



Thomas Hirschhorn

Establishing
a Critical Corpus

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Yasmil Raymond

“Take Care—Take Care”

At the end of his correspondences, whether electronic or hand-written, Thomas Hirschhorn typically signs off with the double affirmation “take care—take care.” Occasionally he slips in the alternative invitation “take care, you!” or the provocative maxim “take care, work hard.”¹ The presence of care, in its infinite versions, in Hirschhorn’s work and working method has revolved and evolved within an examination of *love*. Hence, “care” and “caring” are not merely gestures of civility or friendly affection, but representative of a political position that underlines the artist’s deep insistence on the ethical dimension of art. This act of “care” is embedded in Hirschhorn’s choice of materials, in the formal decisions that underlie his signature use of collage, and more important, though perhaps less obvious, in his address of the spectator.

Hirschhorn’s art differs greatly from that of his contemporaries, not only in his formal choices but also in the presence of language, which is manifested in the written word (his own and that of others) and in his numerous public exchanges (live speeches and interviews).² Given his activities with language, Hirschhorn’s closing salutations, which are never conclusions but rather invitations to action, are a poignant display of a broader position on public discourse and the active power of free speech. His sign-offs implicitly reference the notion of *epimeleia heautou*—“care of the self”—the Greco-Roman concept and practice that dates back twenty-five centuries. We owe our current awareness of this practice to Michel Foucault, who ardently studied the subject in the last years of his life, as outlined in his lecture at the University of Vermont in 1982.³ Hirschhorn’s use of the adage “take care” acknowledges the empowering autonomy and the utopian dimension that Foucault’s concept carries, for as the latter said: “The intersection of political ambition and philosophical love is ‘taking care of oneself.’”⁴ In other words, “caring” in Hirschhorn’s work is the passion that guides his labor-intensive artistic project. He “cares” for the social dimension inherent in his choice of materials and the experiential effects of their overabundance. He “cares” for the excessive physical and mental demands

1—My first exchange with the artist dates back to June 24, 2006.

2—Hirschhorn has collaborated extensively with writers and philosophers, most notably with the poet Manuel Joseph and the philosopher Marcus Steinweg, and more recently with art historian Vittoria Martini and the writers Alexandre and Daniel Costanzo.

3—Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” a faculty seminar held in Fall 1982 at the University of Vermont, in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 1988.

4—Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self*, p. 24.

that his work asks of himself and of others. In choosing to make art from a position of “caring for the self” above all, Hirschhorn thoroughly debunked the evasiveness and nihilistic aura that surrounded the work of art in the late 1980s and early 1990s to remake for himself a definition of art that originates from the volatile place of directness and confrontation, from a position of *love*.

Taking collage as his primary medium, Hirschhorn initiated a transgressive reassessment of the well-rooted hierarchy of ideas related to taste, worth, and quality—a hierarchy that has informed the dogma surrounding how art is to be made, the materials and methods to be used, where it is to be displayed, and the way it is to be discussed. As his work began appearing in exhibitions in the mid-1980s, he launched a critique against fixed and definite assumptions about art. He did this by taking an unpretentious position of direct address as the basis for a practice that would be cognizant of and responsive to the present reality, a position he defined in terms of a battle: “I want to fight against exclusion.”⁵ His reasoned preference for ordinary materials (cardboard, packing tape, aluminum foil, wrapping plastic, plywood) and handmade processes (pasting, wrapping, joining) set him apart from an entire generation of artists who in the 1960s and 1970s favored an aesthetic of expensive materials and technically complicated manufactured forms made by highly skilled fabricators. Asserting a strategy of immediacy and urgency that paralleled the political changes taking place across Europe at the time, Hirschhorn invented an autonomous and at times incendiary working method that confronted poignant political questions head-on and ridiculed the conspicuous “normality” of bourgeois culture. His visual and conceptual strategy was also accentuated by an explicitly excessive production that not only abandoned framing devices, inventories, and traditional pedestals, but also rejected the value placed on site-specificity, the central plot mechanism of art historical discourse during the postwar era.⁶ By 1996, in less than a

5 — Thomas Hirschhorn, interview with Francesco Bonami, “Thomas Hirschhorn: Energy Yes, Quality No,” *Flash Art* 34, no. 126 (January–February 2001), p. 90.

