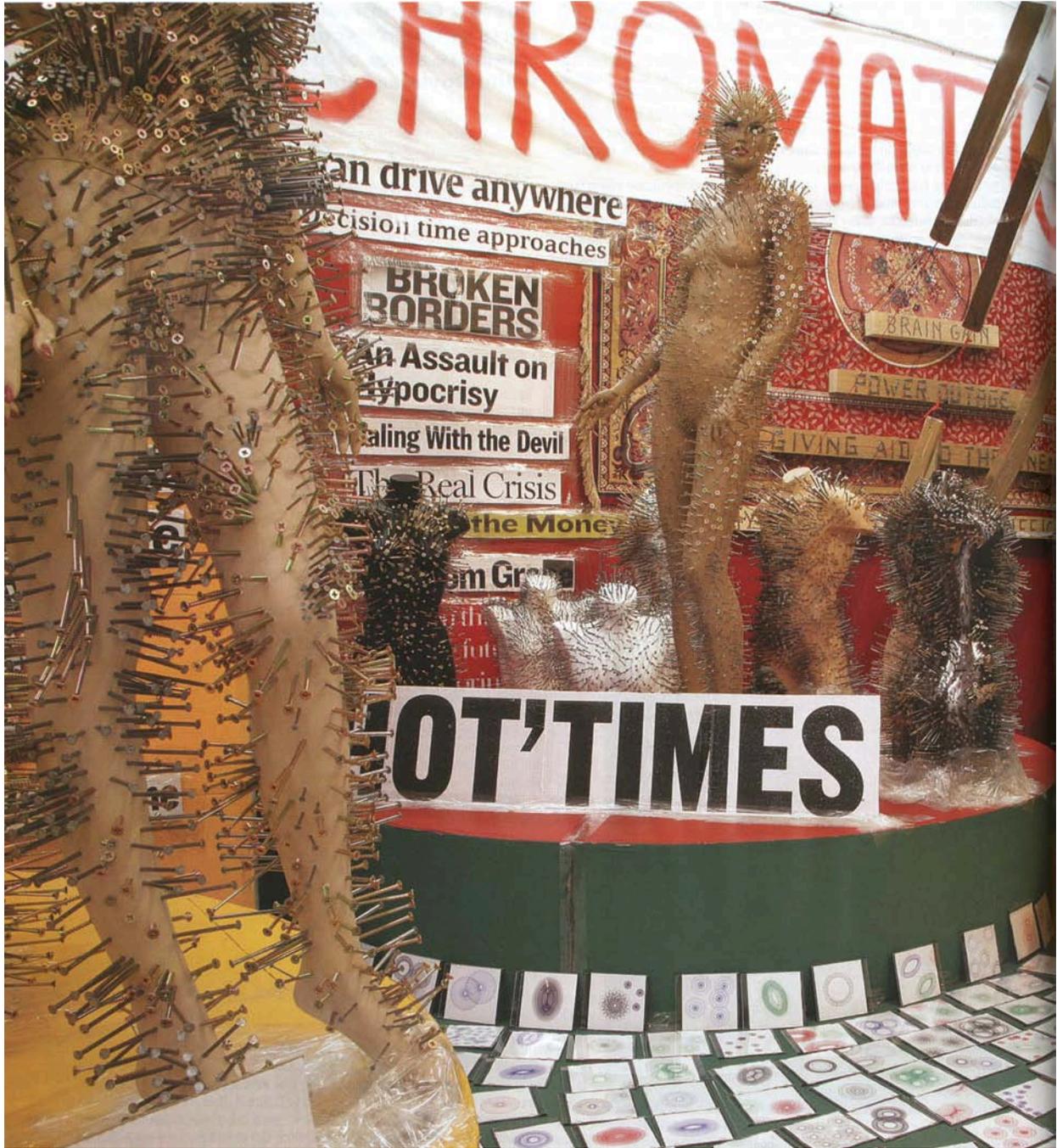


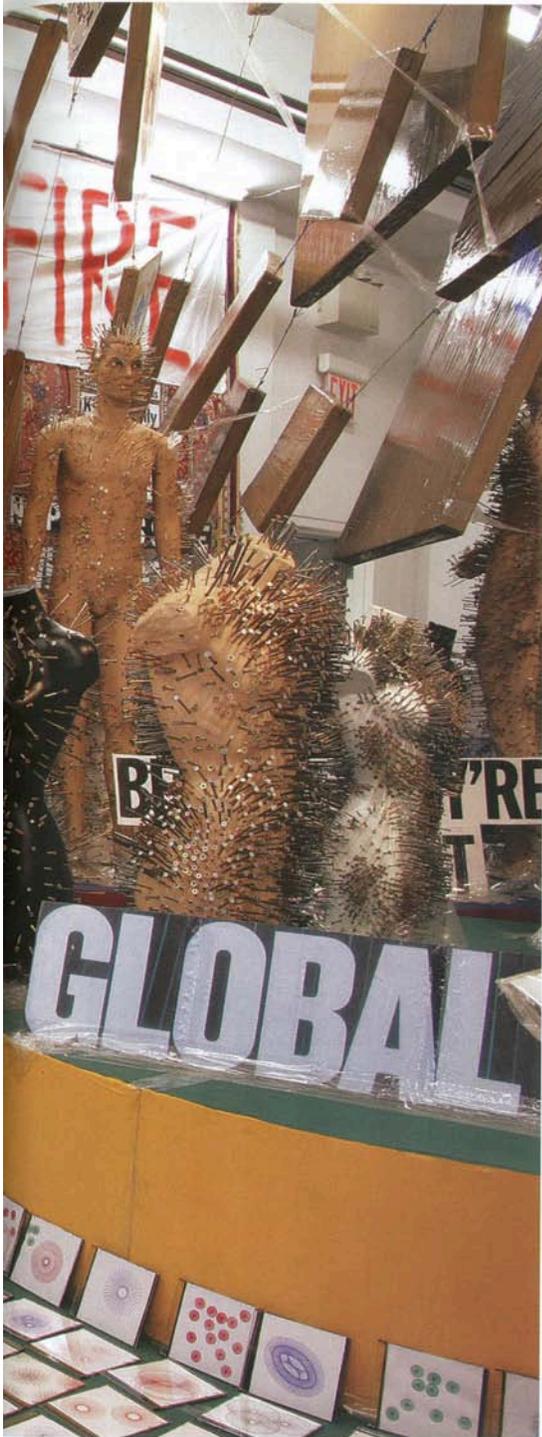
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Shock of the News

Recent exhibitions by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn probed the nearly imperceptible boundaries between Western consumerism and violent world conflict.

BY GREGORY VOLK

An unusual thing happened the second time I went to see Thomas Hirschhorn's recent exhibition at Barbara Gladstone Gallery. I entered the gallery with notebook in hand, glanced at the initial works, and was immediately confronted by a woman I'd never seen before who began venting in a tough-to-locate accent. "This exhibition," she announced, "is horrible. It is evil and sick and should not be allowed. Look at this! Heads of dead people next to pretty abstract drawings, making formalism out of suffering, designs out of death. This can't be done! The artist is a rich European who knows nothing of war, nothing of suffering. There should be an outcry. This is the worst exhibition in New York and someone should write that. This isn't an art exhibition at all but a stupid provocation and it should be shut down now!"

I silently marveled that an exhibition of contemporary art in New York could elicit such a ferocious reaction. I considered responding, something like I'd prefer to see the show in depth and then make up my own mind, but thought better of it. As she vented, I sought mental refuge in the refrain of the Phish song "Stash," "Maybe so and maybe not / Maybe so and maybe not."

Emphatically "not," actually, in retrospect, although the exhibition was disturbing, oftentimes gruesome, and hardly a show I'd like to visit with my four-year-old son, Max. Far from constituting facile, design-oriented opportunism, Hirschhorn's raucous exhibition was a complex and hard-hitting response to a time in which rampant consumerism abuts terrorism, fierce intercultural conflict and a war run increasingly amok. For those who saw Hirschhorn's previous exhibition, "Cavemanman" (2002), also at Gladstone, in which he transformed the entire gallery into an information-laden, labyrinthine series of grottoes made of plywood and cardboard, an obvious question was what he could possibly do next—how he could possibly avoid an almost inevitable letdown. The answer was this exhibition, the jam-packed, also labyrinthine "Superficial Engagement," which turned the gallery into a bizarre department store, fashion show, trade show, war zone, massive scrapbook and contemporary house of horrors, all rolled into one. Arranged as crowded tableaux that filled just about every inch of the gallery, this was an exhibition that engulfed one with its mix of burgeoning chaos and hyper precision.

