

UNDERCONSTRUCTION NEW PHOTOMONTAGE

Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum February 2-April 2, 1988

INTRODUCTION to the exhibition catalogue



In the early years of the 20th Century, many photographers worked for the acceptance of photography as an art worthy of the same respect and admiration given to traditional media. Their critics on the other hand, argued that art could not be produced by a machine; "real" works of art were unique, unreproducible, handcrafted objects. By the late teens, however, World War I had thrown these traditional aesthetic value systems and hierarchies into a state of crisis. Artists who were part of the Dada movement attempted a reevaluation and redirection of art, based in part on making it more responsive to forces which were active in society in general. Thus, their work reflected the increasing impact that machines and new modes of production were having on society. One of those machines was the camera itself. Photographs, most often reproduced in newspapers, magazines and catalogues, had become an inescapable aspect of modern life. The Dadaists, in keeping with their total reevaluation of aesthetic norms, now ironically saw photography's mechanical, ubiquitous and multiple nature as epitomizing contemporary culture, and they adopted photography and photomechanical reproduction as two of their most valued art-making resources.



Although the precise early history of photomontage is clouded by rival claims for its "invention", it is clear that by 1919-1920 several Dada artists in Berlin, among them Johannes Baader, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, Hannah Hoch and George Grosz, and, in Cologne, Max Ernst, were using fragments of photographs, reproductions and postcards as major elements in their works. In order to distinguish their pictures from the related yet "aesthetic" collages of Picasso and Braque, the Dadaists called their works "montages" which in German has a connotation of mechanical engineering. While attempting to distance themselves from the Cubists, the Dadaists formed strong ties with the Constructivists and related groups with whom they shared a "building" methodology, as well as interests in non-traditional materials and visual/verbal combinations. While the Berliners' content was often satirical and iconoclastic, and, consequently, thought of as destructive or nihilistic, it is important to keep in mind that they also shared with their Soviet colleagues a strong interest in the creation of new art-making languages. This more "positive" aspect of their work should not be overlooked.

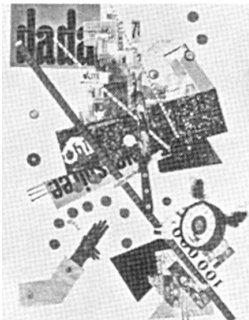


In fact, montage's comparability with critical theories having a strong linguistic foundation (e.g. Russian Formalism, Structuralism, and Deconstruction) has been in part responsible for its ongoing interest to historians and theoreticians as well as artists. A primary characteristic of the "language" of montage is its tendency towards multiple and layered meanings. One example of this multiplicity is the combination of incongruous visual and verbal elements within the space of a single picture. Furthermore, any single element, such as a fragment cut from an advertisement or catalogue, will usually retain a trace of its original commercial context and connotation even after being transported to the montage where it will most likely take on a very different meaning. A favorite strategy of the Dadaists was to turn a magazine's idealized renderings of people and objects ironically (and sometimes grotesquely) against their original purposes without eliminating the viewer's knowledge of that original purpose. Thus, two conflicting meanings -destructive and constructive- are held in active suspension. Finally, these individual elements are combined in compositions, which are more like energy fields than traditional perspectival space (with its attendant sense of rational time). The syntax of montage is non-linear; any single element tends

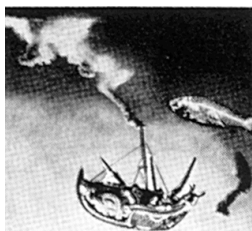
towards a multiplicity of possible connections with other elements. Meanings are contextual and relative, and the literalness of photography gives way to metaphor, metonymy and allegory. These effects are created not only by the cutting and fragmentation of elements but also by the space between the elements which, like gaps that must be jumped, activate and energize the image.

It would not be incorrect to see these "fields" as a kind of shattered mirror reflection of the energy, confusion and contradictions of life as the Dadaists saw it. Many of their works, however, emphasize the desire, perhaps the necessity, to see below this surface reflection to the underlying structure of society or the psyche. Iconographically, the most consistent reminder of that desire is the repeated use of anatomical photographs and diagrams in the

work of Hausmann and Ernst. In addition to their visual impact as figures, these elements tend to constantly remind the viewer to be conscious of what is below the surface, even if that underlying layer is not visible. Thus, during this period the foundations were laid for the Surrealists' examination of the unconscious and for John Heartfield's satirical analysis of the ideology of Nazi Germany in the early 30's.



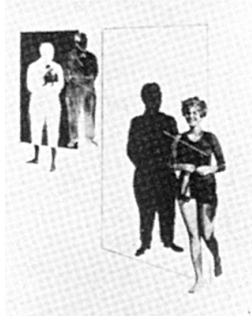
Apart from and following Dada's end as an organized movement, important photomontages were also produced by Constructivist artists such as László Moholy-Nagy and Alexander Rodchenko. By the 1930's, however, the use of photomontage was diminishing. It is interesting, though, that the work of many important photographers of the 30's reveals an adaptation of the principles of photomontage to the making of unmanipulated photographs. Most simply, photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and André Kertész photographed found montages. More complexly, they began to use precise camera placement, "freezing" of motion, and subtle distortion to create juxtapositions of elements reminiscent of photomontage. In the case of Evans in particular, a further relationship to montage is apparent in his highly conscious use of sequencing in his book *American Photographs* of 1938. Although, by this time, the linear, page to page sequence owes much to cinematic montage, the overall effect of *American Photographs* is clearly related to photomontage principles. These adaptations of montage to the unmanipulated photograph and to the book format were inherited and extended by Robert Frank in his book *The Americans*, perhaps the single most influential photographic work of the 1950's.



