

War Games with Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl in Basel

Tactics to strategically engage audience imaginations

For several decades now, Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl have targeted dehumanising game plans and dematerialised military tactics. 'War Games' stages two multi-media career surveys side by side, thus amplifying the toxicity of so much unreality. Fifty years ago, Rosler began parodying planetary colonisation with the series 'House Beautiful: The Colonies' (1966-1972). Space-suited adventurers also occupy Steyerl's video installation 'ExtraSpaceCraft' (2016), parts of which were shot from a drone. In quoting Philip K. Dick's sci-fi novel 'Vulcan's Hammer' (1960), Rosler's 'Theater of Drones' (2013/2018) spoofs the promotion of both predator and mosquito drones for civilian applications. 'Prototype (Sandbox B2)' (2006) features Rosler's sand drawing of the radar-evading B-2 Spirit Stealth Bomber, the linchpin of military invisibility.

It's hard to imagine Rosler's distinctly collaged photomontages not having inspired Steyerl's time-based versions, whose complicated storylines seem constructed from strings of diverse scenes. Another obvious influence is Rosler's ground-breaking performance-lecture 'Semiotics of the Kitchen' (1975). Steyerl's video 'Is the Museum a Battlefield?' (2013) captures her dissecting relationships at the Istanbul Biennial, where she asserts that biennial sponsor Koç Holding manufactured the ammunitions used by Turkey to kill her best friend, PKK guerilla Andrea Wolf, the subject of her 2004 video 'November'. A word to the wise – exhibiting artists are complicit when cash-strapped exhibitors aid and abet spurious sponsors keen to self-exonerate. A TV producer interviewed in 'November' rather nonchalantly claims, "In every war, the principle applies that the truth is the first thing to be sacrificed," echoing Rosler's point, "Truth is the first casualty of war."

No doubt, mediated fictions masquerading as the real cleverly evade and distort the truth. To restore some semblance of reality, Rosler and Steyerl register greater detail. Rosler's videos 'Domination and the Everyday' (1978), 'A Simple Case for Torture, or How to Sleep at Night' (1983), and 'Born to Be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby \$/M' (1988) enrich the nightly news with contrasting opinions, thus giving voice to views ignored by the media, as well as families, workplaces, and governments. Although Steyerl is credited with recognising 'planetary civil war' everywhere, her work rather exposes the fact that all partnerships are punctured by power imbalances, and especially those entangling artists and art institutions.

Truth

Steyerl and Rosler's works astutely scrutinise the way films, advertisements, video games, and even books render truth superfluous, subliminally warping people's perspectives. Steyerl's digital film collage 'The Tower' (2015) juxtaposes 3D simulations of IT/gamer hotbed Kharkiv, Middle East skyscrapers, and a ziggurat meets Hanging Gardens of Babylon structure that serves as the dystopic Tower of Babel in Skyscraper: Stairway to Chaos, a computer game invented by Kharkiv-based Program-Ace. In contrast to Rosler's parody of space colonisation, the video game effectively promotes resource-intensive, luxury lifestyles to desert dwellers, thus hastening its eventuality. Alternatively, Rosler's 'Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an American in the 21st Century)' (2006) consists of 16 panels that invite the public to read Arendt, whose pursuit of truth is still derided by those who deem her arguments inconvenient. Rosler's 'Off the Shelf' (2008/2018) features 12 photos of books from her library shelves, adjacent scores of actual books lying visible on a table.

This exhibition's earliest work, Rosler's 'The Bowery, in two inadequate descriptive systems' (1974/1975), pairs 21 black and white photos of door steps and store fronts with text panels each listing multiple synonyms for

'intoxicated states'. An early example of the genre known as 'image-text', Rosler's surfeit of synonyms situates this oeuvre in a game of endless commutability. Given her work's early focus on gentrification, these photos record sites now excised by high rises, posh shops, and tony bistros, and thus complement 'The Rewards of Money Brunch à la loft' (1987-1988), her photomontage censuring the actions of urban elites. Steyerl's three-channel essay film 'Duty Free Art' (2015) similarly maligns contemporary art speculators who store artworks indefinitely in 'freeports', where their removal from circulation effectively transforms them into cryptocurrencies.

'War Games' reminds us that unreality, virtual reality, dematerialisation, and invisibility are all schemes that were developed over centuries by artists, authors, and filmmakers

to strategically engage audience imaginations. In the past few decades, such tactics have been co-opted by powerful enterprises that think nothing about weaponising them to their advantage, making President Trump's elusive Space Force the latest example of life imitating art. What will it take to subdue Steyerl's planetary civil war? Should artists continuously intervene to countermand authorities? Or should they quit while they're ahead, lest they be blamed for ever more detached and lethal war games?

Martha Rosler & Hito Steyerl 'War Games' until 2 December at Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart, CH. kunstmuseumbasel.ch

Martha Rosler 'Born to Be Sold; Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby \$/M', 1988, single-channel video, color, sound, 35' Martha Rosler, 'Theater of Drones', 2013/2018, 10 printed banners

