

COLLAGE AND CUT-UPS – THE ART OF RE-ARRANGEMENT

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This paper explores some of the history and potential of collaged art and cut-up texts as constructivist art forms. I propose that poetry in particular, by drawing our attention to the poet's placing of words, foregrounds both its own construction and the possibilities for alternative word arrangements and altered meanings. The paper offers some personal examples of cutting and re-arranging familiar texts to create new and playful meanings and possibilities.

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My love of collage and cut-ups began very early in childhood, nurtured by grandparents who introduced me to the Victorian arts of decoupage and scrapbook-keeping. We would scour newspapers for images and hoard birthday card pictures to cut and change and paste. In central London in the 1950s, cash books and ledgers could still be found discarded outside commercial buildings, and these big heavy books with over 200 pages and marbled endpapers became wonderful repositories for found treasure. Some of my earliest memories involve sitting with my grandad who had mixed flour and water into a thick porridgy paste in a jam jar, cutting up papers with a child's blunt-ended scissors and arranging pictures on the page. These compositions left little gaps and margins between images, where unguessable columns of figures and fragments of copperplate handwriting appeared like captions in an unknown language, always surprising, always looking just right.

Over the years I have enjoyed collaging original painting with found images, materials and text. Collage – from the French, a work made with glue – has been arguably the most significant revolution in modern art. Its origins in the west are attributed to Picasso and Braque, whose ground-breaking *papiers collés* incorporated bits of newspaper, café menus and pieces of chair caning into still life pictures, challenging all preconceived notions about representation in art, exploring, quite literally, alternative constructions.

Dadaists used collage and 'found' materials as a central focus in their work, recognising the potential for juxtaposing images in startling and violent ways as a means of highlighting the perceived irrationality of modern life and responding to the horrors of war. Surrealists, the Fluxus group, Pop artists - all used collage, incorporating found objects and texts in their work, stimulating a dialogue between the serious and ridiculous, the real and imagined, the random and the composed, the valued and the discarded. This provocative spirit, designed to trigger in the viewer a *trompe l'esprit* - a kind of ontological strangeness and questioning – rather than the more familiar painted *trompe l'oeil*, underpins the shocking juxtapositions and mind-bending rearrangements in many modern and contemporary art installations.

Any re-arrangement of objects, images or text insists that we tell ourselves alternative stories, that we ask new questions. The disruptive potential of collage lends itself both to mischievous humour – like the elves and imps of our childhood folk tales who mix things up while we sleep – and also to polemic through the shock of mixing and morphing words and images from contrasting and contradictory sources. The most subversive of arts, collage provides a powerful way of hearing voices through censorship, confronting us with hidden meanings and promoting new connections without speaking explicitly.

The knowledge that these pictures have a subversive side is deeply appealing. I do

see why there might be strong opposition to it. There's a lot of vested interest in a neutral viewpoint. (Hockney, 1987, p. 158)

David Hockney distinguishes between manipulative collage, designed to disguise its own construction and deceive the eye, and 'honest' collage where you can see the joins. It seems important to him that collage and cut-up work reveal the mechanics of their own making, reminding us of the constructed nature of reality and the continuing possibility of alternative readings.

Your eye takes in the whole [flat] surface instantly. The eye can't do that in collage, because the collage entails another time existing there. When people make deceitful collage...they try to make it look as if it's all the same time. Honest collage deliberately puts another time there, so that the eye will sense these two different times and therefore space. (Hockney, 1987, p. 163)

Hockney calls his photo-collages 'joiners', choosing to highlight their construction and prevent the eye from unquestioningly taking in the whole. Notions of the disrupted narrative and constructive alternativism are at the very heart of collage.

One of my particular enthusiasms is the creation of collaged poetry or 'cut-ups' – the art of rearranging text to create short poems. Bachelard (1958) has described art as "a competition of surprises that stimulates our consciousness and keeps it from becoming somnolent" (preface, p.31), and cut-ups seem to have just this quality, taking an existing, often unpromising, piece of text and transforming it into something new and worthwhile in its own right.

