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**Hito Steyerl's "Duty-Free Art" as Politics and Pedagogy**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Rachel Carina Sigismondi**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

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in

**Art History and Criticism**

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Abstract of the Thesis

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How does contemporary art engage the contemporary, exactly? Artist Hito Steyerl actively engages this question in her recent works. One might notice upon visiting a Hito Steyerl exhibition that her video works often include recordings of lectures she has given to live audiences in art spaces. Because Steyerl is engaged in this pedagogical practice as an artist, can it be considered contemporary art? Steyerl’s written, lectured, and visual works engage the contemporary moment prodigiously, and cannot be eschewed in an analysis of the perpetually evolving nature of contemporary art. With the use of critical, theoretical and formal analytical tools, this study seeks to examine Steyerl’s most recent pedagogical work, titled: “Duty-Free Art”— and how it functions in the greater schema of the contemporary.

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## I

As both an artist and an academic, Hito Steyerl's catalog of work cannot be evaluated without rigorous study of her written pedagogy in tandem with that of her visual works. As scholar Sven Lütticken asserted in his analysis of Steyerl's oeuvre: "Steyerl writes, films, and performs essays, with their various articulations...bolstering and enriching each other."<sup>1</sup> The artist has made a niche for herself within the video art community by mobilizing the essay through her films and videos as 'essay documentaries.' In recent years, Steyerl has increasingly expanded upon the essay form through her writings and recorded lectures to disseminate the research and thematic ideas that propel her artistic pursuits. Just as Steyerl's essay documentaries are analyzed as sovereign artistic works, her written and performed essays may be, as well. Under this premise, Steyerl's recent recorded lecture titled "Duty-Free Art" is ripe for analysis as a crucial development in the greater schema of the artist's body of work, and as a resonating force in the dynamic scope of contemporary art. Through the positioning of Steyerl's pedagogy as a deliberate expansion of her essay documentaries and the careful evaluation of how "Duty-Free Art" functions as a work—as well as the implications of its content—the potential offered by Steyerl's pedagogy within the unfolding present and prescient future might be revealed.

Hito Steyerl's essay documentaries are not inconspicuous in the contemporary art domain. The German filmmaker has received worldwide acclaim for her filmic works from 2004 onwards. Recently, however, Steyerl's capacity as an academic writer has become an integral facet of her visual work. One of Steyerl's most recent solo exhibitions aptly demonstrated this evolution within her oeuvre: the SoHo gallery Artists Space presented nine of Steyerl's works in a retrospective titled *Hito Steyerl* from March 8<sup>th</sup> to May 24<sup>th</sup> of 2015. Of the nine works

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<sup>1</sup> Sven Lütticken, "Hito Steyerl: Postcinematic Essays the Future," in *Too Much World*, ed. Aikens (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 47.

included in the two spaces of the exhibition, six were digital and HD video installations created between 2004 and 2014.<sup>2</sup> The three remaining works—which were grouped together on the ground floor of Artists Space’s 55 Walker Street location—were recorded lectures delivered by Hito Steyerl. *I Dreamed a Dream: Politics in the Age of Mass Art Production* (2013), *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* (2013), and *Duty-Free Art* (2015) were arranged on television screens opposite varied seating arrangements to accommodate a handful of viewers at a time within the loft-style space of the Walker Street gallery. The presentation of the recorded lectures—an exhibition decision that had been and is still engaged by Steyerl—presents a shift worth noting in the progression of Steyerl’s visual canon. However, as the Artists Space retrospective implies, the shift towards performative pedagogy—while being a fascinating iteration of the essay documentary—is beholden to the Steyerl’s previously staked claim in the territory of the genre. Sven Lütticken, contributor of “Hito Steyerl: Postcinematic Essays after the Future” to the critical anthology *Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl*, points out that “the notion of the essay film or film essay was originally proposed by Hans Richter as an alternative for both feature films and conventional documentaries—as a continuation of documentary film by other means.”<sup>3</sup> How did Hito Steyerl adapt Richter’s idea of the essay film, or what was her interpretation of the ‘other means?’ Writer T.J. Demos gestures to Steyerl’s adapted means in the third chapter of *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*. Demos elucidates: “In Steyerl’s artistic practice...the documentary genre is still rich in historical reference, but is characterized as well by a heightened consideration of video’s formal

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<sup>2</sup> The six video works featured in *Hito Steyerl* at Artists Space included: *November* (2004), *Lovely Andrea* (2007), *Red Alert* (2007), *In Free Fall* (2010), *Guards* (2012), and *Liquidity, Inc.* (2014). Film credits for all works included in the retrospective available at: <http://artistspace.org/exhibitions/hito-steyerl>.