6 — Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1979/81) is a classic example. After four years of court battles, in March 1989 the piece was dismantled from New York City’s Jacob K. Javits Federal Plaza and destroyed. Serra’s artwork had been commissioned by the US General Service Administration’s Art in Architecture program in 1981. Four years later, a jury voted in favor of the federal workers who complained that the sculpture was dangerous. Serra insisted on the importance and specificity of the site, opting to destroy the artwork rather than accepting the terms to install it in a different location. Shortly after the removal in 1989 of the three pieces of curved Cor-Ten steel, which together measured 120 feet long and 12 feet high, a whole generation of artists set out to redefine the relationship of their work toward place. See Michael Brenson’s “The Messy Saga of ‘Tilted Arc’ Is Far from Over,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1989.

decade, Hirschhorn's self-created crude aesthetic of ad hoc collage techniques, with its ballistic material abundance and agglomeration of found imagery and texts, would become an ambitious program that reconceptualized artistic practice outside of any preexisting discourse.

Over the next fifteen years Hirschhorn's copious body of work expanded beyond two dimensions into three, with his unique brand of temporal architecture that likewise was made from precarious and inexpensive "low-grade" construction materials. In his series of *kiosks*, *altars*, and *monuments*, he redefined, as he previously had done inside the gallery, the terms for a new aesthetic itinerary that centered on his prodigious imagination and absurdist irony to explicitly address displeasing societal delusions. He conceived of a tactic of public speech, succinct but critical, that brought into being a radically different "portrait" of the artist as Worker-Soldier-Artist. As he defined it: "With 'worker' I wanted to point out the importance of the work, the importance of production and the importance to do it. Being a 'worker' also means to refuse the terms 'genius,' 'star,' 'prince or princess' and the term 'child of miracles.' With 'soldier' I want to point out that I have to fight for my work, for my position, for my form, I want to point out that this fight is never won but also never lost, I want to point out that doing art is a perpetual battle and I want to point out that to be an artist means to have a mission. With 'artist' I want to point out that I have to stand up, I have to assert and I have to give form to what is important to me. I ask myself: Does my work have the power to reach a public beyond the public already interested in art? Can I, through my artwork, create and establish a new term for art? And I ask myself: can my work create the condition to develop a critical corpus?"⁷

From this militarized conception of his duties, Hirschhorn proceeded to define for himself and others concrete conditions for a practice that aimed not only to communicate but to *display* truths, to apprehend the reality of the present moment, and to address the spectator from a position of "care" and urgency.⁸

⁷—Thomas Hirschhorn, interview with Ross Birrell, "The Headless Artist: An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn on the Friendship Between Art and Philosophy, Precarious Theatre and *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*," *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2009–2010), p. 7.

⁸—See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn," *October* 113 (Summer 2005), p. 88.

Hirschhorn's self-identification as a Worker-Soldier-Artist went hand in hand with his unabashed admiration for and "love" (the artist's words) of eight predecessors who fostered in their work the class and political consciousness that he too was aiming for (in the order listed in a 1995 collage): Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Emil Nolde, Kurt Schwitters, Robert Filliou, Hélio Oiticica, Otto Freundlich, and John Heartfield.⁹ This public confession, following the logic of a manifesto, underlined Hirschhorn's distinct personal affinity for the radical subjectivity one finds in the work of these artists as well as his loyalty and sense of camaraderie toward these historical figures, all of whom fought courageously to undermine social exclusion and faced political repercussions and alienation for their actions. Similar characteristics drove the choice of authors and artists to whom he has dedicated his outdoor series of *altars*, *kiosks*, and *monuments*. In the case of the *altars*: Piet Mondrian, Raymond Carver, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Otto Freundlich. For the *kiosks*: Robert Walser, Ingeborg Bachmann, Meret Oppenheim, Fernand Léger, Otto Freundlich, Emil Nolde, Lyubov Popova, and Emmanuel Bove. And lastly, for the *monuments*: Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, Georges Bataille, and (yet to be realized) Antonio Gramsci. What is immediately evident is that all of the individuals in this roster shared a passion for public speech and a commitment to social purpose, and perhaps more important, produced work that was ultimately, and in every sense, utopian.

