## Virtual Tower, 'Virtual' Pit: On Potentiality and the Status of Unrealised Art

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Vladimir Tatlin, Model of the Monument to the Third International, 1919, photograph, 1919–1920

In 1976, the Latvian artist Valdis Celms set to work on models for the Pozitron, a crystal-disco-ball-like structure imagined as the origin of a sprawling mass of light. Rotating around a central ball, the Pozitron's metallic prisms would refract and reflect both internal and external light sources, bathing the Ukrainian factory for which the structure was designed in various shades of soothing glow. Celms developed four distinct regimes of illumination for the Pozitron, each in turn shifting with contingencies of natural light, in a bid to draw sensory lines between weekdays, Sundays, international festivals and state festivals. Detailed plans and drafts were drawn at the factory's request, but years rolled by and the thing was never built. In 2019, it was announced that the 2nd Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (RIBOCA2), due to take place from May 2020. would see Celms's neglected project realised at last. By April 2020, with the art world on lockdown in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was clear that this could not proceed as planned.

What would it mean for a '70s invention, conceived in relation to a Soviet industrial order of which there remain only traces, to be 'realised' as part of a twenty-first-century art show? Which part of Celms's vision, against the shell-like backdrop of contemporary (neo)liberalised Riga, was considered by the artist and organisers compatible with being fulfilled? In modern day Andrejsala, the idea of hypothetically enhancing the sensory experience of factory workers by playing on the rhythms of the social calendar might jar, for instance, with the general liberal consensus that holidays aren't for work. Presented as a 'model', Pozitron gestures towards an ideal, but in 2020 would do so by means of a mechanism only tangentially compatible with what that ideal entails. What's more, even in 1976, the work's 'model' status was itself less an earnest statement of intent than a canny means of exhibiting art on otherwise hostile ground. Working in a Cold War dictatorship that rejected the values of artistic abstraction, Celms's designation of the 'design' category to this piece, rather than signalling an expectation of meticulous fulfilment, represented a means of pushing what is now described as an artwork into the space of then-acceptable use- and industrybased endeavour.

According to its own internal logic, the Pozitron's meaning and value is arguably produced without recourse to its purported intention. The aesthetic operations of this kind of kinetic art were, according to Celms himself, to do with the possibilities inherent in a spatial structure.1 In fact, they might be read as concerned above all with ideas of possibility itself. The kinetic process begins with a static form, the motion of which begins to reveal the potential in that form. Such potential, says Celms, is inherent in the structure itself, the role of motion being one of interpretation. According to this principle, the effect of motion on the structure's shifting manifestation unfurls (in the Pozitron's case through the play of light) a sense of possibility that floods both body and brain. It is such an aesthetic experience, both meditative and emotive, that constitutes the substance of this work perfected, it would seem, in the function of the 'model' alone. Insofar as the experience of potential is evinced here through witnessing the relationship of motion to structure, a three-dimensional model, or even (in terms of concept) a two-dimensional plan, does much of the aesthetic and conceptual work - work that transcends, in the end, the actualised lighting of a factory floor.

According to the principles of Celms's kinetic process, potential might be best understood as a matter of delicate tension. Stasis, Celms explains, 'is not alien to the kinetic object; on the contrary, stasis plays the role of non-motion within the kinetic object'.2 There in that careful phrasing lies the key to an idea that grounds the project in philosophies of power. This 'stasis-as-non-motion' non-motion as an affirmative state - seems to elevate the Pozitron's powers of exposition towards a proposal that Giorgio Agamben credits with explaining and revealing potential in its truest and most realised form. For Agamben, the power and potential to be or to do involves, indeed requires, the power and potential not to be or do.3 Thus the Pozitron's potentiality for movement consists in its potentiality not-to-move – its potential, that is, for stasis. Were this potentiality for stasis absent - were the model unable to be still - the Pozitron's potentiality for movement would not be a potentiality at all and merely a matter of the 'actual'. Inasmuch as the model, first in its stasis and then in its moving form, animates these principles of potential, it draws some attention to its own conditions of existence. In 1970s Riga under Soviet dictatorship, the conditions in which an artist grappling with abstract ideas of 'the possible' was able to articulate this project were severely limited. And while the Pozitron model appears at a surface level to suggest a horizon - a set of provisional ideals that could then go on to be fulfilled - in fact what it speaks to most of all are the limits of possibility in generalised states of duress. On these terms, if the Pozitron's potential is 'unrealised', that is not because a giant rotating orb never made it through factory doors, but rather because the artist, in actualising his models, had no choice but to position them in terms of 'construction', 'experiment' and 'design'. Agamben would require that artistic mastery retain a trace of resistance in its perfect form. The potentiality attached to the Pozitron's being is lacking in any resistance to the potential (which it lacked) to have taken a different shape.

