

Hackear el sistema operativo del arte: nuevas formas de resistencia al trabajo en *Strike* (2010) de Hito Steyerl

HACKING THE OPERATING SYSTEM OF ART: NEW FORMS OF RESISTANCE TO LABOR IN HITO STEYERL'S *STRIKE* (2010)

ABSTRACT

The following essay focuses on the digital realm to discuss labor in the New Economy, investigating how subjectivity is simultaneously shaped and exploited through technology and its surveillance mechanisms. To do so, I reconsider Hito Steyerl's work *Strike* (2010) as a call to subvert the biopolitical power of information technologies. My analysis of Steyerl's piece seeks to reveal the social and material implications of technology, the unpaid labor that underpins the Internet, and the system of domination exercised by surveillance capitalism, which profits from data traffic and behavior modification. Against this, I suggest that *Strike* (2010) proposes a reappropriation of the machine as a form of resistance. Steyerl's video serves as a starting point to trace interventionist artistic practices that, through tactical means and hacking, have been able to reverse the surveillance mechanisms of the network, revealing their potential as gestures of dissidence within an increasingly computerized art world.

Keywords: Digital art, Surveillance, Hacking, Hito Steyerl, *Strike*

RESUMEN

El siguiente ensayo se centra en el ámbito digital para examinar el modelo de trabajo en la Nueva Economía, investigando cómo la tecnología y sus mecanismos de vigilancia generan y explotan subjetividad. Para ello, reconsidero la obra de Hito Steyerl *Strike* (2010) como una llamada a subvertir el poder biopolítico de las tecnologías de la información. Mi análisis de la obra de Steyerl busca desvelar las implicaciones sociales y materiales de lo tecnológico, el trabajo no remunerado que sustenta Internet y el sistema de dominación ejercido por el capitalismo de la vigilancia, que se lucra con el tráfico de datos y la modificación de la conducta. Frente a esto, sostengo que *Strike* (2010) propone una reapropiación de la máquina como forma de huelga. Así, la pieza de vídeo de Steyerl sirve como punto de partida para rastrear prácticas artísticas intervencionistas que, a través del *tactical media* y el *hacking*, tratan de invertir los mecanismos de vigilancia de la red, revelando su potencial como gestos de disidencia dentro de un mundo del arte cada vez más informatizado.

Palabras clave: Arte digital, Vigilancia, Hacking, Hito Steyerl, Huelga

1 INTRODUCTION

The mutations in the conditions and imaginaries of labor imposed by neoliberalism have been greatly intensified since the advent of the Internet. Information technology has not only substantially influenced traditional forms of work but has also brought about new forms of capitalist exploitation. This translates into precarious jobs in web-based work environments but also into “unpaid work, the activation of our behavior on the social web as monetizable work” (Scholz, 2009, p.2). Work has become atomized and individualized as a result of the post-Fordist reorganization of labor. The shift from the workplace to the private sphere could not have taken place without the technological developments of recent decades, as “Interactive and cybernetic machines become a new prosthesis integrated into our bodies and minds and a lens through which to redefine our bodies and minds themselves” (Negri and Hardt, 2000, p. 291). In the “New Economy,” the home and the bedroom – the domains of private life—have become the spaces in which work is performed in an increasingly isolated but permanently hyper-connected manner. In the words of Beatriz Colomina, “Post-in-industrialization collapses work back into the home and takes it further into the bedroom and into the bed itself” (2014, p.19).¹ Personal computers have turned into indispensable tools for newly detached laborers. In his analysis of this phenomenon, Jonathan Crary has pointed out how “this model of activity is not some transformation of an earlier work-ethic paradigm but is an altogether new model of normativity, and one that requires 24/7 temporality for its realization” (2013, p. 15). As a result, the working day has become interminable.

New variants of value production have materialized in the digital milieu. Cognitive and algorithm capitalism encourages subtle surveillance practices that economically exploit Internet activities that are cast as leisure. Consequently, distinctions between productivity and unproductivity or work and leisure lose their validity and make any form of resistance extremely difficult. Work on the Internet, paid or unpaid, has become one of the fundamental forms of the so-called “immaterial” labor, a model of production that, following Maurizio Lazzarato, increasingly relies on intellectual abilities, entrepreneurial skills, and the management of social relations, and that “produces subjectivity and economic value at the same time” (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 142).²

By its casual and precarious nature, its cognitive, affective, and social dependence, labor in the digital context relates to other types of work that have gone ignored for years and are therefore unrecognized and unpaid, such as social reproduction and the care and affective labor carried out by women. In this regard, feminist author Silvia Federici has identified reproductive labor carried out by women as a fundamental element for the sustenance of the capitalist system, arguing that “The fact that housework is unwaged has given this socially imposed condition an appearance of naturality (“femininity”) that influences whatever [women] do (2012, p. 34). In the Informational milieu, the naturalization of volunteer labor lies precisely at the root of the emergence of the Internet, and the conditions that make it an important element of the digital economy are based on “a difficult, experimental compromise between the historically rooted cultural and affective desire for creative production” (Terranova, 2004, p. 77). Thus, one could affirm that digital work is the post-Fordist work par excellence: centered on the control and generation of new subjectivities, it spreads as an immeasurable and fluid form of exploitation, penetrating all aspects of life.

