

COLLAGE: NEW APPLICATIONS

Organized by William Zimmer, Guest Curator

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COLLAGE IS A THING WITH SEAMS

COLLAGE: NEW APPLICATIONS explores the continuing vitality and wide serviceability of collage. It has been nearly a century since the first appearance of collage in cubist painting. The reason for its continued survival is its ability to mutate. The true power of collage is often overlooked; collages made by cutting or tearing paper and pasting are almost a ritualized craft these days. What this exhibition demonstrates is something simultaneously more consequential and more widespread: the manifold potential of "the collage way of thinking."

This exhibition proceeds from the belief that collage is nothing less than the spine of 20th century art, and goes on to demonstrate how it is manifested in works made within the last few years. As many people know, the obituary page of the *New York Times* is a great source of lore, often providing the occasion for profound meditation. When the great American fiction writer Donald Barthelme died in 1989, the summing up of his life included his observation that collage would stand out as the major art form of the 20th century.

As Barthelme obviously saw it, cultural historians in the future would associate us not with Cubism, or Surrealism, or Pop art or Minimalism, but with a way of thinking and working that conjures up humble actions like Picasso and Braque carefully tearing up the newspaper, or Matisse wielding a pair of scissors. Of course Barthelme was a writer, and for him collage meant hooking together incongruous chunks or snippets of prose for a text that careens, disconcerts, and finally amuses.

But a writer singing the praises of collage is part of the point. Collage is infinitely adaptable: just as it crosses the boundaries between the various movements in the visual arts, it is well rooted in all the various arts. Although he didn't employ the term "collage," T.S. Eliot was alluding to its force when he succinctly defined modernism as "the amalgamation of disparate experience."

A selective survey of "great moments in collage" reveals the underpinnings of the work in the present exhibition. Why collage should remain so potent is no mystery when one considers the texture of the times in which we have lived for many decades. World War I tore up and rearranged the political map of Europe, and Dadaism reflected this. In Germany Kurt Schwitters declared, "I am a painter and I nail my pictures together." He meant all his work, from his room-size constructions to his small paper collages, was rooted in an outlook that reflected the rambunctious climate of life.

As for Dada's successor, Surrealism, the discontinuous surface, a key effect of the collage mentality, is the passport to desired strangeness. One thinks of Max

Ernst amalgamating 19th-century drawings and biological drawings for his fantasies in collage. But for our time what seems especially relevant is Andre Breton's remark uttered in the 1930s, which has turned out to be prophetic, that Surrealism would soon trickle down from being an art movement to become the fabric of everyday life. Who can deny that the last decade of the 20th century promises to be a very strange time?

Surface discontinuity, the natural outcome of working in the collage spirit, is the boldest emblem of the deep rifts built into contemporary life. Speaking of everyday life, it was a small dense collage on exactly that theme by the English artist Richard Hamilton, ("Just What Is It that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?") that gave birth to Pop art in 1956.

On the other hand, one can't discount the potency—and the serenity—of collage as a formal device in abstract art. Perhaps the primary inspiration in this area was Mondrian with his exclusive concentration on the plane of color. The sophisticated "concrete" reliefs of Ben Nicholson approach being collages. When there is discreet overlapping recalling collage in a geometric framework, structure is endowed with great nobility.

Collage fits American art hand-in-glove, because America—especially New York City—is itself a collage. The notion of a melting pot has long been recognized as nice but unworkable. Being an egalitarian culture, without smooth division into homogeneous neighborhoods, our seams show. This creates energy that fuels artists. The immediate American forebearers of large-scale collage aesthetic are Robert Motherwell and Robert Rauschenberg. Exemplifying the path not taken for this exhibition, Motherwell's creations out of the best and most exotic materials have reinforced collage's

status as a classy medium, but Rauschenberg's emphasis on the potential for feistiness in the collage way of working is closest to our times and has informed the sensibility of this exhibition. His combines and silk-screens of the early 1960s, whose subject matter was topical history, widened the scope of collage that Rauschenberg saw as a vehicle for harmonizing the disparate forces that characterize modern life.

