

Davide Fornari

## **Camouflage as an aesthetical paradigm of contemporaneity**

Camouflage is generally intended as a strategy that human beings borrowed from the animal kingdom for concealing and transforming themselves, often in order to survive. Animal mimicry offers unexpected examples of cheating abilities: chameleons can blend in with their surroundings, the butterflies of the species ‘*Acherontia atropos*’ display a skull on their back apparently to deter predators, but can also mimic the scent of bees to move about hives unmolested.<sup>1</sup> The opportunity to survive granted by invisibility or mimicry in the animal kingdom was the model for the elaboration of strategies of concealment on battlefields. But the origin of camouflage is older than its adoption in military tactics.<sup>2</sup>

The etymology of the word camouflage is debatable. The most recognized origin, although uncertain, of the Italian verb ‘camuffare’ (to camouflage) is from the Late Latin ‘muffa’ (glove), ‘muffula’ (muff or mitten), or ‘camuzzum’ (cloth), to be intended as “*to muffle the head*”. The ‘camuffo’ is a “*hood that covers the face*”, and during the sixteenth century the ‘camuffi de Rialto’ were Venitian cutpurses: nasty, sharp petty thieves patrolling the Rialto market. ‘Roba da camuffi’ refers to stolen goods, ‘camuffa’ is a deception or a trap, and ‘Camuffo’ is a surname still existing in the Venice area referring to the job of ancestors.<sup>3</sup>

The French term ‘camouflage’ might derive from the Italian ‘camuffare’, through the French ‘camouflet’ (from ‘chault moufflet’) “*blow a puff of smoke in someone’s face to cause disorientation*”. The locution ‘chault moufflet’ derives from the Walloon ‘moufler’, “*fill the cheeks with air*”, referring to ‘moufle’, “*large face*”.<sup>4</sup>

A more poetic etymology is equally attested from the Latin ‘carmen’ (song, poem): ‘charme’ (charm) is a derivative of ‘carmen’ intended as spell or magical influence:<sup>5</sup> camouflage would be a spell or charm cast on things, in order to change their arrangement, setting or meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Coming to the physical origin of camouflage, biomimetics are animal tactics of dissimulation, employed in the military field as a model for war camouflage:<sup>7</sup> the disruptive pattern of camouflage fabric, conceived as a visual subterfuge to blend soldiers in with the battlefields, is a simple tactic to conceal troops in woods, deserts, snows, and trenches. Nevertheless, for a long

period prior to the diffusion of camouflage uniforms during the World Wars, the earliest employ of visual communication as a military technology was the production of visual devices for distinguishing the troops on the battlefield. Military insignia, uniforms, emblems, gonfalons were proto-applications of corporate image strategies for surviving and avoiding friendly fire. The creation of systems of visual coherence made allied forces immediately recognizable from enemies.<sup>8</sup>

Camouflage, maquillage, body adornment with animal leathers and bones still exist in the rituals of several African ethnic groups as a way to integrate themselves deeply into nature.<sup>9</sup> Also, these practices produce a code of tribal membership, in the same way as military liveries distinguished troops on battlefield prior to the introduction of deception and camouflage techniques.

Surprisingly enough, the technological escalation of weapons, battles on open landscapes, and aerial warfare, can not be considered as the origin of the application of camouflage technologies to soldiers, vehicles, and buildings. Already in classic literature, invisibility is a manifestation of the divine will during battles.<sup>10</sup> Aphrodite interrupts the match between Alexander and Menelaus by raising a thick fog on the battlefield in the third book of *Iliad*.<sup>11</sup> In the same way Athena protects Odysseus from the curiosity of Phaeacians in the seventh book of the *Odyssey*:<sup>12</sup> fog is the favorite special effect used by Homer to deter enemies.

Camouflage as a visual and communicational strategy derives from the studies of animal mimicry and perception. There were contributions from the domain of visual arts, notably by Surrealism and Cubism, during the World Wars in the definition of efficient dazzling techniques.<sup>13</sup> These interactions between nature, the arts, and military practices deeply involved corporality. “Body” is the main issue for those expressions of visual and performing arts employing vegetal and mineral elements in a natural context: artists and performers blend themselves in with nature and disguise themselves as nature teaches. As an example, nature itself produces forms and deformations in the silhouettes by Cuban-American artist and performer Ana Mendieta:<sup>14</sup> the body becomes an impression into the earth, or an empty template, a boundary devoid of matter, obtained through complex chemical processes in order to make the body vanish.

