

Ambiguity in Contemporary Art and Theory

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Herausgegeben von

FRAUKE BERNDT

und

LUTZ KOEPNICK

FELIX MEINER VERLAG
HAMBURG

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POSTREPRESENTATIONAL VISUAL PRACTICE

Rabih Mroué and Hito Steyerl's *Probable Title: Zero Probability*

Rachel Mader

I. Introduction

Rabih Mroué and Hito Steyerl's performative lecture *Probable Title: Zero Probability*, which they first presented at Tate Modern in October 2012, leaves behind an ambivalent impression. The lecturing style of Mroué and Steyerl is nothing if not relaxed, yet this hour-long performance is both dense and rigorous in its composition. The narrative, which can hardly be called rational, stars probability in the leading role and features large quantities of all manner of information. The treatment of the theme begins with a camera trick visualizing one instance of 0 percent probability. Then there is a lengthy digression on the mathematical calculation of probabilities for flight attempts from Lebanon; an excursus on the skull of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz follows a brief summary of one of Erwin Schrödinger's physics thought experiments; and these items are interspersed with remarks on a nightclub in Beirut and the supply of German-made armaments to Turkey. The range of media is similarly diverse: the spoken excurses are interrupted by short video clips illustrating the information presented; documentary statements on specific themes draw on the expertise of external speakers; parts of existing works by both artists are integrated into the argument; and additional drawings and diagrams illuminate the content of the lecture in various other ways. The diverse narrative elements may not be entirely random in their succession, but at first glance they do not seem to have any compelling order to them either.

The discrepancy between dense composition and the implied coherence of a sequence that never actually reaches narrative resolution gives rise to a sense of irritation at the end of viewing. This consternation is just what the performative lecture sets out to achieve, albeit not in the sense of the sort of modish mystification that has become so widespread in the art world in recent years, a mystification that balks at decipherment and clarity.¹ The effect of being carefully led through the performance even as the narrative seems to fall apart is that of a precise step-by-step dissection of the idea of a narrative whose elements are to be read or deci-

¹ On the ubiquity of ambiguity (and similarly named phenomena such as indecision) in contemporary artistic production, see the essays in the volume *Ambiguität in der Kunst. Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, ed. by Verena Krieger and Rachel Mader, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna 2010. For a critical discussion of its popularity, see Tom Holert: *Resonanzen, Streifen, Scherenschnitte. Formen und Funktionen von Ambiguität seit 1960*, in: *Ambiguität in der Kunst* [op. cit.], 241-247.

phered as “fixed containers” against a “static background.”² This static conception of the image, according to which the image (or the visual product in general) is a self-contained object that stands motionless in relation to the world,³ is counteracted by Mroué and Steyerl’s performative lecture, which operates with narrative strategies that aim to destabilize precisely this unequivocal definition or classification of images. In their argumentation, both artists are careful to deploy patterns of narration that are both ambiguous and ambivalent; these make it very difficult (though not impossible) to pin down the content, and uncasing the machinations of the imagery as an active part of the narrative adds to this difficulty. The following text dissects this narrative in line with some of the techniques it employs; it describes their functions in the context of the performative lecture and analyses their interaction in terms of the criteria (or attributes) of postrepresentational visual practice. At the same time, it also analyzes the function of the performative lecture’s rigid framework and asks to what extent it revokes the liberation of the argument from narrative linearity while nevertheless creating a superordinate container of meaning that counteracts nonrepresentational narrative intentions.

II. *Laying Tracks: Title, Staging, and Appearance*

The title already gives some indication of the direction that this hour-long performative lecture will take. *Probable Title: Zero Probability* seems to establish a relatively clear thematic focus: that of zero probability. But the suggestion that this is only a possible or probable title simultaneously implies that its content might be something else. That is not to say that the theme is different, for it soon transpires that the performative lecture is in fact about those realms of probability that are deemed fundamentally impossible, assuming the number of possibilities is finite. And yet the qualifying statement in the title suggests a degree of uncertainty about whether zero probability really is an adequate description of the content. What if, rather than being finite, the possibilities actually tended to be infinite but were presented, interpreted, and postulated as finite? Over the course of the performance, propositions that sound like philosophical mind games – and I will come back to

² In relation to various works of literature and with reference to Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, the literary critic David J. Alworth proposes reading such sites as “social agents” rather than static backgrounds in his most recent publication. His reflections are significant in the present context because his theory of “fugitive meanings” can be applied to the narrative methods of Mroué and Steyerl (David J. Alworth: *Site Reading. Fiction, Art, Social Form*, Princeton 2016, 2).

