

Memory and Unconscious in the Collages of Hannah Höch and John Stezaker

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Abstract

This essay examines the ways in which Hannah Höch and John Stezaker portray the streaming of our collective memory and unconscious, while conveying awareness and fascination with our cultural surroundings, heritage and media imagery. By exploring these dynamics, their collage works delve into the subconscious, prompting reflection on memory and identity.

The fragmentation in these pieces invites viewers to perceive multiple parallel narratives within the image. At the same time, it symbolizes the contradictions and complexities of our world, highlighting the urgency inherent in postmodern communication

Introduction

This essay explores Collage as a particular technique to convey and disclose collective memory and meanings through art objects.

Collage is an art form which allows artists to use different materials to create a visually dynamic and captivating mixture by ripping apart then reassembling them. Coined by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, the term “collage” indicates a medium deeply referential of the political and social context in which the works were produced, offering a prismatic vision of our cultural heritage. In the 1920s, Dadaists further developed this technique with the purpose to break down the boundaries between art and everyday life.¹

Member of the Berlin Dada movement, Hannah Höch (1889-1978) created some of the most innovative, poignant and provoking visual analysis of the culture of the time. She was a pioneer of photo-montage, a powerful tool which combines together different photographs belonging to miscellaneous realities to create a new, artificial one. Using cut-outs from contemporary magazines, her satiric and grotesque works often express a caustic critique of the beauty and fashion industry and of the Weimar New Woman. She brilliantly investigated the complexity of the notion of identity, arising debates around culture, gender and race. Within photo-montage practice, the conventional status of the photograph as an historical source and memory tool is thus altered and used to create a subversive, uncanny sight.²

British artist John Stezaker (b. 1949) works exclusively with found images from books, postcards, magazines and promotional material for films, mostly belonging to the 40s and the 50s. Fascinated by the timeless, powerful force of images, he uses vintage and classical portraits and landscapes to create compelling collages that explore the subversive lure of the photographic image and its role as depositary of memory and meaning and symbol of the modern culture.

Analysing the artworks of contemporary collage artists such as Hannah Höch and John Stezaker, this dissertation focuses on the process and nature of this specific form of appropriation.

Appropriation and Images

Appropriation refers to the act of making use of pre-existing images or objects as elements of a new work, without applying relevant transformation to them. By borrowing existing imagery or elements of imagery and separating them from their context, Post-modern appropriation artists re-contextualize the original image and challenge the viewer to renegotiate its original meaning into a different frame of reference.

According to Buchloh, the beginnings of appropriation in the art practice can be traced to the early 20th Century through the revolutionary artworks of Marcel Duchamp, which challenged the modern culture and the very notion of what art is. Developing his concept of the 'readymade', Marcel Duchamp is considered to be the first artist to use appropriation to create a work of art, thus defining the work of the artist in selecting objects rather than creating new ones. In the era of 'Mechanical Reproducibility', 'Marcel Duchamp appropriated an industrially produced, quotidian object, in order to redefine the cognitive and the epistemological status of the aesthetic object'.³

Artists creating collage using found images express themselves through 'readymade' images⁴, by deconstructing mechanically reproduced pieces of our culture and then contextualizing them into a new and personal meaning.

Through their work, artists such as Hannah Höch and John Stezaker become collectors of collective memories, embodied into discarded pictures trapped and put away in old magazines or forgotten boxes. In their collages 'the rapid scan to which such images are normally subjected is replaced by a more

intense scrutiny, which reveals them as void of the promised they offered or resonant with unintended meanings⁵.

While Höch was “working with the image of things that where around her”⁶, using illustration from magazines and newspapers more representative of her epoch - including the position of women in modern society and cutting edge advancements in photography as microscopical or aerial pictures -, Stezaker gleans his images mostly from the glamorous and iconic world of the 30s and 40s. As he said in a conversation with Daniel F. Herrmann and Christophe Gallois in 2010,

The dominant assumption concerning appropriation is that artists reflect on the contemporary world they live in through the images of that world. I was not interested in the found image as an index in that way. And the big question for me was why my fascination always seemed to take me beyond the contemporary world, into something that came from the recent past but nonetheless a world that no longer exists.⁷

