COLLAGE MAKING

from Appliance House
written by Ben Nicholson
Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism (CIAU)
MIT Press 1990

COLLAGE THINKING

Amongst the arsenal of thinking methods, the process of collage making, though pervasive, occupies a disruptive position by using trash and deadness to form beauty. Collage is part of everyone's experience and, however well it is understood, it seems to refer to a group of ephemeral things brought together by a logic that disturbs, or negates, the status of the individual elements. Throughout the passage of each day, millions of manufactured objects are encountered whose sheer quantity and variety threatens to outclass nature for diversity. Collage permits a silent rapport between the collagist and those objects whose purpose is often too difficult to comprehend. Collage making allows anyone to hold a view on any subject. It counters monopoly and it terrorizes guilds of knowledge. Every professional academy, institution or organization is vulnerable to collage, as orders of logic are broken apart by the collagist. Access is gained to information which is then reordered so that it 'sits right' into the collagist system of thinking, oblivious of the accepted status quo.
A trained collagist requires the act of collage making to be contemplative. He knows that there is something within the soul that longs to come forward, so he engages in collage making to advance it. To express this longing all the printed ephemera, forming the mirror world of modern existence, is mustered for use. Thousands of pictures of things varying in scale and perspective are conscripted to trigger trains of thought, comprehensible or not. Bibliomaniac safaris, considered off limits in respectable scholarship, are taken through trashy magazines, high-brow periodicals or well-loved books. The knife-toting traveller performs transgressive voyeurism that is wholly satisfying and rarely sanctified. Profanities can be quarried that the intellect ought not touch. Pictures are snipped without care for their actual context. Now they are readied for action. Pages are severed from publications just because, and all these acts are done to readjust the pictorial world to suit the viewer a little better.

Then the splicing together of this unique selection of things can begin. Acts are turned against pictorial depictions, recognizable or not. Things are done to pictures that have always wanted to be done but, because of circumstances, they never took place. Fifteen handles can be attached to a frying pan with a few deft strokes of a scalpel. Fingers can be repositioned so that they grow out of ears. Then, depending on interest, skill and the dexterity of the fingers, thoughts can be articulated. When the work is complete, a map of bunches exists and, due entirely to the act of making, the soul is temporarily exorcized of what appeared to be coagulating within. Like all maps, collage can exist as a guide to what exists on the ground or it can prompt a new set of thoughts suggested by interconnections of terrain and cities. When considered from this angle, the collage becomes a transcription that can accelerate the way one understands the everyday world and how it comes together, without necessarily being an expert of any particular field of knowledge.
Collage Tradition

If collage is described as the placement of a fragment next to a similar fragment and then the two are spliced together in such a way that the net result is greater than the sum of the parts, one might wonder how this differs from any other artistic activity. An investigation of sixteenth or seventeenth-century painterly techniques reveals a picture-perfect world that challenges the veracity of Fuji film and the Pentax camera. A close examination of the assembly of a painting shows that the apparent reality of the work is wholly premeditated. No arm or leg can be moved without upsetting the balance of the entire composition. Study sketches of paintings can reveal that a figure might be a composite of different parts from different people and various fragments of sculpture drawn from antiquity. Conceptually, a collage is an aggregation of various pieces which create an irresistible spectacle in the eye of the maker. Artists of the pre-printing age mentally transferred items from other sources through drawing. In this way the artist himself became his own fund for observation. Similarly, the printed page has become a fertile ground for the collagist of the printing era where the source of pictorial and ephemeral views of the world, his picture plane, can be compared to the draftsman’s glance at the world, when he draws it daily, as it appears in all its dimension.

It is necessary for an artist to use raw material that is directly associated with the age in which he lives. It is senseless for a modern city dweller to perform cave painting using wood dyes and ground rocks as pigments. Drawing, upheld as the fastest and most direct way to transfer thought, is a questionable form of representation given the mounting schism between electronic simulation and the tactile world which we walk amongst and touch each day. This schism is fast coming to a crisis as enhanced mechanical senses, independent of each other, appear to work better than the natural senses that are a part of the body itself.

