



Title

Hito Steyerl

Author(s)

Henry Broome

Article DOI

Not applicable

Url

<https://burlingtoncontemporary.co.uk/reviews/reviews/hito-steyerl>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Henry Broome: 'Hito Steyerl', *Burlington Contemporary* (7th May 2019),
<https://burlingtoncontemporary.co.uk/reviews/reviews/hito-steyerl>

About the author(s)

Henry Broome is an arts journalist and utopian.

Cover image: **Fig. 5** Installation view of *Hito Steyerl: Power Plants* at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, 11th April–6th May 2019. Serpentine Galleries AR application design by Ayham Ghraawi, developed by Ivaylo Getov, Luxloop (Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper Gallery, Berlin; photograph © 2019 readsreads.info).

Hito Steyerl

by Henry Broome • 07.05.2019

Following the decisions of the National Portrait Gallery, London, and the South London Gallery not to proceed with Sackler Foundation donations, Hito Steyerl addressed the controversy at the launch of her exhibition *Power Plants* at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London: 'Imagine you were married to a serial killer, then wanted a divorce – I don't think it should be a problem'.¹ Opened in 2013, the space was financed by a £5.5 million grant from the Mortimer and Theresa Sackler Foundation, now implicated in the United States opioid crisis. The manufacturer of OxyContin, Purdue Pharma, which is part-owned by the Sacklers, faces a wave of lawsuits for its aggressive marketing of the highly addictive opioid painkiller.² Steyerl consulted Nan Goldin, the artist and campaign organiser of Prescription Addiction Intervention Now (PAIN), who are dedicated to holding the Sacklers to account. 'I decided to make the private public', Goldin wrote in Artforum.³ On Goldin's request, Steyerl highlighted two of the movement's key demands: institutions should first, remove Sackler signage, and secondly, publicly declare whether they are willing to accept future Sackler donations and outline clearly their policy towards donations.⁴

The Serpentine was expecting the artist's statement and orchestrated an immediate response: 'We have no future plans to accept funding from the Sacklers. We remain committed to being an open platform where emerging and established artists can be seen and heard'. But with this assurance came no commitment to 'de-naming' the gallery, as Steyerl put it, and no policy on future donations. Furthermore, given that the Sackler Trust suspended all new grants in March, the gallery's response seems not much more than good optics.⁵ While the institution appears progressive, inclusive and financially transparent, it remains complicit with exploitation.


Steyerl's exhibition examines the optics of power and immiseration, making the invisible visible. Also titled *Power Plants*, a series of videos on LED screens are mounted on a scaffold structure **FIG. 1**. A few concrete blocks provide seating. The installation is inspired by ruderal plants, species that often grow by railways tracks, motorways, in the cracks between pavements or other disturbed and destroyed environments. Piercingly bright images of flora light the dark, windowless room, a sort of reverse photosynthesis, as if a future ecology has managed to adapt to climate collapse.

The videos are generated by an artificial neural network, a form of artificial intelligence used in predictive analytics that is modelled on biological nervous systems. It amalgamates the previous seconds of video footage to produce new frames, which combine and recombine as visitors watch, forming blurry composite images. Flitting flowers and trees flutter and sway, like a sped-up time-lapse on a nature documentary **FIG. 2**. The video is stuck in a deranged loop, a rapidly repeating shift between winter and spring, growth and atrophy. There are parallels to Pierre Huyghe's recent Serpentine exhibition, *Umwelt*, for which bluebottle flies were bred in the gallery. They have a very short lifespan, only about two weeks. Over the months, a crunchy layer of black carcasses formed on the floor. But life on Earth, as Steyerl's videos foreshadow, will not keep making itself anew if myopic governments refuse to transition from fossil capitalism to renewable energy.

As well as the video work, there is an open source augmented reality (AR) application, *Power Plants*^{OS}, which can be downloaded and accessed via visitors' phones or tablets, or from iPads suspended from the ceiling. You use your camera to scan the sigils located around the gallery **FIG. 3**, magical symbols with the power to summon a desired entity or future, suggesting AI's supposed ability to divine the future, as well as the mystic faith we hold in technology to deliver us there. What you can see of the gallery's interior on the screen through the iPad's camera dissolves behind a rainbow of superimposed text **FIG. 4**, floating in the air, sometimes spiralling, other times, like a will-o'-the-wisp, it flashes and fades **FIG. 5**. Like Pokémon Go, another AR app, you feel compelled to take it all in before it escapes your grasp – a kind of digital vanitas.

The texts developed out of conversations with advocacy groups, unions and artists that aimed to confront austerity and social inequality in the United Kingdom, particularly in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, where the gallery is based and where there is a huge gulf between rich and poor. Steyerl's research partners include Architects for Social Housing, Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), Constantine Gras, the Reclaiming Our Futures Alliance, The Voice of Domestic Workers and Unite the Union's Hotel Workers Branch. The texts provides a speculative taxonomy of future flora; each species has miraculous medicinal-political powers: *Malva Neglecta Futuris* can be used to treat political exhaustion or 'poison your local autocrat'; a not-so-cryptic reproach to the Serpentine and others, *Synechococcus Elongatus Futuris* rids 'an arts institution's addiction to toxic money'; and *London Rocket Futuris*, which spread after the Great Fire of 1666, is 'tasty but [. . .] an eyesore and a visual abomination', invoking middle-class Londoners' repulsion to social housing, particularly tower blocks such as Grenfell.