What fascinates Stezaker about past imagery is their 'obsolescence', their aura of mystery and their enticing distance from our world. According to Stezaker, every act of collecting always involves a disclosure of the image from the “ground of its disappearance: the anonymous space of circulation, where images remain unseen and overlooked”⁸. This space of circulation is the overwhelming flux of mass media visual imagery, where images have the specific function of advertisement and representation of imposed social models and aesthetic standards. By removing it from this context and presenting it as a powerful yet evanescent fragment, the artist reactivates the

image in an attempt to make us aware of its magnificent presence. Unlike Hannah Höch - as we will see later on -, Stezaker chooses images from the past, no longer in circulation, out of their 'moment of currency' and whose context and function is now unknown and therefore illegible. His aim is to show the image in its pure and essential ambiguity, letting us indulge in its irreducible, archetypal fascination. The power of the image consists in its ability to express and symbolize contradictory and indescribable aspects of reality. Thus, this revealing vision awakes us from our sleepy, passive and mechanical consumption of images and make us conscious of the power of the image during its reception. In an interview with John Roberts, Stezaker commented:

I was very interested in the idea of the consumer as unconscious, or the forms of unconsciousness within which one consumes images. I thought there was an interesting possible connection between this idea of the aesthetic unconscious and a consumer unconsciousness or passivity, and I was interested in trying to align the two. (...) I felt these represented something unseen as a kind of cultural connection that perhaps we don't fully understand, the ghostly presence of an archetype - that's if one sees the culture of images as unconscious. Not some collective unconscious in the Jungian sense, not some explicable and dissimulative unconscious as in Freud, but an unconscious that's out there in a world, in the actual images that are in circulation⁹.

The obsolescence of the material used and the artist intervention by fragmenting, assembling or juxtaposing two or more different images to create a new disturbing one, disrupts and decelerates our fluency in image consumption. Therefore, the act of contemplation becomes a pensive

moment of arrest and a synchronisation of three different moments in time: the past the images belong to, the individual time of the artist and the time of the viewer - the voyeuristic, hunting spectator, in Stezaker's words. The fusion of these different contexts reveals a new aura of meaning of the image, which enhances the communicative power of the artwork. As written by Michael Newman, Stezaker goes beyond 'the passivity of the aesthetic of pure appropriation, the distancing of irony and the closure of the caption text to explore the life and death of the image in our culture'.¹⁰

Hannah Höch collected sources for her collages and photomontages from her time, tracing a reflective and multifaceted commentary of the world around her. In her research of images, the function and the legibility of the image is essential, as her collages embodied limbs of social and moral values imposed by the established order and diffused by the mass media. Extrapolated from this context, the image has been unlocked from its function, albeit it is still representative of the collective memory of the time. Similarly, Van Hoesen stated that the intrinsic dichotomy in Höch's works 'reflects the slippage between the medium of photo- montage and its indebtedness to its original documentary sources'¹¹.

By assembling discording pieces of dominant stereotypes and giving them another order and shape, she challenges the viewer's reading and understanding of reality. These new, sometimes disturbing images are presented with the deliberate intention to reveal the initial, manipulative function of the image and show that another order of values is possible. In the Catalogue of her first solo exhibition at the Kunstzaal De Bron in The

Hague, in 1929, she stated:

I would like to blur the firm borders that we human beings, cocksure as we are, are inclined to erect around everything that is accessible to us. I paint pictures in which I try to make this evident, tangible. I want to show that small can be large, and large small, it is just the standpoint from which we judge that changes, and every concept loses its validity, and all our human gestures lose their validity. I also want to show that there are millions and millions of other justifiable points of view beside s yours and mine. (...) I should like to help people experience a richer world so that they may feel more kindly towards the one we know.¹²

Matching cut-outs of different sizes and perspectives, Höch creates cubist figures manifesting the relativity of our perception and the richness and freedom of human expression. Her works are a colourful explosion of boundaries and preconceptions, framed by the timeless language of empathy.

In both Höch and Stezaker's collages we find a self-portrait of our humanity, a reflection of the unconscious through the appropriation of images of our shared, collective memory. The collage stands as a physical simulacrum of our psychic and cultural identity, a universal portrait which invites us on a visual journey of self- discovery and self-identification.

Despite the many differences - one of them being the socio-political connotation that characterizes Höch's production, which is absent in Stezaker's work –, both their collages are uncanny and grotesque mirrors of our collective identity.

Empathy and Ambivalences

A common theme in Höch and Stezaker's collages is the co-presence of an element of familiarity alongside a disturbing element of the uncanny, which conveys a feeling of empathetic uneasiness.

