

Article

Negotiations of In/Visibility: Surveillance in Hito Steyerl's *How Not to be Seen*

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze Hito Steyerl's artwork *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013) from the perspective of surveillance. Looking back at one of the most influential artworks of the last decade, I understand *How Not to be Seen* as a discursive practice using images that poses an ambivalent surveillance critique through media- and wordplay. I first outline the historical references of Steyerl's critique of technology, including Heidegger's (1938) "image as world picture," and position her in relation to other relevant surveillance-resistant practices. Drawing on analytical theory by Rancière (2006), I argue that the video is an example of a documentary fiction that organizes heterogenous visual, semiotic, and sensory material horizontally. From here, I move on to analyze the artwork focusing on how in both its content and form it engages humorously in discussions of (in)visibility, targeting, resolution, and data extraction. Using discourses on Steyerl's work from herself and others, I show how the .MOV file, in playing with representational media, subverts categories used for surveillant targeting and data extraction. Hence, I argue that Steyerl ultimately advocates for resistance through ambivalence as a playful counter-visibility in the face of ubiquitous surveillance. In an era of intelligent imagery, this implicates using the image as an object that is part of the medium and not as subject representation.

The World as Picture

Der Grundvorgang der Neuzeit ist die Eroberung der Welt als Bild. Das Wort Bild bedeutet jetzt: das Gebild des vorstellenden Herstellens. In diesem kämpft der Mensch um die Stellung, in der er dasjenige Seiende sein kann, das allem Seienden das Maß gibt und die Richtschnur zieht... Für diesen Kampf der Weltanschauungen und gemäß dem Sinne dieses Kampfes setzt der Mensch die uneingeschränkte Gewalt der Berechnung, der Planung und der Züchtung aller Dinge ins Spiel. (Heidegger [1938] 1987: 87)

One of the first scenes in German artist Hito Steyerl's video work *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013) is a resolution target. It is the only remaining and publicly available of its sort left in the world, located in Cuddle Lake, California. A resolution target functions as an optician's diagram for measuring sight. The smallest group of bars measurable indicates the settings and the quality of the optical instrument used. Resolution targets were primarily used from the 1950–1970s to measure the resolution value of aerial photo cameras.

The resolution target of Cuddle Lake is shown in a much smaller handheld resolution target, used by Steyerl who acts as the primary guide of the tutorial (Figure 1). The distorted, humorously slow voice-over tells us that these apparatuses are designed to capture the world as a picture. In Heidegger's ([1938] 1987) essay "The Age of the World Picture," he seeks to describe the metaphysical ground on which modern science is

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built. As the preliminary quote indicates, the world as picture is conceived as an object of study for the subject, something that must be mastered, captured, and mapped. The world is made a flat object presupposing that this object will be compliant to technological investigations. In the first section of Steyerl's video, the voice-over is instructing the viewer "to hide, to remove, to go off-screen, to disappear." While the voice is talking, Steyerl steps into the picture with her hand first, blocking the view of the mobile resolution target that stands in front of a green screen. Thereafter, she picks it up and takes it out of the frame. "Resolution determines visibility. Whatever is not captured by resolution is invisible," the voice says while the video zooms out from the desert in Cuddle Lake to a bigger area comprising California, then the US, then the Earth itself. Steyerl makes Heidegger's thought visually graspable; with the use of the Google Maps-apparatus, the video zooms out to the map of the Earth as a whole. We are shown an immovable object completely controlled by technological capture mechanisms from street view to the universe.

