

Interior/ity camouflage: superficial adaptations of bodies and architectures.

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1. Marie goes by Mimi (introduction)

It is 1893, the Parisian Fin-de-Siècle.

The now-industrialised world is speeding up, and bourgeois homes are stuffed with textiles, more readily available than ever.¹ These are a form of connective tissue: all the draping, fringing, hanging is a reflection of social belonging and economic optimism.

While the wealthier lounge in their plush nests, Madame Vuillard makes corsets in her atelier, which is also her home. It's spare, tight quarters but Madame Vuillard, Marie, makes do.² A widow, Marie lives with her youngest son, Édouard, who would become one of the greatest portraitists in French Art History, and her daughter Marie, also a seamstress, who goes by Mimi. By necessity, Mimi works with her mother and is practically exploited by her, housed but not really paid, and with little prospects of moving on.

Although they are far from wealthy, and food is scarce, every surface is a riot. But in this portrait by her brother, Mimi's figure suggests that such extravagance is not a celebration, nor a consolation. The house closes in on her. There seems to be a transference, a confusion of surfaces. Mimi camouflages herself - indoors.

For the next few minutes, anchored by Mimi's portrait, I will wonder what an indoor, domestic form of camouflage can mean. And I say that quite literally: this project is barely in its infancy, and I stand before you today with plenty of eagerness but no resolve. I will attempt what Lilian Chee describes as the work of an "enthusiast, [using] the scene or setting or object at hand as a point of departure, creatively, spiralling outward in arabesques."³

I will attempt to do these things in visual bursts, using image juxtapositions as part of an early tentative to make sense, borrowing very liberally from Aby Warburg's image work. Said enthusiastic arabesques will introduce and

¹ See Freyja Hartzell (2009). "The Velvet Touch: Fashion, Furniture, and the Fabric of the Interior", *Fashion Theory*, Volume 13, Issue 1, 51–82.

² See Julia Frey (2019). *Venus Betrayed: The Private World of Edouard Vuillard*. Reaktion Books.

³ Lilian Chee (2023). *Architecture and Affect: Precarious Spaces*. Routledge.

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contextualise both camouflage and interiors, touch on existing work on the topic, long for a looser version of this talk, take a leap towards 20th century feminist work, and retreat again against a wall to disappear without promising a satisfactory conclusion.

2. Paper snakes and French cheeks (definition)

Abbott Thayer was a turn-of-the-century North American painter. He is, in part, Paris-trained: he missed Vuillard in the École de Beaux Arts by about 10 years. Thayer became obsessed with animal coloration, developing painstakingly composed illustrations that argue for the absolute, aesthetic relation of an animal and its surroundings. Some of these illustrations could even be activated via cut-outs, to further make his point.⁴

This is, of course, the thing we know about camouflage: it is all an outdoor business. We adopt camouflage when we need to disguise ourselves out there, in a wild, antagonistic world - hunting, at war. We do not need camouflage indoors because that is already a shelter, a safe, clear barrier between the natural world and the human-made world. We adapt architecture to us, rather than the other way around.

But what do we talk about when we talk about camouflage? Thayer's copperhead snakes were published in *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*; a 1909 book describing a phenomenon for which there was no better wording yet. For that, English would have to wait until 1917. To be more precise, and following the English etymological dictionary's records, August 1917⁵. First World War raging, we find the following in *Popular Science Monthly*:

“Since the war started [we have] published photographs of big British and French field pieces covered with shrubbery, . . . and all kinds of devices to hide the guns, trains, and the roads from the eyes of enemy aircraft.

⁴ See Maggie M. Cao (2016). “Abbot Thayer and the invention of Camouflage”. *Art History*, Volume 39, Issue 3, June 2016, 486–511.

