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“Is this for real?” A Close Reading of In Free Fall by Hito Steyerl

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The airplane crash. A great readymade game for long flights between workshops and biennials. Something sudden to interrupt the endless easyjet. Forget all those meditations on motionless speed. Forget futurism. Life is more mundane. Really, nothing happens, until something finally does. The stewardess comes with a hot towel that’s meant for someone else. Another hour passes. At some point the MacBook Pro battery runs out. Then suddenly there’s a lurch and a teeter on the brink. That sinking moment when it becomes clear that everything is lost, a point of no return, in which potential reaches its maximum point and tips into actuality. What comes after that is less important, you don’t actually need to see it, though a certain Schadenfreude can’t prevent you from registering what you already know: an eerie silence of white light from the window burns your retina and that’s it, the aircraft goes off the radar, reels out of control, breaks up, and careens to the ground. The smell of kerosene like napalm in the morning, the lurching breakup with flying chunks of engine. Air Force One is down, off the radar. But it’s what came before, that sinking moment you should hold on to, it is the moment when knowledge is about to become. It is the moment you

continue to rehearse, the moment immediately after the inevitable establishment of a fact and the moment before its ultimate fulfillment. It is the moment upon which Hito Steyerl's *In Free Fall* (2010) hangs suspended.

The last sentence of the preceding paragraph sounds like airplane armchair metaphysics, when actually, it is clearly matter that is at stake in Steyerl's film, or to be more precise, the materiality of images, images as things. You can see that in a very literal way in the montage that serves as the film's opening and binds together its three parts as a refrain. Against an apocalyptic sky, a jetliner breaks up in mid-air, and people get sucked out the back. The plane smashes into the ground wing first. Chunks of burning engine fall to the palm-lined beach. Survivors emerge from the debris, crying children in their arms. YouTube fragments become blurred geometries in the darkroom clarity of HD. This is a collective material we all know in the moment before we see it, cut sequences subconsciously memorized, screaming to be reused. "Poor images," blockbuster crashes filtering straight from the obsolescent Fordist dream factory onto the internet, where they join the other living dead in the peer-to-peer afterlife, recut, cropped, uploaded, and juggled in a kind of labor of love by some invisible mass audience of anonymous prosumers, maintained on "public" spaces owned by private corporations, familiar to almost everyone, a no-man's land of phantasms, one of which is the crash, the catastrophe, the end.

We know all about the crash, and why this image would be emblematic. The plummet of commodity values on global markets, we feel on our skin. The "crash" itself is a spectacular image whose repeatable suddenness hides the reality it claims to represent, if one thinks about the delayed effects of ongoing economic crisis, continual governance by state of exception, repeated shock therapy

and privatization, and overt class war from above, a slow war of position, waged through small electroshocks and doses of disinformation everyday. Crisis is never sudden, it simmers forever and boils over one day. People go to the movies after they lose their jobs, spend hours waiting for something to happen, rehearsing the next batch of shockwork on Facebook and YouTube. In real time, a certain systemic logic, an economy of poverty emerges: the crisis generates its own ways of visualizing itself, its ways of coping, its own affects, its own resources, its own modes of recycling the ruins.

It is to such a site of recycling that Hito Steyerl takes us. With pristine HD steadicam footage, she visits Mojave Air and Space Center, a scrapyard under a piercingly blue California sky where airplanes come to die. A jolly captain with a pearl studded cap and a wheelchair cart becomes the entrepreneurial Virgil, the informant who leads us through their afterlife. He tells us about his business ever since the Chinese started buying scrap. “Every time there’s a dip in the economy, it’s windfall to us,” he says, surrounded by profitable ghosts. The montage of the footage breaks the interviewee’s own narrative into discrete, even disjointed units, conscious cracks and jumps in speech. They reinforce the double identification of the airplane graveyard as a site of economic catastrophe then transformed into a Hollywood soundstage: the graveyard’s owner first uses the gutted airplane carcasses for special effects explosions (boom, away she goes, he says, as we see the ball of flame on a perfect day, a Hollywood image that repeats again and again). And then he sells the remains, the raw aluminum. The “vicious situation of the economy” is a profitable explosion. He understands, he knows: “you’re making money no matter what you sell.” To reinforce the constructive edit, Steyerl transforms this new knowledge - namely that there is a profitable life after the