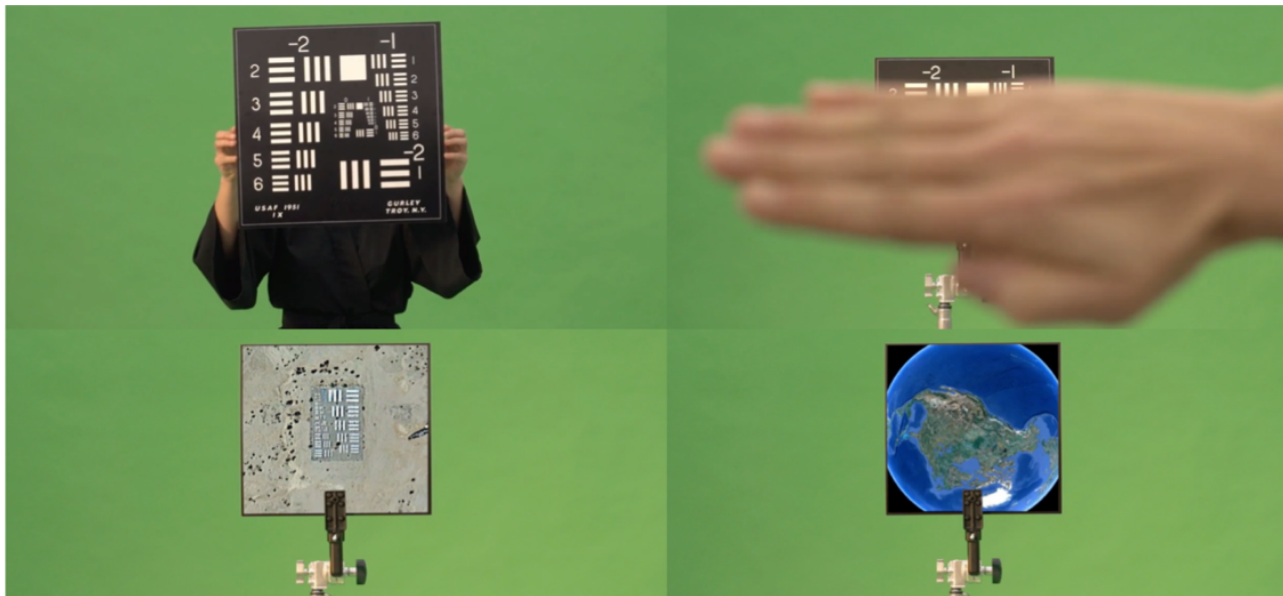


Figure 1: How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File, single-screen video, 2013. Images courtesy of Hito Steyerl and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

In his analysis of the world picture, Heidegger ([1938] 1987) not only focuses on the human wish to map the world as picture and object but also on the subject that the world picture produces. The technology that Heidegger criticizes existed before the contemporary surveilled society Steyerl is speaking to, where individuals are understood as transparent entities. Mapping and control go hand in hand as a technological process of development that is constantly optimized, which the video's example of an obsolete resolution target indicates.

Similarities aside, as Kris Paulsen (2017: 179) notes in her vivid analysis of the artwork, the world as *target* may be a better way to conceptualize how new technologies such as drones and operational images are dealt with by Steyerl. Heidegger's ([1938] 1987) writings are the basis, but new technologies have come along that implicate new issues of surveillance. Where the world was grasped as a picture, mapping distances and objectifying matter, now real-time telecommunications and tele-surveillance have extended these properties and made visibility a constant possibility for (military) destruction and (capitalist) extraction. Even so, the two concepts are intricately related, boiling down to the relation between observation and violence (the camera also *shoots its target* when taking a picture).

The collective called the Invisible Committee (2008) writes about the subject of the world picture today: "The rational Western subject, aspiring to master the world and governable thereby, gives way to the cybernetic conception of a being without an interiority, of a selfless self, an emergent, climatic being,

constituted by its exteriority.” As its name suggests, this French collective’s activities have evolved from a politics of invisibility that seeks to implement avant-garde tactics, mainly those of opting out of surveillance networks completely. Taking seriously the threat of a “being constituted by its exteriority,” they fight for interiority in post-situationist ways of radical refusal.