<sup>3</sup> Sven Lütticken, “Hito Steyerl: Postcinematic Essays after the Future,” in *Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl*, ed. Nick Aikens (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 47.



organization, built on a keen awareness of the uncertain status of truth and meaning...”<sup>4</sup> For Demos, Steyerl’s work is dependent upon the slippery concept of ‘the truth’ in contemporary politics, media, and particularly as depicted by disseminated images. The fertile ground within the range of documentary film—from which Hans Richter and Hito Steyerl’s concepts of the essay documentary have developed—is contingent upon “the one continuous certainty” being “the uncertainty of its truth claims.”<sup>5</sup> Demos further explains how Steyerl has inherited this mode of practice in pointing to her canonic predecessors (Farocki, Duras, Kazuo, Black Audio Film Collective, etc.) and to how her inspiration from such artistic figures “allies her to approaches that stress both the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking (such as Rancière’s).”<sup>6</sup> Rancière’s role in the evaluation of Steyerl’s use of pedagogy will prove its convenience in a later portion of this discussion. Demos highlights Steyerl’s “preparedness” to “reinvent documentary practice—in a way that retains its social engagement and historical integrity despite its inherent contradictions” in the face of the unavoidably elusive truth.<sup>7</sup> Thus is the impetus behind Steyerl’s visual works such as *November*, *Lovely Andrea*, *Guards*, *In Free Fall*, *Liquidity, Inc.*, etc. The artist’s video works relentlessly revolve around the question of opacity versus transparency of both the image and the presentation of the truth versus fiction. Sven Lütticken pointedly addresses the importance of the ‘essay’ format, as introduced to the documentary film by Hans Richter and expanded by Steyerl when he states: “To essay is to try, to attempt. The essay is a form of doubt—a format in which one can explore doubtful theses. While the essay is at its root a literary

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<sup>4</sup> T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During the Global Crisis* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2013), 75.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

genre, in the twentieth century it leapt into new media.”<sup>8</sup> Segue Steyerl’s tendency towards “the creeping predominance of fiction in everyday life, which for her threatens the fragmentation of collective mobilization and the depletion of political agency,” as well as her somewhat recent reevaluation of the essay documentary’s literary root.<sup>9</sup> While Steyerl’s utilization of the filmic montage and essay documentary video has been effective in visually representing her politically charged artistic themes, the artist has made a calculated shift towards academic pedagogy. She executes this shift with the proliferation of the literary, or the published essay, as well as via the recorded video installation in the setting of the white (or sometimes black) cube. Steyerl has not abandoned the creation of autonomous video works. Nor, as Sven Lütticken emphasizes, are Steyerl’s written and lectured essays “‘explanations’ of her films.”<sup>10</sup> Lütticken continues: “Even when they share a title, as with *In Free Fall* (a 2010 film and 2011 article), their relation is one of mutual complementation and contradiction—with the article following a more abstract trajectory of speculation”—or perhaps, following a more free-wielding tangent of Steyerl’s unreliable truth—or, oftentimes motivated fiction with aims towards a slippery truth.<sup>11</sup> Lütticken later reveals what he considers the impetus behind Steyerl’s incorporation of the literary essay beyond the film essay. Lütticken asserts:

Steyerl’s essayism is marked by an engagement with what Heinrich Heine once called the ‘material activity of the brain’ in the age of its digital reformatting. It is a form of early twenty-first century materialism: a materialist praxis that never deals with mere

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<sup>8</sup> Sven Lütticken, “Hito Steyerl: Postcinematic Essays after the Future,” in *Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl*, ed. Nick Aikens (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 47.

<sup>9</sup> T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During the Global Crisis* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2013), 75.

<sup>10</sup> Sven Lütticken, “Hito Steyerl: Postcinematic Essays after the Future,” in *Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl*, ed. Nick Aikens (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 48.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

subjects in the sense of the subject as maker and consumer—circulator—of images, who is also always producing and circulating as image. Thus the artist herself is an instable subject-object...in the free fall of history.<sup>12</sup>

The exemplification of Steyerl's direct self-insertion in the infliction of the artistic mediation of the truth, as posited by Lütticken, will only become more conspicuous via the close analysis of her recent pedagogical works. Simultaneously, Lütticken's use of the phrase "in the free fall of history" unfolds as a reference to Hito Steyerl's notion of 'circulationism,' as coined in her article "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" Fundamentally, an initial, however cursory, examination of the evolution of Steyerl's practice—from the documentary essay, via video works to her expanded use of pedagogy—reveals the necessity in parsing out Steyerl's lectures and published essays as integral cogs within the greater machine of her body of work, and equally as sovereign works themselves.

## II

In the event that the word of Hito Steyerl scholars is a seemingly presumptuous foundation upon which to build the premise of the artistic integrity of the artist's essayism, the philosophical musings of Jacques Rancière can be applied to further explicate Steyerl's methodologies. T.J. Demos references Steyerl's allusion to Rancière

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<sup>12</sup> Lütticken's reference to 'circulation' is potentially—or very likely—a reference to Steyerl's 2013 e-flux journal essay: "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" Steyerl coins the term 'circulationism' and identifies it as: "not about the art of making an image, but of postproducing, launching, and accelerating it. It is about the public relations of images across social networks, about advertisement and alienation, and about being as suavely vacuous as possible." Accessed 5 May, 2016 at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>. Ibid., 55.