³ With reference to Pierre Huyghe’s contribution to DOCUMENTA (13) from 2012, the American art historian David Joselit has pointed out that the majority of art-historical analyses are still based on a similarly rigid idea of the image – the very idea Huyghe was dealing with in his cited contribution (cf. David Joselit: *Against Representation*, in: *Texte zur Kunst* 24 (2014), 92–102. <<https://www.textezurkunst.de/95/david-joselit-against-representation/?highlight=joselit%20gegen%20repräsentation>> [accessed 5 September 2017]).

this point in the discussion of narrative below – become a balancing act on a political and ethical tightrope.

The performance of this balancing act is constrained by the tight contextual corset that is the theater-like setting of the performative lecture. The situation is an unusual one in many respects, and its deviations are precisely what make it interesting here. Its designation as a performative lecture associates it with an artistic format that has been in sporadic use since the 1970s and has enjoyed a greater degree of prominence and attention in recent years. The term comprises the two fields that are simultaneously deployed in its enactment: a lecture generally involves the transmission of specialized knowledge (though by no means exclusively academic knowledge) by an expert; the lecturer usually assumes a position of authority; questions from the audience are only allowed at the end and are often heavily moderated. By contrast, a performance is understood as a staged appearance that actually should not abide by the rules and really ought to rewrite them every time. In practice, performative lectures are for the most part conceived as closed events; viewers implicitly agree to sit through the whole event when they buy their tickets. But stipulating the duration of an event is an unusual move in the art world and has been met with skepticism and criticism on several occasions. This happened with a number of video works by Steve McQueen, including *Western Deep* (2002). In order to meet the artist's stipulations, it had to be shown in a "cinema-like space"⁴ even in the exhibition context. But this requirement defined more than just the appropriate physical setting of the black box; it also contained a temporal specification: the screening times for the twenty-four-minute video were advertised in a prominent position at the entrance to the screening room, and the same notice explicitly told visitors not to enter or leave the screening room once the presentation had started. At McQueen's solo exhibition at the Schaulager in Basel, this stipulation was underscored by the presence of Securitas guards at the entrance. Though they did not actually prevent people from leaving or entering during the screening, they were tireless in making people aware that the film would be starting at certain times.⁵ Despite also being a time-based format, performances rarely come with any clear guidance for the viewer, and when they do, it tends to be interpreted as an authoritative gesture.⁶ The staging is thus set up such that Steyerl and

⁴ Steve McQueen: *Works*, Berlin, Heidelberg 2012, 117, catalogue for an exhibition at the Schaulager Basel and the Art Institute of Chicago.

⁵ In his essay on guiding the reception ("Rezeptionssteuerung") of black-box exhibition situations, the art historian Peter Schneemann emphasizes the potency of such settings for viewers: "In terms of their power to isolate and idealize art worlds, black-box situations are way ahead of the white-cube model. [. . .] The dark-room installation as a construction for aesthetic reception thus stands in the tradition of 'viewing instructions', utopias that intensify personal experience and transfigure artistic perception." (Peter Schneemann: *Black-Box-Installationen. Isolationen von Werk und Betrachter*, in: *Black Box. Der Schwarzzaum in der Kunst*, ed. by Ralf Beil, Bern 2001, 25–34, 28, catalogue for an exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern)

⁶ In this regard, the art historian Oskar Bätschmann has spoken of subordination to an "artist-steered experience" with the problematic ultimate aim of renewing the power of art (cf.

Mroué are unassailable in their roles as lecturers. This is underscored by the spotlights, which are trained directly on them, and by the context of the event, which obliges the spectators to pay attention for a clearly demarcated period, namely the duration of the narrative.

