

Modernism and the Collage Esthetic

By Budd Hopkins

Picasso, sometime near the end of 1911, created a small oval painting that is probably history's first collage. Across more than one third of the surface he filled a piece of oilcloth, commercially printed to simulate chair caning. He then painted a cubist still life on the rest of the canvas, allowing some brushstrokes to cross the oilcloth and thus appear to do the impossible: to exist flat and intact on a surface that seemingly is full of holes. The completed painting was not framed in a traditional way; instead, Picasso fastened a piece of rope around its circumference, underscoring its objecthood and its peculiar mixture of the literal and the illusionistic. With the invention of the collage the philosophical core of modernism was given clear and concrete expression. Though Picasso and Braque shortly thereafter stopped making collages per se, the crucial fact is that the medium of painting was invaded by the philosophical premises of collage.

The collage esthetic implies a complex, pluralistic reading of experience, and envisions the work of art as a stage for a fluctuating series of organizing and disseminating informational and emotional content. I propose that it is the central modernist esthetic in all the arts. It is the clear methodological link between such modernist masterpieces as Eliot's *Wasteland*, Duchamp's *Large Glass*, the theater of Brecht and the films of Goddard. It is the single esthetic premise shared by Cubism and Surrealism. By invoking the collage esthetic as a criterion, one can see why an expressionist like Beckmann is more a modernist than Nolde. Its continuation as the basis for modern art is manifested by such artists as Robert Morris, Donald Barthelme, Vito Acconci, John Cage or Robert Motherwell. In fact the list is as broad as modernism itself.

We live in a disturbingly pluralistic world, containing infinitely more information, more contradictory social roles, more diverse “realities” than any previous entry. The smooth, continuous space of older representational art is not adequate to our current life experience. The act of harmonizing distinctly jarring material, of folding warring ideas, materials and spatial systems into a tense and perhaps arbitrary peace—this is the characteristic procedure of the modern artist. It is the masthead which flows from the collage esthetic.

Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning*, for example, abuts illusionism and raw, physical fact in extraordinarily complex ways. Is the photographically rendered chair caning more or less illusionistic than Picasso’s painted shades and depicted overlaps? The letters “JOU” from “Journal” do not appear to stay flat on their depicted sheet of newspaper, but seem to float up and away. The raw fact of paint slides across the oilcloth, belying its “perforations.” The “real” and the “artificial” are locked into an equation which contains no fixed terms.

To clarify further what is meant by the collage esthetic I would like to consider a painting, picked almost at random, Andy Warhol’s *Silver Disaster 6*, in the collection of Lawrence Alloway. This work is in no way a literal collage; it is, technically a traditional painting in acrylic on canvas. It consists, broadly, of two contrasted areas. At the left are two vertically aligned, silkscreened “photos” of a prison’s execution chamber. At the right is a large “abstract” area of silver paint, casually applied, with a resulting unevenness of surface. The canvas support, in its simple bounded territory containing two different situations, invoking two different sets of associations. The images of the electric chair naturally bring to mind barbarism and horror. One notices the medieval straps and buckles, the sign which spells out the word “silence.” The repeated pair of flawed, nearly identical images one above the other, suggests a film strip, a resemblance heightened by their light-filled, flickering photographic quality. The presence of other similar units not yet visible is implied, with and accompanying sense of time passing, a kind of filmic death watch.

The right area of the canvas, in contrast to the depicted three-dimensional room space at the left, is flat. Its silver tones are quiet next to the dramatically lit electric chair scene. Its territory is peaceful, self contained and unearthly. Associations begin to link the two contrasted areas: the silver region is a place of calm after the horror of execution; traditional narrative sequence, from left to right, operates subliminally. The beauty of loosely applied silver paint breathes atmospherically after the claustrophobic repeat of the same sealed room. One has a momentary vision of a depressing photorealist work co-existing with a lyrical abstraction. Co-existence, juxtaposition: this is the method implicit in the collage aesthetic. In contrast to the art of earlier periods, no single, fixed system dominates. Transitions are not provided.

Though Warhol uses certain unifying devices, such as hints of silver underpainting in the left hand area, and a similar touch in both sides, still the issue posed is one of disjunction. Just as the “picture plane” is broken by consistent deep space at the left and flatness at the right, so the conceptual “picture plane” —our desire to receive all aspects of meaning as continuous, logical and consistent—is also shattered. The viewer must re-construct each, creating a perpetual and conceptual framework into which all of this seemingly contradictory material fits, even down to the dichotomy between paint and photographic image as photographic image. Fifty-two years after Picasso’s *Still Life With Chair Caning* Warhol also interrupts the integrity of the painted surface by introducing photographic material. The nature of these two disjunctive types of image making is the subject of a great deal of modern painting. It is also a common preoccupation in modernist literature, from T.S. Eliot’s mix of Ovid, Dante, and “realistic” bar-room dialogue, down to E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, with its juxtaposition of fictional characters and an odd assortment of real historical personages. Traditionally, the historical novelist sought, by the invention of dialogue and psychological motivation, to “flesh out” known historical epochs and events; plausibility was a guiding principle. The modernist writer uses fragments of historical truth as pieces in an implausible —even absurd— collage.

