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but weapons have a very precise purpose

1 Still from Hito Steyerl's video *Lovely Andrea* (2007), DVD, 30 min.

2 Still from Hito Steyerl's video *November* (2004), DVD, 25 min.

Hito Steyerl and the Unpredictable Potential of Archives

by Vincenzo Estremo

«*November is the time after October, a time when revolution seems to be over and peripheral struggles have become particular, localized, and almost impossible to communicate.*»
Hito Steyerl

Preface

As I was preparing this *Bulletin*, the focus of my research shifted. The topic didn't change – it was rather a shift in my focus within Steyerl's production. As a matter of fact, I decided to leave aside the case of *Lovely Andrea* (2007) (pic. 1) – for which the artist performed an extensive archive research on Japanese bondage magazines – to focus my effort on *November* (2004) (pic. 2). I've been living in Istanbul for some time now, and when I started collecting material for this paper I encountered an «unpredictable unforeseen» event — in the words of a Neapolitan rock band's song.[1] I read that event as a sign of an additional potential for my archival research, and I decided to take a different course. I have embarked on a path which brought me to face completely new challenges, at the risk of getting lost within the Internet. The following is an ethnography of my research on the Internet.

[1] https://youtu.be/APsUVyeHgH0?t=23.

3 Still from Sergei M. Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov's film *October 1917. Ten Days That Shook the World* (1928).

One, three, infinite. Image and images, name and names of Andrea Wolf

Andrea Wolf (Kurdish name Şehît Ronahî, or Martyr Ronahî) was born in Munich, Germany in 1965, and died in Çatak, Turkey in 1998. She was a German left-wing activist in the Red Army Faction (RAF), who later became a member of the banned paramilitary underground organization People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan, or PKK. She underwent a political and military training period with the PKK in order to qualify for the YAJK, or Yekitiya Azadiya Jinen Kurdistan (Free Women's Union of Kurdistan). Andrea Wolf is also the main character of the very first movie Hito Steyerl realized in Bavaria, when she was just 17. It is a sort of feminist martial arts movie, in which Steyerl shows Wolf playing the part of a tough biker-jacket heroine. The movie was never completed, and only a part of the footage is left, which flowed into Steyerl's video *November* (2004). The work is a self-reflexive video that examines the role of images in the post-revolutionary moment, primarily through the figure of Andrea Wolf. The title is a subtle reference to the October Revolution in Russia, and to *October: Ten Days That Shook the World*, the 1928 Soviet historical silent film by Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov (pic. 3). November, as the artist says during the film, comes after October. For Hito Steyerl, «the time of October» was the time of revolution and internationalism, when the enemy was easily identifiable. On the other hand, in «the time of November» – our time, marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Real Socialism – revolution is not possible, as struggles are local and impossible to communicate, never mind universalize. This is November, the time of an

Born in 1966 in Munich, Germany, Berlin-based artist and writer Hito Steyerl is one of the most critically acclaimed artists working in the field of video today. Her work straddles the borders between cinema and fine arts, theory and practice, exploring issues of militarization, the role of the media in globalization, and the mass proliferation and dissemination of images and knowledge brought on by digital technologies.

4 Still from Hito Steyerl's video *November* (2004), DVD, 25 min; super-8 footage.

5 Still from Hito Steyerl's video *November* (2004), DVD, 25 min.

atomized society. As Noam Chomsky remarked: «*There are very few continuing organizations which have institutional memory, that know how to move to the next step.*»[2] Nowadays, any return to the revolutionary project of October is no longer an option.

In her work, Hito Steyerl has reconstructed the image of Andrea Wolf, the internationalist fighter who went underground in 1996. The artist has tried to point out the multiplicity of Andrea Wolf's image. In *November*'s structure, the reconstruction of the character is linked to the representational instability and proliferation of Wolf's identities. Her two names, Andrea Wolf and Şehît Ronahî, already mark out this escalation, but while the name change was her choice, the full extent of the transformation of her image was not. In *November*, Andrea Wolf has many roles. She is an «attractive» woman, and a friend. She is a female fighter in a fictional story, who uses martial arts instead of weapons, and an armed revolutionary who also teaches martial arts to her fellow female fighters. A martyr for the Kurdish cause, allegedly executed by Turkish security forces, and a terrorist in hiding, according to the Turkish and German governments.[3] Each role corresponds to an image, and each image has a specific format, that changes as media evolve over time. We can define this as a process of re-mediation. With the term «remediation,» Astrid Erll refers to the fact that «*memorable events are usually represented again and again, over decades and centuries, in different media.*»[4] In *November*, the media source is always revealed. Every time Steyerl made use of super-8 footage, she added a close-up of a super-8 film projector beaming light (images) into the artist's camera (pic. 4 and pic. 5). When electronic

