

HARUN FAROCKI & HITO STEYERL

LIFE CAPTURED STILL

6 FEBRUARY – 4 APRIL 2020



1.

The first major exhibition dedicated to Harun Farocki and Hito Steyerl, who are often conceptually associated but whose works have never before been shown together in this way. Revered as pioneers in the fields of documentary film and new media art across two generations, the artists' expansive video installations interrogate organisational power structures, divisions of labour and the kaleidoscopic images that permeate contemporary society. *Life Captured Still* is curated by Antje Ehmann and Carles Guerra, with exhibition architecture by Luis Feduchi.

Harun Farocki and Hito Steyerl are bound by a special form of collaboration, beyond any space-time framework. Though they belong to quite different generations, they share a stubborn critical attitude that dismantles the pervasive biopolitical regimes of late capitalism. When there is no hope for a better world, their images open up a crack in the system of art, no matter how discredited it might be. Call it the pragmatism of the hopeless.

Both Farocki and Steyerl represent an exceptional position that challenges the orthodox division of labour operating in the art world. If they are praised as theorists, they are artists; if they are treated as artists, then what they do is theory. Their production unfolds in a world that accepts war and inequalities as basic conditions for a lifestyle heavily dependent on asymmetrical realities. By bringing them together, we get a unique opportunity to transcend their thematic obsessions and look into the details of a sounding critique. They reveal the secret anatomy of images. – Carles Guerra, 2020

We invite the audience to immerse themselves in the works of Harun Farocki and Hito Steyerl, to spend time with and to explore the artists' questions and doubts, their curiosities

and anxieties; their investigations into the worlds between the analogue and the digital, between human labour and the labour of machines, between the worlds of capitalist exploitation and financial accumulation. – Antje Ehmman, 2020



2. Shown together in the hallway, Hito Steyerl's **November** (2004) and **Lovely Andrea** (2007) both relate to her teenage friendship with Andrea Wolf, who was killed by the Turkish police in 1998 following her arrest as a member of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a militant separatist group. Wolf has since become an icon of martyrdom, displayed on Kurdish protest posters, which Steyerl draws upon in her films to consider the ongoing circulation and transformation of Wolf's image in the

popular imagination. *November* was prompted by Steyerl's discovery of one such poster among pornographic ones at a cinema and opens with fight-scene footage from Steyerl's first film, made during her teens and starring Wolf as a feminist vigilante. As Steyerl's voiceover explains, the title refers to 'the time after October, a time when revolution seems to be over', and she uses fragments of found footage to trace the path of Wolf's lifetime radicalisation, as well as the politicised afterlife of her image. Commissioned by documenta, *Lovely Andrea* records Steyerl's search for a lost photograph of herself as a *shibari* bondage model, taken under the pseudonym 'Andrea' while studying at the Japan Academy of Moving Images in Tokyo, a quest that leads her back to Japan and the bondage industry. The resulting film combines documentary footage, images of Wolf and superhero clips to explore the wider implications of the term 'bondage' and the intersections of role-playing, staging, pornography, exploitation, freedom and self-expression.

On view in the Berkeley gallery, **Labour in a Single Shot** is an ongoing collaborative project initiated in 2011 by the late Harun Farocki and his partner, curator Antje Ehmman, organising video production workshops in 15 cities worldwide. Local collaborators were tasked with investigating the subject of labour – paid and unpaid, material and immaterial, traditional and new – in short videos of one to two minutes, taken in a single, continuous shot without any cuts. These formal limitations have resulted in short films of great ingenuity, using other creative devices to create narrative, and raise essential questions not only about the role of labour in society but also the filmmaking process itself. All of the films produced to date are archived in a web catalogue and a selection of 60 films from 10 cities – Bangalore, Boston, Buenos Aires, Cairo, Hangzhou, Hanoi, Johannesburg, Lodz, Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro – are included in this exhibition, each location projected onto its own screen that can be viewed simultaneously, forming a microcosm of the globalised world.

