**Hide and seek.** Hanna Rose Shell, *Blind*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

# Hide and Seek

## *Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance*

Hanna Rose Shell

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**Figure P.1—Sniper in grass.** Instructional photograph distributed by the British War Office, ca. 1916. Reprinted courtesy of the Imperial War Museum [Q17729].

# Preface

A photograph captures everything in that it reveals nothing.

This pedagogical image (figure P.1) was first distributed by the British War Office in 1916 to members of the British Army and its allies. A wooden stick reaches into the photographic frame to direct our attention to what the image's title implies should be a craftily concealed human being: a model sniper, lurking in tall, weedy grass. The invisible subject of instruction is camouflage.

But where is the sniper? *Is* there a sniper? No matter where the viewer looks, she is hard-pressed to find traces of a person encoded in the emulsion. The silver nitrate grain expresses no telltale shadow, hue, or texture. Differentiating the foreground from the background, the human from the natural, is difficult, if not impossible. Even its scale is hard for some viewers to gauge. The photograph is uncomfortably hard to read, its hider, who is also a seeker, even harder to see. When the photograph is blown up big, some viewers profess to see the circular end of a gun dark against the grass. Others see several possible giveaways, while still others see only grass and a deceitful stick, pointing at nothing.[1]

If the sniper *is* there, rifle cocked, eyes peeled, he is observing the world unseen. Given that he cannot be found, this image would be photographic documentation of a job exceedingly well done. But perhaps there was never a man hiding in these weeds at all; we're staring at an empty field. Either way, there's something to learn, for both the World War I soldier in training—for whom the photograph was originally produced—and for the modern-day civilian. To study

camouflage is to investigate how we look at the world and how we conceal ourselves in and among photographs of that world. The logic of camouflage is predicated on the assumption that *not showing up* is, at times and places, both a strategic necessity and a worthy aspiration.

Let's assume there *is* a man there somewhere. In producing this unsettling pedagogical instrument, the War Office aimed to suggest that if and when you need to hide, you should emulate the hidden human subject, the alleged "sniper in grass." Immerse yourself and your own sighting devices into the landscape so that you appear to disappear within its sculptural and textural contours, whatever those may be, wherever you are.

As it happens, the protophotographic environment depicted in this photograph is a scrubby patch of Kensington Gardens, London, which served as the Special Works School research facility during World War I. If you needed to get lost in a similarly gravelly, grassy habitat, you would garnish yourself with local foliage, add face paint, and burrow behind the grass, under the rocks. Disappearance is, within this pedagogical regime, always *from* something—from photographic exposure or from the perceptual capabilities of the photograph's eventual viewer. Disappearing is the effect of receding into the background of one's projected photographic habitat, that is, of not being visible in a surveillance photograph that might be made at this or a future moment. Do as the sniper does, and maybe you will fool the camera, too, and countless and unknown future others.

*Get the better of a photograph?* This is no easy task. Ever since William Henry Fox Talbot, inventor of the first photographic negative, characterized photography as "the pencil of nature" in 1844, critical observers from Oliver Wendell Holmes, to André Bazin, to Susan Sontag, to Roland Barthes have articulated how conditions of photographic production influence the photograph's status as a "trace" or "skin" of an original (or protofilmic) form. Philosopher and founder of semiotics Charles Sanders Peirce called attention to the peculiar twinned epistemological status of the photographic negative. The photograph, like the mounted skin of an animal, both





materially derives from the live organism with which it is associated (a relationship described as "indexical"), and resembles that organism, possessing some of its qualities (a relationship described as "iconic"). It is because the relationship is simultaneously indexical and iconic that photographs are so widely used in evidentiary and illustrative purposes, as in criminology and detective work.

A straightforward understanding of a photograph as a direct "trace" of a protofilmic form guided the development of everything from medical atlases to criminological archives. Art historians and philosophers of science interrogated a related "truth to nature" photographic episteme.[2] Meanwhile, cultural critics argued that notions of "objectivity" and "indexicality" facilitated the development of multiple fields of science and technology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[3] Such work effectively details how, despite repeated claims to the contrary, both the photographer herself and the larger social and economic forces guiding her work shape the final photographic image. Reception and consumption play a crucial role in determining whatever signifying function the image will have.

Back to the photograph in question: The presence of the stick leads us to assume that if we look closely enough at the spot to which it points, we will triumphantly discover our man. But before us there is no foreground or background; just ambiguous ground. Did the sniper not show up on the scene, as well as not showing up visually in the photograph? In that event, the brush, the face paint, the careful body positioning, all would have been wasted. Perhaps this is a pretense of a pretense, a double deconstruction of representation. Maybe we are the ones who have been tricked. Exposed, as it were.

What is the configuration of self, environment, and experience that leads one to hide inside a photograph? To conceal oneself? To become something else? To see everything? To not show up? These questions are conjoined motivations for, and expressions of, the logic of camouflage.

