

WHAT ARE YOU BUILDING? 40

HITO STEYERL AND THE MOBILITY OF THE CONFIGURATION

TOM HOLERT

I.

Over the course of 2019, Hito Steyerl produced and presented more exhibitions, videos, and installations in one year than at any previous stage of her career. Two solo shows were mounted in institutional settings in Berlin, first when the Käthe Kollwitz Prize was awarded at the Akademie der Künste and then, six months later, at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.); the exhibition *The City of Broken Windows* at the Castello di Rivoli near Turin had opened in November 2018 but ran through to September 2019; *Power Plants* was on show at the Serpentine Galleries in London in the spring of 2019; in the summer, *Drill*—her largest solo exhibition to date in the United States—could be seen at Park Avenue Armory in New York; and in October *Hito Steyerl. This is the Future* opened at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

This cluster of solo exhibitions, in combination with Steyerl's involvement in the main exhibition at the Venice Art Biennale, suggests that she had a prescient sense of what the following year would have in store: an enforced break in the functioning of the art industry precipitated by a major pandemic, in the process of which museums and galleries, at the very least, would be closed for months and only offer limited access for some time thereafter. Now it seems natural to assume that removing the option of experiencing her work as a physical presence in an exhibition space would have less of an impact on an artist and theorist like Steyerl. Is she not essentially focused on working with and in the media of text and the digital image, both of which are perfect for publishing, posting, and streaming on the Internet? Doesn't this also involve bypassing the architectural structures built by the institutions, which may not in the end be as vital for a full-on experience of art as we have always tended to assume?

To refute such an assumption, I will argue here that the real architectural space of an exhibition room is a key ingredient in Steyerl's work that cannot simply be jettisoned and substituted with digital spaces. I will also contend that the meaning the installations accrue when built into the space is in turn connected to a critique of the architectural and the digital that runs through her work on a variety of levels, both conceptual and visual. It is this connection and the juxtapositions and contrasts created—the *configuration* of spaces and types of physical environment represented by the exhibition, the installation, and the screen—that articulate a pervasive interest in designed and built architecture, be it material or immaterial.

II.

As 2019 drew to a close, this tightly packed sequence of transatlantic premieres and revivals of individual works formatted as solo exhibitions concluded with the replica of a replica, bookending the space and a year that had been immensely productive for Steyerl. The exhibition at n.b.k. had opened in late November (and received a steady stream of visitors right through to January 2020)—the walk through the show culminated in the miniature reconstruction of the plenary hall of the European Parliament. Built in the 1990s to plans drawn up by the Architecture Studio in Paris, this monumental structure—known as the

¹ For a detailed description of this work and its various contextual settings, see Kolja Reichert, "The Trump-Balenciaga Complex," *O32c*, May 13, 2020, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://032c.com/trump-balenciaga-complex>.

"dome"—has space for 750 MEPs and around 600 spectators: the rows of seats radiate out to form a fan shape, while a marble staircase, designed as a double helix, leads to twenty-nine other halls in the labyrinthine parliament building.

However, it was not so much the original plenary hall in Strasbourg that was the model for the replica in the n.b.k. exhibition as its appropriation and adaptation by an agency that designs catwalk architecture and exhibitions for the global fashion industry. For the set built to present the Balenciaga SS20 collection in September 2019, head designer Demna Gvasalia asked La Mode en Images for its interpretation of the Strasbourg plenary hall. A projecting platform, framed by curtains, was built in the shape of a spiral ellipse in a film studio in the Saint-Denis suburb of Paris, with the visitors to the fashion show ranged upon it. The large space was bathed in a cool blue light reminiscent of both the EU's basic color and the Brexiters' Leave campaign: the prevailing temperature was unpleasantly low in the immersive environment of the crisis.