But collage also has a history of commanding a painting when applied in a limited way. Certainly resonant with contemporary sexuality are those luridly beckoning mouths that DeKooning lifted from cigarette ads in magazines to endow several of his painterly "Women" with a life in our world.

This brief chronology is intended as a backdrop for this exhibition, because the works in it are essentially outgrowths of these earlier milestones. But immediately apprehensible in the exhibition are several factors: the scale is enlarged, the contrasts heightened, the pace accelerated, in keeping with the tempo of life in the late 1980s into the 1990s.

Since collage is most commonly associated with diminutive scale—Picasso and Braque were replicating the corners of tables after all—it's surprising to see the very large work in the show. The Meyer Vaisman tapestry makes its collage point with a single juxtaposition in vast acreage—but it's an unmistakable point. The same pertains to the David Reed painting, which features the meeting of large-scale formal elements. The collage process behind George Peck's "re-painting" may be self-evident, the cutting up of one canvas and re-assembling it on the wet ground of another, but on a large scale it resembles a vast mosaic project.

Abetting the aggressive nature of several works in the show is that the literal process of collage has been dispensed with to emphasize that technical mastery of collage is in some cases subordinate to the need to layer, to crowd pictorial elements and thereby disrupt. There is no binding medium in either Russell Maltz's "painting" or his drawing; Maltz ingeniously stacks his elements to heighten their planar natures. The aforementioned Reed painting is accomplished solely in paint, as is the Ben-Haim with the aid of stencils. Randall Schmit's compositions are kaleidoscopes of various genres of painted imagery. In different ways Jack Whitten's two paintings are pure paint (albeit cut up and reassembled). In one, Whitten lets a skin of acrylic paint form over his found objects; the resulting composition, then, is a collage rather than an assemblage; in his other work, the grid is formed with "chips" of acrylic paint.

Whitten's painting with its rough surface brings up the issue of a crossover to relief sculpture. Sculpture has its analog to collage, assemblage. Works such as Ashley Bickerton's partake of sculptural principles, but in the end proclaim the plane, which collage always does paradoxically by disrupting it. If Whitten and Bickerton push collage toward sculpture, artists like Andrews and Scanga do the opposite. They tap its power through selective and discreet application.

Collages whose basis is photography are certainly new. If one doesn't want to seek them out in museums or galleries, one can certainly find them in advertisements. But the doctoring in this exhibition is notable for its intensity. Mike and Doug Starn made the art world take notice in the mid-1980s with their radical methods of expressionistic reassembling. On the other hand John Baldessari works very coolly—and slyly. In the past, by placing innocuous spots of color atop images, he displaced the surface, and now on large Cibachromes, he blocks out large sections of the image. This "addition" works to negate content, and in doing so can make the viewer anxious.

Mary Miss travels widely, and hers is a sensibility that rearranges to ennoble, in the end to praise, the geometry inherent in a structure. She is attracted to architecture, since it is a major element in her sculpture which is drawn from a variety of traditions.

The postcard of longtime "found object" status is a major medium for several artists: it is widely available and pliant, arranged in grids the viewer can be plunged neatly in to the discontinuous and disrupted surface and, through the varied subject matter in postcards, travel physical and conceptual miles in the process. A succinct nugget of this is *East-West Waterfall* by Howardena Pindell in which postcard

subjects are enfolded into a neat landscape. One surveys Alan Ruppertsberg's grid rapidly at first and then tries to create a narrative. But what takes over is luridness, an undertone of unease not unlike that associated with David Lynch. Burhan Dogancay's photograph of his wife Angela on a camel is a tourist shot, but Dogancay utilizes the mode of repetition to reinforce our musings on the status of women in the Middle East, these days not an esoteric subject. In

his *Pepsi Door* Dogancay focuses on street graffiti as collage, using the layers to record an accumulation of presences. Collage permits discontinuity in time as well as space.

