

# The postmodern paradox in visual arts aestheticism, politics and contemporary materialism

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What does it mean, for a feminist, or a woman, to be a subject? And how can we, as objects that we nevertheless are, be subjects in our bodies, and not only in our words? How can we be feminists without bodies, and how can we be feminists with them? With this question in the background, I intend to focus on a particular discourse or material discussion generated by contrasting different feminist critical production of notions of the material, expressed in two publications: *Materialist Feminisms* (1993) and *Material Feminisms* (2008). I intend to show how there is a tension – a postmodern paradox – between feminist discourses about the material in the visual arts drawing attention to a particular example in the visual arts from Portugal: Ana Vieira’s artistic production from the early 1970s and analyzing this problem through Hito Steyerl’s recent written reflections on the material. To the thesis that **‘feminist theory is at an impasse caused by the contemporary linguistic turn in feminist thought’**<sup>1</sup>, corresponds the certainty that everything is always already discursive, but we are subjects as well as objects and not just subjected to this state of affairs – and therein lies the political agency of feminism as (critical and artistic) practices.

Hopefully, a rhizomatic reflection between all these different, but sometimes complementary, positions can bring us to tie together some loose ends and address some problems inherent to a feminist material position.

## **The Material in Feminist Thought**

In 1993, Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean published *Material Feminisms*,<sup>2</sup> which was introduced as **‘a book about feminism and Marxism written when many people are proclaiming the end of socialism and the end of feminism’**.<sup>3</sup> The first was **‘said to have failed in its competition with the capitalist marketplace’**, the second was **‘said to have won all its battles’** (being that these **‘ends’** corresponded to an increasing expansion of postmodernism in its post-fordist and neo-capitalist guise, and given that post-structuralism, which sustained postmodernism’s discursive and most critical face, was also being declared dead). Landry and MacLean believed in the **“political effects”** made possible by strategies such as deconstruction in a cultural context and decided to revisit the **‘debates between Marxist and feminist social and cultural theorists in the**

1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, primarily in Britain and the United States'.<sup>4</sup> This way, a concept of "*materialist feminism*" as a critical reading practice was brought forward by their work, or, as they put it, the development of a '**deconstructive materialist feminist perspective**', combining Marxist historical materialism (plus its latter developments) and post-structuralist theories, from Jacques Derrida to Michel Foucault. '**Our notion of materialist feminism**', they wrote, '**is one that takes the critical investigation, or reading in the strong sense, of the artifacts of culture and social history, including literary and artistic texts, archival documents, and works of theory, to be a potential site of political contestation through critique**'.<sup>5</sup>