The printed page, with its panoply of images of implied moments of activity, is still the most formidable depiction of Western life. Correspondingly, the preferred method of shopping in the U.S.A., since the introduction of the Sears Catalog in the nineteenth century, is to leaf through scores of magazines illustrating objects earmarked for purchase. Catalog shopping is preferred to sense handling in judging objects’ comparative worth. If this is the contemporary way of producing and conceiving, then is it not wholly correct for the thinker-maker to use these very same devices, printed catalogs, as the medium and raw material for an undertaking?

Once pieces are assembled from one source or another, collage permits extraordinary juxtapositions to occur. Initially, the activity calls for something to be done. Picture a lavatory seat that is photographed from an oblique angle. (See p. 17) Then a flurry of cutting and adjusting dictates that the only object that looks right with the lavatory is a pair of red scissor handles, half-obscured by the sleeve of a woolly sweater, all jammed between the seat and its hinged lid. Then a bigger pair of scissors is stuck between the seat and the side of an iron. The scissor handles and seat are then covered with a nicely done rash of bacon.
Collage Scrutiny

The activity of collage, like every visual activity, can profoundly alter the way things and places are viewed. Initially, a collage may be captured by the eye of the observer and then reduced in consequence by being categorized amongst things that have the appearance of collage. But if the observer looks beyond this appearance, the collage suggests a method of scrutinizing things that is identical to the disposition within a collage. In one of his collages, Max Ernst depicted a humanized slug spread out on a couch in front of which are distracted musicians. After one has seen this collage it is never again possible to see someone reclining on a couch without a slimy afterimage.

In collage the appearance of a subject may be severely altered, so much so that the individual characteristics of each component are only barely recognizable through conventional means. If a collage is constructed of pieces of paper that combine an unlimited number of perspectival angles and scales produced by the lens of a camera or the hand of the draftsman, the observer (and certainly the maker) will find it difficult to look at familiar things in quite the same manner.

Why does this particular juxtaposition seem to be at the same moment correct and haunting? The production of something that is unintentionally both haunting and surprising may be the very thing that collage makes possible which other media of expression cannot because of their techniques. Painting and drawing require every mark on the canvas to pass through the fingers of the artist. Collage making, on the other hand, cannot fully control what occurs in the juxtapositions because it uses readymade components. Unlike the pencil user, the collagist is introduced to further sets of ideas which simultaneously transcend the merely contemplative and go beyond traditional instruments of artistic expression.

A component of an artist’s work is to reveal ways of comprehending things that are often difficult to assimilate. These depictions, however abrasive to the eye, reform the actual appearance of things. It is well to remember here Picasso’s response to critics who condemned his painting on the grounds that the portrait of Gertrude Stein did not resemble the subject: “In time, she will.”

Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye reveals how the painter’s eye, activated by Cubism, can make a piece of architecture in the same way that a painting is assembled. When viewed from the outside, the long window on the middle level frames a bundle of odd, planar shapes. When these shapes are encountered inside the building the space initially worked out through painting is then projected onto the flat frame of the window and finally realized in three full dimensions on the inside of the house. The collagist-architect has the same access to the spatial possibilities as does the Cubist painter and can induce space in the manner that it is experienced through collage making.

The Activity of Collage Making

Collage making can be a very exacting activity requiring a steady hand to locate the smallest whiffs of paper in the right position. The collagist’s tools are simple: a scalpel used in tandem with a probe or a pair of tweezers and small tabs to keep things in the right place prior to the gluing operation. Whilst the activity takes place the collagist’s table has the same suspense as the surgeon’s theater. Cutting, implanting, temporary clamping and adhesion all play a role in the procedure for making a new being. Certain pieces may have to be spliced in and then covered over by a complex layer of interconnecting components. The fingers have to move deftly to prevent the glue from drying too fast. The activity requires that the work concentrates on the tip of the knife and the practitioner must have the skill to free the weight of the body, so that it can pirouette about the scalpel blade whilst constant direction and pressure is applied to its point.

