



This page: Hito Steyerl, *November, 2004*, still from a color video, 25 minutes. Opposite page: Hito Steyerl, *November, 2004*, color video. Installation view, Signal Gallery, Malmö, Sweden, 2006. Photo: Terje Östing/Signal.

IT IS THE SHEER VERSATILITY and multiplicity of global media—the circulatory flux of images, their supple and instantaneous distribution networks—that render the task of documentary filmmaking today more fraught than ever. Or so argues the Berlin-based Hito Steyerl in her 2007 essay “Documentary Uncertainty,” where the artist discusses how contemporary works in the genre bespeak a kind of paradox: Some rely “on authoritative truth procedures [that intensify] the aura of the court room, the penitentiary or the laboratory,” while others end in a postmodern relativism unable “to distinguish the difference between facts and blatant misinformation.”<sup>1</sup>

When so much of contemporary politics runs on precisely this kind of misinformation, the need to reinvent documentary practice—in a way that retains its social engagement and historical integrity despite its internal contradictions—would seem only more urgent and more difficult. Steyerl appears uniquely prepared for the endeavor. On the heels of her inclusion in last summer’s Documenta 12, she is recognized as much for her adroit writings on postcolonialism, globalization, and feminism as for her inspired work in film and video. She began the latter by making amateur films in her teens in Germany in the aftermath of New German Cinema during the 1970s and ’80s—the work of Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Volker Schlöndorff was then at its height—and soon went to film school in Japan, at Kawasaki’s Academy of the Visual Arts (now the Japan Academy of Moving Images), before returning to Munich in the early ’90s to study at the Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film with Helmut Färber. (There Steyerl also worked with former Hochschule student Wim Wenders on two films, including *Until the End of the World* [1991], and she credits the director’s exploration of cosmopolitan subjectivity as highly influential.) Today, the fact that she counts as crucial to her development individuals ranging from Harun Farocki to Marguerite Duras, from Hara Kazuo to the British group Black Audio Film Collective, also allies her to Jacques Rancière’s argument that “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>2</sup> In Steyerl’s artistic practice, in other words, the documentary genre is still rich in historical reference, but is characterized as well by a heightened consideration of video’s formal organization, built on a keen awareness of the uncertain status of truth and meaning.

TO GRASP THIS APPROACH, one may look at Steyerl’s video *November, 2004*, which tells of the assorted lives of the embattled German/Kurdish figure Andrea Wolf—or, rather, the errant lives of her image. Toward the work’s end, a short but poignant passage demonstrates the unnerving fluidity between fact and fiction regarding both Wolf’s actual fate and *November’s* constructed form. A clip from a feminist martial arts movie that Steyerl made in the early ’80s features Wolf—the artist’s best friend at the time—as she plays the part of a tough, biker-jacketed heroine. But this image slowly morphs into one of Wolf in an astonishingly different guise—as Şehîr Ronahî, the identity she later assumed as a Kurdish revolutionary fighter. Wolf/Ronahî, we learn, was reportedly killed in 1998 during armed conflict with the Turkish army, and her image—an iconic portrait shown by Steyerl as it appeared on placards carried by Kurdish protesters in Germany—became a symbol of martyrdom for the Kurdish resistance. Finally, Steyerl dissolves this visage back into Wolf’s rebellious celluloid character, but this time with added valences: The parodically butch fighter (who rides into the sunset on her motorbike) curiously comes to reflect the “truth” of Ronahî’s real-life heroism; the film’s resurrection of her image also alludes to the Turkish government’s (disputed) contention that Ronahî is still alive, operating underground as a guerrilla. As Steyerl’s voice-over narration observes, “Andrea became herself a traveling image, wandering over the globe, an image passed on from hand to hand, copied and reproduced by printing presses, video recorders, and the Internet.”

