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GUARDS

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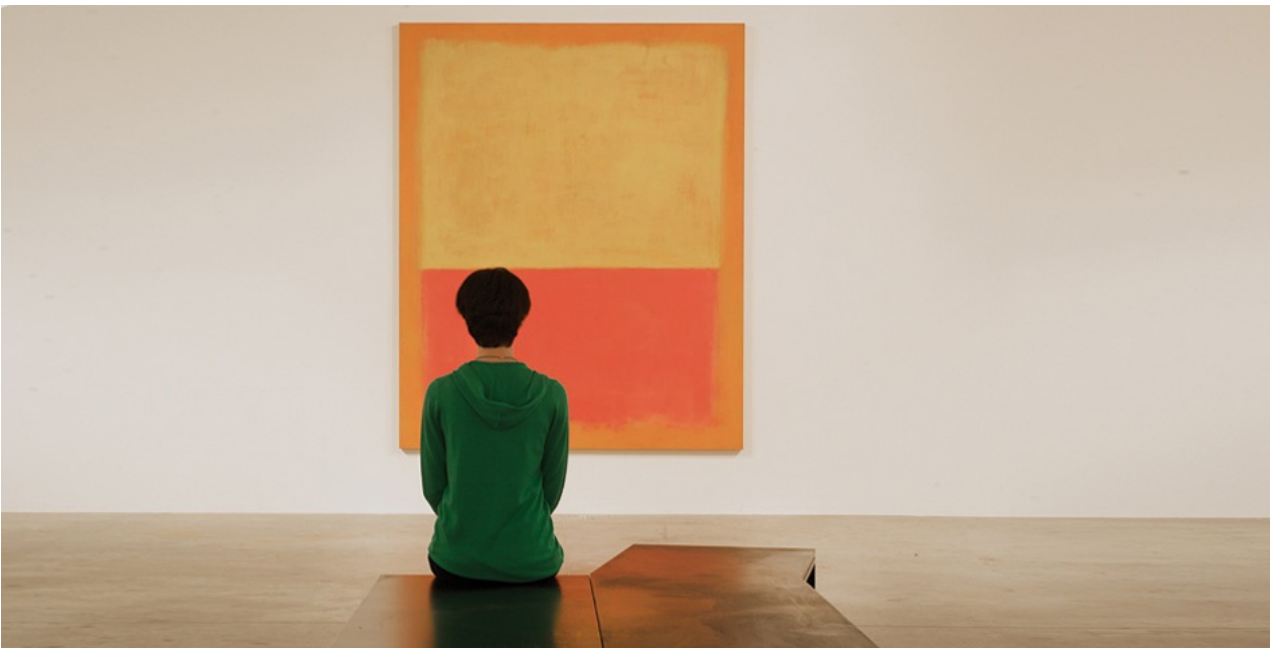
THROUGH THE LASER FIELD

By Andrey Shental

Mark Rothko's exhibition that took place several years ago at Garage, Moscow-based center for contemporary culture, was for me a revelatory experience. After going through the metal detectors and confiscation of liquids similar to customs examination, I got inside a claustrophobic construction made of artificial walls decorated with Rothko's colour field canvases, that predominantly was filled with numerous security guards. They were not the subtle elderly ladies invigilating in the Tretyakov gallery or Pushkin museum, but huge muscular brutal men who had probably worked in the armed forces, now dressed in elegant black suits.