Steyerl’s *How Not to be Seen* asks its viewers how we can occupy a completely surveilled and mapped world differently. But its tactics seem to be much more ambivalent than a total refusal, such as the one that the Invisible Committee has been practicing since the 1990s. Steyerl talks to a world that is far from centralized, as technology makes it possible to view her .MOV file on whatever device we have in our possession. Her tone is inherently ironic and refuses to give us any didactic answer to our current situation while still educating us in subtle ways. Looking back on one of the most influential contemporary media artworks from the last decade, I seek to map the political perspectives it has engendered, with a specific focus on surveillance. Ultimately, I wish to cast light on its ambivalent approach to surveillance and (in)visibility today. This means also having somewhat non-conflating theories at work simultaneously to show how Steyerl’s work contextualizes different discourses on surveillance, encouraging us to oscillate among conflicting perspectives and inhabit contradictions in working through increasingly complicated issues of contemporary control. My suggestion is that Steyerl’s ultimate contribution to the contemporary artistic debate on surveillance is that neither avant-garde methods of subversion nor total refusal are ways forward but that staying “in the medium” and negotiating categories in ambivalent and uncertain ways may be the political agency of our time.

Dialectics is a political necessity in Steyerl’s work to match the rapidity of social and cultural changes being examined in real-time. While a playful and ironic use of both language and visuals is flowing through Steyerl’s work, the critical traditions of Benjamin ([1935] 1969) and Adorno ([1966] 1973) are always also there, which is why a one-sided model of analysis does not suffice. Steyerl seeks to make us understand that old dreams of representability are no longer applicable, and therefore, complete synthesis should not be the goal for an analysis of her work. This essay will be a crystallization of different perspectives that are critical to *How Not to be Seen*, roughly comprised of technology-critique in the tradition of Heidegger ([1938] 1987) and Rancière’s (2004, 2006) seminal work on documentary fiction. But, just as importantly, the post-representational irony of Steyerl is investigated—an irony of wordplay that is subverting categories necessary for the surveillant practices of targeting and extraction.

The Organization of Subject Matter

I choose to read Steyerl’s work as a “documentary fiction,” a term coined by Jacques Rancière (2006) and developed in an essay on Chris Marker’s (1993) film *Le Tombeau d’Alexandre*. This theoretical framework helps me to articulate how thinking of the image as materiality can unfold. Understanding the image as materiality is a way to distance it from representation and to side “with the object for a change” (Steyerl 2017: 50). It is a way to understand how, not just in the guidelines of “becoming invisible” but also in the formal organization of the .MOV file, Steyerl is enacting a counter-visibility that seeks to change the way we understand surveillance by changing our way of understanding representation itself.

Rancière (2006) conceives of the notion as a hybrid form between documentary and fiction that creates *memory* against *information*. It relates to sequences of images that work against the overabundance of “facts” that technologies have created, ironically reducing the possibilities for making coherent meaning, i.e., in the case of fake news. Through this approach, he proposes a way to analyze images that is not led by a narrative but instead lets the pictures themselves be the points of departure for the ideas immanent in the artwork: “thought and things, exterior and interior, are captured in the same texture, in which the sensible and the intelligible remain undistinguished” (Rancière 2006: 159). Rancière (2006) reminds us that the distinction between noise and speech, between what we look after in an artwork (or anything) and what we don’t, is related to the much older social formula of distinguishing between whose speech is important and whose is just “nonsense.” T.J. Demos (2008: 412) pointed to the dialectical educational impulse at the core of Steyerl’s work long before *How Not to be Seen*:

This type of “documentary fiction” is one in which fiction, as Rancière observes, rediscovers its Latin roots, meaning “to forge” rather than “to feign”... 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.

The way Rancière (2006) binds the notions of the documentary and fiction makes the genre stand out as a space where sensuously and logically comprehensible elements are closely related. According to Rancière (2006: 161), documentary fiction dwells in an “indeterminate space of writing,” one that is at once participating in reality and constructed in a system of connected forms. From a surveillance perspective, this enables us to question how history, facts, visibility, and other elements are organized by contemporary control regimes. As Demos (2008) tells us, it also necessarily engages the viewer in the construction of reality-fiction, something that is impossible not to do when interacting with Steyerl’s work.

As is evident in her highly distinctive and peculiar mix of styles, Steyerl seeks to make use of absurd and humorous representations of forms in an attempt to create a sense of political urgency. Here, postproduction and new combinations of image, sound, and text contribute to disentangling the image from its usual connotations and let the viewer conceive of it in a new way. If we, in Heidegger’s ([1938] 1987: 69) words, live in “*Die Zeit Des Weltbildes*,” can we then, with Rancière (2006), understand Steyerl’s work as a politics of the image that—in close interaction with the viewer—lets the “world” materialize in new ways and not just represents it?

