

After Shock and Awe, or, War Porn, the Plight of Images and the Pain of Others:

Considering Two Recent Exhibitions by Thomas Hirschhorn

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The term "war porn" has evolved in the past several years to describe images of extreme military violence that circulate online. A significant point of emergence in war porn's recognition came with the indictment of Chris Wilson, webmaster of the forum-based site nowthatsfuckedup.com. Wilson offered U.S. soldiers stationed in Iraq access to amateur-pornographic images in exchange for images of dead insurgents from Iraq and Afghanistan. Soldier would send in images of graphic, horrible violence—a reporter described one the following way: "you can see an Arab man's face sliced off and placed in a bowl filled with blood"—with captions like "bad day for this dude." Exchanged on the internet by soldiers and journalists semi-clandestinely, especially following Wilson's conviction on obscenity charges, war porn nevertheless remains readily available to anyone with even moderate Googling skills. In the era of



milblogs, blogs maintained by working soldiers, images of extreme violence have begun to circulate as readily as those of extreme sexuality. Often, as the elision of "war" and "porn" implies and as was readily apparent in the images taken at Abu Ghraib, the two are ineluctably bound together. Sexual violence has always been a part of war, but the recognition of war porn as a thing-in-itself signals the conjunction of images of extreme violence and images of sexuality, especially as based on their online circulation.

Commenting on Wilson's site in *The Nation*, George Zornick proposed that viewing images of extreme violence triggers the same part of the brain affected by images of sexuality, causing the viewer to enter into similar states of "high arousal." The recognition of the stimulating effects of violent images and the use of these images is nothing new. There are strong correlations between photographic images of violence and earlier representations of violence. Images of the torture of Christ or martyrs were a means for the viewer to empathetically connect with the pain of another in order to find individual succor. These images acted as role models to aid the viewer in surviving earthly suffering, easing the pain of daily living. But long before the invention of photography, violent images had already migrated from succor to titillation. During the Renaissance, violent scenes were adapted from pagan stories in order to produce horrible thrills divorced from religious trappings. These were designed purely to trigger a fight-or-flight response in viewers as the viewer unconsciously and inevitably transfers the violence depicted onto their own bodies, imaging all too well what it must be like to be flayed or eaten alive. They are images that dare the viewer to look, enjoyable because they offer access to a sensation usually reserved for moments in which the self is in actual physical danger. Horror is contained and managed, becoming a visceral thrill that is for many viewers. As the popularity of slasher-flicks proves, images of extreme violence can be pleasantly arousing.

Susan Sontag, in her last book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, identifies a turning point in the representation of images of violence marked by the art of Francisco Goya. In works such as *The Disasters of War* and *The Third of May*, Goya elicits a non-religious sympathy for those who are shown suffering not as supernatural but as everyday people. Depicting the Napoleonic invasions of Spain, these images are simultaneously historical and distill all that is most terrible about war down to its essence. They go



beyond both sympathy and titillation, opening up a space for the consideration of the violence enacted on actual people in times of war. Irregardless of the absolute historical accuracy of her account, as Sontag puts it so well, in images such as these we regard the pain of another as a point of reflection on "how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others." They reveal the ways in which war is a zero-sum game. After Goya, images of violence and war open onto the possibility of protesting against suffering rather than simply acknowledging it. They can potentially evoke a proactive, Aristotelian pity which empathizes directly with the pain of the sufferer such that it leads to the recognition of viewer's own specific connection to their pain. It is only with this type of empathy that the response triggered by terrible images can open onto possibilities of self-knowledge beyond fight-or-flight or self-serving succor.

For Sontag, works executed explicitly by the hand of the artist more easily—even inherently—condense historical events into untimely meditations on suffering. Through the hand of the artist, a greater distance is placed between the original event and its interpretation. Painting lends itself more readily to reflective distance and universalization than photography, whose mechano-chemicalization of the image (or electrification in more recent forms) always seems to testify to the absolute reality of what it depicts, however much this is a convention of the Western reading of photographic images. The distance-effect of painting in relation to images of suffering has culminated in great works of abstract humanism—Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*—but only at the expense of assuming (even if as its flipside) the kind of universal human subject that fueled so many of the European, post-Enlightenment wars that images of this type were designed to protest. But for the few great, modern anti-war works there are a host of others which fall into bland and ineffectual universalism whose gestures toward protest rings hollow.