Authors of fiction also conceal themselves behind fictitious identities in order to tell personal stories and to create dialogues between hidden characters. In movies, camouflage operates in two different ways: on one hand it deals with the narration, on the other with the story told, applying two different stratagems: optical camouflages (fade-in, fade-out, fog effects), and fake, fictitious

or even fraudulent stories.<sup>15</sup> Music adopts camouflage as well: the jingles we hear everywhere build a sound landscape, a constant and imperceptible thorough bass, that is an evolution of the *musique d'ameublement* by Erik Satie.<sup>16</sup>

Hence camouflage can also be captivating and not just menacing and deterring: an architecture transfigured into its context and nature was the model for a group of German architects, including Paul Scheerbart, Erich Baron and Adolf Behne and lead by Bruno Taut. At the beginning of the twentieth century they designed a utopian model of city: the city-crown, a building transparent and shining as a crystal, at the center of a circular human settlement. A tension towards invisibility that architecture from the Modern Movement up until today has continued to aim for.<sup>17</sup>

Military camouflage is formally different, although strategically similar: the earliest examples of camouflage included the use of fake war installations (i.e. inflatable ones), in order to deter or deceive enemies.<sup>18</sup> “Deception” is intended both as fraud, lack of truth, and as source of affliction due to fraud. Collective imagination has definitively associated the camouflage pattern with war: “*Hamas is breaking the main principle of international laws, prescribing combatants to wear a uniform*”, states Cynthia Ozick.<sup>19</sup> Uniform has become an essential requirement, not for camouflaging people, but to make their role evident. The absence of uniform is the camouflaging technique of terrorists, to blend in with the civilian contexts.

The camouflage fabric and pattern has become an element of the work of many contemporary artists.<sup>20</sup> In the series *Paisajes uniformados* (“*Uniformed Landscapes*”), Spanish artist Mateo Maté modifies the landscapes painted by Corot or Constable, so as to translate the colours into numbers referring to camouflage patterns from different national armies. In the installation *Thanksgiving Turkey* (2007), a typical middle-class living room features furniture, a carpet, and lamps covered in the woodland camouflage fabric of the Italian army (figure 1). The television set broadcasts a scene from the film *Patton* (by F.J. Schaffner, 1970): in front of the American flag Major General Patton pronounces a discourse distorted by the artist. Instead of an official speech, he declaims the recipe for the thanksgiving turkey.<sup>21</sup> It is not just irony towards the military world or American militarism, but rather a way to highlight how much the military element has become an everyday issue also for civilians.

South African artist Stephen Hobbs transformed the Outlet gallery in Cape Town with the dazzle painting pattern used during the World Wars in order to confuse the observers about the actual direction of large ships, such as aircraft carriers (figure 2). It is just another example of how contemporary war and contemporary arts both deal with fraud, disguise, invisibility, figure-ground confusion, intended as privileged ways for exploring the issues of perception and construction of reality.

But how has the camouflage fabric passed from uniforms to catwalks? The shape of high uniforms was meant to display a svelte and erect body, thus implying a high rate of tailoring know-how, easily transferrable to the design of formal suits.<sup>22</sup> “*Camouflage clothing was frequently worn by specialist units throughout the Second World War and thus acquired an elite image*”, as happened with Italian paratroopers uniforms.<sup>23</sup> Most of all, however, it was antiwar protests that made the camouflage fabric a “classic” of fashion. Since the end of the sixties many protesters against the war in Vietnam started wearing military uniforms in public and civilian contexts, such as the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, occupying the Statue of Liberty for three days in December 1971.<sup>24</sup> For many artists the camouflage fabric became a symbol to be subverted into an antimilitary element. During the eighties Andy Warhol used the camouflage pattern for the series of silk-screens *Self Portrait with Camouflage* (1986). Stephen Sprouse employed the same pattern, but with different, vivid and absolutely anti-camouflaging colours for the fabric of his famous *Camouflage Suit* (1987).<sup>25</sup>

The camouflage fabric has thus come back and forth from the street style to catwalks, mediated by American contestation and European subcultures of the seventies.<sup>26</sup> Several fashion designers invited to display their works at the exhibition *Radical Fashion* held at the Victoria & Albert Museum presented camouflage wear: crafted for haute couture clothes, like the evening dress *Camouflage* in silken tulle by Jean Paul Gaultier (spring-summer 2000),<sup>27</sup> or featuring various patterns (woodland, pixelated, and dotted camouflage) on a war scenario in the collection by Comme des Garçons (spring-summer 2001, significantly entitled *Optical Power*).<sup>28</sup> The last version of camouflage pattern is the point of Prada fall-winter men’s- and women’s-wear for 2010: the vivid colors highlight the body, instead of concealing it (figure 3).

