

**Visceral Exposure:
Melanie Gilligan, Hito Steyerl,
and the Biopolitics of Visibility**

by

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Abstract

This study considers a small group of recent video works by artists Melanie Gilligan and Hito Steyerl through the Foucauldian lens of biopolitics. I argue that these works implicitly reveal how biopower viscerally exposes and abstracts the neoliberal subject, constructing it in precarious tension as ostensibly coherent yet infinitely fissionable. Introducing the study by discussing the concept of biopower in Michel Foucault's work, I also draw on work by Gilles Deleuze, Boris Groys, Brian Massumi, and others to suggest how biopower shapes the subject through ever-expanding forms of surveillance and documentation. Biopower does not merely take advantage of the subject's legibility, however; instead, I argue, it produces subjectivity through visual and data-driven forms of description that tend to both function and be masked as representation. In the second chapter, I contend that Steyerl's *Strike* (2010) and *Strike II* (2012) and Gilligan's *Popular Unrest* (2010) intimate how biopolitical subjecthood is fashioned through photographic, behavioral, physiological, and other technoscientific forms of tracking and modelling. These works propose "strikes" against biopower's relentlessly visualizing drive. I argue in chapter three that Gilligan's *Popular Unrest* and Steyerl's *Lovely Andrea* (2007) and *Red Alert* (2007) make explicit the relationship between contemporary forces of intensity and abstraction (formal, economic, social), revealing them as complementary dimensions of biopower that produce a fractured, divided subject amenable to "orderly" visualization. These works propose the redemptive potential of redeployments of affect. In the fourth chapter, I argue that Gilligan's *Self-Capital* and Steyerl's *In Free Fall* (both 2009) demonstrate the relationship of global economic crisis to crises of biopolitical subjectivity. Gilligan's work suggests the character of the archetypical neoliberal subject Foucault describes as "entrepreneur of himself," tracing its modes of self-production and projecting its imminent collapse. Steyerl's turns away from the subject, exploring the vitality and agency of the object and questioning object-subject distinctions. In different ways, Gilligan and Steyerl offer proposals for shedding a biopolitical subjectivity that is increasingly untenable. Illuminating the role of visceral exposure in the biopolitics of subjectivation while reconfiguring this very process, their work extends and exceeds other forms of political engagement with the problem of biopolitics.

Preface

This dissertation is an original, independent, unpublished work by the author, Catherine Steinmann.

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Dedication

To Emma

1 Introduction

You are constantly interpellated. You are under orders to be yourself—for the system. You have to reveal yourself for who you are. In fact, you become who you are in expressing yourself. You are viscerally exposed, like a prodded sea cucumber that spits its guts. You are exposed down to your innermost sensitive folds, down to the very peristaltic rhythms that make you what you are. This is generative power, a power that reaches down into the soft tissue of your life, where it is just stirring, and interactively draws it out, for it to become what it will be, and what it suits the system that it be. This is what Foucault calls “positive” power or “productive” power. It produces its object of power interactively through its own exercise. That object of power is your life. Not just your behaviour, not just your labor—your life. It’s what Foucault calls a “biopower.” It’s a soft tyranny.

—Brian Massumi,
“The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens”¹

“You are under orders to be yourself—for the system,” Brian Massumi writes, intimating that the more we embrace the imperative to be ourselves, the more we give “the system” what it needs. We glimpse our neoliberal “selves” in the biopolitical subject Massumi describes: selves cast as coherent, self-expressive individuals. Living our lives in broadcast mode, we fashion ourselves as unique, artisanal products—personal enterprises with permanent advertising retainers. We feel autonomous, free to cultivate and represent ourselves as we see fit. And yet this exercise is a dutiful one, for if we don’t express ourselves, we will not “become who we are” in the social order of biopolitics. We will not even exist, at least not the way “the system” demands. “*You have to* reveal yourself for who you are,” Massumi insists. This is our mandate: to be inimitable, inviolate, private—yet to become so by revealing ourselves, even by marketing ourselves. We reveal ourselves because we have to; we make our “authentic” selves available. We are under orders to maintain a state of permanent transparency. In generating and supplying data and images that viscerally expose us, we reveal ourselves for who we are—we *make* ourselves who we are. The object of biopower’s “soft tyranny” is our life, and it insists on our visibility.

Massumi’s words shed light on the ways visibility is central to biopower. In his 1976

lecture “Society Must Be Defended,” Foucault describes biopower as a knowledge-power relation in which life becomes the object of political strategy. A productive power, biopower seeks “control of life and the biological processes of man as species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined but regularized,” concerning itself with the governing of the life processes of populations.² For him, the year 1800³ roughly marks the moment life, or biological existence, began to be politicized in this new way by biopower. As this regulatory power emerged, Foucault argues, it began to work in concert with a slightly older form of power he described much more extensively in his work, disciplinary power, to control both the individual body and the population in general. Technologies of discipline and technologies of biopolitical regulation intersected to produce what Foucault calls “the normalizing society,” and, gradually, an even older form of power, sovereign rule, was transformed and eventually largely supplanted.

Since the late 1970s, political and economic changes have brought biopower to the fore both as a social force of escalating intensity and as a subject of study. The Foucauldian formulation of biopower, or biopolitics—terms Foucault used somewhat interchangeably to refer to a concept that he elaborated upon only briefly in his work—has been embroidered in various and often divergent ways by philosophers and theorists such as Brian Massumi, Giorgio Agamben, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Ina Blom, Gilles Deleuze, Boris Groys, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, Maria Mühle, and Paolo Virno, to name only a few.⁴ Nearly forty years later, the concept of biopower allows us to understand how, over the intervening decades, capitalism in so-called “first world” systems of production and financialization has become increasingly invested in the living body of the worker and the management of life. Media historian Pasi Väliäho describes biopolitics as “the direct capture of our lives by the machinery of profitability,” for example.⁵ Virno notes that in today’s neoliberal sphere, capital occupies not only the working hours during which commodities are produced, but also the worker’s affect, thoughts, desires, creativity, and free time—in other words, his or her existence itself.⁶ The contemporary collapse of life into work and work into life—the rapid erosion of distinctions between work time and non-work time—produces subjectivity as, in Blom’s words, “both the raw material of production and the product of production.”⁷ Although it is a productive power, biopower does not directly produce the subject. Instead—as philosopher Brian Massumi suggests in the quotation that opens this introduction—it is interactive. It is a diffuse, immanent power that prods the subject into a

state of ongoing self-production and self-management, encouraging it to adhere to particular norms through practices of self-surveillance and self-improvement.

At the same time, in the current “age of Big Data,”⁸ technologies of surveillance and digital data analysis are becoming an increasingly integral part of everyday life—a fact that has been brought to heightened global attention since June 2013, when Edward Snowden began revealing the first of the documents he collected that describe the surveillance and data-gathering activities of the NSA (National Security Agency, a U.S. government intelligence unit) and GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters, the central British intelligence and security agency). With ever-more exhaustive breadth and depth, our phone calls, e-mail and text messages, movements through geographic space, and web browsing histories are mapped and logged through tools such as GPS-equipped smart phones, urban surveillance cameras, facial-recognition and bio-identification software, radio-frequency identification (RFID) chips, and cookie-enabled home computers. Because we often make ourselves freely available to tracking, much of the data that documents our everyday movements and thoughts is generated with our consent, passive or active. As we click, shop, comment, tweet, tag, and chat, our moods are monitored by the webcam-based emotion trackers of “neuromarketing” and our physiological states are charted through the heart rate monitors and sleep trackers we voluntarily use to optimize our health and the fitness apps we eagerly download. Increasingly, too, our habits are scrutinized and recorded by the so-called Internet of things, that fast-growing network of embedded, digitally interconnected “smart” objects, including watches, socks, bathroom scales, refrigerators, dishwashers, thermostats, lightbulbs, camera- and microphone-equipped TVs, and even cars, which, according to one Ford executive, are now “cognitive devices.”⁹ These tools produce continuous streams of data that describe us as subjects, making us visible not only to human eyes—that is, not only at the level of optics or of “seeing”—but also through various forms of tracking, data-gathering, and modelling.

In some cases, these data streams are accessible to us—the individuals who generate them—and in this respect, they tend to serve as subjectivizing tools, contributing to the ongoing formation of the individual in the contemporary social and political sphere. More and more, however, these data streams exist to be bought and sold—among insurance companies, banks, credit and collection agencies, advertisers, scientific researchers, and Google, for instance—or commandeered by arms of government such as the police, the

NSA, the DHS (the U.S. Department of Homeland Security), the TSA (the U.S. Transportation Security Agency), and the military. For these organizations, as journalist Kathryn Schulz put it recently, data is “gold waiting to be mined.”¹⁰ Data mining enables them to refine with ever-increasing rapidity and granularity their visualizations of the various populations they manage or engage with—citizens, clients, research subjects, patients, insurants, users, foreign governments, and so on—all of which, in the neoliberal market, tend to be reduced to consumers in one guise or another.¹¹ Increasingly, too, the data that is of greatest interest to corporations, researchers, and governments is at least partly and often wholly inaccessible to those whom it describes. In this respect, data surveillance is creating radically non-reciprocal modes of visibility that divide looked-at from looker in an asymmetrical power dynamic. Sight-based forms of surveillance such as camera surveillance have long created such a power imbalance, but the addition of a fast-growing arsenal of digital tools to these older surveillance methods, along with the near-total digitization of photographic surveillance itself, means that, to an ever-greater extent, power is concentrated in the hands of the corporate-military state.¹²

Schulz argues that the idea that data is gold waiting to be mined and that “all entities (including people) are best understood as nodes in a network” is the “theology of the twenty-first century.”¹³ Biopolitics both drives and depends upon just such a theology, treating populations as totalities that must be carefully monitored and analyzed at biological, affective, social, and political levels so that they may be encouraged to maximize their productivity as a labor force serving a globalized capitalist economy. Wide-ranging data gathering and analysis focused on the biopolitical subject’s physical and mental health, affective relations, and behavior ensure that its ceaseless processes of self-production—its cycles of work, consumption, social interaction, and physical maintenance—are consistently visible and trackable down to the most minute actions and data points. As philosopher Colin Koopman argues, because data increasingly defines us as subjects in this new regime of informational politics, our understanding of the role of Foucauldian biopolitics in contemporary life can be usefully expanded through an exploration of the concept of “infopolitics.”¹⁴ Although we like to think of ourselves as separate from, and antedating, the data that refers to us, he contends, more and more, we are not simply described by data but actually composed of it. “Information is not just *about* you,” Koopman writes—“it also *constitutes* who you are.”¹⁵ Koopman terms the contemporary subject made up of “bits and

bytes” the “infoperson,” tracing its development back to historical technologies of identity that began in the late nineteenth century, including biometric practices such as fingerprinting and anthropometry as well as the registration of births and the standardization of names.¹⁶ These early technologies led, in turn, to such identifying systems as the international passport system and social security numbers. More recently, digitization has rendered such data about us progressively more manipulable and assessable, making us more “informational” than ever. While, as Koopman argues, the subject may be composed of data, at the same time, we may additionally note, it is irretrievably wedded to a biological substrate. As Koopman’s analysis also implies, this tracked, monitored, and visualized subject is thus clearly both an “infopolitical” and a biopolitical one—the same subject Brian Massumi describes as constantly interpellated, at the mercy of biopower’s “soft tyranny.”¹⁷

The ceaselessly analyzed, visualized, overexposed biopolitical subject is at the core of this inquiry. This is a study of the biopolitics of subjecthood, but, more precisely, it is a study of the increasingly untenable condition of the biopolitical subject of twenty-first-century capitalism—the neoliberal subject—as it is revealed in a small group of recent video works by artists Melanie Gilligan (born 1979, Canada) and Hito Steyerl (born 1966, Germany). These works, I argue, offer profound insight into some of the ways biopower viscerally exposes and hypervisualizes the neoliberal subject, interactively constructing it in precarious tension as ostensibly coherent and autonomous yet fractured and infinitely fissionable. They suggest how biopower renders the subject ever more visible, and visible in an ever-expanding variety of ways, through tracking and surveillance, at the same time goading the subject into a state of continuing self-surveillance in the interest of self-optimization. Biopower surveils in the visual sense, functioning optically, but it also does so through processes of statistical modelling enabled by data-driven modes of tracking and monitoring that, while not strictly visual in origin, lead to ever more diverse forms of visualization and representation. Biopower does not simply take advantage of or depend upon the visibility or legibility of its subjects, however. Instead, I argue, it actually confers subjecthood through a process of making-visible—through forms of constitutive subject-building that tend to both function as and be masked as representation. Moreover, biopower tends to generate this visibility through means that are themselves often effectively invisible, creating an invisibility-visibility axis that mirrors asymmetrical relations of power. Steyerl and Gilligan, I demonstrate, nimbly negotiate these politics of visibility and invisibility in the work I

consider here, exploring their implications for the shaping and condition of the contemporary subject and suggesting the myriad ways this subject is being nudged toward mutiny. Their work tacitly reveals, at multiple levels, the role and importance of visibility as an aspect of biopolitics in neoliberal capitalism, suggesting what is at stake for us as contemporary subjects and articulating alternative forms and strategies that have suggestive political potential.

In Foucault's lectures and writings, biopower emerges as a force that operates in the normalizing society to cultivate the "right" kinds of lives, to establish and maintain particular norms of living and of subjecthood. According to Foucault, if the old paradigm consisted in the sovereign's power to take life and let live, the new paradigm of biopower consists in "making live and letting die."¹⁸ To make live—to maintain, prolong, and improve life—biopower seeks to eliminate accidents and optimize human neurophysiology, hedging against bodily threats and deficiencies, against risk, and exploring new mental and physical potentials by introducing standards of public hygiene, administering life-extending medical care, promoting mood-altering drugs, developing assistive reproductive technologies, and, more recently, exploring the frontiers of genetic engineering, robotic implants, and brain-computer interfaces. By necessity, the norms of the normalizing society establish themselves against that which is non-normative. Thus, inevitably, not all people are the object of biopower's drive to "make live," and certain lives that do not conform to social norms are ignored and marginalized; these are the dispossessed people—from slaves and war refugees to the unemployed and the homeless—whom biopower often figuratively and literally tends to "let die."

A glance at the world news on any given day conveys the strong impression that it is specifically the subjects who best serve capitalism whom biopower seeks to "make live," and, indeed, the biopolitical processes Foucault and numerous subsequent writers describe appear increasingly integral to the functioning of this economic system. Indeed, as Foucault himself argues in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, capitalism "would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes."¹⁹ Foucault specifically elaborates upon the relationship of biopolitics to neoliberal capitalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, where he emphasizes that an understanding of the trajectories of liberalism and, in the context of the second half of the twentieth century, the transition to the variant forms of

neoliberalism that today are coalescing at a global level, are necessary to grasping biopolitics. In his formulation, liberalism and neoliberalism serve as a “general framework” for biopolitics, both making up the larger context that enables it to operate and rendering it intelligible.²⁰ Whereas biopower originated as a force exercised through state power, the accelerating privatization that marks the neoliberal global market increasingly ties biopower to the for-profit interests of private capital, conferring statelike powers upon private corporations. Today, many services once provided by the state, including transportation and communication services, education, health care, and so on, are being privatized; at the same time, the private, for-profit sector increasingly employs biopolitical strategies of management. The imperative to maximize private profit through biopolitical means has thus exceeded earlier state-based efforts that held wide appeal in appearing to be modelled on ideals of the common good.

Many of the writers who draw upon and expand Foucault’s ideas also emphasize the strong relationship of biopolitics to capitalism, noting that biopower tends to cultivate its primary object, subjectivity, in ways that maintain the operations of and foster capital’s growth. Massumi is among many who suggest the ways biopower today works to ensure the development of proper first-world capitalist subjects. Biopower sets itself up in a relationship of mutual responsiveness with its subjects, Massumi argues, constantly modifying itself in response to their processes of self-production, their activities, and their ongoing shifts in identity, taste, habits, and physical and mental health. For Massumi, a critical driver of the production of biopolitical subjectivity is the “positive feedback loop,” which, in facilitating constant communication between biopower and human populations, creates an interactive system that allows biopower to attend closely to the population’s opinions, needs, and desires, adapting itself to their rhythms and, in effect, learning from them in order to constantly recalibrate its own tactics.²¹ Shopping is an activity illustrative of the mutually responsive positive feedback loop between biopower and the self-producing subject of capital:

You see it everywhere today. The tell-tale sign is the positive feedback loop. For example, you buy things with your credit card, presumably to satisfy needs or desires in your life. Needs, desires: you purchase at your soft points. That visceral act is actually an interaction: you have just participated in a data-mining operation. Your input feeds a marketing analysis apparatus, and that feeds a product development machine. The system eventually gets back to you with new products responding to the input and with new ways to

reach you, massage your rhythms, air out your viscera, and induce you to spend. New needs and desires are created, even whole new modes of experience, which your life begins to revolve around. You have become, you have changed, in interaction with the system. You have literally shopped yourself into being. At the same time, the system has adapted *itself*. It's a kind of double capture of mutual responsiveness, in a reciprocal becoming.²²

Moved by desire, the subject performs visceral acts that are transformed, through digital technologies (of which shopping is just one), into data-mining operations: This is the positive feedback loop to which the subject constantly adapts and to which biopower adapts itself, algorithmically. In this passage, Massumi points to two notable aspects of the condition of the contemporary subject of biopower. The first is the way that biopower appropriates and “optimizes” the subject, and subjectivity more generally, in particular ways specifically in support of capitalism. The second is the way biopower insists and depends on the subject's *visibility*, which it monitors through surveillance and documentation strategies such as data tracking, which feeds information into the positive feedback loop, which in turn is fuelled by data mining techniques. Indeed, in arguing that biopower consists in the power to make live or let die—in the power to regulate life—Foucault himself specifies that biopower has the authority not simply to make life occur but, more precisely, to force life to endure and to manifest itself—that is, to appear—in particular ways.²³

Deleuze is another writer who emphasizes the connections between biopower and capitalism. In his influential 1990 text “Postscript on the Society of Control,”²⁴ he elaborates upon Foucault's account of the transition from the society of sovereignty to the society of discipline and, in turn, from the society of discipline to what Deleuze calls the “society of control,” or the biopolitical society. Tracing the different forms of capitalism that emerged alongside each type of society,²⁵ Deleuze describes these forms not as determining economic structures but, rather, as parallel expressions of particular historical configurations. Nevertheless, for Deleuze, money is the element that most clearly distinguishes the society of control (a society that, in his account, began to accelerate after World War II) from the disciplinary societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and from the even older societies of sovereignty also described by Foucault. In the biopolitical, capitalistic society described by Deleuze, the operations of finance are themselves forms of social control:

The conquests of the market are made by grabbing control and no longer by disciplinary training, by fixing the exchange rate much more than by lowering costs, by transformation of the product more than by specialization of

production. . . . The operation of markets is now the instrument of social control and forms the impudent breed of our masters. Control is short-term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit, while discipline was of long duration, infinite and discontinuous.²⁶

Whereas man was defined in the society of discipline by his enclosure, Deleuze argues, in the society of control he is defined by debt.²⁷ And whereas the society of discipline was structured around minted money connected to the gold standard, the society of control is organized around floating exchange rates that fluctuate in response to shifts in standard currency rates. Furthermore, whereas the nineteenth-century capitalism associated with the disciplinary society was one of discrete, discontinuous, controlled institutional spaces, of the factory and its workers and of the transformation of raw materials into finished goods, in the society of control, capitalism is diffuse and limitless, characterized by open circuits and ever-modulating networks. Nearly every form of physical production is relegated to the “third world” in the society of control, and in the “first world,” the factory has been supplanted by the corporation. For Deleuze, marketing, as the “soul” of the corporation, begins to eclipse commodity production. (As we might further note, that Deleuze confers a soul on the corporation suggests its status as a person, presaging the neoliberal legal concept of corporate personhood.) The corporation, as a quasi-human subject, is now not simply promoted by means of marketing; rather, it is made up at its very core—its soul—*by* marketing, in other words, by a practice of setting up appearances, of representing and making-visible. Significantly, in Deleuze’s account, the brand no longer *represents* the corporation; now, instead, it *is* the corporation.

Deleuze also argues that the historical shifts in power Foucault describes correspond to specific technological developments. For Deleuze, “types of machines” mark the different forms of capitalism and their corresponding forms of power—once again, not in a deterministic sense, but in the sense that capitalism, power, and technology are parallel expressions of the particular social forms that both produce and use them. If “simple machines” such as levers, pulleys, and clocks were the hallmarks of the societies of sovereignty, Deleuze argues, the societies of discipline concerned themselves with machines of energy, “with the passive danger of entropy and the active danger of sabotage.” The control societies, by contrast, embrace a third type of machine, computers, “whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy or the introduction of viruses.”²⁸

Indeed, as a non-determining yet integral technology, the computer plays a critical

role in Deleuze's analysis of the ways capitalism and power converge and are deeply entangled with one another in the control society. Especially important to his argument is the interplay of computer languages and technologies, capitalism, and biopower in constituting its historically contingent forms of subjectivity.²⁹ According to Deleuze, whereas the disciplinary societies were characterized by the two poles of the individual—with its unique signature, at one end, and the number that situated the individual within a mass, at the other—in the societies of control, this individual/mass pair has been replaced: Individuals, Deleuze argues, “have become ‘*dividuals*,’” while masses have become “samples, data, markets, or *banks*.” Deleuzian “dividuals” are marked not by signatures or numbers, but by codes. Codes operate as part of a language of control; they are passwords that allow or deny access to information.³⁰ Elaborating upon Deleuze's proposal, we might conceive of the “dividual” as a fragmented, *divided* subject made up of bits of information—of commodified behaviors and preferences expressed as statistically quantifiable, scientifically analyzable, marketable data sets. Defined by these data sets and identified by its password, the “dividual” is a data object, a user interacting with a digitally mediated, networked market, its every movement tracked, recorded, and characterized through various forms of imaging and data representation. Akin to Koopman's “infoperson,” Deleuze's “dividual” is a subject not just described by but *constituted by* data.

Drawing on these ideas from Foucault, Massumi, Deleuze, and Koopman, we may further conceive of biopower as not merely *relying* upon the subject's visibility, then—as not simply needing or commanding the subject to be visible, or pressing it into visibility—but, rather, as producing the subject through a process of making-visible. Massumi suggests such a process in the quotation that opens this introduction: “You are under orders to be yourself—for the system. You have to reveal yourself for who you are. In fact, you *become who you are in expressing yourself*.”³¹ In this formulation, self-expression becomes not just a practice of self-representation or self-broadcasting but a practice of life-building. The feedback loop and the divided subject can be understood, therefore, as mutually constitutive of subjectivity: networks of surveillance and tracking continuously produce the subject of biopower through life-giving forms of description; at the same time, the ongoing habits of self-expression and self-maintenance that biopower encourages—which are visible, “readable,” and modellable to biopower through expanding networks of visual surveillance and other forms of data tracking—also contribute to the life-building representational cycle.

These forms look like representation, but they are fundamentally different from forms of representation conceived of as the visualization or description of a pre-existing external object.

Whereas the panopticism Foucault described as a signature feature of the disciplinary society similarly involved the surveillance and making-visible of the subject, the transition from discipline to control—to the biopolitical era—parallels the transition from panoptic surveillance to a more immanent and diffuse, post-panoptic form of scrutiny that depends to a greater extent on the subject's ever-more total internalization of the mandate to self-surveil and less on rigid spatial vectors of control. The shift from panoptic to post-panoptic forms is also turning on its head the presumed power of surveillance's end product—the image—to actually show us something that can be considered “true.” As I will suggest in this study, images, particularly photographic images, are today increasingly severed from their referents, possessed of newly autonomous force, appearing less and less as indexes of reality and more and more as creators of it.

This phenomenon can be seen in events that take shape and are played out quite explicitly (unconsciously or otherwise) as photo opportunities, or in the fractured, multiple “selves” that are constituted through streams of photographs posted online. These photographic and cinematic forms of self-documentation, posted on Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, and YouTube, for example, can be conceived of not just as self-regulatory practices but as life-building ones. *New Inquiry* editor Rob Horning argues that “selfies” (the photos we take of ourselves, usually with cameraphones, and share through social media) epitomize the merging of economics with self-production. These casual digital self-portraits mark the point at which “external social control—the neoliberal command to develop a self as a kind a capital stock and serially reproduce oneself in self-advertisements—is internalized as crypto-defiance,” Horning writes. “*I’m not going to consume their images, I’m going to make one of my own, take control of how I’m seen!*” When we snap a selfie, we assume we do so freely and voluntarily, free from the reach of apparatuses of power. Yet this is precisely how control now operates, Horning argues: “producing ourselves as an object for the network, performing the obligatory work of identity construction in a captured, preformatted space.”³² These post-panoptic, deterritorialized forms of self-surveillance, self-simulation, and self-definition are natural companions to the faked realities and real fictions of today’s reality-TV culture, which, as Slavoj Žižek suggests, is one phenomenon that has brought about a “tragi-

comic reversal” of the panoptic logic devised by Jeremy Bentham and later theorized by Foucault: “Today, anxiety seems to arise from NOT being exposed to the Other’s gaze all the time, so that the subject needs the camera’s gaze as a kind of ontological guarantee of his/her being.”³³ Out of these constitutive processes, reality often emerges not so much a precursor to the image as its effect and ultimate end.

Here, Boris Groys’s assertion that, in the era of biopolitics, the difference between the living and the artificial has become exclusively a narrative difference is also significant. In his essay “Art in the Age of Biopolitics,” Groys argues that in today’s biopolitical era, of which the clone is an emblematic figure, life is no longer considered a “natural” event, but, rather, “time artificially produced and fashioned.”³⁴ This is an era in which living things can be reproduced and replaced at will; thus, Groys argues, the living thing has lost its unique, unrepeatable inscription in time—its unique, unrepeatable lifespan. (As we have seen, Deleuze, too, argues that the individual identified by a unique signature is a subject of the disciplinary society, unlike the coded “dividual” of the control society.) Today, Groys proposes, life is so artificially produced, tracked, and managed that it is narrative—specifically, narrative constructed by means of documentation—that produces the life of the living thing as such, conferring upon it a unique identity and inscribing it into history.³⁵ Groys writes primarily of visual documentation, especially photographic documentation, observing (like Foucault, Massumi, and Deleuze) that visibility is critical to the operations of biopower. Groys’s contention that narrative and documentation mark the difference today between the living and the artificial points to an important dimension of biopower as a productive, constitutive power: namely, as I argue, that biopower serves less to control and monitor its subjects than to actually produce them through processes of making-visible—in other words, through myriad processes of tracking, monitoring, analyzing, predicting, and otherwise visualizing. It is specifically in being coerced into carrying on in particular ways and into showing itself doing so—in being inscribed into visibility—that the living thing becomes a subject. Here, again, biopower both describes or represents the subject (thereby defining it) and guarantees that it self-produces and self-defines in particular ways.

Maria Mühle, writing of the epistemic rupture of circa 1800 that ushered in the biopolitical era, makes a related argument about the constitutive power of the image in this ascendant period. For Mühle, biopower bears a twofold relationship to life in that “life is not only the *object* of power relations in the biopolitical age but at the same time offers the

functional model for biopolitical strategies.” Biopower imitates life. In this, it mirrors a technology that also imitates life and that emerged around the turn of the nineteenth century, at approximately the same time as biopower: namely, the photographic image as an index of reality. Mühle argues that “the relation between biopolitics and the photographic or filmic image is not reduced to their capacity to *represent* life, but rather to their specific positivity inasmuch as they both *produce* life through their imitation and *as an imitation*, or a correlate of power-knowledge techniques.”³⁶ Thus, for Mühle, the photographic and filmic image are not related to biopolitics only in their potential to represent life but also in a generative capacity, one that is productive of life itself.

I argue here that through being made visible, the living thing enters into that class of subjects that biopower seeks to “make live” rather than to “let die”—the visible class that serves capital, in contradistinction to the invisible class, which also serves capital, albeit in a different, “negative” way. In other words, biopower inscribes subjects into life through representation in the form of the “right” kinds of capitalist subjects, just as it banishes their necessary underclass, the “wrong” kinds of capitalist subjects, into invisibility. For if Deleuze’s “dividual” is a digital subject, it is also very much a first world subject. This subject stands apart from the abject poverty of some three quarters of humanity that, Deleuze argues, capitalism retains as a constant throughout its various historical forms. This is the mass majority too poor for the debt that defines the new subject of control, he contends, just as it was too numerous for the spaces of confinement that organized the disciplinary subject. Although Deleuze does not explicitly make this connection in his text, we might think of the vast underclass he describes as belonging to that class of persons biopower seeks to “make live”—in support of third-world factory production, for example—or to “let die” as “disposable” or non-essential beings—as in stateless refugees or the largely invisible populations of human trafficking. If, as we often hear today, capitalism can be conceived of as a pyramid or Ponzi scheme, then the populations who are allowed to die, who are not shaped and “looked after” by biopower as the “dividual” is, appear as the necessary and therefore inevitable have-nots, the “losers” in the scheme. That such an underclass exists at the fringes of what Foucault calls the normalizing society does not mean that it is external or irrelevant to the socioeconomic system of biopower, however; on the contrary, they are a necessary component of it. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri warn, everything is caught up within biopower’s web, and nothing stands apart from it as a global social field

inextricably bound up with capitalism: “There is nothing, no ‘naked life,’ no external standpoint, that can be posed outside this field permeated by money.”³⁷

While Deleuze defines these two massive groups by economic status, we may further observe that within each group one nonetheless finds a wildly heterogeneous diversity of subjects, each rendered unique by circumstances of place, time, and sociopolitical context. In their Foucault-inspired study *Missing Bodies*, sociologists Monica Casper and Lisa Jean Moore point out that the material realities of class, sexuality, gender, disability status, citizenship status, and geographic location profoundly affect the particular ways visibility and invisibility are stratified in uneven and shifting ways. Casper and Moore theorize visibility and invisibility as inseparable, dialectically paired ends of a spectrum in which a wide range of subjects and populations are socially produced through the discursive and institutional operations of twenty-first-century biopolitics, which they define as a power that combines biopower with disciplinary power. At one end of this spectrum, they describe a set of intensifying Orwellian surveillance practices involving cameras, watchers, and analysts that enable corporations and governmental forces to both visualize and visually define individual subjects in order to regulate and sometimes discipline them; at the same time, other individuals are consigned to erasure, their bodies “conspicuously missing in action,” they note. “Not all bodies are created equal,” they write; “some bodies clearly count more than others, and some bodies are not recognized at all. . . . This new politics of visibility can lead to the overexposure of some bodies—Lance Armstrong, Jessica Lynch—and to the near invisibility of others—dead Iraqi civilians, illegal immigrants, the victims of HIV/AIDS and ‘natural’ disasters.”³⁸ The politics of visibility and invisibility, inclusion and disappearance, entail a range of specific social, economic, and physical implications at both extremes.

This study inquires into what might be at stake, then, in the idea that biopolitics both depends upon the visibility of its subjects and creates them as subjects by making them visible and representing them in specific configurations that serve capitalism. Its objects, a small group of recent video works by Hito Steyerl and Melanie Gilligan, explore capitalist subjectivity in ways that, I argue, shed light on the biopolitics of making-visible and making-invisible. While my focus is on works by Steyerl and Gilligan, I also comment from time to time on the work of other artists whose practices intersect with theirs in telling ways, including Documentation Céline Duval, Omer Fast, Claire Fontaine, Emily Jacir, Trevor Paglen, Seth Price, SUPERFLEX, and Ryan Trecartin. My core argument is that Steyerl’s

and Gilligan's work, operating along disparate pathways, highlights the role and importance of visibility and invisibility as productive aspects of biopolitical subjectivity under capitalism, pointing to the ambivalent promise of both under such conditions. If being seen—being represented, standing up and being counted, being recognized—has long been viewed as an invitation to citizenship and participation, to enjoying care and community, to having a voice, to enjoying full subjecthood—today, it is also understandable as an invitation to subjugation and powerlessness, to becoming a surveilled subject of biopolitical control.

Gilligan produces multi-part dramas inspired by the genre conventions of contemporary prime time and cable television. In experimental, sci-fi video narratives presented in TV series format, she focuses on the atomized condition of the subject of neoliberal capitalism. Her work explores the ways capitalism works hand-in-hand with science—particularly neuroscience, psychology, computer science, and forensics, but also the economic, political, and statistical sciences—to visualize the subject in various ways through multiple forms of monitoring and analysis and to fragment all aspects of that subject into capitalist categories of value, as data sets. Gilligan's work suggests new possibilities around the group as a formation within the commons that, in offering an antidote to the atomization of the contemporary individuated subject and its corollary, the nuclear family, offers post-capitalist political potential.

Steyerl similarly explores the visibility of the subject of neoliberal capitalism in her practice, but from different perspectives, in avant-garde documentary and abstract video works. Steyerl's practice proposes a breakdown of traditional notions of subject and object, agent and mute material, tracing the trajectories of both as fleeting identifications in a constant state of flux. In particular, she focuses on the autonomous "lives" of images, which, in her work, operate not so much as representation but as things. For her, things are very much like people, acting as generative subjects, creating situations and conditions rather than merely reflecting them. Steyerl's work thereby suggests the emancipatory potential of the breaking down of the traditional subject-object distinction, proposing an embrace of the material configuration of the object—even of a becoming-*thing*—as an alternative to the bleak conditions of contemporary subjectification. Here, Groys's contention that life is made life through documentation and narrative—through being recorded and made visible—is once again relevant. Steyerl asserts that the only thing that can be called "authentic" about a thing today is its brand logo; so too, she says, "it has already come to be with life: copyright

by Monsanto.” Under conditions in which life is generated through branding, in which life is already reified, for Steyerl, a return to and a redefining of materialist approaches is an appealing alternative; as she puts it, “the only indisputable authenticity consists in maximum reification.”³⁹

Steyerl’s and Gilligan’s approaches are in many ways dissimilar, and their works are stylistically distinct. Yet they have a number of points in common. Both artists work primarily in video, albeit using different techniques, to produce films alternately humorous, polemical, and incendiary. While Steyerl, a Berlin-based German artist, often works in an essayistic documentary mode and sometimes in a more abstract video format, Gilligan, a Canadian artist currently based in London, England, works in an episodic science fiction genre, at least in the films I consider here. Both artists’ bodies of work are suffused with Brechtian humor and employ accessible, pop-culture visual language, yet they do more to suggest complex realities than to offer escapist fantasies. Gilligan and Steyerl also both make some of their video work freely available through online distribution, offering a democratic supplement to traditional modes of art ownership, gallery display, and copyright and enabling vastly wider audiences to encounter their films. Both artists have published highly sophisticated written work, including apparently “straight,” philosophically and historically informed texts as well as more speculative as well humorous ones. Both also speak in public extensively, offering lectures as well as performance works, as part of their respective practices. In this, they share a concern for forging alternative modes of communication that respond to established forms of knowledge in the increasingly neoliberalized institutions of the art museum and the university. The two artists’ practices thereby tend to effect a collapse of the distinction between artist and critic, artist and philosopher, artist and historian—that is, a blurring of the divide between artistic production and critical interpretation—even to the point, notably, that they similarly run the risk of overdetermining their own work through auto-historicization.⁴⁰

Chapter two introduces the theme of biopolitics and visibility with a consideration of Melanie Gilligan’s five-part video series *Popular Unrest* (2010, 67 mins.) and Hito Steyerl’s short video polemics *Strike* (2010, 28 secs.) and *Strike II* (2012, 35 secs.), exploring the biopolitical construction of subjecthood through processes of making-visible and the potential for internal resistance to such processes. The third chapter continues to explore Gilligan’s *Popular Unrest*, this time in conjunction with Steyerl’s video works *Lovely Andrea*

(2007, 30 mins.) and *Red Alert* (2007; three repeating video loops), focusing on abstraction as a theme and an operating force in both artists' work. The videos examined in chapter three connect real-world abstraction to contemporary forces of intensity in a late capitalist sphere that increasingly instrumentalizes affect; here, both abstraction and intensity emerge as dimensions of biopower that shape the subject. Chapter four considers two works from 2009, Gilligan's three-part video series *Self-Capital* (23 mins., 37 secs.) and Steyerl's three-part video series *In Free Fall* (34 mins.), each of which explores the implications of the 2008 financial crash for the subject of neoliberal capitalism. In *Self-Capital*, Gilligan's focus is the ways individual crisis parallels global economic crisis; in contrast, the subject of Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall* is the potential of the object to embody the crises of financialization and commodity culture.