During the construction of a collage a small voice within quips: “scalpel... probe... sutures... swab the glue, nurse!” The analogy with the surgeon reminds us of the alchemist’s act of blowing life into inert substance. After the surgeon operates on a supine body, it rises and staggers away in a half-drugged state with its lease on life temporarily extended. The collagist operates to reassemble a flat being and, as with the great collagist Dr. Frankenstein, something is brought to the quick that did not live before. The collagist holds the secret to making things out of thin paper. Things that formally existed in some other state are subsequently transmuted.

The procedure of collage making, the very way that the collage is put together, takes place as a series of passes, each one forming a layer or varnish that must be carried out in a certain order for the effect to work correctly. The first act, book rape, is the most violent because it ruffles the status quo that is embedded within us. Book rape involves the deliberate procurement of a document representing a major part of an author’s life then slashing it into little pieces, a method reminiscent of the voodooer sticking pins into a wax effigy. The book is quarried for parts, its original order revamped into a pile of paper rounds that have the potential of being reordered. Once there is a sheaf of ephemeral devices the grand fidget begins. This reforms the pieces into something that amounts to more than their torn edges alone can effect.

The placement of paper pieces is a desperate act. Unless the first association works, all subsequent layers of activity will do little to hide the inadequacy of the first move, its prime flourishing. A piece of a picture is set down and then another is squinched under, over or spliced into it. Imagine a pair of door-like forms next to each other. (See Sagittal Name Collage, p. 27) For them to be complete they require a squiggle on their kick plates. There is only one spot on the doors where the squiggle can go that is mutually acceptable to both doors. Each portal forces the squiggle around until it nestles into the tightest spot. It is possible to watch the squiggle on the end of the scalpel move until it finds the best location. The hands become tools to aid and abet its placement, they do not cause it. What determines their correct positioning is a question difficult to answer. If found, the answer would instill a terror-knowledge akin to hubris.

Collage making allows for a myriad of yes/no decisions (it is a binary process) to determine where the fragments should go. Because this method involves working with papery objects, rather than pencil, countless irrevocable moments occur: moments when it must be decided if a piece of paper has to be glued either here or there.

The speed of decisions regarding the correct juxtaposition of the paper pieces will be slowed by the contemplative mechanical process of splicing the papers into
each other, so as to make their conjunctions read more effectively. Then the process of placing things next to each other becomes more akin to the drawing process, for the two pieces of paper slowly approach and nudge each other until they fit in with aplomb.

Once the fragments find their rightful places, the collage can appear to be so correct that it becomes bland. It has lost its spirit, since all the tensions are pushing and pulling with equal force. When this occurs the pieces have to be minutely calibrated, taken off-center, to recharge the vitality that surrounds their mutual conjunction. The process of placement of two unlikely objects next to each other causes a pain equal to the sigh of relief released by their new found proximity. The ability of the hands to make nonsensical judgements and the irrationality of these adjustments point to the existence of moments of unerring correctness in matters that are not clearly understood.

A collage cannot be ghosted into existence as a drawing. The activity of drawing often lays down spines on paper which are slowly covered by further, more decisive lines until the likeness of the drawing is formed. Collage, instead, might form islands of material which could be covered over with other pieces, sometimes translucent, permitting the temporal layers to be simultaneously revealed. Collage can be assembled in a manner that reflects the sense of coexistence of urban living. A fragment of marked paper can rely upon its neighbor for conversation, its neighbor’s neighbor and its neighbor’s neighbor’s neighbor, happy in the knowledge that they’re there.
The Technique of Collage

Placing a tiny bit of paper next to another in a sequence implies that once it is placed in a particular spot it will not move. The associations are so dependent on slight movement that 1/64 inch will account for its rightness or wrongness. Prior to gluing, each piece of paper is held in place by homemade tabs of drafting tape measuring 1/16 by 3/32 inch. These sutures are continually lifted and replaced permitting other components to be spliced into each other.

