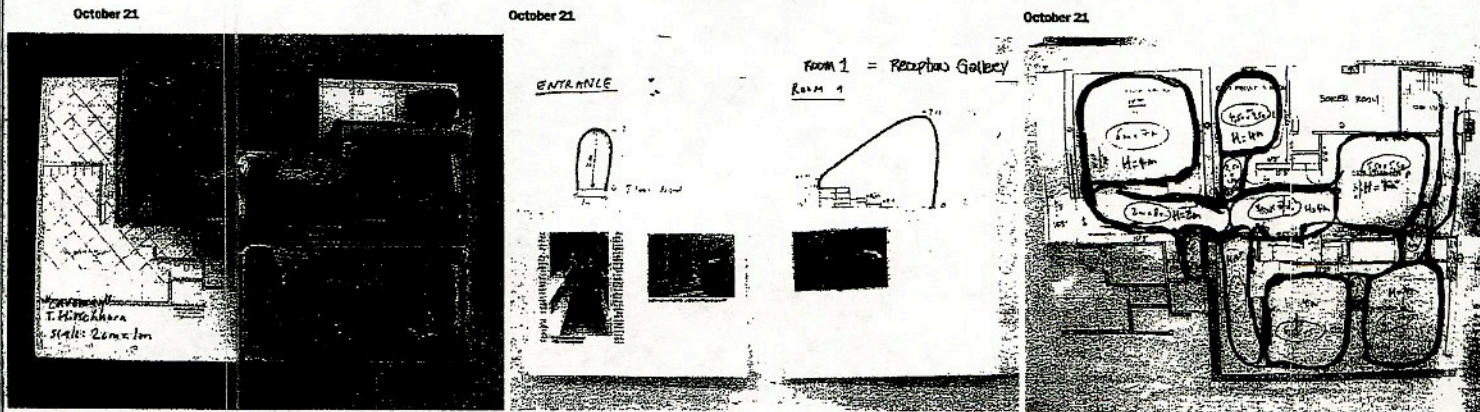


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On the heels of his sprawling *Bataille Monument*, realized for Documenta 11, THOMAS HIRSCHHORN made his Manhattan gallery debut last fall with *Cavemanman*. MICHAEL WILSON paid a visit to the site as the Swiss artist's modern-day cardboard-and-packing-tape Lascaux took shape.

CAVES OF NEW YORK

THE PROPOSAL SEEMS, AT FIRST, LUDICROUSLY AMBITIOUS.

Put forth in a fax headed PRE-PROJECT <<CAVEMAN>>, it outlines, in a child-like but unambiguous hand, Thomas Hirschhorn's intention to transform Barbara Gladstone Gallery into a network of caves. On second read, certain material aspects—the use of timber, cardboard, and packing tape, for example—assert themselves. The idea is at least economically feasible, if still a vast undertaking. And although Hirschhorn's plan omits illustrations and solid technical details, it does establish a narrative context: The caves have been home to a reclusive philosopher who has withdrawn from the outside world in order to confront his all-consuming preoccupation with the achievement of equality "between all human beings, all over the world." It is August 22, 2002; on November 2, *Cavemanman* will open to the public.

A first visit to the installation-in-progress, ten days before its unveiling, reveals an irregular wooden framework extending throughout the gallery's five interconnected rooms. Lines of blue tape mark out a crooked path, while a roughly drawn plan and small tabletop model give some indication of how completely invasive this structure will become. A collage of images clipped from books and magazines depicting a domestic interior studded with bizarre decorations alongside a series of pictures showing caves from around the world provide initial clues as to Hirschhorn's inspiration. The constant whine of drills and electric screwdrivers wielded by a team of a half-dozen technicians makes conversation next to impossible, and the fibrous haze and sweetish smell of sawdust fill the air.

