

ARTSEEN

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Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl: *War Games*

by Lisa E. Bloom



Martha Rosler, *Photo Op*, from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, 2004-2008 Fotomontage, 50,8 x 61 cm. Courtesy the Artist, Mitchell Innes and Nash, New York, and Galerie Nagel Draxler Berlin/ Köln.

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Given the ongoing political upheavals in the US, and the EU, what kind of artists' work is relevant in an age of populist uprisings, when the far right is gaining

power throughout the world? *Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl: War Games*, one of the most important exhibitions of the year, offers compelling evidence in answer to such a question. This affectively and intellectually intriguing exhibition is noteworthy in demonstrating the surprising affinities and shared concerns across countries (US and Germany) and generations ('60s and '90s) of two renowned women artists. Both are theoreticians and creative practitioners whose work reveals the capacity of art to understand and transform the violence which shapes our world.

Such an exhibition also reminds us of how feminism, speculative science fiction, and contemporary art are uniquely situated to voice one's views to challenge the violence of our world blighted by unregulated capitalism, technological innovation, and ongoing wars which produce a constant state of armed conflict and fear (the United States has continuously been at war since 2001). Rosler has been critiquing American culture and the war economy for decades, beginning with her *Bringing the War Home* photomontage series that she made between 1967 and 1972, which draws on images from the Vietnam war, and her later *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series*, made in 2004-2008, which uses images from the Bush era's War on Terror, including images of torture from Abu Ghraib. Both series bring images of war into domestic interiors within the US, rather than keeping the violence of war "far away" in other countries. Rosler's satirical photomontage titled *Photo Op* (2004 – 2008) features a woman (repeated twice as if she is a robot imitating a human) expressing anger at having to see conflict and violence "at home" rather than "at a distance." Rosler's work draws from dystopian science fiction to speculate what can happen to an eerily detached consumerist society who wages war but does not want to see its dead and wounded up close. Her photomontages question the allure of warfare at a distance and anticipate the current moment when armed violence is brought home and embedded in everyday life in our schools, neighborhoods, and homes.

Seeing Rosler's *A Simple Case of Torture, or How to Sleep at Night* (1983) again in 2018, reminds us that our current migrants, whose children are being taken away and put into cages at our Southern border by the Trump administration, are fleeing Latin American countries where the US once promoted the installation of right-wing dictatorial regimes through overt and covert actions throughout the Cold War. The video documents the activity of death and torture

squads, especially in Chile, and examines how in authoritarian governments, violence can quickly evolve into terror masked as a “legitimate” imposition of state order. In Rosler’s video, we see how 1980s neo-conservatives during the Reagan administration were relying on the same propaganda narratives as today, to “protect” the nation and its borders from “others” and progressives were questioning whether to sacrifice our laws in order to seal the border.

In Rosler’s more recent work *Theatre of Drones* (2013 – 2018), she critiques the use of new technologies such as unmanned vehicles or drones for both domestic surveillance and war at a distance. This work explores the connections between public activism and contemporary art by adapting the public banner format she used originally in 2013 when her work was displayed on the free speech wall in front of Charlottesville, Virginia’s City Hall to protest the use of drones in their airspace. Presented as a series of photographs, cartoons and texts, Rosler’s piece addresses the ongoing dangers posed as drone warfare and ubiquitous surveillance become routine and how the US military chillingly sees drones simply as an actual “upgrade”; even utopian instance of new war technology; where drones both replace and protect US bodies from actual combat. This is evidenced in a quote from Gordon Johnson of the Pentagon’s Joint Forces Command in 2013 displayed on one of Rosler’s banners: “They don’t get hungry. They are not afraid. They don’t forget their orders [. . .] Will they do a better job than humans? Yes.”