The miniaturized version of Gvasalia's sadistic and ambiguous comment on the current state of the European Community could be used as a seat in Steyerl's Berlin exhibition. Visitors could obtain headphones and sit there to watch the video element of *Mission Accomplished: Belanciege* (2019).¹ On the opening night Steyerl—together with Giorgi Gago Gagoshidze and Miloš Trakilović—gave a lecture performance, streamed live and almost an hour in length, with the three of them standing at lecterns in the blue replica of the replica of the Strasbourg plenary hall. During the exhibition, the lecture was shown spread across three screens in the mini amphitheater, running in an edited version, some 45 minutes long. The visitors sitting on the spiraling blue furniture had the option of imagining themselves as EU delegates, representatives of the fashion industry or the art world, or, if they preferred, none of these roles. Regardless of their choice, they were invited to consider the space of politics and the politics of space.

The very first minutes of the video are dominated by the theme of architecture. With the Scorpions hit "Wind of Change" playing in the background, Trakilović starts with a reference to the "fall" of the Berlin Wall (the first architectural motif), an event that took place almost exactly thirty years prior to the premiere. Steyerl follows with



the extreme-value mathematical exercise (she calls it a “riddle”) of how to calculate the largest area that can be enclosed by 100 meters of fencing (the second architectural motif). Finally, Gagoshidze shows a video from 2017 in which we see Mikheil Saakashvili—the former president of Georgia, and subsequently a provincial governor and opposition politician in Ukraine—being led away by officers of the Ukrainian security service SBU, at the end of a six-hour siege, from the roof (the third architectural motif) of a house in the centre of Kiev, where he had taken refuge after the security forces had arrived to search his apartment.

The fall of the wall, the geometry of confinement, and the hopeless rooftop situation, from which there is no way out, are just the prelude to a torrent of references evoking the topographies and, most importantly, the topologies of a present in which geopolitics and game design, fashion trends, and neofascist propaganda spiral into one another in ways that are quite unfathomable. The lecture’s intricate composition is itself structured like a fantastical vision of claustrophobic architecture in the tradition of Giovanni Battista Piranesi or M.C. Escher. The argument put forward by *Mission Accomplished: Belanciege* weaves together an analysis of the fashion strategies propounded by Gvasalia, who had fled Georgia as a child, with a critique of AI modelings of destructive right-wing populism, interleaving the Balenciaga sneaker craze of men like Saakashvili with fake Balenciaga trainers in a store in Sarajevo.

The relationship between the city and war, between urbanism and militarism, should also be regarded as architectural in a broader sense. One of the longest sieges in history, the Siege of Sarajevo (which lasted from April 5, 1992, to February 29, 1996), reverberates in the misspelling of “Balenciaga” as “Belanciege.” This portmanteau was picked up in the title of the work and occasioned a “viral” fashion campaign as part of the exhibition, which included the n.b.k. window display and the Berlin newspaper *Arts of the Working Class*. One night in 1994, Meliha Varešanović—the woman Tom Stoddart photographed in Sarajevo without her knowledge for the consumption of a global audience—walked past a different row of shop windows, these ones barricaded with sandbags, wearing an elegant dress, high-heeled shoes, and a self-assured look on her face. *Mission Accomplished: Belanciege* puts this image on show and with it the architecture of the siege as an



Still from *Mission Accomplished: Belanciege*, 2019

2
 On this, see an interview with Gagoshidze on the website *transitorywhite* from January 17, 2020, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://transitorywhite.com/articles/on-the-loop>: “Being on a loop is a constant mood of catching up with the standards which are imposed by others. A standard that was supposed to guarantee a better way of living, [an] easy way of solving problems and dealing with existing challenges. This is the reality where Georgia found itself. Most of these kinds of standards are coming from the West. The feeling of affiliation towards Europe is strong in Georgia. Standardization of life there is referring to Western-European countries.”

