

“Collage from the Clinical to the Celebratory”

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There is a strong sense of renewal in art today. It includes and celebrates the form and the making of works we call collage. It is part of a cultural and powerfully spiritual renewal that seeks new webs or matrices for living “outside the box” of packaged consumer culture. It sees “the way of the artist” (Wuthnow) as key to this renewal process. Engendered from multiple perspectives, not the least of which is the gendered and the feminine, this celebratory collage aesthetic privileges process, play, practice and, most importantly, “piecing together” instead of “cutting apart.” In his essay “Searching for Purpose,” journalist Peter C. Emberley writes of many seekers attempting “to restore a sense of community,” to plumb “a source that replenishes and confers staying power” and to establish conduits to the “openness to the transcendent” (Emberley). For collagists, this search unearths richness beyond treasure.

In contemporary art discourse, collage as celebration finds its intellectual (yet by no means spiritual) match in the late-twentieth-century literary and critical movement known as postmodernism. Collage is implicated in postmodernist discourse, a depersonalized and verbally dense activity of rupturing, fragmenting, deconstructing and finally, demythologizing the “sacred cows” of the past—not least of which are the artworld notions of the self-sufficient object and the self-defined (primarily male) artist. Postmodernist options also include “pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness,” along with “ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject.” Granted much study of her sources, English professor Mary Klages writes, the postmodernist scholar is simply to play among their various possibilities (Klages, p. 4, par. 12, 13). “Play,” however, is more of a formal exercise or a “clinic” than a celebration.

Both of these modalities—the celebratory and the clinical—are products of the late nineteen-sixties through the eighties, the decades of radicalism, revolution, and rupture that achieved ready response in new art movements—feminism, performance, body art, “pattern and decoration,” and appropriation art—just to name a few. One can easily agree with Albert Gelpi that this time of “clearing away” was at the same time “an opening” to new forms of experience focusing on the everyday, the local and the particular, and “a recovery” of the ability to play with multiple meanings, forms, and options” (Gelpi, p. 15).

This, in a nutshell, is what collagists do. But we can’t stop there. It’s not just about play, it’s about the spirit of play in this brave new world. Is it to be deflated on the dissecting table by art clinicians or celebrated on the studio table (which could easily be the kitchen counter) by art makers? Trained as a clinician but much happier as an assemblage maker, I’ll go for the latter (while not ignoring the contributions of the former).

Before looking briefly at the modalities of play and practice, key to the celebratory notion of collage, it’s important to add a fourth to the mix, paradox. Landscape architect Anne Whiston Spirn finds paradox, the bringing together and assembling of disparate components, ideas, and symbols, to be the way landscape “writes” its stories. “Stories compel, capture imagination, change attitudes and actions. . . explain the world, define a place in it, justify actions, guide behavior, reinforce through experience,” she writes (Spirn 262). In landscape, narratives and things are brought together to amplify one another in a playful, provisional way. There is something vital about “an artful wilderness to perplex the scene” (259, quoting Alexander Pope).

To continue the metaphor, we might consider the collage artist the lead gardener who facilitates the process of paradox—the bringing together of opposites—by means of her keen eye, well-honed technique, and knowledge of materials. She makes things fit without cutting away their soul. She makes what looks to be intractable look natural. She cuts and clips, then plants and grafts. She puts it all together in a grand performance. But she lets each player speak her piece. What results is a panoply of voices singing from

colorful and textured garden plots, which, together, bring to mind a garden of paradise.

As the compelling myth of Eden incarnates the origin of humankind, collage incarnates our narratives, bringing life, energy and zest to the mix of ideas the artist wishes to convey. The ideas can, and should, range across the spectrum of our direct engagements and experience. The crucial thing is *bringing them together in real physical form, and giving that form life*. It's a spiritual thing, collage. It recovers, it protects, it enshrines, it sustains. It provides opportunities for divine play. (Why, one might ask, do anything else?)

In his book *Free Play*, Stephen Nachmanovich defines play as "*lila*," "the taproot from which original art springs; . . . the raw stuff that the artist channels and organizes with all [her] learning and technique. . . . the free spirit of exploration, doing and being for its own pure joy." This play-space is not so much space as context, not so much bounded field as energy field, not so much studio as experimental laboratory. Here the artist practices her instrument, sharpens her tools, sharpens her skills. But practice is only the beginning. This opens out to "play, exercise, exploration, experiment. . . . all sorts of combinations and permutations of body forms, social forms, thought forms, images, and rules that would not be possible in a world that functions on immediate survival values" (Nachmanovich 42-43, 75).

The celebratory collagist creates more than a collage; rather, she makes a home and a *temenos* for the images and the materials that have been transformed and transforming. Attended and tended by nature, as well as the Spirit and spirits she has encountered and visualized in her art, this bounded or framed unit, with overlaid layers, becomes her personal sanctuary. The sanctuary is both physical and metaphorical—a physical space energized by work, reflection, meditation, just being, and further art making; and a metaphorical springboard for communication on a variety of levels. Nachmanovich is a musician, but he also describes the free play of collage in his comment, "I see that absolutely everything in nature arises from the power of free play sloshing against the power of limits" (33).

Gardening and home-making are, of course, feminine occupations and it needs to be emphasized that to celebrate collage is also to celebrate the contributions of women artists and feminine imagery. Collage professionalizes centuries of feminine art making. This includes an enormous archive of collage-related genres from album making to scrapbook making to flower pressing to photography and to quilting, with sub-genres in between. Currently art historical scholarship places a high value on the work produced in domestic environments as a key index and generator of material culture. Literally, collage is the stuff of life.

The matrix of domesticity is only now receiving its due and feminist scholars are in its van. Just as in collage and in landscape architecture, Anne Higonnet writes, the domestic feminine arts "celebrate. . . the bonds between artist and subject. . . . Feminine pictures [and collages] are saturated with their social and affective functions; their meaning comes from their setting, from the conditions of their creation. . . . [They sustain themselves] through affective relationships" (Higonnet 178, 183).

Although women artists and collagists have tended to create on the margins of the professional art world, Griselda Pollock finds this very border to be a provocative "matrixial borderspace." Making art in the matrix, Pollock explains, is working outside of the limits and making do. But it is also registering "sensations of co-emergence and partnership in difference." The matrix is "the process of change in borderlines and thresholds. . . . if it has a centre, [the metamorphic consciousness] constantly slides to the borderline, to the margins. . . . Through this process the limits, borderlines and thresholds conceived are continually transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing the creation of new ones" (Pollock 212).

Faced with this textu[r]al barrage, readers may now wonder if I have succumbed to the anesthetics of the postmodern clinic! Perhaps I can summarize all of the above in the following sentence. Collage celebrates

the renewal of community, joy, and energy in the making of powerful, albeit provisional, works that give voice to the harmony of the spheres and the matrices of daily life. Is there any other way to go?

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