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Magazine on Photography



Camouflage

BOJAN SALAJ / JOHN TAGG / MARK CURRAN / ANDREA MUBI BRIGHENTI /
LISA ANDERGASSEN / LEONARDO SELVAGGIO / JAN BABNIK



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Camouflage, or the Temptation of Relationship

Andrea Mubi Brighenti

IN THIS PIECE, I propose to interpret camouflage as *the temptation of relationship*, and examine three artists who powerfully express the structural forces entailed by such a notion of camouflage. First, what could the phrase “temptation of relationship” mean? How does this view differ from the mainstream one? Usually, camouflage is interpreted within the frame of deceitful communication. Regardless of whether it is an animal or human undertaking, scholars have mainly provided accounts of camouflage based on strategic-tactical sign emissions within the frame of ecological competition (e.g., Stevens and Merilaita Eds., 2011 and Fabbri, 2008). Thus, the dominant key is one of antagonism and belligerence, whereby camouflage and camouflage detection are described as a form of a ‘semiotic arms race’ (the reason why camouflage tends to escalate is simply that its advantages are not absolute, but relative to the antagonist’s performance).

In general, all these considerations remain grounded in a utilitarian means/ends scheme of either strategic or tactical nature. By contrast, approaching camouflage as a specific social *temptation* suggests regarding it as something that exists beyond the functional domain. By doing so, we place our inquiry in the line of the scholarship of Adolf Portmann, the great zoologist and towering figure in the study of animal morphology (see in particular: Portmann, 1990). Portmann’s insights can guide us towards a simultaneously wider and more specific understanding of camouflage, in order to approach the domain of *forms* as a layer of animal and human existence on its own account, which can never be reduced to a sum of functions.

A critique of functionalism inspired by Portmann runs in two directions: on the one hand, it points out the insufficiency of basic biological functions (survival and reproduction) in accounting for the richness and multifariousness of animal shapes and colours. The functional gaze disregards the actual plurality of forms and, by failing to attend it, forces interpretation of a wide array of living phenomena into the rigid, monotonous scheme of presupposed biological functions (basically, sur-

vival and reproduction). This way, forms can only appear as devoid of any intrinsic meaning. On the other hand, meaning can never be reduced to function. Whereas *functions* establish relationships between two or more terms to be brought into a single equation, *meaning* constitutes a totality or wholeness which never stands in function of something else. Meaning is a totality which can only be understood with reference to itself. Ultimately, meaning is at the level of life, as opposed to the level of survival – and, if survival is clearly necessary to life, it is precisely because survival is *in the service of* life, rather than vice versa.

Once we understand camouflage as a fully vital phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a strategic-tactical game among antagonists, we can appreciate how the camouflaging animal (or human) enacts a *liminal space*. Liminality is defined in terms of social inter-visibility; in other words, the liminal space makes it possible for the creature to institute communication as well as destitute it, thanks to the creation of a space where intra- and inter-specific distances are managed in a peculiar way. Here is where Roger Caillois and his attempt to develop a set of ‘diagonal sciences’ may prove useful and important. For only apparently is Caillois a functionalist. True, he outlines what he calls “three functions of mimicry” (Caillois 1960). In short, these are: (1) to pass for (disguise); (2) to vanish (concealment); (3) to intimidate (masquerade). But Caillois also insists on the excessive or ‘hypertelic’ nature of mimicry – *il y a une luxue de précautions, excès de simulacre* (there are luxury precautions, excess of simulacra) ... Also interesting to recall in connection to this is the fact that, in his theory of playing, Caillois (1958) identifies four basic types of play, among which the two he terms *simulacrum* and *vertigo*. Indeed, it is impossible to fail noticing the similarity between simulacrum and vertigo, on the one hand, and mimetic disguise and intimidation on the other. This fact reinforces our hypothesis that Caillois believed the three forms of mimicry to derive from some deep drive that is present in social animals and which exceeds sheer functionality.

So, how could we interpret the three “functions” of mimicry evoked by Caillois as *non-functional existential and relational experiences*? First of all, we should keep in mind that social interaction is always potentially threatening, if not devastating for the individual who enters it. At the sheer physical level, the prototypical social relationship between predator and prey attests to this. More generally, every relational mode entails a fundamental psychological ambivalence which is tied to the lack of predictability and control the single individual may hope to exert on the relationship itself (e.g., who owns a friendship?). The *socius* can be a brother as well as an assassin, and sometimes both at the same time. Certainly, the predator-prey relation is not the only social relation that can be envisaged; rather, we should retain it as an analytical trait which is present – or looming – to various degrees in all social encounters. As a result, social life is cut across by a fundamental tension between association and dissociation (and, killing is that situation where the utmost intensity of association causes the deepest conceivable dissociation).