INTRODUCTION

# Camouflage Media

*Here's one way of not showing up.* In 1918, a young American artist and infantryman named Homer Saint-Gaudens invented a new machine in response to a pressing problem. A shortage of blankets had beset the American Expeditionary Forces installed along the Western Front, and had threatened the war effort. Until that hard winter, secondhand wool had been collected in British and American cities for recycling; at specialized factories known as "shoddy mills," this reclaimed material was transformed into new fabrics, primarily bolts of boiled wool dyed olive, brown, or gray-green. These blankets were widely distributed among the infantry and had provided both warmth and concealment, but by January 1918, raw materials and labor were scarce, and factory production stalled. It was cold, it was damp, and soldiers looked into the sky and saw planes equipped with cameras flying overhead.

Saint-Gaudens, son of the renowned sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, had a reputation for making do in a pinch. Early in 1917, when fabric had likewise run out at Camouflage Training Camp in Plattsburgh, New York, he had dug up faded navy overcoats, remnants from the American Civil War, to clothe the new enlistees.[1] Soon thereafter, Saint-Gaudens sailed with the rest of the Fortieth Engineers across the Atlantic, landing at Brest, France. Upon arriving at headquarters in Dijon, the energetic thirty-seven-year-old proposed a solution to the looming blanket shortage crisis. Captain Saint-Gaudens's ingenius invention would turn old newsprint, discarded letters, war bulletins, and bound volumes whose spines had

worn out into camouflage material. Run through the press-and-dye works, shredded paper would reemerge as thick sheets of woven material in environmentally coordinated shades of gray, green, and brown.

Effectively deployed, the camouflage material produced by Saint-Gaudens' book-devouring machine could make people—soldiers or civilians—disappear into photographs much like the photograph of the sniper hidden in the grass, only to be revealed (or not revealed) later. As *Scientific American* reported in the spring of 1918, the blankets of camouflage material were "tinted like the surrounding grass and used as a cover for the bodies of men going up to the front."[2] Infantrymen had been supplied a textile skin. In an almost preternatural process of replicating the landscape, the "material," as the troops called it, was grafted onto observation posts, artillery factories, trench parapets, and gun batteries. From printed paper grew a second nature.[3]

The term "camouflage" was absorbed into English and American lexicon almost immediately after its introduction. Coined in 1914 by French general and artist Lucien Victor Guirand de Scovela, entering into the English language early the following year, the term "camouflage" came into being as a way to refer to systematic dissimulation for the purposes of concealment from photographic detection. The etymology is twofold: On the one hand, "camouflage" harkens back to the nineteenth-century French word *camouflet*, which refers either to a primitive land mine that creates potent underground explosions without surface rupture or to a tiny smoke bomb that explodes when placed into the nose of an unwitting victim. "Camouflage" is also related to the medieval Italian *camuffare*, meaning "to make up."[4]

The sort of systematic dissimulation that "camouflage" implies involves both individual and collective practices. It is effected through human mimicry of natural forms—mimicry, that is, in the sense of visual resemblance, rather than similitude in any ontological sense—as well as through the construction of decoy military





forms. Of course, strategic concealment itself had been a component of warfare long before 1914; one need only consider Homer's history of the Trojan Horse or Birnam Wood's march to Dunsinane in *Macbeth*. In the former, the Greek army gains entry to Troy through use of a giant decoy horse, a move widely understood as treachery; in the latter, an invading army disguises its approach by concealing its human soldiers as trees from a nearby forest, treated as simply an effective strategy.[5] But not until the twentieth century were such practices explicitly set forth and institutionalized as a body of interwoven scientific theories and artisanal practices.

Blame the camera, perhaps. Camouflage was both a potent response to photography's practical and theoretical effects on biology, military technology, and the arts and an instigator of its further development. Trench warfare was made infinitely more complicated by the new possibilities of aerial photography. Artists and cultural critics, as well as politicians and military leaders, heralded photography's heightened significance. To combat this new and in a sense increased threat of being seen by the reconnaissance lens—which included not only aerial cameras, but also periscopes and sniper scopes—*camoufleurs* brought to bear craft skills from backgrounds as diverse as taxidermy, architecture, set design, and portraiture. And they did so against a cultural backdrop in which the ability of human understanding and technologies to expose heretofore misunderstood aspects of natural history was simultaneously celebrated and decried. Could the camera help prove the truth of natural selection? Or did humans, as others alleged, fool themselves into thinking the products of the lens could further any kind of usable knowledge?

Saint-Gaudens himself likened the practice of self-concealment via camouflage to a woman's toilette. Both entail acts of deception in anticipation of the possibility of a spectator's gaze. He recalled installing over his body and his peers "bunches of burlaps to produce a texture like their surroundings.... It would thin out at the side so as to blur the spot into the surroundings, as a girl blends rouge into her face."[6]