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Hito Steyerl and LG Williams: Exposure, Judgment, and Consequence

*The complete correspondence following “When Seriousness Refuses Judgment:
On Carroll Dunham’s Art and Writing”*

I. IMAGE, FORM, AND AUTHORITY

Museums, universities, galleries, and the contemporary art press routinely present Hito Steyerl as a leading authority on the global circulation of images. The institutional credentials are not in dispute: since 2024, a professorship in Emergent Digital Media at the Academy of Fine Arts Munich; participation in *Fabrik*, the German Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale; and the number-one position in *ArtReview*'s 2017 Power 100. The claim is repeated so frequently that it is seldom examined. What, precisely, constitutes that authority?

To say, as Steyerl repeatedly does, that images are produced, reproduced, degraded, distributed, manipulated, or absorbed by systems of power is not yet to understand reproduction, power, or the image. Naming power is not a theory of power. Such language rehearses familiar descriptions of conditions that may — or may not — surround imagery. It does not demonstrate how an image becomes a meaningful pictorial fact — or, in moving-image work, how a sequence of images becomes a coherent temporal and visual argument, much less an original one. Institutions may confer authority upon this vocabulary; the vocabulary has not produced the knowledge that would warrant it.

An image of San Quentin State Prison may evoke imprisonment, surveillance, confinement, or state power. It does not thereby explain the systemic machinery of mass incarceration. Nor does placing several such images in succession automatically produce that explanation. A referent is not an analysis. Political recognition is not pictorial knowledge. Michelle Alexander's account of mass incarceration required sustained historical research, legal reasoning, evidence, distinction, and argument. A moving-image work advancing comparable claims must establish that knowledge through its own means: through the selection and construction of shots, their

framing, duration, sequence, rhythm, juxtaposition, recurrence, sound, movement, and cumulative consequence. It cannot borrow analytical authority by displaying politically charged referents. The mere accumulation of such images proves neither understanding nor mastery. A sequence can end without achieving a conclusion, just as a picture can stop without being finished.

For Williams, an image acquires artistic meaning only when its subject has been formally realized through composition, structure, pictorial coordinates, value, space, light, movement, time, finish, precedent, and the deliberate ordering of eye, mind, and emotion. In video, these demands do not disappear; they intensify. Each shot must stand in necessary relation to what precedes and follows it. The question is never merely what an image depicts, what images have been assembled, or what an institution claims they address. The question is how the work operates, what visual and temporal necessities it establishes, what knowledge it produces that its accompanying rhetoric cannot, and whether its stated claims have been achieved.

On 5 January 2026, Steyerl unexpectedly replied to Williams's essay *When Seriousness Refuses Judgment: On Carroll Dunham's Art and Writing*, distributed earlier that day. She praised his writing; in a second message she remarked that she was "learning a lot about painting" and encouraged him to continue. Williams's final reply accepts the compliment but rejects its premise. It turns the exchange into a lesson in pictorial judgment, naming the structural difference between a practice of exposure and a practice of consequence and declining to treat that difference as a matter of taste. The complete correspondence is reproduced below. Its artistic and critical implications are examined in the Afterword.

REFERENT

When Seriousness Refuses Judgment: On Carroll Dunham's Art and Writing —
LG Williams, published 5 January 2026. The essay is not reproduced here.

NOTE ON REPRODUCTION

The correspondence in Part II is reproduced verbatim, including all errors of spelling, dating, and address, for purposes of criticism, commentary, and the historical record. No word has been amended, added, or removed by the editors.

II. THE CORRESPONDENCE

HITO STEYERL

5 January 2026
7:27 AM PST

Dude I dont know why I am getting your emails, but you do write very well
and I read them all. thanks, Hito

LG WILLIAMS

5 January 2026
10:57 AM PST

Hi Professor Steyerl,

Dude — thank you. That praise genuinely does mean a lot. I don't often hear from
people working at the center of the big-time contemporary art world, so the note
itself is encouraging. To be honest, it was a first for me.

If you ever feel like sharing the essays with students or colleagues you're around,
that's where things start to matter.

Happy New Year...For Now,

Lg

HITO STEYERL

5 January 2026
11:00 PM PST

learning a lot about painting, keep going!

LG WILLIAMS

6 January 2026
Final reply

Sehr Geehrte Frau Professor Steyerl —

Dude — good to hear from you, again. I am honored. This is now my second email
from a superstar big-blue-chip artist. This is a good sign for me in 2026! For that,
I remain in your debt.

And only for that reason will I allow myself a small correction — one I would
normally never make.

