

STEALTH

ELLEN ROTHENBERG



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NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
FINE ARTS CENTER GALLERY



JUN 11 – AUG 03 2007

THE GEOGRAPHY OF INTENTIONS

ESSAY BY SHANNON STRATTON

FILL IN YOUR
UNIT'S ADDRESS

FOLD BACK

POSTAGE AND FEES PAID
DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
DDP-316

Aerotriangulation.¹

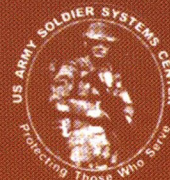
"It is no longer so much a question of nihilism: in disappearance, in the desertlike, aleatory, and indifferent form, there is no longer even pathos, the pathetic of nihilism – that mythical energy that is still the force of nihilism, of radicality, mythic denial, dramatic anticipation. It is no longer even disenchantment, with the seductive and nostalgic ... It is simply disappearance."

– Jean Baudrillard

FOLD BACK

REVERSE OF DA FORM 2028-2 (TEST)

ALL VEHICLES ENTERING THIS INSTALLATION ARE SUBJECT
TO SEARCH IN ACCORDANCE WITH PROVISIONS OF AR 190-22



U.S. ARMY SOLDIER SYSTEMS CENTER

Origin of Coordinates.²

The Natick Soldier Systems Center: Department of Defense Natick, Massachusetts, Summer 2004

After they: check her ID, search her car (including the undercarriage), ensure there is no camera on her person, The Department of Defense gives her permission to enter the base.

Welcome to the *Individual Protection Directorate* (IPD). We are a "major player in both *Future Force Warrior* and *The National Protection Center* by providing technical program support and the necessary individual protection technologies to modernize the Warrior and First Responders." The IPD tagline reads: "Global Threat Protection for the Warfighter."³

A chemist shows her the testing facility. There is a collection of international camouflage – uniforms and make-up. Dioramas are set up in the *camouflage evaluation facility*. She tries on night vision goggles and a new protective vest. They share samples of rejected camouflage patterns, one that looks like a striking tablecloth from the 1950s, and samples of the new digitized pattern, currently on the ground in Iraq.

Those in charge of camouflage development are called the *Army Soldier Systems Engineering Team*. Their mandate is to integrate technology to make a "more mobile, more survivable, and more lethal Warfighter."⁴

Soldier systems. Lethal Warfighter. A poster talks about the *Future Force Warrior*, the next generation of soldiers. Carefully crafted language that distances itself from humanity. Systems are networks, methodologies, regimens, or, The System, the authorities. The soldier is just a part of The Machine. A component detached from the complex.



Zenith. ⁵

Toggle the focus a bit.

This is a phony map, an abstraction of a phony landscape, of a phony escapade. In a world of mediation, it is possible that all of our experiences are phony ones – the ‘realness’ enhanced by the blurring of boundaries between actual and artifice. Military camouflage, the ersatz chameleon, empties the world of concreteness, absorbing it into space, “its terrain rendered featureless and without apparent gestalt.”⁶

Taking stock: this map looks disheveled, a little misshapen, seams and waistbands, which dissolve into arbitrary drawing. The mountain is only mottled cloth, drabs, bundles of garbage, abandoned at the site; an agitation to dispose of or engage with them, tickles the mind. But with mounting uncertainty comes the specter of dread. Apathy come aggression come apathy.

