

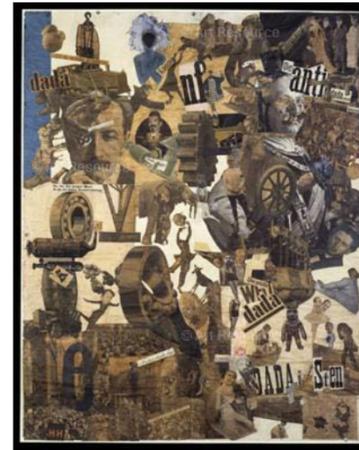


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CHARLIE WHITE

ONE COULD ARGUE that the current financial meltdown has been lurking behind every corner—that with each new height of global wealth, voices of reason warned that the bottom would surely fall out. Perhaps one such bellwether was the return of certain modernist strategies in art. Although most recuperations of this sort have been merely decorative or nostalgic, a few have been symptomatic of a desire to confront art’s embeddedness within political crisis, market fluctuation, and consumer taste. Collage—the medium of modernist shock par excellence—has made one such return: Though never completely absent from contemporary art practices, collage had become a lesser-used aesthetic language during the past three decades. Spurred back into play precisely at a moment of dire political circumstances, images of terror, and an unending war, collage seems to be riding the wave of political corruption, shrapnel, and personal loss to reemerge as a legitimate contemporary language.

But the manner in which collage can make meaning—in an atmosphere now dense in remixes, mash-ups, and shuffles—will be very different than it was in crises past. Today, collage must confront its status as a form that has risen rapidly in postwar popular culture,



Opposite page: Screen capture from Polyvore.com. This page, clockwise from top: Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany*, 1919, collage, 44 1/4 x 35 1/2". © 2009 Estate of Hannah Höch/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst. John Heartfield, *AIZ/VI*, 1936, offset lithograph, 15 x 10 3/4". Martha Rosler, *Bringing the War Home, House Beautiful: Patio View*, 1967–72, photomontage, 24 x 20".

making collage a natural impulse for all media. It is not only a common response to the layers of information that burden us but also an invisible force that reorganizes histories, logs, and lineages to be more readily accessible—now an everyday necessity. I would like to take collage’s recent resurgence in art as an occasion to revisit and update its related popular histories—a shifting story, one that hovers at the fluid seam of art, politics, technology, and mass media.

FROM THE INVENTION OF CUBIST COLLAGES to Martha Rosler’s first devastating images in 1967, collage spanned an era of political revolutions, wars, and cultural upheavals—a period that was defined by the twentieth century’s mechanical conditions and that predated the widespread digitization of media. With the Dadaists’ embrace and expansion of the practice, as well as their development of photomontage, collage was able to explode both art history and popular culture into particulate matter and open up territories of visual experimentation. Dadaists such as Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, and Kurt Schwitters

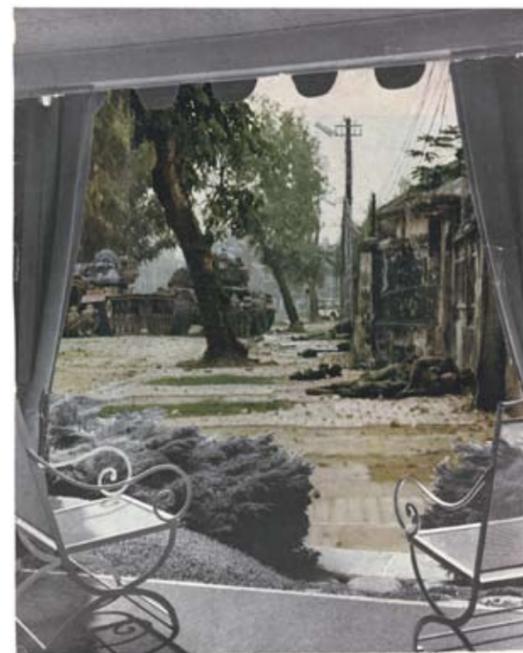
relied on violent gestures, not only entailing the willful detonation of historical narratives but also splintering the imagistic conventions of the moment. These acts of disassembling and reassembling resulted in a visual language of extreme plasticity, a plasticity that could (and would for more than fifty years) take on multiple forms and opposing positions, depending on how it was used and whom it was meant to serve: Compare

John Heartfield’s vehemently antifascist photomontages adorning the cover of the *Workers’ Pictorial Newspaper (AIZ)* to Herbert Bayer’s pro-fascist montages in *The New Line (Die neue Linie)* magazine. After the Second World War, collage played a key role in the Independent Group’s embrace of American commercial imagery; in the wake of the Vietnam War, it reappeared in Rosler’s scathing juxtapositions of gendered American domesticity with war photojournalism, which could be called the last effective harnessing of collage as a modernist aesthetic strategy. Collage has thus been deployed both as a mode of political resistance and as a protest against the commodity

form, as an instrument of totalitarian propaganda and a capitalist advertising tactic. It was this oscillation—a sweeping applicability to both the popular and the political, consumption and negation—that would usher in the late-twentieth-century turn to collage as a common and essential form of rethinking, repositioning, and reworking media.