Both artists' works, rather than remaining content to merely lament the neoliberal subject's fate, offer politically suggestive ways of rethinking what often appears to be its "trapped" condition. This is a subject trapped, I argue, by biopower—a subject captured by visual means even to the extent that it emerges as an entity commensurate with its appearance. In both conjuring up and seeking to liberate this visually constituted subject, I contend, Gilligan and Steyerl actively reorder our own constitution as subjects by exposing the operations that mold us. This is the first major study to focus on Gilligan and Steyerl's work together. It is also the first to consider either of their bodies of work at length through the lens of biopower; although Gilligan has written and spoken about her interest in biopolitics and Steyerl has occasionally mentioned biopolitics in her work, it is a topic that has not been taken up in much depth in the critical reviews or scholarly literature addressing their artistic production. I seek to demonstrate that Gilligan's and Steyerl's work extends and exceeds other, non-artistic forms of political and philosophical engagement with the problem of biopolitics, both reflexively considering the ways biopolitics produces us as subjects—thereby giving us new insight into what biopolitics is—and reconfiguring this production, enacting and illuminating how art and images are deployed by biopower in subject formation.⁴¹

In doing so, Gilligan and Steyerl also offer meaningful calls to action at a moment of deep economic and social stagnation. As critic Mark Fisher points out, the 2008 financial crisis, far from sparking the global post-capitalist revolution some dreamed of as the ultimate outcome of the various promising local uprisings of 2011, has only strengthened the power

of capital, and the austerity programs implemented in its aftermath have intensified rather than weakened neoliberalism. In the absence of a viable post-capitalist counterforce, even though neoliberal capitalism appears newly delegitimized, it continues. “Neoliberal ideas are like the litany of a religion whose social power has outlived the believers’ capacity for faith,” Fisher writes. “Neoliberalism is dead, but it carries on.” And yet, he notes, cynical or passively nostalgic responses from the Left—some of which can be understood as what political theorist Wendy Brown famously calls “Left melancholy”—only serve to perpetuate the sense that from now on we can expect the worst.⁴² In suggesting means of undermining the neoliberal condition from within through the collectivization or erasure of the subject, Gilligan’s and Steyerl’s work offers tactics both fantastical and practical for liberatory, post-capitalist reconceptualizations of subjectivity that are much-needed under conditions of Left paralysis, for both dreaming and enacting a better future, a future that looks different from the one that currently promises, as Fisher notes, “more of the same, forever.”⁴³

¹ Brian Massumi, “The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens,” *Inflexions* 1, no. 1 (May 2008), http://www.inflexions.org/n1_massumihtml.html/.

² Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey and Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Picador, 2004), 246.

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998), 143.

⁴ See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); Franco Bifo Berardi, “Biopolitics and Connective Mutation,” *Culture Machine* 7 (2005), <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/viewArticle/27/34/>; Franco Bifo Berardi, “The Pathologies of Hyper-expression: Discomfort and Repression,” trans. Arianna Bove, *eipcp* (*European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*), June 2007, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1007/bifo/en/>; Ina Blom, *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality, and Media Culture* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2007); Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992), 3–7; Boris Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation,” in Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 52–65; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2000); Maurizio Lazzarato, “From Biopower to Biopolitics,” *Pli* 13 (2002), 99–113; Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: New

York University Press, 2011); Brian Massumi, “The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens” (note 1); Maria Mühle, *Eine Genealogie der Biopolitik: Zum Begriff des Lebens bei Foucault und Canguilhem* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript-Verlag, 2008); and Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).

⁵ Pasi Väliaho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), xi.

⁶ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (note 4).

⁷ Blom, *On the Style Site* (note 4), 38.

⁸ Snowden's leaks began in June 2013, although the “Big Data” revolution was well underway by then. For examples of media sources discussing “the age of Big Data,” see Steve Lohr, “The Age of Big Data,” *New York Times*, February 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/12/sunday-review/big-datas-impact-in-the-world.html/>; Brad Peters, “The Age of Big Data,” July 12, 2012, *Forbes.com*, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/bradpeters/2012/07/12/the-age-of-big-data/>; and “The Age of Big Data,” *Horizon*, TV series, BBC Two, April 4, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006mgxf/>.

⁹ See Sue Halpern, “The Creepy New Wave of the Internet,” *New York Review of Books*, November 20, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/nov/20/creepy-new-wave-internet/>.

¹⁰ Kathryn Schulz, “What Is Distant Reading?,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/books/review/the-mechanic-muse-what-is-distant-reading.html/>.

¹¹ Halpern, “The Creepy New Wave of the Internet” (note 9).

¹² On this topic, see Andrea Mubi Brighenti, “Artveillance: At the Crossroads of Art and Surveillance,” *Surveillance and Society* 7, no. 2 (2010), special issue on Surveillance, Performance and New Media Art, ed. John McGrath and Robert Sweeny, 175–86, <http://www.capacitedaffect.net/2010/Brighenti-2010-Artveillance.pdf/>.

¹³ Schulz, “What Is Distant Reading?” (note 10).

¹⁴ Colin Koopman, “The Age of Infopolitics,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2014, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/the-age-of-infopolitics/>. Infopolitics, for Koopman, refers to government surveillance, data surveillance, and the “data analytics” commonly employed by marketers to root out and target customers, as well as to digital rights movements, digital currencies (like Bitcoin), algorithmic finance, and digital property.

¹⁵ “We like to think of ourselves as somehow apart from all this information. We are real—the information is merely *about* us. But what is it that is real? What would be left of you if someone took away all your numbers, cards, accounts, dossiers and other informational

prostheses?” Koopman, “The Age of Infopolitics” (note 14). See also Colin Koopman, “From Biopower to Infopower?” lecture delivered at Oregon State University, December 3, 2014, available on video at <http://syntheticzero.net/2013/12/30/from-biopower-to-infopower-colin-koopman/> and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTGvaG6T_G4#t=1914/.

¹⁶ On photography's historical role in such practices of making-visible, including anthropometry, see Allan Sekula's landmark study “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 3–64.

¹⁷ Massumi, “The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens” (note 1).

¹⁸ Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*” (note 2), 247.

¹⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *The Will to Knowledge* (note 3), 140–42.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 328; see also 21–22, where Foucault discusses liberalism as a historical precursor that must be understood in order to grasp the concept of biopolitics.

²¹ Massumi, “The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens” (note 1).

²² Ibid.

²³ Here I am indebted to Lauren Berlant's articulation of Foucauldian biopower, which, she writes, requires that life “endure and appear in particular ways.” See Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2007), *On the Case*, ed. Lauren Berlant, 754–80.

²⁴ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (note 4).

²⁵ Deleuze does not use the words “biopower” or “biopolitics” here, but his “control” is widely understood as an elaboration of the Foucauldian concept.

²⁶ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (note 4).

²⁷ See also Maurizio Lazzarato's discussion of Deleuze's text in Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Amsterdam: Semiotext(e), 2012).

²⁸ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (note 4).

²⁹ Although Deleuze does not use the term “neoliberal,” the capitalism he describes corresponds closely to neoliberal capitalism.

³⁰ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (note 4).

³¹ Massumi, “The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens” (note 1). My emphasis.

³² Rob Horning, “Selfies without the self,” *The New Inquiry*, November 23, 2014, <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/marginal-utility/selfies-without-the-self/>.

³³ Slavoj Žižek, “Big Brother, or, the Triumph of the Gaze over the Eye,” *Ctrl [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, eds. Ursula Frohne, Thomas Levin, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 224–27.

³⁴ Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics” (note 4).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Maria Mühle, “Imitation of Life: Biopolitics and the Cinematographic Image,” *Fillip* 17 (Fall 2012), 15–23.

³⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Empire* (note 4), 32.

³⁸ Lisa Moore and Monica Casper, *Missing Bodies* (New York: New York University Press), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 3200–09. While she does not take her cue directly from Foucault and does not define her study around problems of visual definition and erasure, Judith Butler's pivotal study *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* addresses a similar problem in arguing that “specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living”; see Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009). Her earlier volume *Precarious Life* also explores biopolitical questions; see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006).

³⁹ “Patented Idealism: A Conversation between Hito Steyerl and Sven Lütticken,” *Texte zur Kunst* 79 (September 2010), “Life at Work,” 145–50.

⁴⁰ Gilligan often refers explicitly to biopolitical discourses in these contexts, whereas Steyerl does so very infrequently; I argue that the two artists’ work nevertheless has much to say about the relationship of visibility to the condition of the neoliberal subject in the same contemporary milieu of biopolitics and late capitalism.

⁴¹ This study is also one of only a few investigations in the field of art history and visual culture to relate video to the biopolitics of visibility in the context of subject formation. Pasi Väliaho’s recent book *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (note 5) is perhaps the most prominent example of such an in-depth study in the field; he addresses biopolitics and video in the context of visual culture, focusing especially on online war games, as well as in the context of art, with an analysis of work by Chantal Akerman, Trevor Paglen, and Steve McQueen. Väliaho explicitly takes as one of his points of departure W. J. T. Mitchell’s *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), in which Mitchell offers a fascinating analysis of the “lives” of images,

including video, particularly in the visual culture of the so-called “war on terror.” See also Warren Neidich, “Neuropower: Is Resistance Fertile?” in Jakob Nilsson and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, eds., *Foucault, Biopolitics, and Governmentality*, Södertörn Philosophical Studies 14 (Stockholm: E-print, 2013), 133–44; Neidich offers insight into the role of photographic-video hybrid apparatuses in constituting mediatic subjectivities. And in his essay “Biopolitics and Connective Mutation” (note 4), Franco Berardi briefly considers the video work *The Wind* (2002), by artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila, in a biopolitical context.

⁴² Mark Fisher, “‘A social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude’: Popular Culture’s Interrupted Accelerationist Dreams,” *e-flux journal* no. 46 (June 2013), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-social-and-psychic-revolution-of-almost-inconceivable-magnitude-popular-culture-s-interrupted-accelerationist-dreams/>; Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999), 19–27.

⁴³ Fisher, “‘A social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude’” (note 42).

2 **Biopolitics, Visibility, and Disappearance: Melanie Gilligan's *Popular Unrest* and Hito Steyerl's *Strike* and *Strike II***

Warhol's prediction that everybody would be world-famous for fifteen minutes had become true long ago. Now many people want the contrary: to be invisible, if only for fifteen minutes. Even fifteen seconds would be great.

—Hito Steyerl, “The Spam of the Earth:
Withdrawal from Representation”⁴⁴

The Spirit is faced with a paradox: It maximizes
and expels life at the same time.

—Melanie Gilligan, *Popular Unrest*⁴⁵

What would the consequences be of refusing the camera's gaze? Hito Steyerl's 2012 video *Strike II*⁴⁶ both raises and suggests responses to this question. The video opens with a scene of a young girl standing next to the artist in the corner of a homey, sunlit room. Birds chirp, a dog barks in the distance, and a fish tank bubbles serenely nearby. Clad in a snake-print dress, her hair blown out and lipstick freshly applied, Steyerl rests one hand on the girl's shoulder, and the pair face the camera, conscious of its gaze and of the theatricality of their own movements, almost as if preparing for a mother-daughter portrait or, perhaps, a video chat. But the mallet each figure wields suggests that this is instead an arena of domestic anarchy. Abruptly, the two figures move forward, approaching the camera that is recording them. Raising their weapons, they strike it, delivering repeated blows, smashing it. The picture quickly distorts and blurs, and the audio cuts out. In less than half a minute, the camera itself is annihilated, on-camera.

Steyerl's video efficiently evokes several senses of the word “strike”: for example, in its depiction of the destruction of a photographic recording device through mallet strikes, in its evocation of a military “strike” or attack, and in its reference to a “strike” from photographic representation. Writing elsewhere about the oppressive effects of photography's increasing ubiquity, Steyerl notes that, almost imperceptibly, we are beginning to witness a mass walkout from the representational field of photographic and videographic

images—an exodus, an exit from the frame, a quiet refusal of conditions of representation she describes as “too extreme to be survived.” She writes:

I have noted that many people have started . . . surreptitiously taking their distance from the lenses of cameras. Whether it’s camera-free zones in gated communities or elitist techno clubs, someone’s declining interviews, Greek anarchists smashing cameras, or looters destroying LCD TVs, people have started to actively, and passively, refuse constantly being monitored, recorded, identified, photographed, scanned, and taped. . . . Within a fully immersive media landscape, pictorial representation—which was seen as a prerogative and a political privilege for a long time—feels more like a threat. . . . This is why many people by now walk away from visual representation. Their instincts (and their intelligence) tell them that photographic or moving images are dangerous devices of capture: of time, affect, productive forces, and subjectivity.⁴⁷

As *Strike II* opens, we hear a gentle whir reminiscent of analog film reels rolling; the sound alerts us to the mediated condition of the scene, deferring our suspension of disbelief and announcing the camera’s intrusion into the domestic sphere. Evoking a pre-digital filmic device associated with materiality, this sound is the piece’s initial reminder of the physicality of photographic technologies. Steyerl then literalizes this going off of the photographic grid by smashing the camera, challenging its omnipresence and the presumed disinterestedness of its observing eye, refusing the apparatus its power and its usual invisibility.

Steyerl’s concise, bracing polemic protests the intrusive effects of the digitally driven global image economy—an economy in which more and more people and situations are subject to the camera’s gaze. Across the globe, from Fukushima to Mexico City, Athens to Oakland, cameraphone-carrying citizens document disasters, uprisings, protests, wars, and riots, publishing photographs and videos in near-real time with the push of a button. Social media users pour photographs into the ever-expanding realm of Internet-based and mobile digital exchange by the incalculable billions every day. Photographic technologies from CCTV cameras to airport body scanners track, catalogue, and police the geopolitical movements of populations. From the murderous, camera-equipped drones of Barack Obama’s “disposition matrix,” the image-machines of war, to the ever-perambulating surveillant tortoise of documentation that is the Google Street View trolley, these ongoing acts, systems, and conditions of photography have become crucial to the decentered, diffuse relations that characterize the information economies of global capital.

Sociologists Nathan Jurgenson and P. J. Rey describe this condition of proliferating documentation—which occurs through both photographic and other digital means—as “ambient documentation.” On one hand, ambient documentation refers to the default assumption that, even in the apparently semi-private conditions of, for example, a house party, cameras are recording our activities. On the other, it also refers to the contemporary habit of mind in which we continually ask ourselves, “How might my current experience look as a photograph, tweet, or status update?”⁴⁸ Today, the construction of entire identities on Instagram and Facebook, for example—some, as avatars or bots, even unconnected to biological persons—is well recognized and much discussed in the media. As Jurgenson and Rey argue, nearly every action and condition “is potentially just one smartphone click away from becoming a (quasi-)public document, and those around us often have a vested interest in creating such documents, be they photos, tweets, check-ins, or status updates. . . . We are increasingly in the spotlight even if we are unaware that we are performing.” While some of the multiplying acts of documentation Jurgenson and Rey describe are explicit, many more of them are *sub rosa*. Documentation mechanisms abound in our digital world—keyboards, phones, cameras, GPS units, RFID tags—as do documents and data. Given today’s abundance of means of documentation, we can assume that we are constantly being recorded. Our every click, keystroke, and search online is tracked and registered in databases all over the world, sometimes with our consent but often without our knowledge. “Ambient documentation is what we call the condition of documentation that occurs as result of one’s mere presence in an environment,” Jurgenson and Rey write. The result is that an increasingly constitutive element of our subjectivity is the relentless imperative to shape ourselves as would-be documents: “[O]ur present is increasingly lived as a potential document; *the present is now always a future past*.”⁴⁹

Jurgenson and Rey give an account of the contemporary subject as one that, whether consciously or unconsciously, continually fashions itself as a prospective data representation. As we saw in the introduction to this study, Colin Koopman, writing in a Foucauldian vein, makes a similar argument, taking it a step further. While Koopman’s contemporary “infopolitical” subject—the data-infused twenty-first-century incarnation of the biopolitical subject—is one that is more extensively described by documentation than ever before, and while it is encouraged to relentlessly mold and re-mold itself as a more perfect subject of documentation, it is a subject that at the same time is itself constituted by information—the

information generated and recorded through government surveillance, data surveillance, and the “data analytics” commonly employed by marketers to root out and target customers, digital rights movements, digital currencies, algorithmic finance, and digital property.⁵⁰ This is a subject that is no longer antecedent to representation. As we saw Groys similarly note in the introduction to this study, life as a distinctive entity can no longer be seen directly because in a biopolitical era, life exists *only as* documentation.⁵¹ Thus, whereas narrative and documentation initially appear to record pre-existing entities or situations—to depend upon the visibility of such entities and situations to devices and techniques of recording and capture—narrative and documentation in a biopolitical context serve not to represent an exterior, pre-existing life or subjectivity, but rather to define and constitute it. The subject is thus a subject only insofar as it is made visible, through various means of monitoring and recording.

It is in this context that Steyerl’s tactic of stepping aside, of ducking for cover, of becoming invisible—of disappearance or withdrawal from representation—presents possibilities for transformations of the subject in the face of contemporary imperatives around visibility and transparency. As she observes, Andy Warhol’s prediction that in the future everybody would be world-famous for fifteen minutes came true long ago. “Now,” she writes, “many people want the contrary: to be invisible, if only for fifteen minutes.”⁵² In *Strike II* and in her earlier short video *Strike* (which I discuss further later in this chapter), Steyerl examines the conflicted desire to go off camera. Like *Strike II*, *Strike* uses brief, minimalistic, almost abstract means to allude to these conditions of invasive documentation while articulating a “strike” protesting them. Steyerl has made *Strike* and *Strike II* available on YouTube; notably, then, these works take on one of the shapes of their object of protest, the widely distributed low-res video—an emblematic form in today’s order of hypervisibility, surveillance, and self-surveillance—imitating and occupying it. These videos key into the rhetoric and practice of the strike that is increasingly evident today as an expression of dissent amid global conditions of capitalist instrumentalization, suggesting the ways photographic and other forms of documentation respond to, parallel, and produce such conditions, and articulating tactics of refusal.

Expansions in the field of visual documentation clearly provide numerous benefits. While citizen-produced and -shared photography has been providing visual evidence supporting “people’s” accounts of incidents involving authoritarian repression since long

before the beating of Rodney King by the LAPD was caught on videotape in 1991, today, in the wake of the global financial crisis and the failed institutions that created it, the democratization of photography is increasingly important to grassroots forms of political activism, enabling more and more conditions to be made visible. New forms of social organization and criteria of value are emerging, led in many cases by peoples' rebellions that use image- and video-posts as a major medium. Revolutionary and Occupy movements worldwide communicate through such posts on Facebook and Twitter, for example, as do cyberactivists and journalists involved in political transitions popularly dubbed "Twitter revolutions" or "YouTube uprisings."

But while these important developments point to the wildly diverse uses of photography today, they constitute only a subset of photography's proliferating operations, a great deal of which remains less novel and transformative. For while accelerated image production is leading to diversification, this diversification is often superficial, operating within narrow limits; as many writers have argued, the images that flow along digital media networks tend to follow repetitive, conformist patterns of subtle variation, mimicking previous ones, often in reiteration of advertising-influenced tropes and memes that, paradoxically, change as rapidly as they stay the same.⁵³ In this, photographic images appear to be driving the intensifying pattern Fredric Jameson famously identified in the 1990s in his analysis of the post-Fordist paradox, in which he noted that increasingly we must contend with "the equivalence between an unparalleled rate of change on all the levels of social life and an unparalleled standardization of everything—feelings along with consumer goods, language along with built space—that would seem incompatible with such mutability." In the temporal dimension of postmodernity, he argued, henceforth, "where everything now submits to the perpetual change of fashion and media image . . . nothing can change any longer."⁵⁴

Thus, while photography appears nearly infinite in this era of multiplying meanings and uses, it is not limitless or unbounded. This environment of multiplying variation marked by stultifying sameness gives substance to Steyerl's observation that, contrary to expectations, an increase in photographic representation too often corresponds to a decrease in political representation, betraying the long-cherished democratic promise of photography: that visibility and transparency would lead to widespread, positive political change. The desire to evade the photographic gaze therefore also arises from a growing sense that the

camera itself is a tool of political disappearance.⁵⁵ Withdrawal from photographic representation promises escape from increasing photographic documentation and surveillance; yet, at the same time, it invokes the spectre of “disappearances” carried out by governmental forces.⁵⁶ Steyerl’s articulation of a strike from photographic representation registers the tyranny of such conditions, paralleling a conclusion she has noted in her written work: that today’s overwhelming excess of visual representation corresponds to a growing deficit in political representation of the people, whose interests are increasingly being eclipsed by and abandoned to economic interests.⁵⁷

As part of its explorations of the problem of visibility in relation to the condition of the subject of biopower, Melanie Gilligan’s nearly contemporaneous five-part science fiction video series *Popular Unrest* (2010) also considers the ways biopower constructs its subjects through documentary methods, as well as how it tends to strategically render certain subjects invisible, whether the unemployed or the sick or other subjects who fall outside biopolitical normativity—those who exist, in other words, at the margins of what Foucault calls the “normalizing society.” If, as Steyerl remarks, “the discourse of life has historically been closely intertwined with the death of others,”⁵⁸ in *Popular Unrest* this takes at least two forms, the first covert, the second overt, both enacted by a mass, diffuse system of control called “The Spirit,” which monitors and documents its citizens’ every move and every thought. In the first, covert mode, the Spirit assigns citizens ratings based on their personal “market indicators” such as employment, “home labor,” energy output, and physical activity, punitively depriving those with lower ratings of opportunities and pleasures and even fining them if they miss “weekly bio tests” and “health updates.” In the second, overt mode, the Spirit is an unsparing force that is out for blood, ruthlessly murdering citizens apparently at random with kitchen knives falling from above; reduced to mere biological substrates, these victims can be understood as the subjects biopower calculates to be expendable. Like Steyerl’s *Strike* works, albeit through very different means, *Popular Unrest* ultimately also articulates a “strike” of sorts, its narrative culminating in a collective act of resistance to the conditions the Spirit imposes. In this chapter, contending that documentation is a biopolitically constitutive process rather than simply a process that documents pre-existing subjects, I argue that all three works—Steyerl’s *Strike* and *Strike II* and Gilligan’s *Popular Unrest*—suggest myriad ways the subject is constructed through such documentation while also suggesting alternatives that have the potential to transform subjectivation.

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“Political systems dwindle; screens multiply,” Steyerl has recently written.⁵⁹ In her one-and-a-half-minute video *Strike* (2010),⁶⁰ the first in her *Strike* series, Steyerl brings a screen—another photographic device, an LCD display—to its literal breaking point with a single strike of a wrecking bar. The result is a colorful digital error pattern: a kind of electronic graffiti, an accidental painting resulting from a preternaturally controlled, slow-burning act of smash-it-all fury. Her gesture reads as an act of calculated aggression against the depoliticizing forces of today’s screen-obsessed culture, a denunciation of the dominance of visual content. That Steyerl destroys a screen in *Strike*—rather than a video camera, as in *Strike II*—suggests a focus less on technologies that watch, model, or generate the neoliberal subject and more on the mandate for that subject’s total attention to and immersion in screened images. In this vein, Jonathan Crary argues that images today have been subordinated “to a broad field of non-visual operations and requirements” and tend to be deployed as a means of pressing the subject into particular habits of self-regulation and self-management. This is because the *act* of looking at an image is itself now an object of surveillance. For example, he notes, individual acts of seeing such as browsing a web page are often tracked; the screen or display itself may be programmed to monitor the movements of the observer’s eye, its every pause, area of focus, and duration of attention minutely assessed and quantified. Sensory perception is instrumentalized, and “eyeballs,” long a locus of Internet marketing competition, become a site of control, their movements subject to external direction through images and their arrangements in web-page layouts. Thus the act of seeing that might once have signalled the observer’s agency is now a means of subjugation, and the observer is complicit in his or her own data-mining: “Individual acts of vision are unendingly solicited for conversion into information that will both enhance technologies of control *and* be a form of surplus value in a marketplace based on the accumulation of data on user behavior.”⁶¹ As Steyerl’s “strike” against the screen and Crary’s analysis both suggest, not only are we hyper-represented by and even constituted through various means of visualizing and tracking, but images themselves are mobilized to subject our acts of looking to biopolitical control.

In *Strike*, Steyerl also reminds us that the LCD monitor is a physical object. Her distilled gesture presses this association, jolting us out of the virtual universe of the screen. The LCD display is an object of mirrored glass, plastic, and rare earth metals, assembled by

human hands and just as easily destroyed by them. Today's economies are not dominantly immaterial or virtual, *Strike* seems to insist—after all, digital economies rely on both the material bounty of earth-extracted elements and, no less, the human physical labor of manufacturing and other means of material production as well as that of intellectual labor. In refusing the spectacular disconnect between virtual images and material substrates, *Strike* invites us to connect digital to physical, industry to earth, synecdochally tracing the chains of photography's production, distribution, and presentation across the uneven geographies of a global sphere now proposed as increasingly immaterial.

That Steyerl works in both *Strike* and *Strike II* in and against a medium widely considered immaterial in order to demonstrate that medium's own substance points to a historical reversal in the field of art. Whereas once dematerialization was the emblem of the artistic vanguard, denoting conceptual art's opposition to the commodification of the art object, today the situation is reversed: In the era of late neoliberal capitalism, immateriality has taken full hold of life—a historical process that began long before the rise of mass digital communications and that was emblemized by U.S. President Richard Nixon's 1971 abandonment of the gold standard, which hailed a new era of deregulation. Thus, while reminding us that photographs and photographic recording devices are material entities that can be interrupted and destroyed, Steyerl invokes another dimension of dematerialization we must resist—that of financialization.

Strike and *Strike II* thereby point to a third sense of the word “strike,” one that implicates photography in the larger post-Fordist sphere of economic crisis. Steyerl writes in her 2010 essay “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy” that in the early days of the Soviet Union, excess laborers were known as “strike workers,” a phrase derived from a Russian expression referring to “superproductive, enthusiastic labor.” “Strike work” is an accelerated form of precarious production she describes as “affective labor at insane speeds . . . hyperactive, and deeply compromised.”⁶² The precarious affective and intellectual labor that Steyerl and so many other writers describe today is a corollary of the increasing immateriality of financial capitalism and a culture of what Richard Sennett has described as “no long term,” characterized by the decentralization and flattening of the organization of work, the crumbling of post-World War II social democratic promises of job security, and the emergence of a precariat labor force constantly called upon to, in Mark

Fisher's words, remain ever-flexible, to repeatedly "re-skill" as they move "from institution to institution, role to role."⁶³

In a later text titled "Freedom from Everything: Freelancers and Mercenaries" (2013), Steyerl invokes the freelancer as the iconic figure of the "negative freedom" current economic conditions impose—the contemporary incarnation of the "free lance," the Medieval mercenary soldier conjured up by Sir Walter Scott in *Ivanhoe*, a "lance-for-hire" who is not bound to any lord, much like the *ronin*, the itinerant, master-less samurai of Japan's feudal era. (As we might further note, the *ronin* is reincarnated in contemporary Japan as the "salaryman" who is "between employers."⁶⁴) If in the liberal tradition freedom was once regarded as a positive thing—think of the dearly held democratic privileges of freedom of speech, or religious freedom, Steyerl suggests—it is now increasingly experienced as a precarious condition denoting collective loss, a loss of the commons: freedom from employment, from education, from security, corporate freedom from ethical obligations, freedom from social bonds. In this too we are witnessing a contemporary reversal. Neoliberal capitalism is making freelancers and strike workers of more and more of us, Steyerl seems to suggest, not only in the so-called "cognitive" professions, but also in the military, where private mercenary firms are replacing traditional soldiers, and in manufacturing, where the physical sites of production are being fractured into increasingly "free," sub-contracted, autonomous units that offer workers nothing better than indentured or day labor. Although she does not employ the term, here Steyerl invokes what has become widely known in recent discourse as the precariat, that class of temporary, intermittent workers that has experienced explosive growth under the influence of neoliberal labor market reforms since end of the 1970s. Hardt and Negri, for example, argue that this flexible, contingent labor force has assumed new prominence and central importance in the sphere of post-Fordist capitalist accumulation, which they theorize depends increasingly on biopolitical appropriation of such workers' affective and intellectual labor.⁶⁵ The precariat is the class of workers most forcefully subject to the "negative freedom" Steyerl describes. This freedom corresponds directly to the degree of exploitation its members are subject to: intermittent and often low pay, along with overwork and, often, unpaid work under the guise of internships and unrecorded overtime.

As Foucault points out, in the biopolitical era, freedom is not so much a counterweight to control as it is a construct integral to it. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, he explains

that, as a form of governmentality that began to establish itself in the eighteenth century, liberalism-cum-neoliberalism “entails at its heart a productive/destructive relationship” with freedom. On one hand, it needs freedom in order to function—as Foucault notes, “freedom of the market, freedom to buy and sell, the free exercise of property rights, freedom of discussion, possible freedom of expression, and so on.” Thus it is a “consumer of freedom,” and so it also must produce freedom. But here it encounters a paradox: The production of freedom requires that the tensions among competing individual and collective concerns be negotiated; often the freedom of one party entails the oppression of another. In order to produce certain freedoms for its own consumption, then, liberalism-neoliberalism must establish security measures, controls, limitations, and forms of threat and coercion aimed at protecting the freedoms of those in power.⁶⁶ Liberalism and neoliberalism themselves—which, as we have seen, Foucault suggests provide the historical framework in which biopolitics has grown and flourished—are explicitly structured around these core tensions concerning freedom. As Foucault puts it:

Strategies of security . . . are, in a way, both liberalism’s other face and its very condition. . . . The game of freedom and security is at the very heart of this new governmental reason whose general characteristics I have tried to describe. The problems of what I shall call the economy of power peculiar to liberalism are internally sustained, as it were, by this interplay of freedom and security.⁶⁷

Control, Foucault concludes, over time became something more than a “necessary counterweight to freedom”; at a certain point, control became, rather, freedom’s “mainspring.”⁶⁸ Thus freedom is a construct relative to power, “positive” or “negative” depending on one’s position and according to historical contingencies, as Steyerl too points out.

In much of her critical written work—a body of texts peppered with a mix of philosophical and historical rigor, humorous hyperbole, and fantasy-fictional elements, but always infused with a strong political consciousness—Steyerl reflexively interrogates her own position within the politics intrinsic to art as a site of work. She notes that the art world—an industry “that feeds on the crumbs of a massive and widespread redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich”—is also sustained largely through the so-called freedoms she describes, often in the form of unpaid and precarious, self-exploiting labor, or “strike work.” In this, Steyerl advocates for a practice of art that is accountable, rather than one that rests

apolitically on the complex indeterminacy of the work of art itself. In the context of “disaster capitalism,” she observes, art “lends primordial accumulation a whiff of postconceptual razzmatazz.”⁶⁹

The shrinking commons and stressed limits of this “disaster capitalism” have been powerfully theorized by many thinkers. As Franco “Bifo” Berardi, a theorist of the Italian autonomist Marxist school, describes it, the flexibilization of work was an important characteristic of the transition from the bourgeois era of industrial capitalism to the era of what he calls “semiocapital,” a transition that occurred “through a financialization of the economy and a de-localization of work and information.”⁷⁰ Semiocapital exerts an insidious effect on the body, pressing against the physiological limits of human cognition and emotion, subjecting the neuro-psychic energies to mechanistic speeds and requiring them to keep up with the hyperaccelerated rhythm of networked productivity. As Berardi notes, the operations of semiocapital are being widely reconsidered in the context of biopolitical discipline. The archetypical figure of this transformation is the *homo economicus* described by Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, in which every idea and every act is translated into economic terms and the autonomy of knowledge is abolished as economy takes full hold of social life; Steyerl’s “strike worker” suggests just such a biopolitical figure.

While Foucault suggested that the historical ascendancy of biopolitics began around 1800, he located its intensification in the 1960s. As many writers have observed, the sixties is also the decade in which some of the major shifts in spatiotemporal relations that we are experiencing today—a decentering of power and a speeding up of time—first emerged in observable force. For example, Paul Virilio has written extensively about time as a critical driver of contemporary endocolonization, or of the inscription of bodies into technologized apparatuses of power under neoliberal conditions. He argues that the human body is now constituted by speed and functions according to technological rather than biological time; this contemporary experience of increasing speed he characterizes as “dromology,” or the logic of speed, of “chronopolitics.”⁷¹ Pamela M. Lee argues that a fracturing and multiplication of time has produced a fear of time’s acceleration, or “chronophobia,” in digital culture today. She suggests that this fear first arose in the sixties in parallel with the dramatic technological changes—such as space travel, television, and the advent of the computer—that signalled the birth of the Information Age.⁷² This speeding up of time, which mirrors and enables a more rapid turnover of images just as it does an accelerating

turnover of commodities and fashion, produces what Jameson calls “the continuous present” characteristic of postmodern temporality, a “purely *fungible* present in which space and psyches alike can be processed and remade at will.”⁷³ The emergence of a neoliberal political culture centered around precarious labor is a corollary of this temporal condensation. As Fisher explains, the resulting structural instability produces fear and cynicism and, invariably, is accompanied not by innovation but by conservatism:⁷⁴

This is not a paradox. . . . [T]he affects that predominate in late capitalism are fear and cynicism. These emotions do not inspire bold thinking or entrepreneurial leaps, they breed conformity and the cult of the minimal variation, the turning out of products which very closely resemble those that are already successful.⁷⁵

The concurrent forces of speed and increasing sameness that Jameson identified in the nineties established the atomizing conditions that Fisher points to today. These conditions create what Berardi describes as the “fractal-recombinant” modes of financial production of the info-commodity under semiocapital—the ceaseless assembling and rearranging of myriad recombinable informational and semiotic fragments that is involved in social labor. Taking up Berardi’s formulation, we might conceive of the info-image as an atom-smashing force not unlike the info-commodity or even the info-person: as the endlessly varying result of the constant combining and recombining of visual tropes to produce an exponentially multiplying array of ever smaller, more specific images. Such articulations are biopolitical in that they imitate not just finance but new forms of sociality, new experiences of time. In photography, the fractal-recombinant image is now largely based on digitization, a language of information that itself imitates life, paralleling what French philosopher and physician Georges Canguilhem argues was the redefinition of “life as information” in the mid-twentieth century, a transition marked by the discovery of the double helix of DNA.⁷⁶ Just as life is information—semiotic fragments, or the “semio-” in the “fractal-recombinant” sphere of semiocapital—so is life capital, the “-capital” element in “semiocapital.” Indeed, the neoliberal subject, who is obliged to serve as, in Foucault’s words, “entrepreneur of himself,” is a subject reduced to exchangeable, interchangeable units or molecular fractions of capital.⁷⁷

Whereas Steyerl’s *Strike* series alludes to the proliferation of images indirectly, French artist Documentation Céline Duval, as a counter-example, points directly to the taxonomic specificity spawned in the fractal-recombinant sphere of proliferating documentation more

explicitly in her 13-minute video *les allumeuses (hidden eyes)* (2011), whose massive stack of images, many cut from the thin, glossy pages of magazines, show hundreds of variations on the theme of people with their eyes hidden in various ways—with fingers, arms, held objects. A disembodied hand repeatedly reaches into frame, removing pictures off a stack sitting on a brick hearth and throwing them into the fire, one by one. The gradual destruction of this image stack points both to the disposability of individual images—to their status as cultural waste—and to the futility of destroying any single image given the constant propagation, circulation, and turnover of the image-commodity. Its ritualistic burning of icons evokes the burning of effigies in street protests, suggesting a rejection of both the constitutive power of documentation and the increasing sovereignty of the image.⁷⁸

This is an iconoclasm that protests what we might conceive of, following Allan Sekula, as the semantic liberation of images in a contemporary “shadow archive,” a diffuse, historically contingent totality of images that establishes the conditions in which culturally intelligible *new* images may be created—a visual regime that today appears circumscribed by increasingly biopolitical norms. The shadow archive exercises an atomizing effect that isolates and homogenizes, abstracting images from the complex meaningful conditions of their production and assigning its own meanings to images on formal visual terms, establishing “a relation of abstract visual equivalence”⁷⁹ between them that mirrors the abstract logic of commodities circulating in the market. Documentation Céline Duval’s *les allumeuses (hidden eyes)* points out this redistribution of value, a reduction of the constitutive image sphere to mere visual patterns, a sacrifice of textured histories to the smooth, bureaucratic, internal logic of its inventory.

That the people shown in each photo hide from the camera in *les allumeuses (hidden eyes)*—shielding themselves their own hands, with the hands of other people, or with masks, scarves, blindfolds—also points to a new negative freedom Steyerl articulates in her text on freedom: the freedom not to be represented, whether by the camera or by the government, by failed power systems. In these negative freedoms, Steyerl sees the collective emptiness against which so many people around the world rose up in protest in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. As she reminds us, the mask that the hacker collective Anonymous assumed that year as its public face of protest—and that has since come to symbolize contemporary dissent generally—represents Guy Fawkes, who was famously an anarchist (he tried to blow up Parliament) but also a religious mercenary, a freelancer. Shielding the individual much like

the balaclava of Pussy Riot, the mask points to the revolutionary potential of forms of invisibility, impenetrability, and opacity that were once firmly associated only with totalitarian oppression. Here, Steyerl points to a different kind of “negative freedom”: the freedom not to be represented, whether by the camera or by the government, by failed power systems. The masked face expresses a condition of complete freedom from anything, including the processes of making-visible (camera surveillance just one among them) that have emerged as biopolitical forms of control protecting the “freedoms” of a statelike corporate elite and a corporate-style state. Here, flight from representation emerges as an effort to escape and subvert such forms of control. Freedom affects the lives of people just as it affects the lives of photographs, of signs. As we have seen, Steyerl highlights this semiotic freedom in superimposing Medieval mercenaries, nineteenth-century reinventions of them, and Japanese *ronin* on top of one another, deliberately skimming over the asperities of geopolitical histories to suggest their interchangeability as free-floating signs, parallel to the abstracted independence of finance and the ahistoricity of images in the collapsed sphere of semiocapital. This is what Steyerl is concerned about when she writes of contemporary visual culture that “a growing number of unmoored and floating images corresponds to a growing number of disenfranchised, invisible, or even disappeared and missing people.”⁸⁰

Steyerl is not alone among contemporary artists in engaging with the politics of disappearance. Gilligan engages with the problem of the relative visibility and invisibility of the neoliberal subject in her work, as I argue throughout this study, and a generation of artists from Doris Salcedo to Luis Camnitzer continue to address the violent disappearances associated with Latin American political upheavals over the last half century, for example. Investigating disappearance from yet another angle, artist Seth Price’s 2008 project *How to Disappear in America* draws on 1960s countercultural handbooks to create a patchwork of borrowed technical and practical instructions for evading identificatory systems and going off the grid. In connecting photography and representation back to their roots in a renewed cycle of primitive accumulation in *Strike* and *Strike II*, however, Steyerl takes a more oblique approach, her almost abstract video works seemingly removed from the more immediate sites of political contestation embodied in, say, the recent smash-and-grab campaign against CCTV cameras by counter-surveillance activists in Steyerl’s own city of Berlin, part of the worldwide Camover game,⁸¹ which involves earning points by posting videos of yourself destroying cameras. In presenting acts of destruction and withdrawal at a paradigmatic

distance—literal yet almost abstracted icons of iconoclasm—Steyerl alludes more indirectly to the multiple interconnected connotations of “strike,” disavowing didacticism in a technopoetics of destruction that breaks the spell of contemplative anesthesia cast upon digitally fatigued viewers by immersive streams of YouTube footage of property destruction.