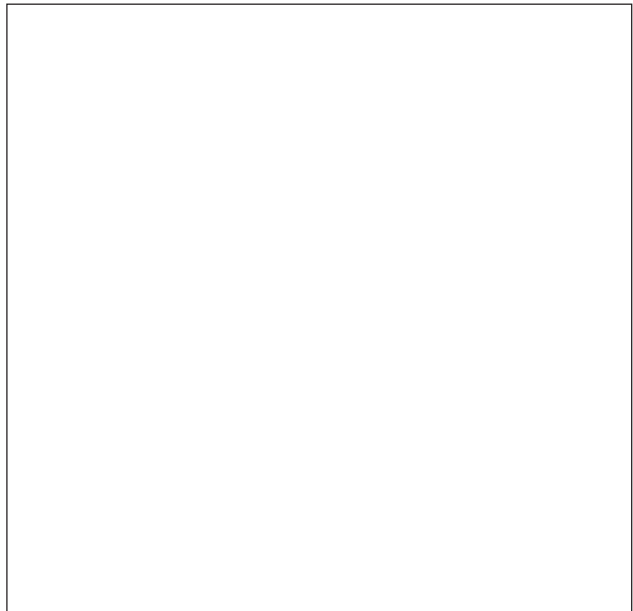
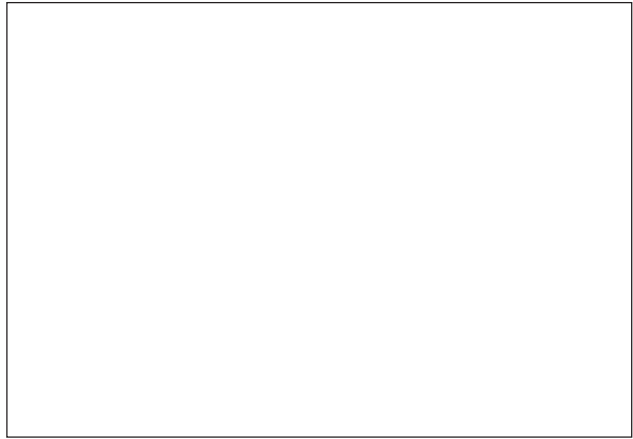
A new millennium entered and the concept of the material in relation to feminism became uttered by many voices which led inevitably to the publication of an edited book, encompassing theoretical and critical inputs from many women including Elizabeth Grosz, Claire Colebrook, Karen Barad, Donna J. Haraway and Susan Bordo. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, the editors, justified this compilation of essays entitled *Material Feminisms*<sup>6</sup> with the recognition of the fact that '**feminist theory is at an impasse caused by the contemporary linguistic turn in feminist thought. With the advent of postmodernism and post-structuralism, many feminists have turned their attention to social constructionist models**'.<sup>7</sup> A fifteen year gap separates the publication of these books (a monograph and an anthology) dedicated to reflect on the concept of the material in relation to feminist thought, and this gap has meant a significant change in perspectives. In this later anthology we can clearly sense the awkwardness of being presented with many different, even opposed "*materialisms*", and start to wonder what has happened throughout this decade and a half, and how this '**material feminisms**' (please beware not to mistake this with the '**materialist feminism**' described above) set themselves outside that postmodernist realm that despite all, continued to linger in the dichotomy of language vs. reality '**almost without question**'. (A postmodernism realm which was characterized by a critique of gendered dichotomies – '**culture/nature, mind/body, subject/object, rational/emotional**', etc, etc.. – and the discursive and social construction of identities). So, the '**material feminisms**' Alaimo and Hekman invited to this anthology are not grounded on postmodern or post-structuralist terms, nor in Marxist ones, even though the notion of the "*material*" (or the "*real*") they propose is not to be mistaken with any modernist epistemology, especially because their

point of departure comes from an ontological site, the body. (Judith Butler, for example, is most commonly identified as one of the most significant producers of this type of discursive analysis on the body). But what is significant is that it is mostly the body that is now taken as central to this material perspective and, positioned against the '**retreat from materiality**' verified within a postmodern and post-structuralist frame. This is why they sustain that '**We need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit**', since '**focusing exclusively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance from consideration**'.<sup>8</sup> The claim is that '**material feminisms**' are the means to address this shift in thinking.

This virtual discussion between different periods and different perspectives, introduces what I believe has always been a very significant, if not the most important, question regarding feminist visual practices, brought forward since the late 1960s. This dialectics between the material/real and the discursive/constructed has never been, in my opinion, addressed satisfactorily, giving us a permanent sense of distress when considering our position as women regarding the materiality of, first, our bodies, and second, our cultural objects. From the first feminist visual arts wave that focused exclusively on the body as essential matter for feminists (that could also serve as basis for the construction of a feminist aesthetics that would counter the patriarchal discourses on art), we went to the body as socially and discursively constructed ("*discursive*" in the expanded sense of neither grounded in nature or materiality). In the middle stands a gap where I think lies what I call the postmodern paradox. The texts and positions that have become widely disseminated throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, try to find a discursive solution for the inconsistencies brought about by the paradox, that I think art, especially feminist art, has tried to deal with. This is expressed through the recent apologia of the (feminine) body as a material object; a trope which is present throughout contemporary feminist and art criticism and that has its roots far back in the 1970s. As a bridge between the performative material body and early materialist feminism, I would suggest the articulation of the idea of a postmodern paradox in the visual arts in the following terms: from its most criticized aestheticism, often linked to a retreat from capitalist criticism,<sup>9</sup> to the development of social construction based theories (via post-structuralism), postmodernism has meant, for feminism, the loss of the body itself beyond mere

