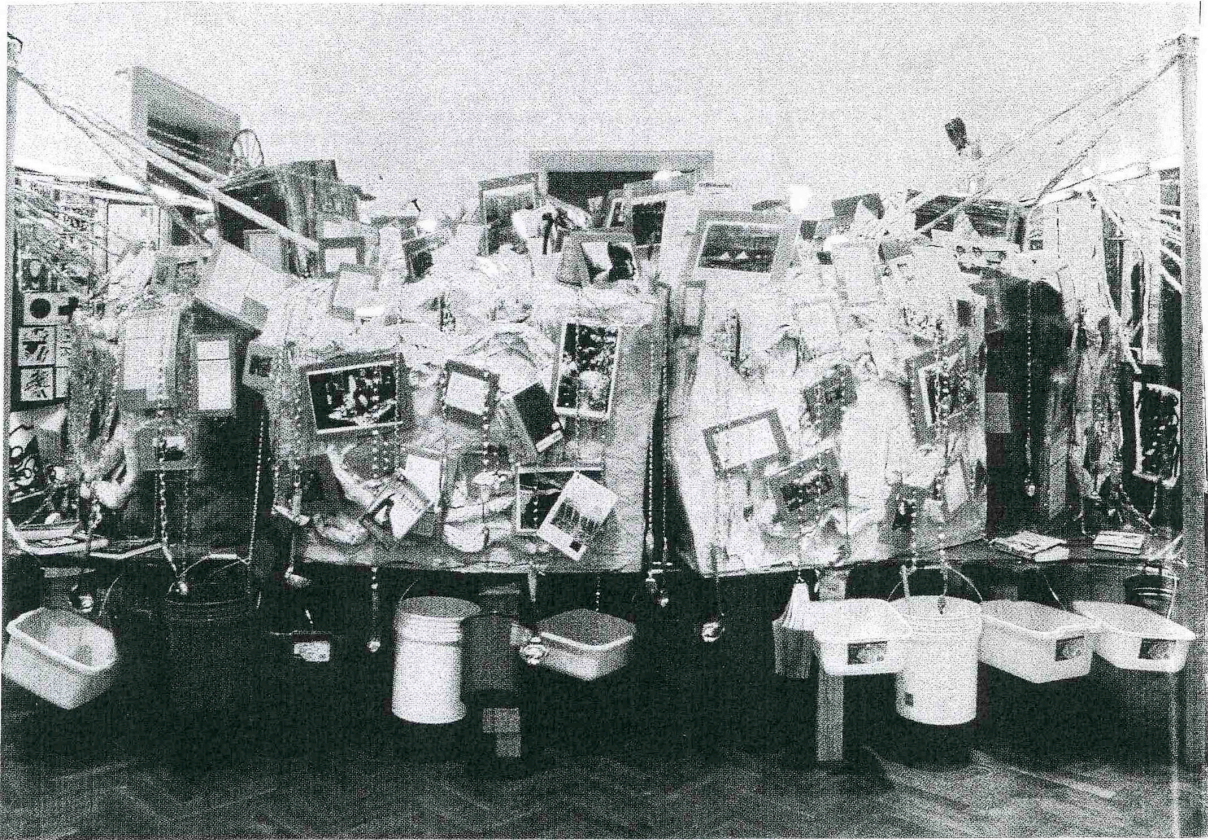


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Snodgrass, Susan, "The Rubbish Heap of History," *Art in America*, May 2000



## The Rubbish Heap of History

*In vast installations constructed from throwaway materials, Thomas Hirschhorn critiques modern globalism and the consumerist excesses that accompany it.*

**BY SUSAN SNODGRASS**

**M**y appreciation of the work of Swiss-born, Paris-based Thomas Hirschhorn has evolved over time, increasing with extended viewing and the intellectual engagement it elicits. His dense, sprawling installations confront, even assault, the viewer with difficult ethical issues related to political injustice and various moral dilemmas. These themes Hirschhorn scripts in extravagant, large-scale environments, chaotic universes that interweave vernacular materials, recycled images and disparate social phenomena.

Equally challenging is Hirschhorn's in-your-face, art-school esthetic, or rather antiesthetic, with its preference for the purposefully crude. Aggregating readymades and makeshift sculptural forms fabricated from lowly scraps of cardboard, packing tape, plywood, cellophane and aluminum foil, he undermines art's visual seduction and aura.

Conceptually and materially embedded within Hirschhorn's politically charged spaces is a critique of capitalism, in particular the way its systems govern and mediate reality. His individual targets are many, as he made abundantly clear in two recent installations, one at the Art Institute of Chicago, the other at the Renaissance Society. This two-part show, co-organized by the exhibiting institutions, marks the artist's first solo museum presentation in the U.S.