On the first floor, Steyerl's short film **Strike** (2010) is the visual enactment of a pun, playing on the varied meanings of 'strike' as 'to hit' or as an organised refusal to work by a group of employees to protest working conditions. The work references Sergei Eisenstein's well-known silent film of the same name from 1925, which details a factory workers' strike in pre-revolutionary Russia and its violent suppression. In Steyerl's film, the action is confined to the single strike of a chisel against a flat-screen, producing colourful 'fractures' that draw

attention to the materiality of the viewing apparatus. In this way, the starkly imperative word that appears on the screen and its deceptively simple re-enaction encompasses a multitude of references.

Steyerl's immersive installation **The Tower** (2015) focuses on the making of the video game *Skyscraper: Stairway to Chaos*



3.

by the Ukrainian company Ace3D, which is based on Saddam Hussein's unrealised plans to reconstruct the Tower of Babel in Babylon, the ancient capital that he began rebuilding in the 1980s. Part of an origin myth explaining the development of different languages, the Tower of Babel has come to symbolise the hubris of humans aspiring to godliness and the chaos resulting from an inability to communicate. As the game developer describes in voiceover, the *Skyscraper* is a contemporary analogue to the Tower that connects to other dimensions, much as Steyerl's film merges the virtual with reality. Precariously situated in a conflict zone, which he describes as a '1 km ride by tank' from the Russian border, the developer explains how he has become part of a global network of technology firms, remotely contracted by European companies who outsource labour to cheaper economies, drawing attention to the physical labour underpinning digital culture.

Farocki's early short film **Two Paths** was made for Sender Freies Berlin television in 1966, and has never before been shown in an exhibition. It can be considered a predecessor of **The Silver and the Cross** (2010), also on view, as both films use the formal device of dissecting visual details to reveal the essential elements of an image and its broader significance. In *Two Paths*, Farocki uses a tableau found in the offices of a sect in Kreuzberg, Berlin to explore the pictorial representations of moral allegories in European Christianity, in particular the divergent paths to heaven and hell. In *The Silver and the Cross*, Farocki intercuts close-ups of Gaspar Miguel des Berrío's painting *Depiction of the Cerro Rico and the Imperial City of Potosí* (1758) with contemporary footage of Potosí, Bolivia, to develop a discourse on European colonisation and the labour structures that still persist. As Farocki describes, 'The Spaniards brought the cross and they took the silver', exploiting the rich mineral deposits of the Cerro Rico (rich mountain) and the local workforce, who continue to work the silver mines to this day.

Displayed simultaneously across twelve monitors in the Library gallery, Farocki's **Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades** (2006) opens with one of the first films ever made: *La Sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895), in which the Lumière brothers recorded workers leaving their factory in Lyon. As Farocki explained, 'The work structure synchronises the workers, the factory gates group them, and this process of compression produces the image of a work force. As may be realised or brought to mind by the portrayal, the people passing through the gates evidently have something fundamental in common. Images are closely related to concepts, thus this film has become a rhetorical figure.' Traditionally used as the backdrop for a character's narrative arc, 'Factories – and the whole subject of labour – are at the fringes of film history.' In this work, Farocki brings the subject to the fore, compiling a filmic record that spans eleven decades, from the birth of cinema to the year 2000.



4.

In **Re-Pouring** (2010), Farocki references Tomas Schmit's Fluxus performance *Cycle for Water Buckets* (or *Bottles*), in which he knelt on the floor encircled by milk bottles, one of them filled with water, and, moving clockwise, poured the contents from one bottle into the next, until it had all been spilled or evaporated. In Farocki's reinterpretation,

each of the bottles is displayed on its own vertical screen, emphasising the repetitiveness of Schmit's ritual action, which is performed instead by a robot signifying the automation of work processes previously executed by humans.

In **Comparison via a Third** (2007), Farocki explores the concept of labour by comparing the different conditions and stages of brick production in traditional, newly developed, and highly industrialised societies in India, Africa and Europe. Forming the literal foundations of our society, bricks become emblematic of broader social issues. Initially mapping out a linear progression towards increasingly automated, 'perfected' manufacturing, the sequence is later interrupted by images that undermine this reading, calling into question the traditional notion of progress. Farocki uses the devices of split screen, montage and repetition to suggest relationships between images, but leaves these open to interpretation by viewers, who are positioned as an active, 'third' point of comparison and invited to draw their own conclusions. As Farocki explains, 'I want to give the spectators something to consider. Today nearly everybody has already seen every imaginable object or process in a representation. I hope to wash the spectator's eyes.'