# Traveling Images

T. J. DEMOS ON THE ART OF HITO STEYERL







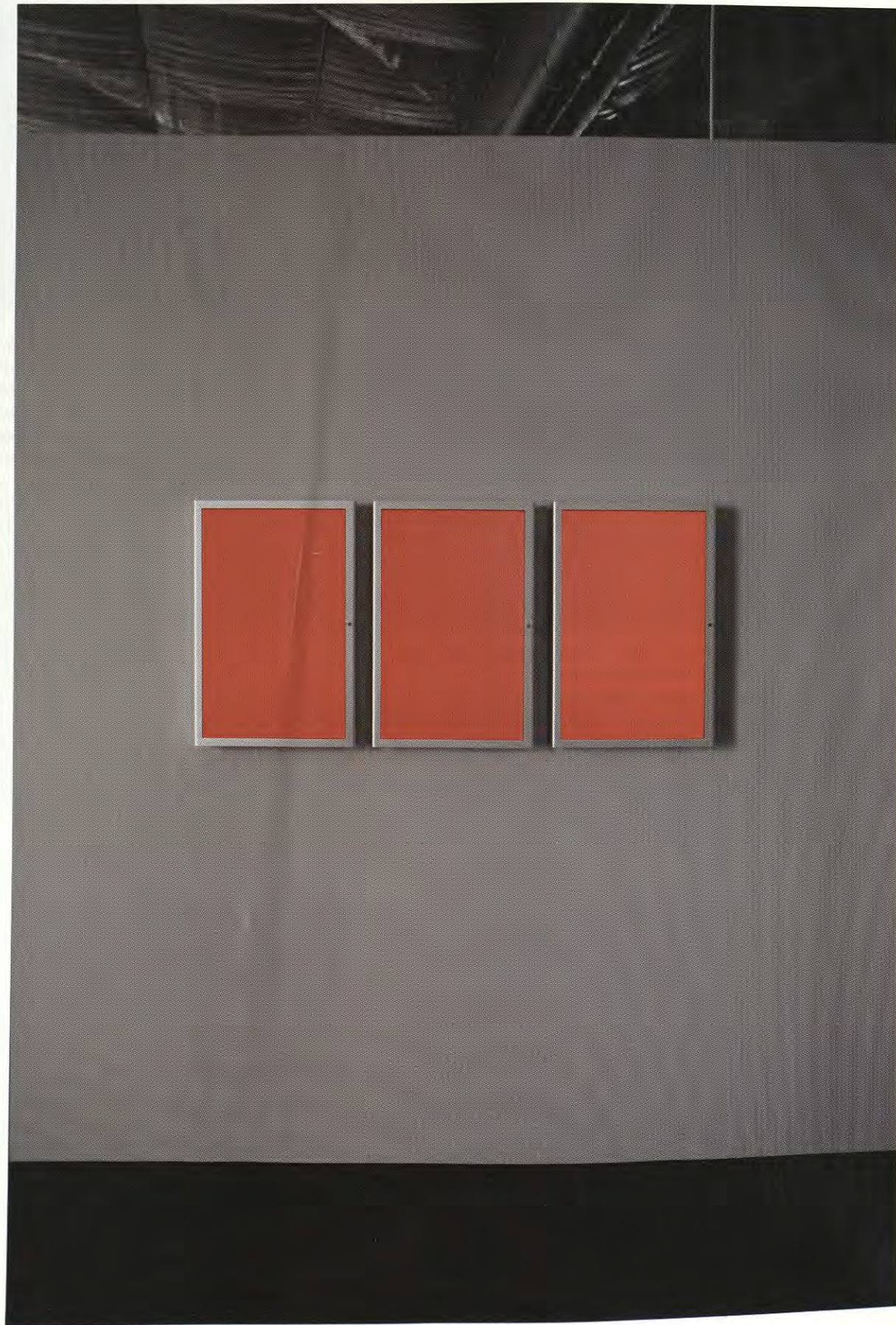
Wolf thus slid into the unpredictable flow of “traveling images” that defines the historical context for *November*—a broader social landscape of unaccountable government power (the kind that allegedly killed Ronahî), fragmented oppositional struggles (in which Ronahî willingly participated), and representational instability (signaled by Wolf’s proliferating identities). To drive home the political implications, Steyerl’s video fittingly includes a short passage from Sergei Eisenstein’s *October* (1927)—to which *November*’s title clearly refers—that focuses in part on the Kazakhs’ alliance with Russian proletarians during the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917: At the time of *October*, it seems, revolution could be universalized, a collective movement transcending boundaries of ethnicity and nationality. These visions of solidarity stand in marked contrast to *November*’s flux of signs, characterized by virtual drift and endless exchange—structurally matching the spread of interconnected markets, but leaving political struggles disjointed and disempowered. (Debordian spectacle and Deleuzian dispersal are far more pertinent than yesterday’s conventional warfare.) And if “in November, the former heroes become madmen,” as Steyerl says in her narration, it is because now no truth is safe, no identity secure, and no protest incorruptible.