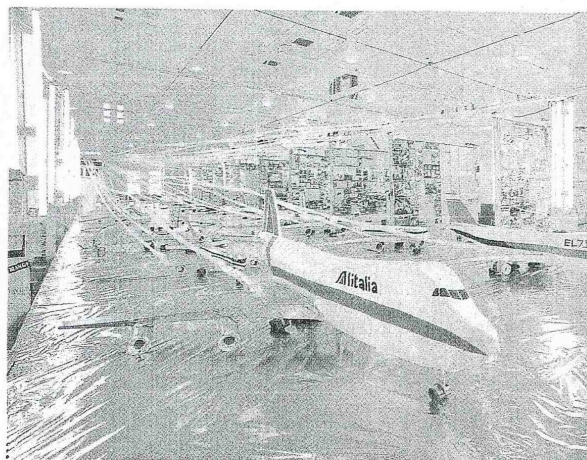
Consumption, consumerism and the universalization of commodity culture were the subjects of *Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake*, created site-specifically for the Art Institute as part of its "Focus" series. At the work's center was a giant pink cake crafted from cardboard, its surface

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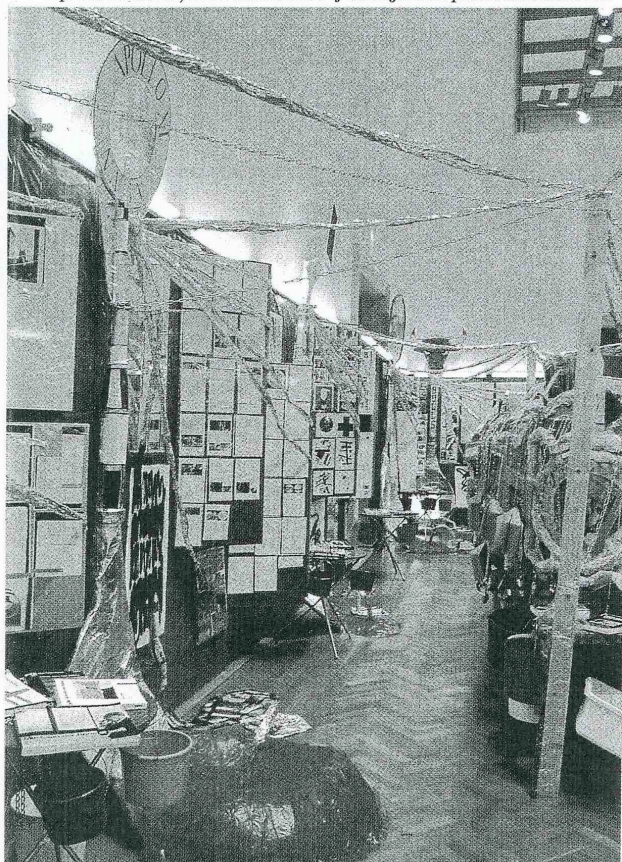
lavishly embellished with shards of mirror, photographs, books, electric candles and video monitors—all attached by means of tape or chains and bits of rope. Statistical charts on poverty and the distribution of world income abutted magazine and newspaper images of famine, war and obesity, while video images of gourmet cooking shows and toiling agrarian workers flickered on the monitors' blue screens. Books such as *Your Money or Your Life: The Tyranny of Global Finance* and *Ethnicity: Racism, Class and Culture* were included to buttress this commentary on globalization and economic disparity, as were a series of plastic buckets and ladles that dangled from the base of this grossly hypertrophic treat.

Twelve colossal spoons, made from cardboard wrapped in aluminum foil, were placed vertically at regular intervals around the periphery of the museum's classical white space, whose walls were cloaked in blue plastic. Each spoon was a memorial to what the artist has termed "a failed utopian ideal," as embodied in a broad range of individuals and cultural artifacts. Depicted in effigy were Friedrich Nietzsche, Rosa Luxemburg, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Kasimir Malevich, whose various modes of moral and political idealism collectively confronted the political extremism of Communist China and Hitler's "Degenerate



*World Airport, 1999/2000, painted cardboard airplanes on plastic-covered tabletop runway, with photo-and-text laden kiosks around the perimeter; at the Renaissance Society, Chicago. Photo Tom van Eynde.*

*Two views of Thomas Hirschhorn's installation Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake, 2000. Opposite, "cake wedges" decorated with chained books, ladles, photographs, plastic pails and video monitors. Below, Apollo XI memorial (at left, in foreground) surrounded by chains, aluminum foil and printed material; at the Art Institute of Chicago. Both photos Mali Anderson.*



Art" show, also commemorated. Additionally included were monuments to the Chicago Bulls, Rolex watches, guns and fashion—all presented as forms of idol and commodity worship—as well as eulogies to Venice and the Apollo space program, signifying tourism and galactic imperialism respectively. A didactic brochure stated that the spoons objectified Bertolt Brecht's well-known statement "First comes fodder, then comes morality," although their original inspiration came from 16th-century religious souvenirs commemorating the 12 apostles and, in a more recent incarnation, from those miniature memento spoons sold to tourists in airport shops. The artist's Oldenburgian translation of the miniature to the gigantic, coupled with the secularization of the sacred, located the spoons and the icons associated with them within the arenas of public spectacle and consumer culture.

