

OVERGADEN.

COPENHAGEN ART FESTIVAL

In this exhibition Hito Steyerl investigates the role images and technological tools play as witnesses to the truth.

ESSAY

Surface Manifestations

By Alwin Franke

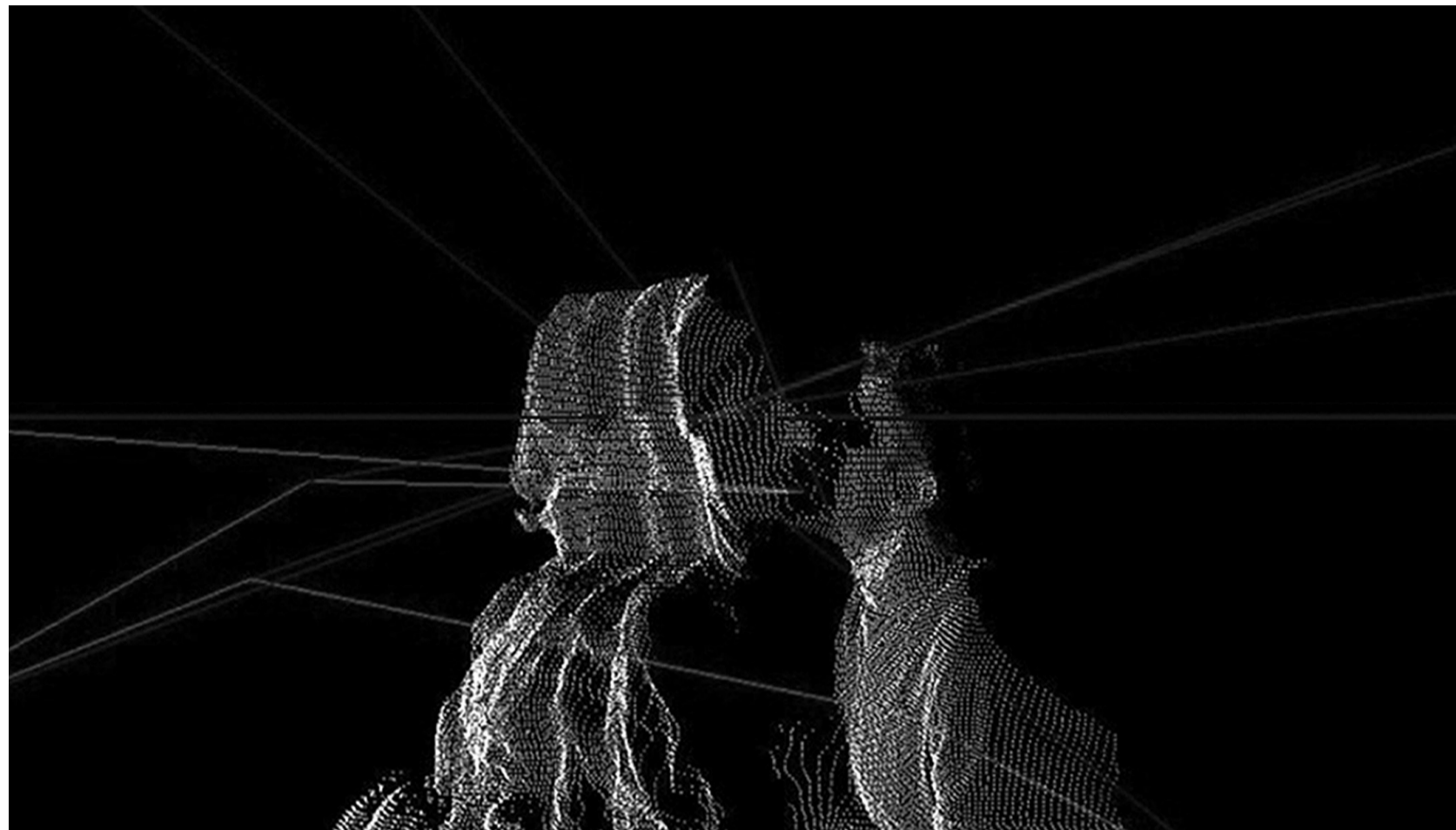
Over the past two decades filmmaker, video artist and writer Hito Steyerl has repeatedly engaged with issues of political violence and their relation to documentary film-making. In her installation *The Kiss* Steyerl combines various documentary and non-documentary elements related to a war crime committed in 1993 during the Bosnian War. A central component in the installation is a triple video projection composed of point clouds captured by a lidar 3D scanner. The scan captures a re-staging of the crime scene according to three eyewitness accounts. The investigative report from which the witness accounts are drawn, a sculptural rendering of the scan as a 3D print and a television news report on a related forensic investigation constitute the other coordinates of a space in which the ineffability of terror and the objectivist dreams associated with 3D technologies are superimposed. At Overgaden, *The Kiss* is for the first time shown along with Steyerl's new video sketch *Abstract*.