Despite the fact that the photographer's hand frames a scene, chooses a focal length and make innumerable decisions (consciously or not) about the final image, from their inception photographs have always seemed, as one of the earliest books on photography put it, to be drawn by the hand of nature. It is considerably more difficult for viewers to distance

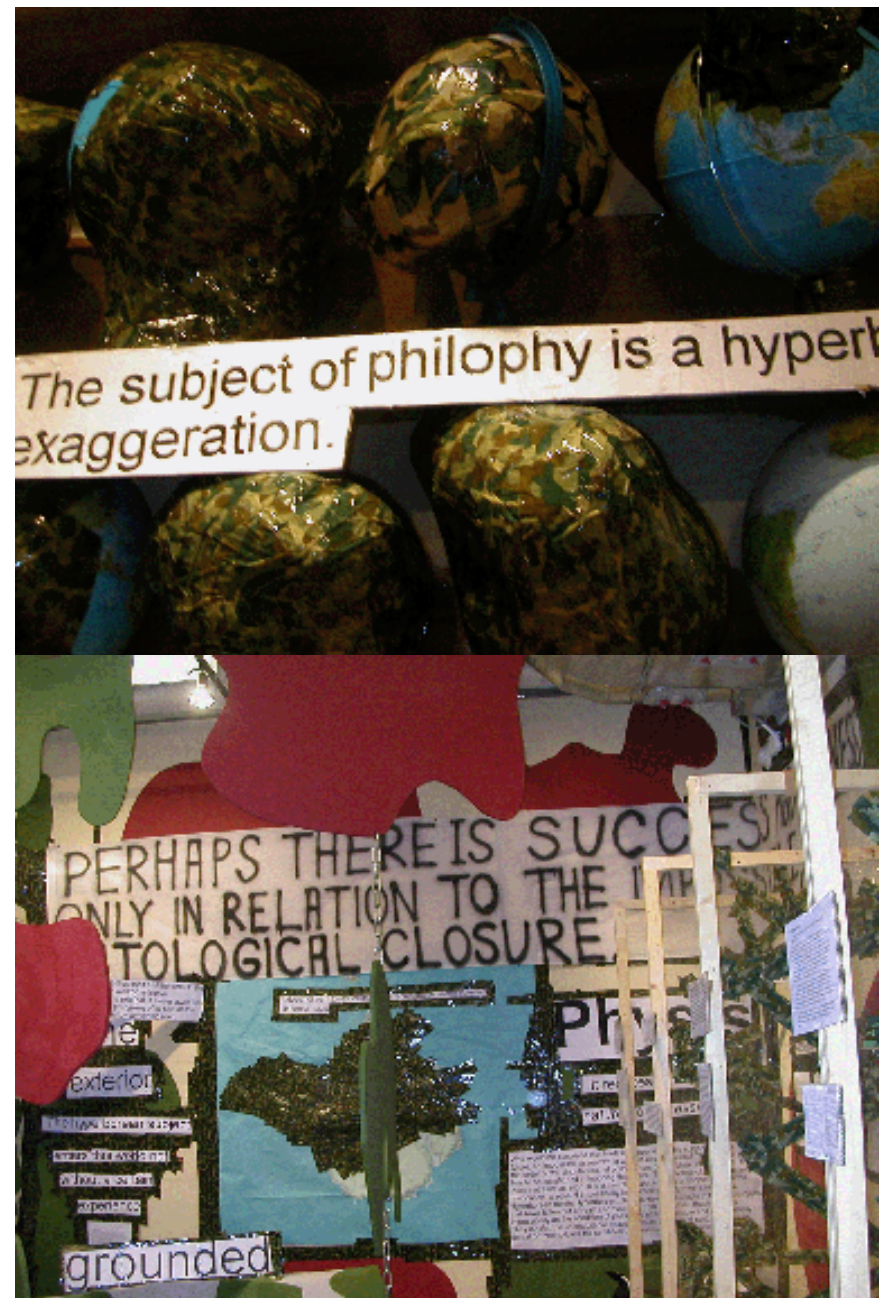


Above photographs of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Superficial Engagement* at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery. Photographs below taken by Aftershock of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Utopia, Utopia=One World, One War, One Army, One Dress* at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco. All imagery of artwork courtesy of the artist.

themselves from an image when faced with photography's "that-has-been" effect, as Roland Barthes, one of Sontag's intellectual mentors, describes it: that which is shown photographically always seems to definitively testify to the past existence of what is depicted. The photograph is evidentiary in a way that Goya's images can never be. In order to argue for their authenticity, Goya had to caption his disasters with "I saw it," but every photograph inherently testifies to this fact. And even those which freely acknowledge their own construction (e.g. photographic abstractions or obviously manipulated digital images) are a reaction-formation against this photographic reality effect.