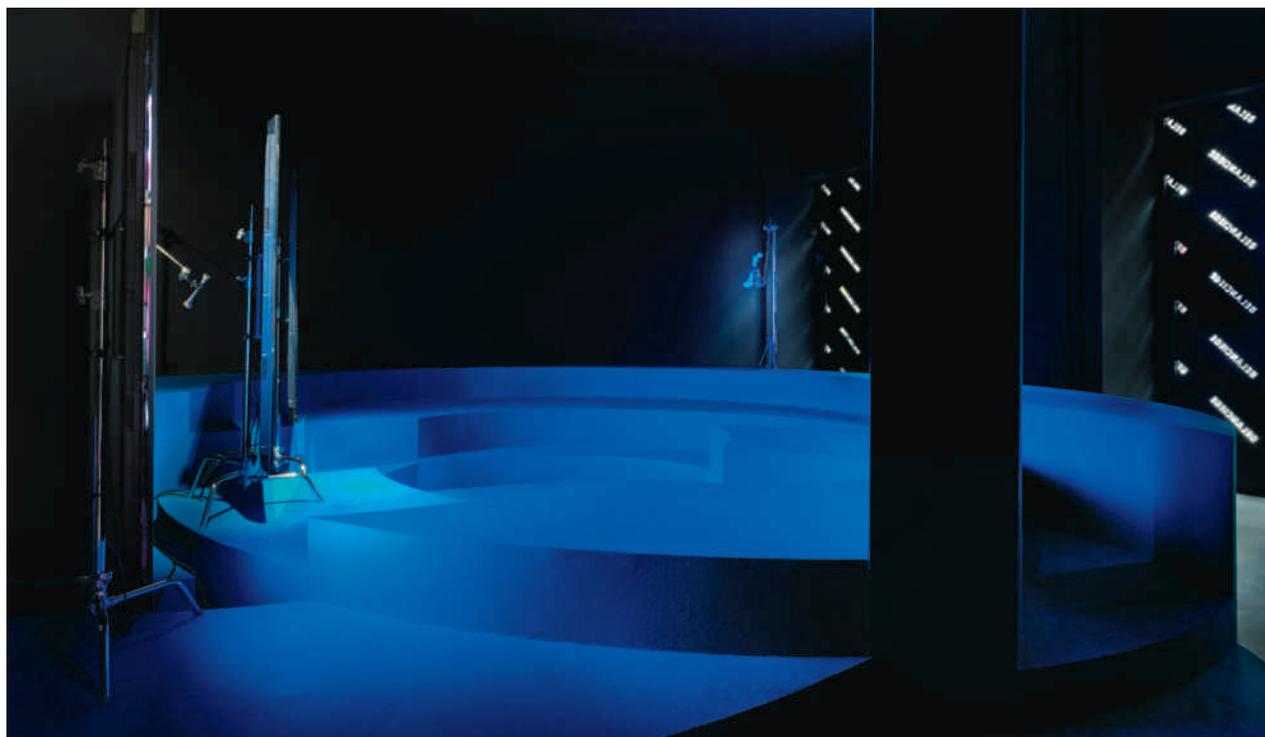
urban setting for an incredible demonstration of feminine aplomb moving in the crosshairs of Serbian snipers on the slopes above the city.

Steyerl, Gagoshidze, and Trakilović repeatedly return to topological figures. The endless loops in which the oligarchic kleptocracies and identity conflicts of the post-1989 world have become ensnarled are mirrored in images of the endlessly circular, yet excruciatingly slow rollercoaster ride of the computer game *Mr Bones’ Wild Ride*.² In one of the many highlights of the video, Steyerl presents a Möbius strip version of the 99-cent IKEA tote bag that Gvasali had replicated for Balenciaga and sold for a price of around 2,000 euros.

By this point of the lecture, a basic problem of topology—the non-orientable surface or the impossibility of distinguishing inside and outside (as illustrated in the Klein bottle or, for that matter, the Möbius strip)—has already been related to the feudalistic dynamics of the post-communist era, the privatization of public space, and the branding logic of political campaigns underpinned by data mining. The architecture of the Balenciaga fashion show can also be seen in this sense as a model presenting the occupation of an outside by an inside. Here, the allusions to the architecture of Dante’s *Inferno*, as visualized in the early sixteenth century in the plans of the Florentine mathematician Antonio Manetti, seem abundantly obvious. Only the gaze of the God-head directed downward from a tremendous height reveals the structural distribution of power and wealth, which must remain hidden from the people competing at ground level in the search for orientation in non-orientable surfaces.

III.