Steyerl and Mroué adapt the lecture situation in line with what they expect from their viewers, combining it with a theater-like setting that announces their performance as a staged event. This is evident from the positioning of the two lecterns: each stands at the extremity of the stage, and there is an open computer on each lectern; the two artists constantly look at their screens during the lecture, as though watching for cues for their respective inputs. Between the lecterns are two projection screens. These are used both separately and together. For example, film sequences drawn from Steyerl's early work are projected onto them, and Mroué expounds a mathematical mind game using a diagram that extends across both screens. They generally show single statements or images illustrating the places and events under discussion. But the screens also constitute a real space, as when the things or people being mentioned disappear into the gap between them.

The way the artists present themselves also seems to approximate conventional lecturing techniques; the differences are not fundamental and are less evident in habitual criteria than in the adopted tone of voice, the idiosyncratic bursts of laughter, and, above all, the content and mode of argumentation. Mroué and Steyerl have an uninhibited lecturing style; this is particularly striking when, for instance, Mroué expounds the probability calculations that his father, a mathematician, has done for him. These complicated calculations go on for several pages, and yet they are presented in the form of a light-hearted Sunday-afternoon anecdote. The same style prevails when Steyerl recounts the disappearance of her childhood friend Andrea, who joined the Kurdish resistance in Turkey in the 1980s before disappearing without a trace. It is this relaxed narrative style that makes the hour-long performance so entertaining despite the fact that it is almost impossible to keep up with the complex and often wild associations that the two artists expect their audience to follow. And yet they are by no means indifferent to whether their spectators are able to follow them; they remain attentively inclined toward the audience for almost the duration of the discourse, and there are several occasions when Steyerl cannot help but laugh out loud at the absurdity of the statements she is making, which all creates the impression that the two narrators are kindly endeavoring to make themselves understood while taking their listeners on a narrative roller-coaster ride, self-consciously drawing attention to their position as the authors of the situation.

III. *Work on Meaning: Narration in the Inquisitive Mode*

The narration itself forcefully uses ambivalences and ambiguities in several places and for various reasons.⁷ For instance: ambiguous linguistic moments occur when metaphors are taken literally, or, conversely, when metaphorically embellished facts are deployed as a means of questioning their very facticity. The initial scenario is also an instructive example of this mode of argumentation, which takes language so seriously that it often verges on the absurd. “What is probability?”⁸ asks Steyerl, opening the performative lecture with a question to the audience just as the question appears on one of the screens. “I will try to give you the simplest possible explanation. Let’s say we’re watching a video, and it shows us this.” In saying this, the artist responds to the question not with an answer but with a curious statement that allows her to delegate answering the question to a video, which she invites us to watch with her. In otherwise total darkness, the first film clip is projected on the screen nearest her. The thematic caption “Probability” fades in and out. The film then shows the artist sitting at a table holding a coin up to the stationary camera. She throws it into the air, picks it up, places it on the table, and again presents it to the camera, this time showing the side that landed face up. A new fade-in with white text on a black background shows the caption “Probability 50%.” Steyerl again picks up the coin and throws it into the air so that it leaves the frame. And this time it does not return it to the table. The lettering that fades in at this point reads “Probability 0%”. With that, the first clip finishes, and the artist continues:

So, in fact, this is how Rabih explained probability to me when we started this project a few months ago, and he gave me this example of tossing the coin up in the air, and then of course it comes down again – it comes down either heads or tails, and the probability will be 50 percent each. But what if it doesn’t come down again? And that is what you saw happen in the video. Then the probability is 0 percent, assuming that we are operating under the conditions of terrestrial gravity and that nobody snatched it away when it was coming down.

And though the stipulated conditions were met, the coin nevertheless disappeared, and, as Steyerl insists, everyone just saw it happen. She brings these first observations to a close with a “Right?” and thereby gets her audience to concede that this

⁷ This distinction between ambiguity and ambivalence is based on Frauke Berndt and Stephan Kammer’s introduction to their edited anthology on this theme. On the one hand, they define their terminology by positing what they call structural ambiguity, which identifies an antagonistic simultaneous bivalency in the given object, but they also understand ambivalence as part of the subjective experience of indecision (cf. Frauke Berndt and Stephan Kammer: *Amphibolie – Ambiguität – Ambivalenz. Die Struktur antagonistisch-gleichzeitiger Zweiwertigkeit*, in: *Amphibolie – Ambiguität – Ambivalenz*, ed. by Frauke Berndt and Stephan Kammer, Würzburg 2009, 7–30).

