

HITO STEYERL'S EARLY FILMS AS ALTERNATIVE DOCUMENTS

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"Documentary works," writes Hito Steyerl in her book *Die Farbe der Wahrheit*, are "palaces of memory that do not, as archives do, organize documents in space—they also arrange them in time." Certainly, her early films—*Deutschland und das Ich*, *Babenhausen*, *The Empty Center*, *Normality 1–X*—are palaces in this sense. The word "palace," however, also suggests beauty and extravagance—as well as visitors gazing in awe and uttering oohs and aahs as they wander through the rooms. These kinds of associations definitely do not accord with the context in which the films were made. For anyone who lived through the early 1990s, in particular, the memory of that period tends to be one of claustrophobia.

However, this was a decade that brought to the fore a whole range of issues that we are still preoccupied with today: the constitution of local communities, the effects of racism and anti-Semitism, the dealings with far-right extremism, the growing influence of populist schisms, the homogenization of cities, the role of the military in "identitarian" clashes, the transformation of the public sphere and mediality, the increasing power of images, and the problems surrounding their "veracity" and the testimony they bear. We are still living, if you like, in a constellation that we might term the "long nineties."

CALLING FORTH THE LIVING

At the same time, however, our memory of the conditions and discourses that prevailed at that time has dwindled. This is striking, because it was also a time when media for recording, storing, and distributing information and images became available to an extent that was hitherto unimaginable. This triggered a frenzy among people for documenting events, adding to the traditional archives a myriad of alternative repositories of knowledge that were constantly accessible. However, the act of creating a record—in *Die Farbe der Wahrheit*, Steyerl invokes Jacques Derrida's thoughts on the archive—also implies shielding oneself from the memory it keeps safe: it is the very act of storing documents that creates the possibility of forgetting. And precisely because we can use the Internet to go back to and access the material at any time, in general none of us do it anymore. In this respect, older people are often baffled today by the gaps in the knowledge of the younger generation, who can afford these deficits given that all knowledge would seem to be at their fingertips day and night.

Yet the 1990s predated the Internet, and the work of remembrance was often a painstaking process of setting up new archives and creating alternative funds of knowledge. Traditional archives were poorly equipped to tackle the problems of the time. The historical archives, for example, did not yield a great deal for anyone researching racism, as they contained no information on the subject—either the pertinent documents were to be found in completely different categories or the relevant work of archiving or collecting had not been done

at all. This process of alternative documentation was literally an activity, an arduous task of making connections, conducting searches, and organizing material. Hito Steyerl's early films are alternative documents of this kind. They also harness the additional options for recording made possible by new media. Portable cameras and computers were suddenly able to do what in the past had only been possible in the studio setting with the help of bulky pieces of equipment. This did a great deal to enhance the different modes of documentation. In *The Empty Center*, Steyerl stresses the fact that she is interested in "establishing [a] tradition of lost causes" and "giving names to the hitherto unknown," drawing on a note by Siegfried Kracauer that forms part of the epilogue to his *History: The Last Things before the Last*, an incomplete work that was published after his death. The original sentence reads "Focus on the 'genuine' hidden in the interstices between dogmatized beliefs of the world, thus establishing a tradition of lost causes; giving names to the hitherto unnamed." The combination of "genuine," "causes," and "unnamed" is indeed captivating. In the film, "causes" is translated as *Prozesse* ("processes"), but the word encompasses a melange of matter, concern, object, and reason. Remembrance brings forth once living persons, active individuals with truths and concerns who have hitherto remained unnamed. Kracauer himself not only supplies a keynote to *The Empty Center* but also becomes a living person in the film when we hear that, as a Jew, he was obliged to flee Nazi Germany.