While the digital condition is not universal and certainly depends on the exploitation of physical labor in non-Western countries, it has undoubtedly reshaped contemporary art: not only has it

become one of the most recurrent themes in artistic production in recent years, but it has also shaken the ways the different agents and institutions of the art world operate. What can be done when digitization makes the production of subjectivity by and for capitalism continuous? Is it possible to escape surveillance capitalism? What forms does the *strike* or labor resistance take in the information age?

In her work, *Strike*, the artist Hito Steyerl hits a plasma screen with a chisel and hammer. The video clip, a few seconds long, closes with a black fade-out. The sequence, which opens with the word “STRIKE,” repeats in an endless loop (figure 1). I intend to argue that this short piece stands as a call for a new type of resistance in the digital age—one that has to be made from and directed at information technologies. Steyerl’s work demands a new modality of strike that takes into account the biopolitical dimensions of information technologies—that is, how technologies contribute to the forms of disciplinary power of control through “the administration of bodies” and “the calculated management of life” (Foucault, 1990, p. 139-40)—and confronts the totalizing dynamics of neoliberal labor.

Many artists have explored the impact of technology on the world’s social and political organization through their work. Steyerl is one of those who has been most deeply engaged in researching and reflecting on these issues, either in writing or through her artistic practice. Her works, which usually take the form of essayistic documentaries or semi-abstract videos, fall within the sphere of artistic research and philosophy. As Nora M. Alter has argued, Steyerl’s video essays constitute a filmic version of the Benjaminian “dialectical image,” (2007, p. 48), namely, the proper form of the materialist presentation of history. Layering images and sounds, the artist employs elements of popular culture, computer-designed sequences, and documentary-style footage to call attention to contemporary hyper-capitalism, and to revisit the relationship between representation and history.

Steyerl’s work *Strike* images a mode of resistance to digital labor. The work’s destructive gesture picks up on a long-standing trope in modern and contemporary artistic practice. Nonetheless, *Strike*’s critical dimension is double: first, the piece rejects the power of the screens with which we interact every day, unmasking its hidden structures, and second, Steyerl’s act is aesthetic. The abstract composition resulting from the disruption of the screen suggests a possible escape route, a mode of resistance. *Strike* provides insight into the idea of digital labor and calls on its spectators to reappropriate the technological tools of control in order to subvert them.



Figure 1. Still from *Strike* (2010) Hito Steyerl. Image via: Ubuweb.

2 IS DESTRUCTION AN ESCAPE ROUTE?

The destructive rhetoric of Steyerl's work recalls the art of destruction developed during the 1960s. While destruction began to play a prominent role in the artistic practice of the historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, it was not until the early 1960s that the poetics of destruction became a full-fledged aesthetic phenomenon (Stiles 2016; Spieker 2017; Gamboni 1997). Paradigmatic examples include the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) that took place in London in 1966, Jean Tinguely's destructive sculptures, Nam June Paik's renowned smashing of the violin against the table performed in *One for Violin Solo* (1962), or the Gutai Group's and Nikki de Saint Phalle's use of shooting as creative practice. While the motivations of these artists were diverse, their approach was equally fruitful in the field of critical art. As art historian Kristine Stiles has pointed out,

Western society and its most compelling aesthetic productions continue to perpetuate the epistemological ethos of destruction. But art that once reflected, mirrored, and passively represented the abstract conventions and patterns of knowledge now actively presents the literal embodiment of psychic wounds, urban bedlam, and militarized consciousness at the crisis core of terminal culture (Stiles, 2016, p.45).

In Steyerl's case, that *epistemological ethos of destruction* is manifest in a gesture that questions digitalization as a functional system that redefines all domains of our lives, including labor. In this sense, I interpret the idea of digitalization as theorized by Art Historian Janet Kraynak, who emphasizes that it "is not a technology, confined to computer hardware and software, but represents an operational ideology, a powerful metaphor, and a transformative force in everyday life itself" (2020, p. 1). Destruction in *Strike* is confrontational in two distinct ways. Steyerl's gesture of breaking the screen functions as an act of liberation against digital labor, while it alludes to destruction as an inevitable condition for capitalist growth. The title of the

work plays on the meaning of the word “Strike,” which, in its literal sense, refers to the blow, and in its figurative sense, to labor resistance. This double interpretation encapsulates the idea of resistance to technology as the new form of strike in the era of digital labor.