These men were staring at me from all possible angles and controlling every step I took. Whenever I came a little bit close to a painting, the alarm started to ring and these macho men popped up in front of me rebuking. This was the perfect illustration of the difference between modernism and avant-garde. Reality in the guise of these *'siloviki'* intervened into the gallery walls making the boundary between art and life indistinguishable. Now, when I try to find images of this show (no documentation was allowed), I find only something like this:

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Both Images from :<http://archive.garageccc.com/eng/exhibitions/13065.phtml>

Brian O'Doherty in his critique of the white cube's ideology describes the popular genre of empty installation shot as 'the icon of our visual culture'.* He writes: 'Here at last the spectator, oneself, is eliminated. You are there without being there – one of the major services provided for art by its old antagonist, photography. The installation shot is a metaphor for the gallery space'.** It is obvious that O'Doherty had a very specific target for his critique – the modernist tradition read through Michael Fried's ideas of the disembodied eye. However, his account still lacks a very important type of gallery representation: omnipresent visitors standing or sitting next to a masterpiece frozen in the act of contemplation as you could see in the Garage examples. As we know, the genre of depicting people at the moment of emotional shock comes from the Romanticist tradition of *Rückenfiguren*; but instead of immense landscapes we see only artworks and very often mediocre ones. These *mise en abyme*'s invite us to contemplate someone else's contemplation, their openness to the artwork, embracing it with all sensory feelings: visual, corporeal, and visceral. A random encounter with an artwork is treated and depicted as *the event* in order to cultivate the feeling of sublime both in advance of attending a gallery and retroactively.

What also underlies these photos is the presupposition that the gallery space consists of only two agents: the subject (visitor) and the object (artwork), while all other participants, elements, and actors are rendered as merely contingent. Their presence in the actual space is based on a certain hierarchy of discourses and utterances. The artist's discourse usually

* O'Doherty, Brian. *Inside the White Cube. The ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p. 15

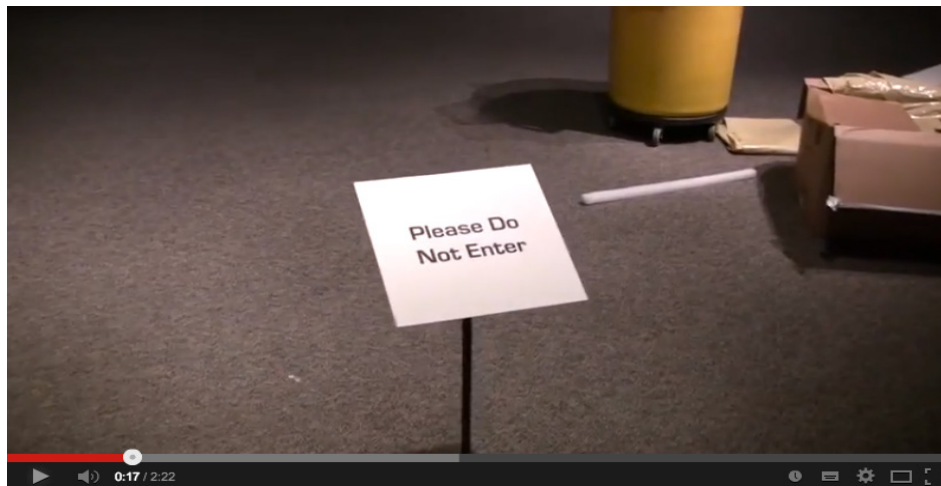
** Ibid.

resides in the interviews, the curator is discursively dispersed in the space, the critic is located within the periodicals, while the art historian is in the books. The only two figures that have the right to speak in the gallery space is the exhibition guide and the security guard, whose speech consists of imperative statements. The task of the museum is to minimise the risk of possible encounters; but if it still happens the viewer is required to distil the artwork from superfluous and derivative effects. The visitor's memories should be exactly as immaculate as those images of Rothko's show.