According to Hirschhorn, who is Swiss but has long been based in Paris, "Superficial Engagement" connotes dealing with surface appearance, with how

View of Thomas Hirschhorn's exhibition "Superficial Engagement," 2006; at Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo David Regen.

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things really look as opposed to what they allegedly mean, because it is precisely these surface appearances that affect us on a daily basis and influence what life is like in these fractious, ultramediated times. Thus, reproduced photographs, both large and small, of mangled bodies; enlarged newspaper headlines alluding to crises; nude mannequins or parts of mannequins bristling with nails and screws; four homemade coffins (for returning American soldiers) sporting scrawled homages and messages of love; many more scrawled messages elsewhere; and various signs were basically everywhere—on platforms and in antechambers, taped or otherwise attached to the walls, suspended from the ceilings and packed into heaped-up clusters.

As is usual for Hirschhorn, everything was willfully trashy, but spectacularly and elaborately so. He has long been deeply antagonistic to fine-art preciousness, and to museum or gallery esthetics that emphasize art as something rare, exquisite and remote. Instead, he habitually uses common stuff (cardboard, tape, old newspapers, hardware store supplies, aluminum foil) and routine procedures (downloading, photocopying, taping, writing by hand). As many commentators have noted, this entails gathering the flotsam and refuse of a heated, increasingly international consumerism, which in its demand for the new and improved is cramming the globe with the old and discarded. Hirschhorn also reveals a radically democratic and antihierarchical streak, an understanding that a cathartic and challenging art can be made out of things so familiar and ubiquitous that they normally wouldn't warrant a second thought.

Violence and war were pervasive themes in the installation, but always mixed with allusions to commercial design (Hirschhorn briefly studied graphic design before he became an artist), snappy advertising, blaring newspaper headlines and even the eye-catching displays in ritzy department-store windows. Appearing throughout the exhibition in a variety of formats were printed images culled from the Internet showing severed heads and mangled bodies (presumably those of suicide bombers, their victims or the victims of war). Provocatively juxtaposed to this shocking array were photocopies of the intricate, geometric, largely abstract drawings by the eccentric Swiss artist, healer and mystic Emma Kunz (1892-1963). These embody visionary consciousness and, according to Kunz, contain overarching information and secrets about the world. (Her drawings were shown to considerable acclaim in 2005 at the Drawing Center in New York.) Hirschhorn seeds his exhibitions with pertinent texts that take quite some time to read. Included here was a mini-treatise on Kunz, detailing her powers of divination, the role and meaning of her drawings, and the profound effect she had on others. Many of the photocopied images—both the Kunzes and the war images—were quite large, like posters, while others were much smaller, like postcards; they were attached to various walls, arrayed in horizontal rows or displayed in diptych format on individual cardboard or wood panels. In one instance, Kunz's drawings were used as fake CD cases, fusing transcendently inclined abstract art and commercial pop culture.

As the enraged woman correctly observed, an odd formalism governed those images arranged as diptychs. The shapes, colors and patterns of Kunz's drawings corresponded to those of the photographs, making for a weirdly elegant mix of esoteric geometries and raw photojournalism, for instance a diamond-shaped diagram and a gaping wound in someone's torso. Combining elements of modernist abstraction, graphic design and rough politics is a long-standing part of Hirschhorn's practice, and something he addressed in a text titled "Letter to Thierry" in 1994,¹ in which he surprisingly declared that he is a "formalist" with an interest in beauty and truth—it's just that his formalism constantly careens into politics, battling ideologies and, in his terms, "the human condition." Still, like so much else in this show, the pairings were rife with complexities and ambiguities. The grainy photographic reproductions could be seen as Hirschhorn's version of high art, one of his raids on good taste and mores. At the same time, they recalled glossy, if distressed, magazine ads, or the homemade signs held aloft by protesters at demonstrations. Hirschhorn excels at creating such mixtures, which ultimately question how information is packaged and conveyed, who is in charge of it and for what purpose.

