

CT: Veneta, magst Du das noch ausführen?

VA: Es ist Macht, ja. Eine, die sich heute oft über Unsichtbarkeit und Unadressierbarkeit definiert. Es gibt keine klar erkennbare Instanz; Verantwortung bleibt verteilt und schwer greifbar. Sichtbarkeit entsteht durch ein diffuses Zusammenspiel aus Code, ökonomischen Anreizen und aggregiertem Verhalten von Nutzer*innen.

CT: Und zum Schluss noch eine persönliche Frage: Gibt es etwas, das Euch beide heute (trotzdem) Hoffnung macht?

HS: Etwa die Hälfte aller Menschen ist sozial und solidarisch. Schade, dass es nicht mehr sind.

VA: Was mir Hoffnung macht, ist vielleicht gerade, dass diese Systeme nicht vollständig geschlossen sind. Sie sind mächtig, aber sie funktionieren nicht reibungslos. Sie bleiben fehleranfällig, unvollständig, abhängig von unseren Reaktionen und Widersprüchen.

Und auch Menschen sind nicht vollständig optimierbar. Wir sind empfindlich, solidarisch, widersprüchlich, manchmal unlogisch. In diesen Lücken liegt noch Spielraum.

CT: Ich danke Euch für das Gespräch.

Das Interview wurde als E-Mailkonversation geführt.

Claudia Tittel, 17.06.2026

A conversation about AI, images and resistance

with Hito Steyerl and Veneta Androva

Hito Steyerl is one of the most influential contemporary artists on the international scene. In her work, she explores the political, social and epistemic implications of digital technologies, particularly AI systems and machine learning. Alongside her artistic practice, she works as a philosopher and author. Her latest book, **Medium Hot**, builds on Marshall McLuhan's distinction between 'hot' and 'cold' media and describes AI technologies as 'hot media' that intensify perception, emotions and social dynamics. She is best known for her complex video and media installations, which combine aesthetic, documentary and speculative elements. At the 23rd Begehungen Art Festival, her work **Mission Accomplished: Belanciege** (2019), developed in collaboration with Giorgi Gago Gagoshidze (GE) and Miloš Trakilović (NL/BU), will be on display.

Veneta Androva is a Bulgarian artist and filmmaker based in Berlin. Her practice combines animation, documentary research and digital imaging technologies to reveal political, economic and technological power structures. Her work **Spray and Pray** explores so-called '*mushroom websites*', which launch targeted, personalised disinformation campaigns to monetise content through advertising. **Spray and Pray** is also being shown this year in the Bulgarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Claudia Tittel: Dear Hito, in your documentaries and experimental films you have analysed the present: be it financial and commodity flows, labour relations under neoliberalism, critiques of visual regimes, and so on. Your work always engages with current issues. You began exploring algorithmic systems, automation and artificial intelligence very early on. What initially interested you in these technologies, and when did they give rise to political questions?

Hito Steyerl: That was a logical consequence of my work to date, in which I have always engaged with the latest imaging technologies, from S-8 through Umatic, Beta, 8mm, Hi-8, DV, digital post-production, game engines, etc., right up to AI image generators.

CT: In your answer, you describe the technical development of your work. Yet at the heart of your practice lies not so much the technology itself as the question of how it is used and what effects it has on perception, subjectivity and social processes. You use new technologies not merely as tools, but analyse how they function and expose the underlying structures of power and meaning. Your works are always precise analyses of the present. In your latest book, **Medium Hot**, you describe AI images as products of a structural distortion of reality that directly influences how we see ourselves and the world. What forms of image production can still offer resistance in the future?

Veneta Androva: For me, the resilience of an image lies in its ability to question its own legibility – to make visible the codes through which we interpret it. What matters is not only how an image was produced, but also the context in which it appears, the narrative it conveys, and the credibility it evokes. In **Spray and Pray**, for example, CGI-animated protagonists appear with pixelated faces – a device we recognise from documentary filmmaking: protection, testimony, danger, anonymity, and often a particular closeness to reality. My characters, however, are animated. The device is shifted, rendered almost overly obvious.

It is precisely this moment that interests me: a code of credibility that is simultaneously being undermined. Not because the image is any more true – but because it reveals how images come to be credible in the first place.

CT: These days, we're mainly talking about the dangers of AI and machine learning. Veneta, what do you think is the greatest danger? In your work with *Mushroom*, you've examined websites that deliberately spread disinformation to make money.

VA: What strikes me as particularly acute is the speed and invisibility with which AI systems are seeping into our everyday perception and political imagination – barely predictable, barely tangible. The 'Mushroom' websites I've been looking at aren't about one big false claim, but rather lots of small, emotionally charged pieces of content – repeated, clickable, ad-supported, built on fear and enemy stereotypes. What is dangerous here is not the individual piece of misleading information, but the climate that results from it: a space in which repetition itself becomes proof and fears become plausible through sheer frequency.

CT: How can we counteract the development of automated platforms and the dominance of Big Tech?

VA: Structurally, we need regulation, legislation and transparency requirements. At an individual level, the key lies in education – in understanding how these systems work by exploiting fear, attention and repetition, rather than being unconsciously exposed to them.

The real problem is the disparity in pace – AI systems and platforms are changing at a speed to which legislation can barely keep up. Power arises in this gap and is exploited long before any regulation takes effect.