representation, a strategy nonetheless important when analyzing patriarchy. This is said to be true, in spite of the materialization of the body that was made concrete by performance, happenings, or even installations, video or photography. I believe that the estheticist face of postmodernism (contrary to its second guise, a post-structuralist one)<sup>10</sup>, has silenced this materialization in the visual arts as not only a discursive site but also as a political site (bearing in mind that we can only “*understand the material in discursive terms*” and therefore not setting the discursive aside but instead incorporating it in our understanding of the real world).

Through the example of Ana Vieira’s *Environments*, I hope to make clear how this postmodern paradox emerged in a specific period (the wake of postmodernism), and permanently evolved throughout the years. Ana Vieira (b. 1940) is a Portuguese artist who, since the mid 1960s, has been producing an interesting and consistent body of work, situated in the interstices of different media: using installation, photography, drawing, but also referring to painting and sculpture.<sup>11</sup> These environments were shown together recently in *Ana Vieira: Shelter Walls* (Lisbon :Centro de Arte Moderna da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 14 Jan - 27 March 2010). Trained as a painter, Vieira soon came to manifest a serious disbelief in the traditional media, and in the sacred character of art, something clearly visible through one of her *Environments* (1971), where, behind layers of veils stands, inaccessible, a Venus sculpture, a wreck and fragment of reified and sacralized art (the critic and curator Paulo Pires do Vale called this work the ‘**funeral ritual of plinth art**’<sup>12</sup>). This was a recurrent strategy throughout the 1970s. In 1977 Vieira then chose to present the Manet’s now canonical *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* as a picnic towel, confronting the viewer’s own body with the impossibility of participating in the action proposed by the work and placing their bodies in an “*in-between*”. This was a virtual positioning that would become a specific mark of most of her proposals, as a sense of the work of art offering some sort of enclosing in on itself, that exponentially increases the viewer’s awareness towards his/her own body and can be said to be a focal point in the artist’s work and it is this that renders its multiplicity cohesive and its practice political. Vieira’s art objects were from the very beginning, difficult to classify under any specific type, and she intended them to be so, gliding through a fair diversity of materials and compositions. I would say that this tension explored by the artist articulates precisely the discursive/materialist dichotomy, between representation and the material nature of objects/bodies.



Above: Ana Vieira *Environment* (1971): FCG/CAM , Lisbon.  
Below: Ana Vieira *Environment* (1972) Berardo Collection, Spain  
Both photos: Paulo Costa.

Performance, as one of the more productive and enduring concepts that undermined modernist formalism, can be seen as one of the most significant art forms from the 1960s associated with the concept of the ‘**dematerialization of the art work**’ identified by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler.<sup>13</sup> This formulation of ‘**art as idea and art as action**’, urged feminism to be grounded on the materiality of the objects and of the body instead of on representation. Interestingly enough, what I believe is most relevant in a feminist perspective, is how this dematerialization of the art work paved the way to a substantive positioning of the body in its material form: on the one hand, “*de-materializing*” the art object – the site of discursive construction of reality *par*