[2] Noam Chomsky, «History Doesn't Go In a Straight Line», *Jacobine*, September 22, 2015, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/09/noam-chomsky-bernie-sanders-greece-tsipras-grexit-austerity-neoliberalism-protest/.

[3] Pablo Lafuente, «For a Populist Cinema: On Hito Steyerl's November and Lovely Andrea», *Afterall* no. 19, Autumn/Winter 2008, http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.19/populist.cinema.hito.steyerls.november.and.lovely..

[4] Astrid Erll, «Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory» (2008), in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Media and Cultural Memory*, Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 389-399.

6 - 7 Stills from Hito Steyerl's video *November* (2004), DVD, 25 min; VHS footage from a Kurdish satellite TV.

8 Still from Hito Steyerl's video *November* (2004), DVD, 25 min.

images are shown (pic. 6 and pic. 7), Steyerl splices in footage of a television connected to a VHS player (pic. 8). Andrea Wolf's image is a trans-medial phenomenon, and its representation is not tied to one specific medium. This is a clear expression of the global condition of media today, as the circulation flux of images through their ever-flexible and instantaneous distribution networks comes from different places and is constantly traveling.

In *November*, we can identify three major groups of images, that can be categorized according to their sources.

1. The first group is gathered from the artist's personal archive. Steyerl picked up the super-8 footage of Andrea Wolf she had shot for her first, unnamed movie. In *November*, that fictional material became a document, remediated in digital format.

2. The second group of Andrea Wolf/Şehît Ronahî's images comes from a Kurdish satellite TV station. These pictures are electronic and recorded on VHS. Steyerl took the tape directly from the Kurdish TV's archive. In that documentary film, Şehît Ronahî is depicted as an unarmed fighter who teaches other militants how to fight without weapons.

3. The third group of Andrea Wolf's images is an unfamiliar icon, a poster carried by pro-Kurdish protesters in Germany. In this last image, Andrea Wolf/Şehît Ronahî is described as a martyr of the Kurdish revolution (pic. 9).

Hito Steyerl explains the mobility and the trans-medial phenomenology of Andrea's figure by pointing out that «*Andrea became herself a traveling image, wandering over the globe, an image passed on, from hand to hand, copied and reproduced by printing presses, video recorders, and the Internet.*»

9 German pro-PKK poster dedicated to the memory of Andrea Wolf/Şehît Ronahî.

Traveling images

Wolf slides into the unpredictable flow of «traveling images» that defines *November*. «*In the video, the artist underlines how nowadays all images are adrift, then only when such uncertainty is fully acknowledged might we revivify our engagement with a politicized conception of history and language. November begins to generate the affective and political constellation that may yet bring them about. Images are bound to travel and we can only make of them what we will, that is for Steyerl, everything*»[5] – such as generating one more Wolf.

[5] T.J. Demos, «Traveling Images» (2010), in M. Babias (ed.), *Hito Steyerl*, Berlin: n.b.k., p. 40.

One more Wolf

The video ends with a question: what is fiction, and what is reality? This is a recurring question in Steyerl's production. The story of Andrea Wolf is not entirely written, because it could be written several other times.

With Wolf, Steyerl points out the blurred border between fiction and reality through documentary reconstruction. At the same time, the artist invites us to do the same, to question the various documents linked to Andrea Wolf. After *November* — after 2004 — more documents were found, and new stories came to light. These documents are neither film, nor electronic images, nor video anymore, but binary codes, and they are inside the Internet. As I mentioned in the preface, I got lost several times on the Internet, but at last I found my way, thanks to the unpredictable potential of archives. After analyzing the video and learning about

the story of Andrea Wolf, I decided to accept the challenge Steyerl has thrown down in her work. I've started a personal research about this internationalist fighter, and I followed the breadcrumbs left by the new data I was able to find.

