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Camouflage and Deception

Abstract

This paper was developed from original research into camouflage and the work of Australian artists and designers in World War II. It draws on historical material that was suppressed by secrecy acts until the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war. How does the material contribute to contemporary discourse on art and culture, and how does it add to art historical knowledge? It offers a new perspective on Australian modernists who worked in camouflage design for the Australian military and Department of Home Security during World War II; the historical material takes on contemporary significance when it is considered in the context of post-war cultural discourse on war and culture by Paul Virilio and Hillel Schwartz; and when camouflage is discussed as both a physical entity, and a metaphor for subjectivity, it contributes to an endless fascination with the will to deceive.

Biography

Dr Ann Elias is a Senior Lecturer at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. She teaches Art Theory to undergraduates and is the Sub-Dean of Postgraduate Research. Her current research focuses on the contribution of Australian artists and designers to war camouflage, looking in particular at the question of visual deception. This investigation furthers a special interest in the intersection between social history and aesthetics expressed through the medium of photography.

Camouflage and Deception

During the 1940s many of Australia's leading modern artists enthusiastically pursued wartime careers in camouflage experimentation. Though this history is still not common knowledge due to the longstanding 'secret' status of government documents relating to camouflage defence in Australia during World War II. Their involvement began when a Sydney University zoologist, William Dakin, gathered together a creative pool of painters, sculptors, designers, photographers, scientists, engineers, architects, administrators and civil servants, and called them the *Sydney Camouflage Group*.¹

Among the *Sydney Camouflage Group* were Max Dupain, Frank Hinder, Robert Emerson Curtis, Russell Roberts, Sydney Ure Smith, Adrian Feint and Charles D. Moore. Of these, Dupain, Hinder, Curtis, and Roberts left their civilian lives and studio practices and together with artists Roy Dalgarno and Sali Hermann became camouflage officers attached to the Army, Airforce and Department of Home Security. At the same time, in the USA, Ellsworth Kelly and Arshile Gorky adapted their experiments in abstraction and illusionism to war camouflage.² In Britain, the most unusual civilian recruit was a stage magician by the name of Jasper Maskelyne who is now famous for 'hiding' the port of Alexandria from German bombers, and for inventing inflatable decoy submarines and battleships.³ The mission of the *Sydney Camouflage Group* was to prove to the Government and the military that camouflage was an essential strategy of modern warfare, and that Australia was acting too slowly in adopting it as a serious defence measure. In their opinion the military understood less about the principles of modern camouflage and visual misinformation than artists and scientists, and they lobbied the Government to take their research seriously. They succeeded, and William Dakin was seconded to Canberra where he became Chair of the *Defence Central Camouflage Committee*, controlling all military and civilian camouflage operations in Australia. By 1942 Australian camouflage defence measures had become urgent but also secret. Official documents remained closed to the public until the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war.⁴

When World War II ended, William Dakin submitted a report to the Government outlining the relative successes and failures of camouflage organization in Australia. He reflected on the future of camouflage warfare and asked, 'What will be the position with the advent of the Atomic Bomb?'⁵ He questioned the ability of camouflage (as he knew it) to remain effective in what was obviously the beginning of a new era of warfare using weapons of mass destruction. However elaborate, the deceptions commonly used in warfare in World War II – disruptive patterning, dazzle colours, camouflage nets, simulations, dummies and decoys - now seemed obsolete because whole cities could be vaporised. In 1994 Paul Virilio offered what could be described as an answer to Dakin's question. In Virilio's view the atomic bomb is a 'weapon

of deterrence par excellence', and deterrence itself is deception, 'not peace, but a relative form of conflict, a transfer of war from the actual to the virtual' with detrimental effects on how we live our lives everyday.⁶

Paul Virilio is frequently quoted in the context of the visual arts, where his writing on speed, disappearance, militaristic space and technology strikes a chord with artists and theorists, especially those working with photography and new media. His discussion about '[T]he obliteration of the very principle of truth' in war introduces an ethical critique to war that has great relevance to the question of camouflage and deception.⁷ The elaborate and ubiquitous nature of deception in World War II, aided by technologies of surveillance and simulation, drew attention, more than any other period of history, to the often-indeterminate distinction between reality and fiction. World War II deceptions took many forms including spies, fake objects, and realistic simulations, but in total they created a state of emotional confusion for civilians and military because they highlighted the difficulty in distinguishing between truth and illusion, fact and fiction, authentic and fake, original and simulation. In 1996 Hillel Schwartz examined World War II as a moment in history when anxieties of authenticity were particularly acute, and in his chapter 'Seeing Double' he highlighted one of the significant questions to arise from the war: 'Where, then are our own skills at disguise, decoy and deception leading us?'⁸ Camouflage in all its forms eroded confidence in the naked eye, but also in people. When camouflage is used as a metaphor for human subjectivity it draws attention to the potential duplicity of the subject. It can be read as an innocent act of hiding but also as an intentional act of deceiving. The film industry relies heavily on public fascination with human deception, and a pertinent example is the classic *Casablanca*, a film released during World War II and about World War II, with a narrative built around the duplicitous acts of not only Rick and Ilse, but also those around them. The film delivers the message that humanity is compromised during war.⁹