Much of the exhibition was indeed overwhelming, and with each foray through the gallery one discovered more and more. Sheer surfeit evoked the excess of information that surrounds us. So many of these objects, words and images had multiple possible meanings, some obvious, and others much more subtle. Call this Hirschhorn's endlessly allusive visual poetry. His art wallops you visually, but also works on your psyche, inspiring you to make your own connections, follow your own intuitions and shake up your own thought processes.

Consider just one of the many tableaux in the show, in which newspaper headlines, printed in large type on paper and displayed on a red wall, ratcheted everything up to emergency levels: "Decision Time Approaches," "Broken Borders," "An Assault on Hypocrisy," "The Real Crisis." Left ambiguous was what decision, which broken borders, who's being hypocritical, and what the crisis really is. Kunz's photocopied drawings, in frames wrapped with tape, were suspended overhead at angles, and seemed at once magical and explosive; below, on a shelf, were her drawings in the CD cases. On colorful, circular platforms featuring more slogans ("Hot Times," "Global Risk") were several mannequins, outfitted not with clothing but nails and screws. Even artificial bodies, when punctured like that, suggest real violence and torture, conjuring, for instance, the nails of suicide bombs. An association with Congolese Nkondi (nail fetish) sculptures, designed to ward off evil spirits and punish wrongdoers, was unavoidable, along with suggestions of Western Op art and Post-Minimalist sculpture. Throw in references to Christian martyrdom scenes—crucifixions, or Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows—as well as sadomasochistic titillation (hammers and electric screwdrivers were provided at the opening, inviting visitors themselves to drive nails or screws into wooden stumps if they wished), and you get a good idea of how fleet and wide-ranging Hirschhorn's associations are.

Without question, this was the most intense and successful exhibition yet mustered in New York in response to the Iraq War and the whole messy conflict between radical Islam and the West. Hirschhorn, however, is far too nuanced to be pinned down as a strident political artist with a clear message of protest.

Below and right, views of "Superficial Engagement," 2006. Photos David Regen, courtesy Gladstone Gallery.



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This spread, views of "Anschool II," 2005-06; at Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto. Above, Rosa Tombola, 1994, pink fabric wall covering and tables with cardboard objects against them. Below, center platform, Neighbors, 2002. All photos this spread Rita Burmester, courtesy Serralves Museum.



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Wherever he finds them, he is willing to take on, distort and transform coercive forces like Islamic fanaticism, U.S. militarism and materialist greed. In part, this installation was Hirschhorn's outsize and outlandish attempt to, if not make sense of, at least effectively address, the contemporary condition of relentless sensory bombardment—one in which "raw war" (to borrow the term from Bruce Nauman's great 1970 neon) is pictured as somehow the equivalent of consumer and entertainment culture and lifestyle concerns.

Hirschhorn's New York exhibition overlapped with his highly unorthodox survey at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art in Porto, Portugal, which featured works from 1992-2005. Titled "Anschool II," an untranslatable German-English term invented by the artist, the exhibition (a previous version of which was presented in 2005 at the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, Holland) took radical liberties with the usual look of a midcareer retrospective. Born in Bern in 1957, Hirschhorn has exhibited extensively throughout the world since his first solo show in 1986, including appearances in the Johannesburg Biennale, Sculpture Project in Münster, the Venice Biennale, the Lyon Biennale and Documenta. A number of his earlier works were borrowed for "Anschool II," but, instead of a series of discrete displays arranged chronologically, with ample room for movement and contemplation, the exhibition proliferated and advanced like a bubbling, out-of-control science experiment or some creeping fungus. It filled whole exhibition rooms, but also corridors, stairwells and windows. It was frequently impossible to tell where one work ended and another began. The artist dispensed with labels and dates, and punctuated the exhibition with enlarged personal letters, copies of essays and reviews, mini-manifestos ("energy, not quality!"; "I don't make political art, I make art politically!") and other texts in Portuguese, German, English and French, with overtones of school pedagogy. He also scrambled his own chronology, and created an expanded field consisting of his thought processes and influences, critical reactions to the work, photographic documentation and related theoretical texts. Older works looked completely up-to-date, as if they had been made last week and not several years ago. Combined with the rest, they formed a sprawling, entirely new installation filled with cross-pollination and cross-references.