One of the major achievements of Evans and Frank was their examination of the effects of the image on American culture. Image in their work must be defined very broadly. It includes not only photographs and other pictures, but images as ideals (e.g. "She's the picture of perfection"), symbols and stereotypes (e.g. the public image of a movie star or politician). Evans and Frank stressed, however, that this broadly based cultural phenomenon was increasingly mediated by and realized through photography (including cinema and television). A comparison with Dada montage may help to illuminate this point. While the Dadaists emphasized the impact of machines, for example automobiles on society, Evans and Frank emphasized that this impact is inseparable from the cultural imagery of automobiles, and that this imagery can have as strong an influence on culture as the actuality of the automobile. This project is not easily accomplished. How does one point out that a picture is referring not only to an automobile as a physical object, but also to its status as image -a locus of connotations and references which include the multitude of pictures of automobiles which saturate the environment?



One method that Evans and Frank used to accomplish this task (within a single photograph) was to use a figurative language not unlike the Dadaists who had often created figures (both as characters and metaphors) which were part person and part machine. These have been termed mechanomorphs. Evans and Frank in turn created what one might call a "pictomorph" -a figure which is part person and part picture or image. Similarly, they often photographed found groupings of objects and pictures in which one becomes aware of the "image" or "figurative" aspects of objects. These types of amalgamations within single pictures are extended, sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically, in the page to page relationships throughout their books. Strategies of this kind make it clear that the principles of photomontage are indispensable to Evans' and Frank's exploration and articulation of the role of the image in American culture.



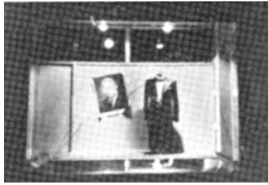
For the sake of continuity one could follow the book theme or concept through the late 50's and into the 60's when the works of Robert Rauschenberg and Ed Ruscha had a dramatic influence on the montage tradition. Rauschenberg, revitalizing Dada strategies, took magazines as the quintessential American book, and, using transfer and screening techniques, spread and juxtaposed their images over large fields. (One important series of these works illustrated Dante's inferno, underlining their literary and "allegorical" aspects.) Ruscha produced a series of what one might call "anti"-books, which both in content (a journey described only in terms of gas stations) and form (a photomontage book which unfolds to over 20 feet) broke from existing norms.



The work of these artists helps to fill out this brief history of photomontage through which a viewer might approach the works in this exhibition. This overview underlines the point that while photomontages have a strong, even primary visual aspect, their full engagement requires the addition of something more like reading than viewing. It is clear, however, that

purely literal or literary models will not suffice to describe this kind of reading. It might in fact be helpful as a final gesture to see the history of 20th Century photomontage within the broader tradition of "picture-writing" which includes, for example, pictograms, hieroglyphics and ideograms and

potentially extends back in time to cave paintings. Within this context, themes vital to today's photomontage - "language" building, analysis of social structures and codes, and the creation of figures of a contemporary self or psyche-take on rich additional perspectives. Most importantly, this vast history suggests a great expansion of traditional notions of "reading" providing a context in which a viewer can be active in inventing an understanding of contemporary photomontage.



This model of reading might be compared to a recent news article. While excavating for the foundations of a new building, a construction crew discovered the ruins of an ancient structure. The photograph accompanying the article, taken some months after the initial discovery, shows the contemporary building under construction over the ruins of the older one. From the perspective of the photograph, it is difficult to tell where archeological excavation ends and construction begins. Surrounding the site are the familiar orange and white striped barriers which both attract and restrain a crowd of excited onlookers. A future treasure has just been unearthed and is being brought to the surface. Its analysis, when complete, will provide the clues for the naming of the still unfinished building.

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Photography
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Illustrations in the order they appear



1. Hannah Hoch *Cut with Cake Knife* 1919 114 x 89.8 cm Courtesy Staatliche Museum
2. Raoul Hausmann *Tattin at Home* 1920 40.9 x 27.9 cm Location Unknown
3. Raoul Hausmann *Elasticum* 1920 7 x 8.5 cm Location Unknown
4. George Grosz and John Heartfield *Dada-Merika* 1919 Location Unknown
5. Max Ernst *Here Everything is Still Floating* 1920 10.5 x 12 cm Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art
6. John Heartfield *Adolf the Superman Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk* 1932
7. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy *Jealousy* 1930 Courtesy Photo International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester
8. Andre Kertesz *Dubo Dubon Dubonnet* 1934 Paris Courtesy The Halsted Gallery
9. Walker Evans *Atlanta, Georgia* 1936 Courtesy The Halsted Gallery
10. Robert Frank *Washington* 1955-56 Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery
11. Walker Evans *Lunchwagon Detail* New York City, 1931 Courtesy The Halsted Gallery
12. Robert Frank *Covered Car* Long Beach, California 1955-56 Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery
13. Robert Frank *Political Rally, Chicago* 1956 Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery
14. Walker Evans *Coal Miners House Scotts Run, West Virginia* 1935 Courtesy Halsted Gallery
15. Robert Rauschenberg *Canto xxxi* 1959-60 36.8 x 29.3 cm Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art

