

Exhibitions

Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl: War Games

Kunstmuseum Basel 5 May to 2 December

Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl's 'War Games' opens with nothing much to see (Interviews *AM314*, *AM375*). On entering the gallery, viewers are confronted, quite literally, with Rosler's *Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an American in the 21st Century)*, 2006, an installation of 16 transparent plastic curtains. Almost touching the floor and filling the space, the transparencies are printed with selections from Hannah Arendt's 1951 book *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Viewers are tasked with reading through the sheets and confronting the faces of others who are also reading. Transparency and publicity usher into view the obfuscations organising totalitarianism, then and now. After all, Arendt's insistence that 'never has our future been more unpredictable' still defines our sense of time.

This time period also frames the other work on view in the exhibition's first room: Steyerl's *Babenhäuser 1997*, 1997. The four-minute video combines footage of the burnt-out home of the town's last Jewish resident with a speech, recorded at an Antifa demonstration, confirming that Babenhäuser has, once again, been 'cleansed' of Jews. The past is never past, *Babenhäuser* makes plain. It repeats, like the recorded speech, confirming, as the recording does, that 'no speech will be acceptable to give an account of what happened here'.

The conceit of representation's inadequacies is, viewers encounter over and over in this exhibition, the 'game of war'. This is made evident by the work which gives this conceit its most famous platform and (art) history: Rosler's *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974-75. Exhibited alongside *OOPS! (Nobody Loves a Hegemony)*, 1999, Rosler's account of the way in which what became known as the Kosovo war was played out through a few iconic photographs and far too many words,

'War Games' installation view



the 24 panels making up *The Bowery* now read as a work about the war in Vietnam. The dead soldiers and dead marines not pictured in the frames become news. They become the droning verbiage making up the soundtrack of everyday life heard on the television in Rosler's *Domination and the Everyday*, 1978. On that screen, the work of representation doesn't begin with a blank or blackout, as in *The Bowery*, but with the techno-colour television test pattern. More than just a reference to the break between programming, this pattern sets off – screens – the US wars that are taking place elsewhere – in Vietnam and Chile – as entertainment.

Seeing what is not seen is the punchline of Steyerl's *Is the Museum a Battlefield*, 2013, a double-screen installation featuring a video of a lecture Steyerl gave on the occasion of the 13th Istanbul Biennale. Designed to advance her claim that the museum is, has always been, a field of war, Steyerl's lecture traces the origins of bullets fired in Turkey, which killed her friend Andrea Wolf, back to the organisation funding the Art Institute of Chicago, where *Abstract*, 2012, a work about Wolf's death, is exhibited. The bullets' trajectory is played out through a series of screens: the ones before viewers of the exhibition, before spectators at the lecture, on the phone recording the bullets in Turkey etc. These mediations also frame the bullet that Steyerl holds up for her audience, which, as she acknowledges with a smirk, is not 'there'; cannot be seen. This critique of institutions does not make visible the trajectories of power that are made not to be seen in the museum and elsewhere; rather, it overwhelms those looking or searching with seeing. As is the case with many of the works on view in 'War Games', including *The Bowery*, representation is not inadequate; indeed, viewers see or are shown too much. There is too much news, too much information. There are too many screens. In *Duty Free Art*, 2015, another of Steyerl's lecture videos, the information being 'disclosed' is already out there among the morass of data on the web – it is already known.

The exhibition's gambit is played out most brilliantly through its form: collaboration. 'War Games' refuses the art-historical conceit of legacy. There is no sense here that the older artist sets the stage for the younger artist. Lineages and influences reverse and overlap, refusing to offer the individual artist as 'the screen' through which war's stories could be told, even though, for both artists, 'the artist' – the female artist – is very present. For both, though, this presence is always mediated – a recorded voice, a lecture that was already given, staged or seen. Both Rosler and Steyerl play and perform their representations through their engagements with technology. This is why the generational story would never have worked. It rides too close to technological determinism, to the claim that technologies drive history. Despite the evident technological distance between then and now on view in the exhibition, the same war is still being fought on the screen. Instead of colonising the moon, the subject of Rosler's 'House Beautiful: The Colonies', 1966-72, Mars is the current destination. Nothing repeats in the modern game of war, it is simply still happening. There is, as Rosler insisted with 'House Beautiful: Bringing Home the War', 2004-08, a new series.

'War Games' reminds its viewers that writing new histories requires wading through the repetitions – or playing the game. This point is made ever so subtly in Steyerl's *Hell Yeah We Fuck Die*, 2016. Taking as its title the five words occurring most frequently in English-language pop lyrics over the past decade, the multimedia installation includes *Robots Today*, an eight-minute video which tells a story that couldn't be told – or that Siri is unable to tell – of the 12th-century Anatolian engineer, Al-Jazari, who is considered one of the first people to have invented programmable devices.