An early work by Hirschhorn, an action "staged" during a month-long stay in the Irish countryside of County Donegal in 1989, offers a clear link to the idea of utopia, which will persist in his practice as his primary mode of resistance. Entitled *6 mots* (*6 words*), the work consisted of six words—*travail*, *réalité*, *stratégie*, *engagement*, *pouvoir*, *art*—handwritten with a black marker on handmade placards constructed from cardboard, which were nailed to wooden stakes.¹⁰ During a long walk, the artist placed the signs in the ground in six different locations and made photographs to document them against the vast coastal landscape. In hindsight, this action, akin to the making



Otto Freundlich-Altar



Emmanuel Bove-Kiosk



Deleuze Monument

9— See the ninety-sixth collage in Hirschhorn's book *Les plaintifs, les bêtes, les politiques*, Centre genevois de gravure contemporaine, Geneva 1995.

10—"I called [*6 mots*] 'an action' at this time with the idea to have a photo-document afterward [...] I prepared the panels before the walk and found the location for [them] during the walk, I wanted different 'situations' (sea, cliff, lake, turf-claim, etc.). [The] word-panels were not removed afterwards from the landscape, I left them on the spot, perhaps they are still there." E-mail correspondence with the author, December 30, 2010.

of a collage, juxtaposes disjunctive meanings and formulates a striking hybrid between a declaration and a protest. As the artist observed recently: “6 mots does not have any specific place, any specific space, the 6 mots are ‘non-lieux’—and it is up to me, the artist, to fulfill this notion with something from me: with MY UTOPIA, with my sense, with my form, and with my work.”¹¹

The signposts—functioning in a manner far removed from the demarcation of land—were anonymous declarations without explication or claim of authorship; they simply, and succinctly, announced publicly the six words (or commandments), which in turn served as a touchstone for the young artist. But to us now, more than twenty years later, Hirschhorn’s six words actually seem stunningly decisive and prophetic in their keen awareness of the situation at hand, which he summarized as: work, reality, strategy, engagement, power, and art. It is fair to say, then, that *6 mots* also functions as a manifesto and stands as an example of the artist’s open address to the public. And its anarchic force, rife with absurdity and self-mockery, is captured in Hirschhorn’s snapshots, which reveal the subversive nature of the action: for this very first declaration, this manifesto made in the middle of nowhere, remains today the foundation of his artistic enterprise.

Between 1986 and 1993 Hirschhorn’s works were made primarily of found imagery adhered to cardboard constructions; he would display these on the floor or on tables, or leaning against the wall. There are several works from this period, however, that were destined for the outdoors, for locations he called *Non-Lieux* (non-sites), which included car hoods and windshields, sidewalks, bar counters, and vacant lots.¹² Hirschhorn’s application of the French legal term *non-lieu* (meaning “no trace” or “no grounds”) encapsulates the notion of an ordinary and transitory space, free from the qualities that clearly define a site as memorable or unique. In this sense, the location where he decided to place his work was never premeditated but rather encountered. The *non-site* is a half-known terrain, unfamiliar and emptied of signification, as opposed to the archaeological site, which carries a set of expectations about its meaning. The political implication of the *non-site* then is precisely this quality of being a passage or a transitory space with no special



Non-Lieux

11 – E-mail correspondence with the author, December 30, 2010.

12 – The French ethnologist Marc Augé expanded the concept of *non-lieu* in his book *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London 1995.

“meaning,” with no particular topographical qualities—an arena of quotidian activities that transgress any claim of uniqueness or exceptional value. In this sense, it is immediately apparent that the provisional nature of the materials used in Hirschhorn’s work parallels the unpretentious nature of his preference for the *non-site*. In *Jemand kümmert sich um meine Arbeit* (*Someone takes care of my work*) (1992), for example, which anticipates the impermanence of his outdoor *altars*, *kiosks*, and *monuments*,¹³ the concept of the *non-site* is problematized even further. The action, which exists only in the form of photographic and video documentation, shows a pile of dozens of collages left out on the sidewalk in front of the artist’s apartment. The next morning, as expected, the street cleaners proceeded to remove the work, unknowingly becoming “caretakers” of Hirschhorn’s work and engaged in the relocation of his collages to another equally valid *non-site*—the dump.