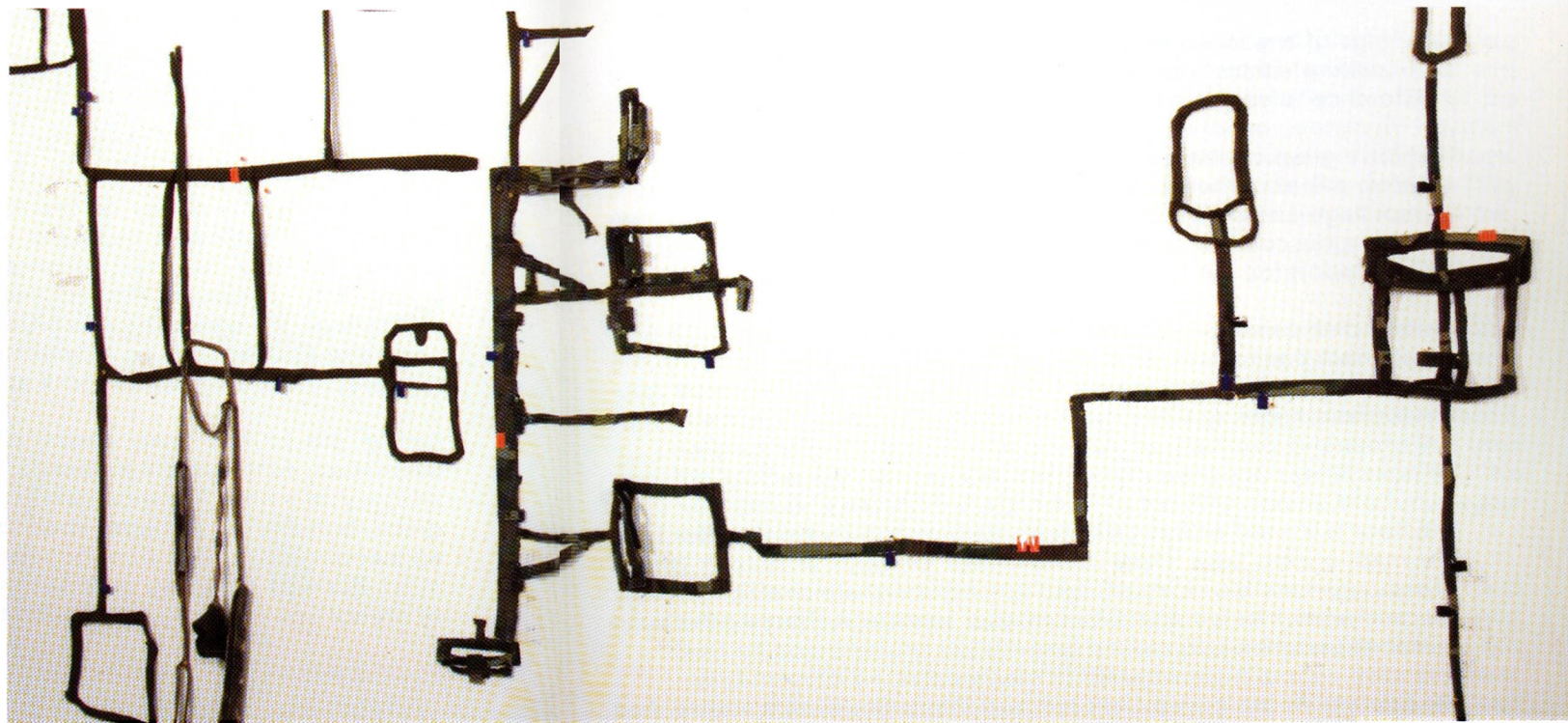
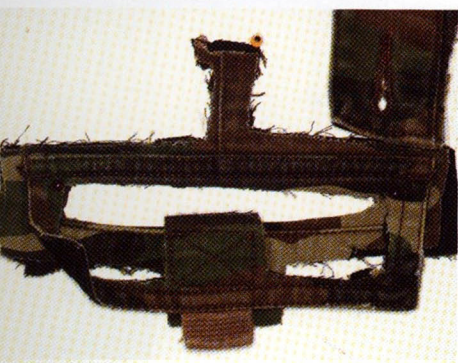
Metes and Bounds. ⁷

Aloof from the circumstances, *Stealth* is a picture of paths and roadways. Maybe borders. Maybe boundaries. Maybe cloth margins that make you scrutinize the sterile, white wall behind them. They droop a little under their own weight. An arbitrary map with microscopic travelers, they trek to dead-end, a dozen cul-de-sacs and parking lots drawing their way across the wall.

Roads laid out (pinned out), without a key, unnamed – they are a cipher: do they look to be solved? The entrance is an invention, maybe at the yellow pin with a number on its head. It indicates ‘missing.’ A clue to the shrapnel of pins that surround it, the wall is now riddled with evidence.

A gambit played at the margins of the discernable, undetected by the everyman, the players cut and build and trace, and their game plan grows like a crack in the wall. Either an endless trajectory without plot or a blueprint for nonsense, *Stealth* hints at strategies that are known to be unknown.

This plan is in tangles.



Alidade.⁸

Honing in on the head of that pin, the rest of the details come into focus: the splayed zipper, the frame of a detached pocket, scraps of green and beige camouflage. The seams of clothing that would predictably hold together a garment, a kind of container, frame or outline for the body when in them, but now free from duty. Cut away the cloth and the retained seams leave a tracing of absence. Pinned out like a forensic specimen, it is a study in missing.

Stealth implies that something is hidden. Perhaps not lost, but covered up. A few double takes and it starts to become clear: the body is gone. In voiding the figure from the combat uniform, in fact in voiding the uniform itself, the absence of the soldier is palpable yet abstracted. Instead of a discernible chalk outline, there is this new outline, made from fragments of camouflage – that trademark for the military industrial complex.