The figure of the security guard is a paradox of the art system, whose role and status is contradictory. Guards are often recruited from professional military organisations, while invigilators who play a similar role are often overeducated and overqualified art history students who could not find an equivalent position, but still tend to think that any job in the art system is rewarding and 'arty'. Another paradox is that security guards spend all their life in the gallery spaces, when even the most exalted art historians do not bother to stand upright in front of the works, resorting instead to books, catalogues, and archives. In the span of their career they could attain knowledge and competence in art history by merely occupying the space and listening to what specialists and professionals say. However an art institution would not acknowledge them, because they are withdrawn from the discursive exchange. Thirdly, these people, who hold the lowest and most precarious positions, are the only ones who have the right to use physical force in a realm of linguistic power. Finally, they are absent from any mode of representation (especially from installation shots), yet are the

most visible part of the staff that overshadow the artworks themselves and very often determine our perception and reception. Moreover, they could be the most challenging and undermining actors within this network. While being exposed to the public, they show no arrogance peculiar to other waged labourers and understand the double nature of their job. Security guards are probably the most humane people in the whole art world who are aware of the conditional character of its conventions and language games.

[click image to watch video](#)



What is art?

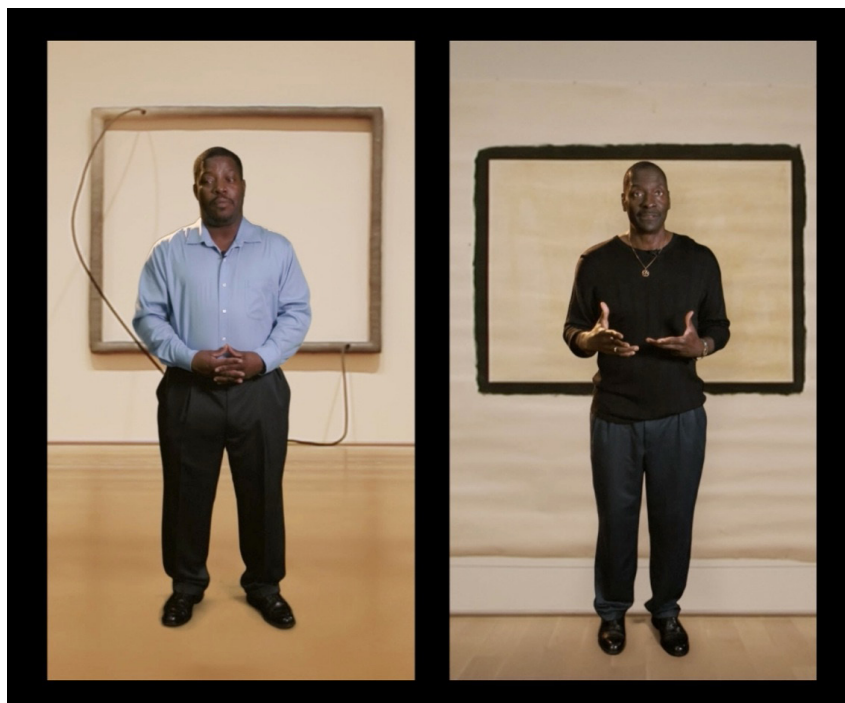
In the two scenes of her film *Guards* (2012), Hito Steyerl exchange her role of artist to that of the *staffage* or *Rückenfigur*, sitting amidst works of the Art Institute of Chicago and motionlessly contemplating. The exhibition space is arranged as a small Panopticon; instead of Rothko's spiritual abstraction one sees museum workers. Two of them, Ron Hicks and Martin Whitfield, framed by the works of Eva Hesse, are the protagonists of the film who directly address

the viewer with their confessions. While division of responsibilities gets suspended, they combine several discursive modalities: personal narrative story (usually associated with artists), oral presentations in front of artworks (the position of museum guides) and mapping trajectories through the space (associated with curators). They break silence of the gallery space and redefine the subject-object relations.