According to Rancière (2006), his perspective on film practice can create a form of memory that runs counter to the massive image archive of the contemporary society of information and surveillance. To read Steyerl’s video as such an archive allows us to work with the discursive functioning of her images. The form and the graspable idea of the work are just as closely connected as images and social relations in today’s spectacle, and it is exactly at this point that we find Steyerl’s critical potential. Steyerl’s discursive play with images is an exploration of visibility and invisibility today, and it is aware of the complexities that these political positions bring with them. This relativizes a one-sided perspective on surveillance; her work functions as a reminder that, in our time, the image is not just a representation, it is an integrated part of the real of our time, and herein lies a new possibility for political agency.

Body, Image, Target

How Not to be Seen is a comic visual guide to different ways of becoming invisible. The visual expression of the video reflects the precarious conditions of today’s negotiations of visibility, online as well as offline. The British voice-over, created from a text-to-speech program, puts forth five lessons on becoming invisible:

1. How to make something invisible for the camera
2. How to be invisible in plain sight
3. How to become invisible by becoming a picture
4. How to become invisible by disappearing
5. How to become invisible by merging into a world of pictures

In its “didactical mode,” the first three lessons emphasize strategies for resisting ubiquitous surveillance, whereas the last two call upon resistance against “undesirable disappearance”; Steyerl is aware not only of the threatening exposure that surveillance conjures but also of the fact that some groups are pictured less than others, while a third group remains completely unrepresented, as unable to “speak” as to be visualized.

As Melissa Gronlund (2016: 31) writes, invisibility is an “(ambivalent) political tool” in Steyerl, having both an emancipatory and an anti-democratic function. This liminality between precarity and political

agency is connected to targeting in *How Not to be Seen*'s treatment of both military and capitalist categorization. It is here that Heidegger's ([1938] 1987) theory of the world picture/target and documentary fiction conflate. If the "image industry" today not only categorizes but also targets subjects and matter at an increasing pace with the intentions of extraction and profit, a practice of ambivalent imagery is needed. This is not the same as radical refusal but is, more precisely, *working with the medium* against representation and categorization. Notably, the Invisible Committee (2008) is working primarily with this one category, the invisible, refusing a dialectical approach to resistance, whereas Steyerl (word)plays on more than one register.

In the second lesson, a collection of absurd techniques is enumerated: "pretend you are not there, hide in plain sight, to scroll, swipe, to erase, to shrink, to take a picture." Most of the instructions are silly because they seem impossible to enact as a material body, but as operations of the interface they make sense. Here, the guide moves from the physical realm of camouflage between subject and (camera)object to the data realm of the digital. Or, more precisely, these two spheres become indistinguishable, as techniques for hiding physically ("hide in plain sight") and hiding in cyberspace ("to scroll, swipe...") intermingle and are incongruously lined up in the same listing. As we shall see, this is one of many ways in which categories are being disturbed through humor-as-incongruity in the film.

In the third lesson, "how to become invisible by becoming a picture," Steyerl is standing in front of a green screen where several resolution targets and color-test cards are projected (Figure 2). She begins to use the green "camouflage paint" on her face, imitating a soldier who hides in a natural landscape. Meanwhile, the scene is accompanied by wellness-salon music which adds an ambivalence to the expression of the artist; is she gesturing towards military combat or the femininity of a makeup session? Gradually her face appears as what is projected on the green screen wall behind her. Instead of seeing Steyerl's skin as the projection surface, we can see through her to the background before which she was visible earlier. The face and body of Steyerl have disappeared optically. The voice-over tells us that this gesture is a way of "becoming a picture." Steyerl is no longer "pictured" or represented, she is the material basis for the background and melts together with it. Here, she stresses how the body itself can become a transmission medium rather than the content of such a medium. From the perspective related to documentary fiction, this is a way of emphasizing materiality instead of representation. Steyerl is playing with the medium rather than giving us any didactic message, since most of these acts are not possible to apply to everyday life.