In addressing the politics of refusal in the context of the exploited biopolitical subject, Steyerl’s *Strike* series resonates with *STRIKE (K. font V.I.)* (2005), by Claire Fontaine, a French-British-Italian artist collective that assumes a position of invisibility in the form of pseudonymity, eschewing the heroic position of the individual, original, authoritative artist.⁸² *STRIKE (K. font V.I.)*, which takes the form of a colorful neon sign, lights up in response to stillness and shuts down in response to its motion sensor’s detection of activity, invoking the “human strike” Claire Fontaine writes about in a text written the same year the sign was produced. The human strike is, according to the artist collective, one “that interrupts the total mobilization to which we are all submitted and that allows us to transform ourselves. . . . It is the most general of general strikes and its goal is the transformation of the informal social relations on which domination is founded.”⁸³ If the term “general strike” refers to employees stopping their work in order to compel an employer to concede to particular demands, the human strike, we may infer, as the “most general of general strikes,” generalizes this tactic of refusal. But whereas Steyerl’s *Strike* and *Strike II* can be understood as proposing a “strike” from photographic representation—among their myriad connotations—Claire Fontaine’s human strike seeks to emancipate the subject from the bonds of subjectivation, to destroy or negate it, by transforming it into the “whatever singularity” Giorgio Agamben describes in his text *The Coming Community*, a form of being that eschews both identity and belonging and that he theorizes as the subject of a near-future community. The “whatever being” is a fully co-opted, depoliticized human who occupies completely the commodity subjectivity of late capitalist spectacle, but this yet-to-be-realized being also enjoys a particular freedom in that it is unencumbered by identity, by group affiliation, by any presupposition of commonality. It is being *as it is*, coexisting among singularities *as they are*, in all their generic qualities and unique particularities.⁸⁴ Alexander R. Galloway connects the “whatever being” to what he, not unlike Steyerl, describes as a new “politics of disappearance”—a politics that rises “at the very moment of the digital, at the very moment of the prohibition of the negative, from out of the trenches of forced speech, of enforced behavior, of networks reinforced with apparatuses of capture and protocols for

ebb and flow.” For Galloway, this politics entails an exodus, a logic of cancellation and subtraction, posing for the obsolete neoliberal subject the question of how to go on not as a “post”-subject but as a “non”-subject: “what are we going to do without *ourselves*?”⁸⁵

If Steyerl’s *Strike* videos explore visibility as a driver of subjectivity under neoliberal capitalism, and if they propose withdrawal from representation and the destruction of recording and screening devices as one way out—pointing to an increasingly potent collective will to “strike,” or delete, these means of photographic documentation—it is because the camera and the screen so thoroughly dominate subject formation today. In presenting images of the destruction of these devices, the *Strike* series can also be seen as a call for a breakdown of the relentlessly visualized subject they shape and give life to. In these works, the smashing of the object that creates the subject is a metaphor for a smashing of the subject-object binary itself, of the traditional dichotomy of human agent vs. mute material. (Indeed, throughout Steyerl’s work, questioning the split between subject and object, thing and image, thing and self, is a theme, one that has important implications for what I contend are contemporary processes of constructing subjecthood through documenting and making-visible.)

As an alternative, Steyerl tends to favor of identification with the object. Recognizing that in traditional emancipatory discourse, objectification was reviled while subjecthood was a cherished ideal, she muses on why, today, anyone should wish to become an object:

Emancipation was conceived as becoming a subject of history, of representation, or of politics. To become a subject carried with it the promise of autonomy, sovereignty, agency. To be a subject was good; to be an object was bad. But, as we all know, being a subject can be tricky. The subject is always already subjected. Though the position of the subject suggests a degree of control, its reality is rather one of being subjected to power relations. Nevertheless, generations of feminists—including myself—have strived to get rid of patriarchal objectification in order to become subjects. . . . But as the struggle to become a subject became mired in its own contradictions, a different possibility emerged. How about siding with the object for a change? Why not affirm it? Why *not* be a thing? An object without a subject?⁸⁶

If we can begin to identify with things, Steyerl suggests, we may be able to escape the dynamics of identification, rejecting them in favor of participation. “A disassembled G4!” Steyerl exclaims in a 2010 interview. “That is much more interesting to me: the inanimate, the expressionless, the objective. What sort of thing is that? What sorts of forces does it

condense, which affects does it concentrate, which present time is compressed in it?” From this point of view, her controlled, exacting strike on the LCD screen takes on yet another appearance. Striking the object with her artist’s chisel, Steyerl begins to look like a sculptor, chipping away at the monitor to see what she can make of it, or a curious engineer, disassembling the monitor to see what’s inside.

* * *

In an early scene in the first episode of Melanie Gilligan’s *Popular Unrest*—a five-part video series Gilligan makes freely available online,⁸⁷ as Steyerl does with much of her own video and written work—a call center clerk seated in front of a computer holds a telephone to his ear. “But nothing’s even happened yet,” the caller on the other end of the line is saying. “I’ve just lost the job. Can’t they wait another week?” Speaking in a gentle, low voice, the clerk replies: “I’ve got you up on the screen now, sir. Many of your market indicators are low, though you’re good on your energy and output profile, home labor scores. The Spirit has to give you a double C rating. But it could be worse.” Ruffled, the caller inquires, “So what does that mean? That I’m not allowed to play football or have sex anymore?”

Slogans on the posters that adorn the clerk’s cubicle wall suggest the penetrating eye of a vigilant governmental apparatus. One poster emphasizes the importance of scanning and information-gathering: “Med-scan week 27: No information is a risk situation for everyone,” it reads. Warnings abound on other posters: “Charges for missing your weekly health updates have gone up,” one cautions. “Know your excitement levels: You will be heavily fined for injury and illness due to avoidable over-exertion,” another admonishes. A poster showing a young, healthy-looking runner assumes a more pre-emptive tone: “Pre-symptomatic? Your local body manager is here to help.” A poster showing a body lying on a morgue cart with an ID tag dangling from its foot exhorts its readers to self-monitor in order to better capitalize on themselves: “The first step to a profitable life-business: *Know your expiry date.*”

The clerk follows a computer-generated script that scrolls down his screen, dictating his reply to the distressed caller: “Once you’re in the red,” he reads, “the Spirit starts looking after your interests to maximize the purchasing power of your physical activity. But the energy measures you mention are only for very specific cases.” “I hear all sorts of stories,” the caller laments. “You can always buy an extension if you want to,” the clerk says, in a

conciliatory tone. “Put off the probationary period.” The caller replies, “And how much will that cost?”

With this scene, Gilligan establishes the dystopic setting of a science fiction story that succinctly encapsulates the intertwining of biopolitics and capital in a future not far from our own. In a city much like London, U.K., a surveillant state bureaucracy closely manages its populace, instrumentalizing it as the “human capital” whose physical and mental health undergirds and drives the economic health of a voracious capitalist economy. Yet human capital in this environment is also clearly suffering; the unemployment rate is said to be holding steady at sixty percent.

As the story progresses, we are introduced to two rapidly spreading new phenomena that are said to be baffling society. First is the formation of numerous human “groupings,” small, discrete clusters of unrelated, previously unacquainted people from various walks of life who are suddenly compelled to meet, to come together, bound together powerfully by an unseen force. The members of these groups, which are said to be gathering suddenly all over the world, are described as feeling deeply connected to one another yet frustrated by their inability to directly experience one other’s thoughts and feelings. Group members spend most of their time together. *Popular Unrest* closely follows the fate of a smaller than average, newly formed group consisting of less than a dozen people. Guy, one member of this group, describes himself as feeling “a part” of something with his newfound groupmates. We understand him to mean that he feels as if he is a piece of a whole—“an aspect, an attribute”—but in a news reporter’s misconstrual of his phrase “a part” as “apart,” Gilligan also plays on the alternative meaning of the phoneme: something separate, isolated. Indeed, the groups are all made up of people who, having suffered for a lifetime from capitalism’s isolating tendencies, find relief and emotional connection in the group. The groups are cast as a direct threat to the integrity of the atomized, nuclear family. One group member, John, describes the group as more important to its members than their own respective families are to them. A newscaster’s puzzled response is, “How can you go to work and raise a family when you spend all your time with fifty people?”

The second rapidly spreading new phenomenon perplexing society in the story is that of “the killings,” a series of mysterious murders involving a knife wielded by an invisible killer attacking from above. “The body count is rising all over the world,” a newscaster tells us. “The murders happen in public, but not one witness has seen a killer,” another reports.

These murders take place daily across the globe, always with witnesses nearby, and the victims seem always to be cheerful, well-groomed, high-functioning working citizens. The first of several murders we witness in the series takes place in the call center office building. As the fluorescent office lights gradually flicker off at the end of the business day, our soft-spoken call center worker leaves his desk, boarding a glass elevator with another worker. As the elevator descends, suddenly a steel kitchen knife descends from above. Although no human hand guides it, this self-propelling knife stabs our clerk to death to the accompaniment of a screeching, staccato soundtrack reminiscent of the stabbing scene in Alfred Hitchcock's iconic horror film *Psycho* (1960), reducing him to a bloody mass of flesh prone on the elevator floor.

"The Spirit" the clerk refers to shortly before his death, in his conversation with the distressed caller, is the all-seeing, corporate-state biopolitical power at the core of Gilligan's tale, serving as antagonist to the protagonist that is the story's core group. Sometimes also referred to in the story as the "World Spirit," the Spirit implicitly harks back to a concept Karl Marx critiqued in his own work,⁸⁸ the Hegelian "world-spirit"—the totality of human life and activity that confronts what it has itself produced as alien. The Spirit emerges in the five episodes of the series as an all-powerful, often bloodthirsty hegemon masquerading alternately as tough-love disciplinarian and beneficent caretaker. It is also a thoroughly capitalistic force. Describing the Spirit, one scientist in the story says, with near-religious fervor, "The Spirit asks: What is the market value? And it gives a beautiful answer." A global power that monitors and analyzes its wards, the Spirit constantly scrutinizes, quantifies, and forecasts their behaviour, goading them—through techniques of shaming, threatening, and enthusiastically exhorting, as well as through rewarding and punishing—to adhere to the particular biopolitical norms of self-surveillance and self-development that support its need for a compliant, healthy, productive labor force. Relentlessly monitoring, tracking, and forecasting its subjects' behaviour, the Spirit follows through to its logical conclusion. Jurgenson and Rey's observation that "the present is now always a future past."⁸⁹ Like biopower—which, as we saw in the introduction to this study, Brian Massumi describes as "a power that reaches down into the soft tissue of your life, where it is just stirring, and interactively draws it out, for it to become what it will be, and what it suits the system that it be"—the Spirit governs and controls its populace, shaping them in the image it requires.⁹⁰ A generative, productive power that vigilantly gathers data from the conditions of ambient

documentation it has put into place, the Spirit uses this data to cultivate its subjects as useful capitalist subjects, as biological beings instrumentalized in the form of pure energy—physical, mental, and affective. In this, *Popular Unrest* illustrates in minute detail the operations of the “positive feedback loop” Massumi discusses in the context of biopower’s “soft tyranny.”⁹¹

Popular Unrest presents us with a world in which—just as Steyerl, too, has asserted in other contexts—an increase in representation, or what Jurgenson and Rey call “ambient documentation,”⁹² corresponds to a decrease in political representation. Under the Spirit’s governance, visibility is a tool not of democratic transparency but of control, a tool that subjugates the people entirely to economic interests. The Spirit tracks its citizens in myriad ways. Emma, one of the story’s central characters, has three “home health monitors” for different aspects of the chronic disease she has suffered from all her life, we learn. A TV ad promotes new, predictive forms of GPS embedded in shoelaces that facilitate the tracking and forecasting of the daily movements of young “tweens.” The Spirit’s “NeuroVigil Bed MonitorTM” keeps tabs on another central character, John, as he sleepwalks in his apartment at night. In the universe Gilligan constructs, NeuroVigil marks the full integration of consumerism and surveillance into both every hour of the day and into the brain itself. For the Spirit, sleep is no longer the “uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism,” to borrow a phrase from Crary.⁹³

The Spirit is concerned with monitoring not only physical cycles but also social behavior. As we saw in the scene in which the condemned call center worker speaks to a man who has just lost his job, the Spirit also marks each citizen with a “social credit rating,” which, it warns, can be damaged by “negligent behaviour”; this rating serves as a punishing, even criminalizing force. The Spirit makes extensive use of propagandistic ad campaigns to raise awareness of its dictates: “Attention scarcity,” cautions one segment, “is one of the leading problems of our time.” “Confidence, excitement, challenge: Do you have the social assets to be an INSURANT? Check your availability,” another ad advises, pointing to the exchange value the Spirit assigns to interpersonal relations. “Get inside the heads of your favorite and most hated celebs,” an ad for a show called *Inside the Stars* promises, as images of brain scans flash across the screen, repackaging neurobiological tracking and analysis as reality TV entertainment. “See through their eyes. Hear through their ears. A new superstar every week!”

The Spirit, we learn, likes to count. As group member John watches TV at night, an ad intones, “The Spirit. Who’s counting? *We are.*” In another scene, one videogame character tells another: “All the Spirit does is count.” In these passages, the Spirit emerges as a calculating entity that employs statistics to project probabilistic models onto a stochastic system. By continually counting and measuring, the Spirit maintains a regularly updated, comprehensive picture of the ever-shifting biorhythms of its constituency; this detailed, real-time picture, in turn, allows it to constantly refine its predictive algorithms, to analyze and calculate so that it may better anticipate fluctuations in the populace’s energy output—as the fated call center worker puts it, their “energy measures”—and prepare for its effects in the market. Indeterminacy hinders the Spirit in realizing its central goal of maximizing physical and affective resources, and its relentless counting and measuring of everything helps it conquer this indeterminacy, allowing it to better predict and prepare for threats. Zhevila Entelechy, a hard-boiled, calculating character introduced as an economist and one of the Spirit’s early architects, describes the actuarial nature of the Spirit to group member Padma:

The Spirit is always looking for patterns, risks, probable outcomes, so that it can project them back onto reality. The Spirit casts a wide net of possibilities, and everything the Spirit catches, it takes home for dinner. This keeps society efficient and profitable.

The Spirit is forever forward-looking, forecasting, concerned with futurity and risk. Another TV ad exhorts its viewers to join in the Spirit’s efforts to forecast their behaviour: “Join the predictive revolution! What are my health risks? What life investments should I make now? What choices will I make?”

As a thoroughly capitalistic power, the Spirit is constantly counting in order to establish the market value of things and people, which to it are equally reducible to exchange value. “To the world Spirit, everything needs to be compared and exchanged, compared and exchanged,” Entelechy tells Padma. “A push-up bra, a shovel, a deck of cards—the work of a nurse, a miner, an assembly-line worker—are all made comparable through the World Spirit. You’re no use to the Spirit unless it can compare you with everything else.” As Entelechy looks out the window from a high floor of a skyscraper at people walking on the plaza below, she explains to Padma that the Spirit is best able to compare and exchange by breaking down everything—labor, commodities, the individual—into tiny, interchangeable, equivalent units:

Those people down there? They look like bugs. They're like so much data. Units, molecules. They're miniscule and generic but they hold a wealth of information. Find the most basic and abstract unit of something's value, the DNA, the molecule, and then you can start to go to work. Change parts around, engineering growth. *Business advantage*. Et voila!

In a related scene, scientists who have come to study the group phenomenon ask *Popular Unrest*'s protagonist group members to re-enact their respective jobs as an ensemble so that the Spirit can compare their forms of work; significantly, in this comparative exercise, even what the unemployed members of the group consider non-work is included. As the group members stage their forms of work together in a room for the audience of scientists—jobs, daily routines—they spontaneously begin to chant a rhythmic song whose words are units of measure, embodying comparisons the Spirit is making and the equivalences it is determining: “per: megabyte / per: foot / per: data inch / per: cell / per: Euro / per: tissue / per: dollar / per: gland / per: gigahertz / per: yard.” Forming a human factory in a dramatization for the scientists (as a “play within a play,” this is one of several mises-en-abyme in *Popular Unrest*), the group members rhythmically hum along as they perform jerky, machinelike movements.

The comparing of exchange values and the extraction of new forms of value allows the Spirit to maximize existing energies, to more thoroughly exploit human life in service of capital. “There was so much work before that wasn’t fully profitable. That’s what got us through the Great Crisis: *intensifying what we already had*. And it was lucrative beyond belief,” Entelechy says, evoking neoliberal promises of unlimited growth in an atmosphere of increasingly limited physical resources. (Although the meaning of “entelechy” is not mentioned in the film, the word refers in Greek philosophy to “that which realizes or makes actual what is otherwise merely potential.”⁹⁴) Through Entelechy’s explanation, Gilligan implicitly conjures up, in vivid, theatrical form, the “fractal-recombinant” modes of financial production that characterize the info-commodity in Berardi’s analysis of semiocapital—the endless recombining and rearranging of informational and semiotic fragments entailed in social labor—marking from yet another angle Canguilhem’s redefinition of life as information, which, as we saw in the introduction to this study, was marked by the discovery of the double helix of DNA in the mid-twentieth century. Here, life as information depends on life as documentation.

Popular Unrest suggests that the Spirit is to biopower—or, to return to Deleuze’s term, the society of control—as Taylorism was to Foucault’s disciplinary society. Under the Spirit’s regime, the individual is no longer simply a Taylorist cog in the system, one tiny tooth among many that fit together in the larger capitalist machine, making the wheels of production turn. No longer simply a number or a statistic—no longer a unique signature situated within a mass, as the individual was in the disciplinary society Deleuze describes in “Postscript on the Society of Control”⁹⁵—the individual constructed by the Spirit appears, instead, as a Deleuzian dividual, an agglomeration of data points in a digital bank. No longer able to claim coherence as an individual yet paradoxically under increasing pressure to maintain a robust narrative of self-responsible individuality, the divided, fractured dividual brought to life by the Spirit is nothing more than a quantified, commodified set of skills and affects.

As in Deleuze’s analysis, the dividual in Gilligan’s series is marked not by a unique signature or number, but by a code. The “social credit rating” is one such code; as we have seen, this rating enables the Spirit to keep track of and learn from the physiological, social, affective, and informational status of each subject, noting their small, everyday successes and failures and constantly adjusting their ratings accordingly. As codes, these ratings—unlike unique numbers—constantly shift as dividuals live out their lives, and the Spirit allows and denies access to privileges (having sex, playing football) according to their fluctuations, like financial credit scores applied to social life. The Spirit thus exerts its power through forms of data analysis that are “dividually” tailored to subjects who are in a state of constant flux. Although they are forced to act as unique individuals with distinctive identities, these dividuals are impermanent. As shifting data objects, they lack any unique, unrepeatable signature. Their codes fluctuate as they take up and lose jobs, as they fall ill and recover, as their energies wax and wane, as they develop and age. In turn, the Spirit refines its techniques of personalization and micro-management in order to maximize each dividual’s social, affective, and productive energies in its support of the market and the capitalist state.

Gilligan herself has written about the condition of the individual under biopolitical capitalism. In her 2012 essay “Affect and Exchange,” she describes the processes by which individuals become “mere cellular units,” broken down into “information parcels in the data representations of state and capital.” The individual—the dividual—is, she writes,

endlessly divisible and reducible to consumption preferences, affiliations, and online user-histories. As manifold characterizing data sets, individual identity and behaviour are fragmented; we are broken apart and reassembled algorithmically—mapped, assessed, targeted, and predicted regarding our usefulness for capital accumulation.⁹⁶

Gilligan's words, too, suggest that the "social credit rating" that clings to the characters in *Popular Unrest* does not merely mark or characterize them as pre-existing, coherent subjective entities; instead, their shifting ratings are isomorphic with them as dividuals. The rating sums up and describes the molecular functions of which the dividual is composed, becoming its core defining quality, albeit a fluid one. In this sense, the dividual is reduced to the status of Berardi's info-commodity: a purely informational entity made up of fractal-recombinant parts—one rendered living exclusively through representation and documentation.

The Spirit is characterized by one scientist in *Popular Unrest* as a medium that creates its subjects as "unique works of art"; its role as an artist that makes the subject visible is perhaps the most direct indication in the story of the Spirit's constitutive, life-giving power. At the same time, the Spirit itself is invisible; moreover, as the scientist adds, it "cannot be represented." In its invisibility and unrepresentability, the Spirit connotes the "invisible hand of the market." It is also God-like, situating itself at the powerful end of the invisibility-visibility axis in which its subjects, at the opposite end, are relatively powerless. Ironically, its invisibility renders it perhaps the only "character" in the series that is genuinely "alive" in a pre-biopolitical sense—in other words, in the sense of having an unrepeatable signature and in being imbued with life that does not spring from or depend on documentation. If the living Spirit in *Popular Unrest* is the analog of biopolitical capitalism in the real world, the implication is that capitalism is itself a living thing, an agentive, even uniquely "authentic" subject, all-powerful, holding the exclusive power to create and destroy.

Yet *Popular Unrest* also shows us that its endlessly documented subjects are not simply victims or powerless puppets of an all-subsuming Spirit; instead, as a biopolitical authority, the Spirit continuously goads them into various forms of self-surveillance and self-cultivation. These subjects are human capital in the Spirit's eyes, but, in order to survive, they are forced to recognize that they are their own "human capital" as well—their own business risks, in a sense, enterprises in which they are themselves inextricably invested. The chronically ill group member Emma laments, "I'm trapped inside this sick body." In the milieu of *Popular Unrest*, sickness means not only personal suffering and pain for Emma; it is

also a stain on her social credit rating—an economic liability, a reduced ability to work, an energy drain—implying that she is a bad bet, a poor investment. Another group member, Stephanie, also expresses her frustration at being isolated in her body: “I want to leave my skin and join the rest of you. I feel so alone in here.” “We feel the same,” the other group members reply.

Gilligan emphasizes that all the Spirit’s subjects are trapped in bodies that are reduced to the status of mere labor, mere material commodity—not just those of the physically, mentally, or economically disadvantaged. Serial killing is the Spirit’s means of “intermittently making some rather severe labor-saving calculations,” in the words of one of the scientists, but it does not do so by targeting the sick, the lonely, or the unemployed. Indeed, in the knife killings, we witness the Spirit choosing youthful, healthy-looking working folk. The Spirit’s young professional quarries—subjects it has created in its own image as “unique” artworks—are warned not to be too confident in their career successes or in the healthfulness of their lifestyles. In one scene, an apparently fit young man who has been running energetically on a treadmill for three hours boasts, “Just had a new implant. I feel like a sports car!”; only seconds later, the Spirit’s knife falls, killing him, as if to smote him for his hubris. Particularly fearsome in that it does not follow an intelligible logic of reliably rewarding its “good” subjects and punishing its “bad,” the Spirit keeps its subjects on edge, reminding them that their relationship to it is aleatory. Everyone is subject to its whim as well as its merciless economic calculations.

Although Gilligan does not invoke terms such as capitalism, biopolitics, or Marxism explicitly in *Popular Unrest*, she does so extensively in her written work and occasionally in her public talks. In “Affect and Exchange,”⁹⁷ in which she asserts that the intersection of biopolitics and capital is at the heart of her work, Gilligan discusses Marx’s notion of real subsumption,⁹⁸ in which gradual and inevitable improvements to productivity lessen the costs associated with the worker’s reproduction, enabling the capitalist to extract more and more surplus value. As an enduring and accelerating condition of labor in post-Fordist capitalism, real subsumption is affecting more and more aspects of the individual’s existence, she notes. The individual often has no choice but to embrace the force of real subsumption, however, which he or she may even do quite willingly because of the obvious, immediate, and often urgently needed benefits it brings. “People allow these forms of real subsumption

into the most personal corners of their lives,” Gilligan writes, “because it is in their immediate interest and, in some cases, necessary for their survival.”⁹⁹

That the populace perceives sinister overtones in the Spirit’s micromanagement of every aspect life is evident from the very outset of the story in the protestations of a young male videogame character we see in a TV clip. “How can I stop the world Spirit?” he asks an authoritative-looking older woman, much like Entelechy but in digitally animated form, seated in a thronelike chair in what appears to be a control room. “We need to overthrow the system!” Seemingly amused by his naivete, the woman informs him, matter-of-factly: “You can’t stop the Spirit. It’s everywhere, everyone, everything. No one controls it. It doesn’t control you. It’s merely the sum total of all interactions between everyone on earth doing exactly what they please, every day.” The only way to stop the Spirit, she shows him, is to stop himself and all the other people who make up this totality. With a hand gesture mimicking putting a gun to her own temple, she demonstrates that self-annihilation is therefore his only hope.

Nevertheless, the groupings clearly pose a threat to the Spirit, which sends scientists to study them all over the world in an attempt to analyze and control their spontaneous impulse to gather even at the expense of the responsibilities they normally pursue in support of capital, such as raising a family and performing work. The groupings are a mere glitch, the scientists assert hopefully—the Spirit’s “hiccup,” a “small seizure,” or a “moment of its thought.” Yet the scientists are nervous, anxiously insisting on pressing the protagonist group into an extensive series of psychobiological studies, collaborative exercises, and experiments in emotional duress designed to better understand and document their new form of intersubjectivity. In the milieu of *Popular Unrest*, described at one point in the series as “a totally rational world” and at another as one in which it is considered “romantic nonsense” to believe that there is anything left that cannot be measured, the anxiety of the scientists hinges upon the potential that the group’s unique emotional ties—their unprecedented and baffling sense of belonging—cannot be measured or quantified.

Massumi’s feedback loop perfectly illustrates the impulse of the scientists, who, as agents of the Spirit, seek both to adapt the Spirit to this new human phenomenon and to ensure that the phenomenon in return adapts itself to the needs of the Spirit. As one scientist describes it, it is with this aim that the Spirit “tries to understand each micro story in its every minute detail and fit it together with everyone else’s and weave it into one

worldwide macro story that's always changing." Speaking of the groupings in another scene, Entelechy tells Padma plainly: "We need to be able to predict their decisions. The system needs to learn directly from behavior. Your emotions are giving it adaptive algorithms for managing workers in all sorts of situations. An asset learns from use; so your body adapts and changes to fit the Spirit's needs." This is a Spirit that exposes its subjects emotionally and viscerally in order to exploit them, at the same time rationalizing them as data objects. Mining the information they offer the Spirit in their interactions with it, the Spirit feeds off the Massumian feedback loop, adapting itself algorithmically to its subjects' needs while shaping them to meet its own. Here, Gilligan presents the Spirit as an "algocratic" power—a power that governs by algorithm rather than through panoptic or other spatially determined forms of control.¹⁰⁰ As such, it practices what Rob Horning terms "algorithmic personalization," an interactive process that marks the automation of selfhood: "The algorithm takes the data and spits out a statistically unique self for us, that lets us consume our uniqueness as a kind of one-of-a-kind delicacy," he writes. Horning's "data self" antedates the subject; in his analysis, the subject is actually constituted through data modelling. This constructed neoliberal "self" both shores up our identities as discrete individuals and masks our interdependency.

Gilligan demonstrates a thorough understanding of the mechanisms by which the destruction of community ties operates in global capitalism. As art critic Erik Bordeleau points out, in their effort to render the group's feelings reportable and measurable, the scientists focus on separating those feelings from the conditions that apparently produce them¹⁰¹; as Gilligan clearly knows, this effort mirrors practices of contemporary real-world psychology and neuroscience. Guiding the group through re-enactments of particular feelings, one scientist tells the group, "Acting out the physiological effects really makes you feel them." In another scene, in which a group member confesses to another scientist an obsessive anxiety over whether her front door is locked or unlocked, he explains to her that the emotions she believes to be connected to particular events and conditions such as the locking of the door are in fact nothing more than the product of an overactive anterior cingulate (a part of the brain). "You simply create ideas to project these anxieties onto," he tells her. "Why not just drop these ideas and simply feel the fear on its own?" The group initially resists the scientists' reduction of their feelings of connection to mere biology, but

eventually they are resigned to the process, despite their mournful recognition that its aim seems to be to evacuate their newfound group relationship of meaning.

In a humorous moment in another scene, when one group member raises the possibility of stopping the Spirit after it kills Emma, a beloved member of the group, the eldest scientist replies, with alarm, “Stop the Spirit? What do you want? *Communism?*” It is precisely a new form of communal being, or being in common, that Gilligan is proposing, however, albeit not in the Marxian sense. While the world conjured up in *Popular Unrest* contains an infinity of surveillance cameras, broadcast screens, and other devices of measuring, documentation, and capture, Gilligan’s strategy of resistance, unlike Steyerl’s, is ultimately not one of disappearance from view or of anarchic material destruction; in fact, Gilligan’s tactic is based on the group members’ visibility to one another. Like Steyerl, however, Gilligan proposes a “strike” of sorts in the phenomenon of the groupings, which Bordeleau aptly describes as constituting an “*étrange grève humaine*,” a “strange human strike.” Bordeleau observes that in Gilligan’s story this strike takes the form of a movement that resists capitalist atomization through affective means.¹⁰² The groups consist of individuals (or individuals) who have set aside the responsibilities capitalism thrusts upon them—work, the nuclear family—effectively walking out on them, going “on strike” from the isolation they impose in order to bond with their fellow humans. If biopower treats them as a mass, we gradually realize, their resistance takes the form of mobilizing themselves as a mass toward different ends. In “Affect and Exchange,” writing of a work she was then developing on affective connection called *The Common Sense*¹⁰³), Gilligan asks the questions that are also evidently at the heart of the *Popular Unrest* groupings’ subversive potential in an era of accelerating biopolitical capitalism:

What are the potentials for collective action in the present, and how must it be reconceived in an age of ever-intensifying economic determinism and biopolitical control? How can struggle toward collective goals also take the full range of each individual’s needs and desires into account? Can the individual subject be reconceived to incorporate the collective dimension that is always already contained within it? Can recognition of the importance of affect and emotions in politics help bring about new social scenarios?¹⁰⁴

In *Popular Unrest*, Gilligan proposes the groupings as an affectively driven, coalition-building political alternative to the biopolitical control capitalism currently exerts. Whereas, as we

have seen, Claire Fontaine's concept of the "human strike" entails the dissolution of individual identity into "whatever singularities," à la Agamben, Gilligan's groupings, perhaps somewhat more optimistically, seem to propose affect as a means of joining individuals in cooperative political action—individuals who yet retain distinct personas, needs, desires, and so on. For the members of the group in *Popular Unrest's* dystopia, however, this potential is never realized. In the last episode, the group comes face to face with the Spirit that determines them. It presents itself to them in their own image, as fully severed, floating, fractal-recombinant body parts: heads, legs, elbows, faces, all recombining with other units of energy in a gridded yet apparently unbounded three-dimensional space. In a brutal imperative that they kill one another or be killed, the Spirit shows them that what is advantageous for one member of the group may not be advantageous for other members or for the group as a whole. Slowly, the group realizes that, as Hegel would have it, the Spirit is both their own creation and an alien force. In the final scenes, we hear the thoughts of the group's members:

We can't kill it. It's us. . . . We think and act separately, looking after ourselves. But together our actions are thinking as one, with one end. But that end destroys us. . . . *We are* the thoughts that the totality thinks. It holds us—it *is us*, holding ourselves hostage, *as us* but not us. What if we let us go?

Ultimately, the group disappears inside the Spirit, out of sight. At the end of the last episode, we learn that elite members of the populace who can pay for protection are being given access to a new, militarized "Spirit safety zone" that will protect them from the risk of violence from the killings, which are escalating to cataclysmic levels. In the meantime—in a scene that can be read as a reminder of the masses Deleuze describes in his "Postscript" as too poor for debt and too numerous for enclosure—the Spirit expands its killing operation to include the rioting populations who cannot afford the admittance fees and are attempting to storm the barricades they have been abandoned outside of, where they are exposed to violence and certain death.

Only here, at the series' end, is it possible to realize the full implications of something Entelechy says to Padma earlier in the story—something that also provides a certain ethical justification for Entelechy's having departed from the Spirit project as it neared its launch. The premise that "if the spirit can use technology to boost productivity in anything and everything it can lay its hands on, that that will be good for the system as a

whole,” is wrong, Entelechy says, because it ends up “excluding what you’re meant to protect—life. The whole purpose of the Spirit is to integrate life in as many ways as possible.” Thus, “the Spirit is faced with a paradox: It maximizes and expels life at the same time.” Here, Gilligan puts her finger on the pulse of biopower, which can never be *only* a productive power, always “making live,” because it fundamentally depends for its power on the invisibility of a vast class of persons whom it must ignore or “let die.” Gilligan implies that the Spirit is itself alive, yet clearly it is also a brutally inhuman entity. Indeed, as philosopher Matteo Pasquinelli argues, “capitalism is an *inhuman force*, a force that aims to exploit and overcome the human”;¹⁰⁵ as capitalism’s analogue, the Spirit seems to be just such a force, one that nurtures yet also extinguishes life. Fittingly, as we eventually learn, the alarming surge of knife murders in public spaces are the Spirit’s own doing—Gilligan’s way of illustrating literally this formidable entity’s lethal, capricious, unpredictable power. In habitually preying on everyday citizens, the rampagous Spirit gives substance to the popular expression “primed for a killing”—financial-system argot referring to being in a position to make an unusually large profit. Using its authority to render the victims of the killings invisible, it exercises its power to assign and deny citizenship, to make live and let die.

Making subjects visible or invisible is the key to making them manageable to biopower in *Popular Unrest*, and the meticulously visualized, documented, and represented group at the center of the story ultimately fails to realize the potential inherent in its transgressive, even revolutionary emotional ties precisely because it commits the fatal error of allowing the scientists to study and represent its dynamics—that is, of allowing the scientists to make the group ever more visible, thus rendering it a modellable object. The group’s downfall thereby begins early in the story, precisely at the point at which it consents, with some reluctance but also with a sense of open-mindedness and naive curiosity, to be examined and documented by the scientists, whom it initially views with a healthy sense of suspicion. Once consent is given—through appropriately elaborate legal means—the Spirit’s agents, the scientists, are given the power to shape the group in the image the Spirit requires, to inscribe them into the manageable biopolitical form of subjecthood that serves capital. As we come to realize, although at many levels it is in the group’s interest to enjoy the Spirit’s protection, at the same time, they are consigned to a life of instrumentalization because the alternative is near-certain death. In showing how far the Spirit is willing to go in its violations of the group and its members, Gilligan suggests the magnitude of the threat the group poses

to the Spirit and, by extension, biopower. In this, she points to the significance of the group as a social formation, recognized and attacked by the Spirit, whose objective, consonant with that of biopolitical capitalism, is to shatter field of intersubjectivity.

Perhaps the most important implication in *Popular Unrest*, then, is that if visibility creates or even constitutes a particular set of relations between individuals (or dividuals) and biopower, at the same time, even against biopower's isolating, atomizing force, visibility also forms a set of relations among equal individuals that challenges and constrains biopower, which in turn works constantly to mitigate the threat posed to it by its always potentially unruly subjects. Within the commons biopower so vigorously attempts to appropriate, there is a tension. Its managed subjects are required to be flexible enough to be molded by the machine of profit, and they are made dimly aware of their status as shifting data objects, yet they are also taught to expect a high degree of individual autonomy and personal responsibility. That biopower, or Gilligan's Spirit, asks its subjects to negotiate this contradiction and even locate satisfaction within this conflicted identity makes for a fragile system of social control.¹⁰⁶ If the members of the group in *Popular Unrest* are exposed to biopower, to the Spirit, they are also exposed to one another—even if to a lesser degree in that they are denied access to the codes and machines that enable the Spirit to gather and analyze so much data about them. Their exposure to one another creates the potential for spontaneous forms of connection to take place—forms of connection that exceed tidy management and that constantly threaten to take the disruptive form of mutual care rather than individualistic rivalry.¹⁰⁷

Confronted with such a group, Steyerl, in recognition of the agency of both documents and documentary techniques, might suggest refusal of the scientists' program of documentation—a “strike” from representation—as a more ideal path to salvation from biocapitalist control. But for Steyerl, recognizing the agency of images does not entail fatalistically submitting to their dominance, to a regime of documentation. By better understanding the technologies that support this reality, she argues—including photography (still photography, video, cinema) as well as printing, 3D modelling, and other digital imaging systems—we can seize control of the tools of representation, changing the nature of an already “post-produced” reality by appropriating post-production methods ourselves: “We can reverse Photoshop it, if you like. We can intervene into reality with imaging techniques.”¹⁰⁸ For Steyerl, therein lies the potential for political action—for people and

visual documents work in concert, as fellow material actors, to direct and effect change consciously, with and through images. In this light, the artist's calculated assault on the screen in *Strike* emerges, in its final guise, as an act of editing, one in which she re-engineers the constitutive images it generates, her wrecking bar turned palette knife.

⁴⁴ Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation," *e-flux journal* no. 32 (February 2012), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-spam-of-the-earth/>.

⁴⁵ Melanie Gilligan, *Popular Unrest*, 2010; online at <http://popularunrest.org/>.