crash - into a thing: we see the explosion on a small DVD-player, playing against the backdrop of airplane wreckage. It is an image that will haunt the whole film, its frontispiece. Machine pincers crunch their way through aluminum sheeting, providing the soundtrack for ongoing images of catastrophe, caught in slow motion, overwritten by an electronic shofar. Is this for real, asks the captain.

This is where Steyerl's film really takes off and becomes danceable. Michael Jackson syncopates a re-cut Discovery Channel documercial on aluminum recycling that now plays on the little laptop DVD player instead of the image of explosions we saw before. The thing about aluminum is that "it's so recyclable," suggests the loop, it can be used again and again, like the "poor images" of the crash itself, one might add. The DVD player shows us how airplane scrap travels down the assembly line, to be melted down back into molecules, becoming the extremely durable coating on DVDs, again and again, overlaid by other samples from the captain's interview, forever. The airplane is transubstantiated, turned into a medium for the picture of its own explosive dissolution. The symbol of Fordism at its cruising altitude (the jetliner) takes wings into its own afterlife as a DVD, becoming a temporary symbol of post-Fordist crisis as commodity. Another early CGI image that will haunt the film: the simple ellipse of the DVD traveling around the globe as an orbital vehicle, much more like a flying saucer than the Learjet-like lobe of Spaceship One, the suborbital private spacecraft that took off from another part of the Mojave Air and Space Port in 2004, around the same time "the Chinese started buying scrap," by the way. Scaled Composites, the aerospace company that launched this private suborbital flight, was bought by Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic, who plans to take ultra-rich private passengers on short joy rides to outer space

sometime around 2015, if the world doesn't end before then. For the mass consumer, such joyrides will presumably be some 3D HD home technology, the good old affect simulator of the stamp-and-cut Hollywood movie of apocalypse, presumably also courtesy Virgin via Apple i3D, again and again, forever. Until the next crash, when all the screens go blank, that is.

This, of course, is the refrain to which Steyerl's film must return, as its passengers embark to the sounds of the Fifth Dimension's "Up, up, and away." The pilot introduces the air safety video. You know you are in for some bad eternity when the guy from Lost looks out of the window. The lurch that stood at the film's beginning repeats, leading into the same old good old, any old crash sequence. It is a false ending that will send the careless spectator out of the black box and on to the next exhibit, if not for the subtle differences and additions in the montage. Another reproduction, another turn, another crash: Air Force One is down again, another shock effect to extend the general trauma that facilitates the kinds of drastic economic redefinitions that crises always bring. How much can we know about this endless repetition? How do we know? Can we ever change it? Can we stop ourselves from falling? Falling for what? Is this just another repetition, another rehearsal?

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When the second crash sequence is over, the camera returns to the Mojave aircraft boneyard, but without the suggestive electronic shofars. It is clear: this is documentary, factography, even, with all the attendant desires.[1] Our hope, of course, is that an operative practice like factography would somehow lead to the reality beyond the spectacle, if not to a new dialectical realism: a living art true to its time, a political art that will grasp the problems of its day, not

by interpreting but by changing them. It is primarily this desire that is discussed collectively at all the conferences, round tables, panels, and biennials, from and to which we travel on crash-prone easyjet liners, a desire constructed and rehearsed in certain circles as often as, say in mass culture, a fantasy of catastrophe.