Hirschhorn’s principle of *non-site* differs from that used by his predecessor Robert Smithson, who described the various topographic sources in his work within the dichotomy of site/non-site whereby the displacement of materials from the original location determined their relation with a second place, that of display.¹⁴ It is precisely the absence of this relational tactic that is notable in Hirschhorn’s proposition. For if we consider the uncertain fate of *6 mots* or *Jemand kümmert sich um meine Arbeit*—the unlikelihood that the placards are still standing in County Donegal or that the collages are hanging on the walls in the homes of street cleaners—then we must admit that Hirschhorn was consciously constructing a strategy in which there would be no “trace.” This renunciation, so contrary to the commercial valuation of the work of art, positions Hirschhorn’s early actions as critiques of ownership and authorship that expand upon his insistent creation of ephemeral art by means of a system of “situations” that test the limits of his work’s engagement with the spectator.

Hirschhorn’s conscious use of the *non-site* coincides with his formulation and use of the term “non-exclusive audience,”



Jemand kümmert sich um meine Arbeit



Piet Mondrian-Altar



Meret Oppenheim-Kiosk

13—See, for example, *Mondrian-Altar* (1997); *Ingeborg Bachmann-Altar* (1998); *Otto Freundlich-Altar—Non-Lieux* (1998); and *Raymond Carver-Altar* (1999).

14—Art historian Benjamin Buchloh asserts, without providing evidence, that the artist “employs Robert Smithson’s term *non-site* explicitly in projects entitled *Non-Lieux*.” As stated in my comparison, there is a distinct difference in Hirschhorn’s use of the term. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Detritus and Deceit: The Sculpture of Thomas Hirschhorn,” *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (2001), p. 41–56.

for the person who encounters his work in this context—a hiker, a resident, a passer-by—is most likely not an art spectator.¹⁵ We recognize here the artist's direct appeal to a different public, which becomes an important aspect in the general context of his work and relates back to his concept of "taking care." This position is articulated visually in his address of the viewer, which occurs primarily through written statements and interrogations in which the artist is always implicated. For one thing that is evident throughout Hirschhorn's oeuvre is his constant analysis of current events, in particular violent conflicts, the atrocities of war, and the banalities that stimulate and entertain the masses. As the artist has noted, "In today's society meaning is diluted by an overload of information as well as the tendency to over-explain everything."¹⁶ The sense of critique, which is already inherent in the technique of collage, has been part of Hirschhorn's tactic from the very beginning. His serial works from the early 1990s such as *Moins (Less)*, *Fifty-Fifty*, *Rosa Tombola*, *Saisie*, and *Lay-Out* all show alongside their abstract shapes—bands and geometric contours made from tape and colored paper—rectangular clippings of found imagery culled from periodicals (*Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *The Economist*, fashion and porn magazines) depicting the cruelty, absurdity, and ironies of the capitalist mode of production. Moreover, this torrent of references, with its contrasting oppositions between mass-consumption and luxury goods, between authoritative and powerless figures, forces a contradiction that is meant to unclench the paralyzing effects of the middle-distance vision generated by denial and apathy.

In recent decades few artists have so ably walked the tight-rope of political critique, and Hirschhorn's inclusion in his work of such blatant analysis of world events has increased in frequency and scale over the years. A telling example of his deliberate consideration of the politics of image distribution appeared in the exhibition *Superficial Engagement*, which included a group of four individual walk-in sculptures: "Chromatic Fire", "Spatial Front," "Concrete Shock," and "Abstract Resistance" (all from 2006). Spread across the walls and floors in a manner mimicking retail shop windows and merchandise displays, the sculptures



Rosa Tombola



Lay-Out

15—Hirschhorn introduced the term "non-exclusive audience" during his lecture at the Cooper Union School of Art, New York, on October 24, 2008.