In his book *Le Mimétisme animal*, Roger Caillois states that human beings transform animal behavior into strategies. They cancel their bodies and blend in with the boundaries and colors of

their environment, assuming the aspect of something specific, in order to vanish or to stand out through stratagems adapting to the situation.<sup>29</sup>

According to the studies by Caillois on animal mimicry, one can distinguish three tactics: disguise, camouflage, and intimidation, with parallels to human behaviour. The innate ability to use “masks” is proper to both animals and humans, the latter being the only living creatures able to use tools to reach their goals, as they are animals not adapted to a specific environment, but able to adapt to everything. While animals are naturally endowed to conceal themselves, human beings have to use objects and machines – the landscape of design – as media for their camouflage.<sup>30</sup>

The integration of new technologies into objects has often happened through phenomena of camouflage. Technological objects were frequently modeled over human, animal or vegetal forms, even without a prosthetic use. Although, the replacement of human body parts through prostheses allowed a strong innovation in the field of technology and design, as far as transforming design objects into cute companions of the domestic landscape.<sup>31</sup>

The current production of robots, the heirs of automata, is a very interesting case study for the status of the design discipline: androids are, as automata, handcrafted in limited series of often just one unique model. They are the result of a ‘bricolage’ process, involving experimental psychology, mechatronics, and industrial design. Prototypical robots and androids currently are, although crafted, the groundbreaking stage of design.

According to Tomás Maldonado, one of the possible turning points in the history of design is the obligation of covering the mechanical parts of machines with a chassis by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> Before the industrial revolution, the mechanisms usually employed in clocks were disguised as humans or animals in the production of automata.<sup>33</sup> Anthro- and zoomorphism have been used as an ontological metaphor both in language and in design, in order to attain personification: representing or embodying a quality, concept, or thing in a person, an animal, or an object.

The production of automata, earliest examples date back to Classical Greece, was blamed by the Catholic Church during the Renaissance. Nevertheless in the same period the first missions of Jesuits to Japan (1549) allowed the diffusion of astronomy and mechanics, as far as the production of the first Japanese clocks (‘wadokei’) and the first automata (‘chahakobi ningyo’), which was a social machine disguised as a Japanese kid (figures 4-5). After the seclusion law

(1638), Catholic religion was prohibited, therefore leaving no trace of the first Japanese clockmakers, while the level they attained is the ideal continuation of the European tradition in the making of automata, and it eventually evolved in the Japanese mechatronics corporations.<sup>34</sup>

Automata and robots belong to the category of artifacts usually defined as “humanoid”, according to their anthropomorphic configuration. Anthro- and zoomorphism are strategies for the configuration of products with a long tradition. They were most employed during the phases of technological innovation: anthro- and zoomorphic configurations make the users familiar with new products and services, in case of deep factors of innovation and development of the categories of artifacts. The proliferation of automata, starting from the fifteenth century and reaching its acme during the seventeenth, can be seen as the collapse of a mythical “*impassable abyss between what is produced by nature and the man-made*”.<sup>35</sup>

If human beings employ objects, artifacts, and stratagems in order to conceal themselves, robots are the most camouflaged artifacts, since they employ a humanoid interface replicating their own creator.<sup>36</sup>

Not only objects, but also words can be camouflaged. In his book *Engaños de guerra*, the Spanish officer Francisco Marín defines camouflage as “*information used to manipulate someone else’s behavior, in order to make them accept a fake or distorted presentation of the physical, social or political environment*”.<sup>37</sup> This definition can be applied easily to advertisement or mass media messages, which Vicente Verdú described as the raw material of “*capitalism of fiction*”: from the point of view of information theory, camouflage is a form of disinformation.<sup>38</sup> It is not just about lies: according to Verdú, contemporary capitalism stopped producing goods in order to create new fictitious and captivating realities.

Finally, even words can be invisible. Shigeru Matsui collected his visual poem *Camouflage* into 13 volumes.<sup>39</sup> Each of them is composed of 84.000 characters (42.000 “/” slashes and 42.000 “\” back slashes) in total, divided into 15 neat tables. It is a poetic practice about the palindrome and the anagram, and the text as criticism (figure 6). It is a book to look at, rather than to be read through. The title is a quotation from Nabokov’s novel *The Gift*: “*Striped and spotted with words, dressed in verbal camouflage, the important idea he wished to convey would slip through*”.<sup>40</sup>

The concept of camouflage moved from the animal kingdom to the domain of the arts, through unexpected applications of abstract art and pop practices to body, vehicles and installations of the military field. Camouflage is about vanishing, and can be seen as a military and visual strategy to blend in with the context. The camouflage fabric has become over years a symbol of this strategy, and it is used either with or without a connection with the military element to refer to our permanent perceptual inquisition of reality.