If you think my work is about “painting”, you (and therefore your students and
colleagues) may be missing a substantial part of my praxis. Let me explain.

You are working at a high level — but you stop where I begin. That difference
matters, and it is structural. You are part of the system. I am not.

In your work, you repeatedly:

- no criteria are asserted
- no judgment is risked

- no line is crossed where something is said to fail as art, rather than merely as politics or infrastructure

So questions simply recur:

“Is it possible to avoid implication?” → not really

“Is there a way out?” → prototypes exist, but...

This produces a closed loop for you that you cannot escape:

exposure → implication → resignation → repetition

This loop is precisely what I am attacking.

The key difference — and this is the real point — is this:

You operate at the level of exposure.

I insist on the level of consequence.

That difference is not stylistic. It is artistic and philosophical.

Your practice depends on institutional immanence. You work inside museums, biennials, presses, and universities that you critique. Your critique therefore cannot be terminal.

Your ethics are diagnostic, not adjudicative.

What is missing is the willingness to say:

- this fails
- this is no longer art
- this seriousness is performative
- this critique is exhausted

Because of this, you cannot quite go there.

The irony is that you know this. It makes you adjacent — but constrained. I recognize the position. I reject this position.

For that reason, you should read my National Strategic Art Initiative. It addresses precisely these dead ends. It answers the question of what happens if we do not decide. It is not diagnosis. It is adjudication.

Below is a brief map of where the work overlaps with questions you’ve been engaging, and where it diverges.

I would insist that your students and colleagues read my latest volumes, which can be found here: www.pcppress.com

Do your libraries have my publications? if not, I would contact your libraries and get them on their book shelves immediately — so they too can get up to speed, too. Time is short.

For specifics, ie the following items below, please refer to this page: <https://lgwilliams.com/>

I. DIRECT OVERLAP

(These most clearly engage questions you’ve been exploring in art)

When Seriousness Refuses Judgment: On Carroll Dunham’s Art and Writing (Jan 4, 2026)

Why it matters: this is the cleanest overlap.

- seriousness as a circulating signal
- judgment evacuated without appearing refused

- institutions that reward exposure without consequence

This runs close to your concerns with visibility without agency and critique without exit — except that I insist on judgment where you stop at exposure.

Andrea Fraser and the Absorption of Institutional Critique (Dec 28, 2025)

- critique folded back into institutions
- exposure neutralized by repetition
- immanent critique that never exits the system

This parallels your position of working inside institutions while exposing them, except that I explicitly name the failure condition.

Richard Prince's Deposition and the Failure of Contemporary Conceptual Art (Dec 30, 2025)

- legal and procedural frameworks replacing aesthetic judgment
- documentation and circulation substituting for artistic risk

This connects directly to your interest in forensic aesthetics and the systems images fall under once art becomes procedural.

II. STRUCTURAL ADJACENCY

(Different material, similar underlying logic)

Open Letter to Texte zur Kunst: On the Refusal of Judgment (Dec 29, 2025)

- refusal of judgment as institutional norm
- critical language performing ethics without consequence

This Is Not Conceptual Art: Charles Gaines and the Aesthetics of Evasion (April 5, 2025)

- evasion through systems
- conceptualism as insulation
- procedure replacing decision

Kerry James Marshall and the Bureaucratic Canon (Nov 9, 2025)

- canon formation
- bureaucratic legitimacy
- institutional insulation

The objects differ, but the administrative mechanism is shared.

III. PERIPHERAL RESONANCE

(Related logics, even when the objects diverge)

- Not Ultimate Enough: Ad Reinhardt's Great Refusal
- The Undead Aesthetic: Zombie Formalism
- How Not to Look at Modern Art in 2076
- The Institutional Embalming of Raymond Pettibon

These echo questions of circulation and degradation, though the terrain shifts.

Bottom Line

If you (and your students and colleagues) are reading my work seriously, it is most likely as an attempt to diagnose circulation without consequence — a condition you expose visually and structurally, and which I insist must be forced back into judgment.

In conclusion, please tell everyone: “Hey, Dudes, this man is the Dude: And he’s the shit.”

With appreciation, Onward

Lg

III. EDITORIAL AFTERWORD

Steyerl's opening remark — "Dude I dont know why I am getting your emails" — contains the exchange's first and most revealing irony. Williams has long used email not as secondary publicity but as a free distribution platform for circulating work without institutional mediation: a means of publishing, archiving, reaching readers, and bypassing the channels through which institutions confer visibility. That independently constructed circulation system then collides with the institutional authority presumed to understand such systems. Steyerl — a designated authority on digital circulation and professor of Emergent Digital Media — encounters it directly yet initially treats its arrival as inexplicable.