Hito Steyerl
The Tower 2015
 three-channel video
 installation



History is written with the information that is made public, over and over again, until it becomes standard – ‘hell’, ‘yeah’, ‘die’ etc. This writing is the training game, the preparation for the war that, as Arendt suggested, is always yet to come. Too much information does overwhelm, screen out war, but it also, as ‘War Games’ instructs, makes the writing of other war stories possible. ■

Stephanie Schwartz is lecturer in history of art at University College London.

10th Berlin Biennale: We Don't Need Another Hero

various venues 9 June to 9 September

There is a telling moment that takes place during a conversation, published in the accompanying catalogue, between the curators of this year's Berlin Biennale. Lead curator Gabi Ngcobo, in setting out the problems of the biennale format, states that ‘we know what *doesn't* make sense’, and from this opening gambit, the team – which includes Nomaduma Rosa Masilela, Serubiri Moses, Thiago de Paula Souza and Yvette Mutumba – strike out several bugbears: narrative structure, the explicit relationship to local context, transparency of intent, self-congratulatory assumptions of postcolonial critique and ‘wokeness’, and ‘a coherent reading of histories of any kind’. Even in its title, ‘We Don't Need Another Hero’ (after Tina Turner's hit song from the 1985 film *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*), the Biennale stands determinedly in opposition but seems less certain when pressed on what is needed. Is this therefore a tactical move, a way of biding time, as if wary of showing its hand too early? Is it a pre-emptory escape clause that insists that whatever you think the exhibition is, it isn't? Or is the transparent declaration of one's aims an immediate precursor to consensus and compromise, to being absorbed into the abiding neoliberal logic that underpins not only the concept of the biennale but contemporary art as well?

If the proposition sounds a little shaky, marked as it is with cautiously non-committal ambivalence towards the whole endeavour, it does begin to slowly make sense as the exhibition unfolds. Throughout, the work feels hesitant, uncertain, destabilising, continually undercutting and questioning itself and what it's doing here. In Basir Mahmoud's enigmatic and utterly engrossing work *all voices are mine*, 2018, shown in the Akademie

der Künste, the artist immediately hobbles his directorial authority, having spent his budget on a single day of filming while asking a cast of professional actors to re-enact gestures recalled from previous jobs. The film's progress is dictated only through the movement from morning to night but, even in this collection of seemingly arbitrary vignettes, one projects a vague narrative, imposing a speculative order through the occasional echoing of earlier scenes in later moments. A man sits stiffly on a white horse, then falls clumsily. Shabby-clothed individuals cross paths, right to left, left to right, jostling each other in gradually decreasing circles. An actor packs down dirt and then hurls himself to the ground. A sentry on night duty points a machine gun through a tower window. The cumulative effect leads one to prioritise certain scenes of forced activity and absurd punishment that, in their aimlessness, end up perfectly encapsulating the strictures imposed on both artist and actors.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's fluid, figurative paintings also offer a possible demonstration of resistance. In her twin portraits, a black woman and man appear relaxed, arms casually thrown over chair backrests, heads tilted and resting against open palms. However, both figures direct their gaze back upon the viewer, confronting them with an unflinching watchfulness which, coupled with the mirrored near-symmetry of the compositions, belies their presumed informality. Yiadom-Boakye's subjects might wear their anonymity as a counter to portraiture's traditional celebration of the heroic individual but they are never less than vigilant. It is a resolve that one sees in Luke Willis Thompson's 35mm film *autoprotrait*, 2017, of Diamond Reynolds, whose own anonymity was lost with the life of her partner Philando Castile. Reynolds's Facebook broadcast of the immediate moments after Castile's murder by Minnesota police on 6 July 2016 may have saved both her and their daughter, with her poise and composure standing in sharp contrast to the panicking officer (who, despite this evidence, was subsequently acquitted). One can't help but reflect on this other, absent video when encountering Thompson's austere film, which gives Reynolds a prominence beyond that of a disembodied commentator recounting yet another instance of the state-sanctioned execution of black Americans.

Unsurprisingly, the disavowal of coherence can also lead to inconclusiveness, to the circulation of distinct elements and ideas that simply coexist without ever coming together. Dineo Seshee Bopape's installation *Untitled (Of Occult Instability) [Feelings]*, 2016, at KW Institute for Contemporary Art is a sprawling arrangement, bathed in orange light, of piled rubble, video