

Camouflage is the Only Game in Town

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Today the act of camouflage seems all pervasive and ubiquitous as it seamlessly and unquestionably aims to reassure humanity in every aspect and every condition of life. It's almost as if the idea of deception and concealment is an agreed means of exchange and negotiation. Camouflage is used as a means of negation of the solid and the effect this produces is that we overlook it, or misrepresent it, or even divert our attention away from it towards something else. In this act of considered, almost surgical undoing of the subject, the intention is to carefully divest the subject of original meaning; by conferring upon it instead another preferred meaning or code. In doing so the original subject is either rendered invisible, or displaced, forgotten or made lesser in prominence. In either context, camouflage as a process and more particularly as a political construct, has served to confuse and diminish what was once considered real in relation to the traditional priority of the subject, in order to reprioritise the world in ways that suit the demands of current political situations and power relationships. The subject is only given priority and prominence if the situation requires it.

We live in the shadow of big politics, where the revelations of *Wikileaks* disrupted the processes of concealment, subterfuge and deception, which are the name of the game. Truth and reality are constantly tested in this cat and mouse game of espionage and counterespionage, surveillance and counter- surveillance where language is used to camouflage any form of reality and representation. Like democracy the notion of free speech is vulnerable to manipulation, camouflaged with presumed agreements, staged realities and media management. Truth and the subject seem to be both a victim and a fluid concept that can be easily manipulated at the expense of what was once privileged as truth.

Think China's truth with its surveillance and political containment of the Internet. Think of the Arab Spring, the revolutionary waves of protest across the Middle East where truth lay in the images shared and perpetuated throughout social media and which were dismantled through the various governments' propaganda and agenda of political camouflage. Truth became fluid as each person, each conflict, and each

protest generated different perspectives. But protests used social media and the dissemination of global information to unveil the camouflage and turn surveillance back onto the power structures of authority. Think also of the infamous destabilisers of camouflage: Edward Snowden, Julian Assange, Bradley Manning who revealed the hidden agenda's of the United States and its allies putting the camouflage of global powers into the public domain. By making the invisible visible *Wikileaks* shifted public consciousness away from the tactics and strategies of deception to rethinking their assumptions of the role of government, the processes of democracy and the political environment of global relationships.

The truth in this global and interconnected world is no longer singular but multiple, manipulated and pliable. Even the way that Bradley Manning, through the use of camouflage, was able to reveal the truth by transferring the secret, concealed documents and files on the CD labelled 'Lady Gaga'. How something as simple as changing the title of CD to that of a pop culture icon, completely shifted the context of the subject and was deemed harmless. This is an example of how appearances are often deceptive and secret. Camouflage often reflects the normal, the understood, the everyday in order to hide or conceal difficult, destabilising conflicts.

Truth depends on perspective and in globalism's multiple perspectives we can no longer rely or be assured that what we see or hear or what we are told is accurate or real. No longer can we trust what we see or hear to be true. We can, however, be confident that any reality is concealed behind a camouflage of constructed truths that need to be believed and realities that need to be seen. In these spaces, we the public have been made painfully aware that we must navigate between the actual and its re-enactment - or spin - as we know that the meaning and value of reality is deeply conditioned by political and institutional frameworks. These frameworks strategically negotiate and control the exchange and publication of democratic as well as socialist structures and processes both directly and indirectly. In this context camouflage helps obscure the real consequences of political actions such as war, or the controversial demonisation of boatpeople, refugees and forced migration. In these contexts camouflage provides the alibi or scapegoat that makes these unethical actions morally bearable for all citizens to politically condone. Within government the politics of camouflage has become a standard, an enforceable strategy of concealment for the

manipulation of truth and political gain. Truth is now like a refracted prism, much like the camouflage fatigues; it obscures, obfuscates and leads us in different and divergent directions.