Creating poetry from unlikely sources dates from my teenage years and began as a way of dealing with boredom at school. I was part of the generation who had grown up with stories of word-play experiments, from William Burroughs cutting up texts and defying our understanding of how writing happens, to David Bowie creating song lyrics from words generated randomly

by a computer. In the long and dreary hours of my least favourite lessons, I would amuse myself quietly by rearranging words in text books to create slogans and statements that matched my impressions of the class or teacher, or captured my opinions about the material being taught.

Now I travel to and from London by train several times a week, and regularly experience the traveller's nightmare of finishing my book before the journey ends. That's the point at which I start making poems from it, or can be seen roaming the aisles for discarded copies of the London Evening Standard, a rich source for comedy poems over the years.

The original cut-up methods favoured randomness, reminiscent of a much older poem by Lewis Carroll:

*For first you write a sentence,
And then you chop it small;
Then mix the bits and sort them out
Just as they chance to fall:
The order of the phrases
makes no difference at all.*

(Carroll, 1883/1982, p. 851)

Despite its message, Carroll's poem is distinctly un-random in its neatly scanning rhythms and rhymes, but it makes its point with some charm and was written well before the revolution. The classic method devised by Burroughs and Gysin in the 1950's - while I was still learning to cut with scissors - was to juxtapose lines from adjoining columns of text, swiftly scanning by eye to pick up new phrases and contrasts, creating new texts by alternating lines and totally disrupting existing meaning (Burroughs, 1960). Their experiments included the production of scrap-books and collections of fragmented, torn and cut-up texts from various sources, presented as alternative disrupted narratives.

These chance-based methods can produce startling and surreal pieces of text-based art, but what is missing for me is pleasure involved in the careful crafting of a poem, the placing of words in relation to each other in an attempt to form a new piece with its own integrity, disrupting texts, but at the same time referencing them to some degree and perhaps revealing their com-

ponents in a new light. I am an arranger of things, and a marginally obsessive one at that. This often occurs to me when I return from the shops with a mix of wonderful items which don't quite add up to a recognisable meal. I realise then that I have been composing a still life collage in my basket, chosen for its surprising aesthetics rather than its culinary usefulness - edible collage.

Randomness is perhaps a problematic notion, and I can hear myself in this question addressed to John Cage by a struggling member of an audience (and this is just an extract of the question.):

...it seems that there's some combination of chance and choice [...] and you take out the words you don't like and so on it seems that it's not possible to do anything but by a chance operation if somebody had given the most formal lecture on musicology in the world that would still be a chance operation because that person would have had very contingent experiences and influences and tastes and values and so on everything seems to be a chance operation you seem to think that what you're doing is a chance operation in a different way you say I'm doing it by chance operation as if there's something else and you also seem to be doing it intentionally which raises another paradox you're intentionally doing something by chance if you're intentionally doing it seems to be a choice so it's not by chance and you have a very elaborate structure to construct your lectures and some of your music so it seems on the one hand that it can't fail to be by chance and on the other hand it can't succeed because when people come to hear you they come to hear John Cage... (Cage, 1990, p. 141)

Most cut-up poets have systems of working which have elements of both chance and discipline. Hockney's 'honest' approach is usually foregrounded, drawing attention to the poem as an alternative construction of found material, sometimes by presentation of the torn or cut frag-

ments on the page, by framing each found word, phrase or sentence to show the joins, or by printing alongside the original text.

One thing cut-up methods seem to share is their spontaneity.