The promising discourses about the emancipatory possibilities of information technologies began to lose momentum as it became increasingly apparent that capitalism’s technology perpetuates its old logics of exploitation and oppression. Although there is some validity to the positive rhetoric of the accelerationist discourse—since technological advances have improved connectivity and communication—the correlation between technological progress and the increasing accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a privileged few is undeniable. In terms of labor, the digital era is economically unequal and has proven to be detrimental to the conditions of workers and their ability to organize. Drawing on the work of Manuel Castells, Terranova has pointed out that “the expansion of the internet has given ideological and material support to contemporary trends towards increased flexibility of the workforce, continuous reskilling, freelance work, and the diffusion of practices such as supplementing (bringing supplementary work home from the conventional office)” (2004, p. 74). As such, technological infrastructures that articulate work today have proven not to be neutral in their relation to labor. Moreover, as Shoshana Zuboff noted in her book *In the Age of the Smart Machine* (1988), information technologies supersede the traditional logic of automation. Work is now not only automated but also “informed”: the vast information mass generated renders the production process visible (1988, p. 9).

The presence of information on productivity becomes a form of control, reshaping work processes, which are now progressively focused on changing the behavior and minds of workers so that they increase efficiency. With increasingly self-exploited and individualized working subjects, we could assert together with Gavin Mueller that “technology reduces the autonomy of workers, their ability to organize themselves against their exploiters ... [and] robs people of the feeling that they can control their own lives” (2021, p. 4). Today we know that our movements on the Internet are scrutinized and recorded by our personal technological devices and are transformed into data that functions as a valuable source of profit in the neoliberal market. This appropriation makes it even more difficult to resist productivity.

Steyerl’s work negotiates this new technological reorganization of productivity and invites us to consider the strike as a confrontation with the screen, with the devices that mediate our working activities, our leisure, and our lives. “In this economy,” Steyerl argues, “even spectators are transformed into workers.” Quoting Jonathan Beller, the artist states that “cinema and its derivatives (television, Internet, and so on) are factories in which spectators work (...) now, to look is to labor” (Steyerl, 2009). Her gesture can be easily related to a Luddite attitude that advocates for a total rejection of the use of technology. However, Steyerl’s destruction of the screen is neither overly violent nor abrupt: it is simply a small blow, a crack that provides a glimpse of what is inside the machine (figure 2). The artist’s reflection on the current online condition reveals that she does not contemplate the withdrawal of technology as a viable option: “The internet persists offline as a mode of life, surveillance, production, and organization—a form of intense voyeurism coupled with maximum nontransparency” (2013).

Therefore, to interpret Steyerl’s work as a plea for the abandonment or destruction of digital control devices is not entirely accurate. Quite the contrary, Steyerl’s work would rather suggest that “staying “in the medium” and negotiating categories in ambivalent and uncertain ways

may be the political agency of our time” (Friis, 2021, p.71). *Strike* evokes a critique of optimistic and utopian discourses that perceive technological development as liberating and emancipating (Bastani, 2019). Steyerl’s subtle destruction alerts us to the powers behind the screen, its political implications, and its impact on society. She develops this idea, which lies at the core of much of her artistic practice, from a position that is critical of capitalist growth based on technological development. The notion of destruction developed in *Strike* has more to do with that which is inherent in the relentless technological development undertaken under capitalism. In *Duty-Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, Steyerl refers to this phenomenon by transforming the Marxist concept of “creative destruction” into “creative disruption”:

Disruptive innovation is causing social polarization through the decimation of jobs, mass surveillance, and algorithmic confusion. It facilitates the fragmentation of societies by creating antisocial tech monopolies that spread bubbled resentment, change cities, magnify shade, and maximize poorly paid freelance work. (...) Creative disruption, fueled by automation and cybernetic control, runs in parallel with an age of political fragmentation (2017, p. 15).

The effect of which Steyerl speaks refers to the negative impact on democracies, on their forms of work and social relations. Yet, there is also material destruction behind technological progress and its creative disruption. Throughout her visual and written oeuvre, the artist repeatedly emphasizes the tangible dimension of the new forms of production, even if they correspond to what has been convened to be called immaterial labor. Her destruction of the screen in *Strike* recalls this physicality: despite its digital and virtual development, today’s economies continue to rely on material exploitation and physical labor. “Digital wreckage” The artist argues, “is both material and immaterial; it is data-based debris with a tangible physical component” (Steyerl, 2017, p. 101). Her 2010 video essay *In Free Fall*, which focuses on the story of an airplane scrapyards in California to examine the material consequences of finance, is a good illustration of this idea.



Figure 2. Still from *Strike* (2010) Hito Steyerl. Image via: Ubuweb.

Because of its planned obsolescence and use of earth-extracted elements, capitalist technology relies on dynamics of destruction. Destructiveness, therefore, functions in both literal and metaphorical ways. As the processes of financial value production become more immaterial and abstract—since they are based on data and information, subjectivities, and affects—their material destructive potential continues to increase. A case in point is the environmental impact generated by cryptocurrency mining: recent studies have determined that the human health and climate damages caused by Bitcoin equal almost half of the monetary value Bitcoin creates (Goodkind, Jones, and Berrens, 2020). Consequently, technological accelerationism not only modifies society and destroys the capacity for agency, organization, and resistance of workers. Its consequences are destructive for society and the planet.

