

GLADSTONE

Rachel Wetzler, "The Pure Products of America Go Crazy: Thomas Hirschhorn's *Fake It, Fake It - till you Fake It.*, 2023," *Artforum*, March, 2024

ARTFORUM

THE PURE PRODUCTS OF AMERICA GO CRAZY

Thomas Hirschhorn's *Fake It, Fake It – till you Fake It.*, 2023

By Rachel Wetzler



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Fake it, Fake it – till you Fake it.* (detail), 2023, cardboard, prints, tape, polystyrene, aluminum foil. Installation view, Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2024.
Photo: David Regen. © Thomas Hirschhorn/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

THOMAS HIRSCHHORN'S *Fake it, Fake it – till you Fake it.*, 2023, opens with a subtle intervention—perhaps the only subtle part of this characteristically chaotic display (the artist abhors the term *installation*): a length of cardboard partly blocking the threshold between the vestibule of Gladstone Gallery's Twenty-First Street location in New York and the cavernous main exhibition space, narrowing the entryway and, in turn, limiting the external view of the work, ensuring it can be fully perceived only from inside its own howling maw. The piece takes the form of a demented military control room, as imagined by gamers hopped up on Adderall and taurine and executed by crafty preschoolers. Here, cardboard tables are lined with rows of cardboard keyboards and cardboard monitors, all held together with packing tape, not to mention racks of cardboard smartphones and cardboard tablets charged by knotty cords of tape and crumpled tinfoil, their buttons hastily drawn on with black Sharpie.



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The screens on this panoply of ersatz devices bear shitty computer printouts depicting all manner of atrocities, provenance nonspecific. Some are self-evidently screenshots culled from first-person-shooter games, given away by little icons in the corners announcing remaining lives or ammo or high scores, while others are presumably photographs or video stills of real, though largely unidentifiable, or at least unidentified, devastation. For the most part, it is alarmingly difficult to tell the difference, though not altogether surprisingly: Games have become more sophisticated, military assaults more simulacral, at least for their perpetrators. Nowadays, a drone strike in Yemen is most likely to be carried out by joystick from a black box in Nevada. But here the violence on-screen seems to escape its boundaries, too volatile to be contained by the hypothetical space of the metaverse, instead doubling back to destroy the room. To drive home the point, a spray-painted pseudo-manifesto scrawled on one wall warns of the dangers of ceding too much ground to the virtual. “We are talking about ‘Artificial Intelligence’—but why only ‘Intelligence,’ why not ‘Artificial Willpower?’ ‘Artificial Belief?’ ‘Artificial Faith,’ ‘Artificial Hope?’ ‘Artificial Resistance’ ‘Artificial Intuition?’” it reads. “Never give up human competencies other than ‘Intelligence’ in order to escape robotic control. BE AWARE or BE NEXT.”



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As is often the case with Hirschhorn's work, *Fake it . . .* stages a paradoxical confrontation between excess and impoverishment (or, to use his preferred term, precarity). The means are poor, in every sense of the term—cheap, readily available, resistant to the standards of archival preservation—and assembled crudely, with little regard for longevity or stability. The artist's motto: "Energy = Yes! Quality = No!" Yet the environment as a whole is characterized by manic hedonism, situating us in the unhinged id of what Hirschhorn has elsewhere called the "capitalist garbage bucket": The floor is strewn with crushed cans of Red Bull assembled from tinfoil and printer paper; keyboards languish under piles of Styrofoam cigarette butts and cocaine. In one corner, by the entrance, a cascade of cardboard debris tumbles from the ceiling, taking one workstation with it; some of the monitor screens are shattered, throwing angular shards onto the surrounding surfaces. Meanwhile, suspended from the ceiling by lengths of tape are an assortment of emoji, the depleted lingua franca of the smartphone era, interspersed with roughly life-size, half-length portraits of CGI soldiers in assorted military uniforms. These cardboard sentries obstruct the aisles at various points, forcing viewers to decide what degree of respect to afford them: Some visitors simply pushed past them, while others were deferential, contorting themselves around the flimsy impediment. A large industrial fan at the back of the room sends these forms all twisting in the wind with progressively greater vigor as one moves through the space: By the entrance, soldiers and smiley faces gently swing like nursery mobiles, while those at the back of the room are whipped and jerked around, their sticky ropes of tape clinging together to form a tangled mass, a rat king of grinning, sobbing, smirking cartoon faces.