In 1944 the *Sydney Morning Herald* aired the issue of widespread deception, and drew readers' attention to disputes overseas on the authenticity of war photographs. Fake photographs were not new to war, having been a feature of World War I as well, but the extent of the deceptions in World War II was unprecedented. A correspondent from London reported on a controversy over a photograph captioned 'Five blazing enemy planes crashing seaward in trails of smoke on August 8 after having been attacked by British fighters', but also reported in reference to the photograph that 'the Air Ministry has since stated that no pilots reported an occurrence such as that shown'.¹⁰ In the *Australasian Photo-Review* in the same year a writer, described by the journal as 'one of USA's "ace" war photographers', asked 'What are the ethics of war photography? My feelings on the subject are very keen and direct. The photographer is a free individual, representing a publication, and as such he has no right to deceive the people at home. They are entitled to look at the war as it is actually'.¹¹ Fake photographs can be amusing but they can also represent a moral affront because once the deception is revealed, the photograph's assumed relationship to a singular reality is destroyed and the one who has been tricked is unmasked as a fool. Fake photographs have been objects of anger since the nineteenth century when William Peach Robinson produced a cut and pasted combination print of a deathbed scene titled *Fading Away*. At first the public were moved and intrigued by this extraordinary image, which they believed allowed them to share the moment of a girl's death. When the deception was revealed there was bitter disappointment at having been emotionally manipulated by a collage of staged events using actors.¹²

Virilio refers to the 'militarisation of science' in war.¹³ One notable feature of World War II is the breakdown of logical distinctions between artists, scientists and the military. Military operations became aestheticised as artists brought fundamental principles of modern art, in particular abstraction, to camouflage methods; artists became militaristic as they adapted their aesthetic knowledge to the design of war objects; the military and artists became scientific about camouflage methods by studying zoology and the way predators and prey behave in nature. Army engineers became artists, and artists became engineers, the two often working together to construct objects of deception on a huge scale. However, on a personal level the relations between the military and artists were difficult.¹⁴ The usual term for a camouflage designer is *camoufleur*, a term that was too effeminate to be favoured by the Armed Forces but one that was used by artists. The military did not allow artists to integrate well and were bemused by their role in the science of war camouflage. This was also true in World War I and the statement, 'Oh God, as if we didn't have enough trouble! They send us artists!' expressed by an American Army officer, illustrates the point.¹⁵ In Australia Frank Hinder recorded the moment he showed Army associates one of his ingenious

dummy camouflage schemes using the shine on a field of upturned glass bottles to simulate a lake, but ‘the boys in the field had hysterics’.¹⁶

World War II used the specialised knowledge of artists to a far greater extent than World War I, and while it forced artists to take a break from their studio practices, it also gave them the opportunity to apply their more abstract ideas to the utilitarian practice of camouflage design. Dupain, Hinder and Roberts applied their knowledge of the aesthetics of light, form and colour to visual illusions, with the intended practical outcome being visual confusion for the enemy, and in particular, visual confusion for the aerial perspective of reconnaissance pilots. Frank Hinder designed dummy objects as decoys, and won a war invention medal for a portable camouflage net.¹⁷ Max Dupain spent much of his time experimenting in the manner of a scientist, devising ways to conceal military objects on the ground by creating confusions of shadows in order to dissolve their form. Shadows were considered the evil twin of objects and people. Soldiers were told ‘never forget your own shadow – it may be visible when your own body is concealed’.¹⁸ Photography was a crucial tool for *camoufleurs* because it was the best medium through which visual checks could be made of the success of camouflage. Dupain’s photographs of camouflage experiments using patterns of shadow have close formal similarities with the photography of Lazlo Moholy-Nagy and the historical avant-garde who used shadows as a source of abstract art. Similarly, Max Dupain’s war photographs of camouflage experiments and shadows are among his most abstract.¹⁹