IMPORT AND FANTASY

As I write this text, many parts of Germany are witnessing mass demonstrations expressing solidarity with George Floyd, a black US American who lost his life in Minneapolis as a result of police brutality. A symbolic image from the USA—the knee of the authorities pressing down on the neck of a black man—was evidently what it took to put racism on the agenda in Germany with such intensity. Prior to this, in the wake of the racist attack in Hanau that left nine people dead, one particular sentence had been brought over from the USA: "Say their names." In Germany, however, the authorities are less directly implicated in the death of the "unnamed" than they are in the USA. Since the early 1990s, in the face of serial attacks, the line the security agencies have tended to pursue is one of backpedaling, with identities erased, blame cast on the victims, investigations aborted, and events downplayed. The period between *Deutschland und das Ich* and *Normality 1–X* saw the newly reunited Federal Republic returning to normality—accompanied by endless debates—while at the same time this "normality" was redesigned for anyone of non-German origin: namely, as a serial, racist threat to ordinary, everyday life. In *The Empty Center*, in particular, one of the films recurring motifs centers on how the act of bringing down borders in turn creates new borders—schisms within society that assumed a new quality but harked back to old divides.

Back then too, of course, attention was focused on the USA as people sought to characterize or explain what was happening. The 1990s were also the time of "postcolonial theory," a theory that viewed history and culture as authors of a constant process of scrimmaging, one marked by extreme inequality engendered by conquest, enslavement, colonialism, and ingrained global imbalances. Thus, behind the West's cultural normality lurks an invisible history of violence populated by "silent Others," as Stuart Hall once put it—a mass of people who were alive at one time or another but have no name in "our" history and whose concerns have been suppressed and forgotten.

Hito Steyerl embraced these theories but applied them to Germany, taking an unacademic approach that has been extraordinarily productive. In fact, the theory has often been imported to the letter—



After the Wall came down the Germans were all excited.

Still from *The Empty Center*, 1998

in synoptic discourses or in the undifferentiated transfer of templates from another context. Steyerl's early films, meanwhile, pick up on the experiences of Jews, blacks, and migrants, and the names of the unnamed appear in places where heads are kept in museums, palaces have been demolished, or traces have vanished into the void: Kula, Tony, Moses, Felix, Bayume, Friedrich, Farid. Living individuals that feature in the films prefer not to give their names for fear of being sanctioned—such as the punks squatting in the former stretch of no man's land in the “empty center” of Berlin. They live as unnamed people in a transitional zone, because they are well aware that after the center has been completely rehabilitated, there will be no more room for “people with different values.”

EXPLORATIONS AND ENCOUNTERS

Because the veracity of images in documentary works and their status as testimony is increasingly precarious, in *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* we also hear that the form of an image still tells the truth about its context and production as well as the circumstances in which it was produced. In this respect, it is worth examining the formal aspects of the early films, because the way they were made constitutes a specific means of creating knowledge. The films always seek out particular places, which the filmmaker literally pays a visit to, exploring them with her camera. These include museums, cemeteries, folk festivals, demonstrations, parades, the sites of arson attacks, construction sites, and places where history and stories have become invisible because the buildings are no longer there or the activities have fallen out of use. The connection between the places visited has an associative quality—the filmmaker, who is always present herself, moves from one to the next as if conducting research. The context is always clear, delineating the historical and systemic nature of borders, but the films make no claim to being exhaustive, nor is the complexity of the situation disavowed and broken down into patterns. In the section dealing with the former Haus Vaterland “pleasure palace” in the center of Berlin, the historical characters are left with all their contradictions. Bayume Mohamed Husen, a former soldier who had served—like his father—in the German colony of East Africa, was a waiter in the Vaterland's exotic surroundings before going on to become the Nazi film industry's black “avatar.” Friedrich Hollaender was composing dreadful hits like

“I get my body painted black, painted black/Then I'll go to Fiji, to the Fiji Islands” just a few years before he was forced, as a Jew, to leave Germany in 1933.



