

## FREEDOM FROM EVERYTHING (2022)

*Clint Enns*

While completing the last stages of a PhD, I began working at an auction house in Montreal. I was hired as a photographer, but the majority of my job consisted of the Sisyphean task of temporarily stacking and restacking furniture. After a year, both my attention and the discs in my lower back began to slip. Complaints echoed in the back of my head, but the weight of labour often tethered me.

In those early days of the Covid lockdown, when my savings rendered me nonessential, I dared to dream of societal transformation. We were all in this together, all vulnerable. After the first rounds of vaccinations, I was deep in debt and desperately needed a job, so I became a dishwasher at a high-end French restaurant. The plates I cleaned whispered tales of economic disparity, as my dentist, a patron of decadence, dined on a meal costing more than my month's grind. Every plate I washed, each glass I polished, became a humble act of resistance against the economic pandemic that loomed alongside the global health crisis.

Returning to the Covid pandemic through Hoolboom's *Freedom from Everything* provides a lifeline back to those days, resurrecting memories already drowned in the cacophony of contemporary crises. It was a time when people's thoughts were replaced by memes, another virus exacerbated by the pandemic. In the tradition of Ishmael Reed's fictional Jes Grew virus—a manifestation of Blackness which Reed uses to expose the power and inherent racism of the ruling class—*Freedom from Everything* uses the Covid virus to reflect on neoliberal ideology and conceptions of freedom.

The video includes writing from Hito Steyerl's 2013 *e-flux* essay "Freedom from Everything: Freelancers and Mercenaries" and extends it to include both the AIDS and Covid pandemics. In her essay, Steyerl argues that "contemporary freedom is not primarily the enjoyment of civil liberties, as the traditional liberal view has it, but rather like the freedom of free fall, experienced by many who are thrown into an uncertain and unpredictable future." Although the freedoms that many argue for are often positive—freedom of expression, freedom to live as one pleases—there are other types of freedoms, particularly for the precariat. As Steyerl argues, "They are negative freedoms, and they apply across a carefully constructed and exaggerated cultural alterity that promotes: the freedom from social security, the freedom from the means of making a living, the freedom from accountability and sustainability, the freedom from free education, healthcare, pensions and public culture, the loss of standards of public responsibility, and in many places, the freedom from the rule of law."

While the freedom from economic security led me to a new life as a dishwasher, it also introduced me to new forms of mutual support which are rarely experienced in academia or the arts, where competition is a large part of the game. In the kitchen, we genuinely looked after and cared for each other's well-being. While denied other freedoms, we, like Kurosawa's freelancers and mercenaries, formed bonds through our shared labours. As a dishwasher, it was easy to understand both Steyerl's idea of negative freedom and how new forms of resistance emerged from the precariat: solidarity and giving what you take.