Fiction and fringe history: Political power and archive

«[T]here is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.»
Jacques Derrida[6]

6 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, p. 4.

Within the context of historiography, fringe history is considered a pseudo-history, or a marginal knowledge. It sits outside the pale of respectable scholarship. Fringe history is made up of stories that may not have happened, or stories that are combined within the realm of reality as fictional facts. In 2004, when *November* was released, that of Andrea Wolf had all the characteristics of a fringe story. At that time, it was common opinion that Andrea was still alive and that the Turkish government didn't want to admit executing her. We had the certainty of Andrea's death only after her remains were discovered in 2011. In 2004, Turkish and international authorities divulged an institutional version of the story, in which they stated that Andrea had not been murdered and that she was still fighting. The Turkish and German historical negationism distorted the course of the events for political purposes. In their «institutional truth,» the figure of Andrea was still a public

10 Supposedly, a picture of the Çatak/Van mass grave, where Andrea Wolf's body was found in 2011.

11 Monument to Andrea Wolf in Kelahêrê (Andiçen), in Van province's Çatak district.

enemy of the nation state of Turkey, and still a threat to the international community. But the truth, as stated in the voice-over of a Kurdish film documentary's director, does not exist, because:

«*In every war the principle applies that the truth is the first thing to be sacrificed.*»

Hito Steyerl deals with the concept of the uncertainty of truth: the uncertainty of documents, and of the stories originated from those documents, that tell empty facts. This kind of documentary, «*instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood,*»[7] as Jacques Ranciére says.

7 Jacques Ranciére, *Film Fables* (2006), New York: Berg, p. 159.

Steyerl puts herself in the flux of information, by saying:

«*We are all part of the story, and I'm not telling the story but the story tells me.*»

What is fiction then?

November doesn't lead us out of the *cul-de-sac* of fringe history, but forces us to be skeptical, and employ critical thinking. In 2011, after an investigation of a mass grave in the Çatak district of the Van province (a Kurdish area of Turkey near the Iraq border), Andrea Wolf's remains were found among approximately 40 bodies in a cave (pic. 10). A Human Rights Association (IHD) investigation revealed that the people buried in this mass grave were killed by bullets. In 2013, a commemorative monument was dedicated to Andrea Wolf, but almost immediately the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) proposed to destroy the monumental grave (pic. 11). For AKP, Andrea Wolf is a terrorist, and Turkey can't allow the celebration of a terrorist.

12 Poster for the meeting organised by the Civilian Solidarity Platform (SDP) in Istanbul Yenikapı in September 2015.

In «the time of November,» the word *terrorism* is replaced by the word *internationalism*. Turkey is in the time when the word terrorism is used to identify the enemy of the state generically, as in «the time of November.» Today, after the new rise of tension between Turkish authorities and the PKK in July 2015, the word terrorism has become common during the discourses of all Turkish politicians. On July 25, 2015, the Turkish government unilaterally revoked the ceasefire, to begin what President Erdogan defined «a war on terror.» Behind the story of Turkey's commitment against terrorism, lies the fictionalization of fear, a terror strategy. Turkey is threatened by a generic terror behind which lie – without any distinction – the PKK and ISIS. This faceless terrorism was evoked again lately by Erdogan's propaganda. A massive meeting in Istanbul Yenikapı emphasized once again the nationalistic (neo-Ottoman) image of the red Turkish flag against the bullet of fear (pic. 12).