From this perspective, the existential experiences related to *form* – which we might also call *morphological experiences* – such as camouflage, bring us very close to the crucial drama of social life: the double tension between association and dissociation cutting across each social individual. At first sight, camouflage inclines towards dissociation – at least, this is how it has been interpreted by Caillois, particularly in his first 1935 essay on mimicry, where he posited mimicry as a sort of *cupio dissolvi*, a desire to vanish into the environment and disintegrate (Caillois,



Leonardo Selvaggio, URME Surveillance Project, 2014. Courtesy of the author.

1938). In theory, cryptic camouflage is a situation where signal-to-noise ratio equals one. However, it is important to stress that the equivalence of signal and noise is really a theoretical asymptote in this operation. What actually matters are the *threshold-states* defined by infinitesimal progressive shifts (incidentally, none of the artists discussed below work under the snr=1 conditions). In this sense, camouflage may as well designate the other vector, that is, the one pointing towards association. In synthesis, it enables the individual to institute a space (a clean, anesthetised space) to be used as grounds for manoeuvre where the decision can be taken to positively engage social intercourse or, conversely, eschew it.

The camouflaging creature finds itself in the situation of being *tempted* by a social relationship to which it is always potentially open and exposed (regardless the outcomes of such relationship – given that, for instance, the individual might also be tempted by a catastrophic or destructive one). Thus, camouflage is connected with the fear of the radicalness of social experience: more precisely, it is *the experience of the fear of experience* itself in all its radicalness. Such a fear also connects to an issue discussed by the psychologist Pierre Janet (1929) in terms of the ‘function of valorisation’ of the individual. But what are the *specific forms* which such a temptation can assume? The three artists I would like to consider now help us to inquire into different facets of this experience.

First, a recent visual project by Leo Selvaggio titled ‘URME’ (i.e., you are me) points to a morphological experience pivoted around the face. Indeed, the face is a specifically sensitive locus which, in the context of contemporary biometric technologies, is increasingly targeted for recognition. In this context, the artist has manufactured a number of facial masks to play tricks to facial recognition algorithms employed by the CCTV systems scattered across urban areas. He has created packs of anonymous federates who are kept together by a replicated ego, a distributed me, or a fictive multiplied persona. It seems that the experience emphasised in Selvaggio’s project is related to what Caillois explored as the “becoming other than oneself”. By disguising herself and passing for someone else, the individual can produce a de-individualised simulacrum which achieves mimetic potential. In this sense, Selvaggio’s project is a continuation of a thread of anti-authorial practices (*noms de plume* etc.) which have accompanied, as a counterpoint, the rise of authorship since the early modern era, and which have found among the French Situationists some of their most active practitioners. Disguise is unmistakably associated with the festive climate entailed by the joy of – literally and metaphorically – dressing up (the joy of the ornament, one may call it). Yet, in this case, the joy is slightly cracked by the thought that the artist is bound to assume full responsibility for all misdemeanours committed by the crowd who is wearing his face.



Arno Rafael Minkkinen, *Continental Divide at Independence Pass*, Colorado, 2013. Courtesy of the author.

Second, the photographic work by Arno Rafael Minkkinen speaks about the way in which the body can insert itself into the landscape looking for some kind of concealment. Notably, in Minkkinen's work the body never vanishes thoroughly – in many cases it does not vanish at all. Its visibility, however, is never smooth. It remains unsettled at all times, and is in many cases a troubled presence. The Finnish-American photographer and performer enacts a personal process of becoming-space – a space which is far from remaining an abstract category. If there is assimilation there, it is to sumptuously rich natural surroundings. Minkkinen often works outdoors, in the wild, and seems to interrogate the place which the human body might occupy. Are there any appropriate places for us humans to be included in this scenery? Many of Minkkinen's photographs contain an echo of

a similar overarching question. To social animals, the location, the proper spot is never given plainly. Describing the outcome of mimic camouflage, Caillois (1938) remarked: “The living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself.” A similar self-procured quandary recalls Janet's psychasthenia, the mental condition in which the boundaries of the body and the subject become uncertain and untenable. On the other hand, which gaze could spot Minkkinen's body in the remote zones he practices, out in the heart of the land? For only one such gaze, only a living eye – which could hope to be at the right place only thanks to an extremely rare stroke of luck – could ever keep the artist from his temptation to dissolve all human bonds.