Unlike journalistic war photography (i.e. non-ultraviolet scenes of conflict), which more readily elicits self-reflection and protest, war porn recapitulates the violence it depicts. Because what is shown photographically appears to have happened as if it were a slice of the real, for a viewer to see a photograph of a soldier whose face has been partially erased by shell fire often produces such overwhelming revulsion that it drives all other thoughts from their mind. So strongly do these images bear witness to the actuality of what they depict that it can become impossible for the viewer to find any distance between the event depicted and their own fear of suffering a similar fate, of compulsively imagining what it feels like to experience what is being shown. This is not pity but sheer self-interest. Besides fascinated arousal, the other response to war porn (and the two are generally commingled) is for the viewer to close their eyes and look away, to deny what they have seen as if suffering from a soft version of post traumatic stress disorder, shifting their minds as quickly as possible onto more pleasant thoughts. While abstract images of suffering can lapse into an ineffectual universalism, war porn and other photo-based images of extreme violence move too far in the opposite direction, becoming nothing more than shock effects and triggering a kind of psychic armoring. This is exactly the power of the image that an event like 9/11 was designed to tap into, as Al Qaeda triggered a fight-or-flight reaction in the U.S. in order to precipitate exactly the kind of unconsidered "shock-and-awe" response which followed.

Two recent exhibitions by Thomas Hirschhorn, *Superficial Engagement* and *Utopia, Utopia=One World, One War, One Army, One Dress*, address the consumption of photographic images of extreme violence. The former dealt more explicitly with photographic images of suffering, the latter with the complicity of civilians in their unwitting support of militarism



and the suffering it produces. The exhibitions were his response to the after-effects of shock and awe and its consequences for the people subjected to U.S. hegemony through a politics of "unilateral-exceptionism" and a doctrine of "preemptive self-defense," a military strategy which has produced much of the war porn circulating today.

Superficial Engagement consists of six main elements, relatively equally distributed on four "floats" (i.e. wooden risers; there are other minor elements I will ignore because they do not effect my argument). As shown at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, the floats almost completely filled the exhibition space, leaving only narrow passages for viewers to walk through. Of the six elements the one that exerted the greatest fascination were color images of destroyed Arab bodies, downloaded from the internet, printed out in various sizes and taped up everywhere in the exhibition. These images were so gruesome that they were nearly unbearable to behold. War porn filled the room, wherever viewers turned to look: burned faces, severed heads, bodies split in two, bones tearing through flesh, intestines emerging from holes in torsos, eye sockets without eyes, brains spilling from halved skulls, and everywhere blood so red it almost fluoresced. Often the same image was repeated, but unlike Warhol's use of ghastly repetition in his *Death and Disaster* series, here the power of these images is reinforced through excess rather than depleted. It is horrible—almost intolerable—to see photographs of a face with much of its personality intact, entirely divorced except for a few stringy remainders from the body to which it was just attached; it is all the more horrible to see this image multiplied. These modern disasters of war, the crudest of deaths caused by suicide bombings and guerilla-style street warfare, are presented with no respite for the viewer because they so overwhelm all the other elements in the exhibition.

The other five elements in the exhibition are as follows. There are newspaper and magazine headlines punctuating the exhibition throughout like pungent horn blasts. Hirschhorn replaces the crudity of the soldier's captions from nowthatsfuckedup with text ripped from the headlines, equally crude in their tabloidism: "NO PLACE IS SAFE," "BROKEN BORDERS," "GOING TO DIE," and "WHO'S NEXT?" There are images of U.S. and U.K. soldiers in full uniform, sometimes as stand-alone cutouts, other times in news articles or images. There are actual nkondi or replicas thereof, used in the Congo for ceremonies both civil and spiritual, and pseudo-nkondi which consisted of rough wooden posts into which the



audience was invited to nail nails or drill screws into with an attached screw gun; Echoing the form of the nkondi, there are department store dummies with numerous screws drilled into them. And there are reproductions of abstract artworks drawn by Emma Kunz, a Swiss healer who made linear abstractions as part of her practice, along with two pseudo-versions of her work made by Hirschhorn, one of which he calls his "Nail and Wire" series and which look like large versions of the kind of string-art craft projects children do summer camp, the other of which consists of videos mimicking similar forms in the vector-graphic style of early screen savers.