Figure 2: *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, single-screen video, 2013. Images courtesy of Hito Steyerl and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

Meanwhile, it is also possible to conduct a fruitful didactic analysis from Steyerl's *How Not to be Seen*, underlining her ambivalent and many-sided practice. As Toni Pape (2017: 633; emphasis in the original)

shows us in her analysis of the artwork *The Aesthetics of Stealth*, “the piece foregrounds in didactic fashion that one of the key concerns in contexts of surveillance is the individual’s visibility in *relation to* the perceptual capacities of (digital) media... in order to become imperceptible, one must first of all perceive the affordances for imperceptibility that a perceptual field holds.”

As Alexander Galloway (2011) reminds us, non-existence and subtractive being is not a declaration of powerlessness but a viable possibility of resistance today. He proposes practical nonexistence as “the only thing today that capitalism cannot eventually co-opt” (Galloway 2011: 247). Strategies of political withdrawal and opacity are important. But, following the logic of targeting and categorization as conditions of possibility for military destruction and capitalist extraction, non-being and withdrawal are not necessarily resistant positions; they are also easily categorizable for surveillance apparatuses. For example, companies are also counting what you did *not* do online, where you did not click or participate, and, therefore, a refusal to participate will in a sense be viable data information.

Therefore, reading only withdrawal as an answer to the issues that Steyerl addresses seems to miss the *fucking* in “didactic educational .MOV file.” Our possibilities of visibility and invisibility are also confusingly and ironically turned around in *How Not to be Seen*. Steyerl shows us that transparency is not just a material consequence of surveillance, it has become a virtual type of existence. Steyerl asks: what if the potential of invisibility today is to become an object in the digital media landscape—a prosthesis of the pixels that create the surveilled subject in its image? To disappear in an image is Steyerl’s ambivalent strategy for becoming invisible while retaining a notion of agency.

Agency without Interiority

As David Lyon (2017) and Shoshana Zuboff (2019) have noted (along with a comprehensive number of other surveillance-scholars that I will not touch on here), the implications of surveillance today are extremely complex, becoming more fluid, participatory, exhibitionist, voyeuristic, addictive, and driven by fear. These interpretations of surveillance are important supplements to older thoughts on targeting, control, and surveillance from the likes of Foucault (1977) and Heidegger ([1938] 1987). Because, even though it is still timely to regard reality and image as melted together, so many aspects of image and surveillance culture have changed. Today, the numbing passivity of the entertainment industry is complemented by an even stronger participatory culture where participation is the ultimate law. In line with the internal subjectification that control societies (Deleuze 1992) induce, the digital imperative to participate creates a 24/7 advertisement culture. Media applications such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are used to promote one’s individuality in front of others in a constant internal competition. But, as Zuboff reminds us, it is not just in social media and entertainment industries that we are driven to participate: “We now depend upon the internet just to participate effectively in our daily lives. Whether it’s interfacing with the IRS or your health care provider, nearly everything we do now just to fulfill the barest requirements of social participation marches us through the same channels that are surveillance capitalism’s supply chains” (qtd. in Laidler 2019).

This means that even the minimum requirements of living a modern life are embedded in self-entrepreneurial and surveillant capitalist frameworks and are not entirely possible to separate from broader politico-military procedures. This is touched upon in Steyerl’s work by her practice of intricately mixing military references with scenes of “ordinary life” and entertainment industries. The digital participation processes on these different levels are all contributing to the targeting of our bodies and desires through data capture techniques that maintain their invisibility and are driving our economic system, as Zuboff (2019) describes. We are being “informatized” through the data that are extracted from digital participatory processes and we are subsequently analyzed by capitalist stakeholders. As Pape (2017) emphasizes, the work’s gesture points towards showing that the agency of the body plays an important role in how we react to surveillance. But it also points to more ambivalent registers that have less to do with a “message” and more to do with the actual practice of the artwork itself.