The case of Wolf/Ronahî provides us with an occasion to reflect on memory and politics within and across borders. Her case challenges us to examine the status of «memory places» beyond the context of nation states, and the relevance of migration and media. As we pointed out before, in the years following Wolf's execution, she has been transformed into a transnational symbol. Ronahî is a martyr for the Kurdish national liberation; and Wolf is a symbol for socialist internationalism, and object of human rights campaigns by Turkish, German, and European NGOs. Through Wolf/Ronahî, we may take a journey throughout the history of media, from super-8 film to the fragmentation of «poor» digital images.[8] The Wolf case study is a mnemonic metamorphosis, and the reactivation of her memory is

8 Hito Steyerl, «In Defense of the Poor Image,» *e-flux* no. 10, November 2009, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/94.

possible only within an unstable archive. Digging among 40 bodies buried in a mass grave means making an archival search to reconstruct Andrea Wolf's identity again and again. A bottomless search, in which connections and meanings have grown substantially. On the Internet, the stories connected to Andrea Wolf are countless. It is impossible to identify the picture of her corpse. Also, on the Internet, pictures have countless meanings. The same mass grave picture, supposedly where Wolf's body was found, is used several times with different meanings. As a matter of fact, on the Internet the picture is reported to be of a Bosnian mass grave, of a Jewish mass grave, and of a Kurdish mass grave. Because «*nothing is less clear today than the word "archive."*»[9]

I want to stress the action of digging because in contemporary art, as stated by Dieter Roelstraete, the Way of the Shovel, or «*The retrospective, historiographic mode—a methodological complex that includes the historical account, the archive, the document, the act of excavating and unearthing, the memorial, the art of reconstruction and reenactment, the testimony—has become both the mandate ("content") and the tone ("form") favored by a growing number of artists (as well as critics and curators) of varying ages and backgrounds.*»[10]

This historiographic mode stands out as a brand new way of using and understanding the archive. The notion of archive expands from the idea of a physical storage space that preserves objects and documents, to a virtual archive of data collections accessible through computer screens – a collective memory engaged in reinterpretations of history, along with a political dimension where archives are invested with issues of accessibility and power.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 90.

10 Dieter Roelstraete, «The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art,» *e-flux* no. 4, March 2009, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/.

Andrea Wolf's images are connected to a virtual data collection and, as we said, they are mutable, transferable, and translatable. These images of Andrea Wolf are digital data on the Internet. These data are the result of a long process of remediation; they are still around because they carry interesting content, and because they are memorable. Thus, from *November* we should move directly onto the Internet, where the number of Andrea Wolf's images becomes countless.

From errors to free access

My archive research started with a quest to gain access to the archive itself. In this first digression, I had to face the problem of accessibility to websites containing information about the PKK. My attempts at reaching several Kurdish websites, or websites with information about the PKK, failed one after another. Every time I tried to access websites with information about Andrea Wolf, a message of ERR_CONNECTION_RESET appeared instead (pic. 13).

I wrote to four Italian friends living in different countries to check whether the information I wasn't able to reach was readable elsewhere than Turkey. When screenshots of Kurdish websites reached me as e-mail attachments from London, Paris, Torino, and Linz, I realized that ERR_CONNECTION_RESET was a clear sign of censorship.
In order to complete my research, I needed to figure out a way to bypass the limitations imposed by Turkish authorities. At first, I thought I could get information by using a non-Turkish Internet Protocol (IP) address. The use of a non-Turkish IP address to access content censored in Turkey was a widely used method during the Gezi Park and Taksim