The institutional asymmetry is almost comic in numerical form. Steyerl enters the exchange bearing *ArtReview*'s number-one position in its 2017 *Power 100*; as of 23 July 2026, Artfacts identifies Williams only as "Top 1,000,000 Global." These rankings are not equivalent measures of artistic quality and are not offered here as such. They register institutional legibility. One artist is rendered at the resolution of one; the other at the resolution of one million. The email crosses that entire distance without an introduction, and the number-one authority on digital circulation responds: "I dont know why I am getting your emails." The contradiction could hardly be more complete.

The point is not that Steyerl fails to understand email technically. It is that Williams has used unsolicited email precisely because institutional invisibility leaves his work no authorized path of arrival. Spam is therefore not merely an effect of his invisibility but a practical means of defeating it. Steyerl's own *How Not to Be Seen* supplies the exact formula for the encounter: "being spam caught by a filter."

The correspondence then tests whether that formula represents actual understanding or merely performative imagery. Williams is the institutionally invisible sender, his email occupies the position of spam, and Steyerl herself becomes the filter that catches it. That first

response reveals the failure immediately. She can stage invisibility and spam as artistic content, but when the condition arrives as an actual demand upon her attention, she cannot recognize what she has caught or why it should have reached her. The category works for her as representation; it fails as recognition.

Yet the message survives the filter. Steyerl reads the emails, reports that she has read them all, praises the writing, and says she is "learning a lot about painting." What first appears to her as an inexplicable intrusion becomes, by her own account, a source of knowledge about painting from which she acknowledges learning. The reversal is complete: Williams uses spam to escape invisibility, while the designated authority on invisibility initially mistakes the successful arrival of that work for an anomaly. The video performs an understanding that the correspondence exposes as absent.

Williams's final reply answers such a reader with a reading list, a library directive, and a benediction. All three are deliberate. A letter diagnosing circulation without consequence ends by enacting the very distribution imperative it identifies — "contact your libraries," "Time is short" — because the surest way to exhibit a machine is to run it in public. Readers who take the closing passages for sincere self-promotion have located the joke without understanding it. The Estate of LG Williams™ confirms: the demolition is load-bearing.

The correspondence has already enacted — and reversed — the formula. The work that supplied it must now be tested. Consider Steyerl's *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013). In the excerpt presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), the work announces "13 ways of becoming invisible" and proceeds by enumeration: among them, living in a gated community or a military zone; inhabiting an airport, factory, or museum; owning an anti-paparazzi handbag; wearing an invisibility cloak; being female and over fifty; entering the dark web; becoming a dead pixel or Wi-Fi signal; being undocumented or poor; being spam caught

by a filter; or being a disappeared person as an enemy of the state (20:45–22:00).

The spam item has already been tested by the exchange. More revealingly, the list omits institutional artistic invisibility: the condition of making and circulating work without the recognition that renders its presence legible within art. The museum appears in the list only as architecture — a place in which a body may go unnoticed — not as an apparatus that confers or withholds artistic legibility, the capacity in which it bears directly upon the work shown inside it. Institutional artistic invisibility is not equivalent to forced disappearance, poverty, undocumented status, or state persecution; the distinction is essential. Williams's work is visible enough to be read, yet institutionally invisible enough for its successful arrival to register initially as inexplicable.

Having assembled this catalogue of contemporary-art clichés — social privilege, militarization, surveillance, gender, digitality, poverty, statelessness, and technological disappearance — the work abruptly declares: "In the decades of the digital revolution, 170,000 people disappear" (22:16–22:32), dragging disappeared people into the same indiscriminate rhetorical heap. No distinction is made between metaphorical invisibility, political exclusion, technological abstraction, and actual human disappearance; each becomes one more item in perpetual circulation. A chain of near-synonymous verbs follows — "annihilated, eliminated, eradicated, deleted" — before, with dreary inevitability, the invisible people retreat into 3D animation and reemerge as pixels. Political catastrophe has been reduced to one more interchangeable effect in a parade of digital-art busywork masquerading as creative or intellectual consequence.

The continuity is topical and verbal. Narration groups unlike conditions beneath the word *invisibility*, but the montage does not establish why one image must precede or follow another. The gated community does not formally generate the military zone; the military zone does not require the airport; the airport does not require the museum; the museum does not require the invisibility cloak. Remove the narration and captions, and the sequence loses the argument attributed to it. The work illustrates a preannounced thesis. It does not derive that thesis pictorially.