Some of these lost ideals received more emphasis than others, particularly those that serve Hirschhorn's own artistic and political agenda. For example, the proto-existentialist ideas of Nietzsche, who denied universal morality, were echoed throughout the installation, as were the socialist exhortations of Luxemburg. Hirschhorn similarly aligns himself with the social utopianism of Mies van der Rohe and Malevich, but rejects belief in the transformative power of abstraction and pure form through his baroque use of banal materials and images coopted from mass culture.

The artist repeated various motifs within the work, bringing a degree of order to its apparently chaotic sprawl. Fluorescent tube lights, shattered mirrors, graffiti, print images and texts were arranged on the wall beside each spoon in nearly identical configurations; nearby, small folding tables offered books on each emblematic ideal. Spilling from the spoons onto the floor were pools of red paint, presumably representing blood, next to which were placed clusters of tools, a reference to labor (as well as to Hirschhorn's own labor-intensive practice). A network of aluminum-foil tentacles and metal chains physically connected these objects to the spoons and to the central cake, signifying capitalism's pervasive hold on the global economy, while again stressing the relationship of margins to centers, both physical and social, at issue throughout the piece.

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## Hirschhorn

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For the Renaissance Society, Hirschhorn transformed the entire gallery into an airport terminal, recalibrating his *World Airport* shown previously at the 1999 Venice Biennale. Many of the same formal elements and theoretical doctrines employed in *Jumbo Spoons* and *Big Cake* cropped up again in this installation, an acerbic take on corporate control of the global market and the information technologies that serve it. Here, too, the artist emphasized centers and borders in massive ad-hoc constructions made from both found objects and handmade forms sculpted from commonplace materials. Individual components and seemingly divergent narratives were unified, this time, by an imposing cellophane web that linked profit and human disaster.

Commanding the gallery was a monumental runway on which sat 24 oversized "model" planes, painted with the logos of various international airlines, symbols for nation-states ranging from Saudi Arabia to Azerbaijan. Spaced evenly around its perimeter were banks of fluorescent lights and several wood kiosks papered with photographs and news clippings related to regional conflicts (Kosovo, Israel, Kuwait, Afghanistan) and megacorporations (Benetton, AT&T, Coke, Microsoft, Boeing, Ford). Plywood altars to philosophers whose principles informed the more subversive content of the work (Gilles Deleuze, Benedict de Spinoza, Antonio Gramsci and, in particular, Georges Bataille) were erected in the gallery's four corners, each bedecked with these thinkers' most important books, as well as with religious texts in photocopy and giant brand-name tennis shoes (Nike, Reebok) cobbled by the artist and placed on top of the other elements. Like the utopian figures memorialized in the other installation, these philosophers were offered for our consideration, even though their placement at the margins of the installation identified them as subordinate to the forces of global industry, image production and commodification.

Hirschhorn has always combined art with political activism, first as a

**In essence, Hirschhorn creates three-dimensional collages, a practice historically associated with political polemic and protest.**

graphic designer, later as a visual artist working at public, nonart sites. In essence, he creates three-dimensional collages, a practice historically associated with political polemic, be it that of the Berlin Dadaists or the Russian Constructivists. (One is reminded of Kurt Schwitters's elaborate, room-sized accumulations or *Merzbau*.) However, Hirschhorn asserts the failure of early modernism, criticizing in particular its proponents' unwavering optimism. His skepticism is more nearly aligned, perhaps, with that of Joseph Kosuth and Hans Haacke, antiformalists who rely on archival data to expose hidden systems of manipulation and control. Obviously rejecting Conceptualism's dematerialization of form, Hirschhorn presents an esthetic of excess and ephemerality, even as he undermines the structural stability of the art object and the authority of the white cube.

The heterogeneous visual and textual elements in Hirschhorn's work are metaphors for nonrationalist forces capable of disrupting what he sees as globalization's drive to bring ever greater order and uniformity to the world in the name of profit. The artist's political position is clear. Through his own questioning he attempts to resuscitate those moral imperatives that may still prove beneficial. These works invite us to do the same, leaving their success and meaning dependent on how deeply we are willing to engage them. □

*Thomas Hirschhorn's World Airport was exhibited at the Renaissance Society [Jan. 16-Feb. 25]. Jumbo Shoes and Big Cake appeared at the Art Institute of Chicago [Jan. 23-Apr. 9].*

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