

HITO STEYERL:
I WILL SURVIVE

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The artist, filmmaker, and author Hito Steyerl is currently one of the most important representatives of the reflection on the roles of art and the museum in society, the experimentation with forms of media presentation, and the critical exploration of the application of artificial intelligence.

Born in Munich in 1966 Steyerl studied documentary film directing at the University of Television and Film in Munich. In 1990–91, she was assistant director and technical coordinator in Wim Wender's team. She earned a PhD in philosophy from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna in 2003. She is currently Professor of Experimental Film and Video at the University of Fine Arts in Berlin. Together with Vera Tollmann and Boaz Levin, she founded the Research Center for Proxy Politics, also in Berlin. Steyerl's films and video installations have been exhibited internationally for over twenty years now. The movie "November" was shown at the Manifesta 5 in San Sebastian in 2004, while her film "Lovely Andrea" was shown at the documenta 12 (2007) in Kassel and gained her widespread public recognition. She also presented her work "Factory of the Sun" in the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015. "Hell Yeah We Fuck Die" was her contribution to the Sculpture Projects Münster in 2017, and she took part in the Venice Biennale in 2019 with several works presented at the arsenal and Giardini, including "This is the Future / Power Plants." Also in 2019, she received the Käthe Kollwitz Award from the Academy of Arts in Berlin.

In addition to creating films and installations, Steyerl is also an author and regularly holds lectures and lecture performances. Steyerl lives and works in Berlin. A selection of her published essays can be found in the following four collections: *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* (The Color of Truth) (Vienna/Berlin: Turia + Kant, 2008), *The Wretched of the Screen* (New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), *Jenseits der Repräsentation / Beyond Representation* (Cologne: Walther König, 2016), and *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (New York and London: 2017). (Cf. *Florian Ebner, Susanne Gaensheimer, Doris Krystof, Marcella Lista (EDS.): Hito Steyerl: I will survive. Film and Installation. Kunststammlung Nordrhein- Westfalen, Centre Pompidou. Spector Books, S. 259, 2020*)

The exhibition "Hito Steyerl. I Will Survive" at K21 is the first major overview of the work of the artist, filmmaker and author to be shown in a museum in Germany. The exhibition, developed jointly by the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen and the Centre Pompidou, first took place in Düsseldorf at the beginning of the year and will be presented in Paris from May to July 2021.

The exhibition begins with earlier works that exemplify Steyerl's significant role in the conception, formulation and practice of a new

understanding of documentary film, the "documentary turn". In her work over the last thirty years, she has traced the mutations of the camera image from analogue images and their multiple forms of montage to the split, fluid digital image. The title refers to a multimedia installation conceived especially for the exhibition, in which Steyerl takes a satirical-critical look at the potentials of the digital world for artistic creativity, museum forms of presentation, social dislocation and the conditions of the pandemic. (Cf. *Ebner, 2020, p. 215ff*)

The three dimensions of a digitally competent exhibition concept can also be found in Hito Steyerl's works. In her works, Steyerl always takes into account the current reality in which we move. In doing so, she also processes our social communication culture, which is mostly digital, linked, non-hierarchical, participative, interactive, on the run and which takes place in multi-layered channels to put it in the words of Dominika Szope (Cf. *Szope, Dominika (2020): '#digiTALK on the digitisation of art and culture': 'Art must be experienced!', available online at: <https://www.techtag.de/netzkultur/9-digitalk-zu-digitalisierung-von-kunst-und-kultur-kunst-muss-erlebbar-sein/>, last accessed on: 07.06.2021*)

In the following part we will focus on two works by Steyerl, taken from the exhibition I WILL SURVIVE, and analyze them in terms of content and curatorial practice considering the three dimensions of a digitally competent exhibition concept: 1) The networking of individual autonomous exhibits (hyperimaging), 2) interactive and the participatory ('perception-in-motion') 3) networking complex image content.

SocialSim (2020) explores the social fault lines and conditions of art production during the pandemic. It is also a reflection on collective hysteria and social networks. Steyerl turns a critical eye on the mass production of content, which is being increasingly taken over or manipulated by algorithms. "SocialSim" also looks back on other moments of mass hysteria in the past, like the dancing mania in the 14th and 16th centuries, which Steyerl translates into a social simulation called "Dancing Mania." The work also features a TV police Inspector on furlough because of the pandemic, and a task force looking for the lost painting "Salvator Mundi" by Leonardo da Vinci.