*excellence*: and on the other, leading to the emergence of the concept of communication instead of the object, as it brought back the (feminist) body to the core of the art practices.<sup>14</sup> Mainly through mediums like performance art and happenings, but also in video art and photography, the body became a site of political agency bringing up the question of how **'senses and things, abstraction and excitement, speculation and power, desire and matter actually converge [since then] within images'**.<sup>15</sup> But this *"body"* was still tied to a constant search for subjectification. As Hito Steyerl puts it, recalling Elisabeth Lebovici, **'traditionally, emancipatory practice has been tied to a desire to become a subject. Emancipation was conceived as becoming a subject of history, of representation, or of politics. To become a subject carried with it the promise of autonomy, sovereignty, agency. To be a subject was good; to be an object was bad. But, as we all know, being a subject can be tricky. The subject is always already subjected. Though the position of the subject suggests a degree of control, its reality is rather one of being subjected to power relations. Nevertheless, generations of feminists including myself – have strived to get rid of patriarchal objectification in order to become subjects. The feminist movement, until quite recently (and for a number of reasons), worked towards claiming autonomy and full subjecthood.'**<sup>16</sup> The **'materialist turn in feminist theory'**, as Hekman and Alaimo defined it (noting the *"turn"*'s debt to French philosophers of difference like Gilles Deleuze, and consequent feminist readings by theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Claire Colebrook), intended to construct a feminist critical ground on an ontological instead of an epistemological basis (the body – object – before the speech) and this is akin to Steyerl's most recent apologia for the object, as we will see ahead, especially clarified in some texts, namely 'A Thing Like You and Me' and 'The Language of Things'<sup>17</sup>, that contain an explicit Benjaminian influence (based on the main idea that the **'image doesn't represent reality, it is a fragment of the real world'**).<sup>18</sup>

Defending the object instead of the subject, in 'A Thing Like You and Me' Steyerl clearly rejects the autonomy of subjecthood to claim for a change in paradigm that has theoretical and practical implications, not only in what artistic practices are concerned, but also in relation to the actual experience of the body in relation to the world and to other objects (be they human or non-human, such as art works, for example): arguing that **'if identification is to go anywhere, it has to be with this material aspect of the image, with the**

**image as thing. Not as representation. And then it perhaps ceases to be identification, and instead becomes participation'**<sup>19</sup>, Steyerl takes a stand for the object instead of the subject in her considerations of *"things"*, regarding the status of the image, but this is something that can be extended to any object (a work of art, for instance) or even to the body as object. This *"thing"* Steyerl talks about is not to be seen as a passive commodity but rather as creative and productive, that **'accumulates productive forces and desire'**. I believe this is consonant with a practice such as Ana Vieira's, which, departing from the principles of de-materialization of the art work embedded in performance art, inhibits the discursive nature of the art work, transferring its potential experimentation (and subsequent possible significance) from the visual field to the viewer's body, creating a space of pure participation<sup>20</sup> instead of mere representation. As Vieira herself puts it **'the vision of the body is much more global than retinal'**.<sup>21</sup>

The current materialist turn, if feminist criticism is to deal with the exact same question expressed by the paradox, for even though the discourse and linguistic (social) site for feminist thought that accompanied postmodernism (mainly in its post-structuralist guise), the fact is that this **"retreat from materiality"** has always been a concern for the visual arts, where the material, or the object, is much more in evidence, therefore making it very difficult to neglect, and is now being put into question. As Alaimo and Hekman suggested **'we need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit, for focusing exclusively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance from consideration'**.<sup>22</sup>

Even though the authors reject this shift as a return to modernist paradigms, maybe we could see this as something close to Habermas position in 'Modernity versus Postmodernity',<sup>23</sup> where the critic defends the project of modernity arguing it is not a lost cause and is, therefore, not to be rejected because **'the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled. And the reception of art is only one of at least three of its aspects'**.<sup>24</sup> Identifying three types of conservatism (anti-modernism, pre-modernism and postmodernism) Habermas defends the continuation of the project of modernity, that **'aims at a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism'**.<sup>25</sup> Maybe this position anticipated a necessary stand towards a critical approach to the growing aestheticism of postmodernism and its

assimilation by capitalism. The contemporary art museum is a good example of this, since by assimilating art works it also annihilates its critical potential, transforming art's value into a commodity value. How can this be reversed? What strategies can be entailed by art works and criticism? Is the material, in the terms discussed here, a possible tool to engage in such a strategy?