The camouflaging of technology (disguise or transparency of objects and buildings) and information (lies, fiction, and disinformation) are everyday matters. Thus we have to constantly reformulate our idea of things and their unexpectedly true essence. I tried to collect from many sources and different disciplines a definition of camouflage, extended though partial, as a paradigm of contemporaneity: virtual, ambiguous, mutable, and deceitful.

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<sup>1</sup> J.F. Bouvet, *La Stratégie du caméléon. De la Simulation dans le monde vivant*, Paris, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> As general references to the issue of camouflage, see: H. Blechman, *An Encyclopaedia of Camouflage: Nature, Military and Culture*, 2 voll., London, 2004; C. Casarin, D. Fornari (eds.), *Estetiche del camouflage*, Milan, 2010; H. Goodden, *Camouflage and Art. Design for Deception in World War 2*, London, 2007; N. Leach, *Camouflage*, Cambridge (MA), 2006; T. Newark, Q. Newark, J.F. Borsarello, *Brassey's Book of Camouflage*, London, 1996; Ch. Prod'hom (ed.), *Cache-Cache Camouflage*, exhibition catalogue, Lausanne, 2002. See also the following monographic issues of magazines: *Lotus International: Camouflage* (2006), n. 126, February; *Revista de Occidente: Ocultación, engaño, máscara. Camuflaje. Una metáfora contemporánea* (2008), n. 330, November.

<sup>3</sup> See the entry 'camuffare' in: M. Cortellazzo, P. Zolli, *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, Bologna, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> *Camouflet* comes from the fifteenth century French locution 'chault moufflet': "*fumée épaisse que l'on souffle malicieusement au nez de quelqu'un avec un cornet de papier enflammé*" (thick smoke puffed in someone else's face through a burning paper mouthpiece). This idiomatic derives from the Walloon 'moufler': "*enfler ses joues*" (to fill the cheeks with air), referring to 'moufle': "*gros visage aux traits épais [aux joues gonflées comme pour souffler]*" (large face with thick traits, with swollen cheeks). As an alternative, 'chault moufflet' could be a derivative of 'mouflet'-'moufle': 'gifle' (slap on the face), from the dialect of Liège 'mofler': 'gifler', and 'donner sur la moufle': 'gifler', as an extension of meaning of 'moufle': "*visage épais*", from the German 'Muffel'. See: <http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/camouflage> and <http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/camouflet> (last retrieved: 23 September 2010).

<sup>5</sup> See the entry 'charme' in: M. Cortellazzo, P. Zolli, *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, Bologna, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> P. Fabbri, 'Strategie del camouflage', in: C. Casarin, D. Fornari (eds.), *Estetiche del camouflage*, op. cit., p. 9.