in her own writings; Demos points out that in “Documentary Uncertainty,” Steyerl writes: “the political importance of documentary forms does not primarily reside in their subject matter, but in the ways in which they are organized. It resides in the specific distribution of the sensible.”<sup>13</sup> Steyerl’s explicit interest in Rancière’s theory of the ‘distribution of the sensible,’ in relation to the political valence of documentary works, explains her loyalty to the documentary form as a vehicle for her artistic work. While Steyerl expands upon the essayist format, the documentary element of her work is important because of its entanglement with the concept of the truth and perceptions of present reality. What cannot be overlooked in the evaluation of Steyerl’s evolution of artistic practice are its inextricable ties to the perpetually transforming contemporary moment and the consequential, necessary dynamism of contemporary art. As acknowledged by both Sven Lütticken and T.J. Demos in their studies of Steyerl’s oeuvre, the driving force of change in her work—or any contemporary artist’s work—is the changing ontology of images within the contemporary environment of global digital networks and what has been identified as late or post-capitalism. Jacques Rancière prods the nature of contemporary art through the lens of a dialectical shift in his essay “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics.”<sup>14</sup> The philosopher establishes the foundation of his theory on contemporary art by stating:

...Art is not made of paintings, poems or melodies. Above all, it is made of some spatial setting, such as the theater, the monument, or the museum. Discussions on contemporary art are not about the comparative value of works. They are all about matters of

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<sup>13</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty,” *A Prior* 15 (2007): 306, 304.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics,” *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, eds. Beth Hinderliter et al. (Durham: Duke UP, 2009) 31-50.

spatialization: about having video monitors standing in for sculptures or motley collections of items scattered on the floor instead of having paintings hanging on the wall. They are about the sense of presence conveyed by the pictorial frame and the sense of absence conveyed by the screen that takes its place.<sup>15</sup>

Rancière's immediate recognition of 'spatialization' as the frame within which contemporary art must be considered draws attention to the aesthetic shift and translation of media as addressed in Hito Steyerl's evolution of practice. The dialectical shift that Rancière identifies between 'presence' and 'absence' can be better understood as Rancière further illustrates his conception of 'communities of sense.'<sup>16</sup> Rancière refers to the classic narrative of aesthetics and posits:

According to this narrative, the identification between art, autonomy, and modernity collapsed in the last decades of the twentieth century. It collapsed because new forms of social life and commodity culture, along with new techniques of production, reproduction, and communication, made it impossible to maintain the boundary between artistic production and technological reproduction, autonomous artworks and forms of commodity culture, high art and low art. Such a blurring of the boundaries should have amounted to the 'end of aesthetics.'<sup>17</sup>

The 'blurring' to which Rancière refers can be reframed in consideration to Hito Steyerl's evolution of artistic practice towards pedagogy. Rancière alludes to the advent of the contemporary, which one might consider as the proliferation of images within a "commodity culture," as well as the frenzied "blurring" of artistic production within the

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics," *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, eds. Beth Hinderliter et al. (Durham: Duke UP, 2009) 30.

<sup>16</sup> Rancière defines 'a community of sense' as: "a certain cutting out of space and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility. [Rancière] call[s] this cutting out and this linkage a partition of the sensible." Ibid., 31.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 33.

space of everyday life. This space was already oversaturated with images within innumerable communities of sense—not only that of what had previously been considered ‘Art.’ Rancière continues to recall the progression of the ruination of aesthetics, but takes issue with the delineation of photography engaged by the works of Robert Rauschenberg as *the* watershed moment in the lineage of aesthetics and its end as imagined by the likes of Douglas Crimp.<sup>18</sup> Jacques Rancière looks farther back to roughly 1830, when Honoré de Balzac published *The Wild Ass’s Skin*. What does this have to do with the shifting nature of art within the spatial aesthetic of the contemporary? Rancière reveals the moment in Balzac’s literary work when “the description looks like a perfect anticipation of Rauschenberg’s Combine paintings.”<sup>19</sup> The philosopher draws a distinct metaphor between the blur of presence and absence within the space of the contemporary and Balzac’s “space of indistinction between the shop and the museum, the ethnographic museum and the art museum, works of art and everyday materials.”<sup>20</sup> He identifies the “blurring” between said boundaries as aesthetics, and refutes the conception that postmodernity ushered in the ‘end of aesthetics.’<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Rancière claims: “If photography could help literature to achieve the imaginary museum, it is because literature had already blended on its pages

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<sup>18</sup> Rancière touches upon the ideas of Crimp in an explanation of the spatial effects of what was commonly thought of as the end of aesthetics with the use of Malreaux’s ‘museum without walls.’ Crimp’s evaluation of Malraux’s imaginary museum becoming heterogeneous with the exhibition of photography—and subsequent irrelevance—with Rauschenberg’s work assembles the foundation of thought which Rancière’s argument for the true shift in aesthetics aims to deconstruct. Jacques Rancière, “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics,” *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, eds. Beth Hinderliter et al. (Durham: Duke UP, 2009) 33.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