Yet *November* also discovers room for maneuvering within this state of uncertainty and its seemingly debilitating terms. Lamenting the passing of *October*’s air of possibility, the video makes the most of the cinematic tools that remain, deploying twenty-five minutes of narration alongside a highly entertaining montage of imagery borrowed from popular culture—looking to media as a kind of humorous rallying cry for real life. These include shots from Russ Meyer’s *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965), depicting an aggressive gang of buxom girls (one of the only models, however campy, of powerful women fighters that Steyerl and Wolf found for their early effort), and scenes from Bruce Lee’s last and unfinished film, in which the main character stages his own death in order to regroup secretly—a fictive plot that unexpectedly echoed the actor’s real death, an intermingling of real and fake (the film even used footage from Lee’s actual funeral)

that relentlessly continues in the migrations and mutations of Ronahî’s image. *November* also proffers a mournful reflection on the co-optation of Steyerl’s own image. While documenting a Berlin demonstration against the Iraq war, Steyerl was spotted by a television director who knew of the artist’s film project. He quickly placed a Kurdish flag around her neck and a torch in her hands, told her to “look sad and meditative . . . as if you were thinking about Andrea,” and filmed the results. Steyerl soon found herself featured in a television documentary as “the Kurdish protester,” the very image of a “sensitive . . . and understanding filmmaker, who tells a personal story.” As she confesses in *November*’s voice-over, such posturing is “more hypocritical than even the crudest propaganda.” Like that of Wolf, Steyerl’s image entered *November*’s infinite regress, wherein “we are all part of the story, and not I am telling the story, but the story tells me.”<sup>3</sup>

As if to gain traction against such slipperiness, *November* frequently interrupts its quick-paced cutting and diegetic trajectory with self-reflexive tactics. For example, a series of shots in the video focuses on the blinding light of a film projector (shown precisely when a visually undocumented story—that of a reconstructed witness account of Ronahî’s death—is being told); or we see close-ups of a grainy TV screen replaying footage from videotapes (as when Ronahî is interviewed in Kurdistan). One might view these moments in the video as yet another return to critical strategies of appropriation or even to a modernist “laying bare of the device”; *November*’s montage also recalls precedents such as Kluge’s benchmark *Deutschland im Herbst* (Germany in Autumn, 1978), which mixed documentary footage and fictional dramatization within a jigsaw-puzzle narrative. But while Steyerl’s own elegiac work may share much with these previous efforts to come to terms with revolution’s seeming impossibility, *November* does not deploy quotation against a regime of “truth” in order to reveal the constructedness of representation. And whereas Eisenstein’s dialectical montage offered a generative combination of shots that would spark the spectator’s insight and action, or Kluge activated the intervals and dark gaps between frames as a liberatory space for the viewer’s creative imagination, in Steyerl’s video we now confront the dissolution of such distinct filmic elements, as they succumb to the endlessly fluctuating economy of images and flexible networks of power that constitute our new digital milieu.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, *November* makes clear that any attempted return to the revolutionary project of *October* would be an absurd proposition. When the film describes Ronahî’s use of martial arts in Kurdistan, for instance, Steyerl introduces shots from René Viénet’s hilarious *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (1973), which famously recast a B-grade Hong Kong martial arts flick as Situationist critique. In Viénet’s account, a group of samurai-bureaucrats terrorizes a local village, the inhabitants of which are training to fight for freedom with the aid of stultified Marxist rhetoric. *November* includes the point at which the lead antagonist loses his temper with the proletarians’ endless talk of class struggle, warning them in totally implausible fashion to stop: “If not I’ll send in my sociologists! And if necessary my psychiatrists! My urban planners! My architects! My Foucaults! My Lacans! And if that’s not enough, I’ll even send my structuralists.” As critical theory becomes mere farce, the broader implication is that avant-garde methods of subversion—from Eisenstein’s dialectical montage to Situationist *détournement*—are now exhausted. Under these conditions, documentary strategies might seem futile or obsolete. For what avenues remain if there is no recourse to preexisting “truth,” no fact that can’t be revealed as subjective viewpoint? Here, Steyerl’s conclusion is innovative: If the one certainty about documentary film is the very uncertainty of its claim to truth, she suggests, then “this uncertainty is not some shameful lack, which has to be hidden, but instead constitutes the core quality of contemporary documentary modes as such.”<sup>5</sup> The refashioning of the video essay today—including its renewed commitment to historical and political consciousness—can only begin with uncertainty as its very basis.