In recent years, it has been observed how new 3D technologies have brought about a three-dimensionalisation of perspective, replacing the paradigm of linear vision with a new visual normality of free-fall and groundlessness, of fog, murk and epistemological uncertainty.¹ If we cut to a different scene and turn to the use of 3D technologies in forensic science, however, the imagery and metaphors suddenly flip. Here 3D scanning renders the world transparent and calculable; it is praised for overcoming the uncertainty of subjective interpretation by freezing a crime scene and preserving it forever: 'Data from the ScanStation is not a 3D reconstruction or someone's interpretation of the scene. It is the scene,' as Leica Geosystem's forensic website would have it.² Faced with this flip-flopping between the transparent and the opaque, *The Kiss* confronts the reality of murk with that of clinical transparency and makes them work within one other, but

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also re-politicises confusion and disorientation by tracing them back to material history.

The events on which *The Kiss* is based took place in post-socialist Yugoslavia. On 27 February 1993 about twenty people were abducted from the Belgrade-Bar train number 671. Half a year later, on 16 August, the weekly *Vreme NDA* published a short article about the case: 'It is not known who carried



Hito Steyerl, *The Kiss* (video still), 2012

out the abduction and upon whose orders, nor is it known what the authorities have done to solve the case. The fate of the missing passengers is also a mystery.' Already on 5 March of the same year, some ten days after the abduction, an anonymous witness had spoken about what happened on train 671: 'The most horrific thing was there was actually no fuss. As if nothing had happened, the train just carried on.'³ The entanglement of mystery and normality, of uncertainty and certainty, conveyed here is described by the anthropologist Michael Taussig as a death-space of epistemic murk, a magical reality in which the signifiers are strategically out of joint with what they signify.⁴

After the war, however, most of the passengers were identified and the events leading up to their death reconstructed. The abduction was carried out by a Serbian paramilitary unit known as the White Eagles. The nineteen victims were robbed, tortured and then driven to the village of Visegrad, where they were killed and their remains thrown in

the River Drina. But this retrospective reconstruction of the events does not release us from the 'epistemic murk' expressed in the *Vreme* article. Not only are most of the bodies still missing, there is also an inconsistency regarding the number of victims. The three eyewitness accounts exhibited in light-boxes mention a twentieth victim, a black man who is omitted in the other reports and whose identity has never been sought after.

He was the last person to be taken from the train, and on his way to the truck Milan Lukic, leader of the White Eagles, tapped him on the shoulder, kissed him and said, 'There is my brother.' Given the impossibility to retrieve the meaning of this gesture, it just documents the loss of reference in the reality of paramilitary terror. Here it is precisely the *documentary* evidence in the light-boxes that refers us back to a foggy surface that resists penetration.