In attempting to think in terms of pure potentiality, Agamben draws on Aristotle's distinction in his Metaphysics between what on the one hand might be called a 'capacity' (dunamis), a theoretical kind of possibility, and what on the other is actually able to be realised (energeia). Aristotle makes this distinction to affirm that capacities or potentialities exist and persist, even when they cannot or will not be enacted. Perhaps the Pozitron's greatest utopian force resides in its affirmation of just these kinds of potentialities. In its elegant display of movement-as-resistance-to-stagnation, the Pozitron subtly points to that which was missing from Soviet-sanctioned art at the time of its own creation: the degree of relative freedom required to enact an ideal. Aristotle's realm of the dunamis, the field beyond the actual to which the Pozitron points, approximates to the kind of realm that Gilles Deleuze called the 'virtual'. Just as Agamben sees in potentiality an active presence of absences, Deleuze saw in the 'virtual' a set of absences that, rather than awaiting realisation, were themselves completely real.4 For Deleuze there was more in the vast idea of the 'virtual' than there ever could be in the simple domain of the 'actual'. More, perhaps, in 'virtual' states of art than their realisation in biennials.

But what if the virtual biennial were to become the norm? Does the virtual in its garden sense, which points, in effect, 'online', have any important relationship to the 'virtual' meant by Deleuze? 5 Such a relationship could not be one of equivalence, given that the Deleuzian 'virtuality' is concerned with process rather than any fixed state. But might the process of art's virtualisation, contrary to much common sense, open up a space for encounter with something materially greater than that which can be physically made? From a constructivist point of view (Russian Constructivism forming, indeed, an important part of Celms's conceptual heritage, along with that of others included in RIBOCA2) a work's materiality could certainly exist more meaningfully in relation to potential – Deleuzian 'virtuality'

- than to its physical actualisation. For despite their preoccupation with both matter and abstraction, the Russian Constructivists could be understood as having advocated for an emphasis neither on the 'matter' nor on the underlying 'idea' of an artwork as concerns in and of themselves, but rather on capacities for praxis that might reorient relationships to matter in the world - a matter, in itself, of utmost material worth. The First Working Group of Constructivists, whose grand ambition was in 'realising vital acts',6 were conscious these were not to be mastered in the fields of design, engineering and construction alone, and those such as Boris Arvatov, who insisted on the primacy of material as a precedent for socially purposeful forms, held that command of material presupposed experimentation, 'laboratories' of abstract thought - sites of engagement, above all else, in questions of potentiality.

Can it be any loss, in that case, that Vladimir Tatlin's proposal for the Monument to the Third International, all three (lost) incarnations being models, was never intended as something to be rendered 'real'? While the technology to synthesise so dizzying a tower of iron and revolving glass was not remotely within reach of an agrarian 1920s Russia, the work implied an organisational relationship between people (with its communal conference centres and centralised hubs of propaganda), a relationship to politics of space (in its supposed situation at Communism's Muscovite heart) a relationship to the physical world (tilted in perfect parallel with the axis of the Earth) and last, a relationship to the compromised conditions of possibility that worked against all these things. Models of such self-conscious limitation, in the words of Tatlin himself, 'stimulate us to invention in our work of creating a new world, and [...] call upon the producers to exercise control over the forms encountered in our everyday life'.7