Opposite page: Hito Steyerl, *Die leere Mitte* (The Empty Center), 1998, still from a color film in 16 mm, 62 minutes. This page: Hito Steyerl, *Red Alert*, 2007, video. Installation view, Aue Pavillon, Kassel. From Documenta 12.



**For Steyerl, the refashioning of the video essay today—its renewed commitment to historical and political consciousness—can only begin with uncertainty as its very basis.**

ONE OF STEYERL'S EARLIEST FORAYS into "documentary uncertainty," *Die leere Mitte* (The Empty Center, 1998), appropriately focuses on unstable space—geographic and cinematic, mythic and mnemonic. The 16 mm film presents Berlin's metropolitan center, the area between Potsdamer Platz and the Reichstag, as a zone of shifting cultural politics. Steyerl skillfully weaves together historical accounts of the xenophobia suffered by composer Felix Mendelssohn and his grandfather, the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn; the tragic fate of one Mohammed Hussein, a German World War I veteran living and dying amid National Socialist racism; and the current amnesia of reunified Germany, which elides these precedents even, she suggests, as it perilously replays them. The film—Steyerl's last before turning to video—connects these episodes by capitalizing on the medium's capacity for slow dissolves and visual palimpsests, formally underscoring the porosity of borders. For example, Steyerl superimposes footage of the location of a former customs gateway over one of Felix Mendelssohn's drawings of his house at nearby Leipzigerstrasse 3, rendering a web of correlations between foreigners' experiences of Berlin over the centuries. The film thereby exposes disturbing patterns of community formation based on jealously guarded rules of belonging and racist exclusion, both of which are shown to persist in the present. When some (Berlin) walls triumphantly come down, other less visible ones—social, racial, sexual—arise in their place. Testifying to these continuously renewed boundaries, *The Empty Center* includes an interview with a young Asian man who describes the unnerving experience of appearing publicly as a "non-German." He concludes that the country's unification has been far from propitious for "outsiders": German economic insecurity, resulting from the integration of the former GDR, has invited the scapegoating of foreigners for "stealing" jobs at a time of growing unemployment. Indeed, Steyerl's coverage soon cuts to the alarmingly racist violence of union workers protesting against the hiring of nonunion, foreign laborers, a demonstration that takes on ominous echoes of Germany's Nazi past—even as World War II sites are redeveloped and erased from public memory, rendering Berlin an empty center of historical evacuation. Yet the repercussion of burying history, of course, is history's irrepressible reemergence.

