



Hito Steyerl: This is the Future
Educator Resources

This is the Future explores a vibrant garden through an immersive environment of narrative film, video sculptures, and spatial intervention. Artist Hito Steyerl (German, born 1966) has created a contemporary parable of climate change, societal dynamics, and the predictive capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI). Throughout Steyerl's career, she has interrogated the hidden connections between technology, political movements, and global capitalism, writing essays and making films that shine a light on the invisible infrastructure established by digital forces such as data mining and AI.

The exhibition opens with a short film. We meet Heja, an incarcerated woman who grows a garden in her cell. To keep it safe from the prison guards, she hides it in the future. There, her plants evolve through the effects of a neural network, a method of AI that trains computers to process data in ways similar to the ways neurons work in the human brain. A second narrator, the voice of a neural network, alternates with Heja's storytelling. This narrator ponders the promise of AI to predict the future: by analyzing mountains of data, the neural network finds patterns that suggest what will come next. But will the unpredictability of human behavior thwart the power of computation?

The film sets the stage for the *Power Plants* of Heja's garden. Three video sculptures depict the shape-shifting floral imagery of her *Power Plants*, invented through machine learning that has processed thousands of pictures of plant life. The plants assume greater agency by developing healing properties that promise relief from contemporary ills. The artist describes them as ruderal, able to thrive in ecologically disturbed areas such as those transformed by climate change, suggested by their gravel beds.

Steyerl considers this work to be a positive look at our future. She imagines a time when plants "have a lot of political characteristics or abilities. They are able to heal the present. . . . It is definitely a vision of nature that is more optimistic than the present really allows." This is the Future proposes that AI could theoretically be used to create positive effects, something that seems unimaginable in today's world of corporate Big Data. Instead, we find an unexpected pathway toward a resilient future.

Hito Steyerl: *This is the Future* is curated by Sara Krajewski, The Robert and Mercedes Eichholz Senior Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and is supported in part by the Contemporary Art Council of the Portland Art Museum, Maribeth Collins Exhibition Endowment Fund, Miller Meigs Endowment for Contemporary Art, the OCAC Visiting Artist Fund, and the Reed College Art Department and the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery.

The exhibition is open February 11 – June 18, 2023. Below, we offer resources and prompts for further learning.

Videos Available on YouTube

[LUX: Hito Steyerl - This is the Future \(3:29\)](#)

A short video that documents the installation and includes a brief interview with the artist

[Hito Steyerl - This is the Future - Biennale Arte 2019 \(14:44\)](#)

This film is included in the PAM installation.

[Hito Steyerl - 'Being Invisible Can Be Deadly' | TateShots \(5:20\)](#)

Steyerl discusses her film *How Not To Be Seen*.

Essays and More

[School of the Art Institute of Chicago Hito Steyerl Resource Guide](#)

libraryguides.saic.edu/VAP/steyerl

[Merve Emre, "Hito Steyerl's Digital Visions," *New Yorker* Feb. 22, 2022.](#)

[Kimberly Bradley, Hito Steyerl Is an Artist With Power. She Uses It for Change. *New York Times* Dec. 15, 2017.](#)

[Rea McNamara, "Hito Steyerl Brings Us Late Night Public Access Weirdness," *Hyperallergic* Nov. 24, 2020](#)

This essay describes a "visual podcast" in which Steyerl interviews *This is the Future* collaborator Hêja Netîrk, a Kurdish multidisciplinary artist from Southeastern Turkey. "The pair discuss the Kurdish refugee's nine-

month-long wrongful political imprisonment in Turkey,” including how the prisoners secretly grew plants. Find videos by Hêja and additional information at [Broken Archive](#) and in this article: Zelwan Z. Wali, [Kurdish artist flees Turkish prosecution to find creative sanctuary in Germany](#), Rûdaw Feb. 19, 2020.

Recent Articles on Artificial Intelligence:

[We Are All Neural Networks by Bill Greisar, NW Noggin](#)

Deepen your understanding of artificial intelligence and neural networks in the context of Steyerl’s work through this terrific blog post by Bill Greisar of [NW Noggin](#), the neuroscience outreach group. (Invite them to your school for a free workshop for students of all ages!)

Ted Chiang “[ChatGPT is a Blurry JPEG of the Web](#),” New Yorker, Feb 9, 2023.

Ezra Klein “[The Imminent Danger of AI is One We’re Not Talking About](#),” New York Times, Feb 26, 2023.

Prompts for Reflection

1. Describe your sensory experience of the exhibition. How did you feel while you were in it? What did you see, hear, taste, touch, smell? Write down several words for each of the senses.
2. Early in the film, the Artificial Intelligence Network tells us, “Future prediction is an old problem. People have tried to predict the future for thousands of years.” The Network seems to offer a solution by predicting the future using past data. But Heja notes the Network’s glitches (“It brags on and then just keeps repeating itself.”). She asks us to consider how this imperfect Network is not merely predicting, but shaping the future.

Steyerl is calling our attention to a real phenomenon that we all currently participate in. When we use digital platforms, such as Google or social media, algorithms collect data on our behavior and then feed us information tailored to our behaviors and apparent preferences. In this way, AI predicts our future actions based on data collected on our past actions. We train algorithms to give us what we want. However, Steyerl asks, “How are these algorithms

training us? Have I, as a user sitting in front of a computer, been trained?”

Look back on the last hour or day. How many times did you interact with a digital device? What did you ask it to do? What information about yourself did you share (intentionally or unintentionally)? Could you have done any of those things without the device? What possibilities does AI open up? What possibilities does it foreclose?

3. How does Steyerl’s work elide the conceptual divide between what is human made and what is not human made, but exists in spite of or beyond us? How is the natural plant world integrated into the work in ways that are both familiar and surprising?

Part of the appeal—and power—of Steyerl’s work comes from her use of humor within her political critique. In *This is the Future*, *Power Plants* have the ability to protect us against “hate speech and austerity propaganda,” to “poison autocrats,” and “like almost every plant on the planet” they can counteract global warming. What superpowers would you like to find (or are already present) in real or imagined *Power Plants*?

4. Steyerl describes *This is the Future* as fundamentally optimistic and Heja reminds us at the end of the film, the future “is already here. Because whatever the future will be: It always starts here and now.” What would you like to know about the future? What kind of future world would you like to create? In what ways do you see yourself already creating that world?
5. Consider *This is the Future* in relation to other utopian and dystopian works. Here are some suggestions:

Films: *Blade Runner*, *Ex Machina*, *Her*, *AlphaGO*

Fiction: *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro and *Exhalation* by Ted Chiang

Podcast: [Two Million Years in Two Hours: A Conversation with Yuval Noah Harari on Your Undivided Attention](#)