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ERR_CONNECTION_RESET

Dettagli
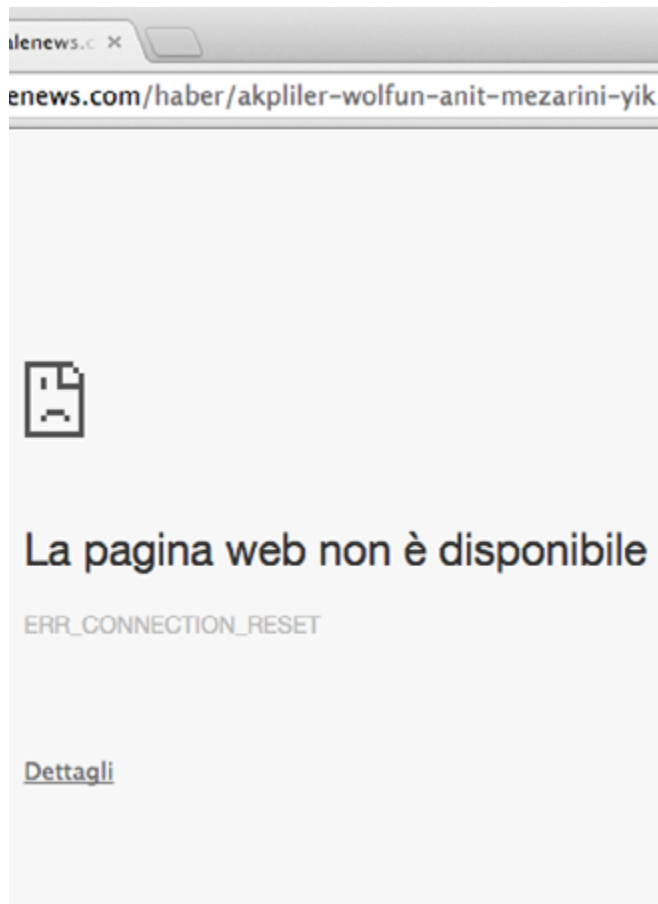
13 Screenshot from my
Internet browsing in Istanbul:
Baskalenews.com
is a Kurdish news web platform.
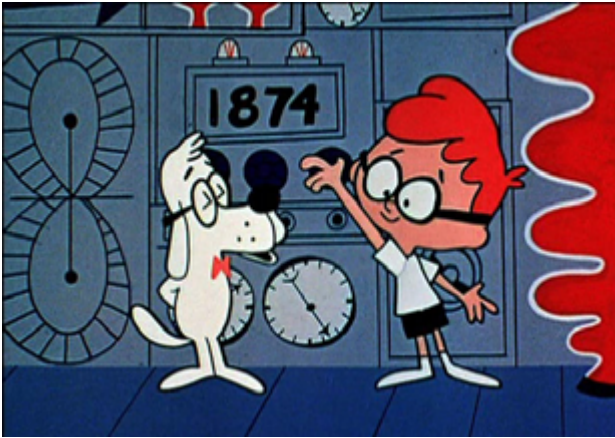
14 Still from *Peabody's Improbable History* (ca. 1960), where Mr. Peabody and Sherman use the WABAC.

15 Screenshot from my Internet browsing in Istanbul: WebArchive.org (Wayback Machine).

Square protests. In 2013, the Erdogan government shut down YouTube and Twitter because the so-called «social media» were being used extensively to organize social protests. At last, I found my way thanks to the Internet Archive, a San Francisco-based, not-for-profit digital library.

The screenshot revolution: Still November, but almost October

In the FAQ section of the San Francisco website, it is declared that the Internet Archive's mission is to allow «*universal access to all knowledge*.»[11] The Internet Archive aims to achieve the universalization of knowledge through two elements: an Internet-based community, and a good number of screenshots. Its community is based on Archive-It, a subscription service that allows institutions to build and preserve collections of born digital content. Data are organized thanks to Wayback Machine, a web interface that capitalized on the popular use of the term «WABAC Machine,» from a segment of *Peabody's Improbable History*, a 1960s US television animated series, part of the *Rocky and Bullwinkle Show* (or *Rocky and His Friends*) (pic. 14). Wayback Machine allows users to view archived web pages. Its purpose is clear, even if not stated in the FAQ section of the Internet Archive: It helps to bypass censorship (pic. 15).

Internet Protocol (IP) address blocking

Certain IP addresses are denied access; if the target website is hosted on a shared hosting server, all websites on the same server will be blocked. The Internet is also

[11] https://archive.org/about/faqs.php.

geographically based. It is quite easy to determine the physical location of your Internet browsing, thanks to an Internet trace-route: it is like tracing a route on a map from point A (where your computer is connected) to point B (where the local data servers are). Every *Host* (computer, tablet, etc.) is associated to an IP address; each IP address is recorded and localized. Whenever we're surfing the Internet, someone knows where we are. If you are in Turkey, you're not granted access to every website you want. But if you use Internet Archive and Wayback Machine, your browsing is allowed, since you're not the one visiting a Kurdish website, but an American IP.

To conclude, I would like to link this journey on the Internet with the idea of traveling images depicted by Hito Steyerl. Andrea is still traveling. For now, she lives in an Archive, until the media change again, and her format will be forced to move elsewhere.

This text was originally thought for the international conference «Usages des archives des sources aux pratiques», University of Lausanne (Switzerland).