16—Thomas Hirschhorn, interview with Alison Gingeras, in *Press Play: Contemporary Artists in Conversation*, Phaidon, London 2005, p. 308.

delineated a narrow walkway through the gallery space forcing spectators to come into close proximity with the works. Hirschhorn arranged dozens of mannequins, their “skin” covered in armor made of nails and screws, alongside hundreds of color print-outs of snapshots culled from the Internet showing severed and burned corpses of victims of bomb explosions in Afghanistan, Bali, Iraq, Israel, London, and New York. Within the intentional spatial chaos and visual cacophony, large red banners hung from the walls declaring their respective slogans: “Chromatic Fire,” “Spatial Front,” “Concrete Shock,” and “Abstract Resistance.” These banners—tools for an unannounced protest, political rally, or parade—stated the nature of Hirschhorn’s “cause” and the personal nature of his protestation.¹⁷ In a convergence of ideologies, each phrase pairs an art term with protest lingo, underlining on the one hand Hirschhorn’s formal insurrection and on the other hand the slogans of an artistic proclamation.

As *Superficial Engagement* made clear, the genre of the manifesto—in the form of protest placards, banners, and statements—is a central tenet in Hirschhorn’s visual strategy (Worker-Soldier-Artist) and in his activities with language, whereby the work of art is conceived as a public attack on disengagement. As the artist has observed, he was encouraged by the writings of French philosopher Jacques Rancière “to make of each artwork a manifesto [. . .] to do each exhibition as a manifesto. A visual manifesto that wants to reply—*through form*—to the essential question: What do I want as an artist? What is the position of my artwork? Does my work address all people without excluding anyone?”¹⁸

The notion of the manifesto in Hirschhorn’s work is centered on three principles: frankness, risk, and self-mockery. This public acceptance of human vulnerability and imperfection is astutely expressed in an early example of Hirschhorn’s large-scale displays: *Les plaintifs, les bêtes, les politiques (Présentoir)* (1995), a room-size display that took its cue from the booths used in trade shows, and included cardboard placards, tabletop displays, a promotional video, and even a take-home publication.¹⁹ What seems most striking here is how the artist’s use of text



Présentoir: Les plaintifs, les bêtes, les politiques

17— *Selected Writings*: Sarah Kofman, Thomas Albrecht (ed.) with Georgia Albert and Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2007.

18— Thomas Hirschhorn, “Eternal Flame,” *Artforum* 45, no. 7 (March 2007), p. 268.

19— The title of this work translates roughly into English as “Plaintifs, Fools, Politicians (Display Shelf).”

(handwritten) and the display elements on the tabletop were fused into a massive three-dimensional collage. The accompanying publication, which reproduced in color a selection of 132 collages by the artist with imagery he culled from periodicals, showed recent and historical events (mass graves, destroyed buildings, pro-fascist demonstrations) alongside scenes of social inequality (famine, poverty, and homelessness) and paired them with sleek advertisements (for fashion, perfume, sport vehicles). In a rare example, some of the collages included a self-portrait as well. But it was in his handwritten commentaries that Hirschhorn's presence was inescapable, as they acknowledged his own frustration and inability to comprehend the meaning of all of these signifiers. The cardboard placards, written in his agitated calligraphy using a blue Bic ballpoint pen (which would become his signature writing utensil), hold a distinct cultural reference in that they recall the ad hoc look of the placards carried by street beggars (in later works such as the *altars* and *kiosks*, the form of the cardboard sign will differ from this reference). Here, however, both the form and the language convey a state of anguish, confusion, and dissent. The artist adopted the same tenor in his statements and rhetorical questions, which instill the work with a certain confessional undertone: "AIDEZ-MOI!" "JE NE COMPRENDS PLUS RIEN!" "MOI AUSSI, MOI AUSSI!" and "JE NE SAIS PAS QUI EST LE WINNER ET QUI EST LE LOSER [*sic*]?"²⁰

It is within this state of incomprehension, shifting from psychological to philosophical helplessness and "panic,"²¹ that Hirschhorn offers his urgent critique on the deceptiveness of taste and the tenuous codes of civility in a world of consumption and destruction. And yet, whenever Hirschhorn takes a moral stance in his work one always finds a proportional degree of irony and self-doubt. He makes this point on the first page of the publication by including a collage in which he pasted an image of the infamous Nazi poster *L'affiche rouge*, a piece of propaganda commissioned by Vichy authorities to publicly announce the capture and condemnation of the members of the Resistance known as the Manouchian Group. Made in 1944, the



Les plaintifs, les bêtes,
les politiques



Les plaintifs, les bêtes,
les politiques



Les plaintifs, les bêtes,
les politiques

20—"Help me!" "I no longer understand anything!" "Me too, Me too!" and "I don't know who is the winner and who is the loser?"