There is a fairly neat divide between the photographs (and the headlines which act as the exhibition's hysterical captions), and the other elements in the exhibition. Hirschhorn reproduces the divide suggested by Sontag between the photography of suffering with all of its shock effects and the universal humanism of painting—in this case abstract painting—with its ostensible potential for healing. As he writes in the exhibition's press release, he want to heal the desire for escalating revenge spurred on by war. To this end he "confronts" (his word) the power of the photographic image with the power of the abstract image, whereby the universality of abstraction has been designed to act as a balm against the specific traumas of the age of electronic reproduction. But to translate Kunz' work into cardboard placards, string art and screen savers, divorced of their original context in her healing practice is ridiculous. Her work is reduced to the universal human Esperanto of the worst of modernist abstraction. Everything in the exhibition fights a losing battle against the pure shock effect of the war porn. Beside these images, everything else becomes background noise, or even—in as much as the work recalls parade floats—its colorful, playful celebration.

The other major element in the exhibition, the various nkondi and nkondi-like objects, are equally problematic as healing objects. They are even more disconnected from their original cultural context than Kunz' work. In his use of these objects, Hirschhorn upholds their fetishization. He puts them on display and then translates them blindly into Western terms as he puts the posts in place for viewer participation. Under the rubric of relational art, he asks the viewer to create their own nkondi. Beyond a very superficial catharsis, the gesture holds no meaning; it rings worse than hollow—it rings colonialist in its insensitive theft of the cultural artifacts of the colonized "other," resonating with the worst aspects of



If Hirschhorn is colonialist in his deployment of the nkondi, he is even more so in depicting only mutilated Arab bodies versus only armored Western bodies. He certainly could have downloaded images that reversed this, showing mutilated Allies and armored Arabs or a combination of both. Given that this exhibition, at least in its first showing, was destined for the U.S., there is an inevitable feeling of accusation in this particular choice. As much as the images cried out, "How could such terrible things be done to actual bodies?" they cried out, "How could you—American, imperialist, supporter, even indirectly, of the War on Terror—do this to me?" or "...force me to do this?" There is a tremendous amount of guilt associated with viewing these images as generated through these accusations leveled by Hirschhorn on behalf of the dead. This is reinforced by the inclusion of mirrors on the floats such that the viewer's image was mapped onto their surfaces. He mobilizes the images of the dead not only for his own artistic gain (an easy, although important, charge to level against him as his signature style has proven capable of absorbing anything), but morally. His stated intention was to use these images, in combination with abstract images, to promote healing against a contemporary cycle of killing and revenge killing, but why reproduce the already well-known bias whereby the dead Arab equals the martyr and the Western soldier equals the crusader? If viewers can get beyond the exhibition's shock effects, they are left with a scene that serves only to reinforce the notion promoted by Samuel Huntington and other right-wing ideologues that we suffer from a "clash of civilizations," reproducing at a deafening (blinding) pitch a contemporary politics of collision rather than promoting the kind of considered self-reflection Sontag describes.

Utopia, Utopia=One World, One War, One Army, One Dress reflects less directly on images of suffering per se. Instead it examines images of the perpetrators of violence as they come to infect those who absorb and mimic their appearance as they become the kinds of subject who would produce and consume war porn. It sets out to dystopically unravel camouflage chic, one facet of contemporary life upon which diverse



global cultures seem to agree. Across multiple rooms and multiple floors Hirschhorn presents the ways in which camouflage has overflowed from the military and into everyday life, especially as a cornerstone of contemporary fashion. There is a vast array of images of people wearing camo, from soldiers to supermodels, multiple dummies sporting actual camo gear as do Barbie and other sundry dolls. Camo seems to spill from the edges of the clothing, covering the gallery space like kudzu. There are camouflaged umbrellas, camouflaged Yankees caps, and camouflaged camping chairs. Miniature army encampments feature camo-covered planes, helicopters and trucks. Paper shopping bags silk screened with camouflage bulge with camouflaged good. And everywhere a viral spread of camouflaged packing tape creeps along, from wall to floor to ceiling, metastasizing over groups of mannequins like tumors, covering a wall of globes, and framing television screens playing back loops of videos of camo-sporting pop stars. This fashionable camo creep is shown as a global phenomenon. There are images from Africa, from the Middle East and from across the world, each style differing only slightly in appearance and not at all in its desire to make the wearer all the more visible in clothes originally designed to make them disappear. As military gear, camouflage is a scientifically designed universal abstraction, engineered to hide the wearer from the beholder's vision. Camouflage gives the illusion of control over one's appearance to anyone who wears it and this works in both directions, for the military and the fashion industry. If the goal of fashion is to stand out from the crowd, there is little more conspicuously "fashionable" than camouflage worn in plain sight.

