GLADSTONE

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"I don't want to lie" | Thomas Hirschhorn, Gladstone Gallery, New York

Text by **Luciana Fabbri** —

Thomas Hirschhorn "Fake it, Fake it – till you Fake it." Cardboard, prints, tape, polystyrene, aluminium foil Dimensions variable © Thomas Hirschhorn / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photography by David Regen

These days we are constantly flooded by images of violence, that invade us in the comfort of our homes through our laptops, phone and television. But what kind of art should be done in moments of darkness and desperation? How to make art in times of war, destruction, violence, anger, hate, resentment? How to continue working – as an artist – and in doing so, avoid falling into the traps of facts, journalisms and comment?These are the introductory questions **Thomas Hirschhorn** raises in the exhibition *Fake it, Fake it – till you Fake it*, on view at **Gladstone Gallery** until March 2.

In 1971 American artist Chris Burden performed his famous Shoot piece, having his friend actually shoot him with a gun on his arm. As an electric shaker of human conscience, during the years of the conflict between the US and Vietnam, Burden questioned what it meant to make and witness an act of violence. If you physically punch or hit someone, you can see the consequences both on that body and within your own. What happens to our perceptions when an image of violence is mediated? Does this mediation reduce the sense of responsibility for a violent act?
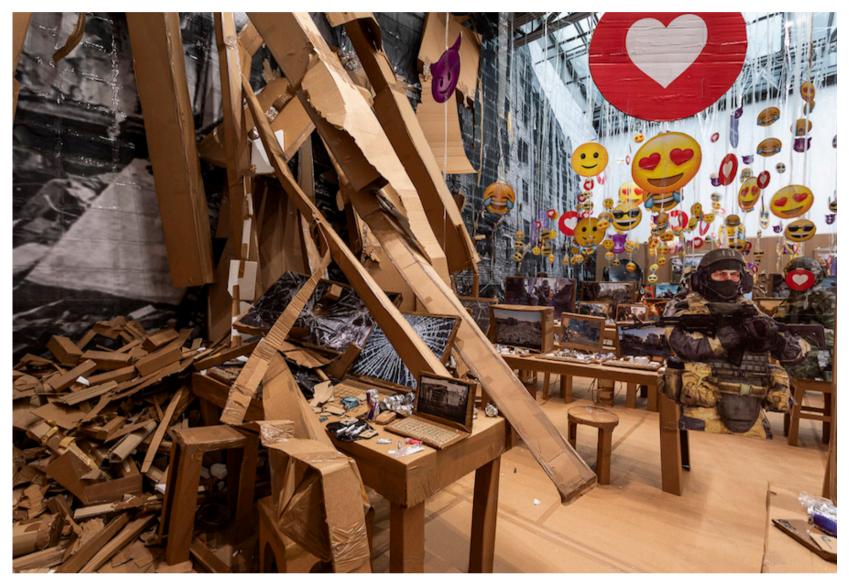
As you walk into Hirschhorn's show, you are immersed in an office-like environment: rows of desks, laptops with screens of various dimensions, charging station with multiple iPads or iPhones attached through visible cords. Everything is made out of three main materials: cardboard, styrofoam and tape. All the screens include printed images of ruins, soldiers with guns, explosions and collapsed buildings. There is a strong feeling of precarity and we are not fully conscious of what is happening. Are these images taken from reality or are they game-based simulations?

On the left wall we see a large, black and white image of a destroyed building. Throughout the exhibition, the artist conscientiously presents us with images of ruins whose specific location is difficult to identify. While all of the images are recent and mostly taken in Ukraine or Gaza, Hirschhorn places emphasis that by sharing images of ruins, one recalls a

familiarity with all kind of ruins, including some ancient ones as well. The use of cardboard makes everything look extremely fake, but at the same time real because it is physical, playing on the ambiguity between reality and fiction.

These pictures are also interspersed with images from different video games and avatar soldier silhouettes, which are hanging from the ceiling and are placed on our eye level. In these images from war video games, the figures and aesthetic imitate scenarios that appear to be war, lying in the intersection between 'real' and 'virtual' while attempting to simulate 'real war.'

Back in 2006, the great photographic duo **Adam Broomberg** and **Oliver Chanarin**, questioned how the status of the 'real' was affected by its documentation. In their work titled Chicago, reflecting on the symbolic and real representation of a territory, they presented images of an artificial city in the Negev desert, built by the Israeli army in the early 1980s with the aim of creating the most realistic possible scenario for training Israeli special forces.

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As reported by The New York Times, the belief that videogames may get people used to the idea of war has already been established. In 2002 the US Army collaborated with major videogame developer to make its own first-person-shooter franchise to attract new potential recruits. And it was a success.

Furthering the question of how our experience of reality is conditioned by its simulation, Hirschhorn adds another level of analysis. If today artificial intelligence provides increasingly precise reconstructions of reality, what is at stake is not only the weight of images as documents, but reality itself and our human capabilities. *"We are talking about artificial intelligence, but why not about artificial willpower, artificial hopes, artificial resistance, artificial intuition, and why not also artificial vision? The vision which only our own eyes can see? Never give up human competences other than, intelligence, in order to escape robotic control."*

Today's incessant flow of violent images has the effect to numb us rather than awake our empathy?
Hirschhorn emphasizes the fragility of our present condition: sitting in front of our laptops with our fake credit cards, bamboozled, addicted to exciting substances like Red Bull, coke or cigarettes, perhaps to compensate for our loss of touch with a reality that becomes increasingly rarefied. A reality becoming light, like the fan that blows the different emoji faces hanging from the ceiling. Our emotions and reality become light as styrofoam, banalized and rendered empty. Every action loses its weight, including violence.

Already in 1994, the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper proposed the establishment of a license for those who worked in television: a provocation through which the philosopher highlighted the risks of television as an instrument of power, capable of manipulating individuals, influencing their behavior and consumption and creating dependency. Above all, Popper spoke of the risk of producing conformist and passive individuals therefore posing a threat to democracy.

"To work in 'the real world' for 'the real world' is the commitment. I want to insist on the importance of material decision in its plastic dimensions. Silicon valley statement fake it till u make it. I include myself in this cliché-credo, are we not all trying to do so? I too, want to fake it so much so long and far, that things don't lie anymore. Because fake it's not the problem. Lying is the problem. And I do not want to lie, I do not want things to lie." Through his monumental precarious sculpture, Hirschhorn considerswhat artistic form can counter the influence and complicity of digital consumerism and the utopian claim of artificial intelligence.

Thomas Hirschhorn: "Fake it, Fake it – till you Fake it."
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