

Narratives in Fugue V. Hito Steyerl / Rabih Mroué

FOR DIFFERENT REASONS, THIS SEMINAR HAS BEEN POSTPONED UNTIL 2012. WE WILL REPORT NEW DATES SOON. THANKS.

Workshop (Pre-booking required)

Venue: Sede de Sta. María de La Rábida, Palos de la Frontera, Huelva

Coordination: Nuria Enguita Mayo

PRESENTATION

Travelling images

Images, like other objects and/or artefacts, are historical agents that do not only inform us of past events but also, and above all, of the way or ways in which these events were codified. Like languages and cities, they are privileged inscription surfaces for historical studies or for exploring memory. As Didi-Huberman tells us, the recovery, reorganisation and circulation of images from the past entail attempts to conjure up a critical time, conducive not to identification but to political reflection.

The possibility of a critical time that allows us to reflect politically is, in turn, the possibility of obtaining extensive forms of temporality in which the past isn't brought to a close, finished or defined. To take a second look at certain images of the present, or from the present, to pick up the remnants, what has been left out of the archive, what remains in profane space, and place them in a new configuration, opposed to the values established by tradition in the archives of culture, unleashes new meanings and new potential that, in turn, come to be considered exemplary in the archives of cultural memory.

However, what allows for political reflection on time is the consideration that the account of the past is also a construction, an interpretation, a form of narrative: the archive is not a reflection of the real either, but a structure with its own syntax and ideology, and sources are not 'pure' but respond to a complex, stratified time that involves its own politics of truth in the Foucauldian sense. So, how can we reveal this construction, which is an ideological construction of time implicit in an image and thereby reintegrate it in another narrative and release new tension? How can we crack these policies of truth? How can we use contemporary images (images that are virtual, blurry, about to fade away) to propose other narratives? And above all, as Hito Steyerl and Rabih Mroué explore in their documentary and performance works, how can we overcome the transnational documentary jargon that connects people within global media systems? How can we suggest other regimes of identification and, especially, of recovery and omission of the past?

The critical reflection made by Hito Steyerl in her texts and documentaries, and the writing and conduct of the text in the performances by Rabih Mroué propose a change of paradigm in the political reflection from the sphere of the arts, starting from other uses and ways of treating images, overcoming their status as representations and examining them from their own facticity and materiality.

Precarious images taken from the World Wide Web, diffuse and poor, and street posters, photographs and newspaper cut-outs in constant movement are the source material. Images are no longer suggested in terms of reality or fiction, but are rather a pretext for a transformation in which their meaning becomes inseparable from their spatial, but also their emotional, sensual and empathetic dimensions. To point out the inconsistencies and disparities of images, to articulate other narratives in an ironic and distanced way are some of the procedures employed by both artists in practices that expand the possibilities of the documentary, drama and performance, while they reconsider the traditional differences and explore new relationships with audiences.

In the work of both Rabih Mroué and Hito Steyerl, travelling images play an important role: images crowding the suburban realms and lowlands of the web; images that change their meaning, outlook, framing, caption and often also their protagonists as they travel through time and space.

In this fifth edition of Narratives in fugue, Mroué and Steyerl will hold a joint workshop that will address questions that run through their work and connect it to them individually. We shall also count on Pablo Lafuente, who will create links between the works, strategies and discourses of both artists.

What role do digital media play in creating new political and aesthetical means of expression? How do they speed up, slow down or modify conflict, civil war and the writing of history? How are media—video or audio tapes, JPEGs or posters—implicated in violence? How does the struggle over copyright and reproduction, over making things seen and heard, factor in these considerations? And is a withdrawal from representation perhaps a new form of strike or refusal?

Mroué and Steyerl will discuss their visual and written essays and performances in the light of these questions, as well as including film work that served to inspire and motivate their ongoing inquiries into the political dimension of digital (and analogue) methods of reproduction.

PROGRAMME

FIRST DAY

5:00 p.m.

Presentation of the workshop by Nuria Enguita Mayo

5:30 - 8:30 p.m.

Session conducted by Hito Steyerl

In Free Fall

A talk about vertical perspective and the military-entertainment complex. Why are we suddenly seeing the world from above? What do all these Google map overviews and aerial surveillance images mean? And how do they connect to a world in which common grounds are rapidly falling apart? Many contemporary philosophers have pointed out that the present moment is distinguished by a prevailing condition of groundlessness. We cannot assume any stable ground on

which to base metaphysical claims or foundational political myths. At base, we are faced with temporary, contingent and partial attempts at grounding. But if there is no stable ground available for our social lives and philosophical aspirations, the consequence must be a permanent, or at least intermittent state of free fall for subjects and objects alike. But why do we fail to notice?