Since I have contended that the supreme strength of collage is its ability to mirror and record the tempo and mood of contemporary life, it should not be surprising that the exhibition contains rich and unique political commentary. The elements of selective collage in Benny Andrews's *War Memorial* work to provide a crispness, even a hyper realism, that lets us feel like we're looking through a window at the burial scene. Keeping such subjects close to life is part of the artist's intent. Tony King reverts to newspaper with which collage began; his use of actual newspaper accounts, both local stories and world news, from a Hudson Valley paper around the middle of the 19th century, when Hudson River landscape flourished, as a frame for a landscape painting, both soothes us by taking us into the past and makes us aware of constant change, as the river flows placidly.

Words are a mainstay of contemporary conceptual art. Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger have accustomed us to tangles of language. But what Myrel Cherrick has effected here via slides in two projectors is a layering of language, words, and phrases that at times seems like a hard political tract but is also romantic and mysterious. The accumulated word images comprise a rounded picture of a contemporary woman's life.

At the beginning of this essay it was mentioned that one of the strengths of collage is its ability to adapt. An area in which collage doubtless has unlimited possibility is video. Temporal rhythm enters into play as visual images unfold.

The videotapes in this exhibition's compact presentation reveal four difficult moods and rhythms. Peter Callas bombards us with an array of images that recapitulates the frenzy of war, while the plethora of diverse visuals offered up by Nam June Paik is an ebullient flourishing. In the space of less than two minutes Karin Levitas addresses the large theme of the journey

through life. In "Elevator Girls" by Woody and Staina Vasulka the discontinuous surface is invoked with laconic wit.

To reiterate: collage is a standard of being modern, in the old noble sense of standard, a heraldic device. To follow Eliot's laconic formula, disparate experiences are with us with more intensity and thoroughness than ever, and collage is proving to be a long term way of reflecting a total world view just as classicism once did. Just a couple of years ago when Eastern Europe thawed, "the end of history" was proclaimed in some quarters. As we are witnessing now, history did not end. Art reflects life, and collage has proven indefatigable at this. Collage, like life, tumbles on in endless renewal.

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COLLAGE AS MODERNIST AESTHETIC: THE INCEPTION OF COLLAGE IN AMERICA

Collage is arguably the most revolutionary development in 20th-century art. By now we are well aware of Braque and Picasso's brilliant invention in this realm; however, less has been made of its reverberations in American modernism. In the years following World War I, collage served as a liberating force for such modernists as Stuart Davis, Man Ray, Joseph Stella, and Arthur Dove—and somewhat later for Anne Ryan and Romare Bearden, among many others. Through their appropriation of new materials and their allusions to mechanical reproduction, the urban experience, nature, and folk art, these artists address key aspects of American culture while at the same time transforming American art. And while thoroughly grounded in modernist aesthetics, these artists are at the same time incipiently postmodernist. Their works are thus crucial for comprehending the role of collage in modernism and for providing a new perspective for contemporary trends—those highlighted in **Collage: New Applications**.

In large part, collage grew out of the realization that art could be a matter of construction rather than of mimesis. As an art assembled from parts, collage can be said to reflect the world of machines; and indeed in the early years of this century, the new world of machines posed a great challenge to artists and writers alike. The poet William Carlos Williams, for instance, referred to the poem as "a machine made of words." Joseph Stella called his collages "macchine naturali," thus imparting to his "natural constructions" distinct mechanical overtones. And Man Ray presented collage as a metaphor for the machine in his series entitled *Revolving Doors* (1917). Other works by Man Ray, particularly his rayographs—simulated collages in which diverse objects left their imprints on photographic paper—often allude to both mechanical reproduction and erotic encounter. In fact, Man Ray frequently suggests that machines and human anatomy are anatomical analogues of each other, an idea introduced into New York Dada by Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia. These early 20th-century artists thus began to inscribe the dominant machine culture into their works, demonstrating that the machine age was a revolution not only in engineering but also in visual language.