what photography would later blend on canvas. It is this ‘literary past’ of photography that appears when the combination of photography and painting turns the canvas into a ‘print.’”<sup>22</sup> Rancière’s emphasis on this moment and its implications hearkens back to the evaluation of Hito Steyerl’s methodological expansion from video works to written and performative pedagogy. Steyerl’s current use of the lecture format as well as the published essay does not detract from their sovereignty as aesthetic works, particularly in juxtaposition to her visual pieces. Just as Rancière gestures to Balzac’s literary blending, Hito Steyerl has presented a new community of sense within the greater communities of sense of aesthetics and contemporary art. Steyerl’s mobilization of the essay is precisely what Rancière later identifies as ‘political art,’ which he characterizes as “a kind of negotiation, not between politics and art, but between the two politics of aesthetics. This third way is made possible by continuously playing on the boundary and the absence of boundary between art and non-art.”<sup>23</sup> In the burgeoning world of homogenized digital images consistently blurring the lines between high and low art, Steyerl has found an effective aesthetic sphere in the mobilized essay, as deployed via digital image, experience, and the ever contemporary written word. This mobilization of Steyerl’s aesthetics is what makes her work political, and what opens the boundary of contemporary art’s community of sense to her particular use of pedagogy as political art.

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics,” *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, eds. Beth Hinderliter et al. (Durham: Duke UP, 2009) 35.

<sup>23</sup> The ‘third way’ is what Rancière identifies as what it means “to do political or critical art, or to take a political view of art”—as stated on page 41 of the text. *Ibid.*, 42.

### III

*Duty-Free Art* was the most recent work within those presented as *Hito Steyerl*, the 2015 Artists Space retrospective of Hito Steyerl's work. The work originated as a lecture presented by the artist at the 55 Walker Street location of Artists Space (Artists Space Books & Talks) in downtown Manhattan on Saturday, March 7<sup>th</sup> of 2015. For the duration of the exhibition, the work was presented in the same space, but as a three channel HD video with sound. The recording of Hito Steyerl speaking on March 7<sup>th</sup> played through thirty-eight minutes and twenty-one seconds on the right of two adjacent TV screens, and an edited loop of accompanying visual material played on the left of the two screens.<sup>24</sup> Directly in front of the two screens, or between the screens and the designated bench for the work's audience, was a low tabletop installation of what could most adequately be described as a small sandbox. A shadow-box frame atop the table contained rippled, white sand, upon which digital projections shot from the ceiling accompanied Steyerl's lecture. The projected visuals varied from those on the screen. This installation arrangement was particular to the space within which the three, recorded lectures were featured in the Artists Space exhibition. *Duty-Free Art* has since been shown in several subsequent exhibitions: *Left to Our Own Devices* at KOW Gallery in Berlin from September 17<sup>th</sup> to December 5<sup>th</sup> of 2015, *Duty Free Art* at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid from November 11<sup>th</sup> of 2015 to March 21<sup>st</sup> of 2016, and the work was most recently on display as a standalone piece at Blue Oyster Art Project Space in Dunedin, New Zealand, from April 6<sup>th</sup> until April 30<sup>th</sup> of

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<sup>24</sup> Due to a lack of published record or public access to the visual material displayed in tandem with Steyerl's lectured delivery of *Duty Free Art*, the content of the visuals, aside from a cursory description based on personal experience, will not be discussed.



2016. “Duty-Free Art” was published in written format as an essay in *e-flux journal* #63 in March of 2015 and remains available to the public on the e-flux website. The experience of the written essay is markedly different from that of the Artists Space video installation, particularly in that the perplexing, sometimes even dizzying visual material is not present to occasionally distract the viewer from Steyerl’s delicate, lilting German accent and serious gaze. Rather, the perplexing, even dizzying content that constitutes the composition of the written “Duty-Free Art” displaces the sensory stimulation available in the video installation. One can take in the written work without the limitations of time and space, which might have been inexorable factors in the experience of the video installation at Artists Space. The seeming liberation of the work in its written form is not lost on Hito Steyerl and is only more explicit in a close analysis of the content of the essay as a work of art—which the form consequentially begs without the competition of sensory accompaniments.

The written essay form of “Duty-Free Art” unabashedly inherits the cheeky, sly tendency of Hito Steyerl to play with the slippage of truth and fiction, as is her hallmark in her visual works. Organized into nine chapters, Steyerl careens from chapter to chapter between a proposal for a National Museum in Damascus, to a Turkish cultural space, to the Geneva freeport storage facility, to WikiLeaks, to a dream, back to WikiLeaks, to an e-mail, and eventually back to the Turkish cultural space. Despite the lack of accompanying visuals (aside from a select few included images), the narrative organization of Steyerl’s essay is not much unlike that of a filmic montage. In similar fashion to her video works, Steyerl uses the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated motifs to present a fiction tightly woven with thematic threads of the truth. “Duty-Free Art”