When the towering, genial Hirschhorn arrives, he is accompanied by a mountain of additional material, most of which is wrapped in black plastic and piled up like so much garbage. There are also boxes of books (both real

and fabricated on a comically giant scale), fluorescent lighting tubes, mannequins and dolls wrapped in aluminum foil, empty soda and beer cans, TVs and VCRs, a couple of beds... Hirschhorn's catchphrase is "more is more": "I like to use 'too many' things," he says, "so it's impossible to stand back. I brought everything with me except the wood; my assistant and I made everything in my studio in Paris over the three months before the show. I like to bring stuff with me so that there's no going back."

To a large extent, Hirschhorn's use of "poor" materials and nonspecialist techniques defeats a process-based reading of the genesis of his work. The construction time demanded by a project such as *Cavemanman* is related almost exclusively to its epic scale. Though the placement of objects and images within the larger piece is determined almost entirely in advance, the exact form of any given feature is more or less arbitrary ("improvised" might suggest an absorption in the subtleties of texture or shape that the artist regards as simply irrelevant). "It's not really important exactly where things end up," Hirschhorn confirms. "It's just important that they are there." He characterizes his work as "sculpture," as opposed to "installation," claiming to prefer its slightly anachronistic ring and its broader accessibility as a term (Gilbert & George have long used the same word for comparable reasons in their poker-faced championing of "art for all"). He has also used the term "display," a hangover from his training in graphic design as well as a reflection of his tendency to think from two dimensions into three. Hirschhorn reserves his greatest admiration for effigies and banners made anonymously for parades or political demonstrations, "work made through engagement."

But despite his alliance with an activist's disregard for the "history of art and all that shit," Hirschhorn has his forerunners. In these pages,

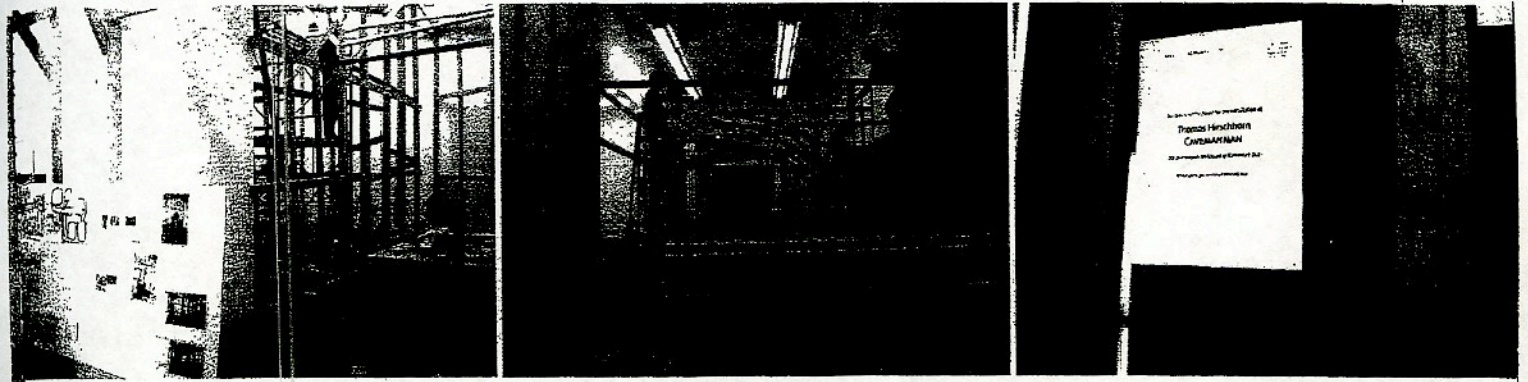
This page and throughout, construction photos: Kathleen Oginski.