⁸ The citations are taken from an audiovisual recording of the performance in London given to the author by Hito Steyerl. There is no officially accessible recording existing.

actually happened before their very eyes, just as she says it did. The appropriate question when faced with this circumstance, she goes on to say, would not be why it happened but where the coin went, and that much was perfectly clear: “Obviously it disappeared into the space offscreen. It disappeared into the edited space, the space between the takes, and this is where the coin is now. It is in the space of zero probability.” And this space is precisely where everything that really ought not to happen does happen, and of course this space is off limits, says Steyerl. Leading her audience along a perfectly comprehensible line of argumentation, the lecturer takes them directly to the endpoint of her argument, a point at which, while conceding the validity of each individual step in the argument, they nevertheless arrive with latent skepticism about the intrinsic correctness of the given breakdown of this paradoxical demonstration. Having followed an argument whose individual steps certainly obeyed the laws of logic, we hear the concluding statement and realize that we have fallen into a trap. Clearly, the assertion that everything that should not happen can happen in the space of zero probability was demonstrated with the help of camera trickery and can only be deemed valid in a filmic context. But in Steyerl’s interpretation, this assertion is logically and correctly classified as belonging to media-theory discourse (“it disappeared in the space offscreen”), which she then interprets from the perspective of cultural criticism by pointing out that what happens offscreen cannot actually happen.

This mode of argumentation, according to the distinction outlined above, is to be designated ambiguous because the paradoxes it presents are neatly encapsulated by the phrase “antagonistic simultaneous bivalence.”⁹ This state is produced by the causal interlinking of two or more fields that do not at first appear to have any obvious connection to one another. The definition of probability, in conjunction with the mechanisms and material conditions of filmmaking, is used to show that what cannot be has just happened, albeit only on film. And it does more than that: the events described by way of camera trickery are embedded in a theoretical discourse that, though conceived from the perspective of film, is absolutely applicable to nonfilmic reality as well. But the camera trick is also part of a documentary demonstration, one that becomes a media critique precisely by virtue of this camera trick; this in turn questions the credibility of argumentative modes that vacillate between filmic enactment and framing discourse.

Steyerl even operates with this tension when, after her brief introduction, she refers to mathematics, which has devised a formula for probability according to which – and the absurdity of this statement elicits a chuckle from the artist – up to 100 percent of the space of zero probability is made up of events that can never happen. As the first video showed, it was in just this space that the coin disappeared, and this, Steyerl goes on to say, also happens to be where houses, landscapes, and even people end up, which is why the place of zero probability is the place of the missing.

At this point, Rabih Mroué takes over with the protracted exposition of math-

⁹ Berndt and Kammer: *Amphibolie – Ambiguität – Ambivalenz* [op. cit.], 10.

ematical probability, which his father, who is a mathematician, had attempted to convey to him. After listening to his father explain pure mathematics for some time, Mroué asked him to illustrate his exposition with a concrete example. A case with obvious political and geographical resonance immediately suggested itself. The case he wanted explained in terms of mathematical probability was formulated as follows: a person attempts to go from point A to point B but has to pass through a checkpoint in doing so. According to Mroué, the three possibilities arising from this initial situation were: first, the probability of going safely from A to B; second, the probability of returning safely back to A; and third, the possibility of being killed or otherwise harmed. Without undertaking any calculations, his father immediately replied that all three possibilities were equally probable and that each probability was therefore one in three, whereupon Mroué insisted that the actual circumstances were significantly more complex and started explaining them to his father. The performative lecture then continues with at least five minutes of narrative, whose intentionally placed redundancies bring it dangerously close to the realm of the ludicrous and whose main aim is to show that the reality from which this example is drawn is far too complex to be tamed by a probability calculation. Mroué gives a thorough description of the constant and yet bewildering proliferation of possibilities that emanate from this seemingly simple starting point – namely, the attempt to go from point A to point B via a checkpoint – and in none of them does the person actually make it to point B. For the checkpoint not only holds the possibility of being sent back, as suggested in Mroué’s provisionally outlined hypothetical situation; it also presents the possibility of arrest and incarceration or deportation to an unknown location, just as the option of going into hiding becomes increasingly attractive in the face of so hopeless a situation. Particularly challenging to mathematical logic are the numerous loops in which so many migrants are clearly caught up; together with all the other possible outcomes, these amount to far more than the three possibilities Mroué initially sketched out.