Hilariously, Hirschhorn took the "school" part of the title literally, and made

La Pile, 1992.



The artist excels at creating mixtures that question how information is packaged and conveyed, who is in charge of it and for what purpose.



Hanging on wall, from left, Wood Chain (Hagia Sophia), 2004, CNN Chain, 2003, and Toyota Chain, 2002.

Swiss Swiss Democracy, 2004.



the whole show seem like a succession of classrooms. He included desks, chairs and lecterns; drawings, photographs and texts on the walls; shelves and vitrines that could have doubled for those found in a science class; and maps that could have been used in geography lessons. Walls were painted an institutional green, and some floors were covered with an institutional linoleum. However, instead of, say, evoking a ca. 1967 grade school in Switzerland, and by extension all manner of rote, formulaic education throughout the world, this "non-school" posited education as a wild and constant encounter with all sorts of diverse information, especially the kind that wouldn't normally make it into the curriculum. Unlike most actual schools, this ersatz place of learning was driven by a sharply critical will to confront pressing political and cultural issues, as well as a distinctly utopian desire to unfetter, not restrict, creativity, and to champion individuality and idiosyncrasy.

The first room featured blue desks in rows, yellow chairs at each desk, more yellow chairs stacked in a pile near the wall and a blue lectern in the front, forming a convincing, yet abnormally colorful, facsimile of a classroom. In the back of the room was *Rosa Tombola* (1994), a seminal work for Hirschhorn, combining

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his interest in formal abstraction with politically charged mass-media images. In front of a wall covered part way up with pink fabric, tables featured numerous works made largely from cardboard, tape and attached images, which leaned against the wall. Among these leaning works one could find traces of Minimalism, or of Russian Constructivism: three yellow bands around a cardboard tube, a horizontal black band beneath an irregular white form on a rectangular piece of cardboard, or a vertical bar of brown masking tape on a white rectangle. The attached photographs functioned as similarly formal geometric shapes, arranged to be part of the designs, but, in their content, they took things in another direction entirely, toward world crises and contrasts between Western luxury and privation elsewhere, as in a Pierre Cardin ad next to a black-and-white photo of African refugees. These cardboard elements, with their rudimentary tape and snipped-out photographs, also amusingly resembled a classroom art project, except that not many classroom art projects feature both harrowing images of poverty and reproductions of John Heartfield photomontages.

Given that Hirschhorn is an artist so often identified with incendiary politics, there is actually a great deal of youthful exuberance in his work; he's got an antic ability to make routine things at once nutty and provocative. Also in this first room, for example, was *Time to Go* (1997), in which mounded forms covered in aluminum foil, resembling both volcanoes and cocoons, were placed in a large vitrine wrapped in transparent plastic and tape. They looked as if they were about to hatch into something marvelous, or blow their tops in a frightful eruption. Looming above the vitrine on the wall were nine huge luxury wristwatches, some gold and some silver, made of cardboard and aluminum foil. Giant Longines, Piaget, Cartier and Candino—all famous Swiss brands—lorded it over the volatile, impoverished mini-environment in the vitrine and turned high-end consumer goods, symbols of Swiss comfort and orderliness, into inane fetish objects.

Throughout the exhibition one encountered whole works from various phases of Hirschhorn's career, but accompanied by eclectic texts (on the walls or as printed flyers) that referred to something else—a different work from a different year, or a tangential critical issue. Viewers were bound to be

bewildered. However, by jettisoning the standard museum practice of arranging works in conjunction with helpful explanations, Hirschhorn succeeded in presenting his art as an ever developing, in-process force that can't be contained or summed up.

Just as often, one encountered only hints and traces of past works—for example, of the artist's altars and kiosks, temporary assemblages of items and messages that he placed in public spaces. Seemingly made by an obsessive, heartfelt fan, these works were dedicated to, among others, Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann, American short story author Raymond Carver, and French writer and critic Georges Bataille, and were here represented by small clusters of photographs casually attached to cardboard panels or the wall. His hugely controversial 2005 exhibition "Swiss Swiss Democracy" at the Swiss Cultural Center in Paris, which involved an installation, theatrical performances, daily lectures and a daily newspaper, was largely represented by copies of that newspaper hanging from a rack, as if in a school library. Critically challenging the cherished Swiss tradition of direct democracy at a time when the far-right Swiss People's Party, headed by the tycoon Christoph Blocher, was a rising force, Hirschhorn's exhibition resulted in an unprecedented emergency meeting of the Swiss Parliament, which denounced the artist and slashed the budget of Pro Helvetia, his sponsoring organization, by \$1.1 million.

