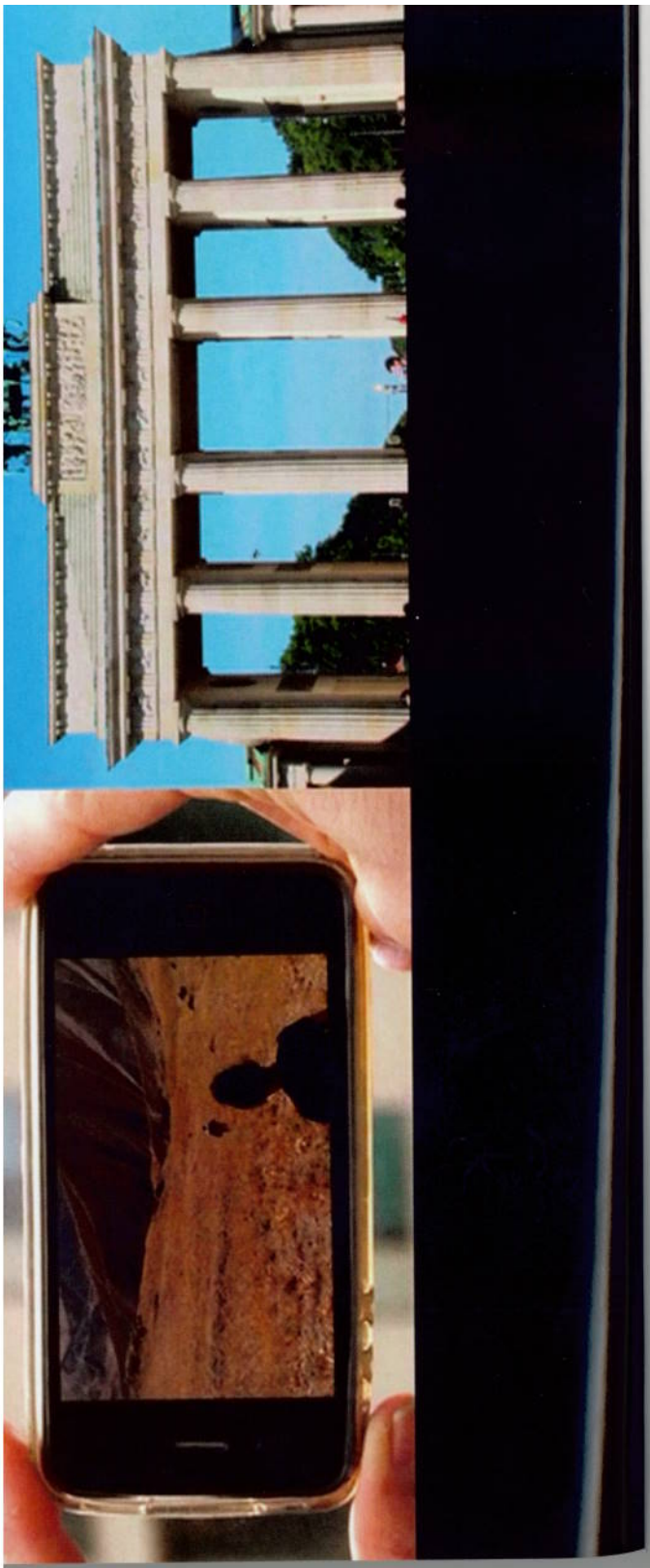

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Bullets from the Black Box: Hito Steyerl's *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* and *Guards*

In a recent essay, artist Walid Raad recounts a fictional conservation with Mordechai Shniberg or "Moti" as he is known, founder of the Artist Pension Trust (APT), in his airy office in a Manhattan loft. Raad, when inquiring about what he saw as the worrying links between APT (a scheme involving artists donating works that are subsequently sold with proceeds split between contributors) and sections of the Israeli Defence Force, was met with the following response: 'Please don't tell me that you are one of those naive left-wing, head-in-the-sand pontificators who actually think that the cultural, technological, financial and military sectors are not, and have not always been, intimately linked?'[1] Moti's words are disarming, fictional or not. He steadfastly, smugly even, confirms Raad's concerns about the sources of money and political affiliations that drive APT. Shniberg not-so-subtly implies that the only idiots unaware of their involvement in the conceptual, digital, speculative and violent web that is the contemporary art world are 'left wing pontificators' – many of whom are credited with producing the objects, theories and performances that fill art spaces throughout the world.