Can it be any loss, furthermore, that the paintings Lyubov Popova called 'space force constructions' were 'to be regarded only as a series of preparatory experiments'?8 Or that her contribution to the Third Communist International was also curtailed in the end? Having worked on the sets for a piece of military theatre, titled 'The End of Capital' and destined (at least provisionally) for Moscow's busy streets, what, you could ask, was negated when 'new controls on street activities' called the whole thing off? Not the dream of capital's end itself. Repeatedly suppressed with violent hands, Constructivism's most profound afterlife didn't always manifest in 'realisations'. When Lygia Pape developed Constructivist notions into new sociological and anthropological ideas and forms in '50s and '60s Brazil, most memorable were works, like the strange Divisor, that had many more lives than were actualised. First imagined, but never materialised, as a plastic awning for suspension in an exhibition space, hung so that gallery-goers might put their heads through its holes, the artist hoped to induce and critique with the work a kind of embodied alienation. Divisor's first actual staging took place by a Rio favela in 1967. Neighbourhood children, without instruction from the artist, slid onto the sweeping expanse of cloth she had left for them on the ground and poked their heads through its holes. An impromptu performance of sorts was birthed as they chattered away to each other, walking as one sheet. Only after this did the artist ascribe specific parameters to the piece on its renewal in other contexts, and still its possibilities remained continually open. 'There is no work', wrote Pape: 'there is only the unfolding into a thousand routes'.9

Perhaps it should come as no surprise, given the traditions of thought from which it emerged, that the Pozitron was considered 'realisable', was planned for realisation, without the involvement of its specified industrial site. Or was it that the museum (here the biennial setting) was simply understood as more or less a factory itself? A site, as Hito Steverl most notably put it, of hyper-production (of images) and exhibition value; a space of confinement and disciplined gazes – a site of organised exploitation?<sup>10</sup> Just as Celms tests out industry's limited powers of wish-fulfilment by projecting his work into the factory, Steyerl posits the museum itself as a site of inherent unfulfillment. A site, that is, of an unfulfilled vision of transparent, 'public' discourse. With its overflow of durational films, blaring at once as nobody listens, woven into a sprawling texture of generalised unintelligibility, the museum, says Steyerl, puts on display its consistent absence of public discourse, making the presence of that absence as public as did Celms with his 'models' in their absence of power to be named as art.

While the museum as represented by Steyerl can hardly be read as intentional or earnest in any reflexive display of unfulfillment, RIBOCA2's re-conception explicitly moved the agenda towards this kind of reflexivity. The biennial's landscape of empty lots and 'wastelands', granaries, a paintball field and various hangars, all of which were earmarked as site-specific backdrops to a series of physical events, instead became the setting for a feature film (constituting the biennial's 'reimagining') that unfolded interactions between finished, unfinished and absent works of art.11 In its purposeful attention to the question of lack – to that which intervenes both in art's viability and its visibility, the RIBOCA2 film tends towards the engagement of a discourse lacking in the polished museum. As Celms wrote of his kinetic process, motion and structural conditions are not the only relevant factors in the genesis of form. An object's character also depends on 'the source of energy that generates this motion [...], the potential uses this source allows and the way in which energy is managed'.<sup>12</sup> So, indeed, does the management of artworks' 'virtualisation' thoroughly shape those artworks' distribution and their meaning. Online museums might frequently be built as variously accessible repositories of virtual simulacra - not much more than thumbnails representing art 'items'. But so might they be built to emphasise the Deleuzian 'virtual' lives of artworks that have not or couldn't be made. The 'virtual' ground of a 'real life' work cannot, says Deleuze, resemble it. The 'virtual' is by definition differentiated in form from that which it might ground. RIBOCA2, always intended as a forum for examining ruptures of modern utopias and Soviet ideals while tending towards counter-hegemonic visions of 'tomorrow', staged its differential re-conception 'somewhere between a ruin and a construction site', in a liminal space that acknowledged both its own situation and 'the limits of our control'.13 Rather than a stealth, begrudging reconstruction of the works in an awkward and falsely 'complete' online space, the film was a means of drafting in the virtual to engage with the unrealised itself - the virtual as space of potential and therefore a 'virtual' space.

The virtual, of course, need not only be a site of utopian 'virtuality', as typified by a phenomenon in early net art that virtualised a vision from the past. In 1848 Fyodor Dostoevsky embarked on a novel which, according to one of his biographers, would have prefigured (Constructivist) concerns with the social value of art, between utilitarian 'goals' and Romantic fancies of autonomy, but the novel in which he would do so was cut off close to inception; Netochka Nezvanova, the story of a woman whose name translates as 'Nameless Nobody', only made it as far as its own and its heroine's adolescence. After the author's forced exile to Siberia for collusion in

a literary circle whose aim was to unravel the wrongs of autocracy and serfdom with recourse to Western philosophy, the partial novel, not to be returned to, became its own testament to the limits of art and language as means of emancipation. If Dostoevsky meant to speak to the artist's role in the possible, an online materialisation of Netochka Nezvanova, in the form of an artist presence identified by that name, would in 1995 become a hallmark for the power of the virtual sphere as a site of malevolent 'virtualities'. Netochka Nezvanova, avatar of avant-garde internet performance, while picking up perversely on Dostoevsky's vision of the artist as an aesthete with a purpose, became as known for her abstract and usable software artworks as she did for aggressive displays of anonymous cyber-domination.