21—Hirschhorn's word. See "I Believe the Solution Is Panic: An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn" by Fernando Oliva and Marcelo Rezende, C: *International Contemporary Art* (March 2007), p. 21.

Superficial Engagement





poster took advantage of the latest printing techniques of photomontage to include headshots of ten of the nearly two dozen members captured and killed, each identified by surname and place of birth. The poster, the result of complex media manipulation for its time, was intended to implant both terror and xenophobia in the French citizenry, but as an example of graphic design, especially its use of color and typography, it echoed the dynamism and invention of the Russian Constructivist posters of the 1920s. Herein lies Hirschhorn's conflict, as he wrote in his frantic handwriting, which spills desperately over the edge of the cardboard: "AIDEZ-MOI! S.V.P CETTE AFFICHE EST FAITE PAR LES NAZI. MAIS JE LA TROUVE BELLE, POURQUOI?"²² This rhetorical plea (not without a sense of irony) holds a double-edged naiveté as it points to the obvious paradox between the visual and the political. If art, like the fascist poster, is examined merely within a pass-fail system of beauty and astuteness, then is it free from moral accountability? In other words, is the work of art anachronistic and independent from its historical context?

Hirschhorn's distrust of any form of hierarchy and value judgment is precisely what makes his work open-ended, but also an easy target for cynics. In fact, his handmade aesthetic constitutes a deliberate act of sabotage against the possibility of consensus in art. Instead, his work emphasizes the importance of making without judgment, of working, as he is known to say, from a place of "headlessness" and in an "instantaneous state" while remaining politically engaged: "The attempt to capture an instantaneous state, a 'slice of consciousness,' if you will—all the things that pass through the brain in a second—that's what connects my works."²³ This attitude is nonetheless carried out through a working method that involves labor-intensive production schedules. Despite the "low" quality of the work, the time-consuming process of production is nothing but high energy: "I don't care about quality, I care about the energy which comes out of an artwork. A work with energy always has something to say, and quality is irrelevant. I don't know what artwork with quality means, but I can seize energy in it. Energy yes, quality no, means to make an active work, which can bring a new and non-exclusive audience to art through multiple access. Energy yes,



Les plaintifs, les bêtes, les politiques

22—"Help me please! This poster was made by the Nazis. But I find it beautiful—why?"

23—Thomas Hirschhorn, "Thomas Hirschhorn Talks about His Critical Laboratory," *Artforum* 38, no. 7 (March 2000), p. 109.

quality no is directed against a hyper-codified thought, in which the concept of quality is hiding in fact the sense of exclusion.”²⁴

In Hirschhorn’s art, this energy is manifested in numerous ways, not only in the excessive abundance of materials and the physical repetition required to amass them, but also in the scale of the overall forms. His use of oversize reproductions tends toward formal hyperbole, as in the case of the utility knives in *Spin Off* (1998) or the massive souvenirs in *Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake* (2000). In other instances, however, the colossal scale carries metaphorical weight, the enormity of the object equating with its “value,” as seen, for example, in the oversize tree trunks in *Sculpture Direct* (1999) and *Deleuze Monument* (2000), in the vastness of the network of caves in *Cavemanman* (2002), or in the enormous book replica of Spinoza’s *Ethics* on the roof of the pavilion for *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* (2009).

Abundance is another metaphor for energy, whether it is achieved through a multiplicity of images, texts, and handmade objects or in the excessive fixing that guides the sturdy application of packaging tape. Herein lies Hirschhorn’s concept of energy, in the unrestrained deployment of the physical effort necessary to create with his hands rather than with his head. Such an uninhibited position is reiterated in the formal character of the work, which derives its force from the abundance of materials and references as much as from the specificity of its critical position. Between 1997 and 2000, following the presentation of the outdoor work *Lascaux III* (1997) in Bordeaux, Hirschhorn engaged in an ambitious cycle of production that resulted in more than two dozen large-scale indoor and outdoor sculptures.