We have now entered a predominantly electronic age, and the computer is fast supplanting the machine as our overriding metaphor. Allusions to information processing and compression of information have begun to emerge in contemporary collage, as seen in the spatial congestion in works by Randall Schmit, the mosaic-like "repaintings" by George Peck, and the barrage of information projected by Myrel Chernick.

With its proliferation of advertising, media information, and its dynamic pace of life, the urban environment, too, has remained a constant presence in 20th-

century collage. It was the early modernists who first responded to the profound demographic changes of the time and the consequent accelerated pace of urban life. Joseph Stella's almost spiritual adulation of the city, as expressed in paintings of New York skyscrapers and bridges, also informs his small-scale collages, in which he juxtaposes reproductions of his paintings of the city with discarded and disintegrating cigarette wrappers, theater tickets, and other detritus—a recycling of elements similar to what Rauschenberg did on a much larger scale some 40 years later. Stuart Davis also extolled the cityscape. As if describing a rich collage, he enumerated "the things that have made me want to paint: . . . sky-scraper architecture; the brilliant colors on gasoline stations, chain store fronts and taxi cabs; electric signs; Earl Hines' hot piano. . . ." Davis juxtaposes brilliantly colored, highly designed words and images whose allusions are to the new environment, to promises of a jazzy and bright future in urban America; indeed, these are allusions fostered by advertising itself. His paintings also partake of the syncopated rhythm of jazz, attesting to his love for this indigenous mode and looking forward to Romare Bearden's collages inspired by jazz. (Indeed, it was a conversation with Stuart Davis that validated such content for Bearden.) Although the inflections may not always be so positive nor the allusions so naive as those of earlier works, contemporary

collage continues to be informed by urban references and materials, as especially evident in works by Jack Whitten, Ashley Bickerton, and Russell Maltz.

Retreat from the city back to nature has always been an attractive option for American artists, and this too endures in 20th-century collage. But instead of references to an American wilderness unadulterated by civilization, so prevalent in 19th-century art, we find in the collages of Joseph Stella, Arthur Dove, and others a nature which is never far removed from the city. We find bits and pieces of nature integrated with signs of civilization. For instance, nature enters the collages of Stella in water-logged scraps of man-made paper, some with vague printing showing through; this is nature in the slow process of reclaiming man's work, but not presenting any real threat. In Dove, too, we find such elements as a small cutout image of a Ford automobile embedded in a collaging of shells, sand, and leaves. Similarly, today, in the works of Zigi Ben-Haim, allusions to nature are mediated by the art-deco design, and in a collage by Tony King, a landscape painting is adulterated by newsprint. Given the present threatened state of nature, a romantic submersion into pure nature is even less feasible today than it was in earlier decades.

Throughout this century, collage has inspired not only a constant reexamination of formal problems but also a confrontation with social issues. In his series of "cigarette" paintings — simulated collages in which he appropriates images from advertising — Stuart Davis extolled, while at the same time criticizing, the manipulative power of advertising. And in several of his collages, Joseph Stella alludes to war and its devastating cost in human life. The social criticism of contemporary collage has sharpened, reflecting the increased social awareness of contemporary culture in general. Thus, Alan Ruppersberg points to the hard sell of the "sensational novel." And, like Stella before him, Benny Andrews gives us another — and more timely — memorial to war. Andrews's collages also demonstrate a strong political identification with folk collages. Likewise, contemporary issues having to do with Third World politicized folk art.

When we view the works in this exhibition in light of earlier developments in collage, it becomes clear that, while collage is modernist in style and in material, it has from the beginning contained "impurities" which we now recognize as the seeds of postmodernism, such as allusions to our society's discarding of resources and to our media's manipulative powers. Thus the collages of the early American modernists provide a context for contemporary explorations in the challenging and disorienting realm of the collage aesthetic.

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