Hence forensic laser scan technology is of no positive use in the documentation of these events. The preservation of the crime scene as digital replication turns out to be an empty promise in a case where, six months after the events took place, nobody seems to even know what crime and on what scene. Yet perhaps there is a kind of negative documentary potential here, one that documents not a truth beneath the surface but instead the truth *in* the surface, echoing Siegfried Kracauer's take on 'surface manifestations', the analysis of which he felt best for determining an epoch's place in the historical process.⁵ There is a certain persistence of the surface in *The Kiss*, an impossibility to go behind the scene and reach the depth perspective promised by the technology, as conveyed in the faces' turning as the camera flies around them. This hints at a truth that lurks in the interstices between 2D and 3D, in the fractional space Steyerl has referred to as 2.3D or 2.4D, where the documentary elements become an index of the non-documentable.⁶

Certainty and uncertainty associated with three-dimensionalisation are not so much different takes on

our contemporary reality, then, as different layers of this reality itself. *The Kiss* condenses these layers of the documentary and the non-documentary, zigzagging from the witnesses' subjectivity and the re-staging of their accounts to the objectivist promise of the scanner's lens, back to the fictional fix of the distorted data and their rendering as a material object by a 3D printer.

It is the insistence on 'not understanding' that makes for the sensibility of Hito Steyerl's work – a sensibility for grasping at the edges of things before they become fixed, smoothed and siphoned up by discourses that do claim to understand.

If laser-scan technology subtracts time out of history, *The Kiss* reintroduces both time and movement, as with the scanner's lens scanning Milan Lukic kissing the black man while walking him to the truck. The material rendering of the movement in the sculptural 3D print is a blur that bears the marks of time, hovering between the abstract and the figurative. And the points defining the surfaces float apart in space when, in the animation, the camera flies through crystallised movement. It is this flip-flop between movement and stasis, certainty and uncertainty, that the visual logic of *The Kiss* documents.

But if this is a space where the signifiers are strategically out of joint with what they signify, one can perhaps again ask some political questions we seem to have lost sight of: whose strategy, on whose behalf, and in whose interest? These are the questions that Steyerl's video sketch *Abstract* insists on. In 1998 Steyerl's friend Andrea Wolf, who had joined the PKK women's army, supposedly died in an extra-legal execution after a battle with armed forces in the Turkish part of Kurdi-

stan. The case has never been investigated. The montage of footage from the battlefield interlaced with shots showing Steyerl at Pariser Platz in Berlin not only addresses the complicity of German interests in war crimes worldwide; it also evokes the exchange between the film-maker's subject and the documented object, addressing another posture that Steyerl's work tries to

escape, namely that of the 'understanding' documentarian. 'But I don't understand anything', Steyerl stated in one of her films. Perhaps it is this insistence on 'not understanding' that makes for the sensibility of her work – a sensibility for grasping at the edges of things before they become fixed, smoothed and siphoned up by discourses that do claim to understand.

Alwin Franke studies Comparative Literature at Freie Universität in Berlin and has worked as a guest-editor for New York Magazine of Contemporary Art and Theory and Tribes Magazine.

1 Hito Steyerl, 'In Free Fall,' *e-flux journal*, no. 24, April 2011.

2 See http://www.leica-geosystems.us/forensic/3d_scanning.html.

3 *War Crimes in Serbia*, Youth Initiative for Human Rights, special edition, February 2010.

4 Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, University of Chicago Press, 1986.

5 Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', in: *New German Critique*, no. 5, Spring 1975.