> Projection:

- In Free Fall, Hito Steyerl, 2010, 32 min

SECOND DAY

10:00 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

Session conducted by Hito Steyerl

Politics of the Archive

What is an archive? What is an original version of a film? What is the impact of digital technologies on translation? And what constituencies are created within the digital limbo of globalised media networks? These questions will be discussed using the example of a Yugoslav partisan blockbuster and its different afterlives on digital media. The archive more often than not preserves the history of the victors, while presenting it as historical reality or scientific truth. The archive is a realist machine, a body of power and knowledge, and it sustains itself by repetition. More precisely, the authority of traditional archives controls and regulates the reproduction of their items. Of course, this means that there are criteria of how to reproduce those objects 'faithfully', according to specific rules. In the audiovisual area especially, property rights are supposed to be reproduced as well. Repetition within the archive is controlled by different logics of power and of knowledge, most often enforced both by the nation-state and capital interests. But nowadays, the function of the archive has become more complicated, for the most diverse reasons, ranging from digital reproduction technologies to the mere fact that some nations simply cease to exist and their archives are destroyed and collapse. Temporarily, this was the case with the Sarajevo film museum, which was heavily damaged during the war of the nineties.

> Projections:

- In Journal no. 1- An Artist's Impression, Hito Steyerl, 2007, 21 min

- November, Hito Steyerl, 2004, 25 min

- Lovely Andrea, Hito Steyerl, 2007, 30 min

5:00 - 8:30 p.m.

Session conducted by Hito Steyerl

In Defence of the Poor Image

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution. The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction. The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance. The poor image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming.

Withdrawal from Representation. Image Spam and the People

Who are the people nowadays? What do they look like? For an answer look no further than image spam. Image spam features mostly naked, attractive people advertising penny stock, fake Viagra pills or orthodontic braces. The population of image spam by far exceeds the human population. They may not be the people but the contemporary stand-ins of the people; their negative image. The people meanwhile have gone on strike: a refusal to be represented.

THIRD DAY

10:00 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

Session conducted by Rabih Mroué and Hito Steyerl

Look out, it's real?

Mroué and Steyerl will converse on the connections between their works and will present the film *Medium Cool*.

> Projection:

- Medium Cool, Haskell Wexler, 1969, 110 min

5:00 p.m.

Lecture by Pablo Lafuente

Pablo Lafuente will relate the modes of reporting, presence and intervention shown in *Medium Cool* to both Steyerl and Mroué's works, especially with respect to the ways in which both appear in their own works, as protagonists, tour guides, militants and flight attendants. The goal of the lecture will be to examine how different strategies of self-subjection, of positing themselves in relation to their work, result in different notions of truth and different politics (within the field of visual arts and outside of it).

7:00 - 8.30 p.m.

Lecture / performance by Rabih Mroué

The Inhabitants of Images

This performance offers an evocative meditation on the paradoxical feelings aroused by photographs of subjects long after they are dead. In this performance, Mroué strives to analyse, from different perspectives, a selection of photographic images, including a poster of deceased Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and deceased Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, who are shown standing together in a garden although, in actuality, they never met. In the text Mroué playfully and with not inconsiderable wit discreetly puts forward instruments of critique for engaging with this image, and sketches fragments of counter-narratives, bits and pieces that remain to be assembled in an uncertain future - an approach true to his belief that what art needs to do most is to prompt people to think things otherwise. This example conveys the distinct character of Mroué's work as a whole, at once grounded in lived experience and historical fact, yet inexplicable, profound, absurd.

FOURTH DAY

10:00 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

Lecture / performance by Rabih Mroué

The Pixellated Revolution: A Lecture about the Use of Mobile Phones During the Syrian Revolution

This talk aims to study the advice and instructions for taking photographs during the events of the Syrian revolution, as shared via the medium of Facebook and other virtual communication tools. How does this act of photographic documentation relate, seen through the prism of Dogma 95, the cinematographic manifesto of Danish filmmakers Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg? How can we envisage the photographic traces broadcast by the Syrians in the vast universe of the Internet? A universe that is loose and ever-changing, that regenerates itself constantly, that is subject to viruses and other phenomena of deterioration, a universe that is framed by incomplete downloads, pixellated images and ruptured modes of communication. Are the broken-up and incomplete images sent by the Syrians an extension of their physical experience? Is the mobile phone an extension of their brains, their bodies, their being?