What does it mean to give such a project over to uncertainty? If *The Empty Center* disavows its own historical tales as absolute truth, Steyerl does not exactly call for the dismissal of her own research. Rather, *The Empty Center* presents a historical archive that acknowledges its subjective construction, most clearly in Steyerl's personal, idiosyncratic voice-over, delivered without sourced authorities or other trappings of indubitable evidence. The very nature and

function of "truth" are consequently transformed. In this regard, Rancière's reading of Chris Marker's "essay films" in his 2001 book *Film Fables* appears valid for Steyerl's work as well: Whereas conventional documentary practice, "instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood," for both Marker and Steyerl these understandings are critically reversed.<sup>6</sup> Far from being opposed to fiction, documentary is actually one mode of it, joining—both in continuity and conflict—the "real" (the indexical, contingent elements of recorded footage) and the "fabulated" (the constructed, the edited, the narrative) in cinema. This amalgam is what Rancière terms "documentary fiction." The imagery that results—heterogeneous combinations of archival documents, illustrations, cartoons, live-action footage, fictional dramatizations, voice-over narration, and diverse sound tracks—represents a radical transformation of the old Platonic opposition between real and representation, between original model and second-order copy. In this way, Rancière argues, "thoughts and things, exterior and interior, are captured in the same texture, in which the sensible and the intelligible remain undistinguished": a precise characterization of Steyerl's documentaries.<sup>7</sup>

This type of "documentary fiction" is one in which fiction, as Rancière observes, rediscovers its Latin roots, meaning "to forge" rather than "to feign," and the documentary loses its basis in factual evidence. What is more, the effects of this hybrid genre also give rise to a new mode of reception. Steyerl's essayistic documentaries do not position their audience as passive recipients of unquestionable information. Instead, they offer us a complex address: We become both engrossed in the storytelling and continually implicated in the multiplicity of representations. In *The Empty Center*, this active mode of spectatorship pries Berlin open as a site of unfinished struggles. The film urgently calls for a heightened historical consciousness, for viewers to position themselves amid the profound contradictions of Berlin's current unfolding. The words of Siegfried Kracauer in the film's closing lines offer encouragement: "There are always holes in the wall we can slip through and the unexpected can sneak in." Near the film's end, we are introduced to a group of squatters camped out in the no-man's-land between East and West Berlin, where they are attempting to found an unlikely free republic in the former "death strip." These figures become an allegorical projection of the film's ideal viewers, those who would insist on participating in the determination of Berlin's future.

ALL IS NOT LOST, then, in the period of November. The resilience of the video-essay format is once again demonstrated in Steyerl's *Lovely Andrea*, 2007. Here, the quest to bring home a "traveling image" from the artist's past becomes the basis for Steyerl's attempt to reclaim history from desolation. The video relays the artist's hunt for a lost photograph, a sadomasochistic image of Steyerl herself posed in the style of *nawa shibari*, or Japanese rope bondage. Steyerl had once modeled for extra cash when in film school in Japan in 1987, but twenty years later, without memory of her photographer, agent, or studio, she takes on the formidable task of relocating a single image from the tens of thousands made that year and disseminated in hundreds of publications each month (the enormity of this image pool, in print as well as online, is repeatedly stressed). Steyerl's quest takes her to various locations in Tokyo with her translator and cameraman in tow; documentary passages and interviews with participants from the expedition are interspersed with appropriations from old cartoons and pop music videos, giving us glimpses of scantily clad women tied in a variety of elegant and vulnerable poses. As the sound track intones, "She works hard for the money," indeed.