⁵ https://www.etymonline.com/word/camouflage#etymonline_v_638

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Until recently there was no one word . . . to explain this war trick. Sometimes a whole paragraph was required to explain this military practice. Hereafter one word, a French word, will save all this needless writing and reading. Camouflage is the new word, and it means "fooling the enemy." ⁶

If we follow the cue to French etymology, we'll see that the word camouflage had become solidified almost a century earlier,⁷ an allegedly derivation of *chaud mouflet*,⁸ hot cheeks or, in English, choking pie, "a heavy-handed practical joke played on someone who falls asleep . . .; cotton is wrapped up in a tube of paper, this is then set on fire and the smoke is directed up the sleeper's nostrils."⁹ The alternative to this French origin is Italian - *cappo muffare*,¹⁰ to muffle the head. Either way, camouflage is born from wrappings that lead to confusion, and faces or heads, that act as synecdoches for the whole being. To camouflage is to clad oneself as a way of "unmaking"¹¹ the self.

Bastardising Aby Warburg's reemerging formulas of pathos, I want to propose camouflage as sort of visual, superficial citation: skin referencing leaves, cloth referencing turf, wallpaper referencing feathers, cladding the self not others' words but with others' cladding, allowing for an expansion of body rather than thought.

(Sidenote: This would admittedly be a great place to bring Adolf Loos' opinionated theories into the discourse, relevant topic and timeline-wise - "The Principle of Cladding" is from 1898¹² - but I am afraid I won't have the time. Selves muffled, wrapped, cited, and clad, let us return indoors.)

3. Velvet impressions

Charles Rice puts forth in *The Emergence of the Interior* that what we now understand for "interior" is a 19th century invention. His key thesis is that, while

⁶ https://www.etymonline.com/word/camouflage#etymonline_v_638

⁷ <https://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/camoufler>

⁸ <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/dmf/MOUFLET1>

⁹ <https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/qsq7h2q>

¹⁰ <https://www.etimo.it/?term=camuffare>

¹¹ Cao, 489.

¹² See Adolf Loos (1898), "The Principle of Cladding", in *Ornament and Crime*, Penguin Classics (2019 edition), translation by Michael Mitchell.

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humans have obviously always dwelled somewhere, in the 19th century the interior goes from an architectural fact, to a brand new conceptualisation of *space plus image*.¹³

He declares domestic dwelling a 19th century *condition* by borrowing heavily from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades*. For Benjamin, the interior is a sort of fold that connects the inside and the outside. In this bourgeois setting, dripping with velvet, Benjamin conceives the *étui-man*,¹⁴ a citizen of means obsessed with encasing collected goods, liberating them "from the world of commodities."¹⁵ In said encasing, soft materials offer an "impressionable surface" that always betrays physical contact.

Both the interior as a fold and as an image imply a partial flattening of the interior, rendering it an impressionable surface in itself. But Mimi is far from the *étui-man*'s way of inhabiting domesticity. Her interior is not a connective, protective fold, nor upholstery referencing industrial progress. For her, there is no retreat from a public life she does not have, but a burden of labour, precarity, and domesticity. Her impressionable surfaces reveal not the treasuring of beautiful knick-knacks, but the affective and existential discomfort of her own body, which she is unable to escape. Mimi the subject freezes, encased in the all-too-small interior. In doing so, she becomes objectified and tethered rather than liberated. So she becomes surface, citing the wall as a way of surrogating her being.

4. Friend or foe

Mimi's superficial surrogacy brings me to Neil Leach's 2006 *Camouflage*, which set out to challenge our cultural understanding of the topic. It explicitly aims to highlight "the creative capacity of human beings to adapt to their environment,"¹⁶ and offer "a more optimistic account of human existence."¹⁷ Leach argues that

¹³ Charles Rice (2006). *Emergence Of The Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity*. Routledge. See also Charles Rice (2007), "The Emergence of the Interior", lecture at the AA School of Architecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLJ6tOp7OrQ>.

¹⁴ See Hartzell, and also Willem Schinkel (2015). "The image of crisis: Walter Benjamin and the interpretation of 'crisis' in modernity." *Thesis Eleven*, 127(1), 36-51.

¹⁵ Rice (2007).

¹⁶ Neil Leach (2006). *Camouflage*. The MIT Press. ix.

¹⁷ Leach, ix.

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camouflage demonstrates a harmonious belonging and identification with one's milieu, and is a positive, vital drive.

Maybe because a lot has happened since 2006, or because I inhabit a female body, I find myself puzzled by this optimistic take. On this front, I tend to side more with Hanna Rose Shell's perception. In *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance* (2012), she establishes that camouflage is needed in moments of utmost vulnerability.¹⁸ Afterall, if there is such a threat to your integrity that you need to conceal yourself, press your body against the wall and melt into its pattern, the world is, at the very least, *not* embracing you back.

