

BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

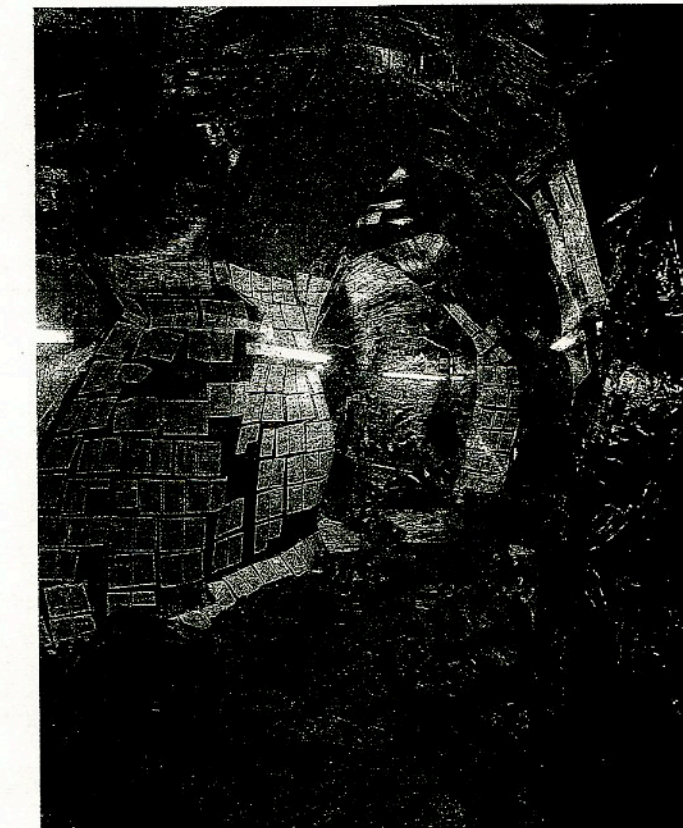
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NEW YORK

Thomas Hirschhorn at Barbara Gladstone

The installation *Cavemanman*, Paris-based Thomas Hirschhorn's first solo exhibition in New York, immersed the visitor in the environment of a fictitious hermit who has retreated from the iniquities of the world. The gallery was totally absorbed into a replica of this anonymous recluse's abode, which seemed to exist somewhere between a labyrinthine cavern and a three-dimensionalized projection of his mind—were we walking around his no-longer secret hideaway or through his very thoughts? Perhaps the distinction meant little in this instance. In any case, Hirschhorn's transformation of the white cube was brilliant in its completeness: with the simplest physical means (two-by-fours, cardboard and packing tape) he produced a complex, multilevel environment of passageways and grottoes, filled with the paraphernalia of its inhabitant. Nothing of the gallery remained unaltered, and yet we were never encouraged to lose ourselves in the setting: its artificiality remained always too apparent for any reality-effect to set in.

From this critical distance, we were invited to examine the hermit's world, or better yet, his worldview. For this cave was not simply a habitation but a kind of philosopher's study, filled with books and thoughts and dreams. The entire legacy of the Enlightenment's belief in human liberation was on display, from Hume and Rousseau through the critical theorists of the last century. Sometimes these volumes were connected via mysterious wires to the bodies of mannequins—all covered in aluminum foil—as if in a desperate attempt to directly transmit this knowledge. The great heritage, which the outside world has implicitly abandoned (at least in the mind of our hermit), has been reduced to its most basic assertion, repeated like a mantra in spray paint on the walls of one rear grotto: "1 Man = 1 Man." It is a claim for human equality, but also perhaps an echo of Bertolt Brecht's early play, *Mann ist Mann*, which captured the dehumanizing qualities of modern life and



Thomas Hirschhorn: View of *Cavemanman*, 2002, cardboard, packing tape, aluminum foil, mixed mediums; at Barbara Gladstone.

its reduction of human uniqueness to standardized units of labor power.

Hirschhorn's work has often taken the critical power of leftist thought as a theme, most recently in his *Bataille Monument*, exhibited last summer at Documenta 11. Here, however, he cast a more wary eye on the retreat of such theory from a direct engagement with the world; if he was obviously sympathetic to the hermit's embrace of human emancipation, he also seemed determined to assert the real limits of the latter's melancholic abandonment of action in the larger realm of human affairs. Throughout the installation, monitors showed video footage of the cave paintings at Lascaux. According to one influential interpretation, these Paleolithic images of bison and deer were meant to invoke a magical means of control over a nature as yet unsubordinated to human need. The books and photocopies within *Cavemanman* seemed to have an analogous function: they were talismans through which

the hermit meant to assert his command over a world again seemingly out of rational control—the global space of triumphant capitalism, with its war of all against all.

Hirschhorn's hermit dreamed of a place outside that worldwide net of domination, but as our itinerant through his sanctuary revealed, there is no possible "outside." Like the breath of tourists which has begun to destroy Lascaux's fragile murals, our footsteps within the cardboard-and-tape cavern gradually mangled the careful construction, leading up to its ultimate dismantling.

—Tom McDonough