Actual Reality^{OS}, a second open source AR app, is made to be used in the gallery's grounds. The programme assembles data from

community-led initiatives, national surveys as well as that obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests. As viewers use the app to locate the three sigils and activate the AR , mountains of data emerge towering from the building, representing the precipitous class structure of the UK. The gallery's pillars waver under the weight of the mass above – how much longer can the one per cent hold up the ninety-nine? But visitors will also notice that the Sackler's name has been excised from the frieze, a tacit reminder of the gallery's still complicit role in the opioid crisis.

Various quotes from hotel employees, domestic workers and other representatives from Steyerl's research partners are inscribed on the building: 'I'm resigning today, because you're a sex maniac'; '70 hours a week? You're having a laugh. Try 90!'; 'Some of us ran away'. Notwithstanding these testimonials, however, AR^{OS} does not really show immiseration on a human level; the data is too abstract, too impersonal. It also fails to explain why austerity was implemented, or by what authority the UK continues to be subjected to it, and whose interests it serves.

That data has become a dominant explanatory framework is borne out (as well as reproduced) in the work. The app's title, a play on 'augmented reality', conveys the idea that social inequality is often screened from view, but it is also suggestive of the deeply ideological notion that data is absent of ideology, neutral, empirical and irrefutable. The catalogue's attempt to frame 'personal testimonies as a form of data' in its description of AR^{OS} supports the notion that data is increasingly seen as the only legitimate type of knowledge – individual experience cannot be taken at face value, it has to be repeatable, quantifiable. Like austerity itself, data pessimism, to borrow Alexander R. Galloway's terminology,⁶ is deeply cynical because it forecloses the possibility that there might be an alternative, not just another epistemology, but another politico-economic system.

In stark contrast to AR^{OS} , *Power Walks* comprises four videos, featuring personal accounts told by the research partners in the first person. It is also accompanied by a programme of guided walks, intended to disrupt visitors' relation to the area around the gallery and see behind the veneer of affluence. In the films, the camera follows the subjects as they walk through Hyde Park, observing them at a distance, giving the work a documentary-like social realism, but it is also suggestive of their isolation. We do not see their faces for long, if at all; they are anonymous, like apparitions of AR or spectral images. Voices out of sync with the picture on screen recall their experiences: in the park, nannies watch from a distance, ready to pick up rubbish, while their employer and their children enjoy picnics. There are fountains and swimming pools in the nearby hotels but behind closed doors modern slaves are at work. Homelessness is rife in Chelsea and Kensington. Some people live in precarious temporary housing

while others continually couch-surf to survive, yet the probability of a property being empty rises with its market value. As a man in a mobility scooter rocks through the park, the voiceover recalls how after the banker bailout and welfare cuts that followed, carers would ask patients if they minded sleeping the night in a soiled nappy. But among the strife there are also stories of resistance and hope. DPAC have fought tooth and nail against Tory austerity measures and have applied significant pressure on the government to scrap Universal Credit. During the housing crisis of the late 1970s (which continues today), a group squatters living on Freston Road in the Royal Borough fought eviction by declaring independence from the United Kingdom, forming the Free Republic of Frestonia. Maybe utopia is not altogether a mirage.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Hito Steyerl: Power Plants* at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, 11th April–6th May 2019. Serpentine Galleries AR application design by Ayham Ghraawi, developed by Ivaylo Getov, Luxloop (Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper Gallery, Berlin; photograph © 2019 readsreads.info).



Fig. 6 *Actual Reality OS AR*, application design by Ayham Ghraoui, developed by Ivaylo Getov, Luxloop. Marker production Philipp Von Frankenberg. (Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper Gallery, Berlin; photograph © 2019 readsreads.info).

Exhibitions details Hito Steyerl: Power Plants
Serpentine Sackler Gallery
11th April–6th May 2019

Footnotes

- 1** H. Steyerl, cited in J. Michalska and H. McGivern: “‘Like being married to a serial killer’: Hito Steyerl denounces Sackler sponsorship of museums”, *Art Newspaper*, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/elephant-in-the-room-hito-steyerl-denounces-sackler-sponsorship-at-opening-of-her-show-at-serpentine-sackler-gallery>, accessed 30th April 2019.
- 2** Anon.: ‘Sackler billions targeted in New York fraud lawsuit’, *BBC*, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-47738353>, accessed 30th April 2019.
- 3** N. Goldin, cited in *ibid.*: ‘Nan Goldin’, *Artforum*, available at <https://www.artforum.com/print/201801/nan-goldin-73181>, accessed 30th April 2019.
- 4** See <https://www.sacklerpain.org/mission-statement>, accessed 30th April 2019.

- 5** B. Zimmer: 'Optics', *The New York Times Magazine*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07FOB-onlanguage-t.html>, accessed 2nd May 2019.
- 6** A.R. Galloway, cited in *ibid.*: 'Network Pessimism', *Culture and Communication*, available at <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/network-pessimism>, accessed 30th April 2019.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

© The Burlington Magazine Publications Limited. All rights reserved
ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