Our cities and our constant connection to the Internet become the contemporary panopticon where we are surveilled, measured, judged and manipulated by both private corporations and government authorities. The panopticon historically created a space where every action, notion or thought was monitored; physicality was involved in being watched or disciplined. In contemporary society the tools for this panoptic surveillance have become so subtle, so part of the everyday that we as citizens forget or accept our constant state of surveillance. We are trapped in a more sinister panopticon, one where we are not even aware of its presence. However, camouflage has also been employed to destabilise this panoptic surveillance and authority. The Guy Fawkes mask, synonymous with the Occupy Movement and other protest movements, has been used to unmask and challenge the authority of the State. It destabilised the authorised processes of governments and surveillance by empowering those who were being surveilled to become the surveillers of power, government and corporate structures through camouflage in anonymity. Camouflage seems to be the only game in town.

The Exhibition

The artists selected for *Camouflage Cultures* cross boundaries between painting, video-art, installation, performance art, new media practices and sculpture to address the two key principles of camouflage - concealment and deception. They explore camouflage as a style, and set of aesthetic strategies, to interrogate contemporary art in contemporary society. There is a real interest in the conflict between what is deliberately concealed and what is authorised as visible. Camouflage is the strategic concealment and revelation of all aspects of our physical and abstract, aesthetic and political existence, whether it be sexuality, architectural style or national identity. The contemporary landscape with its accelerating global problems of war, famine, homelessness and environmental disaster is rife with these fluctuations between strategic exposure and concealment. Camouflage culture has ultimately become a permanent condition of global exchange; it affects the perceptions of artists in the contemporary world and impacts on the visuality of their daily lives.

It is deceptive to make us doubt our own certainties of perception. Ian Howard's works including *Delta Double Fence* (2012) create a doubt of how political statements are used and how they are intended to be perceived or to deceive. His eight calligraphic rubbings of the signs on the border between China and North Korea, which translate as – “We should take care of good relations between ourselves and North Korea and please look after both our relations and the fence” - seem innocent but in fact camouflage the permanency of borders in the most heavily militarised zone on the planet.

Shaun Gladwell's work *Double Field/Viewfinder (Tarin Kowt)* (2010) and *Jack in the Green (Lambretta-AGS 195 to Triumph-GVL2MXD)* (2013) also explore the militarised use of camouflage. Two videos offer a critique on the effects of war. In his theory of camouflage Lacan suggests camouflage is concealment as display.

Mimicry reveals something insofar as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage ... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but being against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.¹

In one of Gladwell's videos, a soldier in camouflage costume set against a desert background, frivolously balances an automatic weapon in his fingers, and is only made visible by the apparent playfulness of his actions. This is in contrast to the serious gravity of the Afghan war zone which demands concealment and invisibility against an equally invisible “enemy”. In contrast the conjoined video shows a returned serviceman, a war casualty, performing, a balancing act on crutches against a “mottled” graffiti urban background, perhaps New York. No longer in uniform he appears to vanish into the mundane city which renders him invisible along with any real possibilities of visible dissent and protest against war. Through mimicry of his background this figure suggests that we benignly accept the war and its consequences. In his work Gladwell also emphasises how the high visibility of camouflage patterns in everyday life means that clear demarcations between fashion and war, cityscapes and war zones and civilian and military realms blend, conflate and reduce.

A similar blurring of boundaries is apparent in Alex Gawronski's work *Scenery*

(2013) where the artist constructs an installation with a purpose built wall that effectively distorts the object's purpose in relation to the background/gallery. It serves as an institutional critique. By embedding what may or may not be a wall that is part of the gallery architecture he emphasises that it is the white cube that functions as the most pervasive form of camouflage in the art world. Gawronski's strategy is to not only break down the dichotomy between art and its consumption by the museum, but conversely to reveal the complex power relationship that the museum has with art. In so doing he creates a self-conscious critique of the original function of the museum and the art that it authorises.

Bricked (2013) evolves from Robyn Backen's research into the acoustics of ancient whispering architecture. Communication systems are the subject of this work, in particular—language, code and remembering. This two part sound installation plays with languages that morph from the visible to the invisible. *Bricked* uses language as a subterfuge, by creating a meta-text that functions as a code. As well as spoken in hushed tones the text becomes anamorphic, a coded disguise or graphic where the convention of text disappears and turns into pattern.

