

ART REVIEW

For Thomas Hirschhorn, Handmade Art Keeps Us Human

The Swiss artist turns cardboard and tape to the problems of social media, artificial intelligence and digital warfare.

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Thomas Hirschhorn's "Fake It, Fake It — Till You Fake It" at Gladstone Gallery. The installation resembles the aftermath of a gaming session gone bad, with screens showing images from video games mixed with pictures of actual destruction. Thomas Hirschhorn/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, via Gladstone Gallery

By Travis Diehl
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Gladstone Gallery looks like a war zone, the aftermath of a Call of Duty gaming session gone bad, the virtual gunmen downing Red Bull and chain smoking over their keyboards, until a bomb came through the roof.

This is the tragicomic scene summoned in cardboard and packing tape by [Thomas Hirschhorn](#), 66, a Swiss artist known since the 90s for wrestling humble materials into cacophonous installations: rows of PCs and desks, a ceiling festooned with smiley-face and purple devil emojis dangling from ropes of tape, and life-size cutouts of geared-up video game soldiers. Energy drink cans made of tinfoil and mounds of cigarettes fashioned from plastic foam litter the paper desktops. The cardboard monitors, many of them spiderwebbed with cuts, sport color printouts of screenshots from first-person shooters and photos of unnamed but real war-torn cities.

The installation, "Fake It, Fake It — Till You Fake It," features plenty of charming, even funny details, like a box of plastic foam pizza slices or a couple of "I Heart NY" mugs. But the overall work is grim and aggressive. Hirschhorn warns of the weaponization of artificial intelligence and social media, represented by virtual forms of war — news feeds and games alike.



Cardboard monitors display printouts of screenshots from first-person-shooter video games. Faux cigarettes, drugs and energy drink cans litter the keyboards. Thomas Hirschhorn/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, via Gladstone Gallery

He hopes that his ramshackle, crazed aesthetic will prove his sincerity and urgency, like the cardboard signs of the panhandler or proselytizer. It's uncomfortable, and it's hard to look away.

But the madcap scenario Hirschhorn conjures isn't nearly as scary or weird as reality. The installation is forceful but quaint, like protest art from a simpler time.

Even if war can feel distant when seen only through pictures, the artist's juxtaposition of documentary photographs and digitally rendered scenes on the cardboard screens is simplistic — does anyone actually confuse the two? And the notion that video games might accustom people to the idea of war has long been settled: The U.S. Army collaborated with major game developers on its own first-person-shooter franchise, [America's Army](#), released in 2002 (on July 4), openly hoping [to boost its reputation](#) with potential young recruits. It was a hit.

Hirschhorn sees his work as politically essential, something he can't not do — and he isn't shy about saying so. The news release, which he wrote, reads like a mini-manifesto: "What kind of art should be done in moments of darkness and desperation?" he asks. His answer is what he calls "Precarious Sculpture," proliferating jumbles of lumpen objects made from common, impermanent stuff, as if refusing to play by the elitist rules of enduring art. (In the past, he's made temporary outdoor monuments to philosophers including [Baruch Spinoza](#) and [Antonio Gramsci](#).)

If you miss that news release, you won't miss the message spray-painted in black across one wall. "Dear World," it begins. "We are talking about 'artificial intelligence,' but why only intelligence? Why not artificial willpower? Artificial belief? Artificial faith?" The writing is on the wall. He spells out his theme, with just a dash of irony: "Be aware or be next!"

The artist turns the self-actualization aphorism "Fake it till you make it" into the work's self-deprecating title, as if faking can only result in fakes. Yet the concept of fakeness feels murky here.

Although a cardboard computer isn't a functional PC, it's still a real thing. Indeed, as Hirschhorn writes, " 'Fake' is not the problem, lying is the problem."



Cardboard sculptures of smartphones are piled on a cardboard desk, some bearing images of war-torn cities. Thomas Hirschhorn/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, via Gladstone Gallery

But for that matter, questioning the honesty of bellicose content on social media feels like too little too late. An attractive young service member and influencer named [Hailey Lujan](#) has over 900 thousand followers on TikTok, where she poses in bikinis and with firearms. Some conspiracy theorists accuse her of being a secret weapon for Army recruitment, which she mockingly denies — regardless, she, not some fatigued avatar, is the modern [military's fresh young face](#).



The pictures on the front of some cardboard monitors are slashed to look like broken glass. Thomas Hirschhorn/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, via Gladstone Gallery

Hirschhorn is probably aware of the dark corners of American culture. Yet his slapdash cardboard style, to which he's clearly committed, seems better suited to promoting European philosophers than tackling rapidly shape-shifting problems like virtual life. For all the human energy — his own and his collaborators' — thrown into this project, the technologies he's critiquing are designed to absorb any attention we give them, and ask for more.

When Hirschhorn was starting out in the 90s, his installations were experienced by a handful of people, documented with film cameras, then recycled. But thousands more people will probably see "Fake It, Fake It — Till You Fake It" online than will visit it in Chelsea. To Hirschhorn's credit, the work looks fantastic in photographs. As he and his team labored on the installation for six days, he shared its frenzied progress on Instagram. Viewed on a tiny screen, the cloud of cardboard emojis fluttering in the air look almost real.

There's something unsatisfying about Hirschhorn thinking that his raw form of creativity comes closer to true humanity, as if technology is inherently inhuman, or corrugated cardboard, adhesives and plastic aren't artificial. Maybe artificial intelligence can't make a room full of cardboard computers — yet. But it can generate a plausible picture of one.

Thomas Hirschhorn: Fake It, Fake It — Till You Fake It

Through March 2 at Gladstone Gallery, 530 West 21st Street, Manhattan; 212-206-7606, [gladstonegallery.com](#).

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