Interestingly, Maggie Cao, in her work on Thayer, mentions Alexander Nemerov's conclusion that the painter's oeuvre evidences "turn-of-the-century social anxieties concerning female visibility and sexuality", and that "camouflage was a pictorial device for making invisible the gendered bodies."¹⁹ Indeed.

This connects directly with another issue. One that may even seem petty. You see, *Camouflage's* easiness applies to how Leach employs Francesca Woodman's late 1970s self-portraits. They appear as chapter covers, without really being integrated into the discourse. In these photographs, Woodman attempts different ways to hide before her own camera. She plays hide and seek with herself, and as we now know, with history. She would die by suicide at 22, a century after Mimi's portrait, in 1981. Woodman's photographs are energetic, but they are also haunting: the objectification of the self, the obsessive becoming surface, the romanticised debris of an interior perceived by a hyper sensitive interiority. Reducing her work to mere illustrations in a book about successful adaptation feels like a significant blindspot. I would argue that there is a lot more to see in Woodman's disguise, and in part, it has to do with an exploration of interior maladaptation.

¹⁸ Hanna Rose Shell (2012). *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance*. Princeton University Press, 60.

¹⁹ Cao, 488

Interior/ity camouflage: superficial adaptations of bodies and architectures.

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5. Academic pentimento (intermezzo: there are always more images than time)

Pentimento is when you can see the original intention of an artist through the layers of a completed painting (a different form of disguise to what we are discussing here). This is, in a way, a discursive version of it. If I had more time, there would be a version of this talk that would pay a visit to Freud's study in Vienna,²⁰ which is contemporary to the Vuillards (the rug was given to Freud in 1883,²¹ and the perfectly sized couch was a patient's gift from around 1890).²² Again, the late 19th century *fabrication* of interior and interiority, space and image, surface and self. This would lead me, ever so smoothly, to a minute or two about Charlotte Perkins' *The Yellow Wallpaper*, from 1892, which Cao also discusses.

In this deluxe, leisurely version, I would remind you that in this period, Vuillard would have been influenced by Japanese Ukiyo-e prints, such as this one by Utagawa Kunisada, from 1854. In these, each distinct area of pattern results from a masterly carved block of wood. Maybe because the printing technique imposes separate layers,²³ I find that these interior portraits, despite the textile excess often found in them, do not really render the same camouflage effect (nor affect). Additionally, Ukiyo-e's are images of a floating world, aspiring "to live solely in the present moment, [...] to not let oneself be overwhelmed by poverty and not let it show in one's face, but to let go instead, like a pumpkin floating in the river."²⁴ These characters, born from impressing surfaces, inhabiting a world of screens rather than walls, choose to impersonate lightness instead of architecture.

Then, instead of the established relation to Ukiyo-e's, I would propose a completely speculative lineage, juxtaposing Mimi to the women portrayed by the

²⁰ See Marina Warner (2011). "Freud's Couch: A Case History". *Raritan*, 31 (2). pp. 146-163.

²¹ Warner, 152.

²² <https://www.freud.org.uk/about-us/the-house/sigmund-freuds-famous-psychoanalytic-couch/>

²³ See https://www.harashobo.com/english/ukiyoe_detail.php?print_id=30798 or https://www.harashobo.com/english/ukiyoe_detail.php?print_id=30156

²⁴ Asai Ryōi quoted in Gisèle Lambert (2008). "Història d'una Col·lecció: Estampes i Llibres il·lustrats de l'art ukiyo-e del Département des Estampes et de la Photographie de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France," in *Ukiyo-e: Imatges d'un Món Efímer. Gravats Japonesos dels Segles XVIII i XIX de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France*. Fundació Caixa Catalunya. 17. Own translation.

