

"Steyerl refuses to nail down a single idea, or insist on a point of view. Instead, we get art as an act of moral thinking-in-progress. In a very of-the-moment, digital-age way, the logic of that thinking is fractured, the nature of morality suspect. But a belief in the necessity of thinking, restlessly, politically, never is in doubt."

NEW YORK TIMES

"Hito Steyerl's nuanced essays dissect the buckshot of digital information streams. And as her own art work engages all those digital filters and proxies that scramble and reassemble and generate noise, she also rehearses another way of thinking or recognizing or laughing."

KELLER EASTERLING, AUTHOR OF EXTRASTATECRAFT

"The highest duty of theory and art is to grasp and articulate their own time. In our time, Hito Steyerl fulfills 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, AUTHOR OF IN THE FLOW



Duty Free Art
Hito Steyerl

Duty Free Art Hito Steyerl Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War



VERSO

Just like institutional critique was overtaken by a neoliberal Right that went ahead and simply abolished art institutions, the critique of contemporary art and claims for an exit from this paradigm are dwarfed by their reactionary counterparts. The reactionary exit—the acceleration of stagnation—is already well underway. Algorithmic and analogue market manipulation, alongside the defunding, dismantling, and hollowing-out of the public and post-public sector,¹¹ transforms what sometimes worked as a forum for shared ideas, judgment, and experimentation into HNWI interior design. Art will be firewalled within isolationist unlinked canons, which can easily be marketed as national, religious, and fully biased histories.

An Alternative Alternative Currency?

Now what? Where does one go from here? Let's put the next paragraph into brackets. It just indicates a hypothetical possibility.

If art is an alternative currency, its circulation also outlines an operational infrastructure. Could these structures be repossessed to work differently? How much value would the alternative currency of art lose if its most corrupt aspects were to be regulated or restructured to benefit art's larger communities? How about even a minimum of rules in the market—gallery contracts, resale-time minimums, artist fees,¹² remunerated internships? Introducing blockchain public records for the production, transaction, and locating of artworks in order to reign in tax fraud and money laundering?¹³ Declining the most mortifying sponsor and patron relationships instead of artwashing fossil extraction, weapons manufacturing, and banks bailed out with former cultural funding? How about asking for fees on resales or on any off-shore art-related transaction? Could art as alternative currency

not only circulate within existing systems but even launch not-yet-existing economies (publics, institutions, markets, parallel art worlds, etc.)?

But to expect any kind of progressive transformation to happen by itself—just because the infrastructure or technology exists—would be like expecting the internet to create socialism or automation to evenly benefit all humankind. The internet spawned Uber and Amazon, not the Paris Commune. The results may be called “the sharing economy,” but this mostly means that the poor share with the rich, not vice versa. Should any less unilateral sharing be suggested, the bulk of capital will decamp immediately. And the currency function will be diminished by decreasing circulation, thus possibly eliminating art's function as currency altogether, reverting artworks to commodities or products. One of the first steps towards parallel art sectors would thus be to organize even partial sustainability in the absence of bubble liquidity and barely limited amounts of free labor. Whatever emerges will be a new version of art-affiliated autonomy.

In contrast to the modernist autonomy of art schemes, this autonomy is not solitary, unlinked, or isolated. Nor will it come about by some fantasy of progress in-built into technology. On the contrary it can only emerge through both a conscious effort and exchange among diverse entities. It's an autonomy that works through circulation, transformation, and alchemy. The links it could build on exist as weak links (aka, air-kiss links) and reshaping them would need to happen within a compromised mess of contradictory activities. But simultaneously people can try to sync with the art-related undercommons¹⁴ by building partial networked autonomy via all means necessary. If art is a currency, can it be an undercurrent? Could it work like an Unter, not an Uber?

How to do this? People are used to perceiving the art world as sponsored by states, foundations, patrons, and corporations. But the contrary applies at least equally well.

Throughout history it has been artists and art workers, more than any other actors, who have subsidized art production.¹⁵ Most do so by concocting mixed-income schemes in which, simply speaking, some form of wage labor (or other income) funds art-making. But more generally, everyone involved also contributes in all sorts of other ways to art's circulation, thus making it stronger as currency. Even artists who live "off their work" subsidize the market by way of enormous commissions in relation to other industries. But why should one sponsor VIP pre-previews, bespoke museum extensions without any means to fill them, art-fair arms races, institutional franchises built under penal-colony conditions, and other baffling bubbles? This bloated, entitled, fully superfluous, embarrassing, and most of all politically toxic overhead is subsidized by means of free labor and life time, but also by paying attention to blingstraction and circulating its spinoffs, thus creating reach and legitimacy. Even the majority of artists who cannot afford to say no to any offer of income could save time not doing this. Refusing sponsorship of this sort might be the first step towards shaking the unsustainable and mortifying dependency on speculative operations that indirectly increase authoritarian violence and division. Spend free time assisting colleagues,¹⁶ not working for free for bank foundations. Don't "share" corporate crap on monopolist platforms. Ask yourself: Do you want global capitalism with a fascist face? Do you want to artwash more insane weather, insane leaders, poisonous and rising water, crumbling infrastructure, and brand-new walls? How can people genuinely share what they need?¹⁷ How much speed is necessary? How can artistic (and art-related) autonomy evolve from haughty sovereignty to modest networked devolution?¹⁸ How can platform cooperatives contribute to this? Can art institutions follow the lead of new municipalist networks and alliances of "rebel cities"? In the face of derivative fascisms, can local forms of life be reimagined beyond blood, soil, nation, and corporation, as networks

of neighborhoods, publics, layered constituencies?¹⁹ Can one transform art's currency into art's confluence? Replace speculation with overflow?²⁰

Art's organizing role in the value-process—long overlooked, downplayed, worshipped, or fucked—is at last becoming clear enough to approach, if not rationally, then perhaps realistically. Art as alternative currency shows that art sectors already constitute a maze of overlapping systems in which good-old gossip, greed, lofty ideals, inebriation, and ruthless competition form countless networked cliques. The core of its value is generated less by transaction than by endless negotiation, via gossip, criticism, hearsay, haggling, heckling, peer reviews, small talk, and shade. The result is a solid tangle of feudal loyalties and glowing enmity, rejected love and fervent envy, pooling striving, longing, and vital energies. In short, the value is not in the product but in the network; not in gaming or predicting the market²¹ but in creating exchange.²² Most importantly, art is one of the few exchanges that derivative fascists don't control—yet.

But as a reserve system for dumb, mean, and greedy money, art's social value (auto)deconstructs and turns into a shell operation that ultimately just shields more empty shells and amplifies fragmentation and division. Similarly, arts venues are already shifting into bonded warehouses and overdesigned freepoint bank vaults.

It's easy to imagine what the motto for art as the reserve currency of a fully rigged system might be. Just envision a posh PR lieutenant policing the entrance of a big art fair, gingerly declaring to anyone pushed aside, displaced, exploited, and ignored: "If you don't have bread, just eat art!"