The architecture of *Mission Accomplished: Belanciege* pointedly displays its own model quality, bringing up questions about the effects, as a modeling agent, of this specific work—and of Steyerl’s multiscalar practice as a whole. At n.b.k., control of the discourse was affirmed and at the same time offered up for negotiation. The rhetoric of the blue mini amphitheater in the exhibition space seemed both grandiose and modest in equal measure. The audience’s need for interaction was reliant to a great extent on platforms outside the architecture of the Kunstverein, coupled with the offer of a paradoxical Brechtian immersion.



Installation view, *Mission Accomplished: Belanciege*, n.b.k., Berlin, 2019

3
Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall:
A Thought Experiment on
Vertical Perspective," *e-flux
Journal* 24 (April 2011).

4
Hito Steyerl, "Is a Museum
a Factory?," *e-flux Journal* 7
(June 2009).

5
Steyerl, *ibid.*

Installative elements play an ever more important role in Steyerl's practice, one that should not be underestimated. Without doubt, this is also related here to the growing recognition of this practice within the art world. In terms of how her position is assessed in art historical and intellectual terms, the consensus that has emerged—at the latest since her invitation to documenta 12 in 2007—has also led to her being offered larger and larger exhibition spaces. One of the ways she met this challenge of having more space at her disposal was by multiplying the use of screens. The multi-channel mode may have partly been based on the insight that people looking at contemporary art in modern-day exhibition spaces are no longer bound by a traditional visual discipline schooled in the architecture of cinema. Instead, they are "drafted" into the production of content—"dissociated and overwhelmed"³—made part of a singularized, spatially dispersed crowd "connected only by distraction, separation and difference."⁴

In her cooperations with the institutions showing her work, the artist stipulates precisely how her installations are to be positioned—Steyerl's insistence here derives from her analysis of the different components and facets of institutional power and its visual framing of space. The artist looks at galleries and museums not only in ideological terms but also as material and physical entities, defining them as "battlefields" and "factories." These are spaces that, through the entanglements of contemporary art, have been branded by finance, the industrial military complex, and the exploitative conditions of neocolonialism and have thus been enlisted in the asymmetric wars of today. Conflictuality plays a constituent role in shaping art institutions (and the institution of "art"), and it is also expressed in much less cultivated forms than those of the philosophical discourse of aesthetics. Moreover, the permanence and ubiquity of production ("installation, planning, carpentry, viewing, discussing, maintenance, betting on rising values, and networking") comes into play, which is why the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Steyerl's terms, is always at once a "supermarket," a "casino," and a "place of worship."⁵



Still from *Mission Accomplished*: BeLanciege, 2019

6
 On *The Empty Center*, see Barbara Mennil, "Shifting Margins and Contested Centers: Changing Cinematic Visions of (West) Berlin," in *Berlin: The Symphony Continues; Orchestrating Architectural, Social and Artistic Change in Germany's New Capital*, ed. Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, Rachel J. Halverson, and Kristie A. Foel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 41–59; Christina Gerhardt, "Transnational Germany: Hito Steyerl's Film *Die leere Mitte* and Two Hundred Years of Border Crossings," *Women in German Yearbook* 23 (2007): 205–23; Nora M. Alter, *The Essay Film after Fact and Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 172–79; and the essay by Mark Terkessidis included in this book.

IV.

Steyerl's attention to architectural and functional typologies (and the porous dividing lines between the different structural forms) is a consistent feature of her practice. At a fundamental level, this can be seen as work in and with the politics of space and a reflection on the social power relationships that spaces articulate. Steyerl's films of the 1990s, when there was as yet no way of predicting her path into the art world, already reveal and focus in on the political and historical function of architecture. They deal with nationalism, racism, and anti-Semitism, to a large degree via images of houses and cities. In *Babenhäuser* (1997), the visual protagonists are two burnt-out buildings located on federal highway 26 as it passes through the town of Babenhäuser in Hesse—"lonely houses, without German neighbors around." They belong to the Jewish entrepreneur Tony A. Merin, who emigrated to the USA in 1993. The buildings and the Merin family were prey to repeated anti-Semitic aggression and nationalistic activities. The voice-over, which was recorded at the site during a demonstration, explains how the arson attack of May 1997 had convinced the owners not to rehabilitate or tear down these buildings that belonged to them but to preserve them as a memorial.