What to do then in the context of capitalist technological accelerationism's perpetual productivity and destructive effects? Steyerl proposes "a process that doesn't grow via destruction, but very literally de-grows constructively" (2017, p. 18). Her destructive gesture in *Strike*, echoing the destructive art practices of the 1960s, is, in fact, a constructive one. Her position does not reject information technologies but seeks to modify them. The strike against the screen reveals what lies beyond it in order to find forms of agency. The work speaks of the possible subversion of technological devices. If withdrawal from technology today seems unrealistic and even impossible, the strike should therefore take place in and through technology, rather than against it. To grasp these possibilities of subversion, we first have to look at how the new technological production model functions and what its political implications are.

3 OF SCREENS, FREEDOM, AND EXPLOITATION: LABOR AND THE INTERNET

Multiple forms of non-waged labor have existed throughout history, albeit invisibly. Never before, however, has unpaid work been so positively regarded and even desired. The transition towards the neoliberal model of labor on the Internet brought with it an intensification of traditional economies of unpaid work. As Trevor Scholz has put it, web-based work environments have implemented "new forms of labor but old forms of exploitation" (2013, p. 2). While the post-Fordist system relies on shaping the workers' subjectivities for the production process, in the new economy it is human sociability and therefore, every user's subjectivity that is rendered profitable. Exploitation happens with the active involvement of the users since digital labor is often not perceived as work, but as a free service or even as leisure. Steyerl's strike against the monitor reminds us that the screens we interact with every day are not neutral and can be manipulated. Thus, *Strike* calls for an examination of how technological devices act as tools of biopolitical control and an investigation of the idea of "free labor" on the internet and the new forms of capitalist exploitation through surveillance.

Terranova speaks of "free labor" to allude to collective work performed for the production of knowledge, outlining its dual meaning as volunteer labor and non-remunerated labor. Labor on the internet is manifest through the work of writing, reading, managing, and participating in online communities. As Terranova explains, "Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into excess productive activities that are pleurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (2004, p. 78). Because cultural and knowledge work is central to the development of the internet, changes in the economies of digital labor parallel many of the conditions of contemporary artistic work today. Like many

artists, internet free-laborers “do not work just because capital wants them to; they act on the basis of a desire for affective and cultural production that is nonetheless real because it is socially shaped” (Terranova 2004, p. 77). In the post-Fordist model of work, traditional forms of Marxist alienation are transformed, as desire and personal satisfaction enter the labor equation. In this vein, Don Tapscott has discussed that

In the old economy, workers tried to achieve fulfillment through leisure. The worker was alienated from the means of production that were owned and controlled by someone else. In the new economy, fulfillment can be achieved through work and the means of production shifts to the brain of the producer (1996, p. 48)

This idea resonates with the notion of enthusiasm present in artistic and intellectual labor widely discussed by Spanish theorist Remedios Zafra. In neoliberal economies, Zafra explains, “(...) enthusiasm becomes at the same time something that saves and condemns, (...) that which, while motivating, lays the foundations of a sort of contemporary exploitation (...)” (2018, p. 32) [Translation is mine]. In a similar vein, what Tapscott indicates is a normalization of the neoliberal subjectivity that attains fulfillment through work enhanced within the New Economy. Considering how this new neoliberal subjectivity has been constituted is thus crucial to imagining what the strike should look like in the age of digital labor.

The configuration of neoliberal subjectivity suggests the existence of what Michel Foucault called a system of biopolitical governmentality, a “set of practices used to constitute, define, organize and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals, in their freedom, can have towards each other” (1999, p. 144) [Translation is mine]. The monitor that Steyerl confronts in *Strike* represents a *dispositif* from which biopower is exercised and the new subjectivity of the individual is constructed. Foucault identified biopolitics as a disciplinary form proper to capitalism, as the biological, the somatic, the corporal were fundamental to capitalism’s productive capacity (2003, p. 137). One could say that this model of control remains operative in the New Economy, albeit with some nuance: while under Fordism control over bodies aimed at optimizing performance, the new post-Fordist model is oriented more towards control over the human mind and emotions. This governing of the “soul” or psyche adopts very subtle, non-disciplinary, and even desirable forms, which makes it more difficult to resist.

That Steyerl chooses the screen as the object of her attack responds to a specific rationale. Her decision to hit the screen has to do not only with surveillance through hyper-visibility and visual representation, as might be suggested at first glance, but also with its status as a device for control, registration, and traffic of data. As Jonathan Crary has observed, screens and other digital forms of display “track eye movements, as well as durations and fixations of visual interest in sequences or streams of graphic information.” Systems of eye-tracking, Crary continues, “provide detailed information about individual behavior—for example, determining how long one looked at items that one did not buy” (2013, p. 57-58). Our use of information technologies accumulates data that serves as raw material for the production of economic value. In this way, information technologies have rendered domains of life that previously remained outside the logic of the market, such as our social relationships and affections, those that generate the most economic growth.