⁴⁶ Hito Steyerl, *Strike II*, 2012; online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1tA6eOgRt4/>.

⁴⁷ Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth" (note 44).

⁴⁸ Nathan Jurgenson and P. J. Rey, "Ambient Documentation: To Be Is to See and to See Is to Be," *Cyborgology*, November 21, 2011, <http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/11/21/ambient-documentation-to-be-is-to-see-and-to-see-is-to-be/>.

⁴⁹ Ibid. My emphasis.

⁵⁰ Koopman, "The Age of Infopolitics" (note 14). See also Koopman, "From Biopower to Infopower?" (note 15).

⁵¹ Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics" (note 4).

⁵² Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth" (note 44).

⁵³ See, for example, Mark Fisher's argument in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009).

⁵⁴ Fredric Jameson, "The Antinomies of Postmodernity," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998* (New York: Verso, 1998), 59.

⁵⁵ Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth" (note 44).

⁵⁶ "Artifacts: A Conversation Between Hito Steyerl and Daniel Rourke," *Rhizome*, March 28, 2013, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/mar/28/artifacts/>.

⁵⁷ Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth" (note 44).

⁵⁸ "Patented Idealism: A Conversation between Hito Steyerl and Sven Lütticken" (note 39).

⁵⁹ Hito Steyerl, “Beginnings: Harun Farocki, 1944–2014,” *e-flux journal announcements*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/beginnings-harun-farocki-1944-2014/>.

⁶⁰ Hito Steyerl, *Strike*, 2010; online at UbuWeb, http://www.ubu.com/film/steyerl_strike.html/, and at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpGobhaYT8Y/>.

⁶¹ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 547–70.

⁶² Hito Steyerl, “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy,” *e-flux journal* no. 21 (December 2010), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/>.

⁶³ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (note 53).

⁶⁴ Akihiko Yonekawa, *Beyond Polite Japanese* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2001), 25.

⁶⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (note 4).

⁶⁶ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (note 20), 64.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Steyerl, “Politics of Art” (note 62).

⁷⁰ Franco Bifo Berardi, “I Want to Think: POST-U,” *e-flux journal* no. 24 (April 2011), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/i-want-to-think-post-u/>.

⁷¹ See, for example, John Armitage, ed., *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews* (London: Sage, 2001).

⁷² Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).

⁷³ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* (note 54), 57; see also Mark Fisher’s discussion of Jameson’s argument in Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (note 53).

⁷⁴ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (note 53).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Georges Canguilhem, *A Vital Rationalist: Selected Writings from Georges Canguilhem*, ed. François Delaporte, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 319, cited and discussed in Louis-Georges Schwartz, “Introduction to the ~~Meaning~~ of ‘Life’,” *Discourse* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2011), 135–55.

⁷⁷ See Maurizio Lazzarato, “The Misfortunes of the ‘Artistic Critique’ and of Cultural Employment,” trans. Mary O’Neill, in Gerald Raunig, Gene Ray, and Ulf Wuggenig, eds., *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the “Creative Industries”* (London: MayFlyBooks, 2011), 47. Also, see chapter four of the current study for a more in-depth discussion of the neoliberal subject as what Foucault calls an “entrepreneur of himself.”

⁷⁸ Documentation Céline Duval, *les allumeuses (hidden eyes)*, 1998–2010; online at http://lesallumeuses.net/video_01.html/.

⁷⁹ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive” (note 16).

⁸⁰ Steyerl, “The Spam of the Earth” (note 44).

⁸¹ See “Berlin activists gamify smashing CCTV cameras,” *Tech Eye*, January 28, 2013, <http://news.techeye.net/security/berlin-activists-gamify-smashing-cctv-cameras/>.

⁸² See Vivian Rehberg, “Claire Fontaine,” *Frieze Magazine* no. 105 (March 2007), http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/claire_fontaine/. As Rehberg points out, neon, a favorite medium of Claire Fontaine, is especially potent because of its “historical relationship to the sale of commodities.”

⁸³ Claire Fontaine, “Ready-Made Artist and Human Strike: A Few Clarifications,” 2005, www.clairefontaine.ws/pdf/readymade_eng.pdf/. For an image of *STRIKE (K. font V.I.)*, see <http://www.clairefontaine.ws/works/30.html/>.

⁸⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); see especially chapter 1. See also Anthony Huberman, “Claire Fontaine,” *BOMB Magazine*, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/3177/claire-fontaine/>.

⁸⁵ Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 2618–2620. On the broader history of the “whatever” concept in philosophy as well as an assessment of it in the context of today, see Kindle locations 2605–2721 in Galloway’s book.

⁸⁶ Hito Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me,” *e-flux journal* 15 (April 2010), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-thing-like-you-and-me/>.

⁸⁷ Gilligan, *Popular Unrest* (note 45).

⁸⁸ See, for example, Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1859), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/>.

⁸⁹ Jurgenson and Rey, “Ambient Documentation: To Be Is to See and to See Is to Be” (note 48).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (note 61), Kindle location 130.

⁹⁴ “Entelechy,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/188810/entelechy/>.

⁹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (note 4).

⁹⁶ Melanie Gilligan, “Affect and Exchange,” in Antonia Hirsch, ed., *Intangible Economies* (Vancouver: Fillip Editions, 2012), 33.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 25–49.

⁹⁸ In “Affect and Exchange,” Gilligan writes: “Real subsumption is a means of increasing the surplus value extracted from labor through boosting productivity. There are two ways in which the capitalist can increase the quotient of surplus value that he or she makes in production: formal and real subsumption. Formal subsumption is the extension of time in the working day. Real subsumption is the implementation of novel technological, social, or organizational processes (to name a few) that increase productivity, hence decreasing the amount of time needed to create the same amount of surplus value. If less socially necessary labor is required in a workday and the capitalist maintains a workday of the same length, this will deliver a larger amount of surplus value. Real subsumption is a condition that increasingly touches all parts of our existence as more and more aspects of our lives are optimized to increase productivity and profitability.” Ibid., 46 n. 6.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁰ “Algocracy” has been defined recently by scholars in the social sciences as referring to governance by computer algorithm; see, for example, A. Aneesh's discussion of the concept in A. Aneesh, *Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁰¹ Erik Bordeleau, “Le Nouvel Esprit de Capitalisme Selon Melanie Gilligan,” *ETC* no. 96 (2012), 35–39, <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/67035ac/>.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ *The Common Sense*, Phase 1, premiered in November 2014 at Casco Projects, Utrecht, Netherlands. As of that time, Phase 2A was scheduled to open at De Hallen Haarlem in December 2014, and Phase 2B was scheduled to open at de Appel arts centre, Amsterdam,

in January 2015. See Casco Projects, “*The Common Sense*, Phase 1, Melanie Gilligan, Exhibition,” <http://cascoprojects.org/melanie-gilligan-the-common-sense-phase-1-exhibition-14-november-2014-25-january-2015/>.

¹⁰⁴ Gilligan, “Affect and Exchange” (note 96), 25.

¹⁰⁵ Matteo Pasquinelli, “The Labour of Abstraction: Seven Transitional Theses on Marxism and Accelerationism,” *Fillip* 19 (Spring 2014), 107–116.

¹⁰⁶ In making this last point I take inspiration from Frédéric Lordon, who notes in his book *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire* (New York: Verso, 2014) that neoliberalism's project is to construct subjects who understand themselves as incapable of social construction—i.e., as genuine. Lordon asks at what point this construction becomes too risky. For reviews of Lordon's book, see Jason Read, “Jason Read on *Willing Slaves of Capital: Marx and Spinoza on Desire*—Of Labor and Human Bondage: Spinoza, Marx, and the ‘Willing Slaves’ of Capitalism,” *LA Review of Books*, December 9, 2014, <http://lareviewofbooks.org/review/labor-human-bondage-spinoza-marx-willing-slaves-capitalism/#.VIcdJIyhLa8.facebook/>, and Rob Horning, “Liquid Authenticity,” *The New Inquiry*, August 19, 2014, <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/marginal-utility/liquid-authenticity/>.

¹⁰⁷ Concluding her essay “Affect and Exchange,” Gilligan writes: “At the end of this investigation into the current state of capital’s economic and biopolitical totality, a feat of imagination is needed to picture how our own total system logics can overthrow the totality of capital. Affect, rooted in the physical and non-conscious, is understood by science to be universal and material, and so it can, at least in this sense, be externalized. Could affect then hypothetically aid the process of communization by fully realizing and unfolding its potentials rather than being relegated to just another tool in the accumulation of capital? A better understanding of the transversal openness of our subjectivity appears to offer a promise for building new practices that emerge from solidarity rather than the opposition of competing needs.” Gilligan, “Affect and Exchange” (note 96), 45.

¹⁰⁸ Hito Steyerl, “Photography and Political Agency? With Victoria Hattam and Hito Steyerl,” lecture and discussion at the conference *The Photographic Universe*, The New School, New York, April 11, 2013; video recording online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqQ3UTWSmUc/>.

3 **Abstraction and Intensity:** **Hito Steyerl's *Red Alert* and *Lovely Andrea*** **and Melanie Gilligan's *Popular Unrest***

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the post-bourgeois dilapidation took the final form of a financial black hole. A drainage pump started to swallow and destroy the product of two hundred years of industriousness and collective intelligence, transforming the concrete reality of social civilization into abstractions—figures, algorithms, mathematical ferocity, and accumulation of nothing.

—Franco “Bifo” Berardi¹⁰⁹

We are the natives of abstraction.

—Sven Lütticken¹¹⁰

Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.

—Karl Marx¹¹¹

In her 2007 essay “Documentary Uncertainty,” Hito Steyerl recounts a story in which she watched a CNN broadcast during the first days of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. In that segment, a correspondent riding in an armored vehicle jubilantly held a broadcast cell phone camera out the window, exclaiming that this type of live broadcast had never before been seen. He was right, Steyerl avers, but only because the low-resolution images showed nothing more than largely illegible green and brown blotches slowly moving across the screen. For Steyerl, what she calls the “abstract documentarism” of these blurred, poor images mirrors the uncertain reality of contemporary life:

Actually, the picture looked like the camouflage of combat fatigues; a military version of abstract expressionism. What does this type of abstract documentarism tell us about documentarism as such? It points at a deeper characteristic of many contemporary documentary pictures: the more immediate they become, the less there is to see. The closer to reality we get,

the less intelligible it becomes.¹¹²

For Steyerl, poor images such as these embody the “uncertainty principle of modern documentarism,”¹¹³ a genre that generates meaning more through how it is organized and how it circulates than what it represents—a form of abstract documentarism appropriate for an era in which political representation has become abstract and blurred.

In her later essay “In Defense of the Poor Image” (2009), Steyerl elaborates on the poor image. For her, the poor image is a low-res image, a compressed, corrupted copy of a copy, always in motion, gradually deteriorating. Because it is constantly ripped, reproduced, remixed, reformatted, and re-edited, “the poor image tends towards abstraction,” she writes. “It is a visual idea in its very becoming.”¹¹⁴ Although Steyerl, who often refers to critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin as inspiration in her written work, does not mention Benjamin in “In Defense of the Poor Image,” her essay clearly owes a debt to his text *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1936), in which Benjamin considers originals in relation to copies, to copies of copies, and subsequent iterations. As Daniel Rourke notes, for Benjamin, the copy detracts from the aura of the original, yet the copy’s own aura, as it propagates, remains stable, “actually heightened in a system of ever-poorer repetitions and redispays.”¹¹⁵

At one level, Steyerl’s defense of the blurred or poor image, much like her *Strike* videos, appears as a critique of increasingly oppressive regimes of visual representation—for example, of the slick, smooth surfaces of the images of high-end advertising. It also anticipates the collective desire the artist would articulate yet another two years later, in her 2012 essay “The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation” (as we saw in chapter two), to become invisible in an era of mass paparazzi and exhibitionist voyeurism in which “the flare of photographic flashlights turns people into victims, celebrities, or both.”¹¹⁶ Her championing of the low-res, degraded image also can be interpreted as a protest against the larger regime that information-rich images participate in—the regime that, since mid-2013, when Edward Snowden first came forward in public with revelations about NSA surveillance and data collection, has been popularly called “Big Data”;¹¹⁷ this is a regime always seeking to learn more, to gather more information, to represent us as so many data points. In a sentence that brings to mind both the breaking down of human subjects into the data sets and the fractal-recombinant info-commodities that, as we have seen, Franco “Bifo” Berardi describes as the building blocks of semiocapital, Steyerl writes: “As we register at

cash tills, ATMs, and other checkpoints—as our cellphones reveal our slightest movements and our snapshots are tagged with GPS coordinates—we end up not exactly amused to death but represented to pieces.”¹¹⁸ Reading between the lines in Steyerl’s text, we see that the poor image thus suggests a second kind of abstraction. If the poor image is in the first place formally abstract in being blurred or in containing less data, in the second, it also enacts a strategy of withdrawal in the spirit of the Latin *abstrahere*, which, as curator Maria Lind notes, means “to withdraw”: It tends toward a politically useful opacity that resists a culture of open surveillance, of oppressive transparency.¹¹⁹ Here, abstraction embodies the principle of “less data,” and the withdrawal and visual opacity it entails emerge as a subset of a larger impulse that can be observed among artists working in today’s milieu of ultra-efficient data gathering and transmission: to reject the culture of “information”—information that describes, represents, and constitutes the contemporary subject, thereby controlling it. As the writer and curator Anthony Huberman observes in his essay “I (not love) information,” whereas conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s, attracted to “the raw blankness of information, which they saw as a powerful opponent to the tyranny of ‘content’,” embraced information as a means of stepping away from the modernist project,¹²⁰ artists working in the period of late post-Fordism seek instead to disrupt information, “to compromise the way information clings to their practice and identities.”¹²¹ Today, Huberman holds, information has become poisonous. Instead of offering us freedom, it has become an addiction: “Like all drugs, information takes hold of everything, surrounds it, swallows it, clings to it, bludgeons it and spits it back out.”¹²² In formulating abstraction as a kind of opacity or retreat from hypervisualization, Steyerl’s work thus can be situated within a larger contemporary trajectory of flight from description.

At yet another level, Steyerl’s 2009 “defense of the poor image” points to both the image that can no longer claim to represent and to a reality that cannot be represented in traditionally indexical images. The poor image is less about what the image shows than what it *does*, how it moves, what encounters it has. This is an image that no longer refers to “the real thing—the originary original,” she writes. “Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.”¹²³ Once again reading between the lines in Steyerl’s text, we can consider the poor image abstract in a third sense: It has been wrested—in other words, abstracted—

from its original contexts of production and use and thrust into circulation, and its indexical role is lost. It now functions as what Berardi refers to as a fractal-recombinant fragment of semiocapital. In his book *After the Future*, Berardi argues that fragmentation and recombination (which I discussed in chapter two) are both abstract and biopolitical, with profound implications for the subject:

Recombination is the (informational and biopolitical) technique that transforms the activity of individual brains in an abstract productive continuum. The individual brain can act effectively only through the recombinant modality: functional recombination of fragments of cognitive labor scattered in time and space, but functionally unified inside the Net.¹²⁴

In the new globalized network of semiocapital, he asserts, workers have been replaced with “an infinite brain-sprawl, an ever-changing mosaic of fractal cells of available nervous energy.” Here, the worker or “person” is reduced to mere precarious residue.¹²⁵

Lind argues that the blotchy cell-phone images Steyerl describes in her 2007 essay gesture toward a politics beyond representation. The cell-phone images “are post-representational, and yet they somehow speak of truth,” Lind writes, in that they express “the uncertainty that governs documentary image production as well as the contemporary world.” In these blurred images, Lind contends, both political and symbolic representation are undermined and become abstract.¹²⁶ Far from being an obsolete phenomenon of the mid-twentieth century, Lind contends, abstraction is a matter of newly urgent concern in the twenty-first century.¹²⁷ For Lind, in fact, the documentary and the abstract—modes that, as we have seen, converge in Steyerl’s work—are the most important lenses through which the last twenty years of art must be considered. Because artistic abstraction employs visual language that is not figurative, she argues, it therefore has an advantage in approaching what contemporary documentary practice also aspires to: “wanting to touch the real, wanting to address real conditions” while at the same time recognizing the impossibility of employing a form of representation that makes one-to-one claims of authenticity.¹²⁸

While Steyerl’s defense of the poor image thereby can be seen as pointing to at least these three dimensions of abstraction, it also points to the way images circulate and operate at the level of affect in a popular culture marked by intensity. In her words, the poor image is the “lumpen proletariat in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution.”¹²⁹ It is of and for the many, marked in its journeys by the countless people who care for it over time, converting it, editing it, and uploading it to send it again on its

way. Considered en masse, she argues, poor images thus function as a barometer of social affect. In poor images, “the affective condition of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction” are in evidence. The poor image is defined by speed, intensity, and distribution. But the poor image occupies an uneasy position in our pop culture of intensity, where it does not always subvert. While it resists the “fetish value of high resolution,” Steyerl notes, at the same time the poor image is almost seamlessly “integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings.”¹³⁰ Here, although she does not refer to Berardi’s ideas, Steyerl again approximates forms of semiocapital much like those he describes, in which the decontextualized capitalist info-commodity is broken down into ever-smaller components in order to be arranged and rearranged into ever-greater combinations: Poor images, she writes, “express a condition of dematerialization, shared not only with the legacy of conceptual art but above all with contemporary modes of semiotic production.”¹³¹

Steyerl’s work concerns itself with multiple levels of contemporary abstraction—formal, economic, and social—focusing in near equal measure on both the oppressive and the emancipatory potential of each, especially with respect to the circulation and agency of abstracted images, the interplay of abstraction and reification, and the abstraction of withdrawal.¹³² In different ways, Gilligan’s work also points to semiocapital’s tendency to break people and things down into tiny parts through processes of abstraction, pointing, just as Steyerl’s work does, to abstraction’s relevance to the production of biopolitical reality and subjectivity today. Approaching the contemporary dynamics of abstraction from a dissimilar angle, one that is focused more on the oppressive dimensions of abstraction, Gilligan’s work focuses less on discrete images and more on abstraction’s role in constituting the biopolitical subject, which, in her work, is directly affected by a complex of tensions among the abstractions of the finance, the abstractions of the physical body, and the social abstractions of affect. While, as we have seen, Gilligan explicitly draws on biopolitical discourses, Steyerl does so only rarely; even so, as Steyerl herself notes, her own work is implicated in the ways documentary forms intervene into social life with a power that is biopolitical, especially in their imbrication with the politics of truth production and with techniques of surveillance, policing, normalization, governmentality, and control.¹³³ In exploring what abstraction means for the twenty-first century, the two artists move beyond traditional formulations to reveal

the abstraction inherent in current social and economic contexts, in particular the abstracting force of capital.¹³⁴

Chapter 2 of this project focused on the biopolitical construction of subjecthood through processes of making-visible in Steyerl's *Strike* series works and in Gilligan's *Popular Unrest*—and on the problem of resistance to such processes. This third chapter continues to explore Gilligan's *Popular Unrest*, here in concert with Steyerl's video works *Lovely Andrea* (2007)¹³⁵ and *Red Alert* (2007). Here, I discuss abstraction as both a major theme and an operating force in both artists' work—work that, I argue, sheds light on the relationship of real-world abstraction to contemporary forces of intensity in a late capitalist sphere that increasingly instrumentalizes affect; in this context, both abstraction and intensity emerge as dimensions of biopower that shape the subject.

* * *

In a large, carpeted room in Gilligan's *Popular Unrest*—part classroom, part laboratory, part stage—the group members rehearse what it is like to live as abstractions. Wearing sensor-lined skull caps and chest electrodes attached with wires to monitors and to each other, they huddle together in circles on the floor, some shivering, others gasping for breath, still others spasmodically gesticulating. All of them seem to be wracked by seizures. A woman lies flat on her stomach, apparently anxious and confused, urgently repeating, “Genetic, genetic, genetic!” Nervously stuttering, “H-h-h-heart rate . . . heart rate,” a man flits back and forth frantically, his movements jerky, like those of a broken automaton. A woman slowly rubs her jaw, her brow knit in pain, muttering units of measure: “Thousands. Millions!” Observing the group's strange behaviour, an assistant asks the woman scientist, “Why are they acting that way?” The scientist replies, “They've left the world of simple abstraction and are living abstraction.” The assistant looks puzzled, asking, “Shouldn't they be speaking in commodities, graphs, algorithms?” Delightedly, the scientist exclaims, “They are!”

At the outset of *Popular Unrest*, when the protagonists who are inexplicably drawn to one another to form this group begin to explore their newfound connection, they engage in emotionally stirring team bonding exercises. Despite their initial reluctance to allow the team of scientists to study and experiment with their intersubjective connections and embodied feelings, they eventually relent. They are curious about what has drawn them together, and they place faith in science to help them understand it. They soon learn that their faith was

naive, however, and that the scientists are working on behalf of the Spirit, to whom their novel affective bond poses a baffling threat. Under the supervision of the scientists, the group's bonding exercises, which before the scientists' arrival were so emotionally fulfilling, devolve into miserable drills. In the agonizing group maneuvers overseen by the scientists, the Spirit literally appropriates the protagonists' minds and bodies so that it may learn from and thereby control them. In doing so, it evacuates them of their humanity, reducing them to uncontrollably babbling, convulsing abstractions. As in Steyerl's work, the condition of Gilligan's group once again evokes Berardian semiocapital: The group members themselves become decontextualized data commodities, redefined as mere rearrangeable units of biological energy or coded Deleuzian "dividuals." These human abstractions are the Spirit's necessary fuel, Gilligan seems to say, consigned to live, produce, and serve the system, in contrast to those whom the Spirit deems expendable, who are stabbed by the unseen killer with knives and, to return to Foucault's phrase, "let die."

This mise-en-abyme is clearly less about the abstractions of a near future than it is about those of the present, serving, like *Popular Unrest* as a whole, as an in-depth exploration of one character's assertion in the artist's earlier video series *Crisis in the Credit System* (2008) that today, already, "abstractions are real, or at least real enough for us to take advantage of." As art critic Maria Walsh notes in a 2010 review of *Popular Unrest*, the role-playing bonding games the group members initially enact in an earnest effort to connect are of a type that were popularized in the 1970s and that more recently have been widely adopted by corporations for use at employee group retreats. Mirroring the capitalist machine in today's real-life global economy, the bonding game in Gilligan's film operates in the same way the Spirit itself operates, infiltrating bodies in order to assess and forecast their appetites, thereby fuelling the system of productive desire and demand.¹³⁶ Like the potentially intractable subjects a corporate group retreat seeks to mold into more perfect workers, the members of the group in *Popular Unrest*, their impulses initially opaque to the scientists, are not just brought under control; they are broken down and remade in a different image through psychological manipulation and technoscientific modes of making-visible. Here, indirectly invoking processes like those Brian Massumi refers to in his concept of the reciprocal positive feedback loop as a relentlessly productive generator of biopolitical subjectivity, Gilligan suggests the ways affective and bodily techniques of self-organizing that once belonged to the counterculture are continuously appropriated by an ever-adaptive form of

biopower. The individual human body and the human subconscious are now so closely monitored by biopower—and so thoroughly transformed by it in the loop of mutual responsiveness—that they are no longer conceivable, as they were in the modern era, as sites of resistance.¹³⁷

Whereas Steyerl's interest is in both the formally abstract character of images and the social abstractions they are subject to, participate in, and generate, Gilligan focuses on biopower's more direct deployment of abstraction as a method of subject construction. Indeed, as art historian Marina Vishmidt observed in a public conversation with Gilligan held on the occasion of the work's premiere at London's Chisenhale Gallery, abstraction is key to the production and capture of the subject in *Popular Unrest*—the economic abstractions of finance, the scientific abstractions of standardization and quantification, and the abstraction of social life under biopolitical conditions. At the economic level, *Popular Unrest* evinces Gilligan's interest in the role of money as an abstraction, an arbitrary means of structuring value, and the story suggests that money is what connects everyone and everything in a biopolitically driven capitalist world. In the third episode, the economist and Spirit architect Zhevila Entelechy, who serves in the story as Gilligan's muse, offering exposition at the same time she articulates a critique of the Spirit as a biopolitical power, explains to group member Padma that when she was a little girl, she used to watch cars going by from her apartment window high above a freeway, and her mind would boggle at the notion that inside every car were people whose lives were as rich and meaningful as hers. After growing up and studying to be an economist and beginning to understand money, Entelechy continues, she realized that she had been “looking at a highway that stretched between every man woman and child on the planet.” In the story, money is an abstraction that represents the relative value of each basic unit of energy, of each commodity—of each unit the Spirit compares and exchanges—mirroring the role of money in the real-world capitalist system. Entelechy even describes the Spirit as money: “It's more money than money,” she tells Padma. “The Spirit is money.” Gilligan's message seems to be that economic abstractions are simultaneously biopolitical ones.

If the Spirit is money, and, at the same time—as I have argued, and as Gilligan herself intimates¹³⁸—the Spirit is biopower, then biopower is also closely bound up with money. In *Popular Unrest*, as in contemporary global capitalism, money is also deeply interwoven with science, a primary engine of biopower and itself an abstracting force. Art

critic and historian Sven Lütticken notes that in Karl Marx's work, the growing power of science and its economic transformation into fixed capital are shown to fuel and eventually even undermine industrial capitalism. Thus the connection between the abstractions of science and those of money becomes clear: "the real abstraction of money (and of money in the form of capital) is complicit with the real abstraction of technoscience—of science that has become immediately economically productive."¹³⁹ Today, capital and technoscience are even more tightly bound up in each other's activities in the forms of money and information. Contemporary technology in the financial sector is enabling ever-faster circulation of capital, "of capital-as-data," on an increasingly massive scale, Lütticken points out. As he reminds us, philosopher Vilém Flusser showed us that to abstract is also to *subtract*—specifically, to subtract data from matter; therefore, historically, increasing abstraction has also meant increasing movement toward information, leading to today's "information economy" and its quasi-theological narratives of dematerialization.¹⁴⁰ It is precisely the integration of economic abstraction and technoscientific abstraction, and of aesthetic abstraction in the form of design, Lütticken argues, that has led to Deleuze's "society of control"—by which, as we have seen, Deleuze means the society in which biopower is ascendant.¹⁴¹

Lütticken traces a history of the relationship between abstraction and concretion in twentieth-century modernism. On the one hand, he reminds us, Marxism conceives of capitalism as a force that, for worse and for better, tends to forge abstract bonds of exchange value between goods and people, abstracting both from their feudal social ties; in this view, art made under contemporary capitalism, which is commodified, is inherently abstract, whether it is representational or not.¹⁴² Thus the work of art is only ever pseudo-concrete, its concretions a matter of appearance that veils the work's status as abstract commodity and exchange value.¹⁴³ On the other hand, Lütticken notes, citing artist Liam Gillick's diagnosis of a constitutional "failure of the abstract" in modern art stemming from art's persistent concretization of the abstract into a series of "failed forms," it could also be argued that art can never really live up to its claims of abstraction, since in concretizing the abstract, art cannot retain any abstract characteristics but can only strive for abstraction.¹⁴⁴ Art is thus for Lütticken marked by "an ongoing and uneasy dialectic of movements between abstraction and concretion, creating potent yet failed forms" that represent failures of abstraction as well as failures of concretion. Next to capital, technoscience, and money, he argues, modern and contemporary art are also manifestations of real abstractions; these

forms of abstraction interact with each other. As an abstraction, art is thus in a unique position to intervene in the realms of its sister abstractions: “If art is marked by a dialectic of (failed) abstraction and (failed) concretion, something similar can be said of the other types of real abstraction. Blundering between failed abstractions and pseudo-concretions, artistic practice reflects and *can reflect on* the instability of any type of real abstraction.”¹⁴⁵

Lütticken’s account is useful in considering the ways the abstract and the concrete converge and play off one another in Gilligan’s video. For example, it could be argued that although *Popular Unrest*, with its pop-television narrative format, does not lay claim to abstraction at a formal level and therefore is not easily marked a failed form in Gillick’s sense of the phrase, it is itself an attempt at concretizing the abstractions that it takes as its narrative subject. If *Popular Unrest* is a concretization, it could also be said that, as a digital video that exists in multiple copies and in multiple places, it evades both the unique physicality of the auratic object of direct exchange and the abstraction of art’s typical commodity status in being made available not for sale but for free—as well as quasi-immaterially—online. Perhaps more interesting, however, would be to note how the uneasy dialectic between abstraction and concretion—to borrow Lütticken’s phrase—plays out in the way *Popular Unrest* was presented at its Chisenhale Gallery premiere. Walsh notes that the drama was presented there on five separate monitors, each in a boothlike structure divided by office screens and plastic dividers; for Walsh, this installation format evoked the spaces in the film where the scientists conduct forensic investigations, and because each episode is a slightly different length, she observes, the viewer might enter a booth some way into an episode, paralleling the experience of viewing television shows in domestic spaces.¹⁴⁶

Although Walsh does not make the connection explicit, these concretely demarcated exhibition viewing spaces would seem to have further invoked the abstraction of social life in capital’s atomized physical spaces of televisual spectatorship, the nuclear family’s living room (with its “entertainment center”), or, more recently, in the screen of the mobile device—the laptop, the smartphone, the tablet—designed and used for private, solo viewing by post-Fordist capital’s itinerant, flexibilized, hyper-abstracted precariat. Walsh is not explicit on this point, either, but her description of the installation’s discrete booths also conjures up the office cubicles we see in the film and recognize as the iconic cell-like dwelling places of the isolated drones of the capitalist workforce.

But perhaps the most compelling implication of Lütticken’s analysis of the interplay

of abstraction and concretion for *Popular Unrest* is that it can show us something about the effects of so many forms of abstraction—social, physical, financial—on concrete events and living bodies in the story. For while *Popular Unrest* points to capitalism’s abstracting effect on the body—as the body is turned into a set of quantified variables or data sets—at the same time, as Vishmidt notes, it points to the body’s visceral, tangible physicality, to its almost unbearable monstrousness. This monstrousness is particularly notable in the bloody knife murders that punctuate the narrative, but it is evoked too in the series’ regular references to the body as a prison or trap, to its inescapability. For Vishmidt, the capture and production of the subject in systems of economic and social abstraction combine with the carceral monstrousness of the body to conjure up a kind of capitalist sublime, suggesting the terror and fundamental ungraspability of subjectivity and physical existence under capital.¹⁴⁷

The roots of the capitalist sublime Vishmidt refers to are alluded to in a brief description of Gilligan’s five-episode series at its online home, popularunrest.org. The online description explains that *Popular Unrest* is inspired in part by the American serial television dramas *CSI*, *Dexter*, and *Bones*. While these shows provide models for the episodic structure of Gilligan’s work, informing its dispensation of the storyline in discrete stages with suspenseful scenes at the end of each installment, the “forensic pornography” genre they pioneered is also cited as formative. In those serials, according to *Popular Unrest*’s description, reality is presented “through a pornographic forensics of empirical and visceral phenomena.”¹⁴⁸ Director David Cronenberg’s signature “body horror” films, which make up a related genre, are also cited as inspiration. These influences are apparent in *Popular Unrest*, a techno-Gothic thriller that thrives on the stimuli of intensity, gore, and danger. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, noting that a taste for detective fiction and a journalistic interest in crime emerged in the nineteenth century alongside fears concerning the integrity of the body—hygiene, sexual degeneracy—Foucault argues that “the stimulus of danger” is “one of the major implications of liberalism.” Indeed, he asserts, “The motto of liberalism is: ‘Live dangerously’.” According to Foucault, liberalism (as precursor to neoliberalism) sets up conditions in which not only are individuals constantly exposed to danger but, perhaps even more significantly, they are conditioned to experience current and future situations as dangerous. Constant stimulation of the fear of danger is “the condition, the internal psychological and cultural correlative of liberalism,” he argues. “There is no liberalism without a culture of danger.”¹⁴⁹

Herein lies a clue to the relationship of two of *Popular Unrest*'s major thematics: abstraction, on one hand, and, on the other, the monstrousness of the physical body—the visceral, capitalist sublime Vishmidt refers to, whose correlate is the culture of fear Foucault argues is one of the primary defining features of liberalism, the underlying framework of biopolitics. As we saw in chapter two, Entelechy refers to abstraction as the method employed by the Spirit to break down labor, commodities, and individuals into miniscule, equivalent, interchangeable units of information, or data, whose value can be compared and exchanged: “Find the most basic and abstract unit of something’s value—the DNA, the molecule—and then you can start to go to work.” This abstraction necessitates violations of the body and mind; that is, the body and mind must be violated precisely so that they may be controlled. These violations of body and mind in turn exert their own abstracting force, so that abstraction itself becomes a form of violence: It seeks to break the body down into manageable, understandable parts, its every contingency made controllable and predictable. *Popular Unrest* is replete with frightening references to the violation of the body, enacted both through the Spirit’s aggressive forms of capitalist instrumentalization and through outright murder. We infer from it that our taste for intensity and violence and for close encounters with the visceral repeats and translates the violence done to us as subjects of biopolitical capitalism. The physical violence makes the abstract violence literal. If the Spirit is a stand-in for biopower, Gilligan’s series suggests that it employs violent methods not only to extract maximum profit from the micro-units it abstracts from bodies and from social life but also to protect itself and the system it governs. It constantly defers the possibility that the unwieldy or irregular body will threaten the system if left unmonitored. Ultimately, this is what leads the Spirit to the paradox Entelechy identifies: that the Spirit both maximizes and expels life, just as biopower makes live and lets die.

The brutality of abstraction, of breaking down, isolating, analyzing, and managing, is manifest in various ways in the series. The violence of neuroscientific abstraction is evident in the laboratory, for example, when the scientists isolate and study the group’s physical pain responses. In one particularly unpleasant demonstration, group member Emma is hatted with an electrode-dotted cap, and the younger male scientist uses remote control to produce brain signals that in turn lead to painful stomach contractions. The exercise demonstrates the abstract connections between brain and body, also alluding to how alone each person is in her agony. Similarly, the violence of contemporary psychobiology is brought to bear when

the scientists encourage the group to dissociate their thoughts and emotions from what its members perceive to be meaningful human interactions, events, and utterances. At one point, the woman scientist tells a male group member that he “didn’t mean” a statement he has just made and clearly believes to be sincere. “You didn’t mean it—I can see you didn’t, even if it’s true,” she informs him, as if she can see brainwaves indicating insincerity. He protests, but she keeps challenging him. His honest persona becomes an product he cannot sell her. “I don’t buy your reasoning,” she insists.

As we have seen, a theme in *Popular Unrest* is that each person experiences him- or herself (and others) as unique, and yet in the Spirit’s eyes each person is just one abstract, shifting data set among many others, a Deleuzian “dividual” lacking a unique signature. Indeed, Entelechy and the scientists take more than one opportunity to remind members of the group that while everyone is absolutely unique, they are merely “unique just like everybody else.” You’re an original, the Spirit seems to warn its subjects, but because everyone is an original, you’re not special. Here, the Spirit breaks down the illusions individuals might hold about being distinctive, abstracting them from the very subjectivities they are required to cultivate, as if to foster in them an awareness of their status as prisoners. Yet the members of the group in *Popular Unrest* seem less concerned with their fate or character as creative, innovative, unique individuals than with the group’s connection, which they consistently indicate their interest in and concern for. Knowing this, too, the Spirit seeks to shatter the group’s sense of powerful connection by continually informing them that it has preordained their bond. It forbids them to believe that they are drawn to one another of their own free will or because of qualities intrinsic to the group itself.

Gilligan also shows how biopower exerts abstracting force inside the physical body. Taking up the increasingly bloody and sensational yet coldly scientific aesthetic of the “forensic pornography” television genre she mentions as inspiration,¹⁵⁰ she suggests the abstracting, molecularizing force of both technoscientific forensics and of popular television in grisly extreme close-ups of bloody human tissue, throbbing viscera, and views of jellylike interior bodily passages. These shots link the escalating portrayals of violence and visceral mortality in contemporary forensic television dramas to an evidently insatiable desire that seems to haunt the subjects of biopolitical capitalism: the desire for intensity. *Popular Unrest* suggests that the cynical brutality of such dramas satisfies a widespread craving in contemporary popular culture to press up against the limits of human flesh—against the

biological substrate that constitutes the subject and from which it cannot escape—and to understand this flesh as a scientifically analyzable entity. Here, Gilligan also seems to suggest the ways such television shows address the public at the level of what, as Steyerl has pointed out in another context, Suely Rolnik calls its public's "resonant body," or its bodily affect, acting upon it not at an intellectual level but instead to excite, horrify, delight, and otherwise activate or appease.¹⁵¹

In highlighting this tension between the desire for intensity and the desire to break the body down into manageable, scientifically understandable components, *Popular Unrest* calls to mind the stochastic, probabilistic relationship between the digitally, technoscientifically modulated subject-organism and its environment described by Berardi in his 2005 essay "Biopolitics and Connective Mutation."¹⁵² Although Berardi does not use the term "abstraction" in this text, his analysis of biopolitics in the digital era nonetheless suggests that the flattened, smooth, asperity-free surfaces of the digital produce a form of social abstraction: a universe hostile to the smells and touch, the irregular textures and imperfections, of human flesh. In its subjects—in Berardi's words, the "first videoelectric generation"—this digital environment encourages a technological prowess that results in isolation, psychic fragility, and a lack of communal identification with the other. It is an environment that substitutes aesthetic stimulation for sexual contact and speed for the empathy that can be developed only in slow time, when it is still possible to perceive the other as a pulsating, sensing body instead of a shiny, digital surface.¹⁵³

The isolation, psychic fragility, and a lack of identification with the other that marks the first videoelectric generation in Berardi's analysis parallel the fractal-recombinant character of the financially produced info-commodity that, as we have seen, he describes elsewhere, referring to the breaking down of all entities into minuscule semiotic fragments. Together, the free-floating individuals and informational molecules Berardi discusses—which become increasingly indistinct from one another as people are recast not as discrete subjects but as recombinable data sets—make up the sphere of semicapital. If, as we have seen, the info-commodity is semantically "liberated," enjoying a kind of freedom, that liberation also marks a loss of connection to a particular context; it is abstracted from the complex and meaningful conditions of its production and use. Like the semiotic fragment repeatedly severed from native as well as adopted contexts, the isolated, alienated human individuals who occupy the sphere of semicapital are also, paradoxically, made

homogenous—*unique like everybody else*—by being reduced to abstract equivalents, their circulation mirroring the abstract logic of commodities circulating in the market.