begins with “Chapter 1: The National Museum” and Steyerl’s presentation of a WikiLeaks file from its Syria files database. The file contains the plans for a National Museum of Damascus, as envisioned by Syrian First Lady Asma al-Assad.<sup>25</sup> Steyerl quickly reveals the unraveling of Assad’s plans for the museum in light of the onset of Syria’s civil war in 2011. In “Chapter 2: Never Again,” Steyerl shifts her focus to the contemporary lack of necessity for museums to centralize their mission around the agenda of a nation-state in a world of “data-capitalism.” She presents the first crumb in a carefully constructed thematic trail when she states: “To build a museum, a nation is not necessary. But if nations are a way to organize time and space, so is the museum. And as times and spaces change, so do museum spaces.”<sup>26</sup> This statement is integral to the artist’s overarching argument for the contemporary state of art spaces, particularly that of the museum space. Steyerl then directs the reader’s attention to a photo of the exterior of the municipal art gallery of Diyarbakir in Turkey, and proceeds with an account of the museum’s fate in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis. She emphasizes the transformation of the museum’s role from the site of an exhibition focused on genocide to that of a refugee camp. In other words, it is a space that “did not represent a nation, but instead sheltered people fleeing from national disintegrations”—a cultural haven turned safe haven in the midst of political fallout.<sup>27</sup> The second chapter closes with an image of the desk of the Turkish museum’s curator left empty—a heavy-handed symbol of the evaporation of culture in spaces representative of collapsed political and social

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<sup>25</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

stability. Steyerl subsequently transitions to the third chapter, titled: “Conditions of Possibility.”

“Chapter 3: Conditions of Possibility” begins with Hito Steyerl’s presentation of data from the Google N-gram viewer on the decreased frequency of the use of the word ‘impossible’ since the mid-twentieth century. This seemingly bizarre screen grab and Kantian reference seems erratically arbitrary, at first. Steyerl’s ensuing question of “what kind of time and space is necessary for contemporary art to become manifest? Or rather: What does criticism about contemporary art say about time and space today?” is the artist’s positioning of her argument for the nature of contemporary art, as well as for the spatial and temporal implications of art in the future. Steyerl’s focus on contemporary art criticism relies upon how contemporary art and art spaces are affected by the evolving conditions of possibilities in the age of digital capitalism. She simultaneously emphasizes the dissolution of the nation-state and its primacy in the schema of the formation (or lack thereof) of art spaces. Steyerl unveils her intentions with a reference to philosopher Peter Osborne in which she paraphrases: “contemporary art shows us the lack of a (global) time and space. Moreover, it projects a fictional unity onto a variety of different ideas of time and space, thus providing a common surface where there is none. Contemporary art thus becomes a proxy for the global commons, for the lack of any common ground, temporality, or space.”<sup>28</sup> Steyerl proceeds to identify the contemporary spaces that are consequentially absorbed into the spatialization of contemporary art, just as Jacques Rancière emphasizes the spatial orientation of contemporary art in “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics.”

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<sup>28</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

Steyerl identifies the space which contemporary art occupies as: “a proliferation of locations”—specifically locations of urban cities transformed by “major real estate operations,” locations of civil wars, locations of “servers and fiber optic infrastructure,” and locations of “private wealth.”<sup>29</sup> This latter location provides the transition for Steyerl’s next narrative destination: the Geneva freeport.

Steyerl illustrates what can be known of the enigmatic freeport storage spaces and points out their *raison d’être* as spaces of tax exemption. She contends: “The freeport contains multiple contradictions: it is a zone of legalized extralegality maintained by nation-states trying to emulate failed states as closely as possible by selectively losing control,” and appends a reference to Thomas Elsaesser’s theory of ‘constructive instability.’<sup>30</sup> Steyerl thus connects the dots she has arranged before the reader, or audience, with a metaphor comparing the freeport storage spaces to collapsed states such as Syria. What does a privatized space that functions as a storage facility for the *über rich* have in common with a country in the midst of a violent civil war? As Steyerl later points out, the security of the freeport art spaces cannot exactly be attested to for obvious reasons, but consequentially cannot escape doubt of its integrity and ability to endure. To collapse the boundary between the seemingly separate spaces: in conditions of warfare similar to those in collapsed states, would the freeport storage facilities resist vulnerability? The potential for the collapse of sovereignty and security is not far removed from the absence of sovereignty and security. In the fourth chapter,

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<sup>29</sup>Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

<sup>30</sup> Steyerl employs an abbreviated conception of Elsaesser’s ‘constructive instability.’ She compares Elsaesser’s use of the phrase in relation to the ‘fall’ or ‘fail’ operations of fighter jets to the ‘planned failure’ of the nation-state in the tax-exempt locales that freeport storage spaces occupy. *Ibid.*

titled “Duty-Free Art,” Steyerl circles back to Syria at the moment when contact regarding the plans for the National Museum of Damascus ceased and the unrest within the country finally boiled over. Steyerl includes an image of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi (the son of Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi) standing in front of a painting of his own, which is identified as a scene of warfare. This image in and of itself points to Steyerl’s indication of contemporary art in spaces of war. Through her allusion to the failure of the National Museum of Damascus due to Syria’s violent instability and inclusion of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi’s painting, Steyerl reveals the nature of contemporary art in the space of the failed state. Without the guarantee of secure spaces to express and present artistic culture, the contemporary art of the failed nation-state is destroyed before it can even be made. What fills the resulting void as the contemporary art of the space of war are actual images of war. Later, in chapter eight of “Duty-Free Art,” Steyerl fully identifies the art of warring nation states by stating:

The current National Museum of Syria is of a different order. Contrary to plans inspired by the ‘Bilbao effect,’ the museum is hosted online, on countless servers in multiple locations...it is a collection of online videos—of documents and records of innumerable killings, atrocities, and attacks that remain widely unseen. This is the de facto National museum of Syria, not a Louvre franchise acquired by an Assad foundation. This accidental archive of videos and other documents is made in different genres and styles, showing people digging through rubble, or Twitter-accelerated decapitations in HD. It shows aerial attacks from below, not above.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps in the case of Gaddafi, power can create exceptional spaces of safety for cultural expression (until, in his particular case, he was imprisoned), but ultimately, the only culture to be expressed is that of war.

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<sup>31</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

Hito Steyerl does not only compare the freeport storage spaces to failed nation states, but she compares them to the opaque regions of the global digital network that has come to be indivisible from contemporary humanity, as well. Steyerl configures this comparison by first likening the freeport storage spaces to “secret museums,” fundamentally because of the sheer quantity of precious objects concealed within their vaults.<sup>32</sup> In Chapter 4, Steyerl gives detailed descriptions of what is known about the freeport storage spaces in Geneva, Singapore, and Luxembourg. Following her introduction to the seeming lawlessness of the facilities, Steyerl asserts that the freeport spaces are “also basically a stack of juridical, logistical, economic, and data-based operations, a pile of platforms mediating between clouds and users via state laws, communication protocols, corporate standards, etc., that interconnect not only via fiber optic connections but aviation routes as well.”<sup>33</sup> The artist’s direct parallel of the freeports to digital platforms and cyber networks is furthered by her claim that they are “[the museums] of the internet era, but [museums] of the dark net, where movement is obscured and data-space is clouded.”<sup>34</sup> This comparison supplements the apprehension suggested by her comparison of the freeport spaces to failed nation states, specifically with regard to the obscurity surrounding their security and lawful integrity. On a superficial premise, Steyerl’s allusion to the ‘dark net’ suggests clandestine activity behind the closed doors of the freeports analogous to the potential for surreptitious activity in the cryptic spaces of digital capitalism. Steyerl’s intention in characterizing the freeport art storage spaces in a way that implicates them with spaces of war as well

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<sup>32</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

as the annals of the internet lies in her initial emphasis on the locations of contemporary art. The loose ties made between these locations gain some clarity in Steyerl's dream sequence chapter of "Duty-Free Art."

The fifth chapter of "Duty-Free Art" is the only chapter of the essay that blatantly announces its 'fictional' content. Not ironically—and not unlike a disclaimer for sensitive material at the beginning of a film or documentary—Steyerl does indeed preface the fifth chapter of the work with the capitalized notice: "WARNING: THIS IS THE ONLY FICTIONAL CHAPTER IN THIS TALK."<sup>35</sup> Of course this forewarning assumes that unwitting readers of this work are unaware of Steyerl's artistic frame of reference and potential for unreliability as an author. Titled "A Dream," Steyerl begins this chapter by revisiting the position of time and space with regard to the contemporary within the narrative of her essay. She asks: "Why is space shattered into container-like franchising modules, dark webs, civil wars, and tax havens replicating all over the world?"<sup>36</sup> Within her dream space, Steyerl visualizes contemporary time and space as a "crosshairs aiming at a target," based on diagrams of the genealogy of contemporary art by Peter Osborne.<sup>37</sup> To Steyerl, the target and crosshairs—seen from 'above' in the spatial context of her dream—"was acting as a proxy or a screen: a sight to cover the site of impact."<sup>38</sup> The 'site of impact' she identifies is what she perceives as the contemporary moment, or the point of intersection of the genealogy of contemporary art and the collapsed time and space of the contemporary. Steyerl incorporates the position of contemporary art in this vision via her dreamt construction of Peter Osborne stating:

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<sup>35</sup> Hito Steyerl, "Duty-Free Art," *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

“This is the role of contemporary art. It is a proxy, a stand-in. It is projected onto a site of impact, after time and space have been shattered into a disjunctive unity—and proceed to collapse into rainbow-colored stacks designed by starchitects.”<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, Steyerl locates contemporary art as a buffer, or perhaps more appropriately as a representative of the collapsing time and space of the contemporary moment. She adds that the primary role of contemporary art in this collapsing contemporary crater is:

...[to pretend] that everything is still ok, while people are reeling from the effects of shock policies, shock and awe campaigns, reality TV, power cuts, any other form of cuts, cat GIFs, tear gas—all of which are all completely dismantling and rewiring the sensory apparatus and potentially also human faculties of reasoning and understanding by causing a state of shock and confusion, of permanent hyperactive depression.<sup>40</sup>

The role of contemporary art as a screen beyond which time and space ‘proceed to collapse’ is compounded by Steyerl’s identification of it as a “cage without borders.” This alludes to a sculpture titled *Cage sans Frontières*, by designer Ron Arad, on display in the Singapore freeport and according to Steyerl, represents the paradox of a cage without limits.<sup>41</sup> In this metaphoric capacity, Steyerl argues that contemporary art is simultaneously without limits, but trapped within the spatial and temporal constraints of the collapsing contemporary. Contemporary art exists simultaneously in ‘secret museums’ that teeter in states of precarious security and lawlessness, in databases such

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<sup>39</sup> This is presumably a reference to Benjamin Bratton’s ‘stack,’ as depicted in “On the Nomos of the Cloud: The Stack, Deep Address, Integral Geography,” as well as Bratton’s recently published *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



as WikiLeaks where images and information are accessible to a limited ‘public’ with appropriate access, and in the free-floating space of the internet where the only art of the cultures of collapsed nations is the propagated, explicit image of war.