Steyerl shows us that images can create actual violence and that, for this reason, it is necessary to violate them—through bad image quality or absurd representational forms, which is exactly what happens in the lessons of her “educational .MOV file.” In her essay, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” Steyerl (2012: 32) personifies the image as she compares poor image circulation to political revolt: “The circulation of poor images feeds into both capitalist media assembly lines and alternative audiovisual economies. In addition to a lot of confusion and stupefaction, it also possibly creates disruptive movements of thought and affect. The circulation of poor images thus initiates another chapter in the historical genealogy of nonconformist information circuits....” If pictures act as parts of reality and objects for political and historical intervention in our time, then the contexts that they are placed in are not only influenced by interpretations but also by their condition. As Steyerl (2012: 50) writes, the image today should be regarded as a medium that incites “objectification” and not solely “representation,” which leads to subjectification and categorization. To be represented can be understood as becoming the subject of a given image, to be given the possibility of autonomy and liberation as an individual. But Steyerl proposes another strategy: she seems to indicate that identification through representation of the subject inspires a passive kind of resistance, whereas an understanding of the image as object creates action. To interact with the image as an object of and in the world, and not just as a representation of it, is affirming the world as picture and target. It accepts that we have come this far and that resistance needs to be enacted on these premises. As Steyerl (2012: 50, emphasis in the original) asks: “Why *not* be a thing? A thing among other things.” Steyerl seems to suggest that to become an object through the medium of representation, to let the image express rather than represent, makes us capable of participating in the political potential of the medium. If agency as obfuscation is practiced in the medium and not in the representation created by it, categorization becomes much more difficult to uphold and thereby use for extraction.



Figure 3: How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File, single-screen video, 2013. Images courtesy of Hito Steyerl and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

The “flat” subjectivity without interiority as described by the Invisible Committee (2008) is illustrated in Steyerl’s work by small pixel persons in black (Figure 3). In the first lesson, they run around to protect themselves from the gaze of the camera by identifying with other pixels and, in symbiosis, becoming part of a bigger picture, an illustration of Steyerl’s idea of becoming an image object. They are not depicted didactically as something to be avoided; rather, their “message” is to confuse our sense of distance and resolution in the medium of the film. They act as objects but do not adhere to what a pixel should be in our usual understanding of it. In an ambivalent move, they are both objectified and retain a certain agency in diverging from what we expect of them, a categorization applicable to poor images in general because they reduce the quality of representation while at the same time reviving a sense of agency in their chaotic poverty.

Transparency and Non-Place

In the fourth lesson, we move from resolution targets and green screens to virtual non-places and invisible identities: duty-free shopping areas in airports, theme parks, shopping malls. The directives in *How Not to be Seen* turn into active verbs: “Living in a gated community, living in a military zone, being in an airport, factory or museum... being a superhero, being female and over 50; surfing the dark web, being a dead pixel, being a Wi-Fi signal moving through human bodies, being undocumented or poor; being spam caught by a filter; being a disappeared person as an enemy of the state.” Here, invisibility is interpreted as a commodity, a privilege given to the ones with the economy to sustain an exclusive and excluded existence, as in a gated community. It is also interpreted as a state of exception where the civil rights of society are suspended if you are an undocumented refugee or declared an enemy of the state. It is those bodies that escape popular culture’s focus on perfection or immaterial technological mechanisms such as dead pixels or Wi-Fi signals. The ambivalent political tool of (in)visibility is further emphasized. In the movie’s realm, visibility is both an opportunity for validation and civic participation as well as a precarious exposure that can be captured and exploited. Contrarily, invisibility is both a radical practice of resistance and a way to disappear politically and lose agency.

Just as in the third lesson, the enumerations of ways of being invisible (now connected more to identity and less to action) are comically incongruous. The list acts as both a parody because of the absurd mix of identities and as a very real reference to issues of surveillance and control. In the end, this ambivalence acts as an obfuscation of classifications as such. This can only be done because a certain participation in the medium is enacted in the artwork. Not by radical refusal but by conscious embeddedness in the medium does Steyerl confuse categories that are normally extracted through surveillance capitalism: where you have “checked in” (such as museums or airports), how you look, what you do online, what your social status is, etc. It *is* true that the descriptions listed are, in some way or another, all related to invisibility, but it is through their being so incompatible in terms of what type of invisibility is at stake that the category becomes useless.