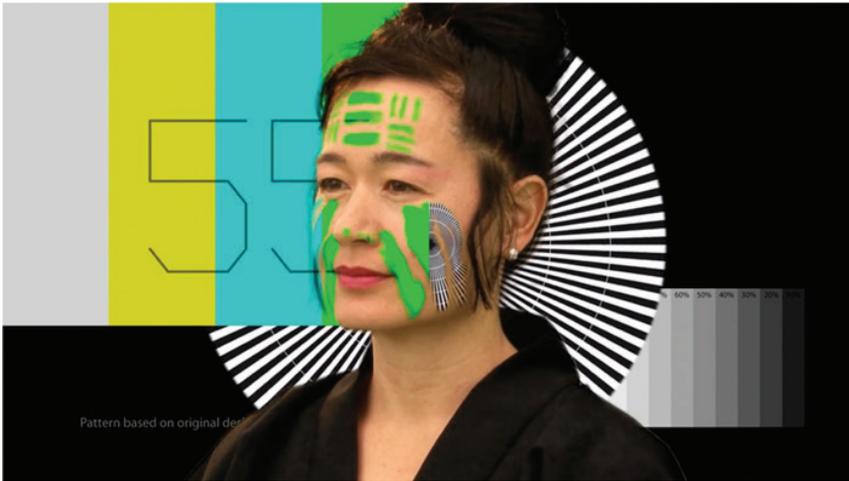


Figure 3. Still from *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic .MOV File* (2013) Hito Steyerl. Image via: Youtube.

Zuboff refers to this phenomenon as “Surveillance Capitalism,” which she understands as a new phase of capitalism that implies a system of power she calls *instrumentarianism*, which “knows and shapes human behavior toward others’ ends” and “works its will through the automated medium of an increasingly ubiquitous computational architecture of “smart” networked devices, things and spaces” (2019, p. 8). Using data analysis and predictive technologies, Surveillance Capitalism leads to behavioral modification and, ultimately, the exploitation of subjectivity for the economic profit of third parties. It contributes to imposing the subjectivity of the producer-consumer. Accordingly, online engagement with platforms that employ these methods, such as Google, Facebook, or YouTube, could be considered unpaid labor, as it generates an immeasurable accumulation of data that these companies sell and exploit. The contradiction here lies in the fact that most users voluntarily lend themselves to this exploitation, relinquishing any agency over it. As Kraynak points out, “we cease to be either consumers or subjects at all, but instead, we become objects for use (...) the digital “subject”, for all intents and purposes, is a digital “object” (2020, p. 22).

The confrontation with digital surveillance has been a recurring theme in Steyerl’s written and visual work. In her video *How not to be seen: A fucking educational .MOV file* (2013), Steyerl proposes a series of instructions to avoid being seen in the era of digital surveillance. Among other tips, the artist humorously proposes being smaller than the pixels of high-resolution satellite surveillance, using green-screen effects, living in a gated community, or even being a woman over 50 (figure 3). Her interest in the theme of surveillance on the internet resonates with the work of other artists who have also explored the topic through their practice. A significant example is the work of Julia Scher, who has investigated the dynamics of social control through interactive installations, site visits, and performances. Her distinctive surveillance beds, developed during the 1990s, invited visitors to lie on a bed while being monitored with cameras, and then screened the recorded material onto monitors. In a similar vein, the artist Hasan M. Elahi has inquired into methods of surveillance in and out of the digital sphere, and specifically in its implication for migration and border control. A good example is his self-surveillance

photo project Tracking Transcience (2002), developed after being detained by the FBI, and which compiled more than 30,000 images of his intimate life for later posting on his website (<https://trackingtranscience.net>), along with communication records, banking transactions, and transportation logs.

Steyerl's approach to the question of surveillance differs significantly, however, from that of the aforementioned artists. Her video essays often tend to employ humorous and ironic rhetoric for coping with the catastrophic, even mimicking the spectacular quality of the consumer culture (Magagnoli, 2013, p.723). While in *How Not to be Seen* Steyerl addresses the circulation of images on the internet and the difficulty of becoming imperceptible, in *Strike* she confronts what surveillance techniques entail in terms of labor. Despite the difficulty of escaping the biopolitical power of information technologies, Steyerl's work encourages awareness of it. It reminds us of the new biopolitical dimension of the technologies with which we interact every day. Resistance to surveillance capitalism begins by recovering our own agency as users, realizing our role as workers but also as objects of capitalist exploitation. This process of emancipation should be carried out within the digital medium itself.

Hence, while the strike in the context of immaterial labor seems to be increasingly difficult to execute, awareness of the mechanisms of control and capitalization that operate in the digital medium is a first step in resisting them. In *Die leere Mitte* (1998), one of her earliest video works, Steyerl concluded with a quote from Siegfried Kracauer: "There are always holes in the wall through which we might slip through, and the unexpected can sneak in" (1969, p. 8). This same idea is taken up again in *Strike*, where Steyerl opens a crack through which to "sneak" inside the device. If the answer to surveillance capitalism is to find ways to sneak into the system, hacking becomes the most viable resistance option.