For now, Steyerl satisfies at least some of those demands. The tone becomes desert-dry didactic, gravel and sand crunching underfoot. Steyerl's narrating voice (in German, with English subtitles) is almost flat, as she introduces Sergei Tretyakov's famous 1929 essay, "The Biography of the Object." This is a new mode of narration in which the story of an object tells of the people who made it, and gives a cross-section of the social relations through which it was formed. Crunch, says the wrecker, through wires and fuselage, underscoring that we are talking about materialism, and not just some fancy metaphors. On the dinky little DVD player close to the wreckage, an inter-title announces "Biography of an Object: 4X-JYI." 4X-JYI was a Boeing 707-700 blown up for the movie Speed (1994); you can read its number on the tail-fin in the footage. Before that it served in the Israeli Air Force, a young expert tells us in Hebrew. The jolly captain confirms the explosion: holes in the wings and kerosene on a crystal desert day. Imagine the glory. Ka-boom.

The explosion from *Speed* becomes an implosion as Steyerl goes back to the biography's beginnings, to the crucial year 1929, the year the stock market crashed, the year with the most airplane crashes in history, the year Tretyakov wrote his essay, one of many crucial documents in the Soviet Cultural Revolution. Deadpan slapstick footage of early aviation crashes links 1929 to Howard Hughes and the film *Hell's Angels*, whose story we know from Scorsese's *Aviator*. The jolly captain ominously tells us that he also knew Hughes. He looks a little like Hughes, come to think of it,

it's something about the beard. The Israeli expert converts this paranoia into a narrative. Intercut with a TWA promo video from the Fifties or Sixties. 4X-JYI was ordered by Hughes Tool Company in 1956, and served as a part of TWA's fleet until the 1970s, when it was sold to Israel for military use. The DVD player plays parts of an Israeli reportage on the Re'em Squadron, a refueling unit made up of former commercial airliners. 4X-JYI served in this squadron, the expert tells us. But its cousin, a plane from the same batch of 707s, 4X-JYD is also a movie star. Converted into an electronic command center, it was part of the operation at Entebbe in 1976, in which Israeli and Ugandan military rescued hostages from an airliner taken over by German and Palestinian militants from the PFLP. Three movies were made. The tension builds. On the dinky DVD player, terrorists pull a pin of a hand grenade and bust into the cockpit. They announce their movement's complicated name (Che Guevara Front, Gaza Brigade, another set of reproductions) and that the airplane is in their hands. Klaus Kinski's appearance makes it clear: the affect of film (and not just THIS film) has once again taken us over completely. We're now under control. By and for what and whom remains unclear.

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This sequence, and the ones that follow it, link Steyerl's *In Free Fall* to another film on airplane hijacking, Johan Grimonprez's *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997). That film also opens with a crash, fragments from an explosion hurling at the camera. In Grimonprez's montage of rarified footage, hijacking is inscribed into the entertainment complex of cinematic attractions and culinary delights, where politics is little more than a stunt routine. Grimonprez's film, one could say, is a kind of post-modern *Bildungsroman* about reproductions and repeatable deathward plots,

culled from the television archive and fictionalized through introspective fragments of Don Delillo's *Mao II* (1991). It is an updated Werther for a global petit bourgeoisie raised on action movies and airline food. All plots head deathward, but it is always the others who die, not just for the manipulator of the readymade footage or the phantom of the novelist narrating that film, but even for the little boy who appears at some point in a post-hijacking press conference, admitting that the whole thing wasn't scary at all, but fun, though he tells the horrified reporters that he wouldn't do it again, he'd probably miss too much school. The little boy receives his real education through the evening news, especially when he becomes one of its fifteen minutes superstars. Is that the only education possible? In the framework of a novel or a Bildungsroman, yes. Right at the beginning of Grimonprez's film, there is a quote from Don Delillo, voiced over to elevator music in a nighttime taxi to the airport. "Everything seeks its own heightened version. Nothing happens until it's consumed." The same consumerism overdetermines more serious productions of knowledge by now. That is, there is no longer any real distinction between the evening news and school; both have reached some new pinnacle of infotainment, fifteen minutes of knowledge rather than fifteen minutes of fame.