One thinks of Doctorow's scene of Freud and Jung bickering as they explore the Lower East Side, under the pressure of Freud's need for a comfort station; or Tom Stoppard's arguments between Lenin, Joyce, and Tzara in his play, *Travesties*.

In earlier times, in cultures dominated by a single religion and a fixed political structure, and having little bewildering information to deal with, artists could easily achieve a simple and ideal unity. In the France of Louis XIV formal pictorial rules could even be codified. For the theater of Racine the unities of time, place and action guaranteed logical continuity and internal consistency. Today our reality is expressed by the disjunctions of time, place and point of view generic to the film medium. Film is, of course, the most pervasive modern art medium, and by its very nature a collage. In 1912, when Picasso and Braque were making cubist paper collages, D.W. Griffith was filming *Birth of a Nation*. His radical editing, intercutting the scene of a family at prayer with quick shots of their son in battle, created a new kind of elliptical narrative, requiring a new kind of mental agility from his viewers. These editing procedures, which Iris Barry dates as early as Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* of 1903, are now so common that television commercials, which depend on ease and speed of communication, use collage techniques more frequently than linear narrative. ("Montage" is perhaps the more accurate term, but it is, after all, simply the filmic version of "collage," the general concept I am pursuing in this essay.)

The collage esthetic can be examined in two ways: as it manifests itself in formal decisions, and as it effects iconography. The latter is the more obvious, so let us begin in the realm of subject matter. The Picasso collage I have discussed included in the "impossible" — brush strokes floating on a surface of holes. A year or so later Giorgio de Chirico was painting the "impossible" landscapes which were based on contradictory perspective systems and eccentrically combined objects. (The presence of systems in a work of art, rather than system is one way of defining the collage esthetic.) The kind of artist who, like de Chirico, was drawn to

the dreamlike and the disturbing, naturally seized upon the iconographic disjunctions implicit in the cubist collage. The ultimate manifestation of this tendency—surrealism—is impossible to conceive of apart from the collage esthetic. If cubism is the purest *formal* example of the collage esthetic, Surrealism is its purest iconographic example.

In 1941 Rene Magritte painted a work entitled *Personal Values*. It depicts a room which we see doll's-house fashion, with the front wall missing. Inside is a bed supporting a tortoise-shell comb. The comb is roughly twenty percent longer than the bed, and almost exactly the length of a centrally placed wineglass. Nearby there is a bar of soap which would fill the bed, and a matchstick that is the same size as the shaving brush which looms atop a mirrored wardrobe. All of this fits easily into a realistically depicted three-dimensional space. Nothing floats, the laws of gravity are obeyed. The unnerving mystery exists because we are deprived of a system of scale in a painting centrally about objects. Is everything miniature? If so, some things are more miniature than others. Magritte's diabolical method is to offer a number of disjunctive scale suggestions without ever giving us any one controlling system. Even the room itself may be any size; in fact, it dematerializes as we study it, because of its illusionistic sky wall-paper.

Employing the collage esthetic as a criterion, let us consider Dali's ubiquitous image of the limp watches, *The Persistence of Memory*. Though self-consciously "modern," an air of the retrograde hands over this painting for some specific reasons. Most importantly, Dali creates a deep, convincing, realistic space which is so clear, and has such pressure as an all-embracing system, that no matter how eccentric the objects he places here and there within it, the traditional three-dimensional space dominates everything. We are reassured by it, not mystified. So literal is Dali's imagination that the correct scales is maintained: the ants are the proper size for the watches, the distant mounts are addicted by aerial perspective, rocks diminish in size as they occur deeper in space, and so forth. The odd iconographic notes—limp

metal and the like—simply do not stand up to the decisive traditional systems he relies on; the painting seems considerably less modernist than the Magritte.

Similarly, imagine a continuum with a traditional landscape by Andrew Wyeth at one end and at the other, modernist end, a classic 1915 De Chirico landscape. Consider in this context the work of Edward Hopper. When most Ashcan School and American scene painters appear to be sliding back towards the nineteenth century in general critical opinion, Hopper stays interesting to us, and in ways that have nothing to do with the past. Somehow he remains relevant to modernist practice. The reason lies in the slightly disjunctive quality we sense in many of his works, between architecture and landscape, between human beings and their urban settings. Despite the strong traditional space he creates, these internal tensions seem equally important, perhaps even more so. Locating Hopper at his best on the scale described above means, I think, that he veers toward De Chirico and away from Wyeth. Though he is not primarily a modernist, the collage esthetic seems present in his work with its subtle undertones of tension between the depicted parts, and its ambivalence spatially between the flatness and consistent, traditional depth. Collage implies the co-existence of disjunctive systems in the same work, even, occasionally mixed loyalties on the part of the artist; once can see Hopper looking guiltily at Mondrian while trying to remain true to John Sloan and the American scene.