What is Hito Steyerl’s ultimate purpose for directing the attention of her audience or reader to the splintered state of contemporary art as immediate consequence of how she currently perceives time and space? This question redirects to Steyerl’s inquiry at the end of the sixth chapter of “Duty-Free Art” (Chapter 6: And Now to Justin Bieber): “How does the internet, or more precisely, networked operations between different databases, affect the physical construction of museums—or the impossibility thereof?”<sup>42</sup> Steyerl’s use of the term ‘impossibility’ recalls her Kantian conjecture of the decreased use of the term ‘impossible’ in recent history. Her question surrounding the contemporary conditions of possibility for the “physical construction of museums” is directly connected to her positioning of freeport art storage spaces as ‘secret museums.’ Steyerl implies that because of the existence of spaces such as the privatized freeport storage spaces, as well as the inability for the National Museum of Syria to physically exist amidst violent warfare, the existence of the contemporary ‘public’ art museum is in jeopardy. In “Chapter 8: Shooting at Clocks—the Public Museum,” Steyerl reiterates her conviction that, contrary to Benedict Anderson’s suggestion, “it is not impossible to build a museum without a nation.”<sup>43</sup> She continues to question whether the “smashing” of time and space is consistently the tipping point at which new paradigms are created. Steyerl recalls Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (thesis XV), or primarily the historical recurrence of the storming of the Louvre in tandem with

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<sup>42</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

revolution, and the changes in the museum space that ensued.<sup>44</sup> As a consequence of the cyclical nature of history, Steyerl insinuates that the contemporary museum space is ripe for its own revolution. In the final chapter of “Duty-Free Art” (Chapter 9: Autonomy), Hito Steyerl asks her audience: “What form could a new model of the public museum take, and how would the notion of the ‘public’ itself change radically in the process of thinking through this?”<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, it is unclear as to whether or not she has the answer to this dilemma, but Steyerl does articulate the ideal space in her own revolutionary construct as one where “art can be shown publicly, in physical 3-D space, without endangering its authors, while taking into account the breathtaking spatial and temporal changes expressed” by the examples of contemporary art spaces which she has chosen to focus on.<sup>46</sup> Steyerl does, however, take her role as an artist in the collapsing contemporary moment into acute consideration. Her own role in the greater schema of contemporary art and amidst the dynamics she has drawn attention to is ultimately the self-reflexive force by which “Duty-Free Art” propels itself into the future of revolutionary contemporary art.

#### IV

Jacques Rancière sheds light upon the plight, as well as the role, of the contemporary artist in his concluding thoughts of “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics.” Rancière clarifies:

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<sup>44</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

In recent years many artists have set out to revive the project of an art that makes real objects instead of producing or recycling images, or that undertakes real actions in the real world rather than merely ‘artistic’ installations. But the political is not the ‘outside’ of a ‘real’ that art would have to reach. The ‘outward’ is always the other side of an ‘inward.’ What produces their difference is the topography in whose frame the relation of in and out is negotiated. The real as such simply does not exist. What does exist is a framing or a fiction of reality. Art does not do politics by reaching the real. It does it by inventing fictions that challenge the existing distribution of the real and the fictional.<sup>47</sup>

Hito Steyerl’s execution of “Duty-Free Art”— as well as her general expansion into the use of pedagogy in tandem with her visual works—is her distinct way of making what Rancière would identify as political art. While “Duty-Free Art” may not dramatically foray into the realm of the fictional, the essay does not deliver the ‘truth’ that would be expected of say, a documentary film. “Duty-Free Art” is Steyerl’s way of experimenting with the questions she asks of contemporary art throughout the entirety of the piece. Steyerl implicates herself in the construction of the written work, just as she has done in the construction of her essay documentary films. In the seventh chapter of “Duty-Free Art,” Steyerl reveals an email sent by her to a representative of OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) in an effort to validate the information found in the emails she includes in “Duty-Free Art” from Wikileaks’ Syria files. Her use of ProtonMail, an encrypted, Swiss-based server, to contact the organization is an admission on the artist’s part to her participation in the opaque annals of contemporary digital networks and privatized spaces, much like the freeport storage spaces. Steyerl explicitly states: “I am in fact taking advantage of legal protections that have enabled tax evasion and money

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<sup>47</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics,” *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, eds. Beth Hinderliter et al. (Durham: Duke UP, 2009) 49.

