

BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Caveman's valentine

Thomas Hirschhorn goes underground at Barbara Gladstone

By Rachel Haidu

Enter the Barbara Gladstone Gallery anytime between now and Christmas and you'll find yourself immediately transported to a maze-like grotto of cardboard, packing tape and aluminum foil. For his first New York gallery show, Paris-based artist Thomas Hirschhorn has transformed Gladstone's white-walled space in a way that is completely unexpected yet strangely inviting. His *Cavemanman* imagines the contemporary dwelling of a cavemanlike recluse, a solipsist who's happiest watching videos of faux Paleolithic cave paintings and gazing at posters of teen idols plastered on the walls of his subterranean abode. Sloping, slippery floors and claustrophobically low ceilings make this labyrinthine structure terrifically disorienting.

Hirschhorn isn't after realism, though, or even spectacle, despite the fact that some will undoubtedly complain that the latter is precisely the trap into which *Cavemanman* falls. With its elaborate construction methods and the Richard Serra-esque sense of spatial bewilderment it induces, the work walks along the edge of brazen showmanship. Still, just when you think *Cavemanman* is only out to dazzle you, Hirschhorn throws in something disarmingly flat-footed, even naive, like the rallying cry *1 man = 1 man*, scrawled repeatedly across a wall, as if to lay this caveman's most pressing concern—social justice—out in the open, for all to see.

For Hirschhorn's isolated protagonist, ideals of equality or democracy can only remain completely hypothetical. But, with the erosion of the democratic process in elections around the globe, they have become almost as abstract for the rest of us. Today's viewers may consider themselves too ironic for his idiosyncratic brand of idealism, or may impute such cynicism to the

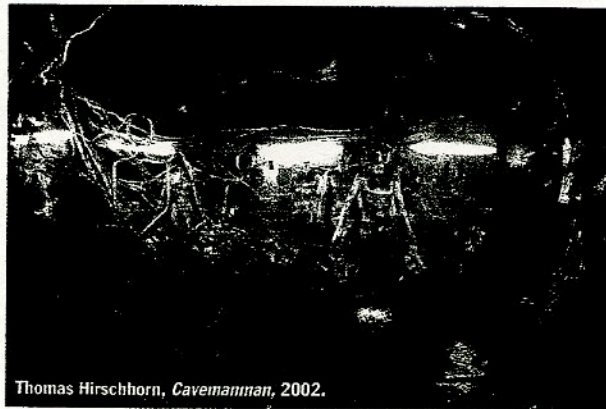
artist himself. Hirschhorn's demand that we reconsider now-banal catchwords and apparently obsolete concepts, however, comes across with great force and wit. By wryly collapsing conventional oppositions—between primitive and urban, private and public—*Cavemanman* forces ideas like democracy and equality out of their usual rhetorical hiding places.

Hirschhorn has described his cardboard cave as "a world without

sociability he can't possibly be living, so different from the rest of us?"

Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* (shown last summer at Documenta 11)—both an homage to and an offering of the work of the revolutionary early-20th century French theorist Georges Bataille—displayed a similar mix of passionate idealism and sly wit. Set in a lower-income neighborhood miles from Documenta's other exhibition sites, it featured a café, a

cal utopianism, the piece worked, both as an exercise in totally free access to information and a provocation aimed at the heart of social inequality. Information is a lot less accessible in *Cavemanman*, but Hirschhorn's new project is just as provocative. "I'm not afraid to be weak," he explained during the show's installation, speaking of the direct, even crude symbolism at play in *Cavemanman*; would that other artists were as confident.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Cavemanman*, 2002.

form, without hierarchy." Even the way that a gallery space typically functions is turned inside out: Text and images taped to the walls appear to invite contemplation, only to throw your desire right back at you. They're always too far away, too high up on the wall, or too repetitive to be really taken in. *Cavemanman* also subtly taps into the rhythms of daily life. Take, for example, the empty soda cans clustered near a group of overflowing gold-colored wastebaskets. According to Hirschhorn, that's what people do: They leave trash near a full receptacle, if only out of some vague sense of civility. But the same act, when carried out by someone living in seclusion, raises a broader question: Is Hirschhorn's caveman, imitating a

library, an archive, a video and television screening room and a sculpture of a tree trunk that became a kind of jungle gym for local kids. Hirschhorn built everything—again, using cardboard and packing tape—with the (paid) help of the area's mainly Turkish-speaking inhabitants, who also manned and maintained his installation-art compound. As Documenta's spectators cum-urban-tourists browsed in the copious library, read about Bataille in the archive and watched TV with the local staff, typically obscured hierarchies—between center and periphery, client and service provider, art and everyday life—were made starkly apparent. Despite, or perhaps because of, what seemed like its radi-