1. Harun Farocki, *Vergleich über ein Drittes / Comparison via a Third*, 2007 [still]. Double channel installation, sound, colour. 24 minutes. © Harun Farocki GbR. Courtesy Harun Farocki GbR.
2. Hito Steyerl, *November*, 2004 [still]. DV, single channel, sound. 25 minutes. Image CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl. Image courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin.
3. Hito Steyerl, *The Tower*, 2015 [still]. Three channel high-definition video installation, environment and sound. 6 minutes, 55 seconds. Image CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl. Image courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin.
4. Harun Farocki, *Umgießen. Variation von Opus 1 von Tomas Schmit / Re-Pouring. Variation I*, 2010 [still]. Installation for 7 light steles, video, silent. Variation I: 20 min. (loop). © Harun Farocki GbR. Courtesy Harun Farocki GbR.

GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC
37 DOVER STREET, LONDON W1S 4NJ
T +44 (0) 20 3813 8400
TUESDAY – SATURDAY 10 AM – 6 PM
ROPAC.NET

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For press information, please contact:
Sarah Rustin | sarah.rustin@ropac.net - Catherine Boteler | catherine@ropac.net

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



Over more than four decades, Farocki produced an extraordinary body of work that, for someone who continuously compared things, situations, and images to one another, is paradoxically incomparable. In all he did, he kept it simple, clear, and grounded. In cinematic terms: at eye level. His legacy spans generations, genres, and geographies. And the abundance of ideas and perspectives in his work does not cease to inspire. It trickles, disseminates, perseveres. – Hito Steyerl, 2014

The German filmmaker, video artist, theorist and writer **Harun Farocki** (1944–2014) is known for his politicised film-essays, in which he assembles found and original footage to explore issues such as the power of images, the intersections between war and technology, and the role of labour in capitalist society. With a background in drama, sociology and journalism, and influenced by the work of Bertolt Brecht and Jean-Luc Godard, Farocki completed film studies at the German Film and Television Academy, Berlin (1966–68). In addition to producing over 100 films for television and cinema, Farocki – as published author and editor of the magazine *Filmkritik*, curator, and visiting professor in Berkeley, Harvard and Vienna – has shaped the discourse surrounding politics, the moving image, and the politics of images. His first film created for a museum setting, *Schnittstelle* (1995), marked a turning point in his career, and Farocki's work has since been the subject of major institutional exhibitions, including Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2017); Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona (2016); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2014); Kunsthaus Bregenz (2010); Tate Modern, London (2009); MUMOK, Vienna (2007), among others.



The highest duty of theory and art is to grasp and articulate their own time. In our time, Hito Steyerl fulfils this duty like nobody else. Her investigations of the fate of images and words in the age of their global circulation are always focused and precise – but also adventurous, unexpected, and fascinating. – Boris Groys, 2017

Hito Steyerl (b. 1966) is a German filmmaker, visual artist, writer, and professor of New Media Art at the University of the Arts, Berlin, where she co-founded the Research Centre for Proxy Politics with Vera Tollmann and Boaz Levin. Her film-essays blend fact and fiction, combining documentary footage with found and computer-generated images, and often featuring the artist herself. In these works, Steyerl explores a complex range of issues, including hyper-capitalism, digital culture, globalisation, militarisation, the alienation of labour, and the circulation of information and images. A prolific theorist, Steyerl's writing appears in periodicals, anthologies and her critically acclaimed book *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (2017), in addition to lecture performances. Steyerl's recent solo exhibitions include Serpentine Galleries, London (2019); Kunstmuseum Basel (2018); The Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston (2017); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2016); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2016), among others. Her work is currently on view at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.), Berlin, and will be the subject of a retrospective at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris and K21 Düsseldorf in summer 2020.