Throughout *Lovely Andrea*, clips from the TV cartoon *Spider-Man* magnify narrative strands—spinning themes of networks and suspension that connect quick-paced transitions, energized further by the

*continued on page 473*



Hito Steyerl, *Lovely Andrea*, 2007, stills from a color video, 30 minutes.



frenzied use of a handheld camera. This rapid-fire delivery evokes the culture industry's increasingly agitated pace (and MTV's libidinal pulse). It also reveals Steyerl's interest in Japanese avant-garde cinema and the documentary approaches of figures such as Hara, whose films of the '70s brazenly mixed sexuality and violence, fact and fiction. Steyerl's search in *Lovely Andrea* likewise becomes a sociological investigation into the meanings of sexual domination, the libidinal attraction of shame, and the relationship between pain and visual pleasure. (In the video, one magazine editor offers his unique insight that "genitals are not between the legs, but between the ears"; Steyerl takes him at his word and censors his face with a pixelated blur.) Cycling through disparate references—including shots of bondage used in samurai arts, in the Japanese military torture of POWs in World War II, and in contemporary US military and Chinese police practices—the video posits bondage's ubiquity, confirming the otherwise banal pop psychology of one *shibari* practitioner in the video, who avers that everyone today is captive in one way or another. But as Steyerl's odyssey is threaded through with persistent references—from the artist's Ramones T-shirt to the sound track's use of the X-Ray Spex punk anthem "Oh Bondage, Up Yours!"—to other subcultures, the meanings of sexual practice are diversified and stereotypes unmoored.

Steyerl ultimately locates her lost image while riffling through a library of pornographic magazines. There, her portrait is titled "Lovely Andrea," a pseudonym the artist borrowed from her friend Wolf. By the video's end, yet another series of revelations emerges: It becomes apparent that Asagi Ageha, Steyerl's translator, is herself a bondage model. In the last scenes of the video, she practices an agile act of self-suspension in which she hovers with erotic charge and (self-professed) agency. As her physical prowess unfolds further, visually amplified by intercut animated sequences of Spider-Woman, Ageha divulges that she also studies Web design and has her own website: All loose ends of the image network finally connect. Although Ageha seems aware of her bondage work as both a form of degradation and a source of personal pleasure (as the video's acid intertitles oscillate between the words *dependence* and *independence*), her desire to control her own image in a system of domination makes her an unexpected heroine in *Lovely Andrea*. Ageha parallels Steyerl's own attempt to repossess her lost *shibari* picture, reframed within the searching narrative of the video essay. Indeed, Steyerl's willful reappropriation of her own imagery suggests another level of transgression, a defiance of copyright law as a form of control within a culture of easy reproducibility. Steyerl appears politically committed to her images' low resolution, the intended consequence of multiple generations of copying. This formal gambit also reinforces the degraded connection between sign and referent: Historical retrieval becomes an act of decontextualization and decay—throwing documentary representation once again into uncertainty. But here uncertainty appears less paralyzing than productive, revealing a space of political mobility, even subjective liberation.

STEYERL'S *RED ALERT*, 2007, would seem to bring representation's demise to its logical conclusion. Shown recently at

Documenta 12 along with *Lovely Andrea*, the work is composed of three computer screens, each displaying the same red monochrome image. According to the artist, the piece defines the "outer limit" of documentary video, where representation meets abstraction, the image reduced to an elementary and static color. The red images mimic the color used by the US Department of Homeland Security to warn that a terrorist attack is imminent. Multiplied to three, the screens indicate both the global proliferation of this warning system and its approach toward being the norm rather than the exception in everyday life. Yet the piece's format and scale also restage Aleksandr Rodchenko's 1921 triptych of primary colors, with which he famously declared the end of easel painting. By evoking both sources, *Red Alert* expands on the lament of *November*: If red was once the sign of the October revolution and the death of bourgeois art production, it is now a Pavlovian trigger of mediated fear, one where the affective image overtakes representational significance.

*Red Alert* also takes its revenge on the system, showing that when representation becomes a matter of "this equals that," where a flash of color is meant to induce powerful emotional reactions, we're not far from pornography—a kind of red-light district where signs are stripped of representational complexity. The prevalence of this system appears connected, moreover, to the evisceration of political representation today. It's no coincidence, as Steyerl has written, that the ascendancy of Homeland Security's reductive color charts coincided with the burgeoning of executive power and the deregulation of multinational corporations that are, for her, devoid of democratic accountability, formations that have paralleled the growth of migratory populations and stateless persons. Brilliantly connecting the subject stripped of political agency to signs denuded of representation, *Red Alert* condemns the grotesque abstraction of language by the state and mass media alike. And by revealing abstraction's multivalence—infusing it with political and art-historical import—*Red Alert* contests documentary's supposed transparency and lays bare the political stakes of this challenge in turn.