Until around 2002, Netochka Nezvanova put her (lack of a) name to various pieces of widely used software. Although numerous artists and programmers were likely responsible for her output, associated also with other aliases, including antiorp, integer and m2zk!n3nkunzt, she managed to establish a reasonably coherent identity largely through two trademark strategies, one being widespread trolling, the other a knack for proprietary capitalisation. Underlying both was an interest in at once exploiting and exposing online information architectures. Liberal use of largely unintelligible code in relentless mailing-list spam was one basic means of drawing attention to interfaces' internal layers; denial-of-service attacks on websites was another way of showcasing virtual power and vulnerability. Having given the world Nato.0+55\_3d (1999), one of the first applications with real-time video manipulation capacities, enabling artists to reconstitute video as live performance, Netochka Nezvanova also showed the easy intersection of such internet 'firsts' with functions of monopoly capitalism. Distributing software licenses at whimsical but not insignificant fees, Nezvanova would revoke the access of any who criticised her code in public. Withdrawing licenses or denying already-paid-for software updates, her exercise of power in its fully realised form was a lesson in potentiality-not-to as violence. What's more, it demonstrated the extent to which the virtual economy could be seen as a 'virtual' space of potential for capitalistic exchange minus the basics of accountability.

If Netochka Nezvanova's internet practices floodlight the darker side of virtual art's materiality – the tendency of such art, for all its utopian impulses, to proffer and develop dystopian potentialities too - this testifies, in part, to technology's distance from its surface neutrality. As Nezvanova herself articulated her vision, the internet is formed on a 'panoply of actions and interactions, mutualism, parasitism, mimicry and errors', none of which suggest a neutral and few of which an equitable space. 4 And inasmuch as we can understand the virtual to be a space of potentiality, with such virtual artworks as RIBOCA2's revived Pozitron working to expose potentiality's dynamics, Netochka Nezvanova pointed to the sense in which the virtual can serve as site of mystification as much as exposure. The characteristic opacity of the code in which she expressed herself, all the while exerting the kinds of tyranny that privileged access to information affords, reveals the truth of the virtual not as a site of dematerialisation, but rather as a site of materiality purposefully obscured. The virtual sphere's tendency towards deliberate obfuscation - protecting the unequal distribution of knowledge and therefore possibility - is precisely the fault that motivates Hito Steyerl's long-term interest in the 'poor image'. The glitchy, scar-ridden digital file that qualifies as 'poor', by drawing attention to its own corrupted code, exposes, for Steyerl, the conditions of its own visibility - the violence that inheres in the distribution of information online.

For Steverl, any distinction between virtual and material realities is subject to the deepest suspicion. Still, in her art, the virtual is frequently privileged as a means of excavating Deleuze's 'virtual' domain. Her 2015 video installation *The Tower*, for instance, merges CGI and film in a virtual environment from which to consider an unrealised architectural project, spearheaded by Saddam Hussein, that aimed to reconstruct the mythic tower of Babel. Centred on a particular virtual reality graphics company on Ukraine's conflictriven border with Russia, the three video channels wind through the virtually continuous sites of the eponymous tower, a shooting game and a complex of luxury condos. 'Realisation' is broken down in the context of a world where a metastatic virtual realm is infinitely implicated in what is called the 'real'. 'Immaterial' processes of real estate rendering, online gambling and military simulation, united in relation to this one VR programmer, arc into real-life military conflict and unarguable material dispossession. With The Tower Steyerl uses a virtual space to tether hypotheticals to that which they ground, sketching the digital construction of material truths, experiences entangled in 'immaterial' networks that outsource, offshore, exploit and destroy. The Tower is neither utopian in the manner of the Pozitron, nor a dystopian performance of cyber-tyranny. Rather, it advances a meta-exploration of how virtual art relates to 'virtual' ontology - how the realm of the hypothetical bears on the (mediated) real.