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Video Stills, Hito Steyerl, Guards, 2012



Video Stills, Hito Steyerl, Guards, 2012

Sociologist Tony Bennett in his book *The Birth of Museum* has shown that the creation and development of 'exhibitionary complex' was parallel to that of the penitentiary system. However, compared to the 'carceral archipelago' that has been gradually withdrawn from public display, museums, galleries and fairs started to expose the objects that were previously held in the private sector as well as 'making the crowd itself the ultimate spectacle'.* These new institutions were aimed at producing 'subjects of knowledge' out of citizens and governing the crowd by means of discipline

* See chapter 'Exhibitionary complex' in Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of Museum*. NY: Routledge. 1995

and training, commanding and arranging bodies and objects. One could guess that the museum was open to the public thanks to the invention and dissemination of firearms, with which security guards could prevent possible perpetrations and subjugate the visitors. Whilst Steyerl in her critique of the 'violence of democratisation', links the deskilling of mass production with the simplification of means of killing, the artistic mass consumption is also the result of these innovations. The institution of art is not based exclusively on the language games or market investments, but also on the army of faithful security guards.

[click image to watch video](#)



FORMER WEST: Documents, Constellations, Prospects - Hito Steyerl: I Dreamed a Dream: Politics in the Age of Mass Art Production

from FormerWest PRO 6 months ago / ALL AUDIENCES

Bennett in his analysis gives a striking example of the relationships between art and armed forces at the time of the Gordon Riots:

The museum staff were sworn in as special constables; fortifications were constructed around the perimeter; a garrison of museum staff, regular troops, and Chelsea pensioners, armed with muskets, pikes, and cutlasses, and with provisions for a three-day siege, occupied the buildings; stones were carried to the roof to be hurled down on the Chartists should they succeed in breaching the outer defences.

While Bennett treats it as an exceptional case, Steyerl perceives the militarisation of the art field as an ongoing inevitable and intrinsic process, which is taken for granted and not often reflected upon. In fact it was determined by several reasons. In the post-9/11 world and its infamous proclamation of 'the war on terror', every territory that used to be 'civilian', 'nondefense' or 'peaceful', in fact becomes 'martial', 'military' and 'warlike', because preventive war is still a war. Galleries and museums that seem to be the most harmless institutions actively participate in foreign affairs. The case of *Without boundaries: seventeen ways of looking* that took place at MoMA several years ago could be paradigmatic. This type of show, dedicated to the artists engaged with the Muslim religion, suddenly includes the set of practices that had been ignored by western art history for decades. If it functions to disclose a notion of islamophobia so often promoted by the state, it is already at war and could incur the acts of resistance and military intervention.* Even though museum

* Interestingly, Iranian government, on the opposite, uses art (I mean the closed Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art) for the military purposes but not by means of exposure of certain objects, but rather by the process of concealment. Art itself is substituted by the means of

participates in international politics only on a symbolic dimension, it is always at risk to be penetrated by what theorist Irit Rogoff would call 'geography in real time' or 'the moment in which some nebulous half-acknowledged entity, previously no more than a vague unease or a partially avowed recognition, crashes into our own reality by becoming a reality itself'.**

Another reason for increase of control in museums (for instance, installation of numerous cameras, metal detectors and employing people with military backgrounds) is marketization and commercialization of art in the last few decades. When art starts to function as a means of capital investment or tax avoidance, its priorities, values and conventions more and more detach and elevate above the institution of critical expertise as well as popular taste and commonsense. Objects of contemporary art that represent nothing but the omnivoracity and conceit of the rich, need the increasing protection from the 'middlebrow' spectators. When people start feeling that art world playing with them a dirty trick, the production of consent becomes possible only by force. Security guards that we see so often in museums are the materialization of Benjaminian aura that would keep the public at a distance in a very literal and prosaic way. Depending on the context, they maintain and perpetuate established attitudes and relations. In case of Smithsonian or Art Institute of Chicago, their actions sacralize the notion of nation state and national culture as well as private property. As for Garage, the ostentatious power of 'siloviks' prevents any possibility of disagreement with the legitimacy of the rules of oligarchy (or so-

protection.

** Rogoff, Irit. 'What Is a Theorist?' in The State of Criticism eds. James Elkins and Michael Newman NY: Routledge P. 100

oligarchy (or so-called ‘peripheral bourgeoisie’) by the feeling of physical disproportion.

