

Exploring the Hoard: Constructing New Maps of Understanding

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ABSTRACT

How do images and diagrams inform cultural identity and the navigation of social space? This is a core question motivating my art practice.

To produce my artwork, I glean images and texts from magazine collections, which I deconstruct and reconfigure into new iconographies. My goal in this process is to simultaneously destabilize knowledge systems that pretend to obscure uncertainty, even while hinting at possible new understandings. Building on the history of collage as a critical strategy, I explore the role of technical images in identity formation, knowledge production, and expressions of power and authority. In this way, my work maps contextual frameworks that span disparate image cultures and identity systems.

The ‘hoard’, as a type of collection, is an important space for my practice; I see the hoard as an archive and active site of social and political possibilities — a physical manifestation of the excess of capitalist culture.¹ I mine these archives for veins of source materials, looking for patterns that emerge through formal aesthetic similarities. Colour and line speak from within images to reveal possible hybrid visualizations and derive new trajectories of meaning. In this work, I am exorcising my suspicion of a tendency to slip into a passive viewing position; in this way, my work is calling to (and being beckoned by) Vilém Flusser’s cautionary writings on the inherent perils of technical images in mass media.

My works traverse image and objecthood. I transform print materials into photographs, then into pixels, and finally to printed-paper structures. In this way I usher meanings from objecthood to image and back again, questioning visual language along the way. With each work, I engage in a struggle to decipher and map historical traces of print images. At the same time, I am actively trying to confuse, question, and re-code visual tropes, questioning the impact of images on identity construction and broader ontologies. I bury my tracks knee-deep in scrap.

¹ In this text, I will refer to the hoard as a metaphor for the overwhelming volume of cultural imagery at large as well as, a specific collection of print imagery that I see as physical symptom of the pressure of image culture.

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INTRODUCTION:

In the first half of this paper I will introduce the foundational concepts on which my practice rests. Pulled from the discipline of sociology, my practice artistically explores the complexity of identity formation in relation to images of consumerism and new media image studies. I will link my source material (the hoard) to the excessive propagation of consumer images; first critiqued by Dada artists in the 1920's. I will demonstrate that the techniques of collage and photomontage have the unique ability to mirror the complexity of our current digital landscape and therefore provide an excellent tool for the critique of images.

In the second half of this paper, I will present a series of artworks that together constitute my thesis. I will begin with earlier works, in which I guided contextually similar images into predictable shapes. I will then show how, in later works, I have allowed the formal elements of images to guide me over historical eras and territories, leading to a broader engagement with image systems. I will explore how my practice both reveals and conceals the tenuous links between different disciplines of visual knowledge and communication. And I will attempt to show that my work questions the physical dimension and impact of images and diagrams in the world, wondering aloud how this relates to the complexity of our digitally imagined identities.

1. MATERIALS AND NOTIONS

The following section will introduce several important terms that I use to frame a discussion of my artwork. These terms are: *images*, *identity*, and *collage as a critical strategy*. Each of these considerations is broad and complex in its own right, and each has unique histories. It would therefore be a difficult project to attempt a comprehensive overview; this is not my aim.

Similarly, I do not mean to attempt to isolate these considerations in order to analyze them in relation to one another. Rather I want to build a dense and textured framework referencing the complexity of my images, which in turn reflect the frameworks of reference we use to make sense of visual language. In other words, these principles should be understood to have overlapped, looped and entangled each other throughout my research. There are multiple routes through this work, despite the apparent linearity of the paper.

1.1 IMAGES

1.1.1 THE PRESSURE OF PICTURES

Images have been speaking to us for a long time, and they continue to communicate a multitude of messages. They refuse to stay silent. They have been illustrated, photographed, traced, imagined and imprinted onto our psyches. The flood of imagery in our digital age has brought a steady stream of anxiety in media theory, as well as near-panic in popular culture discourse about the ways in which images appear to be changing our society. Is it possible to step back and truly *see* what it is we are looking at? What is it that we are *reading* into the pictures that paint our experience of the everyday? My practice sets out to explore the recent past of print images and stitch together new cultural narratives in what I see as a complex web of understanding and confusion in the analysis of the pictorial language of technical images, diagrams and their connections to the objective voice of authority and power.

The pressure to better understand images and their relationships to power, knowledge and authority is growing, as we are exposed to an increasingly elaborate feast of digital imagery. In his influential text *Picture Theory*, art historian WJT Mitchell writes: “Pictorial representation has always been with us, it presses inescapably now, and with unprecedented force, on every level of culture, from the most refined philosophical speculations to the most vulgar productions of the mass media...the need for a global critique of visual culture seems inescapable” (Mitchell 16). Considering Mitchell’s eloquent description, I sense the incredible scale of the warehouses of stockpiled print images that I use to make my work as an analogue metaphor for the *pressure* that Mitchell associates with visual culture.

There is a connection between images, power and knowledge (Mitchell 24). Who makes images? Who has the means to project them into the world? These questions have changed now that digital technologies allow a great majority of us to make and instantaneously disseminate images worldwide, adding to the visual noise of media advertisers, whose roles are already well established in image propagation. Considering how images are used by institutions

of power and authority to manipulate and instruct the public, the pertinent question then becomes, what are images saying? Which histories of knowledge do they carry within them and which do they call on in order to be understood? How are families of images connected? Can *familial structures* of images be traced throughout time, and will they, in turn, reveal their connections to the power structures that underpin them? These are the relationships between images with respect to identity and pictorial language that my practice explores.

1.1.2 IMAGE CONSUMPTION

Instead of passively ingesting the images that are generated by the sign system of consumer culture, I aim to actively engage, track, trace, break, scramble and re-format them, suggesting new cultural narratives. Theorizing on the aesthetics of semiotics employed in cubism, which later influenced Dadaist photomontage techniques, author Francis Francina describes in the essay “Artistic subcultures: signs and meaning” why subcultures subvert mainstream signs: “The social experience of members of a subculture is typically contradictory; they are resistant to but dependent upon a social system which they find inhospitable. In relation to available sign systems, subcultures typically ‘play games’ with them, breaking their rules in various ways.” (175 Francina). Inspired by this stream of aesthetic and symbolic refiguration my work explores alternative combinations and compositions of both pictorial and thematic potentials.

Using familiar print imagery to trigger social memories of consumerism and education, I am attempting to broaden the discourse around how these images have functioned in our recent past and continue to direct and predict our consumer and societal behaviors. Images influence the way we see ourselves in relation to others and interact with one another. I aim to illustrate/map/graph/capture/confuse a glimpse of this *social identity*, both past and present.