Run the same test on *Factory of the Sun* (2015). In "What Is Contemporary? A Conversation with Hito Steyerl and Lanka Tattersall," presented at MOCA on 21 February 2016, Steyerl described three materials from which the project began: Donna Haraway's statement, "Our best machines are made of sunshine"; an anecdote about a CERN experiment in which a particle appeared to exceed the speed of light; and YouTube dance videos featuring Take Some Crime. Her account is one of curatorial free association rather than artistic necessity. A quotation, an amusing scientific

anecdote, and an internet performer independently attracted her attention and were "meshed up" into a work.

Nothing in her account establishes why these materials required one another, why these three rather than innumerable substitutes were necessary, or what would be lost if any one of them were replaced. Their apparent relation is supplied retrospectively through abstractions — light, speed, data, bodies, technology — broad enough to connect almost anything. At that level of generality, association is effortless and therefore demonstrates nothing. What appears as complexity is contingency with an explanation attached (6:29–8:34).

The same arbitrariness governs the film's treatment of its anime figures. Steyerl casts them as stand-ins for people who will be killed during future protests and who travel backward in time to appear as animated characters. But nothing in their visual construction, movement, sequencing, or relation to the surrounding footage makes that identity necessary. Those figures could have been assigned almost any political, historical, or speculative backstory without altering the work.

The choice of protesters who will be killed is therefore not a meaning produced by the film but an ethical charge attached to it from outside. Protest, martyrdom, and state violence lend the figures an immediate moral gravity that their visual and temporal organization has not earned. The figures are not characters whose identities develop through action; they are semantic placeholders onto which political seriousness is projected.

The work offers no artistic reason why they must be protesters at all. Political content functions here as a certificate of significance rather than as meaning achieved through form.

Steyerl acknowledges the dependence on explanation directly: "I don't think anyone will understand that by seeing the film. So this is why I'm explaining it." She immediately adds: "the film is really a mess" (15:53–16:26). The narrative is not merely difficult to decipher. It has not been constructed within the film and must therefore be delivered afterward as authorial explanation.

This establishes a second level of substitutability. Not only can the source materials be exchanged; so can the meanings assigned to them. A quotation can be replaced by another quotation, an anecdote by another anecdote, a performer by another performer — and the anime figures can be redescribed as virtually anything. Where both materials and meanings remain interchangeable, the work has no binding internal structure. Its apparent complexity results from the multiplication of references, not from their artistic necessity.

Later, discussing the soundtrack, Steyerl says that the source materials have "almost nothing to do with one another" and that music "provides a pretext" for the audience to accept the fiction: "It unifies it. It creates the narrative" (32:32–33:17). The admission is

extraordinary. Materials that have no necessary relation are not transformed into a coherent work because music masks their disconnection. A soundtrack cannot retroactively supply artistic necessity to an arbitrary collection of references; it can only conceal its absence.

Questioned again about narrative, Steyerl describes the materials as "really disjointed." Unable to identify any formal principle that binds them, she retreats to the assertion that "they do hang together" and insists that conflicting materials must somehow be brought into a single framework (52:00–54:45). This is not an account of coherence but a declaration of it after the fact. Worse, it is the kind of declaration that treats the audience's willingness to accept a fiction as evidence that the fiction has been artistically constructed. The materials do not become necessary to one another; they are forced into proximity, covered by music, and defended by assertion. What is offered as complexity is artistic incoherence with a soundtrack and institutional protection.

The materials are not held together; they are packaged together. Music supplies continuity, explanation supplies meaning, and institutional authority supplies the expectation that the result should be accepted as coherent. The work does not produce coherence; it requires belief in coherence. What Steyerl calls a framework is not a formal structure discovered in the materials but an imposed container capable of accommodating almost any combination of materials, references, and assigned meanings.

The decisive test remains substitutability. Nothing in Steyerl's account suggests that replacing the Haraway quotation, the CERN anecdote, or the YouTube dance footage with comparable materials would alter the work in any essential respect. If any of the three can be exchanged while the same explanatory vocabulary remains intact, the relations among them are not necessary. They are interchangeable references gathered beneath an after-the-fact theme. Their coexistence is arbitrary; their coherence is rhetorical.