A dedicated adherent of mathematical logic, Mroué’s father started working through these complicated constellations on multiple pages of involved calculations and was appalled to find that the sum of the probabilities of all possible outcomes enumerated by Mroué came not to one but to slightly less than one, namely, to 0.987 with a remainder of 0.013. He went through his calculations again and again but had the same result every time. It was at this point, according to his version events, that Mroué felt the need to divulge the one piece of information that he had hitherto withheld from his father: between the screen on his side of the stage (where point A was located for the duration of his narrative) and that on Steyerl’s side (where point B was) there was a gap, and the missing persons, whose number must have corresponded to that 0.013 remainder, probably fell into it – a remark acknowledged with laughter from the audience and substantiated by Mroué with reference to the war in Lebanon. For during this war, many people wanted to go from A to B through a checkpoint, but 17,000 of them neither arrived at B

nor returned to A, and there was also not any record of them having been killed or injured. They simply disappeared. So in Lebanon, that 0.013 corresponded to 17,000 people.

The remaining sixty minutes of the performative lecture carry on in much the same vein: highly entertaining and informative, it is a madcap journey through aspects of probability that at first seem related only by association and become increasingly politicized and intellectually challenging. Eventually the journey brings us to the disappearance, still unexplained to this day, of Steyerl's childhood friend Andrea, who joined the resistance of the PKK in Turkey and – though Steyerl only provides this resolution at the end of the performative lecture – was executed, a crime that neither state claims to know anything about. Andrea fell through the gap between them, so to speak. Then there are references to the scientific backgrounds of probability, such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who supplied key elements of the justification for probability calculations with the motivation of estimating the reliability of witnesses before court. And there is a brief mention of the physicist and Nobel Prize winner Erwin Schrödinger's thought experiment that uses a completely sealed chamber containing a cat and a potentially leaky flask of potassium cyanide to demonstrate that the meeting of modern physics – in this case quantum physics – and reality gives rise to a zone of uncertainty. This is because quantum physics makes assumptions about the possibilities of processes that in reality can only be verified by observation in such a way that observation determines the process. But so long as no one observes whether or not the potassium cyanide has leaked, quantum physics will maintain that the cat is simultaneously dead and alive; both eventualities are equally probable and possible because the process cannot be controlled.

IV. “*The Space of the Edit is a Real Space*” (Hito Steyerl): *Images, Facts, Discourse, and Postrepresentational Visual Strategies*

Steyerl herself hints at what this piece is all about in one of her many theoretical texts. In *Documentarism as Politics of Truth*, she demonstrates how different sides of politically controversial issues use the documentary form for the production of truth and how these strategies are invariably steeped in power struggles. Nonetheless, she says, drawing on Benjamin, we have to hold onto the idea of moments of truth as the promise of the documentary form. She illustrates this with reference to the four concentration camp photographs that Georges Didi-Huberman mentions at the beginning of his *Images in Spite of All*:

The difficulty for historians in dealing with these pictures is that too much and too little is required of these pictures at the same time: if one demands too much of them – the ‘whole truth’ – then disappointment results; suddenly the pictures are just torn shreds, pieces of film, thus inadequate. If one demands too little of them

and relegates them to the realm of the simulacrum, they are thus excluded from the historical field.¹⁰

The “whole truth,” says Steyerl, using the phrase in a critical but insistent way, is impossible without comprehensive contextualization, something that is very difficult to achieve and will always involve a degree of reflection on the medium and its use. The performative lecture *Probable Title: Zero Probability* endeavors to provide this kind of context. The concept of probability is unfurled and presented in terms of its semantic breadth, its scientific plausibility, its political instrumentalization, its shortcomings, its wit, and its elucidatory potential. And if the narrative is laced with ambiguous word games and absurd causalities, their purpose is to show that contextualization is both shaped and malleable, but they also reveal the limits of such formative activity. In the narrative that Steyerl and Mroué relate, pictures – whether visual or verbal – are not used to explain or illustrate. They are not a stable, self-contained reference in the broader flow of the narrative; they are embedded and interpreted in a critical commentary, just as the apparent clarity of their content is destabilized or even subverted by opposing messages.