The Empty Center (1998) is a complex point of entry—very much in the style of Harun Farocki's and Chris Marker's essay films—into the intricate web in which anti-Semitism, racism, migration, architecture, urban planning, German history, and territorial claims are entangled.⁶ As she develops her historical narrative in visual form, Steyerl draws on images of terrain and border, of models and built architecture: the Berlin Wall, construction site fences, the territory of Potsdamer Platz, the history of individual buildings (the themed pleasure palace of the Haus Vaterland cabaret or the Fascist monumentalism of Albert Speer's New Reich Chancellery), the model of the future development of Potsdamer Platz in the Infobox on the site, and the tents and huts of a community of punks who had congregated in 1990 and set up camp on what had previously been the strip of no-man's land between East and West (right at the start of the film, we are alerted to the fact that the temporary structures put up by the squatters—who asked to remain anonymous—were filmed instead of them).



Still from *Babenhäuser*, 1997

7
 Hito Steyerl, "The Empty Center," trans. John Southard, in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Biemann (Zurich: Springer, 2003), 47–53, here: 51, 53.

The shaping of the "empty center" takes place in a historical space, in which different chronologies intersect and overlap. Steyerl explains that the postproduction of the analogue Hi8 video and 16 mm material was done using "nonlinear editing systems," which allowed her to visualize "the process of excavation" and "the different layers of the terrain." This made it possible for the video to become "an experimental project of a political archeology."⁷ The future of capitalist "occupation" (vividly displayed in the images of the architectural model in the Infobox and captured in the predictions Steyerl's interlocutors make about the future) is tied up with the historical experiences of violence, discrimination, and exploitation—which are supposedly consigned to the past. The emptiness of the space turns out to be a projection surface, a colonial tabula rasa of displacement and eviction—operations that proceed with virtually no friction in the media presentations of urban planning and architectural modeling.



8 Steyerl, "How to Kill People: A Problem of Design" (2016), in *Superhumanity: Design of the Self*, ed. Nick Axel et al. (New York / Minneapolis: e-flux architecture / University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 322-27, here: 323.

9 Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace," *October* 100 (Spring 2002), 175-90, here: 175-76; the first translation of the essay appeared two years prior to this in *Arch+* 149/150 (April 2000), 55-59. For a revealing insight into the concept of "emptiness" in architectural theory, see Teresa Stoppioni, "Relational Architecture: Dense Voids and Violent Laughters," in "Urban Blind Spots," *Field: A Free Journal for Architecture* 6, no. 1 (2014): 97-111.

10 Siegfried Kracauer, "Über Arbeitsnachweise: Konstruktion eines Raumes" (1930), in *Aufsätze 1927-1931*, vol. 5.2 of *Schriften*, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 185-192, here: 186.

11 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Thierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 13.

12 On stasis, see Hito Steyerl, "A Tank on a Pedestal: Museums in an Age of Planetary Civil War," *e-flux Journal* 70 (February 2016), accessed August 20, 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/70/60543/a-tank-on-a-pedestal-museums-in-an-age-of-planetary-civil-war/>.

13 Adorno, "The Essay as Form" (see n. 11), 13.

14 See Denis Hollier, "Introduction: Bloody Sundays," in *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), ix.

V.

In her 2016 essay "How to Kill People: A Problem of Design," Steyerl looks at the wipe function used in 3D computer graphics and game design, describing it as the digital equivalent of wiping the slate clean and overwriting the violent events of history to create a tabula rasa. The example she gives is of the devastated Kurdish city of Diyarbakir in Southeast Anatolia. "Reconstruction" becomes an act of forgetting. The city is slated to be resurrected as a kind of "tidied game-scape built in traditional-looking styles," from which "signs of the different cultures and religions that had populated the city since antiquity" have been erased.⁸

At the same time, the historically produced (or rather the produced historical) emptiness is a stage for the "junkspace" that Rem Koolhaas wrote about in an influential essay published at about the same time as *The Empty Center* (Koolhaas's essayistic approach, larded with propositions and payoff lines, must have been extremely appealing for Steyerl). This type of space has no agenda and is able to dispense with formal concepts. Junkspace is not aware of any "structure" but rather resembles a "bubble" exclusively geared to "expansion." To achieve this, it creates "disorientation by any means (mirror, polish, echo)."⁹