Sociologists and media theorists alike debate the ways in which images are influencing identity and vice versa. As passive visual media consumers we rarely question or link together the sleek pictures of automation and mechanization with the industrial and war-fueled modernist vocabulary of speed, time and movement. Writer and new media cultural theorist Vilém Flusser

roundly criticized this type of passive consumption. As he wrote in his influential work *Into the Universe of Technical Images*:

“Everyone is at once a mouth that sucks on the images and an anus that gives the undigested, sucked thing back to the images...cultural analysis calls this happiness “mass culture” (Flusser 66).

Flusser suggests that our current state of mass image consumption is overwhelmingly passive and self-gratifying. He argues that it is not only uncritical, submissive and indulgent, but that it also creates a condition of isolation. For Flusser, society “drifts into corners, into the lonely mass... interpersonal bonds, the social tissue, dissolve”. People “belong to no family and identify with neither nationality nor class”(Flusser 63). I find this notion of passive, isolated image consumption and the simultaneous deterioration of sociopolitical familial connections in the formation of identity to be uniquely compelling. It is not possible to form a *social* identity in isolation; clearly images have an impact on identity. Could the disruption of this passive image ingestion create a more critical arena within which to consider their influence?

1.2 IDENTITY

1.2.1 A QUESTION OF MEDIA?

One of the new social conditions of digital cultures is that, as time and distance are collapsed, we are delivered a seemingly infinite spectrum of identity signifiers (gendered images, brand identification, socio-economic markers) with increasing velocity. Fed by an exhaustive array of images, institutions with mixed commercial agendas vie for our attention. How can we conscientiously engage with this pressing diversity of identity options? Or – more worryingly – is it possible that we are over-saturated to a point where resistance or critical engagement is impossible? Sociologist Robert G. Dunn writes extensively on the nuances of commodity culture,

image systems and their influences on Identity. In his essay "*Identity, Commodification and Consumer Culture*" he describes the postmodern sense of self as a "tendency toward fragmentation and dissolution" (Dunn 113). Dunn attributes this to "the vast and rapidly changing landscape of consumer capitalism and the evolving means of signification constituting mass culture and the informational society"(Dunn 113). It is not only the number of images and variety of cultural signification of commodities that lend to a fragmentation of the self, but also the isolation associated with the digital formats in which we receive this information that accelerates this process.

Dunn echoes Flusser when he suggests that the "... sources of identity have shifted historically from the internalization and integrations of social roles to the appropriation of disposable commodities, images, and techniques, selected and discarded at will from the extensive repertoire of consumer culture." (Dunn 114). Given that we are bombarded with transient print and digital images, and that we no longer rely on traditional (although often problematic) markers of location (familial, religious and cultural points of reference), is it possible to adopt new ways of thinking about identity formation (in all its multiplicity) as a means of social engagement and critique? How could new media's multiplicity be mirrored in an aesthetic and critical landscape?

1.2.2 IMAGING THE SELF

As I have written, my practice is underpinned by several questions surrounding the entangled role of images in the construction of a social identity, including: the history of print media, consumerism, Canadian identity, and female subjectivity. Women and gender studies scholar Donica Belisle has written a detailed account of Canada's evolution into a nation with one of the highest global rates of consumption in her text *Retail Nation Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada*. Canada's lack of a collective history created a unique corporate opportunity: "Such corporations as Roots, Canadian Tire, Tim Hortons, and Molson's have offered a capitalist solution... Inviting customers to identify with their brands and companies, these corporations

helped create a consumerist Canadian nationalism that sidesteps questions of ethnicity, language, race, and religion” (Belisle 79). Canadian retailers used media images and consumer promises to unite small groups of isolated and diverse cultural peoples.

It would be difficult to overestimate the role of consumer images on the formation and performance of gendered identities; media images both reflect and influence gender. My own postered adolescent bedroom walls and my late grandmother’s comprehensive collection of department store catalogues align with this consumerist perception of history and self. Throughout history, women have been market targets for consumerist images as the primary household purchasers. In Germany, during the Weimar Republic in the 1920’s, social changes for women were tied to shifting private and professional roles and to the emergence of the mass media (a cultural shift that has received impressive comment by many artists, not least the Hannah Höch). As more and more advertising images were aimed at women, “mass culture became a site for the expression of anxieties, desires, fears, and hopes about women’s rapidly transforming identities”(Lavin 2). This cultural shift transformed most of European and North American mass media consumer culture and tied it intimately to the performance of gender. These factors help make collage a viable means for critiquing gendered consumer images as seen in the work of Hannah Hoch, Martha Rosler and Linder Sterling.

Through my physical exploration into image culture I am unearthing the typical stereotyping found in these consumer images. As I re-imagine these families of images I am playing with recoding the objective voice of authority implicit in technical images, diagrams and commercial images to confound these traditional image systems. Materially, I am performing an aesthetic intervention by cutting up popular images and diagrams and re-figuring them into new patterns of knowing by using my own painterly subjective aesthetic and my training in textile arts (embroidery, sewing, quilting, knitting and weaving). The fragility and malleability of the paper and digital images that I am tacking and basting mimic the ease of multi-coloured fabrics and deny both the strict assurances of the diagram and the rigid materiality of its subject matter: metals, machine parts, cabinetry, steel girders, rockets, electrical grids, etc...

1.2 COLLAGE AS CRITIQUE

1.3.1 SEMIOTICS AND COLLAGE HISTORY

Collage as a critical strategy has its history rooted in the work of the Berlin Dada artists of the 1920's. Matthew Biro, professor of modern and contemporary art and author of *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, analyzed the Berlin Dada art motifs and methods of production. The Dadaists, Biro writes used discarded materials to frame what they saw as "imagery drawn from everyday life to disclose invisible forces, overarching concepts, and underlying types... to create historical points of comparison for analyzing the present moment..." (Biro 202). Their initial artistic and politically discursive explorations into media images using collage and photomontage techniques contributed significantly to our contemporary understanding of media and image culture (Biro). Biro further isolates the *cyborg* as a recurring motif in Dada imagery. He argues that the cyborg acts as a metaphor for the complexity of new media social consciousness, "... the cyborg frequently appeared in Berlin Dada art because it could represent a new conception of hybrid or "networked identity" (Biro). By splicing popular media imagery together into unexpected combinations- or hybrids- Dada artists could at once comment on the established media driven political culture while offering new creative and more nuanced speculations.