The French term *camoufleur* refers to the act of putting on make-up for theatre.²⁰ In the ‘theatre’ of war, the two main principles of camouflage are concealment and deception. They have their equivalents in the visual arts in abstraction and illusionism, including the deceptions of *trompe l’oeil*. A recent publication on *trompe l’oeil* in art begins with the claim that ‘as a rule we do not like to be deceived’ but *trompe l’oeil* offers delight in being tricked.²¹ Being taken in by *trompe l’oeil* artifices is a game but alternatively, we could think of it as a type of warfare because the aim of the artist is to trick the viewer and score a victory. The aim is to create situations where illusions are so ‘real’ that viewers are momentarily uncertain of their own perception. Hillel Schwartz makes many connections between *trompe l’oeil* and war camouflage describing the craft of *trompe l’oeil* as ‘craftiness’ thereby associating it with the deceptions of an opponent, and also arguing that by 1900 *trompe l’oeil* had become ‘a disreputable “fooling of the eye”, evoking the same uneasiness as did rigs of machine-made decoys’.²²

Trompe l’oeil has a humorous side but also a serious side due to the way it sets people up as opponents. Just as art becomes warfare with *trompe l’oeil*, so war becomes art when *trompe l’oeil* effects are brought to camouflage design. But the difference is that the success of *trompe l’oeil* is to momentarily kill someone intellectually, but in war, in the extreme situation, it is to trap and kill someone physically. The Australian Army was very creative with its *trompe l’oeil* camouflage work, inventing collapsible rocks and tree stumps that were easily carried by soldiers and when in position looked like the real thing.²³ They were designed to conceal snipers. The Army liked to use the term *bluff* instead of *camouflage*, a term that underplays the gravity of war and the seriousness of camouflage as war strategy. Its flippancy attempts to disguise the fear of becoming the victim of enemy deception.

The Australian Army referred to its most ambitious camouflage scheme during World War II as ‘the greatest bluff of the Pacific war’.²⁴ Between January and April of 1943, on Goodenough Island off the coast of Papua, soldiers installed large-scale dummy objects to make it appear to Japanese reconnaissance pilots that a Brigade occupied the island. In reality it was occupied by one struggling and modest rifle company of the 25th Battalion who were desperate to prevent a Japanese invasion. The Goodenough Island camouflage scheme was extrovert in the same way that *trompe l’oeil* is extrovert. Engineers on the mainland shipped prefabricated assemblages in the vague shape of trucks, tanks and anti-aircraft guns, made of oil drums, hessian, and wooden crates, to the island. ‘Roads’ were built for ‘trucks’ and ‘tanks’ and ‘hospitals’ and ‘camps’ were constructed for non-existent soldiers. ‘Barbed wire’ fences made of jungle vines were built along the beaches. Logs were pointed at the sky to simulate anti-aircraft guns. *Trompe l’oeil* illusions work best at a critical distance, and not too close. At close inspection the Goodenough Island deception was obvious, but from the air it was convincing enough to prevent catastrophe. The undertaking was successful on another level. It diverted the attention of a group of insecure and frightened soldiers from their isolation and loneliness. The Goodenough Island ‘bluff’ was itself a camouflage for the fear of being killed.²⁵

The psychology of camouflage is complex. Being naturally duplicitous, it can seem both serious and humorous. Stories about war camouflage become more amusing as time advances and the event recedes into history. Recently, it was revealed that the ‘dark-brown tones associated with “we shall fight on the beaches” etc, probably aren’t those of Churchill’ but an actor with a better voice.²⁶ This revelation might have had profound consequences in 1940, but today it is something to smile about. During World War II, as the deception schemes of both sides were revealed, each developed admiration for the other’s ingenuity and daring. Camouflage deception added another layer of competition between sides. One historian describes how, ‘the R.A.F and the Luftwaffe both cherish the anecdote of the dummy airfield that was attacked with wooden bombs’.²⁷ Speaking about German methods of deception, William Dakin warned, ‘Any aerodrome, therefore, which is obviously an aerodrome is regarded with suspicion’.²⁸ Dakin admired the use of dummies by the Japanese in New Guinea because ‘What they may have taught some people...is that, in modern warfare, imagination, and a real desire to initiate, rather than work to the book, are required’.²⁹

Camouflage is as relevant to Australian contemporary visual art as it is to war history. The metaphor of camouflage appeals to art critics if there is concern that the artist is concealing something about identity in the surface of the work. When this is the case, ‘camouflage’ becomes a useful point for discussion, but it is an antagonistic one because it infers deception.³⁰ Contemporary artists frequently reference camouflage or use its principles. John Kelly receives acclaim for his paintings and sculptures of black and white cows based on the papier-mâché animals³¹ that William Dobell produced during World War II, and which Dobell used to camouflage airfields.³² Of special relevance is Maria Fernanda Cardoso, whose work represents a contemporary intersection between art and zoology, the science that informed so much war camouflage and which brought William Dakin into contact with Australian modernism. Cardoso claims a special connection between artists and creatures of camouflage: both have the ability to ‘fluctuate between visibility and invisibility, without a hint of contradiction’.³³

¹ Michael Bogle was one of the first historians to discuss this group in detail. See M. Bogle, *Design in Australia 1880-1970*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, p.94.