laundering through Swiss banks and other facilities on an astounding scale.”<sup>48</sup> She identifies her intention “to ask how both internet communication and the (near-) collapse of some nations states affect the planning of contemporary museum spaces” to the representative of OMA with whom she corresponds. Steyerl’s self-implication in the opaque networks and ‘locations’ that she investigates blatantly reveals her intention, as an artist, to deploy her own work using the spaces of contemporary art that she identifies. Her self-implication within the system that her own work unravels becomes more apparent upon a retrospective analysis of the artist’s process in creating “Duty-Free Art.” The few images scattered throughout the article are images obtained by the artist’s own means. The fact that Hito Steyerl was clearly present in the location of the municipal art gallery of Diyarbakir in Turkey—as well as outside of the Geneva freeport—to take photographs of the spaces discloses her objective to participate as a contemporary artist within the unstable locales of contemporary art that she has used to create her pedagogical work. The subsequent success of “Duty-Free Art” might be measured by its appearance in exhibitions across the globe—from New York, to Madrid, to Berlin, and then to New Zealand. Why does it seem that Steyerl’s artistic process and the subsequent work she creates are self-reflexive in their entanglement within the contemporary spaces that she seems to critique? In the ninth and final chapter of “Duty-Free Art,” aptly titled “Autonomy,” Hito Steyerl characterizes contemporary art from her perspective as the contemporary artist. She claims:

Art’s conditions of possibility are no longer just the elitist ‘ivory tower,’ but also the dictator’s contemporary art foundation, the

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<sup>48</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

oligarch's or weapons manufacturer's tax-evasion scheme, the hedge fund's trophy, the art student's debt bondage, leaked troves of data, aggregate spam, and the product of huge amounts of unpaid 'voluntary' labor—all of which results in art's accumulation in freeport storage spaces and its physical destruction in zones of war or accelerated privatization.<sup>49</sup>

For Steyerl, these bleak, contemporary 'conditions of possibility' serve as appropriate motivation to incorporate them into the artistic process and ultimately to beat them at their own game. To further clarify this mission, Steyerl contends: "The idea of duty-free art has one major advantage over the nation-state cultural model: duty-free art ought to *have no duty*—no duty to perform, to represent, to teach, to embody value... Even the duty-free art in the freeport storage spaces is not duty free. It is only tax-free. It has the duty of being an asset."<sup>50</sup> Thus, Hito Steyerl unveils the purpose of "Duty-Free Art" from its inception. In the spaces of contemporary art where art is either stored in a 'cage without borders' with the duty of being an asset, or—on the other end of the spectrum—where a lack of political stability prevents the creation and celebration of artistic culture and commodity, Hito Steyerl seeks to avoid creating art that participates in these spaces. She does so precisely by exposing the aesthetic and political spheres within which contemporary art currently operates. Steyerl's shift to pedagogical practice is a means to this end, as well. By disseminating pedagogical works that function as sovereign pieces within her oeuvre, Steyerl's art ultimately spurns the duty of being an asset. With the accessibility of "Duty-Free Art" on the internet and without a price tag, Steyerl has managed to foster a new 'community of sense' between the aesthetic and political spheres of contemporary art. Steyerl confirms this desired agency with the statement:

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<sup>49</sup> Hito Steyerl, "Duty-Free Art," *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

“Autonomous art could even be art set free from both its authors and its owners.”<sup>51</sup> Her ‘dream sequence’ fiction of the crater, crosshairs and screen was, in fact, yet another guise to validate her motivations. In her manipulative, artistic construction of her own ‘dream,’ Steyerl describes “the screen” of contemporary art as having “two sides and potentially very different functions. It can decrease but also enhance visibility, protect and reveal, project and record, expose and conceal.”<sup>52</sup> As an artist working with digital images, Hito Steyerl channeled her creative energy into the essay documentary and became familiar with the mediation between truth and fiction. With her construction of “Duty-Free Art,” Steyerl demonstrates her artistic mission to ‘storm the Louvre,’ or revolutionize contemporary artistic practice and force it outside of the spaces within which it is currently captive. Although this does not free Steyerl’s work from duty, it does fulfill what Rancière described as the creation of ‘political art,’ and clears a path towards what Hito Steyerl envisioned as the view of contemporary art and its place in space and time from the ground up.

While Hito Steyerl may not have the answer for the future of museum spaces in what she identifies as the “shattered” contemporary, she does have a clear perception of her current role as a contemporary artist. Her expansion from the visual in her essay documentaries to the use of pedagogy in the art space is directly related to Steyerl’s desire to break free from the contemporary “duties” of art. Rather than turn from the spaces that Foster said “duties,” Steyerl engages them and exposes them in “Duty-Free Art” as an act of artistic revolution. While she has not strayed from what Jacques Rancière identifies as a “framing or a fiction of reality,” Steyerl has managed to

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<sup>51</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Duty-Free Art,” *e-flux journal*, 1.63 (2015).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

mobilize her artistic process in a way that deploys her fiction, or her work, into reality, all with the intention of potentially fostering a new reality. The only question that remains is: what will she think of next?

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