FOLLOWING THE LATE 1960s, the collage impulse became increasingly dominant in popular media as segments of information began to get smaller, faster, more readily transferable, and ultimately less linear. Beginning with the Children’s Television Workshop’s heavily research-driven programming, which introduced *Sesame Street* in 1969*, and ending

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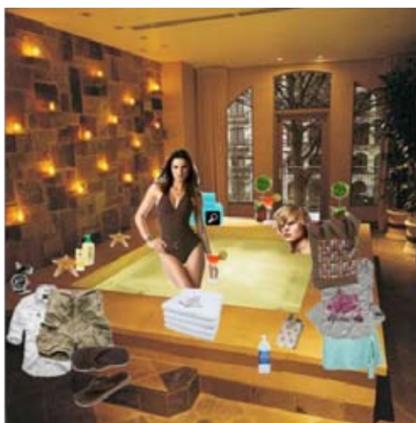
*“In preparing for *Sesame Street*, for example, [CTW’s] research and design focused on [creating a] demonstrable ability to attract attention, to appeal to the audience, and to be comprehensible. Researchers assessed the attention holding power of material by presenting content in competition with potential distractions. The tactics which elicited most interactivity among viewers were explored further. . . . As a result of these procedures, *Sesame Street* went on air with very specific attention holding tactics such as fast movement, humor, slapstick, and animation. It was packaged in a magazine format, and it presented a carefully planned curriculum that focused on teaching letters and number skills.” See <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/C/html/C/childrenste/childrenste.htm>.



with the launch of Shawn Fanning's peer-to-peer software, Napster, in 1999, we might reconsider the late-twentieth-century history of collage as a consumer-as-creator genealogy: On the heels of *Sesame Street*, *The Electric Company* airs in 1971; Walter Gibbons makes his first DJ mix in 1976; Sharp releases the GF-777Z dual-cassette boom box in 1982; Richard Stallman announces the GNU free-software project in 1983; the US Federal Networking Council allows the first commercial Internet connection in 1988; the first ISPs are established in 1989; Photoshop is released in 1990; the first draft of HTML is published in 1993; Avid Media Composer replaces linear editing throughout the film industry by

1995; digital-video (DV) tapes and technology debut in 1996; Google launches in 1998; and Napster, TiVo, and Nikon's D1 SLR camera are all released in 1999. Such a chronology proposes that the convergence of desire and technological capability have created an increasingly voracious appetite for undoing linearity by way of deregulating, dearchiving, recataloging, rerecording, sharing, stealing, destroying, combining, and redistributing as much information as is accessible.

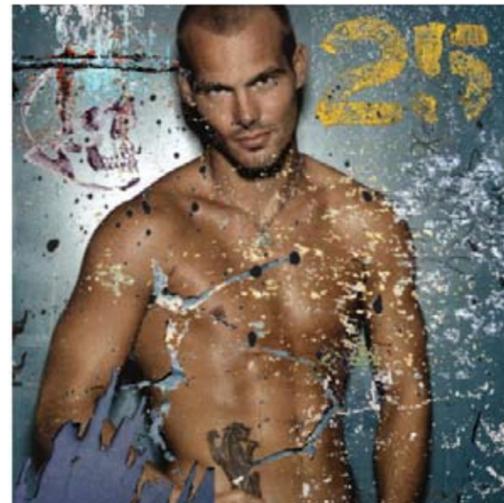
ON OCTOBER 9, 2001, the strange implications of this omnivorous drive were manifested in a single image: *Sesame Street*'s Bert eerily appeared within a field of pro-Osama bin Laden posters at an anti-American rally in Bangladesh. The media swelled with speculation about this bizarre juxtaposition. When the American website Bert Is Evil (www.bertisevil.tv, a satiric site that digitally incorporates the character into pictures of history's tyrants) was identified as the location from which, with click-and-drag impatience, an image of Bert had been unwittingly added to Bangladeshi jihadists' propaganda, the issue faded from popular interest. But this happenstance, Dada-like occurrence, which mirrored the gross misinformation of the forthcoming "war on terror," exposed the potential conflation of signs within new zones of transglobal visual recombination. Internet images were not only fluid online entities but also fixed signifiers in the all-too-real world of global politics, with unprecedented power and instantaneous liability. It was at this moment that the image's potential for total transmutability became abundantly clear.