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- <sup>7</sup> On animal concealment and its application in the field of technical and design solutions, see: G. Salvia, V. Rognoli, M. Levi, *Il progetto della natura. Gli strumenti della biomimesi per il design*, Milano, 2009.
- <sup>8</sup> F.H.K. Henrion, A. Parkin, *Design Coordination and Corporate Image*, London, 1967; G. Anceschi, 'Aderire all'emblema e imprimere il marchio', *Il piccolo Hans* (1983), n. 40, October-December.
- <sup>9</sup> H. Silvester, *Les Peuples de l'Omo*, Paris, 2006, 2 voll.; P. Magli, 'La maschera elusiva. Pitture del corpo tra mimetismo e intimidazione', in: C. Casarin, D. Fornari (eds.), *Estetiche del camouflage*, op. cit., pp. 40-51.
- <sup>10</sup> M. Leone, 'La zampa sinistra del camaleonte. Camouflage e invisibilità nelle culture antiche', in: C. Casarin, D. Fornari (eds.), *Estetiche del camouflage*, op. cit., pp. 29-39; M. Leone, 'Cultures of Invisibility: The Semiotics of the Veil in Ancient Rome', in: *Proceedings of the Congress Semio Istanbul 2007*, Istanbul, 2007, pp. 1069-1079.
- <sup>11</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, III, 379-382.
- <sup>12</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, VII, 14-17.
- <sup>13</sup> T. Newark, *Camouflage*, London-New York, 2007, p. 72.
- <sup>14</sup> O. Viso, (ed.), *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body. Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985*, exhibition catalogue, Ostfildern, 2004.
- <sup>15</sup> A. Costa, 'Effetto nebbia e camouflage', in: C. Casarin, D. Fornari (eds.), *Estetiche del camouflage*, op. cit., pp. 107-116.
- <sup>16</sup> R. Favaro, 'Musique d'ameublement: mascheramento e mimetismo nella composizione del paesaggio sonoro', in: C. Casarin, D. Fornari (eds.), *Estetiche del camouflage*, op. cit., pp. 117-125.
- <sup>17</sup> B. Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, Jena, 1919; L. Orsini, 'Pelle, filtri e membrane: l'architettura della trasparenza', in: C. Casarin, D. Fornari (eds.), *Estetiche del camouflage*, op. cit., pp. 140-146.
- <sup>18</sup> The current Italian ambassador in Japan, Vincenzo Petrone confessed in a public letter to a newspaper that during a NATO crisis between USA and USSR in 1983 the Italian government decided to simulate the transport missiles from the base of Sigonella to the one in Comiso, which was at that moment unfit to host real weapons, in order to avoid further USSR protests: they used papier mâché rockets. See: V. Petrone, 'I missili di cartapesta per ingannare i sovietici', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 4 October 2010.
- <sup>19</sup> See: A. Farkas, 'La scrittrice Cynthia Ozick: "L'Europa non è degna del Giorno della Memoria"', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 19 January 2009.
- <sup>20</sup> M.T. Méndez Baiges, *Camuflaje. Engaño y ocultación en el arte contemporáneo*, Madrid, 2007; M.T. Méndez Baiges, P. Pizarro, (eds.), *Camuflajes*, exhibition catalogue, Madrid, 2009.
- <sup>21</sup> M.T. Méndez Baiges, 'Camouflage nell'arte odierna: appropriazioni e détournement', in: C. Casarin, D. Fornari (eds.), *Estetiche del camouflage*, op. cit., pp. 67-74.
- <sup>22</sup> S. Tonchi, 'Military Dress, Modern Dress', in: F. Bonami, M.L. Frisa, S. Tonchi (eds.), *Uniform. Order and Disorder*, exhibition catalogue, Milan, 2000, pp. 153-159. Notably, the English fashion designer Paul Smith started his internship at a tailor workshop of high uniforms.
- <sup>23</sup> T. Newark, *Camouflage*, op. cit., p. 130.
- <sup>24</sup> T. Newark, *Camouflage*, op. cit., p. 164.
- <sup>25</sup> T. Newark, *Camouflage*, op. cit., pp. 166-167.

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- <sup>26</sup> See: J. Sherwood, 'The Nineties Utility Movement: Prime Suspect in the Death of Designer Fashion', in: F. Bonami, M.L. Frisa, S. Tonchi (eds.), *Uniform. Order and Disorder*, op. cit., pp. 176-185.
- <sup>27</sup> C. Wilcox (ed.), *Radical Fashion*, exhibition catalogue, London, 2001, p. 81.
- <sup>28</sup> C. Wilcox (ed.), *Radical Fashion*, op. cit., pp. 73, 75, 78.
- <sup>29</sup> R. Caillois, *Le Mimétisme animal*, Paris, 1963.
- <sup>30</sup> R. Caillois, "L'Univers de l'animal et celui de l'homme", in: *Rencontres internationales de Genève: Le robot, la bête et l'homme*, Neuchâtel, 1965, pp. 11-30.
- <sup>31</sup> S. Annicchiarico (ed.), *Animal house. When Objects have Animals' Names*, exhibition catalogue, Milan, 2002.
- <sup>32</sup> T. Maldonado, *Disegno industriale: un riesame*, Milan, 2005, p. 25.
- <sup>33</sup> M.G. Losano, *Storie di automi. Dalla Grecia classica alla Belle Epoque*, Turin, 1990.
- <sup>34</sup> M.G. Losano, *Storie di automi*, op. cit., pp. 124-126; T.N. Hornyak, *Loving the Machine. The Art and Science of Japanese Robots*, Tokyo, 2006, pp. 13-28.
- <sup>35</sup> T. Maldonado, *Disegno industriale: un riesame*, op. cit., p. 20.
- <sup>36</sup> D. Fornari, *Il volto come interfaccia*, Milan, 2011 (forthcoming).
- <sup>37</sup> F.A. Marín, *Engaños de guerra. Las acciones de Decepción en los conflictos bélicos*, Barcelona, 2004, p. 15.
- <sup>38</sup> V. Verdú, *El estilo del mundo. La vida en el capitalismo de ficción*, Barcelona, 2003. See also: P. Virilio, *Stratégie de la déception*, Paris, 1999.
- <sup>39</sup> S. Matsui, *Camouflage*, 13 voll., Tokyo, 2008.
- <sup>40</sup> V. Nabokov, *The Gift*, New York, 1952.