This is something Steyerl also confronts us with in the text 'Politics of Art', where she argues that the politics of art resides in its production, reception and distribution and defends accounts which would lead to the dismissal of the **'plane of a politics of representation and focus on the politics which is there, in front of our eyes' suggesting that "If contemporary art is an answer, the question is: how to make capitalism more beautiful."**<sup>26</sup> This overwhelming statement, in my view, encompasses all of the contemporary art's difficult paradoxes and contradictions that are also the basis of much of which is being argued here and makes Rancière's approach when combining art history with labor history very interesting.<sup>27</sup> Ben Davis's critique of Rancière, however, namely that **'it's the kind of social forces that make use of something that determine "politics" not what "regime" it belongs to'**, cannot be so easily dismissed because of a too easy categorization of objects, including art.<sup>28</sup>

*Environment* (1971), as a work which incorporates two of the most recurring elements in Ana Vieira's works, can help us to substantially illustrate our point of view regarding the political possibilities of the material in relation to feminism and, more concretely, in relation to the body. It consists of a metallic three-dimensional structure (250x100x100 cm) covered with a painted nylon net, where several visual elements representing the interior of the house are printed in solid blue. Inside this transparent **"cube"** are other objects that compose this dining-room like assemblage, complete with chandeliers, chairs, other furniture and wall hanging decorations. Keeping the depicted scene/space inside the transparent net and the viewer outside, looking in, Vieira is not only exploring an inside/outside dichotomy, but also creating a third plane in the space around this piece. Ana Vieira's *Environment* (1971) exists (and renders existent) mostly geographical planes. With them, the artist creates a virtual location for the body outside the space of representation, constituted by a montage of several elements that entangle different layers of space, and this is a location where the work of art acquires a certain intangibility and therefore escapes its commodification. It is permanently creating new spaces, sites for the body to feel, to desire, and therefore to exist politically and ultimately to reclaim their agency.

The search for subjectivity, be it as essential nature or as a discursive/constructed or anti-essential one, has always been a problem for contemporary art, that tends to reject grounding of any kind through visual and conceptual strategies using subject/object; viewer/object relations. This is also, I think, the main problem of feminism in relation to contemporary art, as it has not yet freed itself from this **'desire to become a subject'** – to have a recognisable identity – that is entailed with an emancipatory practice, referred to by Steyerl. This is why feminist contemporary art has always been closer to **"material"** perspectives, be they within a Marxist framework, or an ontological one. So, visual practices such as the one by the Portuguese artist Ana Vieira described here, can be a helpful tool to understand the political, but also the aesthetic dimensions of feminist visual practices, for they encompass different layers of materiality that are set in motion not by discourse, or theory (even though these can signify an increased comprehension or even add layers of productivity to the work of art), but by other bodies, which therefore exist outside discursive and social strategies or even pre-exist them. As Paulo Pires do Vale suggests about Ana Vieira's work, it raises **'a wall against contemporary iconography and get[s] closer to in-visibility'** which is **'a necessary condition to step out of assimilable representation'**.<sup>29</sup> These installations remain creative and productive in the sense Steyerl considers in 'A Thing Like You and Me', participating with other **"things"** (other bodies, for example) with which they engender **'tensions, forces, hidden power, all being constantly exchanged'**.<sup>30</sup>

Still, material feminism apologists such as Alaimo and Hekman cannot completely deny identity as central to feminist theory and, also I would say, for feminist understandings of art works in their explorations of subjects/objects. Even though the editors of *Material Feminism* try to elude this difficulty by defending a practice of a **'social ontology of the subject, an approach that defines identity as both material and social'**, that same struggle for subjectivity (which Steyerl firmly rejects in her recent writings) as the ground for identifications continues. We should question if **"identification"** is the best strategy for feminism, and maybe try to understand the gains and losses of dismissing it as fundamental to feminism. And therefore, I would add, we need to step into participation – a political status that encloses **'the collective dimension of social experience'**,<sup>31</sup> but also, I would say, the collaborative dimension entailed by the relation between objects, a **"participatory impulse"** that is a

less global and more situated experience – through contemporary feminist art, so as to escape the assimilation into the same, which means invisibility.