Pressed flat and connected end to end, the framework of a uniform, of a soldier, of an army, spreads across the wall like a battle plan. Each pin

and each flag a notation, an impersonal mark made on depersonalized territory.

Using only the edges of the uniform – parts of a whole – a sense of disposability is writ large. The surgical cutting away of the cloth indicates that this is no accident. Like packing foam or casting 'trees', this framework is unsettling waste. With the contents gone, these artifacts talk about the making of.

The making of a uniform.
The making of a soldier.
The making of an army.

How many identical soldiers have been made? As a somewhat discomfiting print for fashionable street clothing, camouflage casts soldiers both in and out of the army, from anarchists in army surplus to children in pink camouflage overalls and sexy girls in 'camo' bikinis. As a commodity, 'camo' is watered down symbolism and by making the

trappings of war increasingly ambiguous and everyday, camouflage's pop culture status dissolves its significance, further normalizing indifference towards war.

Fashion's great contradiction is that it makes an army of individuals. It creates tribes where traditional community has disappeared. Camouflage-as-fashion would seemingly connect people in a common ideology, but colorful 'camo' does little to express any real connection to, or support for, *the troops*.

Instead pink camouflage overalls, with rhinestone detailing, have only an abstract connection to the uniformed soldier. Like 'camo' in the field, fashion at its most prevalent, makes people invisible. Small comfort found in knowing you look like everyone else. That you disappear.

Sensor.⁹

The floor is littered with surplus cloth, perhaps the missing insides from the map on the wall. There are bundles of cloth in purple, green, brown, grey and blue camouflage. Trussed up in wire and zip-ties, they are packages, not boulders, but maybe sandbags. They could build miniature trenches.

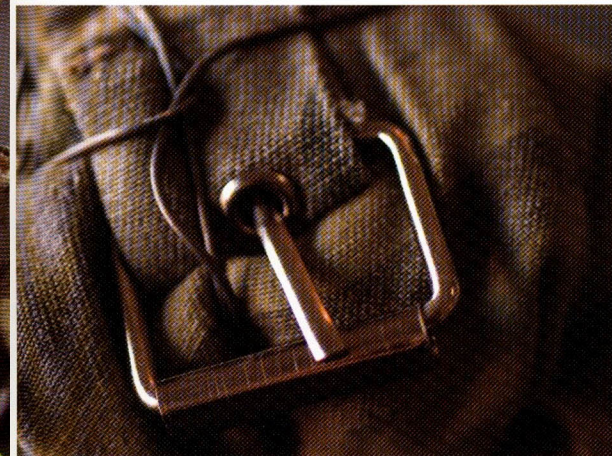
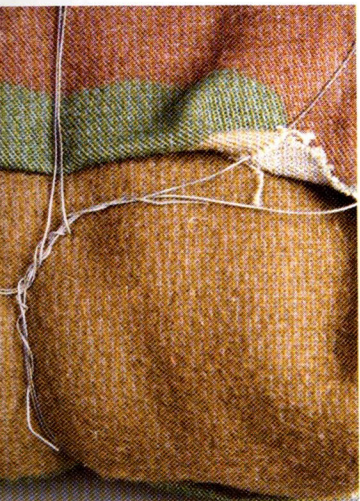
Stealth implies the covert. A something that is not what it seems. And tied up in bundles, these mounds of cloth seem like a magical fetish: voodoo amulets with unknown power. Something about their size is

seductive, as they shift from enticing, intimate objects, to accumulating a kind of uncanny rank as they shape-shift between under and overwhelming in their amassed and muted similarity. But under the wrong, the right, the wrong circumstances these seemingly innocent talismans become cluster bombs, a grenade, the unattended package. Their unknown power is imminent: improvised explosive devices. They both unnerve and invite: touch me, hold me, collect me. Detonate me.

Control Station.¹⁰

This is a story of contested borders and boundaries that erase people from its plot. Detached from their uniform, the soldier is merely subsumed in a map, and the IED, re-fashioned from its own fragments. With only the edges of the uniform left, their individuality is effaced, their identity marginal to the plan: a geography of intentions that uses the soldier but removes all connection between signification and the real men or women on the ground. As the map comes into focus again it is clear as mud: people are essential incidentals.

