

## Shotgun Review

Utopia, Utopia  
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By Marcus Civin

Thomas Hirschhorn: Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress  
Wattis Institute, California College of the Arts  
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Beyond obsessive, BOMBASTIC! We are trapped in a bunker--10 seconds to implosion.

Aesthetics spew and spew: Thomas Hirschhorn declassifies fashion victims as carriers of an imperialist virus. Wearing camouflage: style choice or signal of compliance with Bush's war?

Hirschhorn: "Anyone wearing camouflage clothing, puts him/herself in the situation of a soldier who risks being killed. Factually it means that he or she accepts being part of an army and is ready to kill and ready to die. The ultimate nightmare."

"Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress" is more occupation than installation; it overwhelms, a glut of an exhibit accompanied by and visually incorporating an essay by philosopher Marcus Steinweg. Steinweg considers the role of the bystander or hypochondriac: "Hypochondriacs are those who want to be weak...The will to weakness is the will to non-will, to passivity and an essential will-lessness. The will-lessness guarantees the weak that they are unfree and irresponsible."

Hirschhorn sees hypochondriacs everywhere dressed in camouflage, unable to see each other, participants in dystopia. Hirschhorn dismembers sections of Steinweg's essay, spray paints them on banners or xeroxes them onto cardboard. Hirschhorn uses and reuses passages from Steinweg's text and increases the viewer's potential understanding by letting the viewer reconsider the writing in different visual contexts. Taped to the wall with collections of photos, passages narrate the incommensurable, existence, truth, love, the hyper-critical world. The collections of photos are hastily-reproduced snapshots that provide documentary evidence of the omnipresence of camouflage fashion. Shot: camouflage purse at airport. Shot: camouflage gym wear. Shot: baby camo. Shot: runway camo.

Until the mid-80's, Hirschhorn worked with Grapus, a communist graphic design collective. The exhibit is magazine fashion spread come to life. Throughout the exhibit, a world war's worth of special-issue camouflage tape menaces across globes and grows from surrogate child parts (eerie mannequins carrying more text from Steinweg's essay). The tape bulges in cancerous clumps, catching its breath only just below the top of uniform shopping bags.

Camouflage thongs raid intimacy; wreckage of camouflage toys make playground battlefield. Again and again, Hirschhorn costumes the hipster shoe store, fine art, home decor, the floor, the ceiling. Hirschhorn is a (grim, manic) collector to rival Haane Darboven, Chris Burden, Andy Warhol and Dieter Roth. Amidst the shrapnel, there is a glimmer of hope. To Hirschhorn's thinking, philosophy creates an alternate reality, utopia to dystopia. Missy Elliot, clad in camouflage, plays pop mouthpiece for murder. Yet, Missy Elliot rejuvenated by theory could be Antigone, restlessly searching for truth. Hirschhorn turns down the sound on Elliot's video and surrounds it with Steinweg's essay. Hirschhorn condemns Missy Elliot and her peers for their martial moves, but by presenting an alternative text with the video, Hirschhorn allows a directive for change.

The alternative, from Steinweg's text: "Antigone is dignified insofar as she is this raving dreamer, a girl who tries to protect herself against the symbolic imperatives and temptations of the imaginary in order, in her poverty, nakedness and innocence, to develop a self-assured demand which is a kind of law of the lawless."

Steinweg on philosophy as utopia: "Philosophy is always a surpassing of the world, transcendence."

Hirschhorn is most compelling when his details are as careful as his grand scale is audacious. At times, the details are touching. A humbly xeroxed section about the first military use of camouflage patterning from Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* makes a fitting signpost and refreshing shift of voice beside a hulking sculpture of a military machine carcass. The subjects in Hirschhorn's snapshots are easily recognizable as anyone's friend, family or self. The framing in cardboard is at once familiar (think San Francisco Mission School) and bizarre: out of what desperation for normalcy and in what impoverished airlift chaos does cardboard emerge as a suitable frame? Snapshots labeled with only a few words or in at least one case, just the name "Heiddeger," are less effective; as are modernist-inspired camouflage tape compositions on panel or drawings on paper in camouflage patterns.

Hirschhorn's embrace of the institution as sole mediator for his message is problematic. Hirschhorn's fetishistic attempt at omnipresence would read in airports, malls and storefronts. Why only exhibit in artworld venues? Steinweg's essay, commissioned by Hirschhorn for the exhibit, collapses so many philosophers, at times it registers as only a fashionable philosophical hodgepodge. Ultimately, Hirschhorn opens up an important space, contributing an interesting addition to the literature on bystanders in a world at war. Sometimes Hirschhorn's lack of restraint is ham-handed, yet his politics are welcome boycott of business as usual.