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## Notes

1. With the advent of postmodernism and post-structuralism, many feminists have turned their attention to social constructionist models, that assert the impossibility of dismissing the body for feminist purposes see Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (eds.) *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008)
2. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean *Materialist Feminisms* (Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell, 1993)
3. Ibid p. vii
4. Ibid p. ix
5. Ibid p. x/xi
6. Alaimo and Hekman (eds.) *Material Feminisms* (2008)
7. Ibid p.1
8. Ibid p.4
9. See Fredric Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) where (borrowing the term ‘Late Capitalism’ from Ernest Mandel), he associates postmodernism to a form of culture, marked by the negation and crisis of certain concepts and practices, for example ideology or art: **‘every position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatisation – is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today’**. Even though contemporary art as a political weapon is thriving today, one has to consider the diachronic evolution of capitalism and how contemporary art is now more commodified than ever. This can also be considered in terms of the abandonment of a **“critical stance”** with which postmodernism has been regularly identified. **‘However’**, Andreas Huyssen suggests, **‘the familiar ideas of what constitutes a critical art (arteficialheit and vanguardism, l’art engage, critical realism or the aesthetic of negativity, the refusal of representation, abstraction, reflexivness) have lost much of their explanatory and normative power in recent decades. This is precisely the dilemma of art in a postmodern age’** see ‘Mapping the Postmodern’ in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 1990) p. 235
10. see Hal Foster ‘(Post)Modern Polemics’ *New German Critique*, 33/ Autumn (1984) pp. 67-78, where he distinguishes neoconservative postmodernism from post-structuralist postmodernism. The first position is defined **‘mostly in terms of style, depends on modernism, which, reduced to its own formalist image, is countered with a return to narrative, ornament and the figure’** (therefore representing a return to history and a

return of the subject), the second assumes **‘the “death of man” as original creator of unique artifacts but also as the centered subject of representation and of history’** (therefore anti-humanist).

11. see Ana Vieira *Ana Vieira/ Shelter Walls* (exhibition catalogue, Ponta Delgada: CAM-FCG/Governo Dos Açores/Governo dos Açores/Museu Machado Castro, 14 Jan-27 March 2010).
12. Paulo Pires do Vale ‘Escutai os Muros’ *ibid*.
13. Lucy Lippard (ed.) *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
14. In a letter-essay (dated 1968) only published in Lippard’s *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* the Art and Language Group replied to Lippard and Chandler’s text emphasizing precisely that **‘all the examples of art-works (ideas) you refer in your article are, with few exceptions, art-objects. They may not be an art-object as we know it in its traditional matter-state, but they are nevertheless matter in one of its forms, either solid-state, gas-state, liquid state’**. Ibid. p. 43. This consideration anticipated the fallible ground of Lippard and Chandler’s prediction that the trend of dematerialization could **‘result in the object’s becoming wholly obsolete’** (p. 42). The movement of art, as we have been noticing, was completely the opposite one.
15. Hito Steyerl (a) ‘A Thing Like You and Me’ *E-flux* 15; New York, 2010 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal>
16. Ibid
17. Hito Steyerl ‘The Language of Things’ (2006) <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0606/steyerl/en>
18. Steyerl ‘A Thing Like You and Me’
19. Ibid
20. Here lies Ana Vieira’s performative nature – not performance in a traditional sense, pursued by the artist, but a performance attainable only through another body.
21. Óscar Faria ‘A Desmontagem Da Ilusão’ *Público* (1998) pp. 2-4
22. Alaimo and Hekman (eds.) *Material Feminisms*
23. Jürgen Habermas ‘Modernity Versus Postmodernity’ *New German Critique* 22/Winter (1981) pp. 3 -14
24. Ibid. p.12
25. Ibid. p. 13
26. Hito Steyerl ‘The Politics of Art’ in Óscar Faria and João Fernandes (eds.) *Às Artes, Cidadãos!* (Porto: Museu de Artes Contemporânea de Serralves, 2010)
27. Jacques Rancière *The Politics of Aesthetics - the Distribution of the Sensible* [2000] trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004 )
28. Ben Davis ‘Rancière for Dummies’ *Artnet* <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/books/davis/davis8-17-06.asp> New York: The Art World Online, s/d
29. Paulo Pires do Vale ‘Escutai os Muros’ p. 30
30. Steyerl ‘A Thing Like You and Me’
31. Claire Bishop (ed.) *Participation* (London; Whitechapel; MIT Press, 2006)