When Baudrillard asked: "the Gulf War: is it really taking place," it had been so speculative in its presentation, a virtual war with no images, built on commentary. But *this* war. It takes place. Embedded journalists – and investors – authenticate it; disseminating stories from the front, from inside the Green Zone. But the less official versions of this war, with leaked images and ideologies, gets chopped up and dispersed as fragments across newspapers, radios, televisions, websites and blogs. Each fragment shaped and rebuilt by a different dogma, the war really just a special interest group.



"The discrete display of options melts into a pudding" Thomas de Zengotita points out in *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live In It*, "you can't help but become fundamentally indifferent – unless it happens to be "your issue," of course, one you "identify with," a social responsibility option you have chosen. Otherwise you glide on, you have to, because you are exposed to things like this all the time. *All the time.*"¹¹

This mediated war, is a subjective war. Everyone's reasons – religion, politics, and economics – pitted against one another piece-meal. The required sacrifices of the past are eliminated – no draft, no tax and so, no unity for or against. Instead the cumulative effect of combat is otherwise neutered, dispersed over a smattering of volunteers, leaving barely an impression on the nation as a whole.

This is the post-post-modern condition of fragmentation. The 'whatever' generation. Knowledge dependent on the subjective, the experiential. Nobody believes in a war that makes no real impact on *him or her*, despite the glut of commentary, the glut of images. Between every media reinterpretation there is distortion and misreading, an endless game of telephone where everyone hears what everyone wants to; what they're impartial to. Or whatever, whatever they don't want.

Propaganda has been put to rest for something more insidious: acquiescence through exhaustion. In the information age, overload the recipient with options and they will eventually shut-off. By backing up, it is possible to dispel the tension, lose the ability to locate oneself in this unstable landscape and break the spell of engagement. What moves us one moment might drift past the next, or, as "connoisseurs of what moves us,"¹² we usually learn to move on, back up. Take an exit.

This is the lesson of the Gulf War: since truth is a deception, we lie in wait for something tangible to happen to us. To me. For the war to happen to us. To me. There is ease in removal. Convenience. It is second nature. Throw it in reverse. Just removal from removal from removal: racing backward like a satellite-Google-earth-map.



NOTES:

- 1 The process of developing a network of horizontal and/or vertical positions from a group of known positions, using direct or indirect measurements.
- 2 Point in a system of coordinates that serves as a zero point in computing the system's elements or in prescribing its use.
- 3 Individual Protection Directorate: *Global Threat Protection for the Warfighter*. Pamphlet. Natick, MA: U.S. Army Rdecom, Natick Soldier Center, 2006.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 From *zenith telescope*, an instrument for observing that starts near the zenith: a point on the celestial sphere directly above the observer's position.
- 6 Lee, Pamela M. "The World As Figure/Ground and Its Disturbance." *Thomas Hirschhorn: Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress*. Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 2005.
- 7 Methods of describing land by measure of length (metes) of the boundary lines (bounds).
- 8 Instrument, or part of an instrument, for determining direction. In its simplest form, a peep sight or telescope mounted on a straightedge.
- 9 To extend man's natural sense by detecting emitted or reflected energy.
- 10 Point on the ground whose position is known and can be used as a base for additional survey work.
- 11 de Zengotita, Thomas. *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live In It*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2005. p. 14.
- 12 Ibid. p. 14.

BIO:



Ellen Rothenberg's installations, performances, and public projects raise questions of political engagement, historical memory, and social dialogue. Her work in urban and rural parks reinvent the garden as a place of public discourse. Collaborating with writers, geographers, scientists, historians, horticulturalists, and media makers, Rothenberg's projects often begin with extensive research before unfolding in community or museum settings.

Her work has been presented throughout the US and Europe including The Neues Museum Weserburg, Bremen, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, The Museum of Fine Art and The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston among others. She has received numerous commissions for public projects in the US and Europe, and is currently working on a commission from the CTA and the Chicago Department of Public Art. Rothenberg's work has been supported by grants and fellowships from The National Endowment for the Arts, The Rockefeller Foundation, The Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, and The Massachusetts and Illinois Arts Councils. She teaches at The School of the Art Institute Chicago.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST:

MAP: cut clothing, map pins and map flags
2007, dimensions variable

TARGETS: seven digital prints
2005, each 21' x 23"

BUNDLES: cloth, wire, zip-ties
2007, dimensions variable

WINDOW GRAPHICS: vinyl
2007

 **Northeastern
Illinois
University**
5500 NORTH ST. LOUIS AVENUE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60625-4699

curator
Heather Weber

design
Sonia Yoon

photos
Damla Tokcan Faro
Brad Farwell
Leslie Schwartz

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