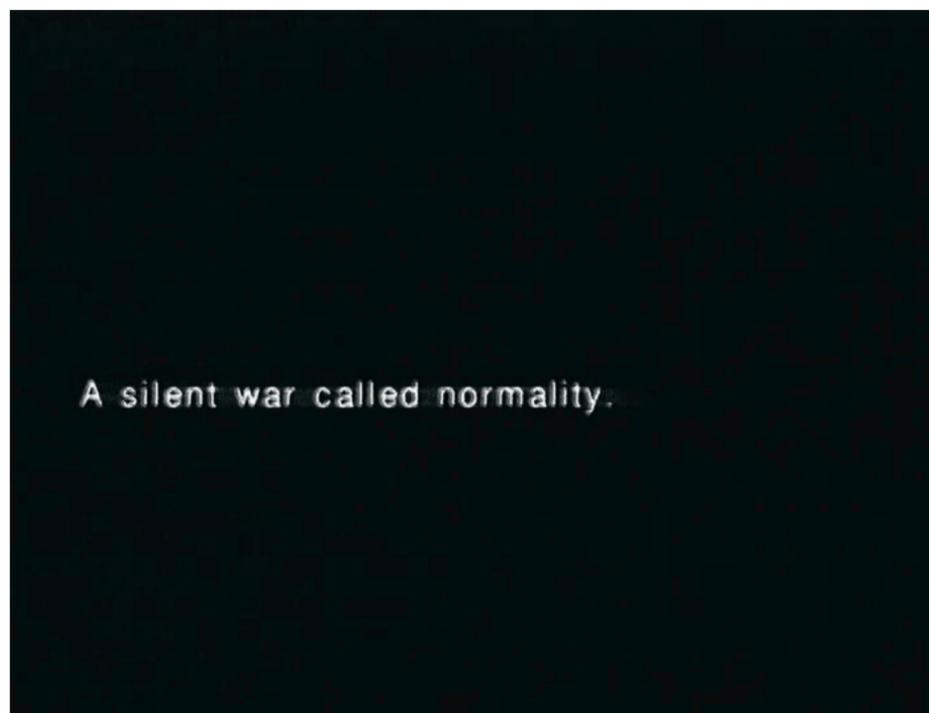
Still from *The Empty Center*, 1998

At the same time, the visits to the sites always involve encounters too—whether sought-out or fortuitous. The individual “talking heads” are not prominent figures, but they do express their concerns and bring in their expertise and experience. In *Deutschland und das Ich*, we meet the Nietzsche expert Britta Glatzeder; in *Babenhausen*, an activist from the anti-racist group Café Morgenland; in *The Empty Center*, it is two students of Chinese origin, Dong Yang and Huan Zhu, and a group of off-screen punks. These people join forces with the filmmaker in pondering and researching her themes and contribute a highly nuanced spectrum of ideas on identity, racism, architecture, and displacement. And they may also answer back—at the end of *The Empty Center*, there is a funny scene in which Dong dismissively describes Steyerl's question as “a little boring.” The people we meet and the way their contributions work together could not be more different from the “talking heads” we see on the talk shows aired on German television, where the male protagonists each pronounce, with absolute assurance, their opinion on the issue of “identity.”

Steyerl doesn't shy away from any form of encounter. She even engages in conversation with the people who bellow out overtly racist slogans while drinking (at the Oktoberfest) or demonstrating (IG BAU unionists protesting against the practice of “wage dumping” through the use of migrant labor from abroad). She also shows that there are always dissenting voices too—in each case, other people appear on the scene who are opposed to these sentiments. In all the visits and encounters, the filmmaker is an integral part of the images she creates. Although the camera generates a sense of distance, her stance is one of intimacy, involvement, enquiry, and intellectual curiosity. Back then, this coincided with the kind of attitude adopted by cultural studies researchers toward their subjects and was far removed from the critical approach typically practiced in Germany at the time, whereby arguments were invariably presented from the outside—on the basis of the “dogmatized beliefs of the world” that Kracauer spoke of, regardless of whether the discussion related to a new-found national identity or a somewhat passé “critical theory.”

PARALLELS AND OVERLAYS

Steyerl's visits to sites and her meetings with people are accompanied by simple cinematic devices like pans or cross-fades, which ensure that present-day parallels or historical overlays are made visible. In *Deutschland und das Ich*, there is a scene in which Britta Glatzeder speaks from a balcony about the "new Goethe-Institut": "They've put an amazing monumental building there now. "But when they finished," she continues, "they realized that having their address on Dachauer Strasse would be rather awkward for their international profile, so they relocated the main entrance from over there and moved it round the back here to Helene-Weber-Allee." However, the camera reveals that you only have to turn around from this new entrance, now unencumbered by any negative associations, to find oneself in front of the makeshift accommodation used to house asylum seekers that looks just like a camp barracks. In the next shot, the camera is pulled to a burnt-out basement, overlaid with newspaper images of firefighters at work and rescue operations. In an absurd gesture, one man proudly shows Steyerl his lighter, which has a huge flame. In the newspaper clippings that follow, we see the victims of the arson attack.