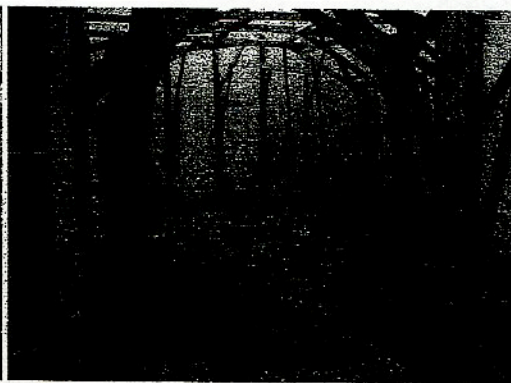
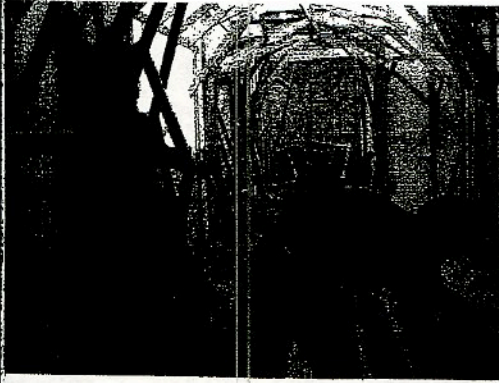
Opposite page: Thomas Hirschhorn, *Cavemanman*, 2002. Installation view, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

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A Guide to the Contemporary Communication
 W. David Martin

THE EXECUTIVE WRITINGS AND SPEECHES
 OF MATTHEW LUTHER KING, JR.

THE GREAT SPEECHES

CHALLENGES WARREN BELMONT

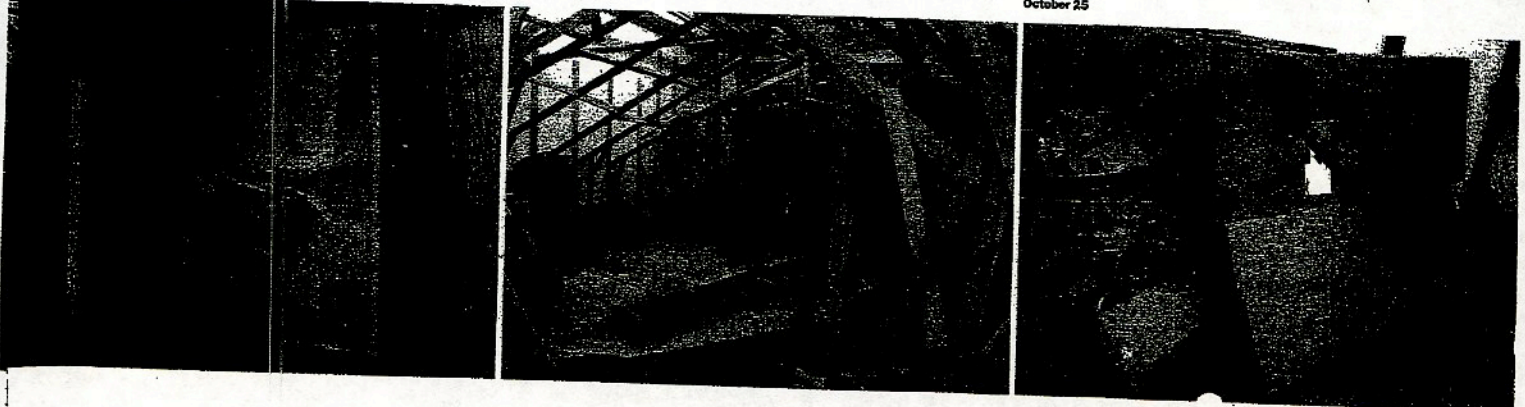
BRUNNEN, ST. LOUIS

Thomas Buschhorn, C. Vermaaten,
 2002

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Benjamin H.D. Buchloh has cited Joseph Beuys's expanded notion of sculpture as a material precedent and the post-Minimalist canon of Michael Asher, Dan Graham, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Robert Smithson as theoretical models. Hirschhorn himself has celebrated an array of cultural heroes in his *Altars*, *Kiosks*, and *Monuments*, impoverished commemorations of intellectual achievement that solicit ungoverned interaction through their public placement. A series of street shrines and slipshod shacks, they reveal Hirschhorn as a fan (rather than necessarily a disciple or even a student) of, among others, Spinoza, Deleuze, and Bataille.