PROJECTIONS

In Free Fall

Hito Steyerl, 2010, 32 min

The airplane crash. A great readymade game for long flights between workshops and biennials. Something sudden to interrupt the endless Easyjet. Forget all those meditations on motionless speed. Forget futurism. Life is more mundane. Really, nothing happens, until something finally does. The stewardess comes with a hot towel that's meant for someone else. Another hour passes. At some point the MacBook Pro battery runs out. Then suddenly there's a lurch and a teeter on the brink. That sinking moment when it becomes clear that everything is lost, a point of no return, in which potential reaches its maximum point and tips into actuality. What comes after that is less important, you don't actually need to see it, though a certain Schadenfreude can't prevent you from registering what you already know: an eerie silence of white light from the window burns your retina and that's it, the aircraft goes off the radar, reels out of control, breaks up, and careens to the ground. The smell of kerosene like napalm in the morning, the lurching break-up with flying chunks of engine. Air Force One is down, off the radar. But it's what came before, that sinking moment you should hold on to, it is the moment when knowledge is about to become. It is the moment you continue to rehearse, the moment immediately after the inevitable establishment of a fact and the moment before its ultimate fulfilment. It is the moment upon which Hito Steyerl's In Free Fall (2010) hangs suspended. [David Riff]

In Journal no. 1 — An Artist's Impression

Hito Steyerl, 2007, 21 min

Two years after the end of World War II, Film Journal No. 1 was released in Sarajevo, and four years after the collapse of the Communist bloc this newsreel, which survived only on nitrate film, was lost in the confusion of the fighting in Yugoslavia. In Journal no. 1 — An Artist's Impression Hito Steyerl attempts to find out what was on that film document from Sarajevo's Sutjeska studio. She listens to eyewitnesses and, following her instructions, artist Arman Kulasic makes a number of drawings that resemble storyboards for some lost film. In the simultaneous projection

of Journal no. 1 – An Artist’s Impression the unattainability of a historical zero hour of national identity takes concrete form. What appears to be a moment of great change in this look-back (the newsreel reported on a literacy campaign, Muslim women confidently removing their headscarves, Communist Yugoslavia under Tito celebrating modernization through education in its early films) remains limited by subjective memory. Instead, the artist, who was supposed to serve as a mere ‘medium’ for the off-screen voices, is himself given a voice: he was affected by ethnic cleansing during the fighting. Where no documentary images are available, Steyerl employs images from fiction films produced at Sutjeska (the anti-Fascist Valter brani Sarajevo [Walter Saves Sarajevo] and Emir Kusturica’s Do You Remember Dolly Bell?), without intending to make a complete reconstruction. Multi-ethnic Yugoslavia remains fragmentary, in terms of both general history and the history of film: a country between images. [Bert Rebhandl]

November

Hito Steyerl, 2004, 25 min

In the eighties Hito Steyerl shot a feminist martial arts film on Super-8 stock. Her best friend Andrea Wolf played the lead role of a woman warrior dressed in leather and mounted on a motorcycle. The engagement expressed in the formal grammar of exploitation films later became Wolf’s political praxis. She went to fight alongside the PKK in the Kurdish regions between Turkey and northern Iraq where she was killed in 1998. Now honoured by Kurds as an ‘immortal revolutionary’, her portrait is carried at demonstrations. In November Hito Steyerl examines the spectrum of interrelations between territorial power politics (as practised by Turkey in Kurdistan with the support of Germany) and individual forms of resistance. Her memories and accounts of Wolf’s life provoke the filmmaker to engage in a fundamental reflection: she comes to understand how fact and fiction are intertwined in the global discourse. Her friend’s picture as a revolutionary pin-up would equally connect with either Asian genre cinema or a private video document. If October is the hour of revolution, November is the time of common sense afterwards, though it is also the time of madness – Hito Steyerl considers from this perspective a relationship which began with a pose, and Andrea Wolf took its implications so seriously that she was no longer satisfied with symbolic action. Wolf chose the Other of filmmaking, which was what made her into a true ‘icon’. [Bert Rebhandl]

Lovely Andrea

Hito Steyerl, 2007, 30 min

This film follows Steyerl’s quest for an image of herself posing in bondage when she was a film student in Japan in the late eighties. The video combines footage of Steyerl interviewing bondage porn industry professionals in search of the image, with footage of Spider-Man casting his web on New York’s Twin Towers, photographs of US soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib and images of women practising self-suspension with ropes.

