'Nervous Breakdown' in the final credits of *Liquidity Inc.*?

Absolutely. It is one of the effects of neurocapitalism: depression, nervous breakdowns, neural conditions. I think the context for these conditions has changed a lot since Freud, Jacques Lacan or feminist psychoanalysis described them. The composition of the mind has changed. Bifo and Mark Fisher have started describing these developments brilliantly. I recently had the feeling that my nerves had started picking up emails. In fact they did.

How much pressure do you feel to keep up with technology? Your films have increasingly moved into the realm of postproduction: CGI graphics etc. Do you work with a bigger team now?

There is one technician, Christoph Manz, who I have worked with for the past ten years now, and he is crucial for every single project. Other than that, production is plagued by an eternal lack of funding, so a lot of my teaching salary goes on funding the films. And we are keeping up with technology but always with the cheapest and crappiest parts of it. I want to use consumer technology. I simply don't feel attracted by blockbuster technology at all, or by corporate aesthetics. Anything that is expensive to make, I don't get the point, but it is not that difficult to keep up with the degraded parts of technology. This is the frontline of what is going on today in terms of labour conditions, but also in terms of political configuration. Apart from this, the teams are shrinking rather than expanding.

It seemed to take a long time for artists to explore digital technology and its associated issues without being relegated to the niche category 'media arts'. Claire Bishop talked about this in the *Artforum* article 'Digital Divide' in 2012. I feel that the same thing happened in the 2000s with 9/11 and the Iraq War: it seemed to take a few years for artists to react on any large scale. This wasn't true of writers. There always seems to be a delay in the art world's responses. Why do you think that is?

I don't know why that is. The infrastructure of the art world has been digital for such a long time. It wouldn't exist in its present form without the digital.

That is in terms of facilitating production. I am talking about the digital as a subject.

I'm not an art historian, and I shouldn't be talking about it because I don't really understand it all, but when industrial factories were portrayed in painting, I think it was really late. Examples in the 19th century are few and far between. So when did the factory, when did industrial production finally enter art production? I think it took until the 1920s to be fully integrated, to be a motor of how art is being defined. Probably we are seeing something similar right now. It is like the awareness of the social factory finally entering people's minds. ■

Hito Steyerl is at the ICA, London to 27 April.

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