

Hito Steyerl

(Munich, 1966)

Among the most influential voices of her generation, Hito Steyerl is an artist, essayist, activist and university professor. After studying cinema between Tokyo and Munich and her debut in the world of documentary, she grew closer to philosophy, a discipline in which she completed a doctorate in 2003. Her videos and immersive installations, her essay-pamphlets and the lecture-performances she holds around the world explore some of the key themes of contemporaneity with a clear gaze and a solid grasp of theory: the pervasiveness of the media and the circulation of images in the digital era; the use of technology in the field of military operations, the mechanisms of video surveillance and the development of artificial intelligence, not to mention the various forms of exploitation within the arts system. The author of numerous essays, in 2009 she published *In Defense of the Poor Image*, which reflects on the role of 'poor images' widely promoted online: of bad quality and bereft of value according to the standards of capitalist society, they may be transformed into tools of emancipation, opening up new circuits of information, unlinked to power.

In *Adorno's Grey* (2012), she films two restorers busy scraping a white wall in the University of Frankfurt beneath which, according to a hitherto unconfirmed anecdote, a coat of grey paint should be found, ordered by Theodor Adorno so that the neutral shade might maintain students' concentration levels high during lessons. While the images of this operation are shown, a voice off scene narrates another episode linked to the final years of the German philosopher's life, according to some, guilty of not having managed to understand the demands put forward by students, in part inspired by his own radical criticisms of bourgeois society. In 1969, shortly before he died, Adorno is said to have suddenly left the lecture hall, never to return again, after some of his female students had contested him by bearing their breasts. In a short circuit that reappraises the image of the philosopher, the video comes to an end with what seems to be a direct invitation to shift from theoretical speculation to concrete action. The voice off-scene of an activist tells of how in more recent times, a copy of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* was brandished to halt a police charge during a demonstration.

The second work by Steyerl in the collection is *Hell Yeah We Fuck Die* (2016), which moves into the cut and thrust of her investigation into the development of artificial intelligence. The work shows a number of lab technicians as they grapple with humanoid robots so as to test their quality, resistance and performance. With a hint of bitter irony, the artist observes the absurd forms of abuse against these heavily anthropomorphised machines, carried out solely in the name of our progress. The title is made up of the five words most used in English-language songs over the previous decade, according to a study by the magazine *Billboard*.

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