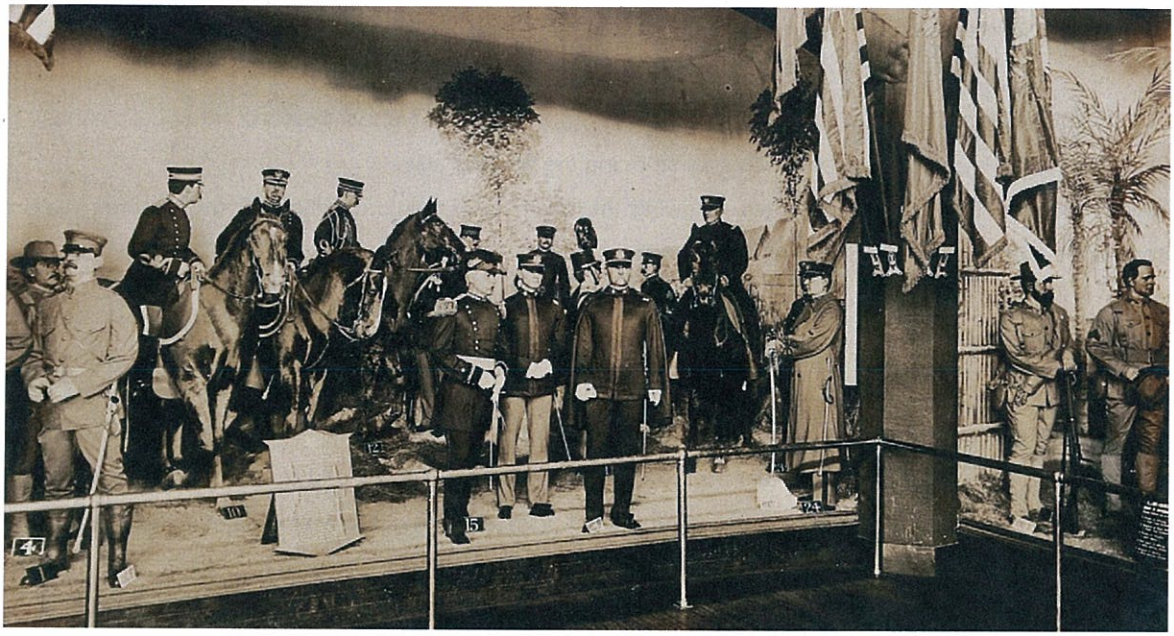
This is a Document of Warfare



'A display of US military uniforms,' 1904 (London: Wellcome Library)

A thing is a web of relations at a standstill.

Paul Chan[1]

On 13 September 2013, Amnesty International released a statement urging the United States, Britain and Israel to suspend shipments of tear gas to Turkey. Three days earlier, Ahmet Atakan was killed by police during a protest in Istanbul. He was the sixth fatality that summer.

Months earlier, the organisers of the 13th Istanbul Biennial had applied for permits to stage events in derelict public spaces around the city. A benevolent gesture, intent on bridging the chasm between art and the people. The people, however, had other plans.

In May of that year, a group of protesters gathered in Gezi Park to express collective outrage at their government's repeated attacks on civil liberties. They were met with military force. The Biennial was forced to retreat, and events were rescheduled to take place within institutions. Among them was Hito Steyerl's *Is the Museum a Battlefield?*

[1]Chan, Paul. "Occupy Response." *October* 142.142 (2012): 40.

We begin in several places.

1) In 1792, the storming of the Louvre, and the radical appropriation of feudal treasures into public hands
2) In October 1917, in Russia, the Bolsheviks storming the Winter Palace
3) In 1998, the site of a mass grave following the death of Steyerl's childhood friend, Andrea Wolf, a comrade in the Kurdish Workers women's faction

We're pulled back.

From a shaky iPhone shot of a hand plucking a shell casing from the ground, Steyerl follows the trajectory of the bullet to its source. At first, this trajectory is linear. Images correspond to words. This is a hillside. This is a blanket. Until we arrive at the headquarters of Lockheed Martin, the weapon's manufacturer.

Text accompanies Steyerl's narration, as both a guide and a gesture.

This is a shot.

Trace the gesture back. Through Sontag. Through Barthes. The gesture is as old as the device itself. The camera is a gun, we know that much. The gesture is not the point. The metaphor is too seductive for it to be valid on its own. This is the first demonstration of the contrary physics that govern Steyerl's performance-lecture. The semiotic understanding of the bullet determines that it travels from one place to another, agent to subject, aggressor to victim, at an incredibly high speed. Steyerl upends this. There are mediations between point of origin and point of impact, 'data clouds,' 'bit flips,' circularities through which mutations take place and understanding is altered.

Lockheed Martin is not the single source, but rather a point within a network of culpability. From the foyer of a weapons manufacturer we are taken to a museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, whose continued existence is directly enabled by the sale of weapons. It is in this institution that Steyerl is confronted with her own complicity in the network. On display is one of her own works.

If the camera is the weapon, then the image is the bullet and the image is unstable. It does not, as we might expect, have a single point of transmission, but reaches us in ways we are yet to coherently imagine. In an essay published in *e-flux* titled 'Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?' Steyerl outlines the trajectory of the contemporary image

> Artworks are e-mailed to pop up in bank lobbies designed on fighter jet software. Huge cloud storage drives rain down as skylines in desert locations. But by becoming real, most images are substantially altered. They get translated, twisted, bruised, and reconfigured[2].