Berardi's analysis sheds light, too, on the regular explosions of human blood and guts that pepper *Popular Unrest* and the popular “forensic pornography” TV shows they allude to and draw from. Here, again, in the sphere of semiocapital, abstraction meets intensity. For Berardi, the increasing intensity and speed that has marked the last decades has exposed contemporary subjects to an excess of nervous stimulation. He writes:

The organism has been exposed to an increasing mass of neuro-mobilizing stimuli. The acceleration and intensification of nervous stimulants on the conscious organism seems to have thinned the cognitive film that we might call sensibility. The conscious organism needs to accelerate its cognitive, gestural, kinetic reactivity. The time available for responding to nervous stimuli has been dramatically reduced. This is perhaps why we seem to be seeing a reduction of the capacity for empathy. Symbolic exchange among human beings is elaborated without empathy, because it becomes increasingly difficult to perceive the existence of the body of the other in time. In order to experience the other as a sensorial body, you need time, time to caress and smell. The time for empathy is lacking, because stimulation has become too intense.¹⁵⁴

Temporal abstraction emerges as the missing factor in Berardi's account—the factor that joins stimulation (intensity) in accounting for the reduction of human capacity for empathy in the biopolitical sphere he describes. The subject who is exposed to increasingly intense stimuli while, at the same time, being allowed increasingly little time in which to process and respond to them, is forced to take shortcuts, as it were, to reduce and simplify what is complex, to smooth out the irregular surfaces, to make sense of the visceral other s/he has no time to become familiar with in slow time. Our cultural desire for ever-increasing intensity in technoscientifically mediated confrontations with the flesh—our desire, in other words, to experience at a hyperreal level the most visceral aspects our own physical mortality—can be considered a logical outcome, then, both of a digitally repressive, abstracting environment exerting regularizing force on us, and of our habituation to hyper-intense stimulation.

This intensity, we may infer from Berardi's, Gilligan's, and Steyerl's work, is closely bound up with and perhaps even a necessary correlate of the biopolitical abstraction at work in the passage from Massumi I quote in the introduction to this project: “You are viscerally exposed,” Massumi writes, “like a prodded sea cucumber that spits its guts. You are exposed

down to your innermost sensitive folds, down to the very peristaltic rhythms that make you what you are. This is generative power, a power that reaches down into the soft tissue of your life, where it is just stirring, and interactively draws it out, for it to become what it will be, and what it suits the system that it be.”¹⁵⁵ Massumi’s words call to mind a scene in *Popular Unrest* in which, during one of the knife murders perpetrated by an unseen killer, this time on a subway train, group members Emma and Mensa have sympathetic seizures in which they have a collective vision of the Spirit sending them a message. They open the message, which appears as a digital envelope dripping blood against a backdrop of pulsating, raw flesh. It reads: “The Spirit is making them meat.” Here, Gilligan offers “meat” as an apt homonym to “meet,” the word that is used in an otherwise identical phrase by the team of scientists in informing the group during their first meeting in the laboratory that the Spirit is making them meet, or causing them to gather together. This scene, Vishmidt argues, demonstrates the abstracting force of the Spirit and its power to reduce its subjects to mere substrates of biological, physical energy consumption at the same time as it provides the ground and cause of their social relations.¹⁵⁶

Marx described capital as “dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks”¹⁵⁷; here, Gilligan’s Spirit behaves much the same way, staging regular gory spectacles reminding the populace of its own labor-sucking force, making literal the dead labor of capital. This scene in particular, with its corpse and its throbbing viscera, also evokes what Thomas Keenan describes as the “ghostly objectivity, a mere jelly . . . of undifferentiated human labor” that is the sole remainder of exchange value’s evisceration of use value—itself a product of the abstracting forces that transform material things and their use values into commodities, or things that can be exchanged. This phantom or ghostly residue, Keenan argues, is what binds humanity together, what capitalist subjects share—indeed, it is what defines them. Gilligan’s graphic depictions in this scene of the Spirit’s paradoxical tendency to destroy life even as it protects it—as in other scenes showing the Spirit brutally stabbing people to death in public as part of its intermittent “labor-saving calculations”—also invokes the horrific conditions of human sacrifice that journalist Chris Harman describes as a post-financial-crisis “zombie capitalism.” As the financial crisis unfolded, he notes, many commentators began to speak of “zombie banks,” those “undead” banks that no longer served any beneficial purpose yet continued to pose a threat. Taking up this newly coined phrase, Harman argues that a larger

twenty-first-century “zombie capitalism” created such institutions: a system that is “undead” in that it is dead to human needs while still capable of wreaking havoc.¹⁵⁸

Steyerl’s investigation in the video triptych *Red Alert* of the U.S. Homeland Security’s deployment of color-coded “terror alerts” similarly explores the interplay of abstraction and intensity, translating Gilligan’s scenes of glazed crimson viscera into vivid, repeating fields of solid primary red. But Steyerl’s video, unlike Gilligan’s episodic fictional narrative, takes the static, essentially unmoving, formally abstract form of a reflection upon the affective power of color. Just as Gilligan considers the Spirit’s abstracting force in *Popular Unrest*, in *Red Alert*, Steyerl examines governmental appropriations of the artistic gesture of abstraction. *Red Alert*’s triptych of red screens, an explicit allusion to Russian constructivist artist Aleksandr Rodchenko’s well-known 1921 triptych of monochrome canvases, reconceptualizes an earlier form of abstraction in a contemporary context. Speaking of his own canvases, Rodchenko famously said, “Every plane is a plane, and there is to be no representation”;¹⁵⁹ in *Red Alert*, Steyerl appropriates Rodchenko’s post-representational gesture to comment on the color red’s multilayered associations in a post-9/11 world. In doing so, she also points to the intensity that marks a contemporary milieu of accelerating militarized global surveillance. In the US terror alert system, the color red denoted the imminence of an attack; this alert, Steyerl points out, was active for several months in 2007, transforming the extreme into the everyday and normalizing a condition of threat and alarm. Art historian T. J. Demos notes that whereas red was the color of the October revolution, signalling the demise of bourgeois art production, “it is now a Pavlovian trigger of mediatized fear, one where the affective image . . . overtakes representational significance.”¹⁶⁰ Similarly, critic Pablo Lafuente notes that if today red is understood as sign of warning against various forms of disorder that threaten the operations of capitalism—terror attacks, illegal immigrants, non-Western values, communism—it was not always so. The Jacobins made the red flag the flag of revolution in 1792, for example, and until the fall of the Berlin Wall, the color red symbolized struggles for equality and against oppression.¹⁶¹ In the post-9/11 buildup to what would eventually foment into global revolutionary fervor, Steyerl’s trio of red flags seem to announce the coming unrest.

In “Documentary Uncertainty,” which Steyerl wrote the year before she made *Red Alert*, the artist notes that, even in an era in which we tend to believe less and less in documentary truth claims, documentary’s potency is increasing because it participates in

contemporary affective economies based on commodifying and transforming information into powerful affects such as fear and intensity. Thus documentary tends to hit us not at a level of rational thought, but at gut level:

Documentary reports are able to unleash military interventions, to provoke pogroms, international relief efforts, euphoria as well as mass panic. . . . We identify with victims, heroes, survivors, lucky winners, and the impact of this identification is heightened by the presumed authenticity of the experiences we believe to be sharing. Pictures that appear ever more immediate, which offer increasingly less to see, evoke a situation of constant exception, a crisis in permanence, a state of heightened alert and tension. The documentary form thus becomes a major player within contemporary affective economies.¹⁶²

If documentary has the power to magnify general feelings of fear, the implication is that in doing so it is complicit with biopower, which, as Gilligan also shows us, employs fear as a standard mode of address.

Articulating lines of inquiry that would seem to have contributed to her subsequent creation of *Red Alert*, Steyerl also refers in her text to Brian Massumi's analysis of the use of color-coded terror alerts in the U.S., summarizing his argument that power works through channels of affect. Here, it is worth drawing directly from "Fear (The Spectrum Said)," the 2006 essay Steyerl refers to, in which Massumi discusses the affective dimensions of governmental control. The post-9/11 U.S. terror alert system, Massumi argues, was designed specifically as a system of affective modulation meant to calibrate fear in the public:

It could raise it a pitch, then lower it before it became too intense, or even worse, before habituation dampened response. Timing was everything. . . . Affective modulation of the populace was now an official, central function of an increasingly time-sensitive government.¹⁶³

Although they were ostensibly a means of demonstrating the government's commitment to the so-called "war on terror," in the event, the alerts offered no tangible content or form, their referents and sources always left frustratingly vague. Effectively, they were "signals without signification."¹⁶⁴ What they did offer, Massumi argues, was a series of variations in intensity of feeling over time, addressing the public not through cognition, but through pre-subjective, affective means, through bodily irritability. The terror alert system thus became a form of response training, teaching the people through fear and self-defensive reflex responses to respond to the system's perceptual cues, thus wirelessly situating the central

government directly within the nervous system of each individual. The result was that government could exert mass affective control: “The whole population became a networked jumpiness,” Massumi writes, “a distributed neuronal network registering en masse quantum shifts in the nation’s global state of discomfiture in rhythm with leaps between color levels. Across the geographical and social differentials dividing them, the population fell into affective attunement.”¹⁶⁵

For Steyerl, power in this case makes use of abstraction in the same way art does, the plain colors of the terror alerts triggering emotional reactions and modulating collective affect. The alerts are empty of content; they do not represent. Instead, they distill affect, pushing politics “into the realm of pure perception”¹⁶⁶—that is, into a zone of sheer intensity. The red light that glows from the *Red Alert*’s three panels thus also refers to the “red-light” pornographic quality of media, Steyerl notes. If the normalization of the state of alarm speaks to a familiar sensational impulse in popular culture that Steyerl describes as the “constant desire to lay something bare, to expose,”¹⁶⁷ the latter emerges as a form of media pornography based on a desire for intensity. Indeed, for Demos, *Red Alert* connects the abstracting force of the system to its pornographic exploitations of pure intensity, demonstrating “that when representation becomes a matter of ‘this equals that,’ where a flash of color is meant to induce powerful emotional reactions, we are not far from pornography—a kind of red-light district where signs are stripped of representational complexity and feed into a direct neurophysiological manipulation of mediatized desire or dread.” Steyerl’s use of abstract video explores a form of media pornography that parallels at an affective level the visceral abstractions of the body in the “forensic pornography” Gilligan refers to in *Popular Unrest*. The role played by the Spirit in Gilligan’s drama is, in Steyerl’s triptych, the U.S. government—a similarly biopolitical, governmental power that engages the public at the level of affect, sensation, and spectacle.¹⁶⁸ Here, again, Steyerl’s and Gilligan’s work intersects with that of Claire Fontaine, whose *Pay Attention Motherfucker* (2006)¹⁶⁹ belies in its title the more bureaucratic phrase—“MERCI DE VOTRE VIGILANCE”—that its glowing neon letters spell out, similarly responding to governmental calls for the public to maintain a state of high alert in an environment of perceived or projected terrorist threat.¹⁷⁰

If *Red Alert* reflects upon the pornographic character of the biopolitical military-industrial complex, or upon a form of media that addresses and modulates the populace at the level of bodily sensation and affect, it was perhaps a fitting followup to Steyerl’s 30-

minute video of the same year, *Lovely Andrea*.¹⁷¹ Whereas *Red Alert* employed abstraction as a means of evoking the contemporary conundrum of affective bondage, or a kind of enslavement of the masses to governmental powers, *Lovely Andrea*'s milieu, that of Japanese bondage pornography, allows us to consider other dimensions of contemporary bondage in an environment similarly driven heavily by intensity in affective modes of address.

Lovely Andrea takes the form of an energetic sleuth adventure following Steyerl's mission to track down a *nawa shibari*-style rope bondage porn photo of herself that was taken in Tokyo in 1987, while she was attending film school. This photo-hunting mission serves as a vehicle that permits Steyerl to address an eclectic gamut of interconnected topics, including the truth value of images and of documentary itself, the politics of domination, parallels between the markets for porn images and for fine art, feminism, and the glut and circulation across print and digital forms of images designed to engage with viewers on the level of emotion, affect, excitement, and intensity, and all presented in a spirited, ebullient stream of often low-res pop-culture images and songs cross-cut, juxtaposed, and superimposed.

Steyerl's signature preoccupation with the life cycles of things—in this case an image-as-thing—drives *Lovely Andrea*, a pseudo-documentary about the search for a long-lost photograph. *Lovely Andrea* offers an object biography that takes place, like Gilligan's video series *Crisis in the Credit System* of the same year, in the suspended pre-crisis moment of free market speculation, the boom just before the bust. If this was a global landscape of increasing confidence and rhetorics of never-ending growth, in both artists' work it was also one of dimly growing awareness of the crash-bound path of the abstract world of global finance, rapidly escalating economic disparities, and overdetermined post-9/11 fear-mongering.

Steyerl's video translates the disorienting, fractured rhythms of a flattened, increasingly abstract postmodern temporality. While, unlike *Red Alert*, which presents repeating panels of static color, *Lovely Andrea* is not entirely abstract at the formal level, it makes extensive use of abstract techniques—frenetic, often gleefully disruptive montage sequences—to convey its story of the search for an elusive bondage photo lost in a sphere of abstracted, fractal-recombinant images. Here, abstract filmic techniques also serve as a hedge against the false authenticity of “straight” documentary style, constantly defamiliarizing both the social milieu Steyerl presents and her own film. They also serve to defamiliarize the

photographic image itself. As a documentary-style film document chronicling the search for a lost photographic document—Steyerl’s bondage photo—*Lovely Andrea* problematizes of the status of the photo through its very absence. The photo is more searched for and spoken of—by Steyerl and her translator, and by the many photographers, ropemasters, archivists, and other porn industry workers they visit along the way—than it is actually viewed. Even after the search team eventually finds the elusive photo, Steyerl allows us only a fleeting, blurred, oblique glimpse of it. By withholding the photo from visual centrality in her narrative, Steyerl denies it its affective and sensational power, as well as its representational function, holding viewers at a distance and reflecting instead upon its status as a historical document with all of these dimensions. This strategy also robs the image of its biopolitical power, serving as a critique of its potential to constitute Steyerl herself as a subject. Rather than presenting us with a decontextualized image, *Lovely Andrea* instead presents, almost exclusively, the image’s context, deferring the image’s role as fractal-recombinant fragment.

Defamiliarization, abstraction, and absence are video-documentary strategies also adopted by other artists caught in the tensions of contemporary biopolitics; in her 38-minute two-channel video *Ramallah/New York* (2004–05), for example, Emily Jacir deliberately disorients the viewer by presenting documentary footage on adjacent screens of parallel scenes of quotidian life in the two titular cities—a New York hair salon next to one in the West Bank, for example, one tobacco shop in each location, one restaurant next to another. But Jacir switches the images from side to side, foiling any attempts on the part of the viewer at easy comparison or differentiation; at the same time, languages shift in unexpected ways, and clues to location are deliberately mixed. As reviewers of the work have noted, this technique conveys a sense of the commonality of the everyday activities Jacir presents, of shared humanity and collective identification;¹⁷² at the same time, we might further note, it defamiliarizes the very decontextualization of images itself while reflecting upon the biopolitics of the dehumanization of an exiled, displaced population.

Steyerl has referred to the rich history of Japanese film as general inspiration for her work, including, for example, the *pinku eiga* or political soft-core genre and, more specifically, Japanese director Kazuo Hara’s 1974 documentary film *Gokushiteki erosu: Renka 1974* (Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974), a film that she says impressed her deeply for its “radically subjective” energy, flamboyant characters (including the director’s lover, a stripper, and the prostitutes around the U.S. military base at Okinawa whom she tries to organize),

and “intense mix of sexuality, lingering violence, and militarization.” This mix, Steyerl says, “knocked me back: it evoked a politics of full contact, a documentary approach that was not only embedded but embodied.”¹⁷³ Perhaps in homage, a similar politics of intensity informs *Lovely Andrea*, whose opening credits roll to the impetuous tune of X-Ray Spex’s brash punk-feminist consumer-liberation single “Oh Bondage, Up Yours!” (1977) as we are introduced to the search for Steyerl’s lost photo, for which the artist posed under the pseudonym “Lovely Andrea,” a reference to her childhood friend Andrea Wolf, who was herself subject to bondage when she was imprisoned and executed as a terrorist in Kurdistan.¹⁷⁴ In *Lovely Andrea*, Steyerl and her translator, a self-possessed young bondage performer named Asagi Ageha, accompanied by a film crew, visit assorted Tokyo porn studios in search of this image, interviewing industry photographers about how best to trace it. Their task is made all the more daunting by the fact that, twenty years later, as a properly itinerant art-world “strike worker” who has spent a lifetime moving precariously from job to job, city to city, Steyerl has forgotten nearly all the details of the context of the images’ original creation—the studio where the photograph was taken, its maker, its publisher. Little by little, through these interviews and visits, she reconstructs this context, and an uneasy consensus about the image’s genealogy emerges that, while forming a traceable plotline, defers resolution by constantly offering slightly varying versions of events, pointing both to the irresolvable conflicts of history and to the uncertainties of documentary truth.

Lovely Andrea revels in parody and paradox, cheerfully exploring the motifs of dependence and independence, bondage and freedom, and the emancipatory and oppressive potential of both. In one passage, we see montaged clips of Ronald Reagan speaking at the Brandenburg Gate in 1987, exhorting, “Mr. Gorbachev, Tear down this wall!” and of the 1989 destruction of the Berlin wall, that well-recognized symbol of Cold War repression whose demolition was widely hailed as marking a new era of freedom. The intertitle “Freedom,” which appears repeatedly throughout the piece, then introduces a scene in which two bondage photographers reflect nostalgically on the success of bondage porn during the late 1980s, a period of strict censorship in their industry. In the free, deregulated era of 2007, these photographers lament, the industry is suffering. In the late 1980s, one cameraman says, “There were lots of restrictions. It was most dangerous for us when the police became relaxed. It was best when they were extremely bothersome.” Another replies, “The more restrictions the better, I agree.” Nodding to indicate his assent, the first

cameraman continues, “When they relaxed, production collapsed. . . . Readers are attracted if we work around the restrictions. . . . We should behave as if we were just as restricted as then. Now they aren’t strict enough. That’s really bad!”

But Steyerl is asking questions more than she is providing answers, and her film’s allusions remain ever precarious. Averting the possibility of certainty, *Lovely Andrea* later offers us a glimpse of the exploitation such censorship entailed. In one scene, the shy, slightly creepy “master” who photographed Steyerl so many years ago, Tanaka Kinichi, wistfully recounts the abuses that took place during those restricted days, when studios would lure young women off the streets, only later revealing to them that they were expected to pose for rope bondage sessions. Distressed at the idea, the women would beg to be allowed to leave; the photographers would then offer them only their freedom—nothing more, no monetary compensation—in exchange for posing. The intimidation of women into providing “free” labor emerges here as yet another negative freedom resulting from the contemporary economies in which Steyerl’s notion of “freedom from everything,” as we saw in chapter two, exerts atomizing force on the subject.

It is here, too, that the feminist stance Steyerl alludes to throughout *Lovely Andrea* and makes explicit to at the end of the film makes itself most apparent. In the film’s final scene, her German producer asks Steyerl, “Do you consider yourself a feminist?” The artist’s reply is, “Definitely.” Indeed, beyond interviewing Tanaka Kinichi about the gendered coercions that enabled him to practice his “art,” throughout the film Steyerl repeatedly points out the connections between work as bondage and bondage as work while interspersing scenes of young women being bound up in the studio for photo shoots with, for example, clips from Donna Summers’s 1983 music video “She Works Hard for the Money,” which features rows and rows of fatigued female factory workers laboring over sewing machines.¹⁷⁵

If Steyerl’s *Strike* videos allude to another form of abstraction, that of images freed from the original contexts of their production, *Lovely Andrea*’s exploration of such freedoms provides a historical backdrop to their even more extreme, post-crash conditions. Steyerl breaks up her own footage from 2007 Tokyo with intertitles and rapid montage sequences featuring still and moving images appropriated from a range of overdetermined media and pop-culture sources, ranging from Spiderman and Spiderwoman (we see the cartoon heroes snaring bad guys in their ropy webs) to Chinese police executions (shown in photographs of

rope-bound convicts being shot in the back of the head) interspersed with scenes of Japanese bondage porn. Such juxtapositions point yet again to the semantic equivalency of images in a fractal-recombinant semiotic universe, suggesting the atomizing conditions that today create what, as we have seen, Berardi calls the “fractal-recombinant” modes of financial production of the info-commodity of semiocapital.¹⁷⁶

As Steyerl and Ageha continue in their quest, they come to realize the overwhelming difficulty of their task to locate a single twenty-year-old image among so many others of its type within a bondage niche that itself contains a micro-universe of subspecialties. As one performer puts it, “You’d be really lucky to find it. There are 100 publications each month [in this subgenre alone].” A ropemaster comments, “If you’d count them, there must be tens of thousands, or even billions [of such images].” Their search reveals what Nina Power has described as contemporary porn’s excessive taxonomical drive: “an ever-increasingly specific remit internal to porn classification itself—not just ‘facials’, but ‘eye-shots’, ‘ear-shots’, ‘mouth-shots’.” In contrast to early-twentieth-century porn, contemporary porn has expanded into “more categories than there are dirty thoughts in the world,”¹⁷⁷ yet it fails in that it can no longer offer anything novel. Power writes:

You could be into women who look like cats who specialize in shaving biscuits whilst bouncing up and down on trampolines, and there’d probably be a website that could cater to your needs, but once you’ve seen a couple of cat-women shaving biscuits whilst bouncing on trampolines *surely you’ve seen them all*.¹⁷⁸

Porn’s urgent taxonomical drive, Power argues, is just one aspect of its mission “to bore us all to death and remind us that everything is merely a form of work, including, or even most especially, pleasure.”¹⁷⁹ Porn’s hyperaccelerated taxonomical drive—conveyed as the team searches through hundreds of magazines in the collapsed temporality of hurried time-lapse sequences filmed in a Tokyo “porn library”—indexes the larger sphere of circulating images, *Lovely Andrea* suggests, mirroring their taxonomies and fractal proliferation.

Documenting the loss and rediscovery of a photo in an atomized, fractal-recombinant image sphere gone taxonomically wild, the video also documents the loss and reconstruction of the artist’s own history in an atomized social sphere, pointing to the alternative, conflicting ways personal histories can be reconstructed. Although the film is built around the quest for a missing image, Steyerl hardly dwells on the moment of its discovery. Even after Steyerl’s bondage photograph is found—in the form of a short series

of photographs published in a porn magazine, as it turns out—the images work alongside the video itself to inscribe multiple narratives into history, generating new narratives of the present. The narrative in which Steyerl the artist traces the history of a lost image of herself intersects with a contrasting historical narrative, one that is revealed as soon as she and her crew locate the published images in the Tokyo porn library. As they discover, “bondage poetry” accompanies the photos, describing the life of Steyerl’s equally present alter-ego “Beautiful Andrea,” herself a kind of precarious “strike worker,” one conjured up entirely in words, images, and the historical imaginary of everyone who has sought her out. According to the caption text next to the magazine images, Andrea is a foreign business woman who tries to earn money in Japan while living a double life as a bondage model and “beautiful body” sweating in Roppongi disco clubs every night.¹⁸⁰ In all of these interchangeable guises as a character in her own narrative, Steyerl is constituted by info-images, her own “self” an abstraction made up of recombining fragments, her own history a shifting signifier.

Here, Steyerl demonstrates her ambivalence toward the photograph as an indexical document, implying that, as Ariella Azoulay has argued in a different context, what we actually see in the photograph constitutes very little of the energies, meanings, ideas, and histories congealed within it. For Steyerl, it seems, as for Azoulay, a photograph is never reducible to a single dimension—never solely the product of a photographer’s artistic impulse or an act performed before the camera, never just an image seen by a viewer located in a particular time and space, never mere material object. It is, rather, part of a charged assemblage in which all of these conditions converge—what Azoulay calls the “photographic situation.” Photography is an “apparatus of power,” Azoulay argues, one “that designates an ensemble of diverse actions that contain the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of the photographic image.”¹⁸¹ For both Steyerl and Azoulay, the photograph is less interesting as representation—as something to be “read” or viewed—than as a vital, dynamic object, one that encapsulates numerous contradictions.

As *Lovely Andrea*’s categories expand, the novelty of the image wanes, devolving into caricature. Images of rope-bound prisoners reduced to a condition of bare life at Guantanamo Bay, which flash across the screen several times, come to appear as equivalents to the images of the rope-bound figures of Ageha and Steyerl, who alternately signify the freelance wage slave and the doubly “bare” life of the fetishized, commodified, stripped female body held hostage to mere biology. Steyerl’s references to “role playing” in the

context of her own quasi-documentary suggest a further equivalency to “role playing” in the context of her earlier bondage. Here, Steyerl and Ageha also evoke the self-valorizing “Young-Girl” described by Tiquun as the “elementary unit of biopolitical individuality.” Privileging the image over the subject, Tiquun describes the Young-Girl as a figure who “resembles her photo.” She is also a figure who is into bondage: “The Young-Girl mortifies her flesh to take revenge for Biopower and the symbolic violence to which the Spectacle subjects it.”¹⁸²

Steyerl’s images of Guantanamo inmates also suggest parallels between porn, on one hand, and governmental, military, and terrorist violence, on the other—two poles of intensity in a universe of abstract equivalence, speed, and overstimulation. Indeed, as Berardi argues, the mediatization and proliferation of Internet porn point to the emotional pathologies of semiocapital. As we have already seen, Berardi argues that as stimulation intensifies and time is compressed, empathy wanes; we are denied the time needed to perceive the other as a sensorial, living, feeling body.¹⁸³ Writing specifically of porn, Berardi notes that although porn and torture may seem to have little in common, nevertheless “their media diffusion takes place in the same vacuum generated by the atrophy of emotionality. The inability to feel pleasure has its counterpart in the inability to perceive horror as horror.”¹⁸⁴ Under such conditions, porn proliferates, as a form of alienation from both the body of the other:

Pornography grabs the attention quickly, you don’t need to work for it, you don’t need to feel empathy, you just watch. Almost like an autistic state of mind. It’s not necessary to try and understand the feelings of the other person, it’s not about them, they are objects or tools in the need for satisfaction. The bodies are deprived of everything that makes them human by the lurker.¹⁸⁵

Affective attention suffers from contraction and is forced to adapt by simplifying and smoothing out its own psychic responses. If the time for “emotional elaboration” is shortened, porn is both a cause and an effect of this, Berardi argues, or at least a symptom. “Pornography concurs to the saturation of the info-sphere,” he writes, “and it is simultaneously an escape from the disturbed psycho-sphere.”¹⁸⁶

Although she often inserts herself and her cameramen into the action, persistently pointing out their mediating role—as well as that of the video camera, which also makes regular appearances—in the tale, Steyerl gives translator and bondage model Ageha center

stage. Ageha's own specialty is self-suspension, a practice in which she binds herself elaborately with ropes and suspends herself in the air. As a practitioner of self-bondage, Ageha is her own master and servant; Depeche Mode's 1984 song of the same title underscores this duality on the soundtrack elsewhere in the video. As a kimono-clad worker in the porn industry, Ageha evokes the prostitutes and geisha of Japan's "floating world," the red-light district of old Edo (today's Tokyo) who, despite their own conditions of indentured servitude, enjoyed unusual freedom in comparison to women of that period who were bound by marriage, often pushing the boundaries of social propriety and becoming fashion arbiters and trend setters. Not only has Ageha succeeded in refining a physically demanding terpsichorean practice that emerges in the film as an art form—"high-quality entertainment" that goes beyond mere "masturbation," as she describes it—she is also a student of web design who runs her own web site, supporting her own fluid, infinitely editable "personal brand." In enjoying her own freedom, she has become a savvy entrepreneur—that category of person Foucault identifies as the very model of flexibilized capitalistic subjectivity for all in *The Birth of Biopolitics*.¹⁸⁷ Philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato argues that the entrepreneur (a figure I explore in depth in chapter four) both manifests neoliberal subjectivity and enjoys the most privileged, protected freedoms allowed in the neoliberal sphere. Whereas Keynesian liberalism favored the freedom of labor, of the consumer, and of politics, neoliberalism radically subordinates all of these, favoring instead the freedom of the entrepreneur.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, for geographer David Harvey, neoliberalism is a political-economic theory that places highest value on the freedom of the entrepreneur. Harvey argues that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free market, and free trade."¹⁸⁹ As an entrepreneur, Ageha knowingly commodifies herself. As art critic Maija Timonen observes, her aerial limbo positions her as the paradigmatic realization of the contemporary free-floating worker who disciplines herself to remain ever flexible, exercising self-mastery yet bound by the constraints of that same freedom,¹⁹⁰ hanging precariously, her identity suspended.

Conveying the complexity of Ageha's identity, however, Steyerl presents her not just as a subjugated, bound body, but as a dignified, nuanced figure in calm, conscious control of her own destiny. As Demos notes, notwithstanding her evident awareness of her work's potential as a both a form of degradation and a form of pleasure, Ageha emerges as an

unexpected heroine in the narrative,¹⁹¹ no matter how compromised the conditions in which she works may appear. Steyerl's defense of the degraded image in her defense of "poor images" elsewhere also suggests her defense in *Lovely Andrea* of traditionally degraded forms of labor. The extended, lyrical passages of Ageha, who, without even a trace of cynicism, meditatively and even joyfully spins around the axis of her suspension rope, neither seeking nor fleeing its center, embracing the freedom that binds her in irreconcilable polarity, suggest a tactic of resistance modelled on biopolitical strategies themselves—one that, as we have seen, Steyerl has discussed elsewhere: the rejection of subjectification in favor of self-objectification, of "becoming an object."

Indeed, Steyerl repeatedly argues that today, images operate less as representation than as free agents. For her, images are constitutive. They have the power to make their own worlds as well as to construct human ones. In her 2010 essay "A Thing Like You and Me," for example, Steyerl expresses an interest in an object-centered approach that unfreezes "the forces congealed within the trash of history" by re-creating people "as things mutually acting upon one another."¹⁹² For Steyerl, the "objective" or object-oriented perspective opens up the idea of emancipation in a new way. Referring to director Bruce LaBruce's queer porn film *Raspberry Reich*, Steyerl observes that its actors do not identify with heroes, but with their own images. "Because they love the pixel, not the hero. The hero is dead. Long live the thing."¹⁹³ If, as Demos proposes, Ageha emerges in *Lovely Andrea* as a heroic figure, and if, at the same time, as Bruce LaBruce would have it, "the hero is dead," "thingification" may promise, at least in Steyerl's vision, Ageha's liberation, the concretization of an increasingly abstracted human subject.

If regarding the subject or the body as a thing may lead to certain avenues of emancipation, Steyerl's 2012 essay "Cut! Reproduction and Recombination"¹⁹⁴ offers a historical note on the notion of the "cut" that is instructive in understanding the dynamics of abstraction and concretion that mark the fractal-recombinant universe in which the subjects in her work—like those in Gilligan's—operate. Debt and the cutting of the body were connected in the "twelve tables" of Roman law, she relates, permitting a debtor's body literally to be split into pieces among creditors. In this context, while "cut" refers to severing or dividing, it is also an economic term, referring also for example to budgetary cuts. At the same time, "cut" is a cinematic term, she notes: Cinema cuts bodies in space by framing them, disarticulating and rearticulating them in different form. Perhaps the time has come,

Steyerl proposes, to “cut” the individual, too, through processes of cinematic post-production, but this time with a new purpose: to do away with the individual, “as well as its identity and its unalienable rights to guilt and debt bondage.” But if the debt bondage Steyerl mentions in her essay parallels the rope bondage she investigates in *Lovely Andrea*—both forms of restraint cutting the body at multiple levels—the “cut” individual, a reassembled body-as-thing, also can be reconfigured through the process of cutting, she contends. In an April 2013 talk at New York’s New School, Steyerl asserted that while representation is still important—while the reading and interpretation of images still matters—it is also vital to pay attention to the way images now act as things in the real world. Once we understand that we live in a world consisting of “the afterlives of images,” she argued—a reality “imbued with the shrapnel of former images,” edited, Photoshopped, and “cobbled together from spam and scrap”—we also can recognize that reality is “post-produced,” scripted, manufactured. Affect itself is a stage-directed affair, a thoroughly constructed after-effect.¹⁹⁵ Thus, as she argues in “Cut!,” the subject can be edited, rewritten, rebuilt, and reborn in new form through cutting.¹⁹⁶ Even entire countries and populations, nations and groups “that have been cut and censored because they do not conform to ideas of economic viability and efficiency,” have the potential to be restored through editing processes, she suggests.¹⁹⁷ Surely it is no accident, then, that Ageha is presented in *Lovely Andrea* as both a bondage performer and a student of web design. As a rope-bondage entrepreneur, she designs herself, continually editing and re-editing her performance persona—one that makes an art of exploring contortions of the female body so extreme that that body appears reducible to mere bound parts—parts that are no longer perceptible as making up a coherent human whole. Akin to the cut-off, fractal-recombinant limbs, heads, and hands that float disembodied in the Spirit’s unbounded black grid in the penultimate scene of Gilligan’s *Popular Unrest*, Ageha’s body in parts is reassembled in various guises on her own web site, which she also designs, promoting herself through imaging techniques, editing and re-editing her persona using digital tools. Like Steyerl herself, Ageha wilfully appropriates her own images, using them to construct reality in reverse, as a back-formation.

Here, the work of contemporary video artist Ryan Trecartin offers a productive critical counterpoint to Steyerl’s. Trecartin employs nonlinear editing techniques to create fractured, disjointed, humanoid digital characters, often inserting himself into his narratives as a character in dialogue with beings whose identities are fluid and constantly changing,

their emotions often separate from their minds, their bodies separate from their affect. In Trecartin's video work *Ready*, the female character Twi-Key—her name derived, according to Trecartin, “from an editing term, ‘keying,’ which is used to abstract a visual structure to enable the compositing of space”¹⁹⁸—is colored entirely black in body and in dress. Played by actress Courtney Malick, Twi-Key is digitally manipulated by the artist, who projects images and text onto her. As critic Kareem Estefan observes, Twi-Key's blackness makes her into a visual “blank screen,” a feminized, racialized, effectively invisible figure that serves as the artist's ground: “Thus branded as a product of green-screen effects,” Estefan argues, “Twi-Key epitomizes the condition of the avatar. But here green is coded black: the composited character inhabits a racialized position of servitude, objectification, and reflectiveness.”¹⁹⁹

Estefan notes that Trecartin's focus on the digital manipulation of bodies by an artist who is visibly present as video editor suggests that the process of image production is a biopolitically informed one of consciously directing human evolution:

Technocratic liberal ideology is still haunted by the specter of eugenics. If humans have the capacity to forge other humans, in the virtual as in the material world, then surely biopolitical questions inflected with histories of racial and class oppression should precede celebrations of emancipation via technology. Put differently, who edits and who gets edited?²⁰⁰

The problem Estefan points to here in the context of Trecartin's work—of who edits and who gets edited—casts Steyerl's proposals surrounding “reverse Photoshopping” reality in a different light, raising the possibility that the faith she enthusiastically puts in technological fixes, or what Evgeny Morozov critically terms “technological solutionism,”²⁰¹ is too naive or utopian to offer truly encouraging prospects for political change. More seriously, Estefan's analysis can be mobilized to critique Steyerl's proposals as potentially complicit with biopower in that they seem to gloss over the problem any such “editing” technology raises of eugenics, the racism that historically has informed such efforts to “improve” biological entities, whether in nineteenth-century America, 1940s Nazi Germany, or contemporary genetic engineering. Notably, for Foucault, eugenics is actually central to biopower. Biopower is focused “on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than . . . impeding them, making them submit or destroying them,”²⁰² he writes. Correspondingly, as a biopolitical process, eugenics is at one level about productive improvements and “positive” choices in biological reproduction, exercise, eating, and so on,

relating individual lives and actions to the life and condition of the population as a whole. Yet, as we have seen, biopower is a power that has the capacity to make live *or* let die, and, as history has shown, the improvement of the self—or, at the level of populations, of a “race”—is also often linked directly to the degradation or death of others. This is the better-known, “negative” side of eugenics as a means of negotiating biological threat.²⁰³ In an unequal society, it is obvious that some people do and will continue to have better access than others to the digital editing tools that seem to promise self-improvement and self-redefinition. Steyerl’s proposal to edit reality using post-production methods could thus be conceived of not just as an inadequate technical fix poorly aimed at redirecting the abstracting, fracturing forces of semicapital toward liberatory ends; instead, it could be seen as even a dangerous one. Ultimately, and in any event, the technological will be only a supplement; it can never be a promising substitute for a social solution. Perhaps Ageha is not so liberated from the bonds of subjectification and objectification—not so in control of her image and her fate—as we might like to believe.