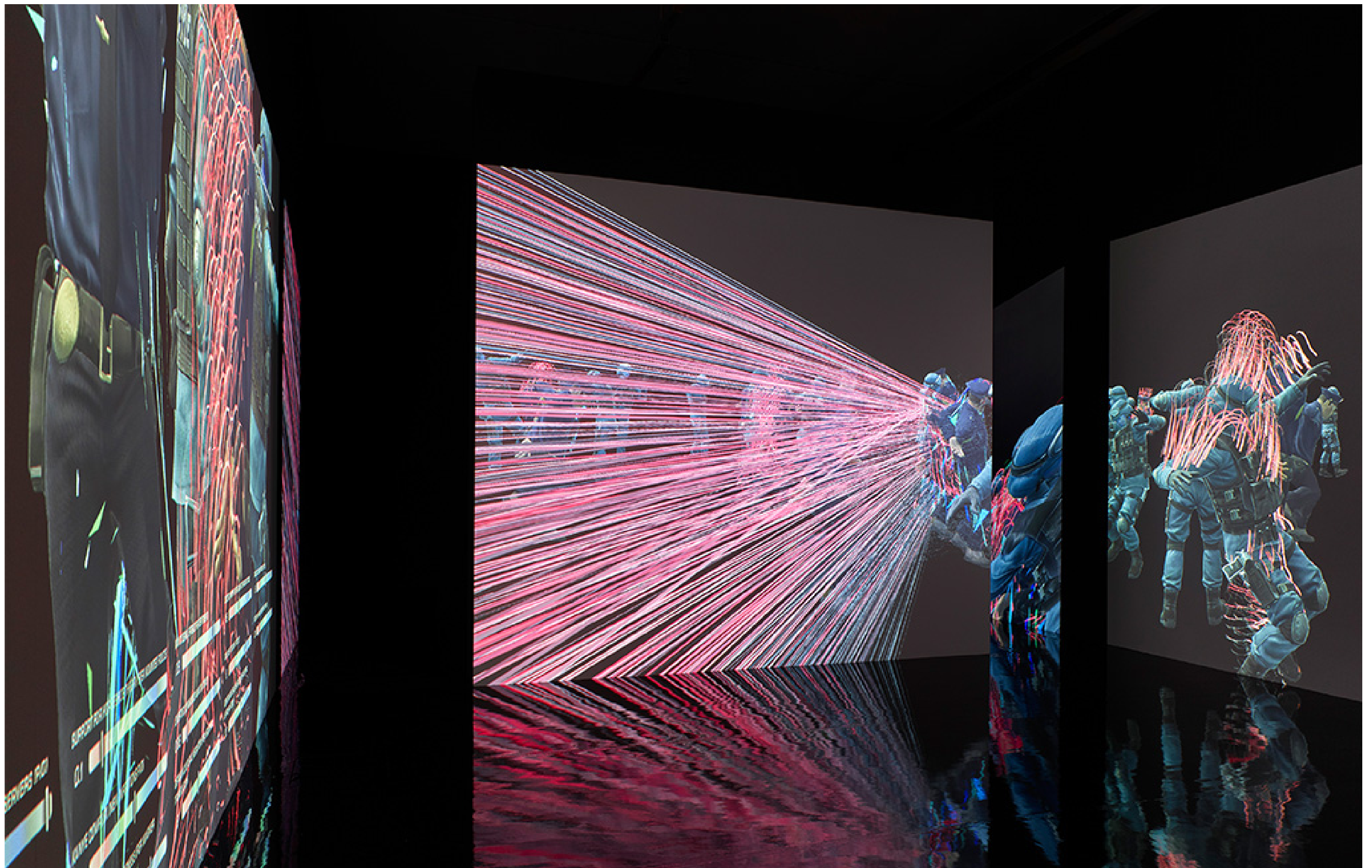
"Social Sim" is the latest work and the centerpiece of Hito Steyerl's survey exhibition. A collage of almost all the themes she has pursued since the beginning of her career: Conspiracy theories, a shift to the right, speculation on the art market, looted art, philosophy, the surveillance state. Sometimes she uses computer-generated, sometimes animated images or even found objects from the Internet. (Cf. *Ghraowi, 2020, p.6ff*)



Pic. 1: Hito Steyerl,
Photo: Rolf Vennenbernd/dpa.



Pic. 2: Installation view K21, Hito Steyerl. I Will Survive: Hito Steyerl, *SocialSim*, 2020, Photo: Achim Kukulies, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020 #HitoSteyerl #K21.



Pic. 3: Installation View, K21, Hito Steyerl.
 I Will Survive: Hito Steyerl, SocialSim, 2020,
 Art Collection Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020,
 Photo: Achim Kukulies, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn,
 2020.



Pic. 4: Hito Steyerl, Power Plants, 2019,
Photo: Serpentine Gallery.

