

Camoumedia – a compendium of research on art, architecture and camouflage.

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Conflating the words camouflage and encyclopedia as a title is clearly an attempt to disguise the true intent of this volume. The outcome of enthusiastic research it may be, but an entertaining summary of the field it certainly manages to be. It's hard to believe that it was only in Modern times that fighting to win obliged soldiers to take measures to survive in order to enjoy the peace. Concealing their presence on the battlefield however, was less to do with returning as heroes but part of the development of industrialized warfare – science and technology conspired to deliver death from beyond the horizon with machines of war so cumbersome that they immobilized the soldier; hiding and obscuring physical evidence of intent was as necessary for the squaddie and GI as the generals' conspiracy to ensure the continuation of the conflict. Good for business, then as now.

The band of brothers we encounter alphabetically in this research are for the most part, the boys in the backroom; and we gather they had a lot of fun – razzle, dazzle, baffle and zébrage especially for the hell of sail or other extreme environments: ice, snow and rain; and more rain. Behrens has it seems, tracked down every last one of the brothers: printmakers, painters, sculptors, even art theorists and set designers, well versed in forced perspective. Apparently architects made the best field *camoufleurs*, scattering their

flowers, their nettings, and their *trompe l'oeil* under fire. Painters however, trained as they were to touchup and varnish, were not good at leaving details to subordinates. Usually wrangled into Groups, Corps and Societies *camoufleurs* are listed here from amongst the talent of England, France, Australia, South Africa and predominantly, the USA, where the author is based. Curiously the adversaries marshaled under the Kaiser are hardly mentioned, except in one instance when some German airmen dropped a message to soldiers of le Grande Alliance suggesting improvements to their methods – wir sprechen Technik.

Robin Darwin, (a descendent of the definer of the species), presciently recommended interdisciplinary creative approaches to a British War Ministry; 'that artists and designers are of undoubted value in the development of camouflage, but that they should work alongside engineers, architects and scientists'. Further surprises abound: in the 1914-18 War, the word *denature* was used to describe the painting of familiar objects in strange ways; camouflage was 'the Cubists revenge', something denied as being coincidental by its main protagonist, Georges Braque, another *camoufleur*; the British surrealist Roland Penrose was another in the following World War, publishing a war-time Home Guard manual on the subject, with a chapter entitled 'How To Turn Yourself into a Hedge'; the famed Comédie-Française actor Jean-Louis Barrault (described as a comedian!) also served in a World War Two camouflage unit. And the psychologists came up with the term *legendary psychasthenia*, or 'the inability of people to distinguish themselves from their surroundings, social or otherwise', a term surely useful in many contexts today. And camouflage toilet tissue has a US Patent Number!

Camouflage technology emerges as the reader works through the book, picking out detail from the background of seemingly endless anecdotal biography entertainingly presented, though

of curiosity value to any but the serious researcher. Experiments by each and every recruit to the cause led to hosts of visual treats guaranteed to alarm if not succeed in their purpose: in the mainly thumbnail sized images we get a sense of the shock and awe value of the designs for ships in particular, the purpose of which were to deceive rather than conceal. There is little evidence of any serious science-based cognitive evaluation of the success of the various illusions, though a team at the Kodak Labs came closest in the scale of their enumerations if not the risibility of a 'visibility meter'. It was however, part of measuring the process of denaturalizing visual memory and confounding tacit knowledge of the natural world. A phenomenology of the state of war, the situated actions of helmsmen in the collisions and other accidents attributed to dazzle painted ships for instance, was the real measures of success determined by commanders. Claims abound as to who was the first to propose concealment in warfare; Shakespeare gets a mention though not his Forest of Dunsinane. Abbott and son Gerald Thayer's article and book on Coloration in Animals in 1909 in the US prompted serious interest from the intelligentsia if not the military. It was not until later in the First War that together with others like Edward Wadsworth, the Vorticist, and Norman Wilkinson in the UK that its usefulness became assured. The paraphernalia of camouflage continues to fascinate visual artists even as recently as 2009 in Australia where Sussi Porsborg installed Portable Cenotaph: working with army blankets, clothing and textiles gathered from around the world, visitors are encouraged to select from the camouflage patterns that take their attention and with scissors and sewing machine, construct small objects to become part of the exhibit.

Self-published, this is no coffee table book and suffers from sheer quantity of entries as a compendium should, but does not lack visual fascination, even though the scale of most of the riveting images are too often postage stamp size. The

obsessive research contained in this Compendium – its as if a mountain of post-it stickies had been transcribed and ordered alphabetically - deliver a prodigious quantity of leads into the field. The author even admits he had to call ‘cease-fire’ as the research results escalated. As such this volume will be a leading contemporary source book, complete with a bibliography of more than a thousand titles, some forty from Behrens himself.