² Roy Behrens, *False Colours: Art, Design and Modern Camouflage*, Boblink Books, Iowa, 2002, prolegomenon.

³ I. C. B. Dear (ed) *The Oxford Companion to World War II*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p.284.

⁴ For verification of the historical facts in this paragraph see A. Elias, ‘The organization of camouflage in Australia in the Second World War’, *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, Issue 38, April, electronic journal, pp1-10, <http://info@awm.gov.au/journal/j38/camouflage.htm>.

⁵ William Dakin, *Camouflage Report 1939-1945*, Australian War Memorial Collection, series 81, 1947, p.152, point 15.

⁶ Paul Virilio, ‘The Vision Machine’ in *The Vision Machine* (translated by Julie Rose), British film Institute and Indian University Press, 1994, p.67.

⁷ *ibid.* p. 66.

⁸ Hillel Schwartz ‘Recapitulation’, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking likenesses, unreasonable facsimiles*, Zone Books, New York, 1996, p.8.

⁹ The film was made by Michael Curtiz in 1942. For a discussion of *Casablanca* and an outline of the plot, see Umberto Eco, ‘Casablanca: Cult movies and Intertextual Collage’, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, Longman, New York, 1988, pp445-455.

¹⁰ ‘Dispute over Air Picture’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 August 1940, p.10.

¹¹ *Australasian Photo-Review*, August 1944, pp.253-4.

¹² Robert Leggat, ‘A History of Photography: William Peach Robinson’, <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/history/robinson.htm>, 20 June 2003, 1.18pm

¹³ Virilio. *op. cit.* p.67.

¹⁴ Elias, *op. cit.*, p.1.

¹⁵ Behrens. *op. cit.*, frontpiece.

¹⁶ Frank Hinder, personal records, Australian War Memorial Collection, PR 88/133, item 7 of 12.

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- ¹⁷ Elias. op. cit., p.3.
- ¹⁸ Dakin. op. cit., [77 part 3], pamphlet on Individual Concealment.
- ¹⁹ For an example of Dupain's camouflage experimental photography see reproduction in Elias. op. cit., P.5.
- ²⁰ Dear. op. cit., p. 220.
- ²¹ Earl A. Powell III, Foreword to *Deceptions and Illusions, Five centuries of Trompe l'oeil painting*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2002.
- ²² Schwartz. op. cit., p.179.
- ²³ Elias. op. cit.,p.6.
- ²⁴ 'The Goodenough Island Deception Scheme', Australian War Memorial, AWM 54, 585/7/1.
- ²⁵ For a detailed account of this deception scheme see A. Elias, "When art became a Weapon: Australian camouflage techniques in the SW Pacific in 1943", *Wartime*, Official Magazine of the Australian War Memorial, Quarterly no 27, pp26-27.
- ²⁶ *New Zealand Listener*, 20 Jan. 2001, p.57, Jim Sullivan's radio show for National Radio (NZ), called 'Sounds Historical', when he compared a live recording of Churchill with an excerpt from one of his speeches.
- ²⁷ Dear. op. cit., p.284.
- ²⁸ William Dakin, *The Art of Camouflage*, Department of Home Security, 1942, p.74.
- ²⁹ Dakin's Camouflage Report, AWM 81, [77 part 4], camouflage bulletin no.7, on concealment in the jungle.
- ³⁰ The term *camouflage* is used to discuss the work of Richard Dunn, see B. Adams, 'The Difficult Impression: Richard Dunn's Dialectical Image', *Art and Text*, no. 43, September 1992, pp19-22.
- ³¹ For an image of Kelly's work see http://www.mcgalliard.org/content/Pictures/paris/champs/_image05.html
- ³² L. Wilkins, 'The Importance of Paint' in Mary Eagle (curator) *A Tribute to William Dobell*, Canberra: The Australian National University Drill Hall Gallery, 1999, p.44.
- ³³ Taken from the artist's statement accompanying the work 'Camouflage: the Art of Disappearing', Maria Fernanda Cardosa, *Zoomorphia*, exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2002-2003.