The problematic of consumption and its form in the post-modern Bildungsroman provides a link back to Sergei Tretyakov's "Biography of the Object,"[2] which was actually rooted in a critique of the novel as such: the novel is always a psychological machine that favors subjectification and affect over objects and objectivity. "In the novel, the leading hero devours and subjectivizes all reality," writes Tretyakov; its structure of psychological consumption - internalization, one could say - and its feudal history make it favor the world of leisure time and shun the

world of production. The biography of the object is the alternative. As the object - any produced object - travels down the assembly line, it is defined by the people on both sides of the belt, people who are not heroes or villains, as Tretyakov remarks, but producers and reproducers of certain relations that the things themselves and the traces on their surfaces later express. Writing a literature of facts and biographies of things would involve understanding precisely what social relations go into a thing's production. And this in the hope of not just interpreting the production process but actually changing and controlling it socially. That is, Tretyakov's project is one of creating a heightened awareness, and even more, a kind of solidarity with the world of things.

This is not so much an aesthetic alternative to the Bildungsroman that describes the "suffering of proletarian Werthers in their leisure hours," as a pedagogical one. Brecht called Tretyakov his teacher, and really, pedagogy was central to Tretyakov's life project, be it teaching Russian in China, or setting up kolkhoz newspapers in the Crimean. He also regularly published his travelogues and texts in magazines for Komsomol activists and young pioneers.[3] Young pioneers play a central role in another monument of early factography, the famous sequence by Dziga Vertov from the Kinoki's report on how pioneers try to convince a NEP market of the benefits of collective enterprise, the sequence where a cow gets cut up in reverse. This and the film as a whole, in its science-film-aesthetic, is a great illustration for the desires behind Tretyakov's idea of the "biography of the object," its didactics, and Soviet Fordism at large: namely, that common knowledge of production processes can ultimately create a society in which work is effortless. The cow can be "assembled" and brought back to life. This is a literal reversal much like the one that must have gone through the head of Henry Ford when he invented his assembly line with a

glance at the “disassembly lines” of the slaughterhouses in Cincinnati. But the reassembly of the disassembled cow is not just an argument for the more rational beef production, an advertising clip for a certain “object” (in this case Soviet beef, the Soviet camera eye, and the Soviet project on the whole). Instead, through Vertov’s camera eye, we see a promise: together we will gain control of production, reproduction, and time. Each movement, each glance will make immanent biomechanical sense, like in the Soviet Taylorism of Alexei Gastev, who also wrote poems about aerial landscapes that influenced all the Futurists including Sergei Tretyakov, whose novel on collectivization begins with a flight from Moscow to the Crimean, the manmade geometries below. Together, we will soar, like the “Flying Proletarians” of Mayakovsky’s strangely romantic epic poem written in service of aviation, the Soviet Fordist equivalent to “Hell’s Angels.” We will live in aerial cities like those of late 1920s paper architect Georgy Krutikov and when we look down we will see suprematism, spread out in all its autarchy. Together we will learn how to harness implosions.

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Steyerl’s film shows you such an implosion, when the fireball from “Speed” sucks back in to recreate 4X-JYI. But what does the biography of the object mean today? The manmade aerial geometries that Gastev, Malevich, and Tretyakov so admired now provide the opening visuals for the romantic comedy *Up in the Air* (2010). Scanning the megamalls below, we look for smiling barristas quoting Shakespeare ad libitum to confirm some theories of the “communism of capital.” But more likely, whatever confirmation we seek we will find virtualized and dissolved online, stored on physical servers under circular fields hidden in defunct EMP-shielded missile silos. Moving images are no longer really

commodities once they are uploaded. Botoxed with new codecs to hide the pixelations, they begin to resemble inversions of Duchamp's reciprocal readymades, comrade things that can be rewound and replayed over and over again as ringtone fetishes, performed at random by whatever multifunctional gadget you happen to be attached to. The purpose or the lack thereof depends entirely on you. So at least the promise.

