

Digital Montage: On Collage and the Legacy of Modernism



DANAE · Follow

Published in DANAE.IO · 7 min read · Jan 10, 2020



Crosslucid, Touchless S(t)imulation, © courtesy of the artists. a visual poem, was created for FASCIA BLUES, a collaboration between deCode & Hervisions. The piece comments on connection as a relative means to facilitate new methods of communication, and was exhibited at CADAF during Art Basel Miami 2019.

By Marie Chatel

Copy-Paste. Today we take for granted this functionality on our laptops as if it had always been there. But the fragmentation, dislocation and recombination of visual and textual content only have a short history that finds all its meaning in art. Flourishing in the early 20th century through the movements of Cubism, Dada and Surrealism, collage and montage still have a visible impact on digital art. Beyond its actual process, the practice brought distinct aesthetics and new ways to represent society and technology. Highlight on the legacy of this revolutionary art technique.



Left: Kurt Schwitters, *Der Weihnachtsmann* (Santa Claus), 1922, collage, 28.4 x 20.8 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Right: Pablo Picasso, *Guitare, feuille de musique et verre* (Guitar, Sheet Music, Glass), 1912, papers and newsprint (*Le Journal*, 18 November 1912) pasted, gouache and charcoal on paper, 48 x 36.5 cm, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX. With collage, Modern artists compiled and pasted together paper materials of various sources

including newspaper prints, tickets, drawings, fabrics and papers with all sort of textures. Kurt Schwitters' composition follows a random pattern of geometric and cluttered shapes of paper put together with the printed text in the lower-left corner, defining the name of the work. Meanwhile, Pablo Picasso's continues the vision of a nature morte with sheets of the journal and music sheets embodying their original function. At the same time, paper cuts are assembled into a geometric shape to form a guitar.



Collage: Kicking Off the Information Age

Collage is the action of pasting (in French); montage is the action of assembling. Depending on your affinities, the artistic practice might bring about the vision of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso's *Papiers collés*, the geometric compositions of Jean Arp, the photomontages of Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausman and John Heartfield, the Merz assemblages of Kurt Schwitters or the surreal narratives of Max Ernst. All these productions vary greatly. Yet they mark a shift away from the traditional art forms of painting and sculpture into a new media whose style and content both reflect changes in society.

The end of the 19th century set pace for an industrialised culture. Train and mail, cinema and radio, entertainment and consumption became reachable at an increasing rate. Images turned widely available with entry to museums and movie theatres, but even more so with the beginning of shutter photography. The commercialisation of portable cameras and roll films in the late 1880s made the recording of photographs accessible to the masses. Likewise, the arrival of autotype allowed for the mechanical reproduction of images. Pictures and illustrated prints went mainstream for the first time, with an unprecedented boom of the press media in the 1920s.

This triumph of immediacy and mass reproduction marks for media theorists Marshall McLuhan and Vilém Flusser the start of the information age and the telematic society as we know it today. Accelerated modern perceptions required art forms to reflect hectic lifestyles, and collage brought this dynamism. Artists sourced content either in photographs, newspapers, labels, advertisements, theatre tickets or other urban substance. When combining fragmentary images from different spatiotemporal situations, artists documented or altered an overarching vision of modern times.

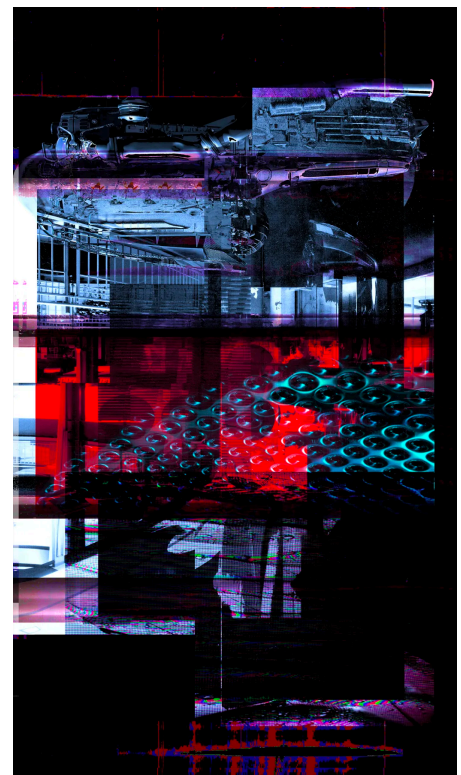
Turning to Digital Tools

The appearance of media for digital image processing and recording, as well as the use of computer software to edit verbal and visual content, changed the scope of collage dramatically. One process that encapsulates the move from mechanical to digital reproduction is scanning – scanners provided with the possibility to translate analogue information into digital data. Images could be transferred instantaneously without losing the sharpness of the originals; in other words, more copies, better, faster.

Robert Rauschenberg, who knowingly used collage as a technique to reflect on American visual culture, consumerism and the mass media, pioneered the use of scanners in his later works of 2000. The artist assembled photographs which he then transferred individually on paper before photographing and scanning the resulting copy.