In the course of working through the formal and conceptual challenges inherent in translating the two-dimensional collage into the three-dimensional spatial realm, Hirschhorn began to treat printed text in the form of photocopies, leaflets, articles, and books as an integral “material” for constructing the work. With the escalation of hostilities and warfare in various parts of the world, more texts on human rights, justice, and ethics began appearing in the work; most of the books were closed or adhered directly to the walls or surfaces of furniture, but occasionally they were left open for viewers to read. If we can credit Hirschhorn with reinstating the political dimension of the collage into the



Spin Off



Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake



Cavemanman



Lascaux III

24 — Hirschhorn, in Bonami, “Thomas Hirschhorn: Energy Yes, Quality No,” p. 93.

artistic discourse of the twenty-first century, then we can also say that he succeeded in making printed text, in particular continental philosophy, equal protagonists in his ambitious visual program. Not only does his work slander the dichotomy of “high” and “low” art, it takes pains to debunk the modernist dictum “Less Is More” by asserting a sublimated logic of “More Is More.”

The resulting work in the early 2000s was maximalist in its material abundance and intricately dense in its agglomeration of supporting evidence and depictions related to current world affairs. Writing (in the form of photocopied texts, free handouts, and books) became a central and ever-present component in the arsenal of tools made available to the spectator, evident in works such as *United Nations Miniature*, *Chalet Lost History*, and *U-Lounge* (all from 2003). The growing inclusion of various types of speech in Hirschhorn’s work vis-à-vis written statements, slogans, and libraries also points to the development of a relational component in his concept of “Présence et Production,”²⁵ applied to works such as the *Musée Précaire Albinet*, *24h Foucault*, and *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* (all from 2004), in which the artist was present at the site for several hours or days overseeing lectures, participating in conversations, and interacting with guest speakers and visitors. This mode of generating exchange and bonding with the audience indisputably echoes the tactics employed by Joseph Beuys, who made himself available for one hundred days in his “Information Office” as part of his contribution to Documenta 5 in 1972. The political commentary of Hirschhorn’s “Présence and Production” expands the conception of sculpture from that of a form one encircles or walks through into an event where debate and creation are generated. That these temporal works operate within the hybrid format of a colloquium and an atelier is not coincidental, but underscores the interplay between discourse and engagement in Hirschhorn’s work. Over the past five years, furthermore, his emphasis on the implications of response and action has been directed at the issue of visibility as concerns injustice, inequality, and intrusion, and the censorship of war imagery. This point was recently materialized, both formally and semantically, in the moving work *Restore Now* (2006).

Hirschhorn’s contribution to the 27th São Paulo Biennial, *Restore Now* took the form of a monumental cardboard box



United Nations Miniature



Chalet Lost History



Musée Précaire Albinet



24h Foucault



Swiss-Swiss Democracy

2

25—Hirschhorn described the concept of “Présence et Production” during his lecture at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design on February 23, 2010.

lining the ground floor of the Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion. Inside, visitors walked into a pseudo-restoration studio, equipped with an assortment of hand and power tools—drills, wrenches, saws, hammers, and brushes—but also books and art. Illuminated by the cold white light of fluorescent tubes, the space was demarcated by freestanding shelving units, tables, and enlarged objects (7-foot-high books, a 10-foot-long hammer, and a megaphone), all of which created a labyrinth of massive obstacles. A network of freestanding display cases made of plywood planks contained books and tools alongside color reproductions, pulled from the Internet, of the dismembered corpses of victims of explosions and bombings. The snapshots left even the most courageous of viewers distressed. One such crude gathering of facts might include, for example, a large wrench, a copy of Jacques Derrida's *Acts of Literature*, two hammers, and color reproductions of mutilated male bodies. Hirschhorn's deliberately excessive use of brown packaging tape to fasten images and objects to the various surfaces, accompanied by weighty metal tools, lent a certain rawness and metaphorical desperation to the scenario. Adding to the overabundance of references and tension was the juxtaposition of real books, sealed with tape so the knowledge contained therein was inaccessible to the spectator, with oversize cardboard facsimiles that stood in the space as freestanding walls. For example, a handmade faux copy of Deleuze's *The Regimes of Madness*, measuring the height of a door, stood upright with the help of a jackhammer, a broom, and a hoe, while a bundle of colossal replicas of Hannah Arendt books stood on a table lined with dozens of crowbars. Hanging from the walls were red cloth banners carrying slogans in Portuguese, while resting in a corner on sawhorses was an oversize handmade megaphone with a copy of Foucault's *Fearless Speech* strapped to it. Within this constrained environment, where power tools were switched off and books were sealed, a series of video monitors positioned throughout the space offered, however mildly, a slice of humanity as they showed the artist demonstrating "How to Dance" to philosophy. Hiding behind a naked female mannequin, Hirschhorn, with bare arms and chest, danced in honor of his favorite philosophers.