In the context of Surrealism as a pure iconographical demonstration of the collage esthetic, consider Meret Oppenheim's famous fur-lined teacup. The collision between hard utilitarian object and natural animal tissue is absolute; grant the qualities of one and there is no accepting the other. A current group of artists, consciously or not are following Oppenheim's modes by treating the gallery as the teacup, as a hard utilitarian container with its own prior associations, and are willing it with, as it were, fur; in the case of Raphael Ferrer, autumn leaves, and in the case of Robert Morris industrial remnants. These later works depend upon the gallery setting as another system to react against in order to generate meaning, just as fully

as Oppenheim's fur requires the tea cup, or Picasso's oilcloth demands the pigment. Much recent sculpture also depends upon the combination of opposed materials, such as fluorescent plexiglass and steel (Judd), Sculptmetal and rope (Nauman), or rough timbers and steel I-Beams (di Suvero); the list is as endless as modernist sculpture. The history of the practice goes back to Brancusi's combinations of polished bronze, mirror, and stone or rough-hewn wood in the same works. Other modernist sculpture, pure collagists like David Smith or Calder, have limited the range of materials in their work, but expanded the variety of forms, with frequent reliance upon the inclusion of "found" or readymade parts.

When one considers the basic technological changes that have occurred in the last hundred years, and the ways they have altered the texture of life, one can see why collage is the most apt metaphor for modern existence. It takes a great imaginative leap to reconstruct the unity of daily life before the advent of electric light. Daybreak and sundown—barely noticeable in current urban life—were events that bracketed existence and marked its sequential flow. Electric life for city people provided an arbitrary counter-system; day and night could be arranged at will. The telephone, first offering service in 1877, supplied another advantage with an accompanying peculiar disjunction; one talked intimately "next to" someone who remained invisible and remote. Reality was not so much heightened as split.

Theater had traditionally provided clear, conventional lines of separation between illusion—the fictional play—and reality—the performers' actual presence. Fiction and reality thus moved along parallel tracks in ways analogous to depicted, consistent three-dimensional space and the physical fact of colored pigment in painting. Film, like Picasso's piece of oilcloth, mixed up these parallel tracks forever. Was a filmed view of the Grand Canyon in a western movie more or less real than the painted scenery in a theater? Did the use of close-ups of a famous actor make him more or less fictional? Did the fictional plot of a movie ever dominate the visual reality, and so on, until we are lost in a series of fluctuating terms and abutted realities.

On a still more subtle level the rise of all methods of reproduction—the phonograph, the cheap camera, tape recorders, video—leads to a situation in which one's past is caught and held made to co-exist with one's present. Proust used only a madeline to trigger memory; the Loud family literally has the past *there*, videotaped for replaying. The unity of time in, say, a Monet or a Hals has given way to a self-conscious simultaneity of different moments in paintings by the cubists, Futurists, and Abstract-Expressionists. The smoky dark and light scatter in analytical cubist paintings implies the unsystematic quality of artificial electric light, a quality radically different from the fixed, regular light source characteristic of earlier painting.

Presently most conceptual artists are using, in single works, more than one medium or technique. A piece may consist of photographs, some kind of artifact or structure, a diagram, a videotape, typewritten sheets and so on. Each part gives rise to its own particular technological associates and emotional overtones. Media-collage is a more accurate—and physical—description of this kind of work. If we are attentive, in McLuhan's terms, to the exact qualities of each medium, we find that a videotape and a typed "explanation," for instance, are as radically opposed as Picasso's oilcloth and pigment, and provide qualities of information that are as totally disjunctive.

The case for the collage esthetic as modernism's first premise and defining presence can only be suggested in an essay of this length. Without reproductions formal subtleties can scarcely be indicted and must therefore be slighted. Neither can I indicate the various reactions and programs counter to modernism, beyond mentioning the strong continuation of earlier traditional idioms, and Clement Greenberg's basic misreading of modernism. Though he is a resourceful polemicist, Greenberg's arbitrary effort to shoehorn modernist complexity and sprawl into a narrow, formally rigid container, is a nostalgic attempt to create a "new" consistency to replace the old. Olitski's vapors and Pearlsteins posing rooms are, ultimately, opposite sides of the same coin.

Like his predecessors the modern artist works to achieve unity and clarity; the difference is that he deals, inevitably, with a wider range of choices and a more disjunctive series of terms. The temptation to abandon these expanded formal and iconographic problems is great. Decoding, for instance, has in recent years greatly simplified (and I believe, reduced) his work in a way analogous, perhaps to Agnes Martin's replacement of Mondrian's unsystematic complexity with a simple grid. Mies van der Rohe notwithstanding, more is more often than less is.

The collage esthetic is the very basis of what we know as modern art. It is at the heart of the work of Leger and Miro, Joyce and Proust. One can not imagine Pop Art or Constructivism or Dada apart from its premises. The presence of the collage esthetic assures a methodological link between modern life and art, creating a common denominator between the seven o'clock TV news, Robert Altman's *Manville* and the late works of Matisse.