For example, Figure 1 is a photomontage made by Hannah Höch entitled *Zweigesichtig* ("With Two Faces"). Here, Höch uses a print image of a common mannequin style that was popular at the time to display goods to the new generation of Weimar female shoppers. The mannequin served as a metaphor for the new consumerist role of women: the simplification, automation and mass-generated mechanizations of the 'new woman' created and promoted by advertising. Höch disrupts the 'logic' of the consumerist link between product and 'ideal woman' by combining both the statuesque precision of the mannequin's face with the profile of a less-stylized shadow-self reflected in the back of the head (Lavin 134-5).

[Figure 1 has been removed due to copy restrictions. The information removed is a photographic reproduction of Hannah Höch's *Zweigesichtig (With Two Faces)*, 1927-30.]

Fig. 1: Hannah Höch, *Zweigesichtig (With Two Faces)*, 1927-30, 10.7 x 16.2 cm, photomontage, Collection Marianne Carlberg. http://www.lalouver.com/html/exhibition.cfm?tExhibition_id=118 HH *Zweigesichtig*

Höch's artistic approach involved searching popular imagery for metaphors and visual patterns that would reveal larger societal systems and connections between power and consumer culture. It is in this sense that I feel an allegiance with Höch, in my visual research. In this example, Höch grafts two simple images together to produce a profound political effect. Early Dada work and the visual culture it critiqued permitted these types of didactic statements, however, the deluge of digital imagery that defines our current moment demands more complex and less deterministic considerations in image making and therefore I seek to *increase* the visual complexity of my compositions.

Although I am critical of mass media images, I am not interested in the physical desecration of my source material as has often been the case in the history of collage. I appreciate the work of Thomas Hirschhorn, who has nailed, painted, ripped and torn some the images and objects in his installations. But rather than emulate this sort of disruption, I would like to expand on the aspects of collage that are evident in Hannah Höch's use of textile techniques. Höch was interested in traditional women's crafts (Biro 200) and had expertise with abstract pattern making (Lavin 59) It is with these handcrafted techniques in mind that I draw from Höch's work.

Focusing on the aesthetically formal and abstract qualities of pictorial language allows me to link contextually diverse and gendered subject matter into surprising new patterns. Just as Höch used her kitchen knife to carve and critique the photographic representation of our consumerist world, so I use my sewing scissors to critically snip into our finely woven contemporary image culture. I aim to critique and subjectively re-consider the objective voice of the scientific, consumerist, mechanical and the diagrammatic; in this way I am beholden to a history begun with Hannah Höch's use of photomontage.

Another important reference for me is influential American artist Martha Rosler. Her series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*, a series of photomontages from the 1970's (revisited in the 2000's), activates how powerfully critical the use of juxtaposition in photomontage can be. Rosler combines glossy Western beauty or home décor magazine images with pictures from the same time period across the world in war torn regions. In these montages the time period of the pictures remains consistent, but the variables of location and social circumstance change dramatically. Rosler exemplifies what British art critic and writer Sally O'Reilly describes as the role of the collagist: "an unethical anthropologist who meddles with the very syntax of a culture" (O'Reilly 19).

[Figure 2 has been removed due to copy restrictions. The information removed is a photographic reproduction of Martha Rosler's *The Gray Drape*, 2008.]

Fig. 2: Martha Rosler. *The Gray Drape*. 2008. 40 x 30". Mitchell-Innes & Nash.
http://www.miandn.com/exhibitions/martha-rosler_1/works/1/#3

Not only does Rosler manage to juxtapose two very different ways of living but also she also effectively combines and clashes what has been described as the domestic/private/home/female-gendered space with the public/foreign/war torn/political/ and male gendered space. This stereotypical differences between the private and the public or the subjective and the objective are confused and interwoven in my work by the hand cut *quilting or weaving* of the smooth formulaic diagrammic language of science, the institution, commodity culture and abstract painting.

1.3.2 COLLAGE AND THE DIGITAL

We are exposed to an ever-increasing number of images: print ads, posters, billboards, the screens of televisions, computer monitors, tablets, and the tiny, shiny surfaces of smartphones.

We surf through them, buy through them, edit our lives through them, and walk past them. They stream, scroll and flash around us. On what level of observation and understanding do we engage with them? My process explores the miasma of visual cues and codes; capturing, cutting, sorting and re-imagining.

The techniques of collage and photomontage seem particularly suitable to represent the digital age, with its collapsing perspectives of contexts and time (Dunn 110). Dadaists and Cubists were pioneers in the collapse of visual time. Their compositions echoed the writings of Henri Bergson who described the experience of time as a subjective layered experience of reality. Francis Frascina in his essay "Realism, ideology and the 'discursive' in Cubism" succinctly summarizes Bergson's subjective experience of time: "Each persons' notion of reality is made up of memories, experiences of the past, which are simultaneously present in individual consciousness. There is a simultaneous flow of past and present, into the future..." (Frascina 138). This erasure of time frames a collapse of context and identity as best described by Marshall McLuhan, in his often overlooked text *The Mechanical Bride* (1951). McLuhan explains how it was no longer possible for people's identities to remain fixed: "There are no more remote and easy perspectives, either artistic or national. Everything is present in the foreground...it is not a question of preference or taste. This flood has already immersed us" (McLuhan 87). Collage as a method of art making can mirror this complexity of identity and subjectivity, the collapse of time and location and the flow and abundance of images. Collage allows me a generative context to layer a mass of different contextual and temporal sources, breaking, challenging and re-assembling our notions of self in relation to the language of image culture.

Using the combined methods of paper collage and digital photomontage to map these new connections, I work to shuffle the historicity of print images and confuse the contexts in which these images are located. My practice maps a shift from the textually linear to the interactivity of the multi-platform; from text to diagram, from analogue to digital, from stacks of discarded print paper to new visual vocabularies. Flusser argues that the contemporary condition of this complex culture of digital images changes the way humans interact. He suggests that moving from an out-moded, text-based culture into a highly visual culture has fundamentally changed our behavior from a dramatic linear narrative to a complex multi-dimensional arena of relationships.