Moti is of course right. Cases of the inter-connectedness between art, the darker sides of finance and shady political or military interests are not hard to find (with the resignation of the chairman of the Sydney biennial a recent case in point).[2] The position of the group of artists who boycotted the exhibition to make light of – and refuse to play a part in – the biennial's reliance on money made on the back of the Australian government's heavily dubious immigration policy is a rare example of the cloak of money and politics that covers contemporary art being lifted. Indeed the largely invisible, ignored or un-discussed underbelly of art is often left to its own devices (with the mutual consent of those involved) until someone upsets the tide and the only response is boycotts or protests.

Tracking and exposing the flow of the murky interests that fuels global contemporary art is one thing.

But what would happen if the trajectory that begins with corrupt private money or bloodied hands and ends up in international exhibitions and galleries could be reversed? This is one question Hito Steyerl poses in her lecture *Is the Museum a Battlefield?*, first delivered at the Istanbul Biennial in September 2013 (the political traction of this exhibition largely slipped away in the wake of its retreat from public space following the Gezi Park protests) and which has recently been re-cut into a 40 minute film. Steyerl's lecture is a speculative wander that aims to trace the bullets fired both from and at the museum. What makes *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* more than a well-choreographed exposé of the sources of art patrons' wealth, is its move beyond the politics of funders (important as they are) to examine the similarity in weapons (digital, economic and conceptual) that all parties standing in the battlefield of contemporary culture deploy. Luckily for us, Steyerl is a mean shot.

The lecture departs with the history of the museum as a site of warfare, showing footage of the Bolsheviks storming the Winter Palace – later the Hermitage Museum – from Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1928), returning 35 minutes later with the multiple stormings of the Louvre in the 19th century. Steyerl's opening imagery is unambiguous: museums, historically at least, have always been important sites of political and military conflict. Yet what of the museum – and battlefield – today?

Steyerl then cuts to excerpts from her own film, *Abstract* (2012) which includes footage of her in the mountains of south eastern Turkey where her friend and longtime subject of her films, Andrea Wolf, was taken capture and executed in 1998 when fighting for the PKK. Capturing the shells that most likely killed Wolf and her 38 comrades (namely the Hellfire missile launched form Cobra helicopters), the edit moves to a shot of Steyerl pointing an iPhone at the headquarters of Lockhead Martin in Berlin, the missile's manufacturers. Steyerl's "shot" of Lockhead Martin, first included in *Abstract*, asks us to consider cinematic and military devices as not

only lexical siblings but as potent weapons of destruction and exposure. Telling the audience she bought one of the shells, Steyerl raises her thumb and forefinger as if holding a bullet. The bullet, though clearly traced form battlefield to Berlin by camera, when bought into the lecture theatre of a contemporary art space, dissolves into invisibility: 'Once you take it into an art space it somehow vanishes form sight', Steyerl later tells us. Such is the power of art to suspend disbelief – or to render true motivations opaque. Interestingly, Steyerl's own practice has shifted from being primarily film-based (where the camera could shoot and make visible) into a more fluid blend of lectures and performances that pop up in art events the world over, meaning that the switch to invisibility seems in part due to her own over-exposure.

Moving on, Steyerl jumps to an overhead shot of the Lockhead Martin headquarters – its pointed shape, designed by Frank Gehry, bears an uncanny resemblance to the shells fired at Wolf. The reason for the similarity, Steyerl asserts, is that both building and weapon were designed using the same computer software and that somewhere a 'bitt-flip' occurred, transforming a missile into a piece of 'contemporary starchitecture'. The links between architecture and the military are not only financial but, more worryingly perhaps, in the tools used to produce both. With 'starchitects' producing a new wave of feudal museums popping up in Abu Dhabi or St Petersburg – as is the case with a rendering of OMA's designs for the Hermitge becoming a new Guggenheim franchise – Steyerl's argument goes further: 'Is the revolution a prelude to all out gentrification?'