4 THE STRIKE IN THE NEW CONTEMPORARY ART SYSTEM: HACKING AND TACTICAL MEDIA

Steyerl's *Strike* is a caustic reminder of the power structures operating in the digital world. By hitting the screen, the artist randomly generates an abstract pattern, an aesthetic composition (figure 4). In "*Is the Museum a Factory?*" Steyerl suggests that the only screen that could serve as the exit to escape relentless productivity is the one that is "currently missing" (2009, p. 74). It may be then that the appearance of this aesthetic composition of colors serves to show that once we become aware of the threatening network, new possibilities open to resist its surveillance structures. Steyerl's piece suggests a threshold, a horizon of action within the machine itself. Her gesture calls for a subversion of the very mechanisms of capitalist control in the current techno-political reality.

For philosopher Jacques Rancière, the political constitutes a rupture of the order of domination:

It is the configuration of a specific space, the parceling out of a particular sphere of experience, of objects we take to be shared and stemming from a common decision, of recognized subjects able to designate these objects and to discuss them (Rancière, 2012, p.33).



Figure 4. Still from *Strike* (2010) Hito Steyerl. Image via: Ubuweb.

This implies a necessary rearrangement of ways of seeing, saying, doing, and ordering objects and bodies, and assigning places and functions in relation to the social order. The aesthetic is political, Rancière explains, insofar as it erupts in the distribution of the sensible, generating new configurations of experience: “The proper of art is to operate a new distribution of the material and symbolic space. That is what makes art engaged to politics” (Rancière, 2012, p. 33) [Translation is mine].

Steyerl’s gesture against the screen and its consequent aesthetic effect can be read, from a Rancièrean perspective, as an interruption of the established order –in this case, that of the domination of digital surveillance. The rupture of the screen allows us to penetrate inside the system and subvert it in a way that establishes new configurations of experience. If in the digital era capitalism no longer hinges on labor but on life by means of surveillance, the strike must undermine the technological system. It is not a question of destroying the machine, but of understanding its functioning and modifying it, which is precisely what hackers do.

Some authors have identified hackers as the Luddite resistance of our era, especially those who have been able to use technology against destructive capitalist growth. In his defense of hacking as a form of political resistance to capitalism, Mueller argues that “far from celebrating technology, hackers are often some of its most critical users, and they regularly deploy their skills to subvert measures by corporations to rationalize and control computer user behavior” (2021, p. 105). Others have placed the practice of hacking within the tradition of the Situationists, whose tactics of *detournement* and *dérive* throughout urban spaces sought to destabilize conventional considerations of the world and subvert behavioral impositions. They have translated this critical interaction with space to the digital domain to argue that hacking represents a key moment of transgressive power within modern society (Zook & Graham, 2018, p. 393). While the motivations for hacking may be diverse, its political and activist potential is powerful. Many hackers share collectivist values of political engagement that can effectively oppose the power structures inherent in digital labor.

Hackers advance an ethic of sharing information and undermining the capitalist system that controls the network. If resistance to immaterial work on the Internet can only arise within it, then we should consider “the double-sided quality of the labor of programmers and technocrats: on the one hand, it is a means of economic value, but on the other, it can be a source of subversive, if not revolutionary, potentiality” (Raley, 2009, p. 11). Gestures that demonstrate this potentiality can be traced back to the beginnings of the Internet, with examples ranging from programmer Richard Stallman’s free software movement to peer-to-peer file sharing systems that resist consumer capitalism by transgressing intellectual property law (Stallman, 2002). Confronted by the commodification of all aspects of life by surveillance capitalism, some technology activists have found ways to make the Internet the autonomous space it once was. An example of this type of resistance against surveillance is the browser extension RequestPolicy, created by a group of hackers. RequestPolicy protects against leaking user information to third-party services that run on other servers. It enhances users’ security and protects privacy by ensuring that “one web page can only load contents from one domain – the same domain that the user typed into the address bar” (Maxigas, 2017, p. 849). These efforts outline the scheme of an ambitious Internet transformation that escapes the logic of perpetual productivity and promotes collective and democratizing gestures. They evoke the “constructive de-growth” advocated by Steyerl.

Taking into account the parallels between digital and artistic labor, a similar observation can be made about critical resistance in the contemporary art realm. Following this ethos, American artist Trevor Paglen developed the sculptural piece *Autonomy Cube* (2014) to introduce the Tor navigation system —a free and open-source software for anonymous communication— in contemporary art museums and galleries, so that visitors can connect to the WiFi network while anonymizing their activity on the internet. Other artists, collectively or individually, have engaged more specifically in what has come to be known as tactical media, that is, the implementation of hacking strategies. Critical Art Ensemble, an art collective that practices this form of resistance, defines tactical media as

a form of digital interventionism. It challenges the existing semiotic regime by replicating and redeploying it in a manner that offers participants in the projects a new way of seeing, understanding, and (in the best-case-scenario) interacting with a given system (2001, p. 8).