“When images supplant texts, we experience, we perceive, and value the world and ourselves differently, no longer in a one-dimensional, linear, process-oriented, historical way but rather a two-dimensional way, as surface, context, scene. And our behavior changes: it is no longer dramatic but embedded in fields of relationships.” (Flusser, 5)

An important counterpoint to Flusser as context for my work is sociologist Robert G. Dunn. Dunn appears to reinforce Flusser’s position; he summarizes that the overlapping, discontinuous and inter-connectedness of newer media processes have “transformed [the] order of experience” (Dunn 125). Dunn also suggests that new media platforms such as, “[t]elelevision viewing, computer networks, and video entertainment are... mediated by technologies whose uses and contents destabilize our sense of place and time” (Dunn 130). Similarly, the artistic act of collage, with its “rejection of singularity, rationality and coherence” (O’Reilly 8), *shuffles* our process of knowing and becomes integral to understanding our current sociopolitical moment. This *destabilization* of understanding is crucial to my work.

The strengths of collage lie in its ability to take an already complex and contextually multi-layered image and juxtapose all of its embedded meaning with another equally complex image. Collage employs a non-sequential strategy creating a hyper-complex mosaic of understanding or misunderstanding. Even so, activating dense networks of visual relationships within the cut and glued edges of the individual collage fragments is only one piece of the puzzle. Francis Frascina expands on this concept in his analysis of early collage techniques found in Cubist paintings: “Not only may parts of the collage act as signifiers but also the particular *relationships* between them... [this] is crucial for an understanding of what is signified by the work as a whole” (Frascina 95). This makes understanding the layers of complex connections between images even more important. The visual correlations that I build upon in my work between images of advertising, science, fashion, art and popular culture create dense playful relational networks of similarity and difference.

Working through a never-ending sea of images over the past few years has revealed a number of visual patterns, or what I call *the familial patterns*. These visual tropes are used to communicate certain types of information to the viewer, they include repeating elements such as: colour palette, close-up angles, perspective, contrast, magazine format sizing, illustrations

and diagrams. For example, the colour red is used to highlight and designate important sales information, warnings and diagrams depicting heat and combustion; arrows are commonly used symbols employed to direct the viewer's eye within a composition or advertisement, to suggest a linear narrative and to illustrate the invisible paths of steam and velocity; close-up angles are used to make a product seem larger and more attention grabbing usually exemplifying a sense of dramatic perspective that includes diagonal imagery for a more dynamic feel. My interest lies in uncovering these visual tropes and re-animating within my own imaginative contexts.

1.3.3 THE HOARD AS CULTURAL EXCESS

To better frame my questions surrounding the abundance of available imagery and ground Mitchell's description of the *pressure* of pictorial representation, I direct my exploration into the abyss of print paper history. My source is the *hoard*, the obsessive production, expulsion and final collection of the paper by-products produced at the intersection of commodity and visual culture.



Fig. 3: Monique Motut-Firth, *East Vancouver Warehouse*, 2014. Source material. Used by permission of the owner.

Squeezed between curving towers of old magazines, my guide and I sidestep slowly along tiny crooked paths into a cave of a warehouse stacked with my source materials. It is unheated, and thick with the scent of paper decay. Humidity cloaks old cigarette smoke and pets, long-passed. For the last two years I have been coming here, to this indistinct warehouse, to select the majority of my print materials. I see this collection as a repository of discarded collective memories, the excess of our commodity culture barely contained by this obsessive space. Together, my guide, entrepreneur and obsessive collector and I comb through the stacks, I flick through ceaseless pages of women, food, machines, landscapes, paintings, catalogues, newspapers... paper ghosts of faces, objects and events. Old stacks dwindle in height as new piles raise up- I alter this landscape. Often, my new piles slip down in between the stacks and onto the path. I crouch, awkwardly confined, and attempt to straighten my mess.

Nicholas Bourriaud believes that it is the responsibility of the artist to investigate and highlight the sign(posts) of our cultural labyrinth:

“We have an ethical duty not to let signs and images vanish into the abyss of indifference a commercial oblivion, to find words to animate them as something other than products destined for financial speculation or mere amusement. The very act of picking out certain images and distinguishing them from the rest of the production by exposing them is also an ethical responsibility”.

The discarded and dusty decaying piles of a hoarder’s obsessive collection signify for me the *abyss* to which Bourriaud refers. The materials in this obsessive collection provide a type of chaotic selection of the discarded, sedimented over time. Selections made from the hoard allow me an opportunity to distill and fantastically re-invent their original message. I see the hoarder as an *unconventional archivist* and the hoard as a site of aesthetic, thematic and political possibility; its mass is a symptom of the excess of our consumerist culture and its chaos is a reflection of the impact of the digital on identity.

The hoard provides a rich and unique source for materials that coincide with Bourriaud’s vision of the abyss and Mitchell’s voice of the pressure of pictorial representation. It’s chaotic

collection and organic organizational systems shuffle history and intention. Using the contents of the hoard I search through disparate materials linking together familial patterns of visual images. Expanding on an extensive history of Dadaist interventions and exercising the complexity of collage strategies; I build indeterminate and overlapping compositions that collapse both time and context to better understand the way in which our current digital moment influences our reflection in the media mirror.

2. *BUILDING SCRAP-SYSTEMS*

In the previous section, I outlined some of the foundational concerns of my practice. Now I will speak directly to my work in relation to established themes of images, identity and collage as critique. I will begin with a description of a content driven practice that evolved into an increasingly formal and abstract body of work. The physical manifestation of my arts research as seen in my practice has led me to question the dimensionality and physical impact of images – not only as seen in the scale of the hoard but their real-world implications of objective authority and commodity culture. I will describe how the techniques of collage and photomontage can generate correlational thinking, mirroring the complexity of technical diagrams and digital images. I will locate my practice in the contemporary art context and analyze the use of the diagram in my work. Finally, I will explore some possible new directions for research that I will be exploring in the future.