Steyerl's historical and conceptual jumps from the Bolsheviks to OMA, via the PKK and Lockhead Martin, delivered with a smirk and a twinkle in the eye, are both raucous and prescient. Yet as she begins to implicate herself in this equation, things get interesting. Following the missile shell form the "average" battlefield of south-eastern Turkey backwards, Steyerl finds herself staring at *Abstract* in the Art Institute of Chicago with her iPhone

raised and the caption reading 'this is a shot'. Coming across her own work Steyerl asks: 'Did I fire the bullet that I found on the battlefield?'

Questions of complicity – even responsibility – hang over Steyerl's lecture, as they have hung over all forms of institutional critique for time immemorial. Yet her point is clear: the circulation of money and influence that encompasses the art world and emerges form military conflicts and government planning is pervasive and imminently hard to capture. Track it down in one place and it will pop up elsewhere. Indeed Steyerl goes further – stating that bullets fired in the vicinity of contemporary art, far from travelling in straight, detectable lines, circle us, passing from museum to 'starchitecture' to battlefield in an endless loop of deadly circulation, killing thousands on the way.

Not content with abstracted metaphors, Steyerl later hones in on the people and money behind the Istanbul Biennial. Showing an image of *Obussen II* (2010), an installation by Kris Martin comprised of a pile of bullets from the 2011 edition of the exhibition (which of course, manifested as mere art, are clearly visible in the gallery – as art they are harmless so let them be seen), Steyerl contends that here we should be asking not who fired these bullets but who sponsored them. Bringing up a range of names from the biennial's main sponsors, Ko Koç Holdings whose subsidiary Otokar produces the police armoured vehicles patrolling the city's streets during and after the protests; to Vestel, the producer of domestic drones or the arms manufacturer Ayestas. These sponsors are the reason that the curatorial and artistic positions in the biennial – which are unsurprisingly often ideological enemies to private weapons producers – have the means to flourish. It is a structural contradiction that is particularly prevalent in the globalised, and still-growing, list of worldwide biennial where corporate wealth, tainted if you look close enough, fuels blockbuster events that create new art markets in obscure parts of the world. 'Is', Steyerl then asks, 'there

a link between military conflict and movements in the art market?'

Again using Turkey as a prescient example Steyerl tracks the development in the art market back to rampant privatisation in the '80s following the military coup. Yet Turkey is but one example that Steyerl could have cited as she herself has written: 'From the deserts of Mongolia to the high plains of Peru, contemporary art is everywhere. And when it is finally dragged into Gagosian dripping from head to toe in blood and dirt, it triggers off round and rounds of rapturous applause'.[3] Steyerl's point is that the, 'unpredictable, unaccountable, brilliant, mercurial [and] moody' side of contemporary art appeals to a certain form of aspiring oligarch who most probably has dictatorial aspirations of his own.[4]

It is Steyerl's insistence on not only highlighting the links between neoliberal economics, what she calls, the transition to 'post-democracy' and contemporary art that are important.[5] Indeed, returning to the closing of Waalid Raad's essay we too could ask, 'do we really need another artwork to show us (as if we don't already know) that the cultural, financial, and military spheres are intimately linked?' What Steyerl does, however, is show that in the kernel of all of these spheres of influence lies the same elusive, speculative appeal. This is the most frightening of her proposals: that contemporary art, more than anything, embodies the very worst in our neoliberal, post-democratic moment and the museum – far form being the last vestige of civil society – is the battlefield itself.

Steyel's speculation – or accusation – dissects and unravels the fallacy that the museum, maligned since the Louvre's inception in the 19th century (beginning with Quatremère and rumbling on today), wrests culture from its source, detaching it from the fabric of the world and leaving it devoid of resonance. 'On the contrary', as Steyerl has written, 'it is squarely placed in the neoliberal thick of things'[6]. It is a point she makes even more explicitly in her film, *Guards* (2012) which

focuses on two security guards, Ron Hicks and Martin Whitfield, as a means to rough up the neutrality of the white cube beyond modernist recognition. In her text, "Is the Museum a Factory?",[7] Steyerl had previously looked at the museum as a site that is both monitored and surveyed but that remains invisible to the outside world. Yet in *Guards*, she pushes the argument, extending the frames of reference beyond notions of the production and labour performed in the museum, to examine the art institution as a heavily policed, contested site.