6 Hito Steyerl: *Objectfiction*, lecture, 2nd Berlin Documentary Forum, 2 June 2012.

Tracing the Dead

By Maja Petrović-Šteger

On the afternoon of Saturday, 27 February 1993 some thirty armed men escorted nineteen non-Serbs – eighteen Bosniaks and one Croat – off train number 671 from Belgrade to Bar. Forced out at Štrpci, a village in the Republic of Srpska where trains do not normally stop, the group were taken onto an army truck waiting in the shade. Of the thousand or so passengers, only a handful stood up to defend the others. No one phoned the police or further raised their voice to interrupt the kidnapping. The media in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia immediately reported the event, speculating that the abduction had been carried out by a gang of thugs as retaliation for supposed crimes committed by Bosniaks. Although the abductees' families immediately pressed the governments of Serbia and Montenegro to investigate the case, it remained unexamined for years. The relatives of the missing people put up money, or offered to swap places, to get their loved ones back. Some believed that the captives were intended as prisoners of war, to be exchanged for Serbian POWs or corpses, others that they had been conscripted as forced labour, others again that the group had fallen into the hands of the Kornjača brothers, who allegedly dissected their bodies while they were still alive in order to sell their organs and blood.

The identities of all nineteen abductees were made public. But some claimed that one additional passenger had been taken that day – a tall, elegantly dressed black man, or a mulatto, as some referred to him, possibly an Egyptian, who was seen offering money to the armed group to secure his release. Others thought this dark-skinned passenger was a member of the paramilitary group itself – a famously violent local Roma. Several witnesses reported that the leader of the armed group hugged and kissed the man, calling him 'my brother', before marching him off. His identity, and indeed existence, has never been confirmed.

The national and international investigations that took place ten years after the event have shown that the kidnapped passengers were brutally beaten, robbed, and then killed on the day of their abduction. The bodies of some have yet to be found. Investigations also confirmed that the paramilitary unit responsible for the abduction had logistical support from the Federal



Hito Steyerl, *The Kiss*, 2012. Photo: Helena Schlichting

Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). The kidnapping was not spontaneous but rather a premeditated operation indicative of the state's policies towards Bosniaks in the 1990s. It has also been shown that senior officials in the FRY government knew of plans for the abduction but made no effort to prevent it.

The wars of the 90s are now mostly understood in terms of international restorative justice. Private individuals reclaim the dead in order to assuage their pain and sense of loss, while public organisations do so to prove claims of 'atrocities' through scientific analyses of corpses. Dead bodies are identified, counted and lent to a variety of symbolic purposes. The dead body however already had a strong political resonance in the former Yugoslavia long before the conflicts. For instance Serbian war apologists invoked the motif of bones – magic caskets holding the soul of the Serbs – to rouse an appetite for war and stake territorial claims. Today, almost two decades after the signing of the peace accord, post-conflict attempts at sense-making and reconciliation still take shape around the bodies of those who died. A peacetime rhetoric of national integrity equates the healing of the region with the rightful assignation of human remains. For the international community, the people of the former Yugoslavia are committing themselves to reconciliation by beginning to reckon with the evidence of war crimes – the sites of mass graves and missing persons. Estimating that more than 40,000 people remain unaccounted for, various local and internationally-run repatriation programmes are working on behalf of the families to retrieve remains through DNA-led methods. These acts of reclamation are often described in terms of the restoration of 'universal' or 'human' rights.

Who claims human remains and why? Two claims made about bodies stand out. One is professional: Scientists and legal officers re-

construct bodily fragments as bits of knowledge, assigning them an evidentiary status, sometimes as traces of past power relations. The other position is more avowedly emotional: Interest groups claim a biological or emotional relationship to body parts, sometimes attributing to them the spirit or soul of those they have lost. People switch between these frameworks in dealing with the dead. The state- and governmental-level procedures using scientific expertise to prove crimes against humanity allow people to repatriate remains legally. Consequently, relatives of the dead appeal to the tools, languages and practices of scientific expertise in attempting to secure some value from remains. Intervention in the disposal of remains, whether by relatives or by the state, is inevitably fraught with political values. These values typically express themselves in either a questioning or an endorsement of the ethics of intervention itself. For its critics, manipulating body parts is an intrusion into the dead person's membership of his or her community. For its advocates, it is a benign reinstatement of the value of the bodies. The two claims – scientific and emotional – construct the dead bodies as different kinds of things and different kinds of people. Those seeking to find, identify and repatriate dead bodies do not just make a claim to ownership; they designate bodies as vehicles through which particular versions of history and of the future are legitimated. In this way dead bodies touch on accountability, justice, grief, victimisation, and suffering. Political versions of the body thus rest on institutionally constituted practices that produce bodies (and things out of bodies) in certain ways.