2.1 CYCLES OF REPRESENTATION

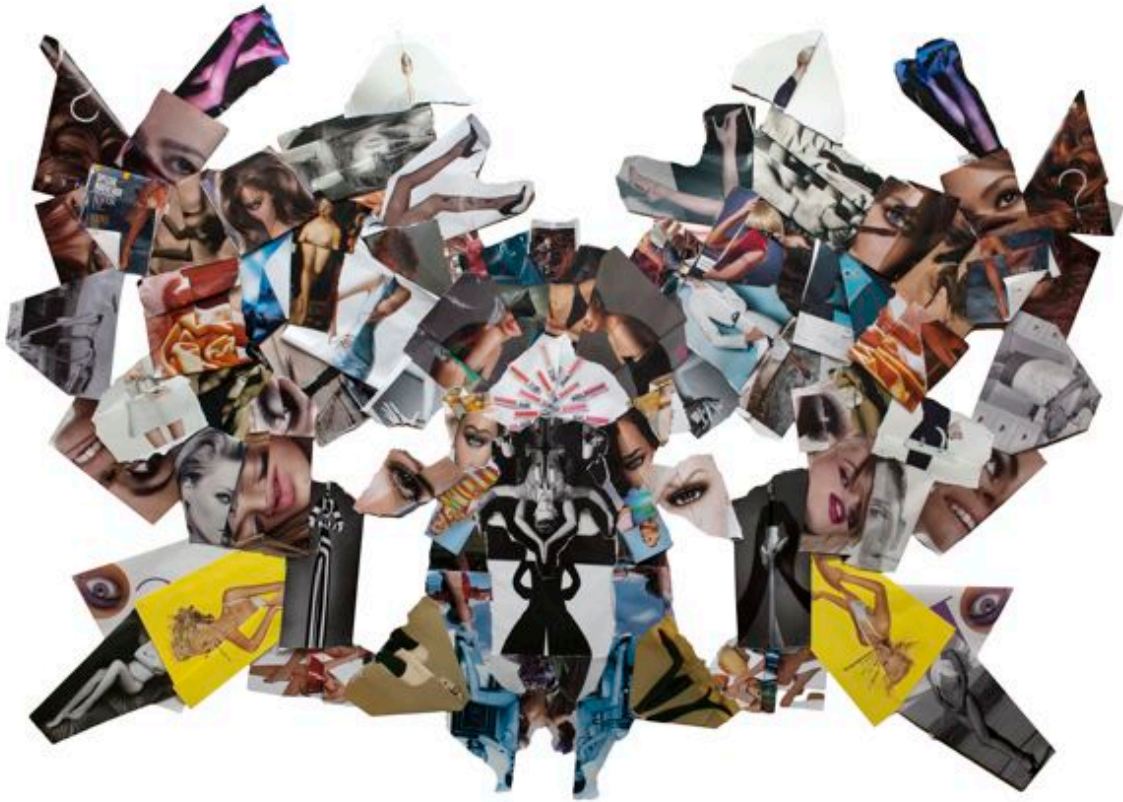


Fig. 4: Monique Motut-Firth, *Papilio figura (Beauty Butterfly)*, 2014. Mixed media collage photography and paint, sizes variable. Used by permission of the artist.

2.1.1 CONTENT AS A FRAMEWORK

Sorting through the inexhaustible images contained within the hoard requires a guiding methodology. One approach I used to direct my research was using *content* as the structuring paradigm. Another involves allowing the formal *aesthetic traits* of the images to guide me through the content. Some of my earlier work (see Figure 4) involved piecing together imagery according to theme or content; in this example the theme was women's beauty products. These theme-based constructions gave rise to successful compositions, but the process limited the

potential for a more complex investigation; it simply reflected the associations that already exist. In the above piece, I used a found collection of Vogue and photography magazines to investigate the imagery surrounding women's bodies. I liken this particular piece to the *Chimaeras* of Annette Messenger from the 1980's. This insect-like form, like Messenger's *Chimaeras*, is also a built from a fragmented combination of the "fantastic and the horrific imagery of daily life, particularly imagery associated with women" (Conkelton 66). I pinned, folded, ripped and obscured the bodies of women in each image in an attempt to deny the original intention and subject of each photograph. The completed composition was photographed, printed and re-presented as one united form. Interestingly, the interventions that I performed on these figures seemed unimportant and insignificant, perhaps because we are highly accustomed to looking at the female body dismembered— a set of legs or breasts. This work affirmed for me the pervasiveness and invisibility demonstrated by the advertising strategy of imaging fragmented female bodies to reinforce and direct gender performance and promote the sale of anxiety-reducing products.

In an attempt to further complicate the way in which familiar gendered images represent women, I broadened my source material for the following piece, *Motor Wasp* (Figure 5). Here, I combined mechanically similar imagery - pumps from beauty cream and perfume bottles, blenders and household taps from home décor and women's Vogue and Chatelaine magazines - with images of sparkplugs, engines, trains and oil containers found in publications from the 1940's to the 1970's (primarily Popular Science magazines and industrial sales catalogues). The image aspires to build an almost seamless mechanized structure that knits together advertisements, home appliances, heating systems, beauty products, electricity, telecommunication, transportation and automobile industries of the past and the present. The links were made using visual-likeness in formal aesthetics e.g. colour, line, shape, illustration or photographic image as opposed to thematic similarities.