Steyerl's statements are not merely instances of self-deprecating humor. Taken together, they describe the method of construction she herself identifies: hit-or-miss free association provides the materials; meanings are assigned retrospectively; the artist's explanation conveys the narrative; and the soundtrack creates the appearance of continuity. What these statements do not disclose is any visual-formal principle capable of making one component necessary to another. The work does not organize its materials through pictorial and temporal interdependence. Explanation supplies intelligibility, while music supplies coherence.

Nor does the explanatory apparatus repair these failures. The artist's talks, voiceover, soundtrack, wall text, and institutional framing do not supply the narrative and coherence absent from the images; they merely assert that both exist. Each supplementary layer attempts to compensate for the failure of the one beneath it,

yet repeats the same arbitrary associations in another medium. The images do not establish the narrative, the montage does not establish the relations, and the explanation does not establish why either should be accepted. What results is not meaning transferred outward but nonsense reiterated across image, sound, speech, text, and institution until repetition itself is mistaken for coherence.

This is where the formal failure becomes an institutional condition. The explanation is not an accessory to the work but the basis of its intelligibility. This is the [Regime of Impunity](#) in cultural form: explanation substitutes for achievement, circulation substitutes for judgment, and institutional repetition protects the work from a conclusive artistic assessment.

The critical conclusion is narrow and demonstrable: in these works, meaning is repeatedly supplied by narration, music, artist's talk, and institutional framing rather than established by image and montage alone. Steyerl's recorded account supports it directly. The narrative backstory is not intelligible from the film; independently gathered materials are unified by music; yet Steyerl says that video "will stand in" for her, "talking on my behalf" (43:37–44:15). The contradiction is complete: a video whose narrative must be supplied by lecture and whose coherence must be supplied by music is nevertheless appointed to speak for the artist. Exposure is staged; consequence is outsourced — to voiceover, soundtrack, lecture, press release, and wall text.

The deeper difficulty concerns where Steyerl's authority principally resides: in writing about images rather than in images that establish comparable knowledge pictorially. That authority rests heavily upon "In Defense of the Poor Image" (2009), an essay that gives a memorable name to low-resolution images copied, compressed, reformatted, degraded, and recirculated through digital networks.

The essay's central move — prizing a degraded image precisely for its degradation — belongs to a genealogy Steyerl traces directly to Julio García Espinosa's 1969 manifesto "For an Imperfect Cinema." But the poor image and poor art are not the same thing. Technical degradation may describe the conditions under which an image is produced or circulated; it cannot excuse arbitrary construction, incoherent montage, interchangeable materials, or meanings imposed after the fact.

Steyerl's category nevertheless becomes an intellectual shelter for such failures. What begins as a defense of the poor image ends as a defense of poor art: formal poverty is redescribed as political significance, incoherence as complexity, and artistic failure as evidence of circulation, exclusion, or resistance.

The writing does not escape the same judgment. It proceeds by the method of arbitrary association that governs the films: politically charged terms are

accumulated, disparate conditions are placed beside one another, and memorable formulations substitute for the distinctions and arguments that would make the claims answerable. The prose does not correct the construction of the images; it repeats it rhetorically. What appears in the work as arbitrary montage appears in the writing as theoretical montage. Steyerl is therefore not a poor artist redeemed by strong criticism. The same failure operates across both registers.

This returns the correspondence to the essay that prompted it. Steyerl did not respond to an incidental text but to Williams's account of Carroll Dunham, where poor painting and poor writing are exposed as a single structure: the paintings simulate risk, while the criticism simulates judgment. The parallel is now unavoidable. Steyerl praises the essay that supplies the diagnostic form under which her own art and writing can be judged. Whether she recognized that implication is unknowable; that the implication exists is not.

There is no need to pursue that genealogy further; doing so would concede theory's terrain and evade the decisive question. Theory is not image. A text cannot compose a frame, make one shot necessary to the next,

or order eye, mind, and emotion through time. A manifesto cannot perform the pictorial work that the images themselves have failed to accomplish. Even a wholly original essay could not supply the visual necessity absent from the work.

The judgment that matters occurs nowhere but in the work itself — and there the claimed pictorial achievement remains unestablished.

The conclusion is not biographical. On the evidence of two emails, Steyerl is generous, quick, and curious — qualities the system she inhabits does not require and cannot use. The larger point concerns that system: one in which a designated authority on images can offer "learning a lot about painting" as a compliment, as though painting were a subject one picks up from a newsletter rather than the discipline of judgment from which the authority of images derives.

Exposure is what that system rewards. Consequence is what it cannot survive. Between the two stands the correspondence above, reproduced without alteration — so that the reader, not the institution and not the artist, renders the judgment the system was built to defer.

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