The entire montage of *Restore Now*, with its abjectness and unsentimental political declaration, underlined the urgent need for "restoration" (a rebooting of sorts) to force a reaction to the paralyzing, pessimistic mess. Hirschhorn strapped the

space with a plethora of power tools and powerful ideas to stress their existence and their potential to “speak” the truth. And as if to recap the urgency for their use, he paired the tools of construction with products of destruction in the form of images depicting the cruel fate of men and women whose deaths remain invisible due to an active campaign of censorship on the part of the mainstream media in the United States and abroad. To help contextualize Hirschhorn’s tactics it is worth recalling another of Foucault’s most beloved concepts, the act of *parrhesia*: “[I]n *parrhesia*, telling the truth is regarded as a *duty*. The orator who speaks the truth to those who cannot accept his truth, for instance, and who may be exiled, or punished in some way, is *free* to keep silent. No one forces him to speak, but he feels that it is his duty to do so [. . .] More precisely, *parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself).”²⁶

Hirschhorn’s work gives visual form to Foucault’s definition of *parrhesia* in that the artist’s poetic effort crystallizes a political resistance to fraudulence and duplicity. Embracing this *duty*, Hirschhorn makes certain truths accessible in his works while also accepting the ramifications of his actions, which returns us to the notion of “taking care of oneself.”

Indeed, Hirschhorn’s willingness to take risks and to publicly object to the indifference that implicitly tolerates injustice and inequality has materialized in a vigilant aesthetic program that is centered on self-awareness. For the radical contribution of his work is not limited to concerns of aesthetics; it equally puts forward a manner of working and engaging with the world. His alertness brings to his art the means for retrieving truths otherwise buried in the nonsensical world of appearances. Through this practice of dissent, Hirschhorn sets in motion a visual proposal that is vibrantly materialist and occasionally incendiary. Without renouncing a resolutely anticonformist examination of the present, he operates from the position of a “fan,” which he describes as follows: “A fan is someone who shares with other fans the fact of being a fan, not the object of his love. Love is important, not the object of love. I want to be a fan in order to speak directly through my work from one to another.

26 — Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, Joseph Pearson (ed.), *Semiotext[e]*, Los Angeles 2001, 19.

I want to fight against resentment and nihilism, the dictatorship of morality, indifference, and cynicism. I want to act freely in my practice and with what is my own. I don't have to communicate, to explain, to justify, to argue for my work. My work allows itself to fight against the culture of powerlessness, weakness, depression, and victimization."²⁷

In his model of aesthetic dissent, Hirschhorn expounds a method of production and investigation that provides truths about himself and thus reclaims the space of creation as an exercise of self-examination and "care." What Hirschhorn's work has repeatedly shown in its autonomous, unpredictable, and volatile manifestations is that the subject of art is ultimately truth. His recurring insistence on an experience of art infused with intensity and energy, that is to say, an event defined by human passion, draws attention to his genuine determination to resist the discourse of helplessness that limits human creativity: "My work refuses the ethics of sentimentality, depression, and good conscience. I am against the inconsiderate pretentiousness of narcissistic self-fulfillment. I want to act, I want to hope, and I want to be happy!"²⁸

27—Craig Garrett, "Thomas Hirschhorn: Philosophical Battery," *Flash Art* 37, no. 238 (October 2004), p. 92–93.
28—*Ibid.*

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