How do six pieces of paper that weave into each other at a common spot get glued? If one piece is irrevocably glued, then it is not possible to slide a piece under it to link up with something else. But despite all this the pieces do get glued. Consciously gluing something in the wrong order is done out of desperation to make an inroad into a mat of impossibilities. It is an activity that requires the collagist to glue anything that seems to not rely upon something else, a muculous anarchy. Once the illogical move is made the gluing continues as if nothing had happened at all. Making requires living with something that is knowingly incorrect. It is this anti-idealistic incorrectness which mysteriously permits the work to advance.

If any moment of the collage making process constitutes spontaneous combustion, it is this. The quick drying glue sets the pace, hands and tools whistling along without stopping until it is completed. The procedure can be likened to a dental assistant’s act of swapping probe for drill, without exchange of words. It is the choreographic interchange in a work of art — whether between one’s own hands or between a collection of hands — that proves its self-worth.

Once this battle has been played out, the terrain of a collage appears exhausted. Pieces of paper bear crease marks where they have been contorted, their edges are scuffed. The knife-edge precision of the work, prior to gluing, is dulled and must now be restored.

Critics have condemned the recent process of cleaning the Sistine Ceiling, arguing that Michelangelo’s touch-up brush strokes have been obliterated by the restoration. What appears in the restored ceiling is the work without the discretionary adjustments of the artist that trim out the work, adjustments that are not possible to include in the frantic immediacy of the making. So that it speaks with a clear voice, collage, as with all endeavors, requires this final pass of cosmetic adjustment.

Collage: The Implications Beyond Itself

The moment after collage making is filled with anticipation. One sort of closure is confirmed, for the work is done, but a further activity enforced by self-critical distance lingers on. Tactile thoughts are articulated that formerly existed only in the shape of grunts and gesticulations. When finished, it is possible to see what issues need to be addressed which were invisible before the making. Only by the continued repetition of the act of making can the initial doubts raised by the work be dissipated.

Collage is an interstitial state: neither flat nor round, neither identifiable nor chaotic. When objects snipped from magazines are reformulated into an ephemera of collage they transcend their former pictorial candor. The identity of a frying pan might be lost but its associated smells still linger. The task of collage is to regurgitate the frying pan enough times so that the metal is worn away but its patina is left intact.

Gazing at a collage, in a shadow-filled light, immediately lifts the work from flatness. Because paper has thickness, albeit paper thin, the collage is a relief. Drawing, the activity which exists within a sheet of paper, does not build up layers of graphite on the surface. The weight of the pencil stroke overwhelms the graphite and the pencil line is scored in the surface of the paper. In a work of art, relief is the very first glimpse of roundness. Whilst shadows are drawn in drawings, they are cast in three dimensions in collage relief. Because of the thinness of paper collage relief also permits translucence. Light is reflected off a surface that is apparently hidden beneath a covering surface. Thus, a collage is the first hint at a condition of fullness that can exist after the substance of artistic intent has removed itself from the flattened surface of the canvas. The relief created by superimposition can be read as a talisman, as an indication of its three-dimensional qualities. Were the collage to become an object in space, its structure would inform the way it is to be built.

The collage method used to form the Appliance House adopts a pungent chopping technique and asks that every junction be highly considered, that each round of collaging, each pass, involves a pictorial dissolution of the depicted object as well as structural reassembly. With this obscurcation in mind, it is possible to take the collage, challenge its status once again and cut it up providing material for a new collage, a new work. The process is then repeated to make
a third collage. In the third state of obfuscation the original objects depicted are virtually unrecognizable. Instead, the increasingly complicated junctions between paper fragments take precedence over the images depicted on the paper. The status quo of the frying pan is abandoned. It is emptied of pictorial content. It wishes to stake out the perimeter of its own rim without touching its edge or seeing a reflection within it.

This desire to locate something that is not known can be confused with the expectation of creating something that eludes forewarning or prediction. Ultimately, both intentions — the unpredictable and the hankering after the elusive status quo of the heart strings — fold into a single cause which collage understands intimately. By peeling itself off the paper surface, collage can be brought into relief, the round, the hollow, and on into the construction of a building.