The effect of ‘Guards’ is quite similar to that of Jasper Johns’ *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) in this regard. Leo Steinberg, who persistently eliminates the subject matter from his analysis, nevertheless points out that ‘John’s subjects are associable with sufferance rather than action’.* One could say that this condition of suffering, passivity or being ‘aimed at’, provides us with a doubled gaze. We see it as a work of art, but at the same time we could not ignore the literariness of the target, so we see in it the potentiality of acting upon it. Our gaze is fluctuating and oscillating between two registers of seeing: a practical, military, violent view and an aesthetical, contemplative one, endowed with nearly Kantian disinterestedness.

While Martin from *Guards* calls the museum a

* Steinberg, Leo. *Other Criteria* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007, p. 46 He writes: ‘John’s treatment of targets neutralizes their native emphasis, chiefly by the strong decentralized red in the spandrels’. Or: ‘Johns unfocuses even the target so that, being seen not with a marksman’s eye, it is seen with an alternative attitude’.

‘soft target’, Ron performs his working rituals. In the film we could see the museum from the perspective of a military agent who perceives the artworks as targets or obstacles, but as object of contemplation. Refracted through the subjectivity of its employees, the hermetic sacrosanct space transforms into battlefield of real physical forces. Ron and Martin narrate their experience working in the military field so vividly that the stories become nearly pictorial, figurative, and palpable, in opposition to the hardedge geometric, abstract expressionist, or pop-art monumental paintings. In the middle of the film one can see a certain transfiguration as everything starts turning into its opposite: front view into back view, stasis into movement, abstraction into figuration, spatial arts into temporal, white cube into black box. Blurred, indistinct, ‘poor’ images of their memories are projected onto the canvases of flat painting; they ‘hole through’ the picture plane for perspectival space. As a result, behind these canvases one could see what Rogoff called ‘geography in real time’.



Video Stills, Hito Steyerl, *Guards*, 2012

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Steyerl's film lacks pathos of counter-hegemonic ideological disclosure that was at stake in institutional critique, but it diagnoses certain tendencies and playfully engages with them on a very personal level. What she does is the reversal of the installation shot: instead of purifying the invariable essence of the Art Institute of Chicago from merely accidental encounters with employees, she actually purifies it from its purity. The gallery space turns out to be a concentration of different forces, a professionally supervised and monitored sphere of unresolved tensions and irreconcilable interests. Her act could be compared to the clichéd scene from Hollywood films. Steyerl like a burglar comes into museum with an aerosol can, pulls it out into the air, and reveals invisible beams of laser alarms.

While it would be hard to answer how one should navigate within this laser field, the film leaves the viewer with many other rhetorical questions: Who and from whom do security guards protect? Artworks from people?

People from other people? Or people from the artworks?

The author would like to thank Nikhil Vettukattil and Asta Meldal Lyngre for their help.

- ANDREY SHENTAL -

Andrey Shental (b. 1988) is a critic, artist and curator based in Moscow and London. He holds a BA in Art Criticism at the Moscow State University and is currently doing his MA at Center for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University. He is a senior editor at [Theory and Practice](#) magazine and a contributor to several publications including [Frieze](#), [Mute](#), [Archronika](#), [Colta](#), [Art territory](#), [Aroundart](#), [Opjce](#) and [Idea](#).

[click image to watch video](#)



Ocean's Twelve (3/3) Movie CLIP - The Best (2004) HD

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Hito Steyerl (born in Munich, Germany, 1966) has produced a body of work as a theorist and a filmmaker. Examples of her work are *The Wretched of the Screen*, an essay book published by e-flux journal in 2012, and the films *November* (2004) and *Lovely Andrea* (2007). Hito Steyerl holds a PhD in Philosophy and is a professor in Media art at the University of Arts, Berlin. Her work has been shown in the Venice Biennale, Manifesta 5 and Documenta 12. She currently lives and works in the city of Berlin.

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