In this two-part installation exploring the ability (or rather inability) of artificial intelligence to make predictions about the future, promises made by machine learning begin to seem very much like magic and alchemy. In the main film, a female voice introduces herself as a neural network that is constantly predicting the future. The narrator proceeds to tell the story of the Kurdish woman Hêja, who served time in prison, where she planted a garden in the future. The garden was full of plants with magical, healing powers that can be used to poison autocrats, or to make you immune to hate and propaganda on the Internet. The narration is accompanied by a deluge of kaleidoscopic images that seem to be constantly overwriting and foreshadowing the next image.

“This is the Future” poses important questions about how we deal with artificial intelligence. What is the function of these supposedly all-knowing algorithms, which can predict the future but not the present? How reliable are predictions based on data from the past? What dangers do algorithms pose that were developed to predict not only the growth of forests, but also the occurrence of uprisings as well as the rate of suicides?

The second part of the installation consists of “Power Plants,” which are bright, colorful plants generated by artificial intelligence, shown blending into each other on eight monitors.

The neural networks programmed to predict the future ceaselessly create each successive flower image based on the current video image. Essentially, the flowers predict their own future in exactly 0.04 seconds (at 24 images per second). The title “Power Plants” plays with the many meanings of “power” as well as “plants.” It can refer to the necessary conditions for digital technology (electricity), the political and economic power relations that dictate our lives, and the importance of the ecosystem for maintaining the basis of life. In Steyerl’s vision of the future, vegetation yet again conquers the wastelands of human civilization and unfolds its power (Cf. Ebner, 2020, p.116ff).

In this two works, it becomes particularly clear how Steyerl works. Under the concept of video essays, which Steyerl coined, several image contents are linked together on one screen as well as from screen to screen. In the process, even pop-cultural, seemingly easy-to-receive image content is stretched into a complex network of images. In terms of content and curatorial practice, or rather spatial design, the multimedia installation asks the recipients to move and participate. In Social Sim one must even move or dance in order to receive her work. As in a club, the video screens and PA systems of SocialSim beam at the recipients from all sides. The volume even reaches so far that it can already be perceived from the adjoining rooms. In addition to the hyperimage-like work. Steyerl thus also connects individual autonomous exhibits with each other on an auditory level. Similar to SocialSim, the recipients of This is the Future/ Power Plants are asked to move. Only through movement can the work be perceived in its entirety. Not only in the work itself do digital image contents merge with each other, but also on an analog level the screens with text contents (This is the Future) connect with the screens showing the morphing plants (Powerplants). The result is a networked and complex image fragment that one first has to see through.

In general, it was noticeable at the exhibition that one needed a lot of time during the reception. Steyerl, however, plays with the over-reaction in reference to the flood of images of the digital culture. A digital perception competence helps us to receive and understand such exhibition situations.



Pic. 5: Installation View, Serpentine Galleries,
Hito Steyerl, Power Plants, 2019,
Photo: Esther Schipper Gallery.



Pic. 6: Installation View, K21, I Will Survive: Hito Steyerl, Power Plants, 2019, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020, Photo: Achim Kukulies, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020.

Florian Ebner, Susanne Gaensheimer, Doris Krystof, Marcella Lista (EDS.): Hito Steyerl: I will survive. Film and Installation. Kunststammlung Nordrhein- Westfalen, Centre Pompidou. Spector Books. S.215-222, 2020.

Ghraawi, Ayham (2020): Dance Dance Mania. In: Florian Ebner, Susanne Gaensheimer, Doris Krystof, Marcella Lista (EDS.): Hito Steyerl: I will survive. Film and Installation. Kunststammlung Nordrhein- Westfalen, Centre Pompidou. Spector Books. S.215-222, 2020.

Szope, Dominika (2020): '#digiTALK on the digitisation of art and culture': 'Art must be experienced!', avail- able online at: www.techtag.de/netzkultur/9-digitalk-zu-digitalis-ierung-von-kunst-und-kultur-kunst-muss-erlebbar-sein/, 06.06. 2021.

Pic. 1: Hito Steyerl, Photo: Rolf Vennenbernd/dpa.

Pic. 2: Installation view K21, Hito Steyerl. I Will Survive: Hito Steyerl, SocialSim, 2020, Photo: Achim Kukulies, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020 #HitoSteyerl #K21.

Pic. 3: Installation View, K21, Hito Steyerl. I Will Survive: Hito Steyerl, SocialSim, 2020, Art Collection Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020, Photo: Achim Kukulies, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020.

Pic. 4: Hito Steyerl, Power Plants, 2019, Photo: Serpentine Gallery.

Pic. 5: Installation View, Serpentine Galleries, Hito Steyerl, Power Plants, 2019, Photo: Esther Schipper Gallery.

Pic. 6: Installationsansicht K21, Hito Steyerl. I Will Survive: Hito Steyerl, SocialSim, 2020, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020, Foto: Achim Kukulies, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020.