When criticized for the at once overtly pedagogical and frustratingly inconclusive use he appears to make of such intellectual figures,

Hirschhorn denies even attempting to detail the essence or influence of any particular ideology or moral position. He admits the impossibility of outsmarting the tightly wound logic of Capital but does not see his approach as pessimistic or cynical. In offering up libraries of dense theoretical texts without condescending to explain his motivations, justify his particular choices, or provide any real commentary or guidance, what Hirschhorn communicates has more to do with disseminating and celebrating a spirit of active inquiry than with any genuine hope that the circumstances might be conducive to understanding the ideas at hand. As he once told Daniel Birnbaum, "I don't want to be didactic."

For all the multidirectional complexity of Hirschhorn's thought—Birnbaum remarks on its "frenetic pace and free-associative serendipity"—the artist does not consider his task to approximate that of the researcher. "I'm not serious in that sense," he admits. "I try to do things without using my head. I'm not trying to be stupid, naive, or intuitive; I am simply interested in praxis." Is *Cavemanman* himself closer to the model the artist invokes? "He's just someone taking time out," shrugs Hirschhorn. "It's true that I can't think of him as an artist because I need to be free to come up with appropriate forms—'stupid' forms that are sculptural but not bound up with the history of art—but he's not a historian or a scientist. The cave is not a laboratory; still, he is curious."

Thus Hirschhorn's aim in *Cavemanman* is to create an archetype, a merely sufficient approximation and a blatantly artificial one at that, rather than to reproduce an actual location. "I wanted to make a space in which

it was possible to feel outside of the real," he explains, "and I thought of a cave." In preparation for *Bataille Monument*, 2002 (a project for Documenta 11 that saw him enlist local help to construct a combined exhibition space, snack bar, library, workshop, and television studio on the lawn between two housing projects in a predominantly Turkish section of Kassel), Hirschhorn visited the caves at Lascaux. "This gave me the idea of making an archaeological cave," he says, "but I was also thinking about tunnel systems in Switzerland—manufactured spaces. I was interested in making a hidden space that awaits discovery; a space in development—

For all the multidirectional complexity of Hirschhorn's thought, the artist does not consider his task to approximate that of the researcher. "I'm not serious in that sense," he admits. "I try to do things without using my head."

indefinite, perhaps infinite—and a space in which someone has been living." Hirschhorn has drawn on the French caves before: In

1997 he made *Lascaux III*, a multisite "sequel" to the original that invaded a number of sites in Bordeaux, including a shopping mall and a private apartment. Located somewhere between teasing simulacrum and ahistorical formal "variation," its intentions were relatively straightforward. He has built other "historical" sites, including *Archéologie of Engagement* at the Museu d'Art Contemporani in Barcelona in 2001. This project saw him undertake a kind of dig in order to excavate the history of political commitment. But Hirschhorn has firmly positioned the domain of *Cavemanman*, in spite of its Platonic heritage, as a contemporary space, with posters, not paintings, adorning its walls. Conscious of the echo of Al Qaeda's subterranean complex, he was also intrigued to discover an article in the *New York Post* about an Ecuadoran immigrant living in a cave in Upper Manhattan.

Three days before the opening, as the cardboard and tape completely obscure Gladstone's white walls, Hirschhorn reflects on his approach to "the site" in general. "An 'ideal' situation is unimportant," he insists. "Here, I had the idea of making a nonhierarchical, nonarchitectural space. Then I had to place different elements inside—elements related to the content of the work, not to its given environment. I wanted to transform the gallery entirely, but only in order to obligate the visitor to spend time with the work." Hirschhorn has no interest in creating atmosphere, nor is he preoccupied with an oppositional or critical stance in relation to the immediate surroundings. "The work is not site-specific," he asserts. "It's adapted to fit the site." Hirschhorn finds that this methodology also allows him to assess the extent to which a given work seems "mentally transportable"—whether

or not its central premise holds when extracted from its physical shell. *Cavemanman* was and is such a work, bound to its location for now, but not to the exclusion of possible variations elsewhere. For Hirschhorn the site represents a variable to be considered alongside many others, not a target at which to take critical aim. The gallery setting is a controlled and predictable one, and *Cavemanman* is designed, unapologetically, with this in mind.