Yet, as Steyerl observes, "documentary uncertainty" may ultimately be inadequate for the political project required today. What we need to do, according to her analysis, is replace the current economy of affect—one based on fear and anxiety—with another one; but the problem is that, as Steyerl confesses, such a new "affective and political constellation" does not yet exist.<sup>8</sup> Or at least, let us add, not in the way it should. Yet I would argue that Steyerl has already pointed the way forward in her own practice. If in the age of *November* all imagery is adrift, then only when such uncertainty is fully acknowledged might we revivify our engagement with a politicized conception of history and language, develop creative relations to the body and sexuality, form experimental social communities, and reinvent urban space. Steyerl's documentaries not only inject urgency into these goals; they also begin to generate the "affective and political constellation" that may yet bring them about. Images today are bound to travel, and we can only make of them what we will—which, for Steyerl, is everything. □

T. J. DEMOS IS A LECTURER IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON.

## NOTES

1. Hito Steyerl, "Documentary Uncertainty," *A Prior* 15 (2007), 306 and 304.
2. *Ibid.*, 306.
3. In *November*, Steyerl also points out the way in which fictional film has determined real-life actions, including the testimony of German radicals who actually employed methods of kidnapping they learned from films such as Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1966) and Costa-Gavras's *State of Siege* (1972).
4. Not surprisingly, Steyerl's discussion of documentary "uncertainty" also bears similarity to Gilles Deleuze's notion of the cinematic image, which dissolves the distinction between the real and the imaginary. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). This text also informs Jacques Rancière's discussion in *Film Fables* (see below).
5. Steyerl, "Documentary Uncertainty," 304. Steyerl's new book, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* (The Color of Truth) (Vienna: Turia & Kant, 2008), promises to expand this analysis.
6. Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables* (2001), trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2006), 158–159.
7. Rancière, *Film Fables*, 2–3.
8. Steyerl, "Documentary Uncertainty," 308.

ROTTMANN/BERLIN *continued from page 431*

into right angles, face each other on either side of the museum's glass wall, creating at first sight the illusion of a spectral mirror image. The two parts of this arrangement are seemingly held upright only by white steel blocks, without which they would inevitably crash through the glass. Not only does the work's dynamic yet static construction allude to post-Minimalist sculpture while emphasizing the fragility of the materials used by Mies van der Rohe, but the cutouts are carefully arranged so that the viewer's gaze, when looking through them, is reflected rather than passing through the glass wall as the architect desired. Additionally, the piece refers to Laverrière's mirror object *La Commune, hommage à Louise Michel*, (The Commune, Homage to Louise Michel), 2001, featured in "*La Lampe dans l'horloge*," which has similar cutouts reminiscent of bullet holes and is a tribute to a little-known female activist who participated in the uprisings that led to the Paris Commune in 1871, during which the column of Baghrarian's title was toppled in the Place Vendôme. Crucially, this two-fold reference to Laverrière and Michel is not merely an idiosyncratic point of interest but is physically mirrored in the exhibition situation both addressed and produced by Baghrarian's work, which makes undoubtedly clear that the literally exclusive context of institutionalized contemporary art cannot be easily transcended by means of referential formalism alone, and instead makes palpable, in the phenomenological experience of an abstract sculpture, how the Neue Nationalgalerie and the architectural ideals it embodies function as part of an aesthetic ideology—that of modernism—whose progressive logic of expansion always presupposes techniques of exclusion. It is such forms of critically reflexive referential density that bring about the several truly productive moments in this year's Berlin Biennial. □

ANDRÉ ROTTMANN IS A BERLIN-BASED ART HISTORIAN AND CRITIC, AND AN EDITOR OF *TEXTE ZUR KUNST*.

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.