In his 'Marriage' series, Stezaker uses publicity portraits of classic movie stars in order to create androgynous icons by overlapping a pair of famous male and female faces. This juxtaposition of the two different images breaks the familiarity surrounding the characters into a sensation of uncanny recognition. The new image presents a discordant harmony, challenging the viewer to accept this grotesque union and to embrace the two irreconcilable images as a whole. Therefore the title of the series is a provocative invitation to the viewer, as their role is essential for the marriage to take place. As Stezaker himself remarked:

The spectator is, in a way, enticed into an act of empathetic engagement. And that is way I feel that the characters created in the 'Mariage' series seem somehow more real than the composite actors they come from. There is something quite human about them. I feel I have returned this stereotypical figures to a certain kind of humanity, that I have breathed life into them. But it is a paradoxical one, of course, because this life of the persona belongs to no one. And as much as one is aware of their humanness, so is one aware of their non-existence. There is empathy and distance simultaneously¹³.

The grotesque hybrids created by Stezaker in this series are marked by a fragility that makes them more accessible to the viewer. No longer shrouded in their gloss of perfection, the wound that cut through them expresses the

laceration of their inner being. When looking at those portraits we experience the ambiguity most characteristic of human identity. In these works Stezaker has opened a breach that shortens the distance between us and this ineffable world that we otherwise struggle to identify with.

Hannah Höch's "Ethnographic Museum" series presents combinations of modern women's body parts and tribal objects, including African masks. The result of this montage between elements from European and non-western culture is a critical and ironic portrait of the morality and racial ideas of the time. In this messy conglomeration of gender, races and cultures the boundaries between the self and the others have been completely melted to create a contradictory yet elegant totality. As identified by Lavin, 'for Höch, montage led away from orderly and toward an exploration of the confusion between self and other, self and selflessness.'¹⁴

As with Stezaker, many of the works of Hannah Höch deal with androgyny, representing a figure characterized by both genders. In presenting this ambiguity, she challenged and provoked the gender role and idea in the Germany of the late Weimar years.

In Höch's collage, the sense of uncanny and grotesque is aroused by the alteration of the body figure through distortions, substitutions and disproportions. Using pieces of our collective memory and consciousness as language of expression, our first approach with her artworks is emphatic and conveys a sense of familiarity, of already-seen: recognition leading to identification. The viewer is then challenged by the distortions and seismic

alterations to discover the individuality of the artist outlined by bold cuttings and edges which mark new horizons of meaning. The viewer automatically responds to the presented illusion with a suspension of disbelief that allows for a momentary immersion in this artificial, composite reality. As explained by Burmaister,

the distorted shapes and composite forms that typify her glued works are the outcome of a disciplined aesthetic strategy geared towards ambivalence. Höch's collage-world is poised between reality and virtuality, consciousness and unconsciousness, humour and the abyss, profanity and poetry¹⁵.

Hannah Höch's personal vision of the human condition is characterized by an intrinsic, powerful duality, expressed in her art through a noisy elegance and a seductive, anarchical beauty.

Optically and Intellectually challenging the very nature of our perception, the art of Höch and Stezaker play with our familiarity with the image to convey an ambivalent feeling of astonishment and fascination, an intrigue which forces us to truly search the image and explore the content within.

Besides acting as collector of emblematic images of our past and contemporary reality, Höch and Stezaker can be considered as curator of our collective memory and unconscious. Their gestures dug grooves into the image, tracing narrative itineraries and metaphorical paths. These artists realized fascinating and innovative shows on paper, lyrically displaying the images like visual poems left for our interpretation.

Notes:

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3. Buchloh, B. H.D. (1982) 'Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop and Sigmar Polke', *Artforum*, September, vol. XXI, p. 29.
4. Salkeld, R. (2014) *Reading Photographs: An Introduction to the Theory and Meaning of Images*, London: Bloomsbury.
5. Newman, M. (1983) 'Simulacra', *Flash Art International*, no. 110, January, p. 38
6. Ades, D. et al (2014) *Hannah Höch*, London: Prestel, p.28.
7. *John Stezaker* (2010), London: Ridinghouse and Whitechapel Gallery, p. 36.
8. Ibid, p. 37.
9. Evans, D. ed. (2009), *Appropriation*, London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge: The MIT Press, p. 97-98.
10. Newman, M. (1983) 'Simulacra', *Flash Art International*, no. 110, January, p. 38.
11. Ades, D. et al (2014) *Hannah Höch*, London: Prestel, p. 82.
12. Ibid, p. 140.
13. *John Stezaker* (2010), London: Ridinghouse and Whitechapel Gallery, p 39.
14. Ades, D. et al (2014) *Hannah Höch*, London: Prestel, p. 94.
15. Ibid, p. 146

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