Hirschhorn is adamant that his work should never be seen as intimidating ("I don't want to impress—my work is big, but on a human scale"), so we'll simply call the completed *Cavemanman* "immersive." At the preview

the night before the opening, it alternately provokes reverent hands-off inspection and enthusiastic prodding and poking. A smartly dressed

older woman removes her shoes in order to avoid getting her heels stuck in the cardboard floor, while another visitor applauds Hirschhorn's juxtaposition of posters depicting Che Guevara and Leonardo DiCaprio wearing similar expressions. And in (probably inevitable) contravention of the artist's intention that the photocopied pages pasted to the walls be registered simply as evidence of research carried out rather than plowed through conscientiously, a few visitors insist on making the attempt. "Here's chapter four!" someone shouts. "Now, where's chapter one?"

The cave is occupied by foil-covered mannequins, huddled together in groups like families of aliens straight off the mothership. The figures are connected by ropes of foil that emerge from the tops of their heads like misplaced umbilical cords to join wall-mounted "bombs"—bundles of foil-coated rods sprouting loops of colored wire that resemble homemade explosives. Each device is taped to a book whose title—they range from Adorno's *Problems of Moral Philosophy* to Stephen Engel's *The Unfinished Revolution*—promises an intellectual blast. The remaining publications from *Cavemanman*'s extensive syllabus are arranged on shelves mounted high out of reach, and the outsize mock-ups are stacked in a corner. On the walls, in addition to the texts and posters, a cluster of stock photographic images provides a visual index of contemporary industry and commerce. Here and there are piles of small "stones" arranged in imitation of makeshift Afghan chapels, while video monitors embedded in the walls show footage taken at Lascaux II (a theme-park re-creation in Montignac, France, designed to preserve the original from the ravages of tourist traffic). Black

spray paint is used to tag a bank of identical clock faces with the names of a dozen different cities—CARACAS, TORONTO, LIVERPOOL, JAKARTA—and to inscribe over and over again the hopeful mantra $X\ MAN = I\ MAN$, as if mere repetition were sufficient to make the call for equality real.

There are a few minor deviations from Hirschhorn's original design: The garbage cans have been transformed from silver to gold, there are more bombs than envisaged, and the beds remain in storage. "I like to make these kinds of decisions very quickly," the artist says, "and I like the idea that 'better is worse.' You just need to find a reason that

Hirschhorn's aim in *Cavemanman* is to create an archetype rather than to reproduce an actual location. "I wanted to make a space in which it was possible to feel outside of the real," he explains, "and I thought of a cave."

something is OK, then you can't do it better." In conversation with Francesco Bonami, Hirschhorn coins the slogan "energy yes, quality no" to describe this particular (anti-)aesthetic.

The tireless accumulation of material in *Cavemanman*, coupled with the artist's drive to establish links among previously unconnected or unconnectable information, suggests a level of commitment teetering on obsession. Perhaps the absent protagonist is not merely eccentric but actually mad, like John Nash making his paranoid collages in *A Beautiful Mind*? Hirschhorn's investment of aluminum foil with the capacity to conduct ideas, for example, feels distinctly symptomatic of a delusional state. While not dismissing such associations out of hand, he prefers to think of what has become something of a signature medium in broader terms. "I use foil because it's cheap," he says. "It's a practical, everyday material, and it's destroyed as it's used. People use it for decoration, protection, even in medicine. It's also a material one uses as a child." That final connection is refreshing indeed in the context of a project whose reception will undoubtedly be dominated by dissections of globalization or a cataloguing of man's inhumanity to man. It is also a reminder of the surprisingly personal nature of Hirschhorn's art, its resolute idiosyncrasy in the face of his increasingly international stature.

The morning after the opening finds Hirschhorn unshaven, hung over, and suitably philosophical: "People are always positive at an opening," he shrugs. "I thought it was OK, but I am always a little bit disappointed. I heard the term 'primitive' used, which I liked," he smiles. "But you have to wait a month or so for real reactions." □

Michael Wilson is a New York-based writer. (See Contributors.)

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Mischon, Caveman
New York, N.Y.