You can not will spontaneity. But you can introduce the unpredictable spontaneous factor with a pair of scissors. (Burroughs, 1960, p.35)

This is not an art to be laboured over – it is word play, best done at speed, swiftly noting key words and ideas and attempting to capture happy and unlikely accidents and connections. It's an energetic exercise. Referring to the possibilities of technology, David Ross has talked of

...the jump-cut of the collage...accommodate the velocity, work with it, learn how to surf. (Ross, 1995, p. 12)

My preferred method is to use only one paragraph or one short column of source material, presenting the challenge and puzzle of working with a limited pool of material. Responding to Ross's fabulous injunction to 'accommodate the velocity', I will spend no more than 15 minutes on a piece, (bear in mind some original poems take years to finish), which keeps the poems short and lively and stops them becoming overworked. I have the feeling that they should jump lightly off the page, and make me smile in some way - a smile of humour, or in recognition of an alternative 'rightness'. I will also restrict myself to the exact words in the text, with no changes of tense for example, or changing singulars to plurals. I rather like the uncertain grammar and occasional missing word-link that makes these small poems read like amateur translations from an obscure language. This seems in keeping with what Brandon Taylor (2004) has described as the essence of collage – that it appears somewhat wrong, but interestingly so.

A sense of surprise is what I am looking for, the potential for finding something striking in a column of the everyday and banal such as a

weather report, or creating new sparks out of a text that has presented itself as finished.

The collage technique, that art of reassembling fragments of preexisting images in such a way as to form a new image, is the most important innovation in the art of this century. Found objects, chance creations, ready-mades..abolish the separation between art and life. The commonplace is miraculous if rightly seen, if recognised. (Simic, 1992, p. 19)

Writing a brief article for the PCP arts website (<http://www.arts-con.net>), I created poems from a paragraph in a chapter by Viv Burr about art and ambiguity, which happened to be on my desk. I noticed a paragraph that started with the word 'Poetry' and that became my source. This is the original:

Poetry is therefore a way of inviting us into this intermediary mode. But in our everyday speech we also exploit this indeterminacy of language. The double-entendre is a way of purposefully disrupting the effort of the hearer to resolve the meaning of what we are saying. As such, our own conduct and that of those with whom we are interacting, likewise become indeterminate. We do not commit ourselves to a single meaning. Meaning is preserved as open-ended, ambiguous. For example, flirting is frowned upon as a dishonest activity; it is failing to engage with someone such that our action has a unitary and transparent meaning, disguising our real intentions with invitations which we do not intend to honour. But flirtatiousness is as ambiguous to the performer as it is to the audience. In flirtatious mode, are we in a position to decide what we are really doing? Being friendly? Issuing a sexual invitation? Trying to be influential? The meaning of our actions is indeterminate, and intentionally so. It is potentially all of these things and none of them alone. We live in a state of ambiguity, producing multiple meanings in our words and con-

duct, and resisting the attempt by others to resolve the inconsistency. To the extent that we both recognise the mode of engagement that is being offered here, it is not dishonourable but playful in the sense used by Warren, an awareness of freedom within ourselves. (Burr, 2003, p. 63)

Lovely language to draw on, I had struck lucky with this piece!

I let my eye roam around until words and phrases started to surface and connect. And the first little piece emerged:

*We are being playful with poetry,
Flirting with meanings.*

*Others are disrupting the effort,
Resisting the invitation to freedom,
Disguising dishonourable intentions.*

Our conduct is frowned upon.

Resolve the inconsistency.

Another little poem appears very quickly on its heels, the idea of frowning serving me well it seemed:

*The performer is trying to be friendly, interacting,
But the audience frowned, resisting this engagement.*

Language is failing.

Then another, which I imagine being read in a particular tone of voice. For those familiar with the movie, something like Maggie Smith as Miss Jean Brodie perhaps?

*An invitation in flirtatious mode
Disrupting our everyday sexual world.*

*What are we doing?
We do not recognise ourselves!*

There are often fragments left at this point – little phrases that appeal but which haven't found

their way into a poem. They lend themselves to something that reads like a tiny haiku translation:

*Transparent words –
Commit to none of them.*

I realised as a result of this play that we have a very rich seam to mine here in our own PCP literature, and subsequently suggested that, should we find ourselves with 15 minutes to spare - between meetings perhaps or while waiting for someone to arrive - we might all cut up each other's work, and make poetry from it.