We can also relate an insight offered by Rodchenko himself into the subject-as-thing to Steyerl’s portrayal of Ageha. In pursuit of a definition of the self different from that of the traditional modern subject, Rodchenko observed critically the objectification of women in 1920s Paris, a city that he said was dominated by a “cult of woman as thing”; Rodchenko was thereby galvanized to seek to “to redefine both thing and person in their interrelationships.”²⁰⁴ This episode in Productivist history is undoubtedly not lost on Steyerl, a feminist artist who repeatedly cites the movement as inspiration for her desire to evade the “subjectifications” of traditional subjecthood and to create a new conception of the thing as a true “comrade”—a thing that shakes off, all at once, the status of the fetishized capitalist object-commodity and the object-subject distinction, and that restores the contexts and histories of objects that for too long have been obscured through capitalist processes of atomization. The final scenes of *Lovely Andrea* showing Ageha bound vertically in suspension ultimately suggest the artist’s tacit ambivalence. Elsewhere, Steyerl takes what could be read as a critical tone in discussing the bound female body *as thing*—“A thing is the ruin of a house in Gaza. A film reel lost or destroyed in civil war. A female body tied up with ropes, fixed in obscene positions”;²⁰⁵ here, we see that in Steyerl’s estimation, things do not as a rule live especially privileged lives, any more than individual human subjects do. Perhaps, then, the final frames of *Lovely Andrea* constitute less an endorsement of the particular

“thingification” of the female body bound in humiliating poses than an invitation to consider the political potential of rethinking the ossified subject-object binary and, in full recognition of the history of the objectification of women, look toward an alternative politics for things and persons alike.

If the history of capitalism is also a history of cuts to the body—the physical body, the body politic—that produce the subject as abstract, artificial, and alienated, broken into fractal-recombinant pieces, or violated and exploded, as in Gilligan’s *Popular Unrest*, Steyerl’s vision of “re-editing” reality suggests a new means of appropriating abstraction, pointing to a new way of cutting up and rearranging already-fractured human and social bodies. In this, she offers an object-centered political alternative to the form of resistance Gilligan proposes in *Popular Unrest* to biopolitical control, the bonded group’s staging of an affectively driven human strike. Yet Steyerl’s and Gilligan’s proposals have something in common in that both call for a redeployment of affect in the service of a different kind of economy—one not of threat, fear, and intensity, but of something more redemptive. For Steyerl, such an economy takes the form of “an affective and political constellation which does not even exist, and which is yet to come”²⁰⁶; in Gilligan’s devising, as we have seen, affect emerges as a means that might enable an overthrowing of capitalism itself in favor of a system based on solidarity rather than competition. For Gilligan and Steyerl, it seems, the task of art is to think such matters through and to offer up affectively charged proposals for political change.

¹⁰⁹ Franco Bifo Berardi, “Introduction,” *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press and e-flux journal, 2012), 10.

¹¹⁰ Sven Lütticken, quoted in Maria Lind, “Abstract Possible: The Trailer, 11 November 2010–12 January 2011,” exhibition text, Konsthall Malmö, <http://www.konsthall.malmo.se/o.o.i.s/4635/>.

¹¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, vol. 1, part III, chapter 10, section 1, “The Limits of the Working Day,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch10.htm/>.

¹¹² Hito Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty,” *A Prior* 15 (2007).

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *e-flux journal* 10 (November 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

¹¹⁵ Daniel Rourke, “Falling into the Digital Divide: Encounters with the Work of Hito Steyerl,” *Afterimage* 40, no. 5 (March 2013), 19–22.

¹¹⁶ Steyerl, “The Spam of the Earth” (note 44).

¹¹⁷ On the “age of Big Data,” see note 8.

¹¹⁸ Steyerl, “The Spam of the Earth” (note 44).

¹¹⁹ Maria Lind argues that withdrawal constitutes an important strand of contemporary social abstraction. See Maria Lind, ed., *Abstraction* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), Introduction, 11. See also Lind, “Abstract Possible: The Trailer” (note 110).

¹²⁰ Huberman writes: “Starting with Pop, artists took on the ‘phenomenon’ of information. . . . Suddenly, information—already and always everywhere, as Warhol pointed out—was everywhere. As of the early 1960s, Conceptual artists dug into its systems, its patterns, its brute force. Following Warhol, they were drawn to the raw blankness of information, which they saw as a powerful opponent to the tyranny of ‘content’: art matters because it is, not because it is *about* something. Moving beyond the Warholian sphere of celebrity and popular culture, however, these artists shifted toward Wittgensteinian philosophy and considered the fundamental rawness and blankness of language, perception and knowledge, and what it all had to do with art. Mel Bochner presented a space’s measurements; Ian Burn photocopied one hundred blank pages; Ed Ruscha catalogued every building on Sunset Strip; and On Kawara’s *One Million Years* literally refers to and encompasses all the information known to man. The ‘theme’ of information, consequently, soon found its way into curatorial projects, and exhibitions introduced the radical ways art aligned (and erased?) itself with the rawness and blankness of information, setting the stage for the looming epistemological inquisition of postmodernism.” Anthony Huberman, “I (not love) Information,” *Afterall* 16 (Autumn/Winter 2007), <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.16/i.not.love.information/>.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image” (note 114).

¹²⁴ Franco Bifo Berardi, *After the Future* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), 100–01.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Lind, ed., *Abstraction* (note 119), 19.

¹²⁷ Lind discusses several recent exhibitions and publications as partial evidence of abstraction's resurgence. Ibid.

¹²⁸ Maria Lind, "On Abstract Possible," *Abstract Possible*, <http://abstractpossible.org/2011/04/02/on-abstract-possible/>.

¹²⁹ Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image" (note 114).

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Here I draw on the renewed categories of abstraction established by Maria Lind in her recent symposium *Abstract Possible* and in her edited volume *Abstraction*; see Lind, ed., *Abstraction* (note 119), 11.

¹³³ Hito Steyerl, "Politics of Truth: Documentarism in the Art Field," *springerin*, March 2003, http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=1353&lang=en/.

¹³⁴ For an in-depth discussion of contemporary abstraction, see *Texte zur Kunst* 69 (March 2008), a special issue edited by Sven Lütticken, André Rottmann, and Stefanie Kleefeld, with contributions from Ina Blom, Sabeth Buchmann, Alice Creisher and Andreas Siekmann, Sebastian Egenhofer, Melanie Gilligan, Isabelle Graw, and Sven Lütticken.

¹³⁵ Hito Steyerl, *Lovely Andrea*, 2007; online at UbuWeb, http://www.ubu.com/film/steyerl_andrea.html/.

¹³⁶ Maria Walsh, "Melanie Gilligan: Popular Unrest, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 7 May to 20 June," *Art Monthly* 6, no. 10 (June 2010), 337.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Chisenhale Gallery, "Melanie Gilligan Discusses Popular Unrest (2010) with Marina Vishmidt 15/10/2010," sound recording, <https://soundcloud.com/chisenhale-gallery/melanie-gilligan-discusses/>. See also Gilligan, "Affect and Exchange" (note 96).

¹³⁹ Sven Lütticken, "Inside Abstraction," *e-flux journal* 38 (October 2012), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/inside-abstraction/#_ftn1/.

¹⁴⁰ Sven Lütticken, "Attending to Abstract Things," *New Left Review* 54 (November–December 2008), http://newleftreview.org/II/54/sven-lutticken-attending-to-abstract-things#_edn4/.

¹⁴¹ The society of control is also what Deleuze and colleague Félix Guattari referred to as one example of an "abstract machine," just as Foucauldian discipline was. See Nicholas

Thoburn's discussion of the concept of the abstract machine in chapter four of Nicholas Thoburn, *Deleuze, Marx, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁴² Lütticken, "Attending to Abstract Things" (note 140).

¹⁴³ Lütticken, "Inside Abstraction" (note 139).

¹⁴⁴ "By making the abstract concrete, art no longer retains any abstract quality, it merely announces a constant striving for a state of abstraction," Gillick writes. Quoted in Lütticken, "Inside Abstraction" (note 139).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Walsh, "Melanie Gilligan: Popular Unrest, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 7 May to 20 June" (note 136).

¹⁴⁷ Chisenhale Gallery, "Melanie Gilligan Discusses Popular Unrest (2010) with Marina Vishmidt 15/10/2010" (note 138).

¹⁴⁸ "Information," *Popular Unrest*, <http://popularunrest.org>.

¹⁴⁹ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (note 20), 66–67.

¹⁵⁰ See *Popular Unrest*, <http://popularunrest.org>. See also Chisenhale Gallery, "Melanie Gilligan, 7 May–20 June 2010," press release, <http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=105/>.

¹⁵¹ Suely Roelnik, cited in Hito Steyerl, "Truth Unmade: Productivism and Factography," March 2009, *eipcp* (*european institute for progressive cultural policies*), <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/steyerl/en/print/>. See also Lars Bang Larsen and Suely Rolnik, "On Lygia Clark's Structuring the Self," *Afterall* 15 (Spring/Summer 2007), <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.15/lygia.clarks structuring.self/>.

¹⁵² Berardi, "Biopolitics and Connective Mutation" (note 4); Berardi draws here on ideas from Foucault and Deleuze.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Massumi, "The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens" (note 1).

¹⁵⁶ Chisenhale Gallery, "Melanie Gilligan Discusses Popular Unrest (2010) with Marina Vishmidt 15/10/2010" (note 138).

¹⁵⁷ Marx, *Capital* (note 111).

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Keenan, “The Point Is to (Ex)Change It: Reading Capital Rhetorically,” in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 164–68; quoted from and discussed in Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 2007–2012, 3083–3084. Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009).

¹⁵⁹ Aleksandr Rodchenko, quoted in Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), “The Death of Painting,” *MoMA*, http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1998/rodchenko/texts/death_of_painting.html/.

¹⁶⁰ T. J. Demos, “Hito Steyerl’s Traveling Images,” in T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 88–89.

¹⁶¹ Pablo Lafuente, “For a Populist Cinema: On Hito Steyerl’s November and Lovely Andrea,” *Afterall* 19 (Autumn/Winter 2008), <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.19/populist.cinema.hito.steyerls.november.and.lovely/>.

¹⁶² Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty” (note 112).

¹⁶³ Brian Massumi, “Fear (The Spectrum Said),” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2005), 31–48.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty” (note 112).

¹⁶⁷ See “Hito Steyerl, interview at Documenta 12,” 2013, *dmovies.net*, video recording, <http://vimeo.com/68195540/>, and Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, “Hito Steyerl about *Red Alert*,” 2010, video recording, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILgZEHKNcc4/>.

¹⁶⁸ On the politics of intensity, see also Hito Steyerl, “Truth Unmade: Productivism and Factography,” *eipcp (european institute for progressive cultural policies)*, March 2009, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/steyerl/en/>.

¹⁶⁹ For an image of *Pay Attention Motherfucker*, 2006, see <http://www.clairefontaine.ws/works/22.html/>.

¹⁷⁰ Rehberg, “Claire Fontaine” (note 82).

¹⁷¹ According to Steyerl, *Red Alert* was “a necessary consequence of the bondage film *Lovely Andrea*.” *Red Alert* and *Lovely Andrea* debuted together at Documenta 12, in Kassel, Germany. See “Hito Steyerl, interview at Documenta 12” (note 167).

¹⁷² See T. J. Demos, “Life Full of Holes,” in Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl, eds., *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art* (New York: CCS Bard, 2008); see also Kirsty Bell, “Another Country,” *Frieze Magazine* no. 114 (April 2008), http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/another_country/.

¹⁷³ “Life in Film: Hito Steyerl,” *Frieze Magazine* no. 114 (April 2008), http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/hito_steyerl/.

¹⁷⁴ Andrea Wolf is also the subject of other works by Steyerl, most notably her 2004 documentary *November*, which chronicles the lives of Wolf and of her images.

¹⁷⁵ See Thomas Elsaesser's discussion of the feminist thread in Steyerl's *Lovely Andrea* in Thomas Elsaesser, “Thomas Elsaesser presents Hito Steyerl, *Lovely Andrea* (2007),” Thomas Elsaesser, December 1, 2013, http://www.thomas-elsaesser.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=91%3Aneuer-berliner-kunstverein&catid=39%3Ablog-category-01&Itemid=69&limitstart=1/.

¹⁷⁶ In a 1997 essay titled “Culture and Finance Capital,” Jameson linked late-twentieth-century processes of financialization to aesthetic and cultural forms, drawing on Giovanni Arrighi's book *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994) to build upon his own earlier work on postmodernity. Fredric Jameson, “Culture and Finance Capital,” in *The Cultural Turn* (note 54). See Maija Timonen's discussion of Jameson's essay in Maija Timonen, “The Operation Was a Success, But the Patient Died,” *Afterall* no. 29 (Spring 2012), 105–14.

¹⁷⁷ Nina Power, *One Dimensional Woman* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Roppongi is a district of Tokyo.

¹⁸¹ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

¹⁸² Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 33, 98, 135.

¹⁸³ Berardi, “Biopolitics and Connective Mutation” (note 4).

¹⁸⁴ Berardi, “Frail Psycho-sphere,” in *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (London: Minor Compositions, 2009), 104.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 101.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 102–03.

¹⁸⁷ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (note 20).

¹⁸⁸ Lazzarato, “The Misfortunes of the ‘Artistic Critique’ and of Cultural Employment” (note 77).

¹⁸⁹ “The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices,” Harvey adds. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁹⁰ Timonen, “The Operation Was a Success, But the Patient Died” (note 176).

¹⁹¹ T. J. Demos, “Hito Steyerl’s Traveling Images” (note 160), 87.

¹⁹² Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me” (note 86).

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Hito Steyerl, “Cut! Reproduction and Recombination,” in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press and e-flux journal, 2012), 176–90.

¹⁹⁵ Hito Steyerl, “Photography and Political Agency? With Victoria Hattam and Hito Steyerl” (note 108).

¹⁹⁶ And despite its newly artificial composition, Steyerl argues, this new object-being can “[open] itself up to inorganic flows of matter and energy.” Steyerl, “Cut! Reproduction and Recombination” (note 194).

¹⁹⁷ Here, we might note, Steyerl seems less interested in contrasting a putatively “natural” subject with this newly artificial one but in pointing out the fundamental artificiality of all modes of social construction. Steyerl, “Cut! Reproduction and Recombination” (note 194).

¹⁹⁸ Quoted in Kareem Estefan, “A Cute Idea,” *The New Inquiry*, February 7, 2014, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/a-cute-idea/>.

¹⁹⁹ Estefan, “A Cute Idea” (note 198).

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).

²⁰² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *The Will to Knowledge* (note 3), 136. Quoted and discussed in Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (note 158), Kindle locations 1834–1836, 3057.

²⁰³ Here, I am indebted to Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's analysis of eugenics and biopolitics in her book *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (note 158).

²⁰⁴ Sven Lütticken, “Art and Thingness: Part Two, Thingification,” *e-flux journal* 15 (April 2010), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-and-thingness-part-two-thingification/>, citing Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 217.

²⁰⁵ Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me” (note 86). My emphasis.

²⁰⁶ Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty” (note 112), 308.

4 **The Mutinous Subject: Melanie Gilligan's *Self-Capital* and Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall***

We have always lived off the splendor of the subject
and the poverty of the object.

—Jean Baudrillard²⁰⁷

We have been condemned to being designers of ourselves.

—Boris Groys²⁰⁸

In her video series *Self-Capital* (2009),²⁰⁹ made up of three episodes of around eight minutes each, Melanie Gilligan examines connections between the collective “body” of capitalism and its isolated, precarious, overstimulated subjects. The protagonist of the story—a thirty-something woman named “Global Economy”—is a psychiatric patient undergoing treatment for what one analyst describes as “severe post-traumatic stress” suffered after “a complete meltdown.” This patient suggests a manic depressive, personifying the global socioeconomic body while manifesting its pathologies at the level of the individual. Amassing and compressing capitalism’s demands and contradictions, she appears alternately energetic and spent, pleasure-loving and indifferent, exhilarated and overwhelmed, experiencing her desires and anxieties in affective and corporeal registers, pulled among these conditions in whiplash oscillation.

Global Economy personifies both the subject of capital and global capital itself as agents that exhibit subject-like qualities. She also embodies the neoliberal subject, I argue, as her own form of capital. Gilligan explores these layers of allegory in a film that draws subparallels between the crises of subjectivity neoliberal capitalism gives rise to and the economic crises it also produces. In contrast, Hito Steyerl’s video series *In Free Fall*—which also dates from 2009, is also composed of three parts, and also addresses economic devastation in the aftermath of the 2008 crash—resolutely turns its back on the subject, focusing instead on crises of the object. The life cycle of a Boeing 707 jet is the non-human “subject” of Steyerl’s work, an anti-heroic “object biography” that explicitly takes as its point of departure Russian avant-garde poet Sergei Tretyakov’s 1929 essay “The Biography of the

Object,” which argues that the life and death of a thing tells us more about social relations than the biography of an individual. Here Steyerl similarly engages, I argue, with the problem of troubled neoliberal subjectivity, albeit using very different means: by questioning the subject-object distinction and by inquiring into the nature of the thing as an active agent with an identity and a corporeality of its own. Both artists’ works suggest that the waning of today’s particular neoliberal subjectivity in a biopolitical sphere is both a necessity and an inevitability.

Self-Capital and *In Free Fall* were both made in 2009, just after the global economy crashed, putting free-market capitalism under a cloud. Although that crash was hailed as a crisis, it nonetheless represented a culmination of decades of regulatory failures in the neoliberal global economy and, correspondingly, of widespread abuse and corruption. As we saw in chapter two, the post-World War II economy that led to the crash is marked by increasing precarity; it is also marked by the collapse of pensions and other socioeconomic safety nets. In 2008, when the financial system collapsed, a new phase of economic depression set in, accompanied by a plunging stock market and heavy job losses. Global Economy inhabits and embodies a world of post-financial crash anxiety, her individual depression mirroring that of the larger economic sphere. Whereas Gilligan’s prescient four-part 2008 video series *Crisis in the Credit System* was set immediately in the milieu of the investment banking industry, its characters participating in corporate retreats and negotiating deals in bank offices,²¹⁰ the setting of *Self-Capital* is instead the macrocosm of the global economy itself, anthropomorphized as the microcosm of the precarious worker.

Neatly alluding to the flexibility the precarious worker must demonstrate in today’s labor market, Gilligan cast a single actress, Penelope McGhie, to play all of *Self-Capital*’s roles: patient, bookstore cashier, receptionist, and two psychoanalysts. In the first episode, we learn that Global Economy, who is currently unemployed, is worried about her state pension and is cracking under the pressure to continually solicit new jobs. Her nervous state of mind appears to be at least partly the product of a lifetime spent negotiating the insecurities of being an intermittent worker in an uncertain economy. “What is the body saying?,” her analyst asks. Wearily, Economy replies, “I don’t want to play the jobs game anymore. . . . You just have to play the jobs game.” Suddenly anguished, she becomes tense and fidgety and enters a paranoid, hallucinatory state, imagining she is being persecuted by an invisible army of bugs. “The bugs take hold of the nerves inside me,” she declares. “The

bugs start above my lungs and pull and pull until the nerve ends extend outside—out through the corridors of my body, into the outside, where the air can burn them!” Her delusions give oneiric, horror-story form to her condition of exhaustion, fear, and hysteria, and to her frayed nerves.

Episode 2 includes a flashback scene showing what Global Economy’s life was like “when things were good.” Chipper and well groomed, she is in a bookstore, browsing at a table; she picks up a finance title that seems to interest her. After reading a sentence or two, she looks up and repeats out loud what she has just read: “Industry clusters. Creative economy. Hmm. Chamber of commerce. Hmm.” She smiles and nods approvingly. Soon she is savoring the words, shaping them sensually in her mouth, smacking her lips in a virtuoso display of capitalist libido, as if relishing a series of increasingly tasty morsels:

Comm . . . Commm . . . mmm! Comm . . . erce. Commm . . . MMM.
Commmercial. mmm! mmm! Commercial Commercial. Mmm. Real. Reeceal.
MMM. Real estate. Mmmmm! Emmm . . . Emmmmmerging. Emerging
markets! Emerging markets. Emploi emplah emmm mmm! EmpLOYEES!
Employees! My my migrant workers. MMMM!! Mmm! Migrant workers.
Yeah! I want workers. I want workers!! Mmmmm!!

The almost pornographic intensity of her encounter with these seductive phrases is short lived. Suddenly Gilligan cuts to a scene showing what Economy’s life was like “when the crisis started.” Economy is still tasting words in the bookstore, but the words are now bitter. Frowning, she spits them out, choking on them and eventually retching:

Luh luh lay lay LABOR. LABOR. Casual. CA CA CA CA CA CA. Casual
labor. Contra contra contra ooh oh ooh contract workers. Wuh . . . urr . . .
kers. Wo woo wor workers. Ers err err uh hh. Way way wages. Why wages?
What wages? Bleagh hh!

She vomits off camera, and next we see her wiping her mouth and exiting a women’s bathroom in the bookstore lobby. In this scene, Global Economy consumes the words of capital like unnatural substances; their sounds take on an abstract, formal quality, affecting her viscerally, infiltrating her at psychic and bodily levels. The first words are like sugar, evoking growth, profit, and spectacle, and she delights in them. Yet, Gilligan seems to imply, her desire to taste, to make meaning, to comprehend, and even embody the concepts these words refer to—if not erotically, then almost innocently, like a baby biting an object—comes at great cost. Global Economy seeks satisfaction in the system of relations the words seem

to promise, yet they are ultimately arbitrary, abstract, and alien. The adult trying to bite the abstractions of capital is increasingly frustrated. When finally she encounters those that evoke capitalism's human cost, she gags; she cannot stomach them. Global Economy is a figure who has both known the pleasures of capitalism and been crushed by it.

Soon Global Economy is back on her feet and in consumer mode, buying books, DVDs, and CDs at the bookstore cash register. Addressing the cashier, she presents herself as her own capital—self-capital—asking if she can pay not by card but by herself: “by me.” The cashier is initially confused but quickly agrees to the scheme, gamely offering her digital scanner to scan Economy's hand as payment. An extended flurry of buying and selling ensues, accompanied by Monty Python-esque banter. At one point, the cashier grabs Economy's entire arm, pulling it toward her. “Mine!,” she declares. “Give it back!,” Economy cries. “It's not yours!,” the cashier retorts. “Yes. it is!” Here, Economy's body emerges as both the subject's private property—an entity owned by and intrinsic to her unique, entrepreneurial self—and splintered into discrete pieces, like so many data points or commodities (a scanned hand, an exchanged arm), all for sale just as the CDs, books, and DVDs she purchases are.

Gilligan then leads us into a rapid-fire discussion of the commodity's desires: “It says thank you,” the cashier tells Economy. “It says eat me. It says spend me. It says it's angry. It's still thinking. It feels rejected and unattractive.” The commodity also emerges as a loving and beloved subject: “I love it,” Economy says, wistfully. “It misses you. Hold it!,” the cashier advises. “I love it,” Economy repeats. “Don't you?” But the price of all this consumer desire becomes apparent as they conclude their exchange: labor, reproduction, and the gradual attenuation of the body. “So now, you must work,” the cashier tells Economy. “Then you eat. Then you sleep. Then you work.” Then you must reproduce, she tells Economy, and then do it again. “But get paid less.” The frenzy has ended, and Economy looks disappointed but unsurprised. As her own capital—“human capital”—her value depreciates, she readily admits.

The title of Gilligan's series, *Self-Capital*, draws our attention immediately to the ways the subject of capital—the “self”—is shaped by economic exigencies, suggesting neoliberalism's “privatization” of the individual. Indeed, the title evokes Foucault's argument in *The Birth of Biopolitics* that although neoliberalism is often understood as marking a return to *homo economicus*, or economic man, *homo economicus* in his biopolitical guise has undergone a

profound transformation. Whereas in his classical incarnation he was a partner of exchange in an economy built around the problem of mutual needs, in his neoliberal form he is something very different: his own “permanent and multiple enterprise,” an “entrepreneur of himself.”²¹¹ Foucault argues:

In neo-liberalism—and it does not hide this; it proclaims it—there is also a theory of *homo œconomicus*, but he is not at all a partner of exchange. *Homo œconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. This is true to the extent that, in practice, the stake in all neo-liberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo œconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo œconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings.²¹²

The neoliberal *homo œconomicus* is no longer the divided subject who is both consumer and producer. Instead, Foucault argues, he is himself a form of capital, his own capital²¹³—a notion today thoroughly normalized, we might further note, in the everyday phrases “human resources” and “human capital.” As capital, he is an “ability-machine,” one that cannot be wrested from the body that bears and constitutes it.²¹⁴ Maurizio Lazzarato argues that Foucault’s concept of the “entrepreneur of the self” helps us understand the “positive” or productive aspect of neoliberal capitalism as what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a “machine of subjectivation.”²¹⁵ The neoliberal subject must now continually cultivate its “self” as capital, overseeing its own education, growth, and accumulation and ensuring constant self-improvement. “This is achieved,” Lazzarato writes, “by managing all its relationships, choices, behaviours according to the logic of a costs/investment ratio and in line with the law of supply and demand. . . . Individuals are expected to deliver not the productivity of labor, but the profitability of a capital investment (of their own capital, a capital that is inseparable from their own selves).”²¹⁶

The neoliberal imperative to be entrepreneur of oneself exerts pressure on the subject to engage in what is popularly called “personal branding,” which for more and more people today has become an earnest and necessary pursuit, emerging alongside new expectations concerning the design of the body and the self. Boris Groys argues in his 2008 essay “The Obligation to Self-Design” that today we are all forced to be designers of ourselves; design has become so total that there is no longer any possibility of an outside perspective on it. Design has also become so thoroughly politicized that it has assumed the function of religion, he contends. As he puts it: “Design has transformed the whole of social

space into an exhibition space for an absent divine visitor, in which individuals appear both as artists and as self-produced works of art.”²¹⁷ (Groys’s image of individuals as self-produced works of art evokes the scene in Gilligan’s *Popular Unrest* in which, as we saw in chapter two, the Spirit—a quasi-divine entity—is said by one scientist in the story to be a “medium” that creates its subjects as “unique works of art.”) In his essay, Groys critiques Adolf Loos’s well-known 1908 text “Ornament and Crime,” in which Loos anticipated an ethically and aesthetically pure white city of the future, a heavenly Zion; Groys argues that in the city Loos envisions everyone would effectively be his own self-designer, “the author of his own corpse.” Loos’s projection, Groys contends, has now been realized, even proving irreversible, for today, “every citizen of the contemporary world has to take ethical, aesthetic, and political responsibility for his or her self-design.”²¹⁸

The neoliberal subject who in Foucault’s analysis is his own “permanent and multiple enterprise” is thus connected to a condition we have similarly seen Groys outline in his 2004 essay “Art in the Age of Biopolitics,” which I discussed in the introduction to this study—namely, that in the biopolitical era, life is so artificially produced that the difference between the living and the artificial has become exclusively a narrative difference. Foucault asserts that the neoliberal subject is forced to cultivate himself as his own enterprise, and Groys argues in his later essay that we are now “condemned to being designers of ourselves”; if, as Groys also argues in the earlier text, life today is constituted exclusively through narrative and documentation, it is inevitable that self-design—which is achieved through self-narration and self-documentation—has become “a question no one can escape anymore,” as Groys laments.²¹⁹ Self-design emerges, then, as a fundamental aspect of self-entrepreneurship.

Self-design is a crucial component of the contemporary “political economy of design” Hal Foster describes—a culture in which marketing, the branding of identity, and the spectacularization of commodities create an almost seamless loop of production and consumption. Foster argues that the postmodern “constructed subject” in this economy has now become, largely, the “designed subject” of consumerism and of an increasingly technologized capitalist sphere in which “the product in question is your home or business, your sagging face (designer surgery), or your lagging personality (designer drugs), your historical memory (designer museums), or your DNA future (designer children).”²²⁰

The neoliberal subject as a self-designed product, or what Gilligan’s *Global Economy* here embodies as “self-capital,” adds dimension to Hito Steyerl’s “strike worker,”

a figure I explored in chapter two—the freelancer, the economically insecure worker who enjoys negative freedoms, or “freedom from everything.” As I discussed in chapter three, Asagi Ageha, the bondage-industry freelance performer and student of web design in Steyerl’s *Lovely Andrea*, emerges as a precarious, self-designed, self-branding, self-promoting entrepreneurial subject, “flexible” at literal and metaphorical levels. In Gilligan’s *Popular Unrest*, as we also saw in chapter two, a poster on the wall of a government office showing a corpse lying on a morgue cart with an ID tag dangling from its foot addresses its reader as a “life business”: “The first step to a profitable life-business: *Know your expiry date.*” The profitable life-business that is one and the same as the subject himself here is equivalent to Foucault’s neoliberal entrepreneur of himself, the subject who is “his own capital.” The limit of the successful life business, Gilligan’s poster suggests, is the same as that of the economically productive lifespan of the subject who is the bearer of it. This is how the Spirit of *Popular Unrest* shapes its subjects: as capitalist instruments much like Foucault’s “ability machine,” machines that are inseparable from them as individuals—not just individual bodies as labor power, but also individual affects, intellects, and emotions. Foucault’s entrepreneur of the self is evoked negatively in *Self-Capital*, which, in the figure of Global Economy—a faltering, collapsing self-entrepreneur who longs to opt out of “the jobs game”—proposes that the burdens of self-entrepreneurship have exceeded the limits of human psychic capacity, threatening to dissolve the nervous, exhausted subject, a prospect that *Self-Capital* suggests is at once terrifying and promising.

The alienated labor of the biopolitical “self” enslaved to capital as its own commodity is evoked from a different angle in Claire Fontaine’s neon-sign installation piece *ARBEIT MACHT KAPITAL* (2004),²²¹ whose title can be read as a play on words reading either “work, power, capital,” “work produces capital,” or “work *makes you* capital,” all referring to the German phrase *Arbeit macht frei*—“Work makes you free”—that became the cynical Nazi slogan placed above the gates to Adolf Hitler’s concentration camps during World War II. Here, as in Steyerl’s and Gilligan’s works, the notion that freedom is bondage as well as that the freedom-bondage dialectic is intrinsic to capitalism are suggested, as is the untenability of the subject position; as we have seen, Claire Fontaine seeks to eradicate this subject position by means of moving toward something akin to Agamben’s “whatever singularity,” whereas Steyerl and Gilligan propose different exit routes.

The central character of *Self-Capital*, Global Economy, is as enslaved to time as she is

to capital, nicely personifying Marx's characterization of "economy" in the *Grundrisse*: "Economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself."²²² As a precarious, casual worker, she is subject to the speeding up of time and the accelerating pace of the infosphere that Franco "Bifo" Berardi associates with the flexibilization of work. In this atmosphere, human time is subjugated "to the regime of absolute and uninterrupted exploitation of the neurotelematic network."²²³ The "fractalization of working and existential time" and of social insecurity translate into "fear, solitude, and terror" in the contemporary psychosphere of biopolitics, he argues—as we saw in earlier chapters—in which the subject has been transformed by decades of techno-mediated overstimulation of the brain and nervous system at the same time it has had to cope with a speeding up and compressing of time in which to assimilate such stimuli. According to Berardi, intensity of stimulation and reduced response times have led to a reduction of the capacity for empathy. Berardi further argues that the biopolitical subject's lack of empathy, perpetual nervous overstimulation, and crises of solitude are dimensions of a psychopathology of the new millennium that is becoming epidemic.²²⁴ He writes:

It is within the psychosphere that the effects of twenty years of info-invasion, nervous overload, mass psychopharmacology, sedatives, stimulants and euphoric substances, of fractalization of working and existential time, of social insecurity which translates in fear, solitude and terror manifest themselves. Time-based psychobombs are exploding in the interconnected global mind. The effect is unpredictable.²²⁵

In her anxious, frightened, overstimulated state, Gilligan's Global Economy suggests just such a psychopathology. As a representative of both the shattered neoliberal subject and the crumbling post-crash global financial system, she is like the "time-based psychobomb" Berardi conjures up—one that seems ready to detonate at an intersubjective level.²²⁶

At the end of the first episode of *Self-Capital*, we see Economy suddenly alone in a vast, empty theater, standing, gripping the back of a folding seat. "Push! Health!" she cries in anguish, breathing rapidly and rhythmically, as if trying with all her might to give birth to a new resolve, even a new subjectivity that will allow her to reconcile the pressures that have ravaged her. Groaning, she continues: "The body was in very good shape! But it ran itself down—down! It pushed things too far! Now the body must re-regulate itself! Reproduce its productive energies . . . better!" Her words suggest a kind of self-flagellating exercise, as if she is attempting to batter herself into recommitting to a new program of self-improvement.

Horror-movie-style sound effects begin distort her shouts as she continues, with steely resolve: “There were no limits! Then . . . we found limits! Now we will juggle the limits! Unlimited JUGGLING of limits!” This reference to an economic system pushing up against human limits evokes the “maximization” ethos of another of Gilligan’s characters, the all-powerful Spirit of *Popular Unrest*, which stands in stark contrast to Global Economy’s own mentally ill, ineffectual persona. Articulating her fear, rage, and sense of guilt, Global Economy concludes with a self-punishing rant: “You cannot have your redundancy package! Redundancy package! Responsible for health! You are responsible! You cannot have your pension! You don’t have a job!” This is the tirade of a human enterprise pushed to its very limits. But although she may exhibit the psychopathology Berardi describes, *Self-Capital* proposes that hers is yet a psychopathology of the sane, as it were—a “normal” reaction to pathological socioeconomic conditions to which no healthful adaptation is possible. Indeed, to the neoliberal subject-viewer of Gilligan’s film, Economy’s mourning of her own instrumentalization, her lack of security and connection to any protective social group or community, her lonely sense of sole responsibility for herself, and her current joblessness, with its implication of a dim economic future, will be undoubtedly all too viscerally familiar.

Perhaps mental breakdown is ever more common during economic bad times. But whereas, in another arena, the nearly contemporaneous multipart video work *The Financial Crisis* (2009) by Danish art collective SUPERFLEX (Jakob Fenger, Rasmus Nielsen, and Bjornstjerne Christiansen) presents a series of hypnotic psychotherapy sessions in which analysands experience the financial crisis as a personal, psychotic nightmare of greed, speculation, fear, frustration, and downfall, Economy’s analysis sessions in *Self-Capital* imply that the neoliberal subject, as her own autonomous, self-responsible mobile enterprise, also tends to be held personally accountable for such breakdowns, as well as, conversely, for her own psychological well-being. It also provides a sketch of the support and encouragement this subject receives from the psychiatric industry, at least in the case of the elite. Gilligan shows us a subject thus increasingly depoliticized, pathologized, and individuated, the responsibility for social ills thrust upon her, her own desires and political energies defused, neutralized. Guattari, a philosopher who was himself a psychotherapist, famously proclaimed that psychoanalysis is “the best capitalist drug,” after all, because it serves to contain libidinal energies that might otherwise manifest themselves collectively, limiting the potentially disruptive effects of desire by staging it—visualizing it, one might say—as a conflict internal

to the individual, stemming from and played out within the nuclear family and the domestic sphere.²²⁷ Gilligan thus articulates a mutilating critique in *Self-Capital* of psychoanalysis and the politics of therapy as techniques of biopower complicit with neoliberal capitalism's individuation of the subject, actively constituting analysands as autonomous enterprises of the self, cut off from collective political action.

Not all neoliberal subjects have access to psychoanalysis, needless to say, and many turn to other sources of solace and self-cultivation. As we have seen, Berardi observes that the psychologically fragile subjects of the biopolitical psychosphere are adapting to current political conditions in large numbers by turning to "mass psycho-pharmacology, sedatives, stimulants and euphoric substances," not only in pursuit of relief from the pressures of perpetual speed, tension, and excitation, but also for help sustaining the unrelenting intensity required of them in daily life. But while formal psychiatric treatment and self-medication alike make use of physiologically altering drugs, treatment for mental health problems increasingly also includes various forms of body work aimed at enhancing the "body-mind connection," and this is the type of treatment Global Economy's analysts pursue in *Self-Capital*. In this, as curators Aileen Burns and Alex Snukal note in a statement accompanying an exhibition of Gilligan's work, *Self-Capital* suggests the ways psychological subjects are increasingly reduced to and treated at the level of their bodily materiality under capitalism.²²⁸ In the first episode, an analyst said to be employing unorthodox body-oriented techniques hypnotizes Economy, speaking to her in rhythmic verse and encouraging her to attune herself to the somatic:

I am speaking, Economy; you are lying back and relaxing. No need to think of anything, or to think of anything you might be thinking of, such as the changing focus of your eyes, certain phenomena of life. Your mind doesn't need to do anything, Economy.

The analyst's words are familiar to us as the language of forms of bodywork such as yoga and of related practices such as mindfulness meditation. But Gilligan defamiliarizes this discourse, and the analyst's initially soothing verse becomes increasingly strange. Noting Economy's fear and nervous fatigue, the analyst first encourages the patient to free herself from focusing on the life-or-death problems inherent to her economically insecure position by thinking of herself as "an animal whose attention is drawn away from the need to survive." Gradually she begins to encourage Economy to self-regulate, reminding her of her

duties as a self-sustaining subject, as self-capital: Economy may be better able to move her body if she knows “how to go to work the way a busy bee knows how to be, in an advanced society,” the analyst gently suggests, and if she can learn to “recalibrate” her emotions “like inner Corvette”; here, the analyst implicitly evokes Foucault’s vision of the neoliberal subject as a machine. As if to comfort her patient, the analyst cheerily observes that even “serious businessmen”—the most visible entrepreneurs of the self, we might note—“recognize that emotions are important.”