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Malian Seydou Keïta in his studio in the 1950s. A great body of work to discuss theatricality and fiction, subject and object, class and representation, these are portraits of a society at the brink of colonial independence, proud.²⁵ In a faux interior suggested with a hung cloth, Keïta's clients pose in their Sunday best in aspirational defiance, often borrowing consumer goods available in the studio: a watch, a handbag, a telephone, a radio - even a car. Although the compositions of Keïta's photographs seem to have significant parallels with Vuillard's paintings, his subjects are displaying rather than camouflaging themselves. The material encounters lead not to objectification, but *incorporation* of all these patterns, surfaces, and goods into their personhood. Alas, we have, again, no time for all of that.

6. Walls like lion skin (feminist performance)

So, from Woodman's photographs I arrive to other 20th century feminist, performative practices, from where I will conclude.

Louise Bourgeois' *femme maisons* go beyond imitating a surface: they are not mimesis but complete metamorphosis. Nonetheless, I still want to mention Bourgeois because her lair concept, to which she returned repeatedly, can further illuminate the intertwining between interiority and interior. Bourgeois warned that while a lair is protective, its security "can also be a trap."²⁶ It is no surprise that the double edge of the domestic interior concerned many 20th century women artists. The interior is subjected to artistic appropriation and subversion, transforming the embodied traces on its surface into an extension of professional practice.

For instance, take Yayoi Kusama's *Accumulation* and *Self-obliteration* series, from the early 1960s. The dotted, protruding, and netted surfaces seem to expand, relating to cosmological potential, rather than the well-manicured shrubbery of 19th century walls. Kusama, who has suffered hallucinations since childhood, turns such alienation into an exterior reality. She inserts herself into these environments, and self-obliterates by covering her body in similar patterns. The willing objectification is

²⁵ <https://www.seydoukeitaphotographer.com/biography/>

²⁶ <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80872>

Interior/ity camouflage: superficial adaptations of bodies and architectures.

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the result of an internal perception of a threat, but also points at camouflage as a way to claim agency against a confusing reality. The dazzled dazzles dazzlement back.

In a completely different practice, Swiss artist Heidi Bucher, in the late 1970s, would paint layers of muslin and latex on the walls of abandoned buildings burdened with meaning and experience - a sanatorium, her old family home. In ripping the latex, she'd obtain ghostly, soft copies of the surfaces of the space, still gripping to material traces such as paint chips, tiny wood splinters, dust. A physically taxing process, she would use her whole body, often being overwhelmed and covered by the resulting limp skins. We have glorious images of her wearing them, reminiscent of warriors or hunters wearing the skin of a bear, or lion. They read as a demonstration of might, or even, magical transference (here, I shall acknowledge that Leach does relate sympathetic magic to mimesis). Bucher's camouflage only takes place in an accidental, fleeting moment, when she is struggling with these haunted interiors. She becomes surface out of need: she has to cover her body to be able to carry history, before she can drag the interior outside, and expose it.

7. An open door (non-conclusive departure)

I too shall leave. On my way out, I will reference not a surface but a text, *On Longing*, where Susan Stewart writes that

“... the body itself is necessarily exaggerated as soon as we have an image of the body, an image which is a projection or objectification of the body into the world. Thus the problems in imagining the body are symptomatic of the problems in imagining the self as place, object, and agent at once. ... there are a number of ways in which the body and the world, the experienced and the imagined, mutually articulate and delimit each other.”²⁷

With this early excursion into interior camouflage, I wanted precisely to dip my toes into these issues of how bodies, images, and spaces relate to each other. More specifically, how bodies mediate affective needs by assimilating themselves into an interior, not only sheltering but becoming visually close enough to be mistaken for it.

²⁷ Susan Stewart (1993). *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Duke. 132.

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It is early days, and I have only offered you a rushed peek into visual affinities that may only fully build into meaning later on.

For now, I wanted to plot a preliminary atlas of interior camouflage in order to identify some patterns of these mutual articulations. Spiralling from Mimi's portrait, I have suggested that interior camouflage is a response of a body so pressed by its circumstances and environment, that it resorts to objectifying itself into a surface, a citational act of survival, often obsessive, exhausted and exhausting. There is so much more to learn (for instance, about pattern, intersubjectivity, or commodification). As I faced Vuillard's painting of his sister and mother in person, in a storage facility in Queens, the day after the North American election, Mimi's bodily recoil reminded urgent in its provocation: what can each of us do in an interior that may be more vulnerable than expected, knowing that history does not stay on the other side of the door?

Many thanks.

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