Such conditions would seem appropriate enough for a new "biography of the object," put to use as a critical instrument for revealing the conditions that underlie the spectacle. However, *In Free Fall* misplaces these hopes, or, more precisely, it reappropriates them. The ticking tension becomes increasingly phantasmagoric; the "biography of the object," which was supposed to be about the object's human uses, has started to speak of something else entirely. Stranger than fiction, the narrative entangles itself in the garbled versions of the totality that we all carry around in our heads, presenting an increasingly paranoid, even catastrophic sequence of affective doublings that rest upon something too fluid to be called pure reproducibility. Che Guevara Front, Gaza Brigade. This is not just about the spectacularization and failure of politics, the conversion of its "grand narrative" into piecemeal for the evening news. Instead, perhaps predictably, it is exchangeability that takes over the narrative. In that sense, the documentary does not become a mockumentary with the introduction of the story of 4X-JYD, even though it would seem that way. Instead, it becomes even more realistic than realism; it is as if the commodities themselves could speak, as in that famous opening of *Capital* Vol. 1.[4]

Paradoxically, it is this moment of exchangeability of images that reveals the "biography of the object" to be a story made by people, whose affective labor still feeds the exchangeable commodity form,

despite all claims that “there is no outside.” The Israeli expert looks past the camera and asks “Is it HD?” in English, smiling and regaining his composure when he hears that it is. The hijackers announce that we have almost reached our destination, and that we are in the hands of an international revolutionary movement. The wrecker at Mojave tears into more fuselage. When the Israeli expert tries to continue, he stutters and breaks off the narrative, he has to ask in English. Ok, the Israeli cabinet, he resumes after a mumbled prompt. Charles Bronson is back on the DVD player, together with Robert Loggia. After some more ticking tension music, the story reaches its deathward climb in a gunfight. Four dead hostages, on top of 45 Ugandan soldiers, the hijackers, and of course Yoni Netanyahu. But other than that, a “sweeping success,” says the expert-actor, adding “so cheesy,” and translating the whole thing into English much to the mirth of the entire team off screen. 4X-JYD briefly served as Israel’s Air Force One, and is now a movie theater in the Air Force Museum of Hatzarim. Another affective-mimetic simulator ride. The expert’s work becomes overt mimetic labor. Once again, we suspend our disbelief.

The story returns to 4X-JYI, which became a transport plane in the Israeli Air Force’s 120th International Squadron, the support-and-refueling group that has been training for attacks on long-range targets. The expert-actor tells us that in an interview with the Squadron’s commander, he saw champagne bottles with dedications on the labels that themselves are classified. (The cork is to be popped only after the end of history, in some fallout shelter, presumably. It is a strange gift: one that can be only be taken as a given, like death.) Again, Klaus Kinski comes on screen. A stewardess offers him champagne. He assures her and us that he has his own brand. As champagne pours into flatbed glasses, celebrating year one of the 707, he extracts a grenade from the

bottle. “In interviews with Israeli Air Force, the word Iran is never mentioned. But it floats in the air.” Like bombs. The expert-actor shows us a close up of the tiny 707 matchbox model, 4X-JYI stenciled in on the wing. The bus from *Speed* slams into the plane again, and the music comes on, and we don’t know for sure what exactly is exploding: is this some future apocalypse involving Israel and Iran? Is this still all about 4X-JYI? Or maybe it is Tretyakov’s “biography of the thing” that has been blown to bits?

To support that last reading, Steyerl herself steps in before the recycling sequence, wearing what could be Rodchenko’s black haute couture proletarian jumpsuit. She is overshadowed by yet another machine, the wrecking claw, a negative halo, about to squash her head. “In 1929, Tretyakov asserts that the life of individuals is less important than the life of objects,” she reads from a sheet of paper. “Matter loves, er, lives on in different forms.” The Freudian slip breaks what would otherwise be a dour anti-humanism. It is a conscious reply to Tretyakov’s ascetic assertion that “people’s individual and distinctive characteristics are no longer relevant” in the biography of the thing: “The tics and epilepsies of the individual go unperceived.” Here, the entire edit hangs on such a tic. The pixelated aluminum bars look like gold or silver as they are shoved into the furnace. The artist herself becomes material in the cut, a speaking object, like Michael Jackson, who is back, he-it-we are all so recycleable like aluminum, the slip repeats again as melted aluminum pours, until Steyerl completes the phrase, “Matter lives on in different forms, this does not apply to humans.” To preempt any unnecessary pathos, the safety film starts with its yellow oxygen masks, and the expert is back, wearing a uniform and pilot’s cap, chromakeyed against a wrecked airplane interior. The inflight words of welcome are done with a much thicker accent than before. “It’s too much, no,” he