As the second episode opens, we see Economy moving about alone in the large, dimly lit therapy room doggedly yet enthusiastically doing audible breathing exercises, deep stretches, and various other new-age-style calisthenics. The analyst’s disembodied voice encourages her in this work:

Good, Economy, We’re getting to a much deeper place already. Now remember: When I’m speaking, you do not have to listen with your mind, because your body will always be listening and responding. And during our discussion, we will speak to your body, not your mind. The body is knowledgeable. Your mind may think it knows the answers, but it is too concerned with knowing. On the other hand, the body will know, and will explain exactly what is happening without having to think at all. Listen to the body.

Seemingly encouraged by these words, and obviously sincerely invested in her efforts, Economy is reinvigorated, infusing her movements with fresh energy, shouting and gesticulating rhythmically, with increasing abandon, proud of her efforts.

The rising popularity of health improvement and health maintenance regimes in the form of yoga, t’ai chi, meditation, and so on correspond to the twentieth-century rise and twenty-first-century intensification of what medical historian David Armstrong calls, in a Foucault-inspired analysis, “surveillance medicine,” a form of medicine, health care, and lifestyle management that, he argues, plays an important role in the constitution of contemporary identity. Whereas throughout the nineteenth century medicine was centered around hospital-based care focused on specific pathologies, in the early twentieth century, rather than being concerned only with illness, medicine became concerned with problematizing the normal, thereby bringing everyone into its field of vision.²²⁹ Armstrong writes:

Hospital Medicine was only concerned with the ill patient in whom a lesion might be identified, but a cardinal feature of Surveillance Medicine is its

targeting of everyone. Surveillance Medicine requires the dissolution of the distinct clinical categories of healthy and ill as it attempts to bring everyone within its network of visibility. Therefore one of the earliest expressions of Surveillance Medicine—and a vital precondition for its continuing proliferation—was the problematisation of the normal.²³⁰

What is at stake in this new paradigm, Armstrong contends, “is less illness *per se* but the semi-pathological pre-illness at-risk state.” Whereas in hospital medicine each illness was the object and endpoint of clinical attention, he argues, in surveillance medicine illnesses are merely nodal points in an infinite network of “health status,” which makes up the field of visibility and is continually monitored.²³¹ Thus surveillance medicine, seeking to identify precursors of future illness, exits the three-dimensional space of the individual sick patient, moving to a more diffuse, extra-corporal space, one that is also four-dimensional in that it is no longer temporally delimited. This new space of illness is, at least in part, the community, where public health initiatives, surveys, screenings, health education strategies, and so on are increasingly preoccupied with the attitudes and practices that inform the “lifestyle” of the populace. This new space of illness is also a psychosocial one, in which the question of specific mental illnesses becomes less of a concern than the general mental health of the populace, of the social body: thus there is “a shift in the psychiatric/medical gaze from the binary problem of insanity/sanity to the generalised population problems of the neuroses (which affect everyone).”²³² Note that Armstrong emphasizes surveillance medicine as a power that works through processes of making-visible: making the subject visible, but also, and more importantly in its implications for biopower, making the entire network of subjects and bodies—the population—visible.

As Berardi reminds us, biopower is also that which brings life into the realm of calculus. Thus, as Armstrong notes, in the realm of surveillance medicine—which, although Armstrong does not use the term, we may understand as a technique of biopower—signs, symptoms, and actual illnesses are of interest primarily inasmuch as they are risk factors based on which the probability of future illness can be calculated. Maria Mühle points out that Foucault introduced the concept of biopolitics to describe an ascendant power that takes life as its object, whereas the old sovereign power took as its object the juridical subject and the more recent disciplinary power takes as its object the individual. As Mühle demonstrates, one aspect specific to biopolitical techniques is that, unlike disciplinary and sovereign techniques of power, they are non-repressive and “positive,” and that rather than

acting externally upon their object, biopolitical techniques are intrinsic to it. If biopower increases, protects, and regulates life—“makes live”—Mühle notes, it does so “by infiltrating the processes of life (instead of repressing or suppressing them) in order to regulate them from the inside.”²³³ The surveillance medicine Armstrong describes can be conceived of, then, one might conclude, as a biopolitical technique that does not only “police” the population through monitoring and direct intervention but also infiltrates the subject, regulating him or her from within. Biopower’s protective, future-oriented impulse informs this new, more diffuse form of medicine, a form that hinges upon, as Armstrong shows us, the problem of *risk*, a “novel and pivotal medical concept.”²³⁴

The body work *Global Economy* engages in so vigorously and dutifully in Gilligan’s film thus becomes recognizable as a popular form of anticipatory, preventive self-care the neoliberal subject learns to perform in order to optimize his or her own health within biopower’s field of visibility. As the object and subject of surveillance medicine, *Global Economy* manifests as what Armstrong calls a temporalized “risky self,” one whose normality, like the rest of her existence, is always cast as precarious, and one whose future mental and physical health must be managed as a calculable entity through maintenance and improvement through the control of current behaviors and attitudes. *Self-Capital* further suggests that the goal of *Global Economy*’s work is the cultivation and maximization of herself as a Foucauldian “ability machine”—that is, the pursuit of a more perfect continuing and future human enterprise that must remain economically productive. As in the real-world global economy, *Global Economy* hedges and speculates with her own capital.

Geographer David Harvey remarks in his essay “The Body as Accumulation Strategy” that capitalism defines sickness as the inability to work.²³⁵ Taking Harvey’s observation as a point of departure, philosopher Lauren Berlant demonstrates that medicine today is often concerned less with healing and health than it is with ensuring that the subject remains economically viable—with “treading water, maintaining income and momentum.”²³⁶ In caring for ourselves, we often make sacrifices in certain health domains in favor of other domains, frequently economic ones, managing our energies, affective labor, and mood in order to keep working. Similarly, Berlant contends, the familiar arguments in favor of exercise and healthful eating are often less about cultivating better health than they are about having the energy to be “more productive.” Such arguments are often compelling to the individual insofar as they promise personal satisfaction and pleasure as well as economic

gain, yet they also serve biopower, which, as we have seen, functions as a “positive,” productive power. Berlant argues that such conditions, while not thoroughly determining, contribute significantly to shaping the subject. “The project of being reliable to the economic system that ostensibly supports you (while you’re supporting it),” Berlant writes, “choreographs not only your skills but your physical, cognitive, and emotional energy.” She continues:

It shapes how you imagine the everyday life of competence, satisfaction, and happiness. The conditions of the reproduction of life shape fantasy itself: one’s optimism for living, one’s pragmatism about what it takes, and what it would mean not to be sapped by all that. I’m not saying that we are determined by the scene of labor, or only miserable in it—not at all—but rather that our bodily lives are shaped pretty significantly by its demands.²³⁷

Gilligan’s work narrativizes the subject Berlant describes, ultimately suggesting that the relentlessly visualized self-as-capital is both exhausting and exhausted as a paradigm. The individual—or, more precisely, neoliberal capitalism’s particular form of embodied subjectivation—is dead, and we need something new.

* * *

Self-Capital employs a narrative that radically subjectivizes capitalism itself, focusing on a crashing precarious worker as allegory for both an untenable form of neoliberal subjectivity and a crumbling world economic system. Hito Steyerl’s nearly contemporaneous video series *In Free Fall*, made in the same year, 2009, in contrast, problematizes subjectivation by turning its attention instead to a crashing object. Although they approach it very differently, I argue that Steyerl and Gilligan address very much the same problem in these two video works: how to grapple with increasingly oppressive conditions of biopolitical subjecthood. Steyerl’s project is an inquiry into the object’s agency and life, into the object as material locus that, for her, condenses and organizes affects, emotions, events, histories—in other words, a vast range of social forces. By questioning the traditional subject-object distinction—between the divided neoliberal subject and the object typically supposed to be inert, lifeless—Steyerl proposes an alternative to heroic narratives of the subject.

Here, Steyerl’s allegory for the plummeting markets of the 2008 financial crisis is a crashing Boeing 707 airliner, 4X-JYI that becomes *vis vitae* itself, animating everything and

everyone around it in the film. *In Free Fall* traces the “biography” of this object, whose rapid downward descent, complete with passengers, crew, and objects flying about in a chaotic, panicked cabin, opens the first episode, *After the Crash*, on a note of hang-on-to-your-hats, Hollywood-style intensity. A frantic montage of planes falling and crashing quickly gives way to a scene of a Mojave desert junkyard—or, as Steyerl calls it, a “graveyard”²³⁸—full of airplanes in various states of repair. The junkyard’s corpulent, whiskered, wheelchair-bound owner, Mike Potter, who is said to have been one of first pilots for TWA (Trans World Airlines), describes his business to Steyerl, telling us of the life of these grounded planes, which, he says, are often stored there during economic downturns, when it is unprofitable to operate them. Older planes are dismantled and stripped for parts, which in turn are sold secondhand or scrapped altogether. The Mojave is near Hollywood, and Potter sometimes rents airplanes to be crashed or blown up in movies. We also learn that Potter’s junkyard was the setting for the final frames of the popular 1994 Hollywood film *Speed*,²³⁹ starring Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves: a frantic, fast-paced scene in which a bus collides with 4X-JYI, the same airliner that Steyerl makes protagonist of her object biography. Steyerl repeats this scene throughout her own film. Constantly interrupting her interview with Potter, she cuts rapidly among visual and conceptual references ranging from the various qualities and uses of aluminum scrap to Hollywood film plots. A portable DVD player set in the desert sand against the backdrop of the junkyard’s wreckage broadcasts a rapid montage of various illustrative clips—including one from a documentary about aluminum recycling, set to a Michael Jackson tune, in which melted aluminum recycled from derelict airliners is poured into molds to manufacture DVDs—thereby introducing a multitude of alternative, often conflicting perspectives as she recites, flatly but almost poetically, a text about recycling and the persistence of matter.

Potter is among the few people enjoying financial gain from the economic downturn, but, like Gilligan’s *Self-Capital*, Steyerl’s *In Free Fall* also explores the negative economic consequences of the 2008 financial crisis for precarious workers. In *Crash*, the second episode, we learn that, while he was helping Steyerl produce her film, cameraman Kevan Jenson’s own economic situation was suffering as a result of the financial crash; as Steyerl notes in a short video interview about the making of *In Free Fall*, his problems resonated with the subject matter of the film, and while they were shooting, he agreed to discuss them on camera in interviews with her.²⁴⁰ In the film, Jenson speaks of the declining need for

freelancers with his skills and of the repossession of his lovingly constructed house. Digital software was leading to increasing film piracy and decreasing profits for Hollywood film studios around the time of the crash, he notes; these conditions exacerbated his already insecure job situation as a precarious contract worker. Critic Rosanne Altstatt indirectly conjures up Berardi's descriptions of the fractalized sphere of flexible labor in comparing Jenson to the smashed, fractured, recycled airplane, forced to "recycle" himself as a worker, to regroup and re-skill.²⁴¹

Jenson's story is interwoven with the story of 4X-JYI, told in the third episode, *Before the Crash*, by Israeli artist Imri Kahn, playing the role of an aviation expert. This story progresses from the 1929 Wall Street crash to the acquisition of TWA by Howard Hughes, who was also a Hollywood film director and producer, to the death of several pilots during the making of Hughes's 1929 film *Hell's Angels*, to Israeli military's use of some of TWA's Boeing jets, including a different 707 model, which it flies in a 1976 rescue operation after Palestinian terrorists hijack an Air France flight in Entebbe; Steyerl also shows us clips from various German hijacking films inspired by the Entebbe attempt. We learn that the Entebbe rescue plane later served as the official jet of the president of Israel and then as a museum movie theater. By the end of this episode, we are left with a vertiginous sense of the numerous varied histories that converge around 4X-JYI. Steyerl deliberately blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, employing a "green screen" method to digitally place different backdrops—a desert, windmills—behind Kahn and, later, behind a scene of herself and Kahn explaining seatbelt safety while dressed in flight crew uniform. During this demonstration, the little DVD player set in the sand displays the image of a man struggling while falling from an airplane to release his malfunctioning parachute. Unlike the crashing plane, he is not a recyclable subject. The film ends with the image of his free fall.

As we saw in chapter two, Steyerl observes that, despite its implied position of control, "the subject is always already subjected";²⁴² in a 2010 interview, Steyerl describes subjectivation as a transformation that takes place during free fall, when something or someone is cast down: "Subjectivation, as it were, takes place in freefall, at the moment of least control, of absolute exposure, where freedom and horror become indistinguishable." Just as Gilligan invoked the Hegelian "world spirit" in *Popular Unrest*, so here does Steyerl, who situates the contemporary free-falling subject in inverse relation to the historical subject that spirit produces:

The subject then comes into being at the moment of impact—not, that is to say, when Napoleon, as in Hegel’s “Phenomenology of the Spirit,” comes riding on his horse as the incarnation of the world spirit, but only when the horse bucks him off.²⁴³

Thus, whereas *In Free Fall* is at one level an allegory of the economic and financial free fall that marked the 2008 crisis, it also can be understood as referring to the larger condition of what Steyerl describes in a later essay, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective” (2011), as our current moment’s overwhelming sense of groundlessness, which, she argues, provokes a sensation of being in a permanent state of free fall.²⁴⁴ Although she does not mention her film of the same title in the 2011 essay, she nevertheless explores many of its themes. For example, her observation in the essay that airline pilots have reported that the disorientation produced by free fall results in an inability to distinguish between the self and the aircraft, subject and object, evokes the film’s opening scene of the crashing airliner: “While falling, people may sense themselves as being things, while things may sense that they are people.”²⁴⁵ Free fall and its accompanying loss of a stable horizon become a metaphor in Steyerl’s essay for the contemporary dissolution of modernity’s confidence in a grounded viewer—a stable subject—oriented to a fixed horizon line, a paradigm that, although artificial, for so long situated concepts of subject and object, time and space. Indeed, the film *In Free Fall* conveys this instability at multiple levels, questioning not only the subject-object relation but also the apparent contiguousness of time and continuity of space. Steyerl employs dizzying montage sequences in which documentary and Hollywood movie clips are juxtaposed, for example, and repeats certain scenes, exploding any illusions of linearity; the sequentiality of Steyerl’s narrative is further blurred and made uncertain in that its three episodes are presented in a uninterrupted, single-channel loop, so that the viewer is left with no strong sense of beginning, middle, or end.²⁴⁶ These qualities foreshadow Steyerl’s later assertion, in the essay “In Free Fall,” that as contemporary subjects we have lost our footing socially, politically, and philosophically, so much so that “we no longer know whether we are objects or subjects as we spiral down in an imperceptible free fall.”²⁴⁷

In the video interview about the making of the film *In Free Fall*, Steyerl tells the story of coming across images of the Mojave junkyard and being inspired to make a film about it. In the early stages of planning, she relates, she envisioned an object biography that involved

blowing up a plane stored there during the economic crisis, collecting the resulting scrap, and exporting that scrap to China, where it would then be recycled into aluminum, which in turn would be used as the material substrate to press pirated DVD versions of the same Hollywood film in which the plane was destroyed; completing the cycle, these DVDs would then “take off” and be circulated again. This fantasy, which manifests itself in screened form on the little DVD player in Steyerl’s film but which was to remain unrealized in real life, provides telling background to the artist’s use of Russian avant-garde poet Sergei Tretyakov’s essay “The Biography of the Object” (1929) as an explicit point of departure in her film, which proposes the biography of the Boeing jetliner as a more nuanced alternative to the traditional biopic of the heroic individual subject. Writing in 1929—a crucial year that also witnessed history’s most famous stock market crash, the largest number of airplane crashes in history, and the year Howard Hughes’s *Hell’s Angels* was made, as critic David Riff notes²⁴⁸—Tretyakov sought to counter the idea then popular in the context of socialist realism that the ideal story, which at the time was widely thought to be found in the bourgeois novel of the nineteenth century, should follow the biography of a noble, heroic individual. As an alternative, one that he believed could offer more complex insight into social relations, Tretyakov suggested privileging an object as protagonist, following it on its journey through the production process. In the video interview, Steyerl cites as inspiration for her work Tretyakov’s desire to “progress toward a materialist representation of the forces inherent in society” and to observe the ways the object orchestrates, organizes, and expresses all the social forces that went into its production.²⁴⁹

But whereas Tretyakov ended his biography at the conclusion of the object-production process, when the object reached the consumer market, Steyerl begins with an already-produced object, the Boeing airliner—which, we learn, was built in the United States in 1956—and effectively reverses the trajectory Tretyakov proposed, beginning just as the airliner ends its “normal” life (she opens the film with a scene of its imminent crash) and tracing its subsequent “afterlife” as scrap and recycled aluminum. Here Steyerl is concerned with a bruised, battered thing, just as she is concerned with “poor” or degraded images as things. “A thing is usually not a shiny new Boeing taking off on its virgin flight,” Steyerl writes in her 2010 essay “A Thing Like You and Me” (which I also discussed briefly in chapters 2 and 3). “Rather, it might be its wreck, painstakingly pieced together from scrap inside a hangar after its unexpected nosedive into catastrophe.”²⁵⁰ *In Free Fall* nonetheless

takes from Tretyakov's revolutionary narrative method the idea of the object as the nexus of a rich network of stories. The method is significant. As historian Devin Fore observes in a special issue of *October* devoted to Soviet Factography, Tretyakov did not simply seek to replace the novelistic hero with an object; instead, he deflected attention away from the emotional biography of the individual in order to shine a light on the complex interactions of the larger network of individuals that make up a story. Rather than being held together by the hero in whose solitary psyche these interactions fall into line as a sequence of events in a misleadingly orderly teleology, Tretyakov's object biography is held together by deeds, by acts, Fore explains. The goal of Tretyakov's method, then, is to progress away from narratives of psychic interiority—of the heroic, individuated subject—and their characteristic linearity and fatalism, moving instead toward “an epic of the collective.”²⁵¹

Steyerl concludes “A Thing Like You and Me” with a polemic declaration: “The hero is dead. Long live the thing.”²⁵² *In Free Fall* explores this idea in film, demonstrating Tretyakov's anti-heroic, object-centered method.²⁵³ This method allows Steyerl to tell the stories of numerous agents and events that in one way or another involved or touched the jetliner during its life, “death,” recycling, and recirculation—in other words, of a collectivity of actors, both objectlike and subjectlike, both human and non-human—whose stories converge around it. Her object-centered method also enables her to tell the stories of those who participated in the collective act of making the film itself, whose producers are also its characters. Potter, the junkyard owner, is joined by Steyerl, who interacts on and off camera with him and two other protagonists: Jenson, who is also the film's cameraman as well as an old colleague of Steyerl's from her days working for film director Wim Wenders around the time of the fall of the Berlin wall, and Kahn, an artist and filmmaker who plays the aviation expert.²⁵⁴ Thus the film itself acts as a ghostlike meta-object in the narrative, a thing that takes on lifelike qualities just as the airliner it follows takes on lifelike qualities.

As a meta-object—a moving image-as-thing—*In Free Fall* itself can be seen as biopolitical in the sense art historian W. J. T. Mitchell has argued for in describing the character of contemporary images. For Mitchell, the image today acts as a “living organism” that has “desires (for example appetites, needs, demands, drives),” migrating from substrate to substrate, medium to medium, spreading and defining affects, feelings, and social values in a biopolitical era.²⁵⁵ Steyerl argues for a similar understanding of the image-as-thing. If “truth” can be found anywhere today, she contends, it “is neither in the represented nor in

the representation,” but rather in material configurations, which distill the intense forces of a commodified infosphere. For her, the image is just such a material configuration. It “doesn’t represent reality,” she writes. “It is a fragment of the real world. It is a thing just like any other—a thing like you and me.”²⁵⁶

In arguing for the ways images occupy and actively transform our social, political, artistic, and historical landscape, shaping us within it, Steyerl emphasizes that the very material of aesthetic production is key to understanding the overwhelming acceleration of image production in our time. Her concern is thus not only for the image as something *other* than representation. It is also not only for what we might understand as the image’s “materiality-effect”—philosopher Bill Brown’s term describing the effect of processes that convince us of the materiality of things (“be it the stone on which you stubbed your toe or the handle you’re about to grab within an immersive VR system”).²⁵⁷ Rather, it is for the image’s actual form, a form that—like that of other physical objects in the world, such as the derelict Boeing airliner, the video camera in *Strike II*, and the LCD display in *Strike*—is vulnerable, mutable, variously subject to modification, translation, reuse, injury, and destruction.²⁵⁸

Here, Mitchell, Brown, and Steyerl bring itinerant images into the broader debates around materialism, embodiment, and subjectivity that have been renewed in the twenty-first century as the “immateriality” of the digital has also been increasingly posited. In his pivotal 2001 *Critical Inquiry* essay “Thing Theory,” Brown describes this trend as a “new materialism”—a trend that is not so much “about the material effects of ideas and ideology” as it is “about the ideological and ideational effects of the material world and of transformations of it.” For Brown, the new materialism offers an antidote of sorts to the fetishization of the atomistic subject, but it serves less as a project of abandoning that subject than of granting objects their potency in order, he writes, “to show how they organize our private and public affection.”²⁵⁹ We saw in chapter three that Steyerl proposes identification with the thing as a means of escaping the bonds of an oppressive, surveilled, hyper-imaged contemporary subjectivity²⁶⁰—as I argued there, offering material concretization as a form of escape for an increasingly abstracted neoliberal subject. In the face of the relentless pressure biopower exerts on us today to produce ourselves as more perfect capitalist subjects—as I argue, by means of forces of making-visible—the tactic of ascribing new agency to the object and of subjective overidentification with the object’s apparent stillness

and muteness may offer a form of relief. Similarly, reconceiving of the image as an agent rather than as a form of representation suggests new avenues of deliverance from the constitutive force of a fractal-recombinant image sphere.

Art historian Paolo Magagnoli notes that Steyerl deliberately follows the Boeing into its future rather than its past. For him, this signifies Steyerl's refusal to occupy a nostalgic position—her avoidance of the “Left melancholy” Wendy Brown famously described in the late 1990s as pervading post-communist left-wing discourse (and that I discussed in the introduction to this study).²⁶¹ Similarly, art historian Kerstin Stakemeier observes that Steyerl is future-oriented, inverting Tretyakov's method, but for Stakemeier this is important in that it allows the artist to tell the story of collectivization by following the degradation and dismantling of an object of capitalist consumption. In her review of *In Free Fall*, she argues that for Steyerl to have attempted to create a collectivized narrative as Tretyakov himself did, through tracing the object through its stages of production, would have been anachronistic. Neoliberal capitalist modes of production would have been resistant to such an effort. Furthermore, as Steyerl has argued in her writings about the poor image, for example, what is important in our historical moment, unlike in Tretyakov's, is the reproduction and degradation of the object more than its production. Whereas Tretyakov focused his attention Russia's post-revolutionary production lines, emphasizing “a perspective of emphatic collectivity *through* the figure of the object,” Stakemeier writes, Steyerl appropriates Tretyakov's method in a manner more appropriate to current political and economic conditions, staging the object's biography “as that of its visual representations in capitalist mass culture, in TV series, in Hollywood movies, in music videos, in news reels and through internet data—its profanation.” Thus, Stakemeier contends, Steyerl creates meaning not, as Tretyakov sought to do, through deeds, but specifically through visual representation.²⁶²

Stakemeier argues that it is these visual representations that appear collectivized in Steyerl's film, while “the narrations of production, that of the cameraman above all, remain individual.”²⁶³ Although Stakemeier does not put it this way, her analysis suggests that Steyerl's vision of collectivization is one focused more on objects—that is, again, images *as objects*—than on persons. Rather than advocating for the kind of collectivization that involves identification with human others—with human groups—as an alternative to relentless neoliberal individuation, then, *In Free Fall* can be understood as more radically advocating for a form of identification among collectives of objects—an act the neoliberal subject would be

able to perform only by first “becoming” an object, as Steyerl herself also proposes. But in Stakemeier’s view, in inverting Tretyakov’s method to focus on the object’s degradation rather than its production as “the potential moment of its collectivising anticipation,” Steyerl rejects the assumption that capitalism’s collective reconstruction must begin with its productive forces: “Steyerl proposes to start from the object’s end instead and anticipate the collectivity of capitalist consumption as one which can potentially engage in its own activation.”²⁶⁴

Riffing on the themes of wreckage and groundlessness, critic Mark Fisher gave a talk on *In Free Fall* in conjunction with its 2010 exhibition at London’s Chisenhale Gallery in which he asked, “Can anything genuinely new emerge in a political landscape that is clogged with ideological junk?” Noting neoliberalism’s “dilapidated state” in his opening remarks, Fisher analogizes the capitalist subject’s condition of groundlessness and free fall to that of a cartoon character running off a cliff, in which—as we all know—there is typically an unexplainable, momentary, mid-air pause before the character’s downward plunge begins. With this image in mind, Fisher asks what is keeping us suspended in post-crash conditions now that the ground has fallen away.²⁶⁵ As we saw in the introduction to this study, Fisher has also written on the 2008 financial crisis. In his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher notes that contrary to initial hopes, the 2008 crash did little to undermine neoliberal capitalism. Even so, however, he argues, it did lead to a discrediting of neoliberalism—to “the collapse of the framework which has provided ideological cover for capitalist accumulation since the 1970s”—and to “the relaxing of a certain kind of mental paralysis,” a new atmosphere in which public questioning of capitalism became acceptable. Although Fisher does not discuss Steyerl’s work in his book, he approximates Steyerl’s junkyard of derelict planes and aluminum scrap there, too, in likening the current political landscape to one “littered with . . . ‘ideological rubble’—it is year zero again, and a space has been cleared for a new anti-capitalism to emerge which is not necessarily tied to the old language or traditions.”²⁶⁶

If wreckage dominates the video and textual versions of Steyerl’s *In Free Fall* projects (the three-part film and the essay), she invoked “wreckage” again in the context of the image-as-thing in her presentation at the April 2013 photography symposium at New York’s New School: “The reality we live in,” she says, “consists of the wreckage of images, of half-destroyed images littering our reality.”²⁶⁷ That images should make up the very fabric of reality today is a historically specific condition, Steyerl argues, one that is connected to a

trend that became noticeable in the late 1980s, when images began to acquire greater force as material actors in the real world, partly shedding their function as representation. “Images started less representing something that was there beforehand—they didn’t record situations *that were there*—but they started catalyzing actions and events.”²⁶⁸ Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică’s 1992 film *Videograms of a Revolution* provides her with an example. As their film shows, during the December 1989 overthrow of Nicolae Ceaucescu’s authoritarian regime in Romania, she relates, protestors stormed not the Parliament, at first, but a Bucharest TV studio and proceeded to make recordings. The protestors’ recordings did not document existing conditions, however, Steyerl argues; instead, they served as catalysts, migrating nodes of energy and matter that shaped and affected people and events. These images proliferated, transformed, enabling the revolutionaries created a new reality—an entire regime change—through the broadcasting of pictures. “Around 1989,” she says, “television images started walking through television screens, as if they were a force wall, right into reality.”²⁶⁹ Steyerl implies that the ambivalent transition in which images acquire legs in the real world is understandable both as the material transition of images from screen to reality and as the larger historical transition in which this phenomenon began to occur on a massive scale. This historical transition corresponded to another fraught transition of 1989, she notes, namely, the political transition of former Eastern bloc countries to Western-style free-market democracy.

If, as Steyerl’s Romanian example suggests, images began acquiring agency and constitutive power as early as 1989, we might take her analysis a step further, noting that technological upheavals as well as political ones were a contributing force. It is telling that TV was a decisive technology in this transition. 1989 was famously the catalytic year in which the Berlin Wall crumbled, marking the transition from the tripartite global divisions of the Cold War (first world, second world, third world) to the hegemonic mono-paradigm of neoliberal globalization and stirring massive and widespread cultural, political, economic, and artistic change. As the year in which computer-based, nonlinear editing systems for video became available,²⁷⁰ 1989 also witnessed a technological transition. The editing systems introduced that year facilitated quick and easy editing of many hours of video footage into presentable form—a process that had previously been time-consuming and difficult—facilitating the birth and flourishing of contemporary reality TV, a genre whose historical trajectory parallels that of neoliberalism.

Taking advantage of this technological development, the reality TV series *Cops*, one of the longest-running reality TV shows in history, premiered in March 1989.²⁷¹ Conceived of partly in response to pressure to fill TV schedules with unscripted shows and reruns in the wake of the 1988 Writers' Guild of America strike—an early symptom of Reagan-era deregulation and the neoliberal devastation of organized labor—*Cops* introduced the camcorder effect and the unscripted, unnarrated *cinéma vérité* conventions that would quickly become common in reality TV,²⁷² the now-ubiquitous pseudo-documentary genre that, with familiar sleight of hand, manufactures reality specifically by means of peddling transparently faked images purporting to represent that reality. As a form of melodramatic parody that presents outlandishly un-"realistic" images as real, reality TV produces, even in an audience of savvy viewers, humiliating stereotypes and mutual surveillance, thereby creating deeply felt realities of its own. As cultural theorist Catherine Chaput argues, because these images instruct viewers in techniques of citizenship and affect, they have constitutive power in actual reality, and the affective forces through which the TV audience collectively constitutes itself in harmony with the needs of late capitalism.²⁷³

In this light, reality TV can be understood as a nearly paradigmatic example of the power of images to produce real situations and conditions, to prompt real-world actions and events—and to exceed or even evade indexical or documentary function. Chaput argues that reality TV teaches its audiences how to become better capitalist subjects in an era of biopolitical neoliberalism, not by fostering mass consumption, but by encouraging viewers to cultivate themselves as unique, self-expressive individuals with discrete preferences and tastes. It does so by normalizing surveillance as a process of constant monitoring and assessment that becomes necessary and even desirable as the individual produces him- or herself as his or her own most valuable commodity (corresponding, not uncoincidentally, as we might further note, to Foucault's notion of the neoliberal subject as "entrepreneur of the self") as well as by valorizing free labor.²⁷⁴ In its power to habituate our bodily responses, then, reality TV makes explicit the processes by which the image as representation in some sense finds itself nearly outmoded in contemporary culture, at the same time highlighting its increasingly constitutive function.

Steyerl makes a related point in a 2011 interview with filmmaker Harun Farocki in which she points out that while reality TV clearly fails to show "life as it really is," nonetheless it gives a "true impression" of the circumstances of its production—a

competitive society in which “elimination and survival of the fittest” are paramount—thereby offering “allegories of a kind of neoliberal natural state of being.”²⁷⁵ More recently, Steyerl argues that we cannot understand reality without understanding image production and circulation practices such as television, photography, cinema, 3D modeling, animation—all forms and pathways of still and moving images.²⁷⁶ Not long after the Berlin wall fell and reality TV exploded onto the screen, she asserts, the developments that led to TV’s constitutive power accelerated as the Internet and mobile devices began to add to and eventually supersede TV networks as pathways for the circulation of images, multiplying points of transfer. Today, she contends, if digital post-production tools are used to create the world, not to represent it, aerial views and maps, such as Google Maps, have much to do with this in that they have contributed enormously to the enormous array of images that saturates the world, leading to what Steyerl calls “too much world.”²⁷⁷ For Steyerl, “too much world” is a possible reason for which images have acquired such creative power:

With digital proliferation of all sorts of imagery, suddenly too much world became available. The map, to use the well-known fable by Borges, has not only become equal to the world, but exceeds it by far. A vast quantity of images covers the surface of the world—very in the case of aerial imaging—in a confusing stack of layers. The map explodes on a material territory, which is increasingly fragmented and also gets entangled with it. . . . While Borges wagered that the map might wither away, Baudrillard speculated that on the contrary, reality was disintegrating. In fact, *both* proliferate and confuse one another: on handheld devices, at checkpoints, and in between edits.²⁷⁸

Despite or perhaps because of our contemporary condition of groundlessness, our time is also marked by the “obsessive policing, division, and representation of ground” in the form of aerial views, map views, satellite views, and surveillance panoramas, Steyerl observes.²⁷⁹ Aircraft play a significant role here: They carry aerial cameras, for example, providing data for aerial maps and views. Hollywood films now increasingly use 3D digital techniques to produce aerial views and vertiginous nosedive scenes. Military, surveillance, and entertainment applications converge.

This preoccupation with aerial representations is compensatory, Steyerl argues. In portraying a stable ground, such representations propose that ground’s actual existence. They also create the illusion of a safely distanced, superior spectator—a stable, powerful viewing subject—floating in the air and enjoying a privileged, God-like overview. These

visualizations constitute not only a new visual paradigm but, correspondingly, a new spectatorial subjectivity.²⁸⁰ The new subjectivity created by these shifting visual paradigms is one that is “safely folded into surveillance technology and screen-based distraction,” Steyerl argues. Its gaze is a hyper-subjective one: a “one-way gaze of superiors onto inferiors, a looking down from high to low.” It is also a subjectivity that is disembodied and remote-controlled, displaced to machines and other objects, creating the illusion of “3D sovereignty.”²⁸¹

In a passage that connects her preoccupation with intensity and pornography in *Lovely Andrea* and *Red Alert* to her focus on this new spectatorial subjectivity, Steyerl writes that this gaze of assumed mastery belongs to the subject of intensity in a pornographic visual sphere:

Gazes already became decisively mobile and mechanized with the invention of photography, but new technologies have enabled the detached observant gaze to become ever more inclusive and all-knowing to the point of becoming massively intrusive—as militaristic as it is pornographic, as intense as extensive, both micro- and macroscopic.²⁸²

This new viewing subject is based on a radicalization of linear perspective in which the former distinction between object and subject is magnified, she argues. This radicalization, this increased disparity between object and subject, is a metaphor for the intensification of economic inequality and of class relations, a “verticalization of class relations in the context of an intensified class war from above—seen through the lenses and on the screens of military, entertainment, and information industries.”²⁸³ Such conditions are too extreme to be sustained, she suggests. The projected gaze of superiority is itself an unstable delusion, an artificial means of orienting the free-falling subject in a fractured socioeconomic sphere, one that, she writes—in one of her rare explicit references to biopolitics—is “surveilled aerially and policed biopolitically.”²⁸⁴

If, as Steyerl argues, this gaze is compensatory—allowing the subject a feeling of superiority, safe remove, and a God-like perspective on an apparently stable landscape—we might further speculate that it compensates not only for the anxiety we feel in a contemporary conditions of groundlessness, but for the discomfort we experience as the constantly surveilled and increasingly disempowered subjects of the biopolitical state. As Caren Kaplan argues in her study of biopower and aerial photography in the visual culture of 9/11, the state controls populations by “seeing” them and making them legible in particular

spatial arrangements, and aerial views afford a unique perspective that allows the state to visualize with the ever-increasing precision it needs to maintain power and enact violence. The state also uses aerial views as a means of proposing and normalizing particular ways of seeing, Kaplan argues, thereby mobilizing visual culture at a biopolitical level to manage populations;²⁸⁵ these ways of seeing, we can conclude, contribute to the spectatorial subjectivity generated by the “view from above” that Steyerl also describes. As we might further note, with the ascent of unmanned military and surveillance drones, this spectatorial subjectivity, along with its associated ethics of viewing, has even more recently been displaced to machinic vision, a problem contemporary artists such as Omer Fast and Trevor Paglen have also investigated. Fast’s video *5,000 Feet Is the Best* (2011) and Paglen’s video *Drone Vision* (2010), for example, both consider the rhetoric of “objectivity” that is attached to these often deadly apparatuses of aerial biopower.²⁸⁶

Steyerl’s use of the green screen technique in *In Free Fall* produces an unfamiliar, skewed, queasy picture ground; as she notes in her video interview, her goal in using this technique is to produce cubist perspectives that do not exactly align and are thus free of “the tyranny of central perspective,” as in painting. Finally, she declares, with the shattering of the horizon, cinema is able to liberate itself from the optical lens it depends on.²⁸⁷ The experience of free fall—and its accompanying disruptions at economic, social, and subjective levels—is potentially a liberatory one, then. If the fracturing and multiplication of the horizon and the introduction of new tools of imaging and visualization can be used to constitute new spatial illusions, new realities, and new subjectivities, this is true whether they are used for better or for worse, and the tools can be used toward revolutionary ends just as they have been used otherwise. Thus, “what seemed like a helpless tumble into an abyss actually turns out to be a new representational freedom”—one in which we may find that we don’t need the illusion or the reality of a stable ground after all.²⁸⁸

Rather than dwelling upon the tragic effects of the financial crisis, Magagnoli points out, Steyerl instead presents it as a historical event that blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction, her achronological montage sequences heightening this effect. The film’s characters invariably describe their experiences of the financial crisis as “a sudden descent into the unreal”—for instance, when Jenson describes the surreal experience of having his house repossessed, or when Potter remarks, in reference to the derelict jets: “And I said to myself, is this for real? These planes are all ghosts.” The crash and ensuing economic crisis,

Magagnoli argues, are thereby “transformed into an oneiric and hallucinatory experience in which the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, have collapsed.”²⁸⁹

In Magagnoli’s analysis, this effect conjures up Frederic Jameson’s descriptions of schizophrenia in the context of postmodernism, which, as we have seen, is a disorienting melange of disconnected, free-floating, fragmentary signifiers. For Jameson, the late-twentieth-century condition he wrote of in the 1980s and the culture it marked simulated the schizoid experience. Magagnoli finds that Steyerl’s films, with their rapid montage sequences and energetic mix of pop culture references, themselves simulate the schizoid forms of late capitalist culture. *In Free Fall* does so with a lighthearted and forward-looking attitude, he suggests, almost exhilarating in the “free fall” of a collapsing financial system.²⁹⁰ As Magagnoli notes, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—who famously theorize capitalism as fundamentally “schizophrenic” in character in that it is based on unconscious, profoundly irrational desire²⁹¹—reject dispassionate ideology critique, instead advocating the appropriation of the schizophrenic energies of capitalism for revolutionary aims. Similarly, he suggests, “if Steyerl’s work simulates schizophrenic disorder, it also reinvents it and invests it with generative and revolutionary potential” by redeploying the widely accessible tools of capitalist popular and commodity culture.²⁹²

In exploring the schizophrenic aspects of capitalism, *In Free Fall* takes up a concern similar to one we see in Gilligan’s *Self-Capital*, in which capitalism shadows and is shadowed by the psyche of Global Economy, the agitated analysand who stands for both the pathological neoliberal self-as-enterprise and the precarious global financial system. The kinetic and fractured formal qualities of *In Free Fall*, in the meantime, parallel its narratives of financial and material ruin, both conveying the schizoid, chaotic experience of a semiocapitalist sphere of free-floating, unmoored signs and material garbage, crowded with the “spam and scrap” of capitalist commodity culture.²⁹³ In these works, neoliberal capitalism is implicated in both stimulating and simulating schizophrenia. Gilligan’s and Steyerl’s films also share an interest in the dismantling of the autonomous human subject. *In Free Fall*’s focus on object “biography” implies this, whereas *Self-Capital*, in characterizing the putatively autonomous subject that capitalism manufactures and upon whom it depends as a severely traumatized, psychologically broken mirror of an ailing global economy, also questions the subject’s self-sufficiency and closure.