Steyerl's essayistic method contrasts the epistemic violence of this kind of abstraction, which topologically colonizes and recodes time and space with the discovery and critical reassembly of the structural rudiments. The question driving her enquiry relates to the composition of this illegibility, this opacity, this emptiness. How can her Other be imagined, conceptualized, and produced? In an essay written in 1930 that is one of the conceptual cornerstones of *The Empty Center*, Siegfried Kracauer analyzes the "construction of space," illustrating his point with Berlin unemployment offices. Unlike statistics, newspaper comment, or political statements on jobless figures, the space of the labor exchange is "supplied by reality itself [...] without the disturbing intervention of consciousness." The society dreams in "spatial images," which an essayist like Kracauer uses to sound out "the depths of social reality."¹⁰

Strictly speaking, the form of the essay is anti-architectural. It "erects no scaffolding and no structure," as Theodor W. Adorno writes¹¹—it is directed against stasis:¹² "But the elements crystallise as a configuration through their motion."¹³ The proponents of the "desire to loosen the symbolic authority of architectures" (Denis Hollier) also include Georges Bataille—who, in the late 1920s, came up with the idea that all architecture functions in its origins as a prison—and Michel Foucault, who, in the 1960s and 1970s, explored the spatial organization of psychiatric and punitive institutions, which first invent and then produce insanity and delinquency.¹⁴

These days, "architecture" can no longer be viewed simply as a built environment. It only really makes sense to think of it as the physical outpost of an all-embracing digital technosphere that assimilates, stifles, and melts everything down. In terms of raw materials, information architecture is based more on fiberglass and coltan than on stone, concrete, wood, and mortar. The "digital turn" has fully taken hold of architectural practice, while at the same time traditional principles of architectural design (perspective, modeling, etc.) continue to play an active role in the virtualizations of a present in which all boundaries have been removed. In her work since the 1990s—in the development of her subject matter and frames of reference, her narrative methods and formal strategies—Steyerl has been outspoken in transacting (and helping shape) our view of this refashioning of the architectural. She persistently dissolves the boundaries around the concept of spatiality not only by using the deterritorializing effects of digital

¹⁵
Hito Steyerl, "Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life," in *The Wretched of the Screen*, e-flux Journal series (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 103-20.

¹⁶
Steyerl, 108.

¹⁷
Steyerl, 109.

capitalism as a dynamic for her own theoretical practice but also by seeking to fend off such effects as a threat to anything beautiful and just that may be inherent in the social. From this point of view, the screen and indeed the images themselves are nothing other than sites of a daily routine harping on a single note of perpetual creativity.

This is to say nothing of art and its perfidious "topology of occupation," as Steyerl puts it in one of her most compelling texts.¹⁵ Art is seen as an occupying power, and as a violent agent involved in the restructuring of living labor. In the aftermath of a secret and aggressive mission—one to which it gives its support—targeting the liquefaction of borders (separating bodies, nations, disciplines, opportunities for value creation, and other entities), contemporary art takes on all manner of tasks to help normalize the situation and lend it an air of familiarity. It quite literally maneuvers to occupy and revalue space, making it a prime topological and ultimately ontological factor in the processes of neoliberal and neo-feudal privatization, which is the theme of *Mission Accomplished: Belanciege*. It serves the production of a "space that includes the outside and excludes the inside simultaneously," an "architecture" that is "astonishingly complex": "The schematics of art occupation reveal a checkpointed system, complete with gatekeepers, access levels, and close management of movement and information."¹⁶

As a business model, as an agent of gentrification, as a testing ground for new working conditions, as a mechanism for changing and upgrading perception and knowledge, art is involved in the "structuring, hierarchizing, seizing, up- or downgrading of space,"¹⁷ a space that can be digitally rendered as quickly as it can be wiped, as quickly as is required to satisfy any possible financial and narcissistic needs. In spite or precisely because of this, Steyerl's critique remains committed to the intellectual traditions of critique and enquiry that take as their starting point the physical, psychological, and symbolic violence of built architecture.