School is supposedly all about education, and Hirschhorn's "Anschool II" revealed his own informal artistic education, but in a way that did not spell anything out and left room for the viewer to make multiple connections. *Jeudi 17.1.1991-Jeudi 28.2.1991* (1992), a wonderful small stack of drawings, paintings and mixed-medium collages on cardboard panels, relates to *Flying Boxes* (1993), an aerial display of cardboard packages, replete with abstract designs, photographs and mailing labels. *Neighbors* (2002), with a nasty assortment of burned wood, a partly burned toy car, and upended plastic chairs atop a rectangular pedestal, recalls the ethnic and religious strife that sometimes turns neighborhoods into battlegrounds. This work relates to *Hotel Democracy* (2003), in which rows of miniature hotel rooms in a two-story construction are furnished with plastic chairs, tables, cheesy wood paneling and beds wrapped up in tape. Walls in each room are entirely covered with disturbing photographic images—a grieving woman in a war zone, presumably in Iraq; marching Klansmen; people grasping for

aid packages. Hotel décor is invaded by drastic visual news of the world, and Hirschhorn's meticulous, yet rickety, structure seems poised to be busted into smithereens.

Sometimes chance discoveries were especially illuminating. *The Procession* and *The Four Books* (both 2005) feature mannequin hands protruding from mounds of what look like hardened red or blue foam. In the first, the hands hoist a coffin-shaped cardboard box festooned with snippets of dire headlines; in the second, the hands hoist extra-large and enchain versions of the Koran, the Torah and *The Art of Happiness* by the Dalai Lama (the Bible didn't make it into this show). At the bottom of one stairwell, among numerous photographs, I discovered an alarming image of a man, much of whose face was a freakish, bulbous mess intimating some kind of violent attack. The uncanny resem-

This spread, two views of "Anschool II," showing *The Procession* (on floor), 2005.



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Along right wall, *Hotel Democracy*, 2003. Photos this spread Rita Burmester, courtesy Serralves Museum.

blance of this terrifying image to Hirschhorn's sinister mounds and other swelling deformities protruding from both human figures and maps elsewhere suggested a possible connection.

Among the many texts in the show, one could find a polite letter, dated Apr. 12, 2000, to curators Laurence Bossé and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, announcing Hirschhorn's withdrawal from an upcoming exhibition at ARC/Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, and explaining his reasons for doing so.³ He had already withdrawn one proposal for a project called *Conduit*, determining that it wasn't feasible. Instead, the curators suggested participating with an approximately 9¼-by-13-foot poster. After careful consideration, Hirschhorn declined, and his response is a wonderful statement of artistic integrity and tenacity. He simply wasn't willing to undertake a compromise project, however well intentioned. "The trouble," Hirschhorn wrote about the poster idea, is that "it isn't my project! I mean I would only be participating, rather than confronting myself, positioning myself, developing my ideas, proposing a reflection, concretizing a project." He acknowledged that the alternative project "wouldn't take much time or energy," but then declared that he is only interested in works involving "total,

100 percent energy." That's precisely the kind of energy Hirschhorn gave to this exhibition, which turned a selection of past works into a teeming installation chock full of driving ideas and esthetic risks. □

1. Among the artist's writings, in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Alison M. Gingeras and Carlos Basualdo, *Thomas Hirschhorn*, London and New York, Phaidon, 2004, pp. 120-21. "Thierry" is not given a last name.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 136. The exhibition is not further identified.

"Superficial Engagement" was on view at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York [Jan. 14-Feb. 11, 2006]. *"Anschool II"* appeared at the Museu Serralves, Porto, Portugal [Nov. 4, 2005-Mar. 5, 2006]. Another Hirschhorn exhibition, *"Utopia, Utopia—One World, One War, One Army, One Dress"* opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston [Sept. 21, 2005-Jan. 16, 2006], and traveled to the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, San Francisco [Mar. 10-May 13, 2006].

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