Matthew Barney, *Her Giant – Cremaster 5*, 1997.

Third, a giant masquerade is what takes place in Matthew Barney's five-volume cycle *Cremaster*. Caillois called this form of mimicry ‘intimidation’. Of course, Barney's artwork does not match a commonsensical understanding of the word *intimidation* (just like, for that matter, previously discussed artworks do not mirror the everyday notions of, respectively, ‘disguise’ and ‘concealment’). Nonetheless, Barney's baroque procedures constantly stage a power of metamorphosis which, in many cases, breeds fearful deformations. It is again a question of face, but of a face distorted into a mask. As Peter Sloterdijk (2007, p. 189) effectively put it, “the mask is the facial shield that is raised in the war of sights.” War here exceeds the mere requirements of antagonistic logistics, tactic and strategy, though, and needs to be understood above all as the production of a totalitarian panic. The situation is one of visual vertigo, like an encounter with Medusa's gaze, which turns onlookers to stone or even pulverises them.

The *ocelli*, the butterfly's eyespots, notes Caillois, do not really resemble eyes. Resemblance is not what is at stake here: “We see nothing else but exalted eyes which are no longer eyes – that is, ordinary organs of vision – but supernatural apparitions, as if coming from a netherworld, enormous, blind, impassive, phosphorescent, with the same fixity and the strange perfection of geometric figures.” (Caillois 1960, p. 539). The production of such abstract eyes is functionless; their territory is one of hypnosis and terror. Whereas camouflage asserts the power of the neuter, masquerade detonates the powers of expression. The social space drawn by intimidation, however, appears no less liminal than the one drawn by

concealment. The shield as a quintessential tool for protective aggressiveness is again a social quandary. This is why Barney's monsters are so static and, ultimately, melancholic – if not irredeemably idiotic (various different degrees at which temptations fade, and then go).

The morphological experiences just reported reveal the thinness of the liminal thresholds in the social encounter. Social life occurs in quantum states, as an undefinable, ever-evasive eigenvalue. Because the encounter with the socius is written entirely in the domain of *the visible*, liminal spaces appear as places for transforming and manipulating inter-visibility. While this can certainly contain functional requirements and leave scope to utilitarian calculations, the management of distances in the domain of the visible constantly supplements extensive matters with intensive experiences which can never be surrogated by the first.

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Fig. 1, *Tired household*, 2012 / Jana Hojstričová / Courtesy of the author. A series of staged photographs exploring obsessive care for home and family in which women can lose themselves and gradually »blend« into their home.

Fig. 2, *www.facebook.com/nofaceLOOK* / Author of the project: Kristian Albert (alias k) Courtesy of the author of the project. The project raises the issue of the digital fingerprint and (invasion of) privacy in the context of social media. Users are invited to participate in the project by posting their no-face LOOK selfies.

Fig. 3, *Pixelhead*, 2012 / Martin Backes / Courtesy of the author. Pixelhead is a full face mask that makes a person's face unrecognizable on photographs taken in public places. The project challenges the concept of anonymity on the internet and camouflage in contemporary media. In 2014, the singer M.I.A. used the masks in her music video Double Bubble Trouble. Masks can be ordered from the author's website.

Fig. 4, *The Invisible Empire* / Juha Arvid Helminen / Courtesy of the author. Juha Arvid Helminen is a Finnish author who explores relations of power between institutions and individuals. A staged fictional world investigates the dark side of the uniform, which often serves as a cover for repression and authoritarianism.

Fig. 5, *#FREETHENIPPLE*, 2015 / Nina Flageul / Courtesy of the author. Free The Nipple is an Instagram account where users post photographs that challenge Instagram's policy of censoring the display of female nudity, especially of female breasts. <http://ninaflageul.com>

Fig. 6, *Soldier in a Camouflage Uniform*, 1917 / Unknown author/ Courtesy of Army Engineer Corps, Creative Commons. Soldier testing a black and white uniform designed to conceal him while climbing trees. *Camouflage class at New York University*, 1943/ Marjory Collins / Courtesy of The Library of Congress.

Fig. 7, Preparation of a model in a camouflage class at New York University. *Camouflage class at New York University*, 1943/ Marjory Collins / Courtesy of The Library of Congress.

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