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“How to do art in times of war, destruction, violence, anger, hate, resentment?” Hirschhorn asks in an accompanying artist statement.

“What kind of art should be done in moments of darkness and desperation?” His answer is to amplify this brutality, to render it hysterical. This is the operation that Hal Foster calls mimetic exacerbation: Hirschhorn’s key move, Foster writes, is “to take bad things and make them worse.” Such a strategy— inherited from Zurich Dadaists like Hugo Ball, who channeled the deranging experience of watching the world burn to the ground from the safety of a Swiss café into a caustic buffoonery—emerged, or reemerged, as a dominant mode of artistic practice in the 2000s, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, another period when the world suddenly seemed to lose its collective mind. The gambit is that in inflating society’s most grotesque, degraded forms, one can pressure them, make them strange, and allow them to be seen anew, this time for the horror show that they really are.

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Fittingly, then, my overriding impression of *Fake it . . .* was colored by déjà vu, recalling, as it does, a number of works Hirschhorn made in response to the Iraq War, in particular the 2006 show “Superficial Engagement,” also staged at Gladstone, a similarly all-encompassing environment assembled from detritus and revolving around dense juxtapositions of incongruous images: In that case, gruesome photographs of mostly anonymous bodies maimed and murdered by American bombs, and the ethereal abstractions of the early-twentieth-century Swiss mystic Emma Kunz. Reviewing the exhibition in this magazine, David Joselit wrote that “Hirschhorn’s opposition of figurative evisceration and abstract healing . . . gives the lie to our American world of euphemism in which devastating bombardments are advertised as ‘surgical strikes’ and wars are planned by Halliburton.” This circularity would seem to be the point. One wall of the gallery is papered with a grainy black-and-white photomural depicting yet another street bombed into oblivion, but this one older; I assumed from World War II, but the dangling emoji blot out the scene so thoroughly that it’s hard to perceive anything more specific than rubble, a heavy-handed metaphor for our lapsed historical consciousness. Hirschhorn, in his statement, says he wants the work to be a “surface of reflection,” and what it reflects, as if through a funhouse mirror, is an amnesiac culture that never learns anything at all.



View of "Thomas Hirschhorn: Superficial Engagement," 2006,
Gladstone Gallery, New York.
© Thomas Hirschhorn/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

But twenty years on, I suspect that this approach offers diminishing returns. To what extent is it possible to meaningfully exaggerate the absurdity of a society in which reality TV star Donald Trump, currently under indictment in four different criminal cases, is running for a second term as president of the United States, and will probably win? And, more to the point, it's hard to imagine a more hideous and venal cesspool than my real social media feeds, which absorb every fear, hateful thought, and base want and spit them back as consumable, bite-size posts: ads for drop-shipped midcentury-modern knockoffs, adaptogen supplements, and magical shapewear next to dead and dying children, neo-Nazi memes, makeup tutorials. (Sometimes these are combined into repulsive hybrids: the IDF reservist Natalia Fadeev posting sexy selfies from the beach in Gaza, for example, or "manosphere" grifter and accused human trafficker Andrew Tate touting crypto schemes and misogyny on TikTok.) By comparison, Hirschhorn's lo-fi warning seems almost quaint. But his question remains: "How to do art in times of war, destruction, violence, anger, hate, resentment?" So many artistic practices of the recent past, not only Hirschhorn's, have seemingly run aground amid the extremity of our moment. One lesson we might take from Hirschhorn's project is that nobody really wins a race to the bottom.



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“Thomas Hirschhorn: Fake it, Fake it – till you Fake it.” is on view through March 2 at Gladstone Gallery, New York.