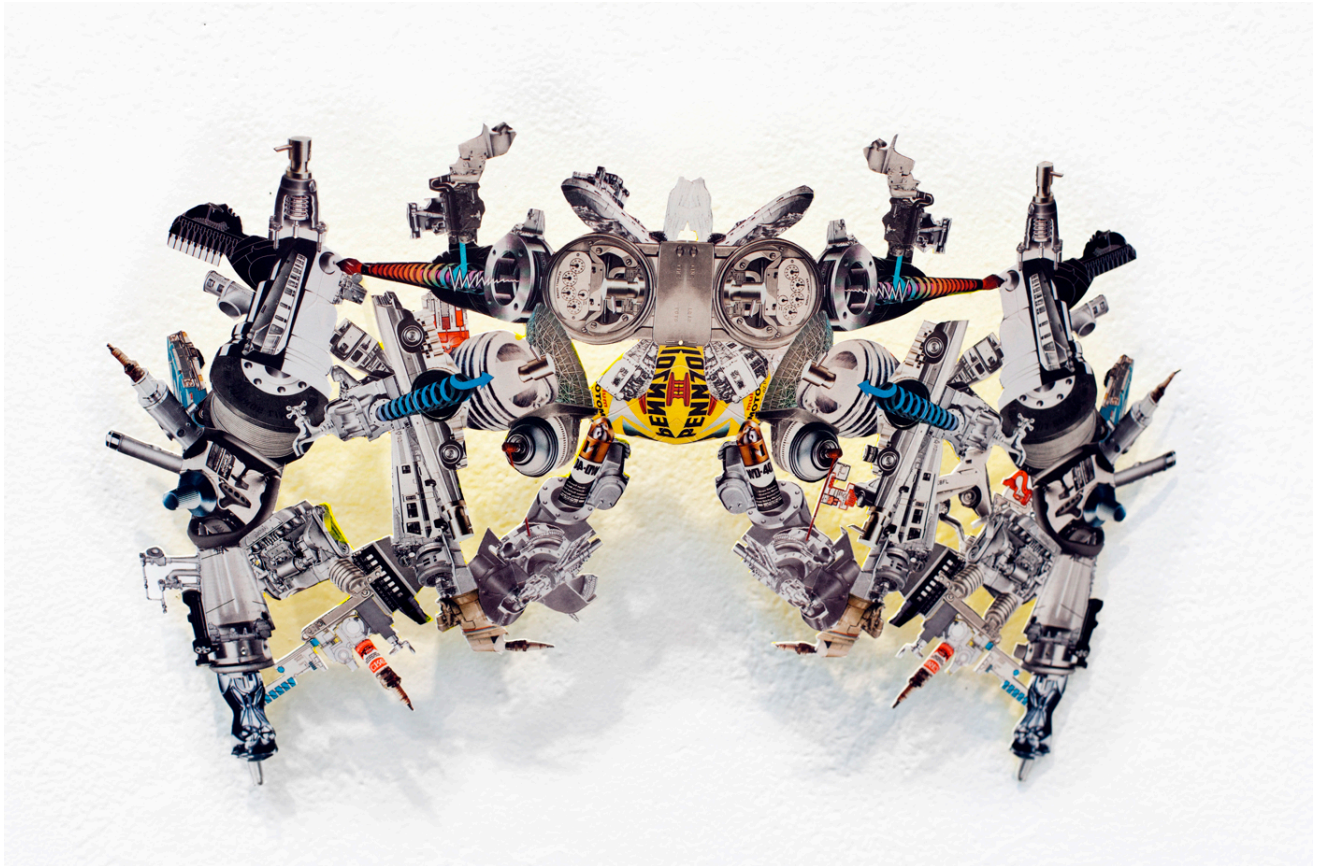


Fig. 5: Monique Motut-Firth. *Motrum vespa (Motor Wasp)*, installation view Emily Carr Concourse Gallery, 2014. Mixed media collage and paint, sizes variable. Photo: Amanda Arcuri. Used by permission of the artist.

The increased density of the resulting composition and the visual similarity between machine parts and female beauty products is both confusing and revealing. It serves to remind us of the complexity in which we come to understand our social selves. As I discussed earlier, the mechanization of the female form and her consumerist role were a concern for Hannah Höch in her photomontages, and later in Marshall McLuhan's text *The Mechanical Bride*. Through the pairing of the uniform idealized female form with the labour-saving assurances and 'scientifically proven' slogans of beauty remedy ointments, "Beauty and efficiency were equally attributed to the machine. Women were encouraged to aspire to the status of mannequins with the help of commodities, and the commodity itself was offered as an ideal with which to identify." (Lavin 93). These thematic links are well demonstrated in the visual similarities between machine and beauty imagery, for example, beauty products are often packed in slick faux-metallic containers aesthetically linking them to machine power and efficiency. Tracking formal similarities alone

can lead to new correlations of understanding between different disciplines and eras inciting me to question how certain spheres of knowledge are related and functioning in concert around us.

2.1.2 ALLOWING THE IMAGES TO LEAD

An important development occurred midway through my thesis work. Originally, I worked in perfect symmetry; building one half of my visual hybrids and then mirroring them, influenced by the psychoanalytic Rorschach test or the insect body. I was imagining the imprint these images might have on the psyche. The Rorschach acted as catchall shape in which I could connect and layer the excesses of everyday images. Later, I moved towards the insect shape, perhaps I was seduced by this insect-form because it kept re-appearing in my Rorschachs. The insect seemed to serve as a metaphor for all of the disposable paper handbills that crowd us, lurk under our feet, in our recycling bins and the forgotten depths of our pockets – the mental swarm that scatters when the light is turned on.

In the end, this methodology and the resulting compositions proved too predictable, limiting, and literal. I was leading the imagery instead of letting the formal aspects of the *images guide me*. The more I worked cutting and sorting imagery the more I noticed certain repetitive visual tropes; magazine scale, line, colour... I began to wonder what would happen if I let the formal elements of the visual language lead me through the mass of seemingly unrelated subjects. I started using the physical qualities of a curve or a point in an abstract gestural fashion pulling from my history as a painter and textile worker. Allowing the images to guide me through my visual research has been surprising and compelling – it has also greatly increased the level of complexity in my final compositions – confusing the reading. They are no longer another simple re-representation of existing materials but a more complex constellation of gesture, movement and thought.



Fig. 6: Monique Motut-Firth. *Brayton Single Shaft*, 2014. 22 x 30". Di-bond mount inkjet print. Used by permission of the artist.

For example, in the image above, *Brayton Single Shaft* (Figure 6), the colour blue leads the viewer through and between diagrams of lunar charts, construction layouts, corporate logos, paintings, and mechanical machine cut-aways, an unpredictable array of print materials ranging

in era and thematic contexts. Viewing perspectives and depths are skewed and overlapped to confuse the predictable conventions of the pictorial space as well as the promised objective clarity of the language of diagrams.

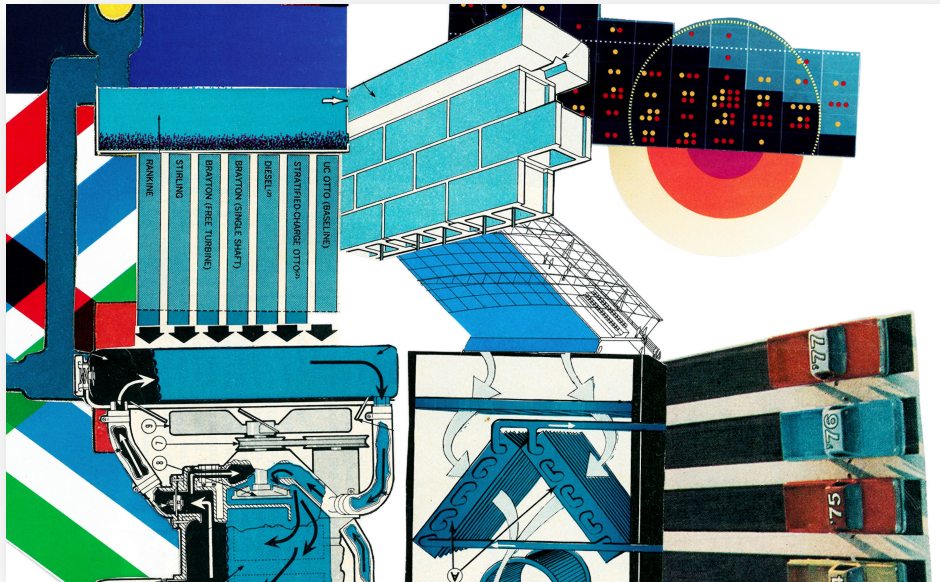


Fig. 7: Monique Motut-Firth. *Brayton Single Shaft* (detail), 2014. 22 x 28". Di-bond mount inkjet print. Used by permission of the artist.