laughs, as a mother reassuringly helps her little girl to put on the oxygen mask. We know we are in for trouble again when the guy from Lost looks out of the window, and the plane tilts again. Now more than ever, we don't need to see the explosion. We have learned its biography by heart. But even more, we have become part of the carnage. All we need is the title of the emblem, its nominal presence, its Logos, its sound.

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Gravel crunches underfoot. The sun is bright. The silence holds. The steadicam pans over girders, wires, scraps of fuselage. On his trip through the zone, you can almost hear the cameraman breathing. "Good morning, Kevan," says Steyerl off screen, asking who shot these images. We are now seeing for them for the third time around. "I photographed them," he confesses from skype. What follows at first looks a little like a "making of" as it is usually told in special features on commercial DVDs. The cameraman directs the claw hovering over the dinky little DVD player, which now, lacking its motion graphics YouTube, looks all the more like a prop, an empty shell. From Skype - a medium that embodies a constant panoptical potential for unexpected confrontations with instant humanity, creating an imperfect, contingent space of disarming interruptions and bendings of time - Kevan tells us that he was trying to extricate himself from a financial situation. The claw moves too abruptly and hits him, but he laughs, the steadicam shadow bobbing ghostly sharp on desert sand. Fuselage, wiring, removed aluminum sheets where airline decals used to be. Kevan talks about the little house he bought and turned into an architectural masterpiece. Oddly enough, he remarks, it was clad in aluminum like an airplane. But the crisis forced him to sell it when the real estate market was at an all-time low. Part of a landing gear stands alone on the edge of the Mojave runway, a little like the

ghost towns of Arizona and California. The claw crunches into fuselage again. “We had to prepare for a crash. Once the process of descent began, there wasn’t anything to stop it.” Kevan confirms that allegories have a certain use-value when he talks about how watching and editing the film helped him to understand that he needed to ride it out and put something back together on the other side. The introductory sequence of radar disappearances and rapid descent are back as an illustration, so overloaded with significance now that there is a waning of affect. We know this all by heart, we knew it from the beginning, and we know it even better now in all variations. We have become numb to terror itself. We are living through the consequences.

To mark this transition, the dinky DVD player migrates to a new location. There is a large oil painting in the background up on a huge easel, a smaller one dangles suspended from the ceiling, which almost looks like a bondage quote from Steyerl’s earlier film *Lovely Andrea* (2007). Comrade thing is a bondage model recast as an oil painting, an exemplar for which theorists like Boris Arvatov and Sergei Tretyakov exhibited an almost pathological (and one could say misogynistic) hatred. The moving image, threatened by crisis and made obsolete through cooptation by the internet’s “communism of capital,” returns to painting. Abstract expressionism 2.0. This is strangely appropriate, if you think about the genealogy of post-war painting, which already made its home in the equivalent of the airplane graveyard, a jumble of mimetic devices and strokes. For abstract expressionism, canvas and paint had become base matter, to be recycled, a little like aluminum; the formlessness of gravity had replaced the gravitas of form. The ultimate claim is that painting after the collapse of painting could be more indexical than photography. The moment of contact was key, its ultimate goal to create comrade things that are more like

lovers than friends, like the canvases of Mark Rothko, which are supposed to quicken in proximity effects like silky skin, if you don't get distracted by the security guards. There is no truth beyond that; abstract expressionism does not need any veracity devices, save that of the romantic authorial biography, which now finds ways to connect and internalize truth as base matter, to intern it in a personal form whose process or "happening" is far more important than any material result. Kevan returns to painting after the crash of painting, a site all the more specific because it is linked to a very definite cultural tradition deployed as a knowledge weapon in the Cold War. At the same time, unlike the original abstract expressionism, these canvases are not made with the pretense of being high art; instead, they are abreactions that delve beyond the image into the world of matter, much more about the physical human use of creating and destroying on a flat picture plane, just to ride it out, get it over with, and constitute something on the other side.