Still from *Normality 1-X*, 1999

Steyerl elects to use cross-fades again in *The Empty Center*. Right at the start, "the center returns" as a shot of the Berlin Wall fades into an image of the same space as a construction site, which was the state this new center was in at the time the film was shot. "At Potsdamer Platz, ages and images overlap," says Steyerl herself, and as the story unfolds, this is exactly what we see, as the film constantly shifts back and forth in time, fading between past and present. What is special about the film is the highly individual analysis of a complex nexus interweaving architecture built to project power, internal borders, such as those that separate off Jews and immigrants, the external borders drawn in Europe (at the Berlin Conference of 1878) and overseas (at the Berlin Conference of 1884), colonial museum practices, exotic entertainment, preparations for World War II, and deaths that took place at the wall. The contradictions are included: the demonstrators protesting against wage dumping who express certain racist sentiments appear at the same time as people beset by feelings bordering on fear in face of a perceived threat; meanwhile the "Others" are certainly not just

depicted as victims—we are given a detailed account of the story of the Waffen-SS "Free India Legion," whose members were, in other respects, regarded by their Nazi superiors as "racially inferior stock."

THE VIOLENCE OF NORMALITY

Yet the return of the center in the early 1990s is also a story of the violent drawing of boundaries, through racist violence, in particular. This violence had a serial nature—evident in the waves of attacks that followed. Steyerl depicted this serial quality in *Babenhausen* and especially in *Normality 1-X*. In the face of this sequence of violence, however, the film finds itself bereft of resources: What can it depict when the violence has orchestrated an act of disappearance? In *Babenhausen*, Steyerl attends a rally protesting against anti-Semitic violence. The camera lingers poignantly on the fire-damaged buildings belonging to the Jewish family Merin. Off-screen, a member of Café Morgenland presents a chronicle of events, a succession of violent attacks and antagonistic behavior from the authorities, which ultimately causes the family to quit the town and move away from Hesse.

Still from *Babenhausen*, 1997

In *Normality*, the violence is even more nightmarish. The ten short chapters cover the desecrations of the graves of two chairmen of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Heinz Galinski and Ignatz Bubis—and of other Jewish graves (including some in Austria)—neo-Nazi demonstrations, the pipe bomb attack on immigrants in Düsseldorf-Wehrhahn, some of them Jewish, the murderous attack on refugees in Guben, and the continued desecration of the site established to commemorate the crime. In the seventh section of the film, which deals with the Düsseldorf attack, Steyerl gives up trying to find visual images to accompany the narrative—the screen remains black, or we see indistinct images in which it is not clear what we are actually looking at. "How can we see the structure of violence?" she asks, and describes the "normality" of the reunified Federal Republic over the preceding ten years as being in a state of war, where violence is a measure of normalization: "a silent war called normality."

Twenty years on, has this war come to an end? Or have we stopped seeing it or simply grown accustomed to it? After 2015, attacks on refugee hostels were once again carried out in waves, and the violence escalated, culminating in the lethal assaults in Halle and Hanau.

Still from *Normality I-X*, 1999

Steyerl's probing of the character of "normality" is startlingly relevant today—a privilege based on violence, which at the same time constitutes a constant threat to the normal conduct of life for certain people. Of course, the world has changed since then—in Berlin, in Germany, in the center—but the issues of the "long nineties" are still on the agenda. People like Steyerl, who were already tackling these themes at the time, managed to achieve an extraordinary level of insight because their (documentary) work was almost without precedent: the individual subjectification of people familiar with racism from their personal experience; the uncovering of truths and forgotten concerns—the fruit of an autodidactic process and stripped, perforce, of ideology; and the productive survey of a field that had only rarely been looked at in this kind of synoptic way. This far-from-idiosyncratic approach and the knowledge that it brings to light have hitherto been given too little attention in comparison to other works by Steyerl. In light of our current concerns, it would also be better if this archive were not used to forget what it contains.

FORTLEBEN UND MIGRATIONEN SURVIVAL AND MIGRATION