Steyerl's 'data cloud' when described by her, sounds semi-mythical, a non-space where matter is transformed from one thing to another. This isn't far off. When we refer to the cloud we do not imagine data banks; rather, it is a liminal space between points of contact. Before even disclosing it, the stability of Styerl's image ruptures.

Steyerl's practice has historically positioned itself between fiction and documentary. In *Is the Museum a Battlefield* there is the empirical, and there are incongruities Trains of speech are interrupted by an incredulous laugh which does not distinguish between the verifiable and the implausible. It appears during a scene from the 2008 film *Wanted*, used to demonstrate the upsetting physics of Steyerl's bullet. It appears when Steyerl reveals the software Frank Gehry used to design Lockheed Martin's headquarters was the same software used to design some of their weapons.

This blurred line makes visible the ideological matrices which produce the narrative. Steyerl is a scavenger, trading in historical oddities, the leftovers of cultural output, and discrepancies in language. What she constructs is a reality that is close to our own, one in which language and the way we visualise things do not align.

Take, for instance, tear gas. Its name suggests both brutality and banality. A momentary violence that serves the greater purpose of retaining social order. This is a misnomer. Tear gas is outlawed by the Chemical Weapons Convention for use during wartime. The Omega Research Centre argues that 'less-lethal' weapons are positioned as acceptable alternatives to guns, a 'soft' form of social control[3]. Euphemistic labels enable this. Watering eyes are just one effect of the substance. Tear gas also causes violent retching, throat irritation, involuntary blinking that can last for several days, and potential death.

The museum exists to stabilise the image. The conservator understands that chemical degradation is inevitable. There is no halting decay, only minimising it. The conservator, when faced with modern technology, sees decay differently. Lead soaps can't eat away at binary code so easily. Artworks get trapped inside the machine. According to Professor Christine Frohnert, around 90-95% of digital artworks are in an unknown condition. To assess them, files have to be accessed, and even by opening files, there

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[2] Steyerl, Hito. "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" *e-flux*. 49. (Nov. 2013)
[3] "What is Tear Gas?" *Facing Tear Gas*. 2012.

is a potential that images, on a bit level, can be corrupted[4]. Steyerl's image circumvents this. Its original is a copy. Commissioned by the Istanbul Biennial, filmed in Germany, and subsequently licensed by institutions around the world, including the Adam Art Gallery, to be viewed on a flat screen television, or even online.

The museum stabilises the image not just for posterity. It mounts the image, positions it under lighting bright enough to enable its reading without causing irreversible damage, it provides corresponding text. It rescues images from circulating within a capitalist economy and lays them to rest in public hands. It is a discreet and attractive architectural object. Designed, perhaps, by Frank Gehry, or Zaha Hadid, or Frank Lloyd Wright. It has an investment in maintaining this set of assumptions.

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is part of the most visible contemporary network of museums. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is designed as a series of circulations that echo Steyerl's bullet. On 30 March 2014, a loose coalition of academics, students, and labour activists dropped 9,000 flyers from the banisters of the museum's spiral ramp. The flyers criticised the well documented abuses of construction workers building the Abu Dhabi branch of the museum. The museum was promptly shut, visitors ordered out, flyers swept away. The next day, museum management released a statement to *Hyperallergic* stating that the Abu Dhabi branch was not yet under construction[5]. Denial of dissent negates its potency. On several early summer mornings in 2013, the Turkish government contracted grounds workers to replant foliage in Gezi Park, thereby erasing any sign of unrest[6].

How is a Hadid built? How is a Gehry built? According to Steyerl, a plasticine monolith is erected, around which bullets are allowed to fly, breaking of pieces. Every act of creation, whether image or structure or network, is simultaneously, necessarily, an act of violence.

Steyerl cites Abu Dhabi as the site of a new kind of feudal collection. Public space, here, is a euphemism for means of oppression. She performs the role of pedagogue assumed by the lectern in front of her, the slideshow behind her, and, necessarily, offers a conclusion. A return to the violence that designated the museum a public space. To free the museum from a web of reproductive violence, she suggests, it must be stormed once more. But this seems insincere, belated, ultimately futile, and at the same time seductive. Steyerl's conclusion is engineered as a cruel homage to the utopia of public space. As Bryan N. Alexander explains in his essay on Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernity's occasional dreams of the perfect world, by virtue of the real's catastrophic failures, become dystopias by the enormous amplitude of their shortfalls[7].'

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[4]quoted in Walker, Benjamin. "Artifacts (1 of 2)." *Benjamin Walker's Theory of Everything.* December 2013.
[5] Haddaya, Mostafa. "Protesters Rain Down Thousands of Bills in Guggenheim Rotunda." *Hyperallergic:* 30 March 2014
[6] Snow, Tom. "Istanbul Biennial: A Retreat to the Institution." *Afterall.* 21 November 2013
[7]Alexander, Brian N.. "Jameson's Adorno and the Problem of Utopia." *Utopian Studies* 9.2 (1998): 56.

The contemporary imagination has trouble imagining its own reality. The cloud is not a cloud. The image is not an object. The object is a series of relations. The museum was never public. The contemporary imagination fails to realise the potential of revolutionary praxis because it cannot escape from its failures. If 1792 marks the beginning of the public collection, how are we to speak of 1830, 1832, 1848, and 1871?