Both Rosler’s and Steyerl’s work reveals a renewed interest in 1980s cyborg discourses, which are now returning in the guise of human-enhancement research. Steyerl’s work also influenced by dystopic science fiction explores how forms of technology such as robotics are used in warfare and surveillance as well as for humanitarian crises, and how they are also viewed without irony, as a form of techno-fix. Her work explores the increased militarization of civilian life, but unlike Rosler’s, Steyerl’s relies more on juxtaposition and satirical humor to imagine the future consequences of humans merging with robots. In *Hell Yeah We Fuck Die* (2016), she presents robots as a new discrete subject of history, by staging self-absorbed identical robocops (filmed from computer simulations off the internet) now used in peace-for-aid missions in crisis zones that move and fall down in a dance style popular in music videos and computer games. Though presented as a benign cultural figure familiar from non-violent video and computer games, for Steyerl these robots are far from harmless.

In *Robots Today* (2016), rather than using found footage of computer simulations of robots off the internet as she did in the last piece, this installation has more of a documentary feel. To make this piece, she traveled to the South Anatolian city of Diyarbakir where the famous medieval inventor and writer Al-Jazari considered one of the fathers of robotics from the 12thth century once lived. We see two young men who dance in the city's ruins, following the same robotic dance style of the robots in *Hell Yeah We Fuck Die* (2016). Steyerl thinks we are all living inside our computer simulations and in her work she takes these simulation out into the world as is the case of *Robot's Today*. There she depicts human's simulating robots as eerily dancing warriors rather than as peaceful emissaries dancing amongst the ruins in the city of Diyarbakir destroyed in 2015, not by robots per se, but by human's imitating robots and acting from their cybernetic scripts. She adds an apocalyptic turn to Al-Jazari's vision which was unimaginable at the time of his inventions. For both artists, the distance between play and warfare is shorter than we think. A robot that dances could also kill. Games of playful simulation are not that distant from actual warfare. As the far right is gaining power throughout the world, for Steyerl and Rosler, life is beginning to resemble the dystopic science fiction they read, and some of these actual books such as Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton* and Doris Lessing's *The Sirian Experiments* are amply displayed in an installation by Rosler in the same room as Steyerl's *Robots Today*.

Both Rosler's and Steyerl's work warns us against the hubris of drone and robotic technology, and the Silicon Valley view of the world that makes us believe that we can solve our problems through distant warfare relying on the smooth working of the market and technological fixes such as drones and AI robotic devices. US warriors today wage war with drones and are the new subjects to occupy the position of Rosler's self-absorbed civilian consumers. These strangely detached drone operators working at the predator drone command centers located many thousands of miles away from their targets in the state of Nevada, push the button, then leave the experience of war behind when they return home and go about their daily life. And yet, human detachment from one's role in such violence is not so easy as rates of PTSD suffered by these long distance suburban drone operators has risen in recent years.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Steyerl, in her piece *Duty Free Art* (2015), a video recording of a lecture that she gave at Artists Space in New York in 2015, does not privilege the world of contemporary art as a pure space removed from capital and the prevailing global order and its war economy. Rather, she advocates for a duty-free art, in the form of art that is free of all nationalist and financial obligations, that can provide a space for creativity and critique dedicated to thinking through our current political moment so that ongoing warfare does not remain meaningless or futile.



Martha Rosler, *Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an American in her 21st Century)*, 2006. Installation with 16 transparent curtains with printed text, aluminum mounts. Courtesy Kunstmuseum Basel.

I want to conclude with Rosler's powerful work *Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an American in the 21st century)* (first exhibited in 2006 at the Jewish Girls School in Berlin marking the centenary of Hannah Arendt's birth) that responds astutely to how, in the service of unjust and arbitrary authoritarian governments, war and violence will be constantly reshaped by these evolving technologies. The installation creates a calm and quiet space for viewers to read and reflect as they walk amongst the floor to ceiling pages of Arendt's once again timely text, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that first appeared in 1951. Before we let governments tighten the screws even further, we need to remember Hannah Arendt's chilling warning of what might be yet to come: "After a few years of power and systemic co-ordination, the Nazis could rightly announce: 'The only person who is still a private individual in Germany is somebody who is asleep.'"