The spaces that the voice-over describes are illustrated with scenes reminiscent of architectural project sketches (Figure 4). Here, the human proxies are all transparent, white figures who move around the non-places harmonically and interact with one another. The sketch presents fantasies of the rationally managed and controlled society, symbolizing different forms of social, biotechnical, and informatic control. Meanwhile, other bodies are intervening in the idyllic scenes. The pixelated people from prior lessons move around the project sketches and people in green screen burka robes are intervening as well, doing martial arts and posing in different constellations. Even though these figures seem invisible to the white figures, they appear all the more visible to the spectator because their movements and dress do not fit into the sterilized surroundings.

In these non-places, the pure “in-flow” and perfectly proportionated are prioritized and surveillance is equal to security from external dangers. The odd figures of the almost invisible, or nearly visible, symbolize an understanding of resistance as that which disturbs stable categories. Just as the odd enumerations of ways of becoming invisible that appear throughout the lessons, these figures visually disturb the categories that they are themselves embedded in. This is essentially a Rancièrian (2004) disturbance of the sensible—a theoretical basis for the notion of documentary fiction—de-stabilizing what makes (non)sense in the hyper-surveilled, capitalist, and privileged environment.



Figure 4: How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File, single-screen video, 2013. Images courtesy of Hito Steyerl and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

Representation and Expression

The work's title is also a reference to a sketch from an episode of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (MacNaughton 1970). In this sketch, we see a plain, unpopulated field where individuals rise from their hideouts one after the other and get shot instantly. The voice-over symbolizing a panoptical eye says that this shows "the value of not being seen." However, later in the movie, the individuals who continue hiding are also killed because their whole refuge gets bombed. Apart from the humorous reference to surveillance as an all-seeing eye and to military destruction in general, the title also makes way for an understanding of how Steyerl's work acts differently.

As the pixel-persons in particular exemplify, Steyerl's movie shows us that it is not possible to hold on to your liberal subject position in hyper-surveillant times, whether you hide or not. In the Monty Python sketch, the subjects get bombed by showing themselves and they get bombed by hiding, but by "becoming a picture," Steyerl's political agency is neither-nor, siding with the objects of the media used and thereby obfuscating targeted categories of "resistance" and "withdrawal." What we are left with is an ambivalent-ironic stance towards agency, where the medium is the message, to use McLuhan's (1964) famous words. Or rather, the message is the word-playing obfuscation of the categories inherent to the medium.

In the fifth lesson, this chaotic agency is turned up a notch (Figure 5). We are back in the abandoned resolution target in the desert. Various layers of representation arise at the same time. *Second Life*-versions of the band The Three Degrees sing their hit "When Will I See You Again" in the world of the architect-drawn non-places from the fourth lesson. Now this is projected on a Mac desktop interface, hung up as a backdrop in the middle of the desert. The avatars are followed by a grainy YouTube version of a "physical scene" of the persons from the band. At the same time, cue words are projected around the screen: "shoot this for real," "fly away with drone," "pixels hijack camera crane," and "camera crew gets tied up by invisible people seen from above" they proclaim without a clear relation to what actually goes on in the interface. The pixel persons appear again, dancing around in green screen bodysuits and punching resolution targets, the white proxies do odd gestures in three-dimensional sketches of a mall, and the camera team who took care of the production of the movie seem to disappear.

This scene levels up the challenge of cleanly marked lines and categories already enacted in prior lessons. Elaborating on Steyerl's own thoughts on representation, this chaotic and uncertain imagery is exposing an immanent image critique as *expression*. The collage aesthetics in the fifth lesson punctuate the illusion of space that cartesian perspectivism dictates; the image material in the movie appears as superimposed

elements on one spatial level, underlining the intentions of documentary fiction. Steyerl's digital film editing methods such as green screens and CGI are untied from predefined understandings of their use, opening up new perspectives.