Tactical media practices have become effective gestures of activism and resistance consistent with the prevailing immaterial conditions of the art system. Steyerl’s practice, whilst employing digital language and alluding directly to the political and social changes caused by it, is not framed within this type of practice. Nevertheless, her work *Strike* evokes it as a form of resistance to the biopolitical control of technology. The piece seems to follow Felix Guattari’s call to “invent new fields of reference to open the way to a reappropriation and a re-symbolization of the use of communication and information tools outside the hackneyed formulae of marketing” (Raley, 2009, p. 8). The emergence of tactical media constitutes a means of destabilizing capitalism’s growing colonization of life and generating a new political subjectivity. In the face of the competitive individualism promoted by neoliberalism, the imposition of consumerist subjectivity, and surveillance, tactical media stands as a collective struggle capable of reversing capitalist biopower.

Tactical media artists draw on hacking culture—collectivism, connectivity from different points of the globe, anonymity— but start from less sophisticated and more experimental approaches. Critical Art Ensemble emphasizes the amateur component of tactical media as a determining factor in its critical outcome: “Amateurs are not invested in institutionalized systems of knowledge production and policy construction, and hence do not have irresistible forces guiding the outcome of their process such as maintaining a place in the funding hierarchy or maintaining prestige-capital” (2001, p. 9).

This idea is fundamental to grasp the limitations of many manifestations of critical and political art today that remain subject to the logics of profit and prestige. As it is widely known, irregularity in artistic labor is often triggered by the symbolic or social values that encompass artistic activity. This is because these values are *invested in institutionalized systems of knowledge production and policy construction*. As Steyerl has suggested, the conditions of artistic production and display remain “pretty much unexplored,” and the politics of art represents “the blind spot of much contemporary political art” (2010). Tactical media, because of its detachment from the systems of power and legitimization that operate in the institutional environment, presents an effective option to critically approach the working conditions of contemporary art.

Some authors have argued that genuine forms of resistance are therefore necessarily found outside the institutionalized art system. Brian Holmes, for instance, suggests that art is “one of the few fields open to experimentation with the technologies, habits, and hierarchies of symbolic exchange.” “These experiments,” however, “can only take on a transformative power in the open, evolving contexts of social movement, outside the cliques and the clienteles of the artistic game” (2008, p. 92). But can these ways of intervening and subverting the system be adopted by artists, curators, and critics who seek to generate a radical transformation in the system? For Steyerl, the moment we realize that art is not outside politics, but that politics resides in its production, distribution, and reception, we might surpass the plane of a politics of representation and embark on a politics that is there, in front of our eyes, ready to embrace (2010). In an increasingly digitized art system, the ways to address and reverse these politics of art require interventionist tactics. The artist must become a hacker.

In “A Hacker Manifesto,” McKenzie Wark speaks of a “hacker class” to refer to creators of information, researchers and authors, artists and biologists, philosophers and programmers—in short, what we could refer to as “immaterial” workers (2004). While the status of the artist is not fully equivalent to that of a hacker, Wark’s identification of the artist with the hacker is valuable for it implies the possibility of action in the field of art. Within the operating system of contemporary art, artists could emulate hacking tactics to subvert the mechanisms of the system itself. In this way, the system, like the artistic circuit, could be reappropriated and changed. Art, in this case, would no longer offer critical commentary about possible imagined realities but would generate real changes.

Examples of this critical potential of art can be found in initiatives and efforts set up by artists who use the structures of network culture for their own purposes, escaping the capitalist logic of ownership that normally surrounds creative work. A case in point is UbuWeb, a free, non-commercial platform that acts as a database of a wide array of artworks. Founded in 1996 by artist Kenneth Goldsmith, UbuWeb functions on no money. Its site does not include advertisements, logos, or ask for donations, it is free and open to all.³ The actions of numerous tactical media artists also represent radical transgressions to the biocontrol strategies of

information technology and surveillance capitalism. I am referring in particular to the practices of online interventionist collectives like Ubermorgen.com, who have confronted Internet giants such as Amazon, with their “Amazon Noir: The Big Book Crime,”⁴ or the artistic campaign “Wages for Facebook,” which attempts to destabilize the economic exploitation of our relationships by social networks (figure 5).⁵ These are instances of a practice that opens small cracks in the exploitative system of immaterial labor, and like Steyerl’s work, offers a glimpse of the possibility of a different future.

THEY SAY IT'S FRIENDSHIP. WE SAY IT'S UNWAGED WORK. WITH EVERY LIKE, CHAT, TAG OR POKE OUR SUBJECTIVITY TURNS THEM A PROFIT. THEY CALL IT SHARING. WE CALL IT STEALING. WE'VE BEEN BOUND BY THEIR TERMS OF SERVICE FAR TOO LONG—IT'S TIME FOR OUR TERMS.