Hovering above one room is a female mannequin, completely taped in camouflage except for her head. She occupies the same position held nearly 100 years earlier by the *Prussian Archangel* at the Berlin dada fair. The *Prussian Archangel* was pig headed and wore a (non-camo) woolen officer's uniform. A sign on its body read, "I come from Heaven, from Heaven on high." Another sign dangling from its waist read, "In order to understand this work of art completely, one should drill daily for twelve hours with a heavily packed knapsack in full marching order in the Tempelhof Field." He was a stern C.O., demanding absolute authority over the viewer. In response, Hirschhorn's show-room dummy answers from the depths of our commercialized present. A sign dangles from her mass-manufactured body reading, "Assertion: Hypochondriacs are those who *want* to be weak. Their activity is restricted to this will to weakness."



This quote is cribbed, as are most of the many texts Xeroxed and taped up throughout the exhibition, from an essay written especially for it by philosopher Marcus Steinweg. What Steinweg suggests, and what Hirschhorn puts on display, is the armoring of this weakness, the desire to produce some kind of defense against our dystopically utopic "one world," a world which produces the war porn so prominent in *Superficial Engagement*. In *Utopia, Utopia...* the mechanomorphs of the dada imaginary have become insectile, not flaunting their wounds against the machines of military disorder but attempting to dissolve against a background world consumed by military chic. But this dissolution is never complete. Just as the soldier gets stuck in the craw of the military machine in dada, so the subject of Hirschhorn's utopia may want to dissolve but forever ends up putting its wanting-to-dissolve on display. If there seems to be a kind of conciliation offered by the global fascination with military gear, here Hirschhorn antagonizes those who inconsiderately adopt its image on the side of the war pornographers, whether in solidarity or opposition to the politicians who actually mobilize the armed forces of global hegemony. He elicits a moment of overdetermination in which fashion depends on violence, in which the scientifically artistic universalism of camouflage opens onto the specific support of militarization as the viewer imitates the image of the perpetrator of military violence.

The rub, as it emerges in the dialog between Sontag's late writing and Hirschhorn's two exhibitions, is that the self as depicted in *Utopia, Utopia* is the logical outcome of a world filled with war porn. Implicit in the movement between the two exhibitions is that war porn has become the unparalleled image horizon against which the self produces itself, not through mourning the loss of the other but in an attempt to stave off a never ending flood of melancholia produced by such terrible sights. The world that Hirschhorn depicts is truly hyperborean, its subjects frozen in their inability to work through the violence in which they are implicated. Whatever Hirschhorn had set out to do, what he demonstrates in these exhibitions is that, while images of supernatural suffering—even when depicted with gruesome realism as in the Northern Renaissance tradition—may have offered a means of healing in the past, our image culture today holds this possibility at bay. He puts on display a subject whose need to camouflage itself in plain sight stands in for the larger drive toward self-defense in a self which is essentially incapable of changing—and even celebrates—its plight. He utterly fails at Sontag's inducement to



reinvigorate the possibility of connecting with the pain of another person despite the hyperborean weakness fostered by our contemporary image world. In these exhibitions his engagement with healing is superficial indeed. Hirschhorn is the anti-Goya. For Hirschhorn, the after effect of shock and awe is the never-ending working over of the divide between friend and enemy and the armoring of the self. He elicits sympathy not for the dead but for the living, who live in a world where war porn is just a mouse-click away.

The phrase "war porn" was apparently first used in a translation of a text by Jean Baudrillard, made by Paul Taylor. Baudrillard's brief essay was originally "Pornographie de la guerre," which Taylor pithied-up into "War Porn." Jean Baudrillard, "Pornographie de la guerre," *Liberation*, May 19 2004; Jean Baudrillard, "War Porn," in *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* (2005).

Chris Thompson, "War Pornography," *East Bay Express*, September 21 2005.

Zornick, "The Porn of War," in *The Nation* (2005).

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003). In essay "Regarding the Torture of Others" she directly addresses images from Abu Ghraib and the connections with pornography and the circulation of images online. Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *The New York Times*, May 23 2004.

Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 103.

William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (New York: H. P. Kraus, 1989).

Superficial Engagement appeared at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York from January to February, 2006. *Utopia, Utopia=One World, One War, One Army, One Dress* appeared at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco from March to May, 2006.

Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

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