VI.

Somewhat on the margins of Foucault's typology of disciplinary architecture dwells the armory. After victory in the Civil War, the elite 7th New York Militia Regiment, one of the units in the triumphant Union Army, treated itself to the Seventh Regiment Armory, also known as Park Avenue Armory, located in Manhattan's Upper East Side. The grandiose building, which was designed in the Gothic Revival style, was inaugurated in 1880 and is today home to a nonprofit art organization. Steyerl was invited to put on a solo exhibition there in the summer of 2019. In the opulently paneled Belle Époque rooms, hung with chandeliers and paintings and furnished in part by Tiffany, she installed *Duty Free Art* (2013), *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* (2015), *The Tower*, *ExtraSpaceCraft*, *Hell Yeah We Fuck Die*, *Robots Today* (all 2016), *Prototype 1.0 and 1.1* (2017), *The City of Broken Windows* (2018), and *FreePlots* (2019). Most of these works share an interest in political economy, sociology, and the relationship between technology and space. For example, Steyerl examines the issues of real-estate speculation, the territoriality of duty-free zones, the 3D rendering of gated communities, urban gardening organized at community level, the interplay of AI and urban planning, and the relationship between the "broken windows" theory, programs of austerity, and data-based security systems to detect intruders.

Besides this retrospective look at the six years leading up to the exhibition, Steyerl created a new work for the Armory show. The large-scale three-channel video installation *Drill* (2019) was presented in the enormous Wade Thompson Drill Hall, a bizarre combination of parade ground and ballroom. Unlike most of her videos from the 2010s,

18
 Zachary Small, "Hito Steyerl's Indictment of the Park Avenue Armory's Ties to Gun Violence Misses Its Mark," *Hyperallergic*, June 1, 2020, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/506210/hito-steyerls-indictment-of-the-park-avenue-armorys-ties-to-gun-violence-misses-its-mark/>; Jason Farago, "In 'Drill,' Hito Steyerl Adds Polish to Images of a World Gone Mad," *New York Times*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/05/arts/design/hito-steyerl-drill-armory.html>; Ben Davis, "Why Hito Steyerl's Near-Mystical Denunciation of the NRA at the Park Avenue Armory Lacks Firepower," *artnet.com*, July 11, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/hito-steyerl-drill-park-avenue-armory-1595455>; Raheel Aïma, "Firing Blanks: Hito Steyerl and the Voiding of Research Art," *Momus*, July 16, 2019, <https://momus.ca/firing-blanks-hito-steyerl-and-the-voiding-of-research-art/>.

which were typically associated with the principles and methods pertaining to the "poor," overused low-res image that has gone astray, Steyerl here opted for a visual idiom that lent her more muted cinematography a kind of HD aesthetic, even though the resolution she used was no higher than in her other videos.

The more sophisticated visual tone that Steyerl references here was prevalent in the moving image installations typical of contemporary art in the 2010s but mostly shunned by the artist. This may be why some of the responses to *Drill* turned out to be surprisingly querulous and ungracious, as if they sprang from a sense of disenchanting love.¹⁸ The criticism took aim at a perceived emotionalism in Steyerl's presentation of the results of her artistic research; at what looked like the smug exposure of a squalid secret lurking in the place and its history; and at a supposed aestheticization of violence—accusations that all measure Steyerl by her own yardstick.

The fact that the choice of aesthetic and narrative registers can also be viewed as a formal strategy employed by the artist in response to a spatial environment that is so assertively overpowering is generally discounted in these objections. There can be no denying that *Drill* responds to the pomp and historical and contemporary inconsistencies of the Park Avenue Armory with considerable visual and auditory weight. The images, which are for the most part shot in the rooms of the Armory, seem to have absorbed in some strange way the aesthetics of the sumptuous interior. Steyerl's witnesses and experts, whom the camera follows through the building's different floors and ambient settings are listed in the credits as Anna Duensing, public historian, Nurah Abdulhaqq, one of the organizers of the National Die-In, Abbey Clements, activist and survivor of the Sandy Hook School shooting, and Kareem Nelson, founder of the organization Wheelchairs Against Guns, as well as a "sportswoman and retired K-12 principal": in turn, they unpack the architecture, revealing its history and idiosyncrasies.