IN 1931, HAUSMANN HAD CLAIMED that photomontage could create "the most striking contrasts, to the achievement of perfect states of equilibrium." By 2001, this equilibrium had reached a global scale through the trafficking of billions of digitized images: the hyperplastic descendants of the rigid cut-and-paste fragments from an earlier moment of collage. An explosion of global DSL subscribers spurred a series of major expansions in digital-information dispersal and retrieval, due to broadening bandwidths. A brief time line of the Web's role in this new distribution might take as milestones the introductions of BitTorrent in July 2001, Google



This page, from top: Supporters of Osama bin Laden during an anti-US demonstration, Dhaka, Bangladesh, October 11, 2001. Photo: Reuters/Rafiqur Rahman. Screen captures from Polyvore.com. Opposite page: Screen captures from Polyvore.com.



disassemble and reassemble the Web's visual content. The site's functionality is based on two proprietary elements: a toolbar device (called a "clipper") that cuts and grabs images from other websites and an algorithm (known as the "Polyvore Editor") that allows users to combine these images into unique collages of their own (which the site refers to as "sets"). Polyvore also offers a comment field for community members to respond to the collages and a list of links through which each individual collage element connects back to its online, often e-commerce-based, source.

Polyvore does not position itself as a contemplative, critical, or aesthetic experience, but rather as a new form of shopping—even though no merchandise is bought or sold on the site. As the site elaborates, "From recreating celebrity fashion, to mixing and matching items based on colors and styles, the Polyvore platform is setting a new standard for shopping online." In other words, Polyvore's use is directed precisely toward converting its users into consumers, rather than supporting the otherwise unregulated possibilities of its digital cut-and-paste tools (even the term *set*, used in lieu of *collage*, evokes consumption over expression).



portrait or as an autobiographical mood board indexing the teen self's desires and defining traits. Adolescent expression may very well have trumped art history in its influence on contemporary collage, transforming the practice into a purely commercial entity that is stricken with arrested development. Has collage become the visual

Image Search in December 2001, MySpace in August 2003, Flickr in February 2004, YouTube in February 2005, and the lesser-known Polyvore in February 2007. These developments mapped a series of rapid steps toward an increased production and dissemination of archived, original, and copyrighted media onto the Internet, pushing popular culture, pornography, politics, and personal data into a soft space of potential accessibility—and inviting further alteration, recombination, and transformation.

HAVING PROPOSED A HISTORY that spans from the CTW to YouTube, we arrive at a moment when the impulse to remix, reedit, and reorder media, as well as the analog desire to take, tear, and tape imagery, meets the methods to do so with ease and endless availability. Enter Polyvore.com: an unabashedly commercial entity targeted toward teen girls (whether in age and gender or just in spirit) who love the stuff of fashion-as-lifestyle. Developed by former Yahoo engineer Pasha Sadri, Polyvore provides a simple way to



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In 1969, with the last gasp of modernist collage forms, *Sesame Street* marked the start of a new era in which short-form, fast-cutting, experimental media structures would become the dominant mode of a youth-oriented visual culture. Since this transition, youth culture—and by this I mean specifically *adolescent* culture as both a community and a target market—has become an increasingly dominant force in the construction of culture at large. The developmental stage of the teen has come to define the adult world's desires. Popular culture has shifted considerable energies toward preteen and teen audiences for television, film, music, and all other media, both soft and hard. Nothing illustrates this better than the transformation of collage, where one might argue that fourteen is the new forty, due to the embrace of levity in the face of tragedy, self over society, and desire over discontent.

SUCH A SHIFT TOWARD the adolescent does not, however, undermine the potential of the collage medium. It simply transposes its role from the social to the individual, from collective cultural dissonance to the confrontation of personal desire.

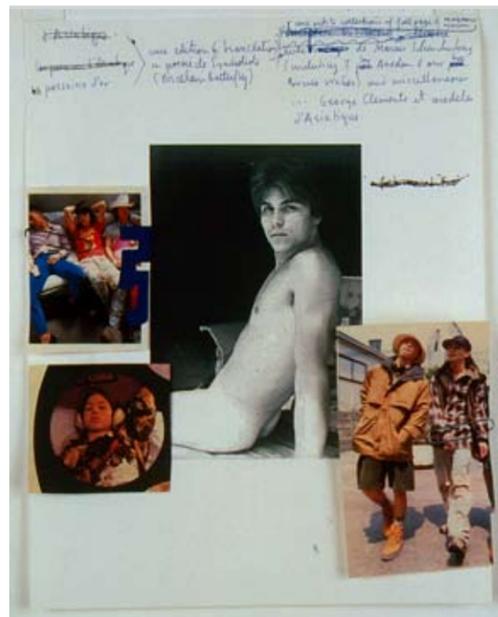
This transition was not immediate, and not until the mid-'90s did collage effectively find new footing as a contemporary artistic endeavor. The first major breakaway occurred with Larry Clark's book *The Perfect Childhood* (1995), which included his early collages of popular teen icons such as Matt Dillon and River Phoenix; this was followed by Richard Hawkins's scrapbook approach to celebrating hot fashion boys, movie stars, and classical Greco-Roman sculptures. Marnie Weber's cut-and-paste fantasies adorned the cover of Sonic Youth's *Thousand Leaves* (1998), and Rita Ackermann's equally edacious collages combined cutout girls, painted rockers, colorful stickers, and pencil or ballpoint-pen drawings, which were more in keeping with binder doodles than with the lofty figurative efforts of her peers. All these artists deployed an analog approach at the cusp of incredible technological shifts in