While The Tower's tower graphic is actually based on the Great Mosque of Samarra, the video's reference to Babel as a fulcrum of unrealisation seems far from incidental. Some fifteen years before making The Tower, Steyerl had spoken of a Franz Kafka fragment from 1920 in which the writer proposed the idea of digging a pit of Babel, rather than the mythic tower. 'Instead of constructing a monumental presence', she noted, 'he suggests the active creation of an absence, which has to be excavated in order to advance things and to be able to progress'. Since the disaster at Babel, according to its mythos, resulted in the loss of a universal language, the implication seems to be that the creation of such a language would require the construction of knowledge 'bottom up'. For while technological means of mass communication might parade pretensions to universality, at least from the aerial perspective signified by a tower, they have in fact concealed those tensions and exclusions that imperfectly 'universal' codes so typically inscribe, and that only a perspective from the ground would ever be able to reveal. Take, for instance, the development of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's universal code at the end of the seventeenth century. As Steyerl points out, his proof of universality leant on a false equation of zeros and ones with (respectively) the interrupted and uninterrupted lines of Chinese hexagrams as found in the I Ching - an imposition of correspondence rather than an accurate discovery in dialogue with more first-hand channels of understanding. Netochka Nezvanova reveals something similar in her treatment of digital code, as several of her works showcase the strange and entrancing audiovisual results of translating code from one form into another - code into sound, sound into graphics, graphics into code. That which you'd expect to correspond to something legible often proves harder to fathom, and if The Tower attempts to unearth potentialities - plans for building and destruction - that are otherwise sheathed in virtual networks of communication, that which it posits as most unfulfilled is the dream of Babel itself.

As I write, The Tower can be seen online, via an independent 'gallery guide', as part of a 'VR' 360° tour of the exhibition 'Life Captured Still' at Thaddeus Ropac in London, providing an alternative channel

of access while the gallery itself is closed. Arrows joltily drag the viewer between installations that, given the limitations of this virtual format, are often moments in these videos literally captured still. The purpose of this virtual exhibition in the absence of access to the moving image is somewhat unclear. Pre-dating the gallery's unforeseen closure (which lends the virtual version a kind of 'virtuality' as a shadowy parallel of the exhibition's unrealised run) the virtual tour is predominantly a deadened record of a once-living show. The virtual here intrudes on the work in the interest of little more than its capture as so many units of cultural value, its replacement as so many objects in the kind of contemporary 'museum' that Steyerl aligned with the factory – a container for the production for 'images, jargon, lifestyle and values'.

And yet, if conditions are such that a factory becomes a museum, a museum the set for a biennial-reimagined-as-film, there have arisen artistic inventions that give reason to expect or insist that the film sets of this time might be more than cemeteries of cultural widgets. If the virtualisation of art on the one hand opens onto instances of art's inertia - works entering awkwardly into an order of vacuous commodities while heightening a pretence to immateriality that mystifies that order, the consequence need not be a return to nostalgic veneration of the physical object – the object that is honest, at least, in its relationship to the market. There is scope, it would seem, for virtual art to expose, critique and intervene in the politics of what is materially possible. Such feats of artistic intervention demand an openness and sensitivity to questions of 'virtuality' - that which Deleuze imagined to have greater material significance than what is understood to be 'real', realised, complete. Contra prevailing tendencies in online representation, the virtual can be recruited as a means of manifesting the 'virtual' capacities and limits of artworks that have not been, could not be or will not ever be 'actualised'. Pointing to their own contingency, proposing perhaps utopias, perhaps the violence inherent in non-creation, these artworks attest to what has been revealed about incompatible realities - realities that belong, at once, to the same chaotic world.