When I concede to the formal elements of the images and allow them to lead me, I am less concerned with contextual links - in fact, I am often surprised by the scope of subjects that I am able to link together by simply isolating a particular formal characteristic. It is in this way that the images are now guiding my practice into and between overlapping disciplines. It is important to note that I am not following formal variables in order to erase the political implications of content, but rather to reveal and complicate the connections between what appear to be fundamentally different categories of content and discourse. More specifically, attempting to create a field of playful exploration across time and subject that triggers social memories and paradigms of understanding using a type of *aesthetic kinesis* to link image histories as opposed to linear narratives or specific content.

I am allowing the visual vocabulary of existing images to guide my artistic mark-making in the creation of inventive compositions, machines and systems. I am using machine motion to build

my compositions, imagining the colours and shapes pushing and pulling throughout my designs; it is as though the pressures and forces of fluids, gravity, momentum and steam are themselves at work. As one would fit a puzzle, I ask: can I continue a line? Is there a colour running through it? I tack and weave illustrations of pipe, paper, wire, wood, metal, colour and text scraps together; piece-by-piece, slowly building outwards in all directions as a city planner might. Preferring to work on a flat surface - free from the constraints of perspective and gravity - I join images together horizontally and then mount them vertically to further disorientate the viewer and exaggerate a sense of compositional strangeness. This sense of imbalance or miscalculation is important to the work.

2.2 THE PHYSICALITY OF IMAGES

2.2.1 QUESTIONS OF DIMENSIONALITY

Images exercise particular formal tropes to imply dimensionality, for example, perspective, shading, deep space, figure/ground relationships and so on... And although images can only allude to the physical they *are* capable of affecting profound real-world change. I am interested in exploring the tension created within this multi-dimensional dynamic. The locus of identity building has shifted from traditional social groups and relationships to an act of public consumption. As Dunn has aptly claimed, “[t]he commodification of society and culture has relocated the search for identity in the act of consumption ” (Dunn 131). It is the commodification of these image systems that I aim to visualize, question and reflect in my structural compositions and finishing processes. If one traces any given simple, yet convincing, advertising process, it may look like this: the product (object) is photographed (image) and distributed, viewers consume the commercial images, motivating and potentially activating the viewer through complex emotional expressions of anxiety, fear and desire to act on the world and purchase the product (object) that seduced them in the image space. As an investigation of this cycle, it logically follows for me to experiment with a ‘push and pull’ of my own images, back and forth between image and object spaces. I wonder if it is possible to prevent them from

sitting comfortably in either image or object category. The physical manifestation of overflowing landfills and the hoard of my print source materials also serve as concrete consequences of mass production and planned obsolescence—magazines obsolete with each new issue, the memory of their visual language still circulating as they lay in forgotten corners and recycling bins.

I am experimenting with a number of different methods to create this tension between image and object spaces. To begin, I cut, sort and physically combine source materials into new compositions, intentionally colliding scale and perspective to challenge the viewer's sense of kinetic empathy. I then collapse my collage of mixed paper into a digital image (scan, photograph) to flatten all the levels of time and space between the disparate pieces. Collapsing the hand-cut collage into a digital image acts as a catalyst in a number of different ways in my practice. The first is a type of compilation of the chaos of the hoard; the contrast between the original source material and the clean precision of the final digital image serves to compact and distill all of the different levels of information into one new graphic. In another sense, the digital image acts to re-invigorate, archive and re-present the decaying paper relics that I am working with. Lastly, as new media guru Mark B. N. Hansen has theorized on the infinite pliability of the digital image (Hansen 72-3), all physical components are reduced to fluid lines of digital code. This pliancy of the digital image reinforces the *ease* and fragility of the materiality of paper and textiles, my scissors denying the suggested strength of metallic machine imagery, the rigid structure of wooden construction materials and the objective inflexible information inherent in infographics and diagrams. I then re-print my compositions, converting them once again into print material, solidifying their new existence as image or sculpture, repeating the object/image/object cycle of representation inherent in image culture.

