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The Hollow Men: Chris Marker
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By Miriam Jordan and Julian Haladyn

Chris Marker's video installation *The Hollow Men*, presented on a series of eight plasma screen monitors mounted in a row, captures a haunting vision of the death and destruction of World War I, an event that functions as a prelude to the dawn of a new era. Taking as his starting point T.S. Eliot's poem *The Hollow Men*, written during the violent chaos of the early 20th century, Marker juxtaposes fragments derived from Eliot's lyrical lament with found photographs that float across the screens and fade away into blackness. These alternating sequences of black and white still images and text march solemnly, almost mechanically, to the cadence of Toru Takemitsu's melancholy piano composition *Corona*. The video is presented in an alternating pattern across the sequence of screens, with every second monitor displaying the same series of images; the resulting visual meter – an eight line rhyme scheme of *abababab* – creates an ironically mesmerizing sense of order that contrasts with the visions of madness that are presented.

The overall feel of *The Hollow Men* was one of solemn silence that was punctuated by the flickering screens and reverberating sounds echoing through the empty space of the main gallery of Prefix; the presence of this installation is literally overwhelming. Marker parenthetically creates a relationship between the past and the present, between the war to end all wars and the present conflicts that roll across our nightly television screens. *The Hollow Men* was originally commissioned by and premiered last spring at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the resulting 19-minute video is an implicit criticism of the global politics of the new millennium. As the

first part of a larger series of videos titled *Owls At Noon*, the anaphoric repetition of *The Hollow Men* loops endlessly like a broken record, an aural and visual metaphor for the continual reenactment of past atrocities that resonate incessantly across the events of the present.

As an ardent political activist, Marker's various artistic productions span a diverse range of media – including writing, photography, television, cd-rom, film and video – which unanimously form a record documenting the tyrannical forces that have dominated the events of the past century. In his only fictional film *La Jetée* – which, like *The Hollow Men*, is composed primarily of still photographs – the futuristic technological advances that have made time travel possible, instead of enhancing the freedom of individual members of society, are used to control and entrench existing oppressive power structures. Similarly, in *The Hollow Men* Marker uses the past to highlight the lack of political accountability in current events by showing images of people devastated by war that are often suppressed from public debate. The emptiness present in the gallery appears to be an apt metaphor for the meaninglessness of contemporary political rhetoric that pervades public discourses concerning questions of morality that surround war. One of the lines presented in the video asks: *Remember "The Hollow Men"?* Through this question, Marker invites the viewers of his installation to consider the lessons of the past in light of the present ideological situation, in which the oft-repeated mantra of hollow men stifles reasoned discussion: *you are either with us or against us.*

The Hollow Men continues in this vein of political criticism on the hollowness of people who passively sit by and allow governments to fill their empty heads with lies to justify the horrendous consequences of their actions. The act of waging war carries as a

result the death of innocent people, but this reality is overshadowed by the justification that ideals such as valor, honor and courage are more important than human life. Marker is critical of the moral vacuity that prevents any meaningful discussion of the destructive human consequences of warfare. In the opening lines of his poem, Eliot passes judgment on this blatant thoughtlessness: “We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men / Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!” More than just documenting the past, Marker’s employment of Eliot’s poem as the basis for his video installation becomes a frightening reminder of the continuing presence of these people whose heads are *filled with straw*. These masses of ignorant minds overlook the atrocities that continue to proliferate, even today, and account for the shadows that fall between ideals and reality; that is a lack of acknowledgment for the consequences of the ideas that propel *us* into war. The empty black screens that punctuate *The Hollow Men* mirror the manner in which violent images of war are elided in favor of willful ignorance. The images of Marker’s video fade away mimicking the manner in which society forgets terrible events, remembering instead the patriotic slogans and hollow catchphrases that permit the re-visioning of the past.

As a purely aesthetic experience *The Hollow Men* is unequivocally hauntingly beautiful. But this is its lure; the immensely disturbing content of the predominant amount of the imagery – bombed out buildings, wounded and dismembered soldiers – is heightened by the fragmented construct of this installation. This nightmarish vision of war stands in contrast to the present practices of documenting “bloodless” conflicts, in which dead soldiers and the victims of war are visually elided in favor of crisp technologically enhanced images of bombs dropping on an invisible populace. Marker’s

use of World War I documentation, as well as the harsh beauty of Eliot's polemical poem, serves as an ingress into the difficult subject matter that begs for our attention. To quote the final lines of Eliot's poem, as Marker does with aerial shots of bombed out cities, drawing attention to the overlooked human element that falls prey to war: "*This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.*"