Debra Dawes work *Untitled* (2013) from the series *Double Dealing* explores the shifting territories of political power and authorisation through intense optical effects of hard edge abstraction to give material form to the subject of camouflage in political life. Dawes suggests that politicians dazzle us with rhetoric, conceal their mistakes and cover up their deceptions. By concealing the simple word “sorry” she offers a national apology to the indigenous communities of Australia, using camouflage to subvert the act of refusal by the then Prime Minister, John Howard.

Although these two principles, blending and dazzling, seem opposed, they very often combine in nature, which includes warfare and politics. This apparent contradiction is worth thinking about as it goes, I believe, to the heart of life.²

Both Justene Williams's performance videos, *Static Ballet* (2012/13), and Emma Hack's performance painting (Hack will make a new live performance painting for the exhibition), mask and make invisible reality including intentions, thoughts and objects. The artists change their identities at will. Blending is a form of empowerment as it hides gender and identity behind distracting displays of movement,

sound and colour. The artists go undercover and remain camouflaged, yet the artworks are able to speak about a multiplicity of concerns. This invisibility also reminds us about our human capacity to conceal ourselves from others whilst in full view. They deploy tactics of distraction and ‘dazzle’ to simultaneously conceal and reveal.

Maria Fernando Cardoso’s photographs of sculptural works *Hojas secas/Dry leafs* (2010), *Hembras palito/Female sticks* (2010), and *Palito/little stick* (2010) explore the invisibility and concealment of camouflage within the natural world. Her work suggests that when a living being, like a stick insect or a butterfly, uses camouflage as a form of protection they occupy a space not dissimilar to death; their stillness is a type of un-living, where death is the camouflage itself. Yet if these animals are disturbed they dazzle their enemy as a desperate measure to conceal their defencelessness. Ultimately, camouflage is about deception and in human social contexts this can be a matter of survival, but it can also be a type of game.

Also interested in animal camouflage is Jonnie Morris however this filmmaker explores the crossing of boundaries between the worlds of animals, militaries and artists. The drama of performative skin, and masquerade, are Morris’s subjects. For *Razzle Dazzle* (2013) she films a wide variety of phenomena from octopus camouflage to battleship dazzle in the First World War. Animals, though, are the masters of camouflage and Morris’s collage of the biological world shows us just how creative nature can be.

Sarah Goffman’s installation *Hard Rubbish* (2013) combines a mass of objects including cameras, gloves, liquids; they are an assemblage of real artworks, fakes and simulations. Goffman describes herself as a trash convertor/collector and her work blurs the distinction between what is real and what is fake. However, when she makes a simulation of an artwork it becomes an artwork itself, compromising the condition of what we consider to be art in the everyday. The fake is deployed as a camouflage turning a critique of the real against itself.

Jan Howlin’s installation *Tools of Engagement* (2013) consisting of suspended kitchen implements, wages war against the traditional gendered roles of the domestic setting.

Each ceramic object in the shape of a glass, a saucepan, a rolling pin, hangs in space like a set of flying kitchen utensils. The installation speaks of the unreal positioning of feminine stereotypes of order, domesticity, neatness and prettiness. Yet this immobilisation of the domestic world is further tampered with as each object is painted in camouflage colours that replicate the military camouflages of the traditional masculine world. The artist is inherently gendering each object creating conflict between the feminine function of the kitchen and its occupation by the masculine. She rejects the traditional hierarchies and expectations where the kitchen was the women's domain and instead has positioned herself at war with this expectation and assumption.

Camouflage is the most prevalent and pervasive condition of contemporary society. It functions within our tele-visual environment and it is the *modus operandi* for corporate media management and government policy-making. It is enacted in popular culture through media, networks and fashion, in the everyday, the global conflicts. It is subtle, obvious, deceitful and deceptive but it is always present as it proliferates seamlessly, consciously and unconsciously. Camouflage is no longer just a case of patterns and optics or associated with military use or prevalent in the natural world as animal and insect defence, but more significantly it has become a social and community anxiety of a globalised world.

¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Line and Light," *Of the Gaze* cited in Homi Bhaba, "Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse," *October*, Vol. 28, p. 125

² Michael Taussig, "Zoology, Magic and Surrealism in the War on Terror," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 34, No. 5, 2008, p. 107