

## Camouflage Cultures: beyond the art of disappearance

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Camouflage is a term rich in implication; and connections of all kinds including gentle forms of humour. A military officer addresses a subordinate: “I didn’t see you at camouflage training this morning Smith”. To which he receives the reply, “Thank you Sir”.

This is not attributed to contributors of this volume who first presented at an international conference and exhibition of contemporary art held at the Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney in 2013. A keynote by Roy R Behrens, artist and pioneer researcher in the field, (whose books were previously reviewed in LDR; June 2010 and Jan 2012), introduced the ubiquity of camouflage, leading the discussion developed over the past decade away from the kind of military applications with which the term is more commonly linked towards other researches.

As a milieu for the sciences, arts and humanities, assiduously riffing on terms like mimesis, deception, falsification, disguise,

even delusion, enable this collection of stimulating essays derived from the conference to encounter a wide range of practical applications for the term camouflage.

Deploying the philosophical dimensions, from cosmos to mythology, Hüppauf commences and Papastergiadis concludes the volume, the thread becoming materialised in a fascinating chapter by Brock and Hasenpusch in describing their work on Australian stick and leaf insects, Phasmida, spectacularly illustrated with contemporary and historical images; even the eggs they lay can be patterned to merge with the vegetation habitat.

Other such 'masters of camouflage' are claimed by Morris: cephalopods, moths, butterflies and owls. These have led to the kind of advanced biotechnology research that delivering 'adaptive camouflage' and 'Quantum Stealth' is itself concealed, 'commissioned by the military and hidden from the public under strict classification'.

The post-modern debates of yesteryear, appropriation, 'the poetics of the copy', avant-garde modernism (apparently this approach 'is one of anti-camouflage or attention seeking') and originality, are applied by McLean to the photo facsimiles of the American Sherrie Levine and the extraordinary works and projects of the Australian artist Imants Tillers. Hansford pursues further 'unstable forms of being' by examining recent developments in gene research and the dressing of cells to deceive viruses or to coax an immune system, leading on to a discussion of the work of artists Armanious, Dwyer and Williams, concluding, '..we are cuttlefish or we are nothing.'

Camouflage as the aesthetic basis of making two-dimensional artworks was discussed by Tyler, in the context of New Zealand and Maori, and Howard and Olubas 'within the changing contexts of inter/national military engagement and artistic collaboration', a practice which for Howard goes back to the American War in Vietnam. More recently a series of visits to China has resulted in an artist, a member of the PLA military, exchanging work sites, '..the material space of collaborative art practice ... as camoufleurs, Xing Junqin and Ian Howard have exposed their intentions through art, their desire to talk to the other side.'

The performative aspect of practice is extended by West Brett in a reflection upon the lengths individuals would go to disappear beneath the radar of East German surveillance and data collection to eventually cross the political dividing line disguised 'in full view'. Likewise, Leigh Bowery, in crossing gender definitions as studied by Millner, whilst liberating for the cause had become for the artist '.. another carapace that camouflages the vulnerable self, cloaking it in the language of high art'.

Though unmasking militarism runs as a thread throughout the discussions, a closing chapter by Hsu tangentially takes some of the terms applied earlier toward a social critique; whereby mimicry of disempowered cultures and communities is used by empowered 'hipster' individuals, (and artists), as camouflaged entry, thereby recolonising space and territory, consequently enabling corporate resumption of previously abandoned communities.

Camouflage Cultures is a variously stimulating collection,

illustrating aspects of critical theory through the extension of a metaphor into cross and interdisciplinary areas of historical and current practice and commentary in the arts and sciences.

END