Park Avenue Armory has been the scene of festivities hosted by New York's upper echelons, military exercises, and exchanges of fire in the basement, as well as a place where members of the National Rifle Association (NRA) would meet. Founded in 1871, initially as a rifle



Installation view, *Drill*, Park Avenue Armory, New York, 2019

19
See Sarah Lucie, "Haunting Entanglements of Art and Violence," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 42 (January 2020): 53–58.

20
Fawz Kabra, "This Is America: A Drill at the Park Avenue Armory," *Art Papers* (Fall 2019), accessed August 28, 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/07/61390/is-a-museum-a-factory/>.

21
Hito Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory?" (see n. 4), 74.

22
Hito Steyerl, "The (W)hole of Babel: Magische Geografien des Globalen," in *Jenseits der Repräsentation / Beyond Representation: Essays 1999–2009*, ed. Marius Babias (Cologne: Walther König, 2016), 73.

club, the NRA is now the world's largest gun lobby, whose interpretation of the Second Amendment is responsible for thousands of civilian deaths, the victims of ordinary murders and mass shootings in the USA.

As is so often the case in Steyerl's works, music takes on a key role, mediating between the images and the spoken statements. Here—in the case of the three pieces "AR-15: 2016–2018" (Thomas C. Duffy), "Mass Shootings: 1999–2018" (Antonio Medina), and "Firearms Manufactured: 1986–2016" (James Brandfonbrener)—the score, which was directed by Duffy, was composed for wind and percussion instruments on the basis of statistical data on gun violence and the weapons industry. In the dark room, where it was difficult to get one's bearings, the audience experienced the full weight of detail in *Drill*'s complex weave of sound and images, such as the "snare drum's capacity to mimic gunshots."¹⁹

The music was recorded in part by the Yale Precision Marching Band: for the film, members of the band, all dressed in uniform, performed an elaborately choreographed parade in the Drill Hall. The geometric forms described by the band have their equivalent in an outline made up of electroluminescent strips, of the kind used to mark out escape routes in airplanes. These shapes spread across the floor of the darkened Drill Hall in front of and below the three projection screens hung from the ceiling. However, what could initially be taken for the floor plan of the building obviously denoted and demarcated something else too, such as the sequences of movements performed by marching bands, dancers, or crowds of demonstrators. The music helps to connect the different levels, causing the military, hedonistic, and political dimensions to reverberate and collide as they traverse the—inevitably nonlinear—reconstruction of history. As Fawz Kabra puts it, the luminous markings become a "portal,"²⁰ a conceptual diagram of perception, a "spatial image" in Kracauer's terms, through which the various scenarios unfolding on the three projection screens can be viewed.

If Adorno trusts the essay to create a "configuration" in which "the elements crystallise [...] through their motion," then the luminescent outline on the floor of the Drill Hall can be read as the image of just such a configuration. But perhaps it is actually more like an escape plan, the map of a path to a place outside of the confinements of financialization and marketization.

At the end of her essay "Is a Museum a Factory?," Steyerl asks about a way out from the purgatory of ceaseless productivity. It is a rhetorical question. In June 2009, when the essay was first published, the screen running the very "political film" that would open the way to such an exit was evidently not there for Steyerl.²¹ In the first half of June 2020, when the text you are reading was written, lockdowns and distancing rules, images of racist police violence, scenarios of counter-insurgency, anti-racist mass protests, and statues of slaveholders being toppled have fundamentally changed the politics and aesthetics of space. A luminescent floor diagram might really be more than an instrument of control after the experience of these months. It could point the way to a configuration of motion, consideration, benevolence, and public good. It might be a start. More than two decades ago, Hito Steyerl quoted a note written by Franz Kafka. It is headed "I ran away from her" and includes the question "What are you building?," followed by the answer "I want to dig a subterranean passage. Some progress must be made."²²