All writing is in fact cut-ups. A collage of words read heard overhead. What else? Use of scissors renders the process explicit and subject to extension and variation. Clear classical prose can be composed entirely of rearranged cut-ups. Cutting and rearranging a page of written words introduces a new dimension into writing enabling the writer to turn images in cinematic variation. (Burroughs, 1960, p. 37)

It has been interesting to think about and explore my methods for creating these little poems. I've noticed that I read the text very carefully first – I do want something of its essence to remain. Words and phrases catch my eye and build to lines, and then follows the puzzle of fitting lines and fragments into the best possible arrangement. This will hopefully read like a poem, but perhaps a slightly odd one, having no obvious motive beyond an alternative construction of found words.

This method of building poems from happily discovered lines may not be too far from the methods of some celebrated poets. I have always treasured a tale reported by Seamus Heaney (1986) in which Christopher Isherwood is describing his part in the poetry of W H Auden:

If I liked one line, he would keep it and work it into a new poem. In this way whole poems were constructed which were simply anthologies of my favourite lines,

entirely regardless of grammar or sense. This is the simple explanation of much of Auden's obscurity.

Heaney follows with:

No doubt this practice (in so far as Isherwood's blithe account can be credited) betrays an irresponsibility with regard to comprehensibility but it does represent a strong life urge in the artist himself. To avoid the consensus and settlement of meaning which the audience fastens on like a security blanket, to be antic, mettlesome, contrary, to retain the right to impudence, to raise hackles, to harry the audience – to do all this may not only be permissible but necessary. (Heaney, 1986, pp 122-123)

So in the spirit of the antic, and claiming my own right to impudence, I elected to work with our own sacred text, George Kelly's Psychology of Personal Constructs. Volume One opens with a preface, which starts with this short paragraph:

This book started out twenty years ago as a handbook of clinical procedures. It was designed for the writer's students and used as a guide in the clinic of which he was the director. At first, the emphasis was on specific ways of revealing and understanding the client's record of personal experience and of seeing clearly the milieu in which he was seeking to find his place. From this beginning the handbook was supposed to develop gradually into something which might have wider use. But, time after time, the writing bogged down in a morass of tedious little maxims. It was no good – this business of trying to tell the reader merely how to deal with the clinical problems; the why kept insistently rearing its puzzling head. (Kelly, 1955, p. xi)

No, I didn't actually take my scissors to the great book, but scanned the page repeatedly for words and connections. Here is the poem:

*Twenty years ago
bogged down in his handbook
the Director started out in business*

*Specific little maxims to tell
his tedious client how
to deal with his head*

*Twenty years seeking
puzzling down gradually
revealing beginning
to see clearly*

*trying
insistently
to find
something good*

It feels coherent enough, with a story to tell, referencing the original in some way, yet the language still reads slightly oddly, prompting us to ask whose voice is this? and why has it been written? Good questions

A couple of leftover fragments of text make another tiny piece. As often happens, this is the one I like, fashioned from leftovers agitating to be used. My personal, miniature, reader's version of the preface to volume one:

*This revealing book
rearing its head
in the clinical milieu
time after time*

- find its place

Poetry, the ultimate polishing of language crystallising words into their perfectly necessary patterns, paradoxically never entirely tightens. The reader is always aware to some degree of the art of construction, of the words being chosen, placed and arranged, and therefore being capable of rearrangement in ways disguised by most prose. Poetry is helpfully 'honest' in that way. Creating and encountering new versions of our most familiar texts in collaged and cut-up form might perhaps provoke in us new questions, that valuable *trompe d'esprit*, a revived interactive relationship with familiar words on a page.

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