CT: Your work, Hito, often addresses topics that only become the focus of public debate years later. How do you recognise which developments will become socially relevant? May I ask how you conduct your research?

HS: I don't have any special skills, just curiosity.

CT: In many of your works, it becomes apparent that images do not merely depict reality, but actually construct it. What role do images play today, at a time when they are increasingly generated, analysed and disseminated by machines?

HS: Images modulate and train people, standardise them, bring them into line, paralyse them, or deliberately agitate them, thereby generating exploitable volatility.

CT: What happens to people when automated systems train them to interact in a way that is useful to the systems? What does this mean for our self-image? Are we becoming figures who optimise ourselves for machine readability?

VA: We have long since optimised ourselves for machine readability – so subtly that it is hardly noticeable anymore. Anyone who wants to be visible in the digital space learns to use the codes for indexing, discoverability and reach. Following this logic, a simplified self-image also emerges: a version of ourselves that functions in the digital space and with which one might eventually identify all the same.

CT: AI systems today generate images, texts and entire realities in a matter of seconds. How does this change our relationship with truth?

HS: These images relate to truth insofar as they are documentary representations of their hierarchical infrastructures; from energy consumption to black-box algorithms. They generate reality by literally altering the landscape and the atmosphere.

CT: If AI images are documentary representations of their own infrastructures, how do we then distinguish between documentary truth and algorithmically generated fiction?

VA: For me, the distinction lies less between truth and fiction than between points of reference. Documentary truth refers to an external reality: a situation, an event, a lived experience. AI-generated images often refer to something else: datasets, patterns, probabilities, infrastructures. The question, then, is not whether an image is documentary, but which reality it documents – that of an event in the world, or that of a system that has learnt to simulate reality. Both can be real. Both can be interpreted as documentary. Only the point of reference differs.

This shift is central to my own work, because I work with animation and reconstruction. My images are not documentary because they depict something directly – they become so by referring to real structures and power relations.

CT: We can observe that the boundary between reality and staging has been shifting in recent years. This frightens us all. How do you view this development? How has your view of the world changed in recent years or have the conditions under which we view the world changed above all?

HS: Which world? That's an idea from the post-'89 phase of so-called globalisation. There is no longer a single world; only competing spheres of influence, including technological ones.

CT: If there is no longer a unified world today, but only competing spheres of influence, the question is: which forces or systems currently have the greatest influence on how we perceive our surroundings – beyond geopolitical borders.

VA: It is the systems that organise visibility: platforms, search engines, recommendation systems, and, increasingly, AI models. They structure what is repeated, what appears plausible, and what remains invisible.

The *Mushroom websites* are not about political conviction, but about an economic logic – clicks, reach, advertising revenue. This infrastructure knows no geopolitical boundaries.

CT: Our festival is taking place this year in a former theatre. That is why it also explores the theme of staging. Politics has always been a form of staging. Politicians have always staged themselves and harnessed the power of images, but today these images are generated directly by AI. What changes when the stage today is no longer parliament or television, but algorithmically controlled platforms and AI-generated images?

HS: Staging can be controlled more easily – if necessary, by machines for machines; no one else needs to be there.

CT: Right-wing politicians, in particular, use AI for disinformation, fake news and as a means of staging. Why are these technologies so well suited to political mobilisation and propaganda?

HS: Because of the underlying infrastructure of anti-social media, which has taken over large swathes of what used to be the public sphere and has already established key elements of meme politics.

CT: A personal question relating to the festival venue: Do you think the theatre is still a place of illusion today, or have digital platforms long since become the more effective stages?

HS: Effective in what respect? During the pandemic, it became clear that face-to-face interaction is irreplaceable, at least for most people. The platforms run by digital corporations operate for their own sake, for their baroque system of optimisation, milestones and benchmarks.

CT: Veneta, you've been working with digital publics and platform logic for many years and have closely witnessed and accompanied the development of social media and digital platforms. How do you view this today – have we become dependent on them?

VA: Dependent – yes, because platforms are often the most important spaces available for visibility and connection. It's less a choice than a necessity. I see alternatives in smaller, self-organised structures – collectives, independent spaces that aren't optimised for reach. They don't scale, but they create a different kind of commitment. Not a substitute, but a necessary counterbalance.

CT: Our festival is called 'In der Vorstellung' (In the Imagination), drawing on the idea of the theatre as a place of performance and imagination. Who controls society's notions today of what becomes visible and what remains invisible?

HS: Power, as it always has been.

CT: Veneta, would you like to elaborate on that?

VA: It's power, yes. A form of power that today often defines itself through invisibility and the inability to be held to account. There is no clearly identifiable authority; responsibility remains dispersed and elusive. Visibility arises from a diffuse interplay of code, economic incentives and the aggregated behaviour of users.

CT: And finally, a personal question: is there anything that gives you both hope today (despite everything)?

HS: Around half of all people are socially minded and show solidarity. It's a shame there aren't more.

VA: What gives me hope, perhaps, is precisely that these systems aren't completely closed. They're powerful, but they don't run smoothly. They remain prone to error, incomplete, dependent on our reactions and contradictions. And people, too, cannot be fully optimised. We are sensitive, supportive, contradictory, and sometimes illogical. There is still room for manoeuvre within these gaps.

CT: Thank you both for the conversation.

The interview took the form of an email exchange.

Claudia Tittel, 17 June 2026