Seen alongside Steyerl's Istanbul lecture, *Guards* is less polemic, quieter and more specific in its claims. Take the language of contemporary art and its re-emergence – or roots – in military practice. In one section, Ron Hicks 'runs the walls' of the gallery – emblazoned with funders' names – arms extended. He is ready to 'engage' the target, the word's utterance echoing with visitor's *engagement* with works of art or of *socially-engaged* practice. Martin Whitfield, wandering through the airy spaces of the Art Institute Chicago with the male heavyweights of modernism drenching its interior, talks about his considerations when addressing a space. He talks of 'points of view', 'lines of sight', asking, 'what are the advantages we can take in terms of the use of the space?' – all very valid curatorial questions (or certainly for a display of blue-chip abstraction) posed by an ex-navy officer. And when Steyerl superimposes video footage of police shootings – one of which Whitfield recounts, modernist masters make way for helicopter shots of a shootout in sub-urban America and the museum's emergence from the far-away clouds of AbEx to an embodiment of contemporary conflicts is complete.

Towards the end of the film, Hicks accosts the intruder to the museum, finding him in a black box showing shots form military helicopters zooming in on targets. Here the intruder is finally 'engaged'. Film and its presentation in the museum are, by inference, where contemporary conflicts come to the boil, for good or bad. It is where intruders (conceptual, financial, military

or political) can be rooted out and taken down.

Cut to the theatre of the Istanbul Biennial, and we remember this is where Steyerl traced herself back to, wondering whether this was the place from which shots were fired. Most probably it was. Revealingly, it is in the black box that this lecture will now be placed, morphing, with the help of Steyerl's own editorial 'bit-flipp' from biennial lecture into film – from a performance of her own cultural labour into a projected reappraisal of the art institution. If Steyerl has been forced to mutate her modes of address to appease the increasingly ravenous art world, then film seems to remain her weapon of choice. More revealing still, perhaps is that at her survey exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum, Steyerl shows this film as part of the trilogy of films alongside *November* (2004) and *Lovely Andrea* (2007) (with *Abstract* formerly as its the third component). Where she had previously used *Abstract* to centre on the crossovers and complexities of the grammar of cinema and the grammar of warfare now the grammar – and violence – of museums has been bought into focus.

At the end of her talk, Steyerl asserts that we must now not only storm the museum – the Hermitage, the Louvre or its new pumped up stunt double in the Gulf – but the screens and clouds, 'that transform bullets into art spam and reality into realty'. Giving us a short instruction manual, Steyerl explains that by using the flashlight on our cameras (one of the applications least likely to be hacked or monitored) we should shine the light on our own hand and grab the invisible bullet that has been flying around art spaces and battlefields, killing thousands of people en route. 'Now, with a flick of the wrist, curl the bullet the other way'.

For all of Steyerl's historical and visual crossovers, her sly wit and self-deprecation – her closing message (seemingly aimed at herself, the audience in the lecture theatre and the viewer in the black box) is cut and dry: if you are immersed in the circling bullets of the contemporary art world, the origins of which flex back

and forth from sites of war to fund raising galas – take agency. The contemporary art museum never has and never will be a neutral space. In Steyerl's nightmare scenario the contemporary museum - in a morphed version of Benjamin's take on how politics is aestheticized by those in power - would show genocide in the form of CGI info graphics and digital human rights appeals, viewed from a camera attached to a drone. 'This', as Steyerl says, 'is totally unsatisfactory as it still accepts the white cube as a neutral frame'.[8] The museum as a battlefield from which to defend and fight is an altogether different proposal. Only by making visible and countering the conflicted nature of what Moti rightly identified as, the merging of the 'cultural, technological, financial and military sectors', do we have any hope of stopping the bloodshed entering (or emanating from) museums. What's more, as Steyerl's closing makes patently clear – the screen (or video, or artwork) remains a prime weapon with which to fire.