People's relations to dead bodies can, then, hinge on their structuring of concepts of the past and the present, and on the political, biomedical, artistic and philosophical implications of these concepts of time. Hito Steyerl's searching installation, *The Kiss*, opens up some of

the same implications. Using testimony and biomedical and forensic evidence from the Štrpci massacre, Steyerl translates scans of the crime scene into a three-dimensional print to get a sense of where the abductors stood in relation to their victims and so generate possible findings overlooked in previous investigations, while other parts of the installation document the exhumation of those killed during the war. The audience is basically invited to 'repiece' the events at the Štrpci station, a process requiring a consideration of the nature of 'knowledge' and 'documentation' – and so calling into question the notion that the methods of forensic investigation are the ultimate tools for reconstructing the past.

The Kiss does not then directly represent the Štrpci event. Instead, it subtly if piercingly dissects the no-

tion of 'the missing' – both the missing train passengers and the absence of reliable information about the event. Hito Steyerl casts the intrinsic value of 'facts' and 'documents' not as material (as facts that have been discovered, crimes that have been solved or remains materially reattached as objects and reunited with the relatives of the bodies) but as essentially conceived or projected. Her work importantly reminds us that body parts acquire a meaning, as do the events of the abduction, only through participative processes of searching, identifying, claiming and collecting 'what happened'. Otherwise, in the register simply of material fact, they remain inaccessible.

Maja Petrović-Šteger is a social anthropologist specialized in how living and dead bodies and body parts become objects of artistic, economic and scientific attention.

CV

Hito Steyerl (b. 1966) was educated at the University of the Arts in Tokyo and the University of Television and Film in Munich, and holds a PhD in Philosophy from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. She has had several solo exhibitions, recently at Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2012; Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam, 2011; Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2010; Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Høvikodden, 2010, and Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 2009. Her work has been included in group exhibitions and biennials all over the world, among others at the Taipei Biennial, Taiwan, 2010; 8th Gwangju Biennial, 2010, and Documenta 12, Kassel, 2007. In November Steyerl has a solo exhibition at Art Institute Chicago. Hito Steyerl lives in Berlin.

GUIDED TOURS

Sunday 26 August and Sunday 2 September at 3pm Overgaden invites you to a guided tour of the current exhibitions. Afterwards we will serve coffee and cake. The events will be in Danish.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 9 November 2012 Overgaden presents a group exhibition by Suzanna Asp, Maija Luutonen, Sini Pelkki and Pilvi Takala and a solo exhibition by Stefan A. Pedersen. The last day of the exhibitions is 20 January 2013.

Hito Steyerl would like to thank Esme Buden, Aneta Szylak / Wyspa Institute of Art and Nikolaus Hirsch / Portikus for producing the works, her assistant Alwin Franke, Studio Miessen for the spatial design of the show, Henriette Bretton-Meyer and the team of Overgaden and the teams that realised *The Kiss* and *Abstract*.

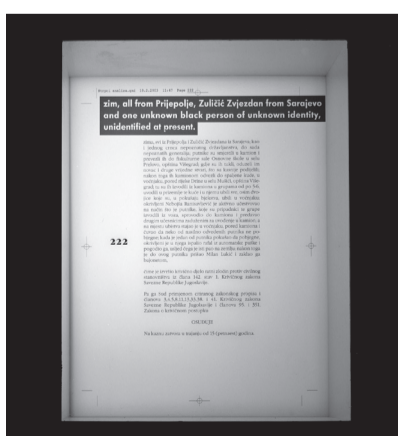
Images: courtesy of the artist and Portikus, Frankfurt am Main.

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Hito Steyerl, *The Kiss* (detail), 2012. Photo: Leon Kahane