Many contemporary artists such as Ria Patricia Röder follow this tradition in mixing analogue and digital through the use of scans. Her scanograms are digitally created with the scanner without any further manipulation after the exposure. As such, the scanner not only helps with creating a final, digital rendition but acts as a tool to manipulate 2D and 3D objects to provide effects of focus and blur, and intriguing perceptions of dimensionality.

Also alternating between software and analogue techniques, Chris Dorland operates montage from a voluminous archive



Chris Dorland, *Untitled (colony)*, 2018, UV ink on Alumacore, 198 x 112 cm, © courtesy of the artist and Super Dakota.

of print and digital visuals that document our consumerist culture. After scanning, filtering and altering content through many digital manipulations, the artist prints out images which he reworks manually with various machines. A variety of outdated and old scanners, hand-held scanners, different types of printers and other obsolete technology inhabit his studio, making it a marvellous place for experimentation. “The studio is offline. Nothing is connected to the internet (including my desktop). I hate software updates, so in some cases, I’m running really old programs and hardware,” insists the artist who instead challenges devices to generate randomness, elements of glitch and other failures, defining his distinct aesthetic language.

Internet: A New Source of Graphic Traffic

Along with digital technologies, the internet revolutionised our approach to images, written material, and by extent, collage. Suddenly, press institutions and companies were not the only one to spread content (at a cost). All people could create, distribute, and access information for free as browsers advanced the democratisation of the web. With internet channelling vernacular knowledge, people could relate to, empathise with, and appropriate others’ content. The amount of data available gave artists a new breath in collecting and recalibrating existing material. An excellent example is Lorna Mills, who creates GIFs from online videos which she fragments and displaces out of their first interface. Her use of re-contextualisation offers a gripping portrait of online communities which parallels social depictions found in Modern collages.

While the illustrated press offered a configuration that assigned meanings to images through texts, captions and branding, on the web, purpose and context are up to personal interpretation and information is fluid, participatory and interactive rather than definite and site-specific. The notion of background on the web is therefore versatile, and the material that artists reframe often comes as already manipulated, de-contextualised or repurposed.



Alexandra Gorczynski, Time Was In Time, 2015, Archival pigment print, 5,5 × 2,6 m, © courtesy of the artist.

As digital artists alternatively fuel their montages with personal photographs or pictures from the internet, the source of information becomes irrelevant. In Alexandra Gorczynski’s

compositions, for instance, both online and offline media come at play, drawing an intentional ambiguity on reality versus virtuality. But following Susanne Holschbach, this interchange is qualitative:

“In the sense of an information society, “instability” can be regarded as a positive value: It stands for dynamic transmission, unobstructed circulation, and for communication that is not bound to real space; it stands for virtuality as the ability to experience what is possible.”

Continuing or Disrupting the Aesthetics of Modernist Collages?

Digital tools mark a shift in the perception of photography, which influences the purpose of montage today as images can be manipulated more seamlessly. In Modern times, photography had a documentary and irreversible nature and collage allowed for the connection of disparate events that assumably took place. But as digital photography came along, viewers started to wonder about the actual happening of action in space and time. To address this new photographic paradigm, digital artists either erase the boundaries and edges in their montages or exacerbate the fragmentary nature of the content they put together.

In the first scenario, post-photographic montages provide with visions of alternative realities playing on people’s awareness that the image has been altered. For Felicity Hammond, the digital collage composes a simulated form of existence that shows the precariousness of our post-industrial economy. Growth juxtaposes decay. Hoardings and lustrous large-format advertisements confront abandoned sites falling into landfills of detritus. While the composition departs from the scattered aesthetic of 20th-century collages, the content shares Modernists’ aim to describe society overall, as well as attention to advertising and consumer culture.

Meanwhile, other digital artists overtly show the fragments composing their images. Akin to Modernist aesthetics, Crosslucid assembles pieces from magazines, science and travel journals but also books, vintage catalogues and glossy periodicals. The art collective sees collage as “a medium in [its] practice [that] comes back to the idea of recomposing and fusing realities, re-assembling existing particles, a way of prototyping a speculative world”. Comparably, Carolyn Janssen explains, “Collage allows me to incorporate all forms of my practice — by photographing sculptures, tiny sets, costumes and drawings I’ve made IRL. The technique allows the digital canvas to act as an almost hyperlink to my physical world — with any cement texture, food leftover or doodle up for grabs.” In turn, the artist repurposes these scattered photographic elements as miniature objects which she combines in a Photoshop-y manner to construct meticulous and uncanny sceneries mark by mark.

Speculative or imaginary world: in digital montages, the idea is predominant. While in modern times, the city presented a new space for dreaming with the fantasy of a hectic urban lifestyle, professional possibilities, leisure activities, and social change, now artists’ imagination gives in to other-worldly places that merge real and virtual elements in an ethereal whole. This move away from grounded social possibilities into abstract social aspirations or predictions reveal hope for other realities or at least a wish to reconcile with beauty as we realise the crude being of our present and future existence.