We see Kevan at work in his studio, presumably located in a space provided by a former part of the military-industrial complex. He talks about how he worked as a video engineer who would put moving images on TV-screens or other devices into films in any circumstance. We see him projecting the explosion of 4X-JYI from a notebook to canvas, juggling the pictures in real time. "There was a great need for veracity in film, and one of the best ways to do it would be to put a television in what you're doing," he tells us from the DVD player, which itself has served as such a veracity device. "It makes things seem real." Painting used to be full of such devices, so in that sense too, Kevan's practice is a painting after painting, a world of homeless representations. That turn in painting was only possible because its veracity devices turned out to be little more than scenery, props and projection surfaces, even if

they once had the validity of law. Think of Jan Van Eyk's "Arnolfini Wedding Portrait," where the mirror – a little like Steyerl's DVD player – is a seal on a visual marriage contract, as well as a symbol for mimesis and its capacity to reflect reality, which supplies the author with his juridical authority. It comes as no surprise that later scholarship shows this marriage contract itself to be a fake. The bride on the picture was possibly thirteen years younger, a dreamy teenager living not in Bruges but in Paris, promised away by dad to a lesser merchant from Lucca who looks like Vladimir Putin to underwrite a major loan. By painting her on this canvas and claiming that this picture mirrors reality completely, Van Eyck turned her into a mobile image, a Thing detached from any human biography, worth more money than any living being, not only in its own time, but especially now, when the picture hangs in London's National Gallery as a founding document of an entire painterly tradition.

Steyerl involuntarily returns us to such a long history of mobile images by showing us Kevan as he sketches the flying saucer of the DVD on a canvas in pencil. Images circulate, he tells us, and precisely that is the problem. People no longer watch television, or at least not like they used to. The time that used to stream back to the corporations as money now streams back down to the user as a torrent. The "user's freedom" to watch TV without commercial breaks online produces the strange new freedom for Kevan to manipulate his canvases like familiar comrade things, in destigmatized degraded surfaces that will never reach any museum: the ubiquity of images means that he is out of a job, destined to produce the kind of painting that by no stretch of the imagination is a valuable art market commodity. "The corporations have to squeeze somebody so then they squeeze labor, the means of production," says Kevan. The emblematic image of the DVD,

applied in oil paint and burnt by a blowtorch, looks like it has been through a crash itself, remarks Steyerl. Indeed, it was "caught in the digital revolution." Painting this emblem of obsolescence becomes the only possible therapy after that "experience of descent." It is the only way of dealing with that feeling of flying a plane that you can't land.

Suddenly, the skype confessional breaks off. The jolly captain is back to tell us another story, only now this story is true. "We're heading down through 20,000 feet in our approach," he says, when air traffic control calls him and tells him that there's a bomb on board. Because stuff like this really happens. The footage on the DVD player is back again briefly with its ticking bomb. Only now, the Hollywood soundtrack illustrates a real-life experience, finally giving credence to phrases that we have been hearing all along, torn out of context and used as material for biographies of things. Is this for real? This is like a simulator ride. Here, the footage itself is related back to a real close encounter on the part of the film's most fictitious and uncanny character, who suddenly turns out to be a subject too, and not just some Howard Hughes type Fat Controller. Precarity is ubiquitous. Danger is everywhere. Following the logic of equivalencies, the crash footage becomes a document of his experience, too, much like painting could be understood as more of a document or a prompt for some universal aesthetic experience than an aesthetic experience in and of itself. Again we are about to suspend our disbelief. Whoa, remarks the Israeli expert qua captain, and what happens to the passengers? The spectators? The audience? Breath normally, says the safety video, as the aircraft breaks apart in half. And does anybody make it out alive? A skydiver plummets from the explosion. Wind whistles as he tries to catch a falling parachute. Oxygen masks drop into the abandoned cockpit. The film goes back to that point of

undecideablity where fiction and reality merge, where knowledge hangs suspended, where there is so much air that you cannot breathe.

