

Media release
Basel, April 2018

Martha Rosler & Hito Steyerl **War Games**

May 5–December 2, 2018, Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart
Curator: Søren Grammel

The exhibition *War Games* at Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart features early and recent works by Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl. Earlier as well as recent works appear in a dialogical arrangement conceived in collaboration with both artists. As well as being their first joint show, this is the first major exhibition in Switzerland for both artists. In addition to numerous works on video, photographs, photomontages, banners, and objects, the presentation on two floors of the museum includes expansive multimedia installations that confront the visitor with spectacular dramatizations of high-tech imagery.

Both artists' oeuvres address themselves to the intersections between politics and mass media. In their art and theoretical writings, Rosler and Steyerl reflect on how audiovisual media act as coordinates that control and shape our perception of social reality.

As early as the 1970s, Rosler adapted the television format of the cooking show to speak out on feminist issues. In the past few years, she has examined the effects of drone-based visual production as well as the profound changes in how we form political opinions wrought by social media.

Steyerl's early works on film reflect her critical study of documentary and essayistic filmmaking. In her more recent video installations, she increasingly blends computer-animated visual environments with the aesthetic of the homemade clips disseminated through numerous online platforms. The resulting works scrutinize the ambivalent function of the digital mobile devices with which we communicate and take pictures: their operation inevitably confounds distinctions such as those between empowerment and control or between simulated and real wars.

A recurrent motif in *War Games* is the artists' preoccupation with various forms of social, political, economic, and military domination. Many works explore areas of conflict such as (post-) colonialism, anti-Semitism, migration, xenophobia, war, urban development, consumerism, and gender, addressing both hard and soft mechanisms that sustain power relations and social hegemonies. The role that cultural institutions—including the museum—play in dominant political-economic constellations is very much part of this nexus. Several of the pieces on display address the recent resurgence of a pernicious phenomenon suggested by the exhibition's title: the militarization of everyday life.

The exhibition is supported by:

Fonds für künstlerische Aktivitäten im Museum für Gegenwartskunst der Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung und der Christoph Merian Stiftung
CSR Swiss Center for Social Research AG
Foundation for the Kunstmuseum Basel

Media conference

Thursday, May 3, 2018, 11am

Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart, St. Alban-Rheinweg 60, 4052 Basel

Opening

Friday, May 4, 2018, 6:30pm

Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart, St. Alban-Rheinweg 60, 4052 Basel

Imagery and information on the exhibition

www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/media

Media contact

Karen N. Gerig, Tel. +41 61 206 62 80, karen.gerig@bs.ch

Martha Rosler

Over the past four decades, the American artist Martha Rosler (b. New York, lives in Brooklyn) has created a large and diverse oeuvre, addressing contentious political and social issues in photomontages and photographic series, video art, performances, and installations. She rose to renown with a now-legendary series of collages, *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–1972), in which she contrasted glossy pictures of American interiors from the magazine *House Beautiful* with documentary photographs from the Vietnam War that appeared in *Life*. The manipulated scenes prompted the beholder to reflect on the disconnect between the distant war's reality and how television viewers or magazine readers experienced it in the comfort of their homes.

Rosler's videos and performances have been explicit about her feminist convictions since the 1960s. She also wrote a series of widely read theoretical essays discussing the political in photography and other questions. The photographic series she started making in the 1980s shift the spotlight toward everyday scenes she finds in the streets of New York and elsewhere—she is an avid traveler—to examine power structures, prevailing social standards, and the pressures of conformity. The critical reflection on urban structures and realities is another focus of her work. In the installation *Unsettling the Fragments*, her contribution to the 2007 Skulptur Projekte Münster, she transposed historic elements of Münster's architecture from which Nazi symbols had been purged into new contexts to draw attention to old wounds and ruptures that persisted in the community's built environment.

Hito Steyerl

The videos and writings of Hito Steyerl (b. Munich, lives in Berlin) undertake astute and provocative analyses of contemporary society and its institutions. The German artist and teacher—she holds a professorship at the Berlin University of the Arts, where she founded the Research Center for Proxy Politics—explores into global capital and commodity flows, labor conditions under neoliberalism, and entanglements between corporations and public politics. She investigates visual regimes and reflects on the power that images wield as media of our perception and vehicles and structural frameworks of information.

Digital technologies often figure prominently in Steyerl's more recent films such as *The Tower* (2015), both on the level of their formal realization—she increasingly resorts to digital production methods—and as a key theme. Digital information streams are active agents in her videos, informing both physical and social processes. Reality, Steyerl argues, has been expanded by digital technologies and follows its lead. A deft editor with a keen eye for visual correspondences and sense of rhythm, the artist interweaves digital animations, screenshots, found footage from the mass media, and scenes she has filmed herself in works such as *How Not to Be Seen (A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File)* (2013). The playful lightness of touch in these montages belies the hard disjunctions that run through them.