- Valdis Celms, 'The Dialectic of Motion and Stasis in Kinetic Art', *Leonardo*, vol.27, no.5, 'Prometheus: Art, Science and Technology in the Former Soviet Union', October 1994, pp.387–90.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp.389–90.
  - Thus Agamben's influential thesis that the power that grounds the juridical order does so by virtue of its power to suspend the law; see *Homo Sacer:* Sovereign Power and Bare Life, California: Stanford University Press, 1995. It should be noted that in March 2020 Agamben sparked controversy over his rash application of this theory to what he deemed to be an 'unmotivated' state of exception imposed by the Italian government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this case, while Agamben perhaps usefully drew attention to the means by which the pandemic was leveraged for the implementation of nationalist and authoritarian logics of governance, he was dangerously incorrect to assume and assert the lack of a legitimate motivating force behind any imposition of lockdown measures.
- 4 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (trans. Paul Patton), New York: Columbia University Press, 1995 [1968].
- I use quotation marks ('virtual') throughout to distinguish the Deleuzian sense of the term from its common meaning.
- 6 Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists, March 1921 (trans. John E. Bowlt).
- 7 Vladimir Tatlin, 'The Work Ahead of Us' [1920], in John E. Bowlt, *Russian Art* of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934, London: Thames & Hudson, 1917, p.207.
- Lyubov Popova, statement in  $5 \times 5 = 25$  (exh. cat.), Moscow, 1921, p.3.
- 9 Lygia Pape, 'Divisor. The Skin of All: Smooth, Light Like a Cloud: Loose', in Lygia Pape: Magnetized Space (exh. cat.), Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2011, p.244.
- Hito Steyerl, 'Is a Museum a Factory?' [2009], in *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012, pp.60–76.
- 11 See the RIBOCA2 website, available at https://www.rigabiennial.com/en/riboca/riboca-2 (last accessed on 8 July 2020).
- 12 V. Celms, 'The Dialectic of Motion and Stasis in Kinetic Art', op. cit., p.388.
- Online announcement, available at https://www.rigabiennial.com/riboca-2 (last accessed on 21 May 2020).]
- 14 Netochka Nezvanova, 'The Internet, A Musical Instrument in Perpetual Flux', Computer Music Journal, vol.24, no.3, Autumn 2000, p.38.
- Hito Steyerl, 'The (W)hole of Babel', lecture as part of haus.0, Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, 20 January 2000, transcript available at http://www.haussite.net/site.html (last accessed on 22 May 2020).



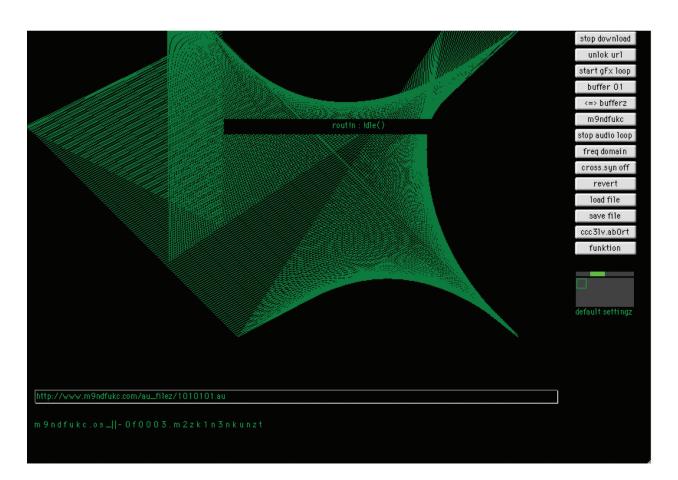
Valdis Celms, *Pozitr*on, 1976, kinetic maquette of steel, paper and wood, 46 x 37 x 40cm.
Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at
Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy
Dodge Collection of Nonconformist
Art from the Soviet Union.
Photograph: Peter Jacobs

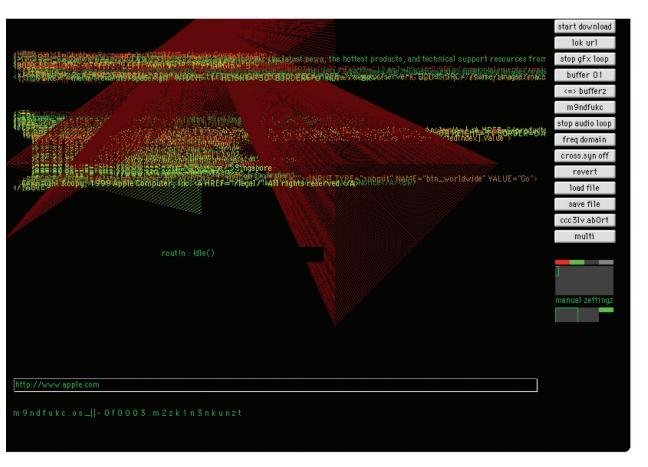




Hito Steyerl, *The Tower*, 3 channel video installation, 2015 HD video, colour, sound, 6min 55sec. Installation view, Esther Schipper, Berlin, 2019. Photograph © Andrea Rossetti. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020. Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin







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