It is at this point that Steyerl's film generates what is perhaps its most memorable and its most painterly image. The Israeli expert and Steyerl are in uniform and unison, rehearsing the mechanical ballet of the airline safety routine against the backdrop of windmills turning desert wind into energy. The safety routine is an individualized mass ornament, biomechnical in the sense of avant-garde theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who instructed his actors in Taylorist moves gleaned directly from Alexei Gastev's rationalization manuals; a performance of post-human robotics, an internalization of the Futurist costumes in *Victory over the Sun*. The windmills indicate the possibility for a new stage of post-Fordist rationalization involving "smart energy," knowledge production, and other new sources of income for a nicer, "softer" capitalism with a post-human face, where people-qua-commodities continually "maintain" and "reproduce" their routines in loose and grandiose biomechanical performances. This is mimetic labor: building potentialities that can never quite be actualized, sometimes approaching virtuosic grace, sometimes on the verge of comic disintegration into total dilettantism. Virgin winds upturned; productive leisure performed by imperfect bodies reforged in late afternoon sunlight.

There is some uncanny proximity to painting from the height of the Stalinist purges in these images. It makes sense. Meyerhold was shot as a Japanese spy. Sergei Tretyakov jumped to his death down a flight of stairs while in the clutches of the NKVD. Boris Arvatov ended his days in the madhouse. Socialist realism is factography's afterlife, a precursor of peer-to-peer. What we see in these sun-drenched images is a little like the work of former October-group

member Alexander Deineka. A similar source of oxygen lies buried somewhere in his painting of three little boys on a shoreline watching a seaplane fly away. It is air from a postcard. Air you try to breath when you crane your neck to look at Deineka's famous ceiling mosaics in the Moscow metro station "Mayakovskaya," under what was supposed to be Meyerhold's theater, upward views of Soviet aviation at all times of day, suggesting sky more than 30 meters underground. Such oxygen is the air of disposable time, time that can be stolen in a noisy crowd, on an assembly line escalator, in a pause during a lecture, under almost any regime. It is the air of total inoperativity at the height of production, fatally locked into the black box of the High Definition video cube. From outside that box, all one can hear is the sound of its own making, that oxygen hymn with which Hito Steyerl's film *In Free Fall* reaches its end.

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[1] A catalogue of such desires can be found in the recent eipcp issue "the new productivisms" with contributions by Christina Kiaer, Devin Fore, Hito Steyerl, Dmitry Vilensky, Gerald Raunig, Marco Peljhan, edited by Marcelo Exposito. This publication - and the concurrent issue of Chto delat "What is the use of art?" are documents of a renewed interest in the "factography" that an English reading audience has known since 1984 through H.D. Benjamin Buchloh's "From Faktura to Factography", in: October, Vol. 30 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 82-119. Also see transversal 09 2010, http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910.

[2] Sergei Tretyakov. The Biography of the Object, in: *October* 118, Fall 2006, pp. 57–62.

[3] It was for pioneers that Tretyakov designed one of his most intriguing experiments, documented in a text called “The Pocket.” The experiment was started in 1929 when he asked his young readers to empty their pockets (and rather eerily, thinking of Pavlik Morozov, those of their neighbor) to describe the history of each of the objects inside, to invent or construct such biographies. The experiment continued until shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1933, when Tretyakov, about to embark on a militant investigation of collectivization, published its results. Today, every one gets to play Tretyakov’s game in those split seconds at the airport security check.

[4] Karl Marx, Capital Volume 1.: “Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values.”