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CFP: “Incongruities”

Imminent Failures, Possible Utopias: Thomas Hirschhorn’s Principles of Collage

*As students we were always encouraged to go beyond  
the Rolls Royce juxtaposed with the hungry Third World child.  
It took me a long time to understand that the really important thing was  
the Rolls Royce juxtaposed with the hungry Third World child!  
The action of putting together two things that have nothing  
to do with each other...that’s where the politics lies.  
—Thomas Hirschhorn*

Paris-based Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn is known for his aggressive, entropic, and politically-charged works composed of packing tape, cardboard, spray paint, aluminum foil, and found images. The principle of collage—in its most agonistic form—governs Hirschhorn’s practice, in which images from consumer culture, high culture, and the culture of war confront each other, mediated only by the artist’s agitated ballpoint pen markings. Within the museum, Hirschhorn’s seemingly ad hoc displays overtake the white cube; outside its walls, Hirschhorn takes care to situate his works in more challenging circumstances. A monument to Spinoza in the red-light district of Amsterdam and a Bataille monument in a largely Turkish-inhabited neighborhood of Kassel—disjunctions between the sites and the apparent “subject matter” of his works have opened Hirschhorn to accusations of obtuseness or worse. (What, one might ask, does Bataille have to do with the lived circumstances of the Turks in Germany? Or Spinoza with pole dancers?) Yet, for Hirschhorn, art’s autonomy and utopian possibilities are precisely enacted, however tenuously, in just such incongruities. This paper will address the purposeful disjunctions at the levels of site, content, aesthetic means, and rhetorical frame that govern Hirschhorn’s practice.