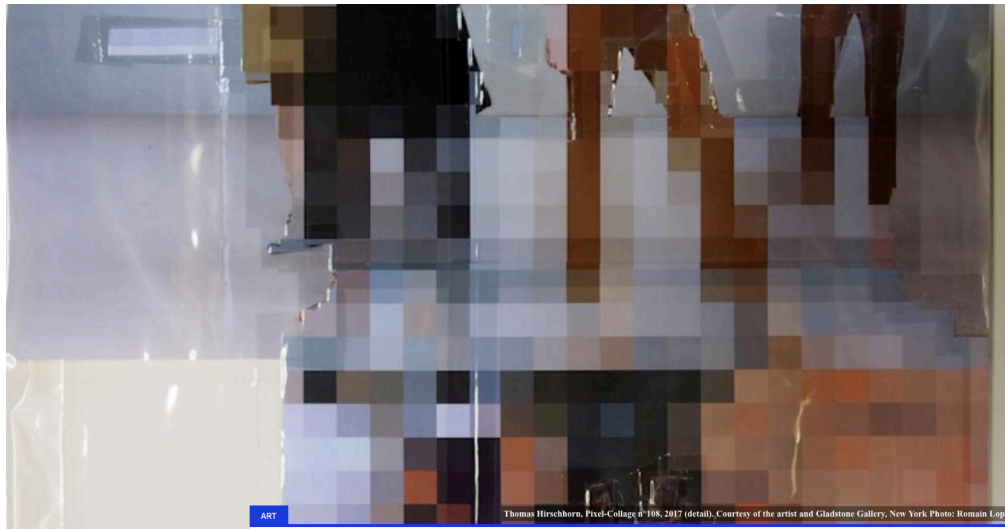


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Hettie Judah, "Thomas Hirschhorn's Pixilated Images Don't Obscure the Horrors of Conflict," Garage, October 30, 2017

GARAGE



Thomas Hirschhorn's Pixilated Images Don't Obscure the Horrors of Conflict

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"To pixilate is always an authoritarian act." Thomas Hirschhorn's characteristically provocative new work applies an all-too-familiar digital filter to probe our tolerance for two starkly opposed varieties of image.

"I have to look with my own eyes and think with my very own brain," says Thomas Hirschhorn. Brainwork has been a career-long interest for the Swiss artist; Hirschhorn's previous projects have included the production of vast environments intended to promote discussion of on thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Antonio Gramsci. For his new exhibition at New York's Gladstone Gallery, however, the work that Hirschhorn wants us to contemplate can claim no such distinguished authorship.

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De-Pixelation addresses the activities of censors that mask images of human violence with obscuring patterns of squares or digital blurring. Whether undertaken by the state, the press, or social media, says Hirschhorn: "to pixelate is always an authoritarian act." In his *Pixel Collage* works, the artist uses appropriated imagery to bring together two distinct aesthetic systems: the banal perfection of glossy magazine ads and the horrifying online reportage of the dead and injured in conflict zones. But there's a twist, of course. The portions of the collages that Hirschhorn obscures are those drawn from the ads; those he leaves untouched are the records of violence.

While pixelation is nominally a protective gesture, Hirschhorn reads it as insidious. Whether it's concealing fake news or masking the full facts, he sees this widespread practice as contributing to a post-truth culture. The general acceptance of the pixelated imagery also suggests complicity; the censor protects us from disturbing imagery, and in accepting the masked version of events, we permit ourselves to be infantilized, placed at a distance from reality. It is this distance that Hirschhorn aims to dissolve.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Pixel-Collage n°97*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York Photo: Romain Lopez

Because they draw on the palette of the concealed image, censors' pixels have an intense suggestive power. For Hirschhorn they are a literal work of abstraction, transforming an existing image into something non-specific. Pixelation sets the mind spinning: "It has the phenomenon of pushing the eyes to the borders, seeking information," says the artist. Hirschhorn is also interested in the authenticity associated with the act of obscuring a photograph or video in this way. While they provoke a horrifying fantasy, the pixels simultaneously suggest that the image needs to be concealed *because* it is a faithful record. In this era of fake news, the pixelator somehow plays both sides: on the one hand announcing that they are possessed of the facts (the image), but on the other, refusing to reveal them.

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Hirschhorn admits that the *Pixel Collage* works are "difficult." They're intended to challenge the association of truth with censorship, as well as the unquestioning acceptance of compromised images. "I must see everything in the world today," says Hirschhorn, "and I'm fighting with my tool, which is art, collage." That 'fight' has been taking place within the art world as well as outside of it: over two years of working on the collages, the artist has encountered plenty of objections to exhibiting them. "I had to push this work because nobody did it for me," he explains. He has, however, managed to show elements of the series at a dozen locations, from Art Basel to the Aarhus Kunsthall in Denmark.

The Gladstone Gallery exhibition marks the culmination of the project. Over the course of two years, Hirschhorn has made 121 collages: a body of works ranging in dimensions from magazine to billboard scale that he now considers substantial enough to have an impact. For the artist, the initial pushback that he received was a sign that he was producing something potentially transformative "I am not surprised; each artwork is received with resistance," he says. "I the artist also must resist; I am very happy that I can push myself."



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Pixel-Collage n°106*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York Photo: Romain Lopez

Of course, war photography and fashion imagery already co-exist on the pages of newspapers and online. In literally placing both within the same image, Hirschhorn forces what Arthur Koestler termed *bisociation*: a mental association between two elements from apparently unrelated fields. It forces the consideration of a link between, say, West European and US American consumption of luxury goods, and the deaths that have accompanied the American-led military intervention in Iraq. Hirschhorn is not the only artist to

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have explored such territory: Martha Rosler's series *Bringing the War Home* (1967–72) was created during the US military intervention in Vietnam, and featured violent imagery from war reports collaged into glossy interior shoots from magazines.

Like Rosler, Hirschhorn addresses the way we consume (or refuse to consume) images of conflict. In accepting pixelated images uncritically there is a suggestion that we are acquiescing to the activities of the censor. We internalize the idea that we don't want to see these violent images—we fear the friction they might create in our passage through social media, or the upset they might cause us when eating dinner in front of the news. In pixelating the advertising photo specifically, Hirschhorn nudges the association between capitalism and conflict a step further: "A pixelated image is always the worst thing," he explains. "If something is pixelated I immediately think it's the worst. If something is pixelated there's already a power to it."



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Pixel-Collage n°110*, 2017 (studio view). Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York
Photo: Romain Lopez

[Thomas Hirschhorn De-Pixelation](#) is on view at Gladstone Gallery, New York, from October 28 to December 22, 2017.