imagemaking, deriding the clean aesthetics of the digital while waxing nostalgic for a lost form of expression before most people knew it had passed. What is important to note here is that these artists were not executing a known style; rather, they proffered a new synthesis between popular and art-historical forms of collage: Hausmann peeks through in personal scrapbooks filled with lusty desire; Höch is echoed in the obsessively worked binder cover, heavy in naive scrawls, pictures, and sayings.

A short while later, a bigger and bolder manifestation took shape in Jeff Koons's series of digitally cut, pasted, and then painted images. In his "Celebration," "Easyfun," and "Easyfun-Ethereal" series, the visceral collision of images anticipated the Web era's merchandise-driven, Polyvore aesthetic, with pieces and parts from all walks of commerce coalescing in a milkshake of clothing, hair, toys, food, and flu-



This page, clockwise from left: Rita Ackermann, *Try Jessie*, 2000, acrylic and ink on canvas, 69 x 99". Larry Clark, *TKTKTKK*. Richard Hawkins, *French Title*, 1996, mixed media on paper, 11 x 8 1/2". Opposite page, from top: Amanda Ross-Ho, *Still Life (Freedom of Expression)*, 2007, acrylic, Xeroxes, pins, tape, linen on sheetrock, dims TK. Tobias Buche, *Ohne Titel*, 2003–2004, collage on paper, 12 1/4 x 7 3/8".



ids, each with carefully selected edges and all stacked layer upon layer. Koons's collage-based paintings speak to a process translated from Photoshop's digital splintering and layering of image segments—not from the optimistic billboard aesthetics of James Rosenquist or from Hawkins's or Ackermann's nostalgically handmade testaments of desire. Koons's contribution to collage paralleled the click-and-drag impatience indicative of Internet image grabbing: a piling up of parts, which, as in Polyvore, are taken almost at random for their gloss, glitter, and goo. If Clark, Hawkins, Weber, and Ackermann returned to high school angst, Koons embraced (albeit with absolute technical proficiency) the picture planes of visually articulate tweens—a gesture part Polyvore, part polymorphously perverse.

More recently, another generation of artists—who do not have nostalgia for an analog high school of yesteryear or a desire to update Pop's iconic appeal—have found traction in a mode of collage that more directly derives from the language of contemporary online image distribution. Take, for example, the works of Amanda Ross-Ho, who since 2006 has been mining the territories of congested image zones on- and offline to map new meanings born from these locations. Ross-Ho's collages of found objects and images culled from online searches—including the documentation of federally seized contraband and photographs of elaborately displayed personal collections, shown for posterity on individual web-

sites—propose an even larger collection of collections from these endless online sources. These relationships become all the more clear in Ross-Ho's "Untitled Proximity Collages," 2007–: The works are a kind of materialization of the vast rhizomes of Google results, forcing the viewer to build paratactic meaning among parts that would remain unrelated if not for a search algorithm that tethered disparate fragments of information. But perhaps most surprising here is the way Ross-Ho evinces our expanded notion of the act of "cut-and-paste," after its virtual enactment on the keyboard (Command-C, Command-V) has redefined its purpose for a generation no longer paging through periodicals or folding back sheets of newsprint.

If I have attempted to relocate collage as the visual language of the late-capitalist teenager, art has extended this dialogue by going in multiple directions at once: both embracing the terms of an adolescent visual language (Clark, Hawkins, Weber, and Ackermann), exaggerating these terms through refinement and elevated consumerism (Koons), and then pushing all these terms forward, as in Ross-Ho's visceral grab through panels, walls, and picture planes, her transformation of the dizzying reach of the search engine into a physical, sculptural space. A host of other young artists, including Tobias Buche (with his freestanding panels) and Ryan Gander (with his "Loose Associations" project), have taken up this last option. Their work faces the facts of a technologically redefined pictorial field—and reckons with the normalization of collage as an everyday experience, one that surrounds us all. □

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