In this respect, the two lecturers appeal to a conception of the image first formulated in the English-speaking world, a conception that has increasingly met with a positive international response. The American art historian W. J. T. Mitchell is one important voice in this discourse on image theory, and it was in this context that he published his theory of the “lives of images” in the highly regarded book *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* in 2005. This work picks up on reflections originally explored in his *Picture Theory* from 1994, which first raised the question of living images as a central issue. In response to accusations that he vitalizes the image, Mitchell has insisted that his use of the phrase as a metaphor is well considered, and he justifies it with reference to the desire we attribute to images, whether implicitly or explicitly (this goes for all image consumers, not just art historians). For images, according to this line of thinking, are at once both material and immaterial, which is the basis for the “double consciousness” that we harbor toward them and that causes us to vacillate “between magical beliefs and skeptical doubts, naive animism and hardheaded materialism, mystical and critical attitudes.”¹¹ With reference to Roland Barthes, Mitchell insists that images are not the same thing as their meaning; they carry a “vague notion” around with them, and methodologies such as hermeneutics – useful though they are – can never really do justice to this aspect of images. For Mitchell, and here he cites the philosopher Nelson Goodman, the vitalization of images is a result of their needing to be understood as “ways of worldmaking”¹² with an intrinsic life, albeit one that

¹⁰ Hito Steyerl: *Documentarism as Politics of Truth*, trans. by Aileen Derieg, 2003. <<http://eicpp.net/transversal/1003/steyerl2/en>> (accessed 29 August 2017).

¹¹ W. J. T. Mitchell: *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago, London 2005, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, xv.

is attributed to them by our desire. Nonetheless, he claims not to have confused this aspect of the “life of images” with the recently much-discussed “power of images.”¹³ In an e-mail exchange between Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm – who both called out a ‘turn’ in the same year, Mitchell the ‘pictorial’ and Boehm the ‘iconic turn’ – Mitchell not only maintains that the ‘iconic turn’ tends to neglect what he regards as important components of ideological critique; he is also emphatic in pointing out that he wants to consider iconology and ideology together because they produce a mutually dependent constellation.

In the German-speaking world, these reflections have been taken up perhaps most prominently by Tom Holert, who supplements Mitchell with Michel Foucault. According to Holert, images are not only steeped in power constellations but also constitute one aspect of the exercise of power, as when they are used to visualize things that would not be seen at all without the corresponding illustrations or, more radically, that can only achieve any degree of visibility with the help of flanking descriptions. In light of the “increasingly decentered and multiperspectival visual sphere” that now surrounds us, it is very difficult to see these processes taking place, so the task of *Bildwissenschaft* (the science of images) – or, as Holert more often than not says, visual culture studies¹⁴ – is to “investigate the logic of visual processes.”¹⁵ That is, rather than analyzing the nature of images, visual culture studies should aim to open up “a knowledge of the economy of image gateways.”¹⁶

Mroué and Steyerl’s performative lecture is indebted to precisely this interest in opening up the applications and access points of visual argumentation. Their discourse on probability is woven into a fabric of historical references, political instrumentalizations, spaces of scientific experimentation, personal experiences, mathematical cul-de-sacs, and aesthetic superimpositions. Given the calm, dulcet tones in which this dense narrative is presented, it is tempting to try to follow the stringency of the lecturers’ ruminations. The rich and complex weave of the composition is a demonstration of the relational system of images, facts, discourses, and their representations; be it as a metaphor that is suddenly taken literally as a media-critical statement; be it as a mathematical concept that cannot keep pace with the complexity of reality and therefore becomes a cynical commentary on political rationalism, a rationalism that allows disappeared people to be effaced from the collective consciousness without justification; or be it as a scientific insight that calls for modes of argumentation that dissolve into supposition, promoting mystification

¹³ Here Mitchell is primarily thinking of his American colleague David Freedberg, who published a comprehensive study under the title *The Power of Images* in 1990.