TO DEMAND WAGES FOR FACEBOOK IS TO MAKE IT VISIBLE THAT OUR OPINIONS AND EMOTIONS HAVE ALL BEEN DISTORTED FOR A SPECIFIC FUNCTION ONLINE, AND THEN HAVE BEEN THROWN BACK AT US AS A MODEL TO WHICH WE SHOULD ALL CONFORM IF WE WANT TO BE ACCEPTED IN THIS SOCIETY. OUR FINGERTIPS HAVE BECOME DISTORTED FROM SO MUCH LIKING, OUR FEELINGS HAVE GOTTEN LOST FROM SO MANY FRIENDSHIPS.

CAPITAL HAD TO CONVINCE US THAT IT IS A NATURAL, UNAVOIDABLE AND EVEN FULFILLING ACTIVITY TO MAKE US ACCEPT UNWAGED WORK. IN ITS TURN, THE UNWAGED CONDITION OF FACEBOOK HAS BEEN A POWERFUL

Figure 5. *Wages for Facebook*. Still from <https://wagesforfacebook.com/>

5 CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, I have tried to outline a journey through the changes that the idea of labor has undergone in the context of the New Economy. A close reading of Steyerl’s work has revealed the rise of immaterial forms of labor and commodification on the internet, the increasing capitalist colonization of life, and the difficulty of resistance that new forms of production entail. However, it has also shown the determination of artists to respond to an increasingly unsustainable situation, to act from the field of art in the face of problems that transcend it. Instead of pointing out in a literal way the obscure mechanisms in which digitalization operates, Steyerl’s work *Strike* is presented to us as a gesture, quick and clean, that repeats itself as a loop, giving us a glimpse of an abstract composition. In this way, Steyerl shows her viewers a horizon of possibility that invites them to reappropriate the machine, not to do away with it. This has allowed us to unpack different examples of artistic activism in new media that have emerged precisely as a direct response to post-Fordist production, surveillance, and neoliberal globalization. The pieces mentioned above are just a few examples of radical interventionist practices that continue to explore ways to reverse the control system inherent in the New Economy network culture.

According to Lazzarato, “the activist is simply someone who introduces a discontinuity in what exists. She creates a bifurcation in the flow of words, of desires, of images, to put them at the service of the multiplicity’s power of articulation” (2004, p. 230). At a time when the forces of

capitalism seem more relentless than ever, Steyerl's work reminds us that activism can provide ways to resist. Her strike against the screen transforms the function of a technology and gives it a new utility. The screen ceases to be a platform that directs, manipulates, tracks, and monetizes our attention, and is converted instead into a space where we are forced to change our gaze, where attention is diverted in pursuit of the flashes of the broken panel. The screen's original function is overlapped with a new layer of meaning, creating a palimpsest. Steyerl's strike is a strike in the classic labor struggle sense: we do not want to destroy our material medium, the main element of our subsistence, but to change it, to substitute it with a new one that is fairer and more genuinely ours. Its forms, however, are novel. The strike that Steyerl proposes is a reappropriation of the material technological means: a hacking that goes to the core of the contemporary art system.

NOTAS

1. This topic has given rise to numerous publications, artistic projects, and exhibitions. A significant example are the exhibitions *Sleepless. Beds in History and Contemporary Art* held in 2015 at Belvedere 21 Museum, Vienna; or *The Century of the Bed*, curated in 2014 for the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna by Beatriz Colomina, August Ruhs and Andreas Rumpfhuber. Publications on this subject include Crary, J. (2013). *24/7: Late capitalism and the ends of sleep*. Verso Books; Zafra, R. (2010). *Un cuarto propio conectado:(Ciber) espacio y (auto) gestión del yo*. Fórcola ediciones; Colomina, B., Ruhs, A., & Rumpfhuber, A. (Ed.) (2014) *The Century of the Bed*. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien; EXIT #85 Durmientes y soñadores. *Exit: Imagen y cultura* (2022).
2. As I understand that the autonomist idea of immaterial labor can be problematic, given that some of its theorizations have tended to minimize the material and physical implications of workers and ignored forms of immaterial labor that have always existed (such as care work), I feel I should emphasize that I am using the term here in a highly critical way. My understanding of immaterial labor's hegemony by no means implies a denial of the existence of material labor. However, it refers to the transformation of the latter and its adoption of forms and qualities typical of immaterial work, such as informational, image-based, and communicative components. In words of theorists Negri and Hardt, "The central role previously occupied by the labor-power of mass factory workers in the production of surplus-value is today increasingly filled by intellectual, immaterial and communicative labor power" (2000, p. 29).
3. See <https://ubu.com/resources/about.html>
4. See <https://www.amazon-noir.com/index0000.html>
5. Taking Silvia Federici's thesis on women's work as a starting point, *Wages for Facebook* claims compensation for the use of Facebook. Its website consists of a single page with the manifesto scrolling automatically, without visitors being able to scroll or use the scroll bar. Its activity has also materialized in posters and videos. See <https://wagesforfacebook.com/>

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