Guattari himself was interested in dispelling the notion that subjectivity and subject

were inseparably paired; for him, subjectivity was an independent construction.²⁹⁴ In an effort to break out of the subjectivity paradigm so cherished in the West, Guattari, inspired by his interactions with Brazilian and Japanese colleagues, explored the idea of animism, or the attributing of a soul to non-human entities, toward the end of his life. His pursuit is the focus of Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato's 2010 film *Assemblages*, which combines new and archival materials, including interviews with Guattari, to follow Guattari's investigations of the topic at the unorthodox French clinic La Borde. Guattari's aim at La Borde was to develop an alternative form of psychiatry that would reverse the traditional patient–analyst dynamic characteristic of the institution.²⁹⁵ But whereas the understandings that arose in the nineteenth-century western ethnological tradition of animism as a putatively “primitive” faith in the agency and vitality of things long seemed to support Western subject-object dualism,²⁹⁶ today—as Steyerl's investigations of becoming-object and object-to-object relations also suggest—animism plays a different role.

The notion that inanimate objects and things have agency (“that they have designs on us, and that we are interpellated by them”) is the central tenet of Anselm Franke's 2012 exhibition *Animism*,²⁹⁷ in which the film *Assemblages* was exhibited.²⁹⁸ In a text describing the exhibition, Franke connects animism to biopolitics, arguing that in the biopolitical present, animism actually informs the capitalistic *subject* as much as it informs the object. No longer the repressed impulse that once served as the grounds for colonial discipline and subjugation, today animism serves instead as both an excuse for and a generative force in processes of subjectivation—in what Franke calls “the biopolitical mobilization of the individual psyche.” Franke argues that the rise of digital communications technologies and 1960s counterculture converged to form a modern frontier that “has folded in on itself and has become *intensive* rather than *extensive*.” In this new intensive mode, the Freudian unconscious is no longer something that must be repressed; instead, it is already contained by the autonomous “self” through biopolitical self-management, a paradigm that prevents its isolated subjects from “becoming a collective affair,” Franke argues. These historical developments are both biopolitical and specific to capitalism: “Ever since this epochal shift, we—as self-realizing, self-animating subjects—have lent capitalism our human face.”²⁹⁹ Franke's implication here is that today, animism is no longer merely the belief that objects or non-human entities have souls; instead, animism has been transformed into a biopolitical means of subject production—a means by which the subject engages in self-creation and

self-maintenance. In giving us tools to animate our *selves*, animism today slyly perpetuates the misapprehension that Guattari, following the non-Western “primitives,” sought to shake off—that we are one and the same as our subjectivities. Franke notes that these developments mark a significant historical shift: “Complementary to the big, depressive cybernetic machine, the ‘self’ has become the very frame (or profile) in which the old oppositions and divides are masked and seemingly reconciled.”³⁰⁰

Guattari’s ideas about animism and Franke’s extension of them add powerful dimension to Steyerl’s and Gilligan’s treatments of the neoliberal subject of biopower. We might say that, rather than animating only “inanimate” objects, as we once expected of it, today’s animism is a subjectivizing biopolitical force that gives life to—animates—us *as objects*, thus creating us as discrete subjects, as *dividuals*. As we have seen, Steyerl focuses on identification with the object, and Gilligan considers the ways the individual is constituted biopolitically; both artists propose exit routes as a means of shedding an increasingly constraining subjecthood. If we conceive of animism as a force that invests objects and people equally, then both artists’ investigations, in different ways, can be understood as pointing to both the individual’s independence from the subjecthood it is assigned and to how the individual is *animated* by historically specific subjectivities.

The frenetic, exuberant style of *In Free Fall* implies that, despite Steyerl’s implicit recognition of the ill effects of neoliberalism and rampant financialization (and this recognition is evident throughout her video and written work), she remains upbeat, seeing political potential in both pop culture,³⁰¹ with its constantly recycled “poor” and popular images, and the detritus of capitalist commodity culture, whose rubble and ruins she invites us to identify with as fractured subjects—“dividuals” split into ever-smaller component parts. Steyerl’s crash narrative suggests the potential for the fractured pieces of that subject to be rearranged in novel, revolutionary ways and for the spell of commodification thus to be broken. Compared to Steyerl’s almost hopeful account of post-crash conditions, Gilligan’s *Self-Capital* is relatively pessimistic, focusing on the painful implications of such conditions for the distraught, crashing neoliberal subject who is but one among many desiring commodities, caught in tension as an integral, entrepreneurial “self” that, paradoxically, is also split into commodified parts. Both artists articulate this self’s mutinous impulse.

²⁰⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, ed. Jim Fleming, trans. Philip Beitchman and V. G. J. Niesluchowski (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), 111.

²⁰⁸ Boris Groys, “The Obligation to Self-Design,” *e-flux journal* 59 (November 2014), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-obligation-to-self-design/>.

²⁰⁹ Melanie Gilligan's *Self-Capital* was produced at and funded by the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) London in 2009; currently available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ATnDUzYilg/ (episode 1); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5RD7NbqYbY/> (episode 2); and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWVcQx_6S7c/ (episode 3).

²¹⁰ *Crisis in the Credit System* was produced shortly before Lehman Brothers, at the time the fourth-largest investment bank in the United States, submitted the largest bankruptcy filing in history, on September 15, 2008.

²¹¹ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (note 20), 241.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 226.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Lazzarato, “The Misfortunes of the ‘Artistic Critique’ and of Cultural Employment” (note 77).

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ Groys, “The Obligation to Self-Design” (note 208).

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes* (London: Verso, 2002).

²²¹ For an image of *ARBEIT MACHT KAPITAL*, 2004, see <http://www.clairefontaine.ws/works/9.html/>.

²²² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 1, chapter on Money (part II), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch03.htm/>. Quoted in Sven Lütticken, “Liberation through Laziness: Some Chronopolitical Remarks,” *Mousse Magazine* 42 (February 2014), <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=1071/>.

²²³ Berardi, “Biopolitics and Connective Mutation” (note 4).

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ As Adam Shatz writes “Deleuze and Guattari had an instant intellectual rapport. Both men were frustrated with the ‘Mummy-Daddy’ focus of psychoanalysis. By understanding desire in terms of the family romance, psychoanalysis had become (in Guattari’s words) a ‘capitalist drug,’ individualising collective problems and neutralising the disruptive effects of desire.” Adam Shatz, “Desire Was Everywhere,” review of Francois Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: Intersecting Lives*, trans. Deborah Glassman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), *London Review of Books* 32, no. 24 (December 2010), 9–12, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n24/adam-shatz/desire-was-everywhere/>.

²²⁸ Aileen Burns and Alex Snukal, *Self Capital: Melanie Gilligan*, curatorial statement, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, <http://www.interaccess.org/exhibitions/index.php?id=97/>.

²²⁹ David Armstrong, “The Rise of Surveillance Medicine,” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 17, no. 3 (June 1995), 393–404.

²³⁰ Ibid., 395.

²³¹ Ibid., 397–401.

²³² Ibid., 401.

²³³ Mühle, “Imitation of Life: Biopolitics and the Cinematographic Image” (note 36).

²³⁴ Armstrong, “The Rise of Surveillance Medicine” (note 229).

²³⁵ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 97–116.

²³⁶ Lauren Berlant, “Risky Bigness: On Obesity, Eating, and the Ambiguity of ‘Health,’” in Jonathan M. Metz and Anna Kirkland, eds., *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); see also her discussion of related problems in her book *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

²³⁷ Berlant, “Risky Bigness: On Obesity, Eating, and the Ambiguity of ‘Health’” (note 236).

²³⁸ “*In Free Fall* by Hito Steyerl,” *Picture This Works and Projects*, video interview, <http://www.picture-this.org.uk/worksprojects/works/by-date/2010/in-free-fall/>.

²³⁹ *Speed* was directed by Jan de Bont.

²⁴⁰ “*In Free Fall* by Hito Steyerl” (note 240).

²⁴¹ Rosanne Altstatt, “Hito Steyerl’s ‘In Free Fall,’” March 1, 2013, <http://rosannealtstatt.com/2013/03/01/hito-steyerls-in-free-fall/>.

²⁴² Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me” (note 86).

²⁴³ “Patented Idealism: A Conversation between Hito Steyerl and Sven Lütticken” (note 39).

²⁴⁴ Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *e-flux journal*, April 2011, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ *In Free Fall* was presented on a single channel in a continuous cycle in its installation at the Art Institute of Chicago in the exhibition *Hito Steyerl*, November 1, 2012–January 27, 2013. See http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/citi/resources/Rsrc_002918.pdf/.

²⁴⁷ Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective” (note 244).

²⁴⁸ David Riff, “‘Is this for real?’ A Close Reading of *In Free Fall* by Hito Steyerl,” *eipcp* (*european institute for progressive cultural policies*), February 2011, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0311/riff/en/>.

²⁴⁹ “*In Free Fall* by Hito Steyerl” (note 240).

²⁵⁰ Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me” (note 86).

²⁵¹ Devin Fore, introduction to Sergei Tretyakov, “The Biography of the Object,” *Soviet Factography: A Special Issue*, ed. Devin Fore, *October* 118 (Fall 2006), 57–62.

²⁵² Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me” (note 86).

²⁵³ It should be noted that Tretyakov is evidently only one source of ideas for Steyerl about the force of the object. A November 2010 panel discussion at London’s Chisenhale Gallery centred around the idea of the “biography of the object,” Steyerl referred to philosopher Walter Benjamin’s influence on her work, noting that Benjamin sought to free the object from the stigma of the alienated commodity and to reveal its richness as a container of stored social energies that lie dormant within the alienated commodity. Steyerl said she became interested in how to restore the petrified congealed energy, in how to bring it back into circulation while breaking the spell of the capitalist commodification from the object. This, she said, was an inspiration for *In Free Fall*. See Chisenhale Gallery, “‘Biography of the Object’: A panel discussion focusing on the notion of the ‘biography of the object’ with Hito

Steyerl, Peter Osborne, Professor of Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University, and Eyal Weizman, Director of Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths, University of London, chaired by Melissa Gronlund, Managing Editor, *Afterall*,” February 12, 2010, sound recording, <https://soundcloud.com/chisenhale-gallery/biography-of-the-object-panel-discussion-2-12-10/>.

²⁵⁴ Steyerl provides these biographical details in the video interview “*In Free Fall* by Hito Steyerl” (note 240).

²⁵⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 11. See also Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (note 41).

²⁵⁶ Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me” (note 86).

²⁵⁷ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1, *Things* (Autumn 2001), 1–22.

²⁵⁸ Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me” (note 86).

²⁵⁹ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory” (note 258).

²⁶⁰ Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me” (note 86).

²⁶¹ Hito Steyerl, cited in Francesca Boenzi, “Do You Speak Spasmoc?,” *Mousse Contemporary Art Magazine* 23 (March 2010), <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=540>; also cited in Paolo Magagnoli, “Capitalism as Creative Destruction: The Representation of the Economic Crisis in Hito Steyerl’s *In Free Fall*,” *Third Text* 27, no. 6 (2013), 723–34, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2013.857899/>.

²⁶² Kerstin Stakemeier, “Plane Destructive: the Recent Films of Hito Steyerl,” *Mute Magazine*, February 23, 2011, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/plane-destructive-recent-films-hito-steyerl#sdfootnote6anc/>.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Mark Fisher, “Can anything genuinely new emerge in a political landscape that is clogged with ideological junk?,” November 17, 2010, Chisenhale Gallery, London, sound recording, <https://soundcloud.com/chisenhale-gallery/mark-fisher-chisenhale/> and <http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=108/>.

²⁶⁶ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (note 53), 77–78.

²⁶⁷ Steyerl, “Photography and Political Agency? With Victoria Hattam and Hito Steyerl” (note 108).

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ “Charlie Brooker's Screenwipe: Reality TV Editing,” BBC TV, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBwepkVurCI/>. See also “Reality Television,” Wikipedia.com, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality_television, July 12, 2013: “Film, which was easy to edit, was too expensive to shoot enough hours of footage with on a regular basis.” . . . “The series *Nummer 28*, which aired on Dutch television in 1991, originated the concept of putting strangers together in the same environment for an extended period of time and recording the drama that ensued. *Nummer 28* also pioneered many of the stylistic conventions that have since become standard in reality television shows, including a heavy use of soundtrack music and the interspersing of events on screen with after-the-fact ‘confessionals’ recorded by cast members, that serve as narration. One year later, the same concept was used by MTV in their new series *The Real World* and *Nummer 28* creator Erik Latour has long claimed that *The Real World* was directly inspired by his show. However, the producers of *The Real World* have stated that their direct inspiration was *An American Family*.”

²⁷¹ *Cops* entered its twenty-sixth season in the fall of 2013.

²⁷² Karla Peterson, “With writers on strike, expect more reruns and dose of reality,” *Union-Tribune San Diego*, November 6, 2007, SignonSanDiego.com, <http://legacy.utsandiego.com/news/features/20071106-9999-lz1c06strike.html/>.

²⁷³ Catherine Chaput, “Affect and Belonging in Late Capitalism: A Speculative Narrative on Reality TV,” *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011), 1–20.

²⁷⁴ Chaput, “Affect and Belonging in Late Capitalism” (note 274).

²⁷⁵ Harun Farocki and Hito Steyerl, “A Magical Imitation of Reality,” *Cabier* no. 2 (Kaleidoscope Press, 2011), http://monoskop.org/images/5/57/Farocki_Harun_Steyerl_Hito_A_Magical_Imitation_of_Reality.pdf/.

²⁷⁶ Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” *e-flux journal* 49 (November 2013), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/#_ftn15/.

²⁷⁷ Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” (note 276).

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective” (note 244).

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Caren Kaplan, "'A Rare and Chilling View': Aerial Photography as Biopower in the Visual Culture of '9/11,'" *Reconstruction* 11, no. 2 (2011), http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/112/Kaplan_Caren.shtmlhttp://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/112/Kaplan_Caren.shtml. Kaplan draws upon the work of, among others, Mark Whitehead, *State, Science, and the Skies: Governmentalities of the British Atmosphere* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1998. On the relationship of aerial perspective to territory, militarism, and conflict, see also Peter Adey, Mark Whitehead, and Alison Williams, *From Above: War, Violence, and Verticality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁸⁶ Omer Fast's *5,000 Feet Is the Best* is online at Vimeo: <http://vimeo.com/34050994>. For an analysis of these artists' work in the context of the exercise of power through drones, see Kate Chandler, "System Failures," *The New Inquiry*, August 16, 2012, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/system-failures/>.

²⁸⁷ "In Free Fall by Hito Steyerl" (note 240).

²⁸⁸ Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective" (note 244).

²⁸⁹ Magagnoli, "Capitalism as Creative Destruction: The Representation of the Economic Crisis in Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall*," (note 261), 728.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Athlone, 1983).

²⁹² Here, Magagnoli locates in Steyerl's work an "accelerationist" tendency: "Her mimicry of commodity culture hints at a 'politics of accelerationism', which has been taken to task by a number of theorists. A term coined by Benjamin Noys, 'accelerationism' designates a philosophical strand of post-1968 radical thought based on the notion that a socialist revolution will be possible only by exacerbating the contradictions inherent in the dominant economic system. Epitomized by Deleuze and Guattari's notion of schizophrenia, 'accelerationism,' writes Noys, is 'an exotic variant of the politique du pire'; it argues that 'if capitalism generates its own forces of dissolution then the necessity is to radicalize capitalism itself: the worse the better.'" Magagnoli, "Capitalism as Creative Destruction: The Representation of the Economic Crisis in Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall*" (note 261).

²⁹³ Magagnoli, “Capitalism as Creative Destruction: The Representation of the Economic Crisis in Hito Steyerl’s *In Free Fall*” (note 261).

²⁹⁴ Burkhard Meltzer, “Animism,” *Frieze* 134 (October 2010), <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/animism/>.

²⁹⁵ Anselm Franke, “Animism: Notes on an Exhibition,” *e-flux journal* 36 (July 2012), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/animism-notes-on-an-exhibition/>. See also “*Assemblages* (Melitopoulos and Lazzarato, 2010, 66 min.),” *The Ultimate Capital Is the Sun: Metabolism in Contemporary Art, Politics, Philosophy, and Science*, exhibition website, <http://theultimatecapital.org/symposium/visuals/>.

²⁹⁶ Meltzer, “Animism” (note 294).

²⁹⁷ *Animism* was shown at Kunsthalle Bern in 2010; see <http://www.kunsthalle-bern.ch/eng/animism/>. See also Anselm Franke, ed., *Animism: Volume 1* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).

²⁹⁸ Franke, “Animism: Notes on an Exhibition” (note 295). Also relevant in this context is Mark Leckey’s 2013 touring exhibition “The Universal Accessibility of Dumb Things”; see, for example, information on its installation at Bluecoat, Liverpool, U.K., at “The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things—An exhibition curated by Mark Leckey,” *Bluecoat*, <http://www.thebluecoat.org.uk/events/view/exhibitions/1508/>.

²⁹⁹ Franke, “Animism: Notes on an Exhibition” (note 295).

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Lafuente argues that, rather than rejecting the ideological elements of popular culture, Steyerl’s body of work redirects and reappropriates those very elements, demonstrating the possibility of not just articulating a critique of the world through art or popular film but of offering tools for political change. For him, Steyerl’s work is “a new model of politicised filmmaking, one for which the term ‘populist’—in reference to ‘the popular’ and not to ‘the people’—is perhaps a compliment rather than a critique.” Lafuente, “For a Populist Cinema: On Hito Steyerl’s November and Lovely Andrea” (note 161).

5 Conclusion

Who or what are you? You are you, and so is everyone else. A shifter, *you* both addresses you as an individual and reduces you to a you like everyone else. It is also singular and plural, thus able to call you and everyone else at the same time. Hey you. Read this. 'Tellingly, your home page is no longer that hokey little thing you created after your first HTML tutorial; it's a mass-produced template, or even worse, someone else's home page—Google's, Facebook's, the *New York Times*.' You: you and everyone; you and no one.

—Wendy Hui Kyong Chun,
*Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*³⁰²

Of course you're unique—unique just like everybody else.

—Melanie Gilligan, *Popular Unrest*³⁰³

With penetrating insight and often incinerating wit, Melanie Gilligan and Hito Steyerl trace for us the shaky outlines of neoliberal subjecthood, illuminating biopower's generative, subjectivizing capacity as well as its abrading, eviscerating force. Cultivated as a stable, free, self-responsible individual, the neoliberal subject alluded to in the galvanic works considered here has come to understand itself as a unique enterprise, a rare commodity—for if it did not, it would never be able to follow through on the demands of being a subject of biopower. But whereas this subject is indeed unique, it is also, as Gilligan reminds us, *unique just like everybody else*. In Steyerl's apt phrase, it is also "represented to pieces," a dividual composed of billions of fractal-recombinant data elements, infinitely splitting, perpetually in flux as algorithms define and redefine it, constantly adjusting to the information that flows through the Massumian feedback loop. Cast as coherent and autonomous yet increasingly conscious of its fractured, shifting, fissionable nature, this ceaselessly visualized subject is suspended in a state of almost unbearable tension. Steyerl's and Gilligan's implication is that it is under too much pressure to sustain itself.

Biopower's incessant surveilling, tracking, modelling, representing, and making-visible is compensatory, then. It needs the robust, autonomous self as its object, and it creates that self through these very processes. The documents these processes generate

create customized narratives to form a self that, as Groys argues, would not otherwise exist.³⁰⁴ It is documentation that gives life to the biopolitical subject who lacks a unique, unrepeatable signature. The Koopmanian info-person is constituted by data and images, not merely described by them. The illusion of the autonomous self, so long central to our identity, may be a historical construction of Victorian romanticism and Freudian psychology,³⁰⁵ but it is also the flagship product of the neoliberalism Foucault describes as inseparably intertwined with biopower. To the constructed neoliberal self, the notion of being made up solely of shifting data sets seems an affront, even the stuff of horror stories. But the very forces that enable it—or require it—to perceive itself as a discrete, bounded, consistent individual also obscure its intersubjective reality, its interconnectedness with other “selves,” other individuals. They cast the subject adrift, alone. And they perpetuate biopower’s ever-expanding constitutive force. As Steyerl observes, being a subject no longer means having access to political representation; today, more and more, it entails being subjected, cast down. This is why Massumi insists we are under orders to be ourselves specifically “for the system.” We have to reveal ourselves, for that is how we become subjects: through self-expression, through visceral exposure. Gilligan and Steyerl show us how uniqueness and “authenticity” have become biopolitical forms of control, even as they are presented as expressions of distinctiveness. They show us the Pyrrhic victory of the individual.

In Steyerl’s camp, strategies of evasion, camouflage, and disappearance offer respite from the unrelenting demands of subjecthood. Outright destruction of digital technologies of representation offers a similar haven of escape, as does the prospect of seizing control of such technologies in order to redeploy them toward new ends. Steyerl’s work points out the potentially revolutionary possibility that if, as individuals, we are constructed through techniques of making-visible, we are thus “re-editable” through the same means. For her, this may entail the rejection of subjecthood altogether in favor of an identification with things, which she reveals to be anything but enduringly inert or mute; it may also mean assigning subjecthood and agency to material objects. Both identifications, she suggests, are mutable, fleeting. In challenging the subject-object distinction, Steyerl raises the spectre of former human subjects and former things losing themselves in the blur of a crowd, cutting the chains of biopolitical definition and together taking control of the tools of visual manipulation to reformat reality.

Meanwhile, in astringent, absorbing portraits that lay bare the biopolitical and

economic devastations that traumatize the neoliberal subject, Gilligan's work suggests that the potential for resistance lies in the dreadnought of the collective, where intersubjective bonding promises to empower former individuals. If, as Gilligan implies, the subject is reaching the physiological and psychological limits of biopolitical control—of unremitting improvement and maximization—and therefore is, paradoxically, increasingly unviable, that subject's imminent breakdown may yet be neoliberal capitalism's undoing. Whereas the global financial crash ultimately failed to challenge the capitalist system, the looming crash of the worn-out, wearied neoliberal subject, in collapsing the very infrastructure of "human capital" upon which capitalism depends, could produce surprising results. Gilligan's work intimates that, through persistence of courage, a redoubtable collective of such "crashing" subjects could effect astonishing political change through affective means.

The sociality inherent in the Massumian feedback loop may itself hold revolutionary intersubjective and affective potential, but for the moment, biopower has appropriated it. Technology, too, holds such potential, but it is similarly exploited by biopower, and it has magnified and accelerated biopower's force in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Indeed, as Foster points out, the infiltration of the technological into the very substance of existence appears more and more inseparable from the self-producing, autopoietic operations of the market for such technologies.³⁰⁶ This increasing inseparability points to a biopolitics that, having appropriated new technologies, is fused with capitalism—a biopolitics that implies, as Massumi observes, "not just a profitable power over life, but a life-like power animating the profit system." Like Gilligan's Global Economy—who is at once a personification of the larger global financial system, an embodiment of its ailing individual subject, and a global financial system that itself manifests person-like qualities—this vital, subject-like power "is not 'global' because it is controlled by world powers. It is global because it is a worldwide power, in its own right."³⁰⁷

Considered through the lens of biopolitics, Gilligan's and Steyerl's work speaks to concerns that appear ever-more urgent in light of the intensification of forces that have been gathering collective momentum since the early 1980s: privatization, inequality, rising corporate power, financialization, increasing militarization, an expanding atmosphere of repression, and an emerging police state. Operating as component elements of and within a biopolitical global sphere, these forces are exerting increasingly suppressive force in large part because of the emergence of increasingly sophisticated surveillance methods.³⁰⁸ Digital

technologies are facilitating the development of ever-more complex and invasive tools of description—in other words, proliferating practices of making-visible.

In tracking our every move and every physiological measure, and in making every private moment visible—indeed, in visualizing those moments for us—such practices are rapidly doing away with previously held standards of privacy, as Edward Snowden’s revelations about the staggering growth of post-9/11 surveillance and data-collection practices by the National Security Administration (NSA) and other government agencies recently made clear. In a videotaped Christmas message of December 2013, Snowden notes,

Recently, we learned that our governments, working in concert, have created a system of worldwide mass surveillance, watching everything we do. Great Britain’s George Orwell warned us of the danger of this kind of information. The types of collection in the book—microphones and video cameras, TVs that watch us—are nothing compared to what we have available today. We have sensors in our pockets that track us everywhere we go.³⁰⁹

In a later interview for *The Nation*, Snowden emphasizes the dramatically enabling power of these digital technologies, speaking of mass electronic surveillance as a profound “moral moment” for computer scientists, one that corresponds in magnitude to the moral moment physicists faced in the wake of their invention of the atomic bomb, when they recognized that what they had produced could make them responsible for harming enormous numbers of people.³¹⁰

As philosopher Henry Giroux points out, however, these developments are not so much a product of technology as they are of expanding global flows of power, the rise of the totalitarian state, and the emergence of “networked societies.” Further, they are linked to neoliberalism’s condition of historical amnesia, which has enabled what Giroux calls “narcissistic culture” and “casino capitalism” to transform every relationship into a commercial exchange; these are the forces underlying the death of privacy and the routine exposure of the most intimate details of everyday life. The consequent ubiquity and inescapability of surveillance, Giroux argues, produces an atmosphere of mutual distrust, discouraging free speech and free thought.³¹¹ Today’s surveillance methods are being brought to bear increasingly to construct a manageable neoliberal subject, not just through external monitoring and intervention but, as we have seen, through infiltrating the subject and encouraging him or her to self-manage and self-monitor. This subject’s ingrained habits of self-surveillance are connected at multiple levels to corporate power, capital accumulation,

digitization, and the fracture and “privatization” of the individual.

Writing about surveillance, Steyerl notes in her 2012 essay “The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation”—which I discussed in chapter two—that social media networks and cell-phone photography have created conditions of mass self- and mutual surveillance, adding to the ever-growing urban networks of institutional surveillance that include security cameras, GPS tracking, and face-recognition software. These practices, she argues, which produce horizontal forms of social control at least as influential as vertical ones, are based on practices of visual representation that strongly influence the production of the self:

The top-down cultural hegemony exercised by advertisement and corporate media is supplemented by a down-down regime of (mutual) self-control and visual self-disciplining, which is even harder to dislocate than earlier regimes of representation. This goes along with substantial shifts in modes of self-production. Hegemony is increasingly internalized, along with the pressure to conform and perform, as is the pressure to represent and be represented.³¹²

The “down-down,” internalized hegemony Steyerl speaks of, a supplement to the more explicit forms of “top-down” hegemony, is producing shifts in modes of self-production and subjectivation precisely through the “soft tyranny” of biopolitics that Massumi describes in the quotation with which I introduced this study.³¹³

In her essay “Affect and Exchange,” which I discussed in chapter two, Gilligan writes about transformations in the production of the biopolitical subject as a function of proliferating tools of digital surveillance and documentation; for her, these constitute “new forms of calculating individual identities.” In a biopolitical era, she argues, these forms are tools that serve capital. Tailored data sets tend to fragment the subject into component parts that are constantly rearranged and reordered algorithmically; these processes aid in the incessant monitoring and forecasting that decides precisely how useful we are to capital accumulation.³¹⁴

I have made the case throughout these chapters, then, that the works in question by Steyerl and Gilligan operate in at least two ways. First, they offer opportunities to grasp and rethink the conditions we find ourselves in today in the midst of neoliberal crisis, shedding light on how biopower shapes us as subjects of capitalism by wielding visibility as form of control. Second, these works propose politically potent avenues of relief. I laid out some of the philosophical and historical underpinnings of my approach in chapter one, discussing the

concept of biopower in Foucault's work and exploring its implications for the production of biopolitical and capitalist subjecthood as discussed in the work of Massumi, Deleuze, Groys, and other writers. In all of these authors' texts, the subject's visibility emerges as critical to biopower's functioning; their work reveals the ways biopower actually shapes subjects by rendering them perceptible, observable, open, and exposed.

Steyerl's video polemics *Strike* and *Strike II* and Gilligan's three-part science-fiction video drama series *Popular Unrest* are the focus of the second chapter, which explores the insights these works offer into how subjecthood is fashioned biopolitically through photographic, psychological, physiological, and other technoscientific forms of documentation. Drawing on work by Foucault, Deleuze, and Massumi, as well as on related work by Berardi, I argue that both video series suggest that documentation is not merely a process that chronicles pre-existing subjects, instead pointing to its power to actually constitute subjects through rendering them visible—and therefore manageable—in various ways. Both series, I argue, also suggest possibilities for a different kind of subjecthood through their articulation of “strikes” aimed at resisting or evading biopower's relentless visualization of the subject.

In chapter three, I discuss abstraction as both a theme and an operating force in Gilligan's *Popular Unrest* and in two works by Steyerl, the pseudo-documentary *Lovely Andrea* and the static video triptych *Red Alert*. These works, I argued, all perceptively assess the relationship of contemporary processes of abstraction—formal, economic, social—to forces of intensity in a late capitalist sphere. Supporting my analysis with reference to work by Foucault, Massumi, and Berardi, as well as to work on abstraction by Sven Lütticken, I argued that in these videos, abstraction and intensity emerge as complementary dimensions of biopower that shape the subject through violent processes of fracture, atomization, and bodily compromise, breaking it down into discrete, rearrangeable units, thereby rendering it more isolated and thus both politically impotent and amenable to an “orderly” form of biopolitical visualization: more “readable,” more understandable, and therefore more controllable. These three works propose that a redeployment of affect offers redemptive potential.

With reference to work by Foucault, Berardi, and Groys, I argue in the fourth chapter that Gilligan's 2009 three-part video series *Self-Capital* and Steyerl's three-part video series *In Free Fall*, of the same year, make explicit, in different ways, the relationship of global

economic crisis to crises of biopolitical subjectivity. Gilligan's work, I contend, explores the individual who is required to model herself after capital—becoming her own enterprise, or “self-capital,” a manifestation of the quintessential neoliberal subject Foucault describes as the “entrepreneur of himself”—while also exploring the subjectlike qualities of global capital itself. Gilligan's work focuses on the ways the individual is pathologized and learns to self-pathologize in order to remain economically productive. Hers is a risk-assuming subject who is constantly monitored and, much like a financial instrument in the market, the target of incessant forecasting in a regime of surveillance medicine. Steyerl's work turns away from the subject as a means of rejecting its artificially discrete status, exploring instead the “biography” of an object as an agent-like, material thing that troubles the received subject-object binary. For Steyerl, the image as a thing rather than as representation is also of interest, and in her work, the realization that today, the image is more constitutive than it is descriptive of an external subject emerges as a potentially liberating one. It means that new tools of imaging and making-visible can be used to re-draw reality itself and to create new forms of subjectivity.

This study is limited in scope to considering what a small group of video works from Steyerl's and Gilligan's much larger oeuvres tell us about the relationship of biopolitics and visibility to neoliberal subjectivity—and to what political possibilities these works suggest. A great deal of productive study remains to be pursued at the intersection of biopolitics and contemporary art. The field of art history and visual culture has witnessed a flourishing of studies that deal with art's engagement with the problem of surveillance and visibility, yet biopolitics is a topic that is brought into such studies only occasionally. And while biopolitics itself is a steadily growing topic of study and philosophical analysis today in fields outside of the history and theory of art and visual culture, the study of biopolitics in relation to art is still at a relatively nascent stage, thus far explored only in limited ways.³¹⁵ More case studies of Steyerl's and Gilligan's videos, writings, and other works—which I have just grazed the surface of here—as well as of work by other contemporary artists, some of whom I have mentioned briefly in this study, will allow further assessment of the implications of Foucauldian biopolitics for an understanding not only of neoliberal subjectivity in particular but also of many other dimensions of twenty-first-century life. Such studies are urgently needed in an increasingly polarized political environment—one in which, on one hand, modern technoscientific developments magnify the social abstractions produced by

biopower in the smooth spaces of the digital, generating fantasies of dematerialization, perpetual growth, and triumph over human limits, and, on the other, looming political and human collapse promise the opposite of biopolitical optimization.

For Gilligan and Steyerl, it seems, art is a political platform, one that operates at philosophical and theoretical as well as activist levels. Both artists expose tiny cracks in the veneer of a seemingly invulnerable capitalist system that may yet be prised open. Their work suggests that if it is possible to envision a self beyond the reach of biopower, outside of or after neoliberal capitalism, there is hope for it to be a less instrumentalized one. This future self may be a fractal-recombinant node or object in an affective network; if this network exerts its own subjectivizing force, it may be one that favors collectivism. To embrace being “unique like everybody else,” as Gilligan’s work implies, or to identify as a thing among other things, as Steyerl suggests, may promise liberation from the bonds of subjectivity and individuation and offer a path toward a more interconnected existence. Thus, whereas the theorists whose work I draw on here—Foucault, Deleuze, Massumi, and others—are sometimes accused of pessimism or even fatalism, Gilligan and Steyerl, by contrast, taking up a similar set of problems, offer something different, each in her own way: proposals for collectivization of the “I” as “we.”³¹⁶

³⁰² Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (note 158), Kindle locations 262–265.

³⁰³ Gilligan, *Popular Unrest* (note 44).

³⁰⁴ These documents form what critic Brian Droitcour poetically describes as “the residue of our personhood’s digital and physical molting—images shed in square, flat flakes like bits of a snake’s skin, recording a body’s change.” Brian Droitcour, “Selfies and Selfiehood,” *Culture Two*, April 6, 2013, <https://culturetwo.wordpress.com/2013/04/26/selfies-and-selfiehood/>.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Foster, *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes* (note 220).

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Henry Giroux, “Totalitarian Paranoia in the Post-Orwellian Surveillance State,” *Truthout*, February 10, 2014, <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/21656-totalitarian-paranoia-in-the-post-orwellian-surveillance-state/>.

³⁰⁹ Edward Snowden, Christmas message, December 25, 2013. See Michael B. Kelley, “Here Is Edward Snowden’s Christmas Message,” *Business Insider*, December 25, 2013, transcript and video, <http://www.businessinsider.com/snowdens-christmas-messgae-2013-12#ixzz2oUr5gFxp/>.

³¹⁰ Katrina vanden Heuvel and Stephen F. Cohen, “Edward Snowden: A ‘Nation’ Interview,” *The Nation*, October 28, 2014, http://www.thenation.com/article/186129/snowden-exile-exclusive-interview#/.

³¹¹ Giroux, “Totalitarian Paranoia in the Post-Orwellian Surveillance State” (note 308).

³¹² Steyerl, “The Spam of the Earth” (note 44).

³¹³ Massumi, “The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens” (note 1).

³¹⁴ Gilligan, “Affect and Exchange” (note 96), 33.

³¹⁵ Relevant works already cited in this study include Blom, *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality, and Media Culture* (note 4); Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation” (note 4); Kaplan, “‘A Rare and Chilling View’: Aerial Photography as Biopower in the Visual Culture of ‘9/11’” (note 285); Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (note 255); Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (note 41); and Väliaho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (note 5). Azoulay’s pivotal book *The Civil Contract of Photography* (note 182), also cited earlier in this study, is, arguably, implicitly a study of biopolitics. Other important studies linking art and biopolitics include Beatrice von Bismarck, Bettina Leidl, and Eva Maria Stadler, *Art or Life: Aesthetics and Biopolitics* (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2012); Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip, *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), <http://mitpress.mit.edu/books/tactical-biopolitics/>; Jaleh Mansoor, “A Spectral Universality: Mona Hatoum’s Biopolitics of Abstraction,” *October* no. 133 (Summer 2010); Yates McKee, “Haunted Housing: Eco-Vanguardism, Eviction, and the Biopolitics of Sustainability,” *Grey Room* 30 (Winter 2008); and Yates McKee, “The Public Sensoriums of Pula: Cybernetic Abstraction and the Biopolitics of Urban Survival,” *Art Journal* 67, no. 3 (Fall 2008). My own series for *Fillip* magazine, titled *Apparatus, Capture, Trace: Photography and Biopolitics*, appeared in issues 15 to 18 (2011–2013) and includes essays on the intersection of photography and biopolitics by Saul Anton, Ariella Azoulay, Ahmad Hosni, Caren Kaplan, Martha Langford, Gabrielle Moser, Maria Mühle, Public Studio (Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky), and me. See <http://fillip.ca/content/apparatus-capture-trace-photography-and-biopolitics/>.

³¹⁶ I am grateful to curator, writer, and theorist Mohammad Salemy for giving me permission to borrow his phrase “the I as we,” which he coined in a different context on April 28, 2014, in a Facebook conversation with Matteo Pasquinelli.

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