¹⁴ In their *Einführung in die Bildwissenschaft* (introduction to visual studies), Gustav Frank and Barbara Lange also set out to identify the now prevalent terms for this new field of research, citing the term *visual culture studies* as a research program from the English-speaking world that has found quite divergent formulations and corresponding designations in Europe (cf. Gustav Frank and Barbara Lange: *Einführung in die Bildwissenschaft*, Darmstadt 2010).

¹⁵ Tom Holert: *Imagining. Visuelle Kultur und Politik der Sichtbarkeit*, Cologne 2000, 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

over the illumination of knowledge. In this sense, we can safely say that *Probable Title: Zero Probability* is conceived as an illuminating narrative that intently and adeptly departs from linear logic in order to demonstrate the inconsistencies and paradoxes of commonly accepted lines of argumentation in knowledge production. It is nonrepresentational in David Joselit's sense because, like the example he cites – Pierre Huyghe's contribution to dOCUMENTA (13), *Untilled* (2012) – it is committed to a similar “refusal to represent.” Instead of representing, *Probable Title: Zero Probability* subverts and relocates the meaning of images, texts, and references, creating an ever-expanding spectrum of interpretation that is left hanging in proposal mode by its unusual and apparently associative connections.

As for the ambivalence that the performance provokes, it is only part of the artistic choreography of the work in a very limited sense; in fact, it is an effect of the very mechanisms that Steyerl and Mroué undertake to uncover. It is the result of the simple circumstance that, as a staged event, the performative lecture nevertheless creates a real social situation. It rests on the stubborn superimposition of staging (the theatrical setting, the mode of entertainment despite the weighty content) upon the logic of the narrative (the intended level of difficulty arising from the density and diversity of themes and perspectives), as well as on the confined setting, where escape from exposure to these difficulties is impossible. As part of a politically motivated artistic practice – and this work is certainly that – this last aspect is unusual. Addressing the audience in a direct and sometimes provocative way is a recurring strategy of political action in the artistic field. Exemplary in this respect is Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Bitte, liebt Österreich – Erste österreichische Koalitionswoche* (Please Love Austria: First Austrian Coalition Week). This project was staged right next to the Vienna State Opera in the context of the Wiener Festwochen in the year 2000. It imitated the reality TV format of *Big Brother* by having foreigners ‘voted out’ of the performance artwork. Similarly, Marina Belobrovaja virtually imposed herself on her audience with the project *Öffentliche Abschiebung!* (Public Deportation!), which was performed on Helvetiaplatz in the center of Zurich in 2007. To the Swiss citizens who witnessed it, this piece served as an uncomfortable reminder of their civic responsibilities, for Belobrovaja's residence permit had in fact expired on 21 August 2007, so her interest in the project was quite real. For the duration of a week, she took up a position on Helvetiaplatz with a minibus containing all her worldly possessions; a text on the side of the bus implored passersby to do their duty as citizens by deporting her. Ultimately nobody did, but the setting put passersby in the uncomfortable position of having to speak out either for Belobrovaja and thus against the law, or for a higher, abstract regulation and against the right to remain of the person standing in front of them. The different paradoxical constellations of these two projects were both aimed at the individual experience of ethical ambivalence on the part of passersby, and this ethical ambivalence was present even for those who did not react at all – namely, in the very circumstance of not reacting. Steyerl and Mroué's performative lecture initially presents this ethical ambivalence as an intellectual experience that, unlike the abovementioned examples,

does not rely on direct confrontation, but, with its concisely formed framework, it still obliges its audience to listen. This rigid setting envelops the narrative and thereby construes a superordinate context that runs the risk of being misunderstood as a costume of meaning, reincarcerating narrative escape attempts and letting the brilliantly conceived narrative fall back into the mode of representation.

Übersetzt von Jonathan Blower