Figure 5: How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File, single-screen video, 2013. Images courtesy of Hito Steyerl and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

The aesthetics mimic the interface that can showcase an infinite number of “windows” as a basis for communication and visualization. As in the interface, space in Steyerl's work is infinitely expanding while time is still because there is no depth-perspective to drive the narrative forward. Therefore, we automatically focus on expression before narrative. This film collage unites many different scenes that have circulated across the sequences of the movie until now. For example, as we have seen, *The Three Degrees* appear as *Second Life* versions in the gated community, in the Mac interface with the desert as a backdrop, and in the YouTube video that is distributed on the resolution target. Signifiers circulate freely, and the audiovisual references function not as delimited entities but as loose fragments of data information, constantly dissolved and staged in new contexts. It is true that these fragments *represent*, as their original intention is interpretable, but the point is that what they represent is not the essence of the scene. It is in their expression as different types of media flowing rapidly and freely that they gain significance. Again, the most important point to take from Steyerl here is the ambivalent position of staying with the medium while still trying to obscure its categories incessantly.

In the article “A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition,” Steyerl (2017: 47–63) describes the “sea of data” that is collected through online marketing and data tracking programs, produced as a result of our daily use of various information technologies and social media. The need to translate all life to signals that can be de/coded and carried by machines is symbolic of our times. However, Steyerl writes that the construction of meaning in data is essentially happening through apophenia: a subconscious process that creates systems by seeing and recognizing patterns in randomness. Apophenia was first defined in research around psychotic behavior, where delusions are experienced as visions and revelations (see Fyfe et. al. 2008). Steyerl reminds us that the information we are able to extract from data and implement through algorithms is only an interpretation. Apophenia, and the arbitrary pattern recognition related to the phenomenon, is the prediction and mapping of a world that is seen as dangerous because it is unpredictable and out of control.

Again, this theory relates directly to Rancière's (2004) distribution of the sensible translated to digital data extraction: What is *understood* in the data that are constantly extracted from our actions and what remains “noise” and nonsense? As such, pattern recognition is connected to a broader question of political recognition. Rogue data (including the “rogue pixels” mentioned various times in the movie to describe the pixel persons) are those which do not fit into the algorithmic operations, where the desired outcome could be to distinguish between a refugee or a terrorist or to distinguish between a customer interested in a refrigerator from the one interested in a washing machine. When desire is bound up, that is, on capitalist-, power-, and control-oriented practices.

Steyerl's *How Not to be Seen* can broadly be understood to both show the characteristics of pattern recognition and to perform apophenia itself. Steyerl's work criticizes the surveillance-apophenia of contemporary societies that implicates ideological preferences and overidentification for the purpose of control, capitalist extraction, and even military destruction. But building up to the fifth lesson, she also shows a potential in playful apophenia if the patterns can act as a point of departure for a radical politics of ambivalence, obscuring the categories that make surveillance-for-profit possible.

As Gronlund (2016: 32) also comments on, another meta-layer of the video's irony is evident from the repercussions of *How Not to be Seen*, arguably Steyerl's most popular artwork to date. Pictures of the scene where she, as if on a touchscreen, zooms in on the text "I am completely invisible" (Figure 6) have been shared on numerous websites and social media platforms. This "invisibility" has paradoxically made Steyerl more famous than ever, partially leading to *ArtReview* selecting her as the most powerful person in the art world in 2017. The irony of representing invisibility as text while being anything but invisible, circulating in art press, Google searches, and the like, emphasizes the main point of Steyerl's practice. This image is an example of a context-traveling object of ironic disturbance that engenders new contingent meanings on its way.



Figure 6: *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, single-screen video, 2013. Images courtesy of Hito Steyerl and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

As is clear by now, Steyerl's work is not didactic at its core and would not seek to imply actual guidelines for how to move on in an increasingly surveilled society. But if we should take anything from her gestures towards notions of (in)visibility, it would be to stay with the medium, stay with the trouble so to speak, and work our way through by avoiding enclosure and practicing digital sabotage. That is, we should not withdraw because it would not be a possibility of escape in the first place. Instead, we should turn up the speed of transmission and de-subjectification through irony so as to confuse the steadfast categories that uphold conditions for surveillance and data extraction. The space between identity and refusal can be occupied if ambivalence is at the core of our online behavior. This poses a hope to undermine the categories of big data that rely on stable subjects to be known and understood. And, since it is now the images that operate, target, and extract in moves invisible to humans, Steyerl shows us that this agency can only happen through the medium.

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