Medium Cool

Haskell Wexler, 1969, 110 min

Medium Cool is an almost impossible oddity: director Haskell Wexler wanted to shoot a fictional, narrative film in which actors mingled with real people in an uncontrolled social environment. With that in mind, he began shooting a film about racial tensions in Chicago during the weeks prior to the 1968 Democratic National Convention, on the assumption that there would be a riot there. Then he brought his cast, crew, and camera to the scene of the proposed mayhem, and waited . . . and lo and behold, civil disorder broke out. It’s intensely strange to see actors playing characters, interacting in a real-life situation with real cops and real hippies fighting and running about. This is made stranger still by the story about a reporter covering the growing unrest in the black ghettos of the city who discovers that the FBI may be

in cahoots with his network. In preparing his script, Wexler assumed that the riot would be racial, but in fact it turned out that most of the rioters were white, so the final scenes seem to interrupt the narrative and make the film an odd pastiche and a commentary on the lack of connection between politics and life. Perhaps more of a curiosity than a wholly successful film, *Medium Cool* is still worth seeing for its striking footage and unprecedented combination of the real and the imaginary. [James DiGiovanna]

PARTICIPANTS

Pablo Lafuente is a writer, editor and curator. He is co-editor of the journal *Afterall*, London and associate curator at the Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Oslo. He has published his writing in catalogues and periodicals such as *Afterall*, *Art Monthly*, *Parkett*, *Radical Philosophy* and *The Wire* on topics including the possibility of criticism and the relationship between images and ideology, as well as on the work of artists Hito Steyerl and De Rijke and De Rooij, among others. He is currently developing a research project on the history of contemporary art exhibitions, and is also working on a PhD on political change in the work of Louis Althusser and Jacques Rancière at Middlesex University, London.

Rabih Mroué lives in Beirut. He is an actor, director and playwright, and a Contributing Editor on the Lebanese quarterly *Kalamon* and *TDR* (New York). He is one of the founders and member of the executive board of the Beirut Art Centre association (BAC). Winner of the Award for Performing Arts, 2010 from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, New York, and the Spalding Gray award, New York 2010. His works include *Extension 19* (1997), *Three Posters* (2000), *Biokhraphia* (2002), *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003), *Who's Afraid of Representation* (2005), *Make Me Stop Smoking* (2006), *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* (2007), *The Inhabitants of Images* (2008) and *Photo-Romance* (2009).

Hito Steyerl is a filmmaker and writer. She worked as stuntwoman, bouncer and bondage model before studying camera work in Tokyo and documentary filmmaking in Munich. Her written and film essays revolve around the dilemma of the production of documentary truth and explore political unrest, spectacle and violence as well as the political economy of contemporary media. Her work insists on a feminist perspective, although she doesn't really know what this means, and explores the digital vernacular in its lowest and most proletarian versions. In 2008 and 2009 she participated

in the Workers Punk Art School, Berlin. Her books include *The Colour of Truth* (2008), *Beyond Representation* (2011) and *The Wretched of the Screen* (forthcoming).

ENROLMENT

Advance booking is required for the workshop as it is directed at students and professionals of the visual and performing arts, audiovisual communication and art history, and at people from other fields of contemporary culture interested in the new forms of representation and their aesthetic and political dimension.

Maximum number of participants: 25

Enrolment fee: €90. The fee covers accommodation (from the 19 to the 22 October in a shared double room) and meals (dinner on the 19, full board on 20 and 21 and breakfast on 22 October) of all those registered at the university hall of residence at La Rábida.

Applications should be made by filling this form or else by sending an e-mail to uniaartepensamiento@unia.es before 12.00 noon on 10 October 2011, stating personal details (name, surname, address, telephone number and e-mail address), and including a CV and the reasons for wishing to participate in the workshop. The directors of the workshop will select successful applicants and decisions regarding admission, and form of payment, will be communicated to accepted applicants individually.

Selected applicants who are working on these themes at an artistic, academic or self-taught level will have the opportunity of presenting their work to speakers and other participants, should they wish to do so.

Certificates

Those registered students who can prove they have attended at least 80% of the sessions and have successfully passed the assessment test foreseen in the course will receive an attendance certificate.