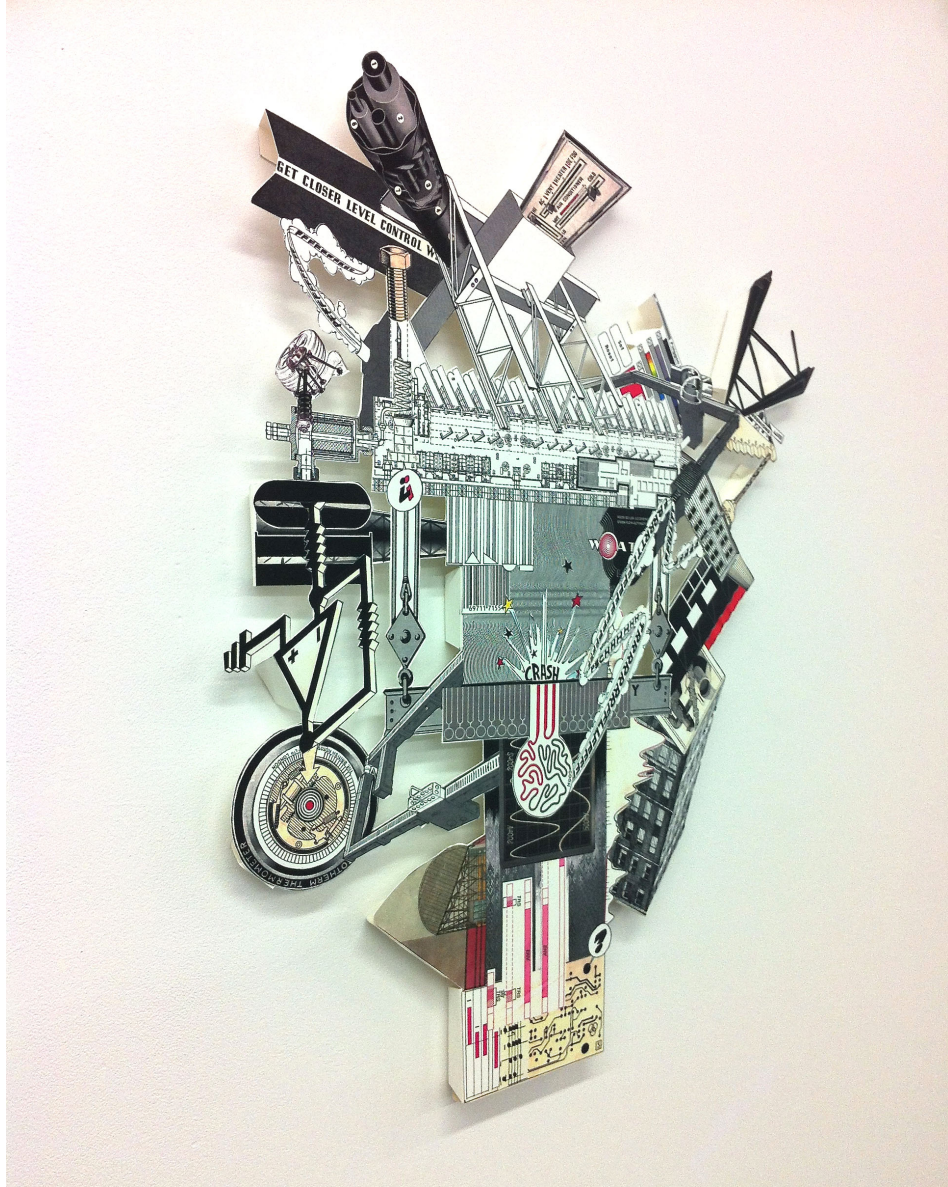


Fig. 8: *Steam Flow Automatic*, 2014. 24 x 29 x 1". Mixed paper collage. Installation view Mitchell Press Gallery. November 2014. Used by permission of the artist.

In *Steam Flow Automatic* (Fig. 8), I am playing with the use of line and the visual language of spatial sequencing and perspective used in architectural and technical diagrams. I intertwine and juxtapose an array of visually complex spatial perspectives and dramatically differing scales to build a new imaginative and somewhat disorientating structure. In this way, I am tapping simultaneously into the history of cubism, but also of new media. As Bender has suggested, “digital data technologies may have finally killed off spatial illusion as the most compelling representation of the world” (211). From the explicit diagrammatic language I am building, a new

blueprint of potential knowledge emerges. I then reconstruct the image as a physical three-dimensional object, pushing the image away from the wall, into the viewer's space and awareness.

One of my inspirations in the use of print material for sculptural installation is Geoffrey Farmer. Two works are of particular significance in this regard: *Leaves of Grass*, 2012 (Figure 9) and *Boneyard*, 2013. In both of these projects, the original print archives were given to Farmer as source material; a comprehensive collection of Life Magazine, and another collection of art history textbooks (Hoekstra). To create his works, Farmer unfolds print archives into impressive sculptural installations. He "...advances through a process of looking back...its images, detached from their source, are freed to assert their presence more urgently"(Hoekstra). Although my practice parallels Farmer's works in some respects (using print media images as raw materials for semi-sculptural presentation) my method of collection, presentation and assembly are different, as is my intent.

[Figure 9 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a photographic representation of Geoffrey Farmer's *Leaves of Grass*, 2012.]

Fig. 9: Geoffrey Farmer, *Leaves of Grass*, 2012. Installation view at Neue Galerie Kassel.
<http://www.kunstkritikk.no/artikler/documenta-13-i-bilder/>

In *Leaves of Grass* and *Boneyard* Farmer's image collections each span a specific linear historical period. Individual images are displayed singularly, in chronological order, en masse. In contrast, my combined sculpture-like images come from an *abyss* of unmanaged excess, the unruly and neglected. I want to avoid any direct links to *curatorial authority* or a collector's value-laden

sense of authenticity in the source materials. Instead, I want to reflect the sedimentation of commodity culture, the undervalued and the discarded. Whereas Farmer works from an *authentic collection* with a unique historical authority, I work from a space better characterized by Julia Kristeva's semiotic description of intertextuality, in which culture operates as a "sea of copies with no original" (1980.). Farmer keeps theme and content consistent, to re-present a physical installation of our shared historical narrative— a nostalgic display at once, searching for and questioning modernist clarity. In contrast, I aim to confuse meaning and historicity.

Related to both Farmer's and my own work is the project *Mnemosyne Atlas* created by astute cultural observer Aby M. Warburg in 1929. His major work (unfinished) comprises a large constellation of panels physically 'mind mapping' a diverse array of images that repeat similar gestures and iconographic significance throughout history. Farmer addresses the history of these gestures with his sculpture-themed paper subjects in *Boneyard* (Hoekstra). My own work mimics Warburg's project in its search for rhizomatic correlations between diverse cultural materials, visual languages and eras but to differing effect. Where Warburg thoughtfully and methodically mapped the links between his chosen imagery throughout time my own work seeks to confuse the facts, quash time and tangle linear narrative- much like newer digital media interfaces. My practice physically interprets or demonstrates a postmodern awareness of complexity, the glut of available imagery and the collapse of linear history. I want to expand and explore the theory that the full implications of an image (and image history) can never be known. My final pieces are complex overlapping networks of visual information, confusing and modifying current sign-systems developing new patterns of understanding and discussion.

2.2.2 CORRELATIONS IN WHITE SPACE

The tension between image and object is amplified in my use of diagrams; this has been a compelling recent development in my practice. The diagram does not simply operate as an image, but also as an *object of thought*. In *The Culture of Diagram* written by scholars John Bender and Michael Marrinan (2010), they recount how diagrams activate the viewer to engage cognitively: "Users of diagrams, unlike viewers, are functional components inseparable from the

system in which they are imbricated. They are empowered to initiate a process of correlation” (72). Suggesting the absence of a traditional viewer when looking at or reading diagrams, they assert that *viewers* become *users* who input their own field of expertise into the ‘user interface’ of the diagram, activating a physical experience of thought, visual correlation and learning.

Combining the method of collage with the complex pictorial language of diagrams compounds the effect of relational thinking. Bender expands: “When diagrams are treated as material objects, their entire surface plays a role and whiteness is never a void. Switching between disciplines like drawing and anatomy becomes standard procedure in a process of correlation that produces new forms of knowledge and understanding...”(29). This parallels the way in which collage and photomontage are read; the signifiers are not only the individual images but also more accurately the *relationships* between them. The user of the diagram “is reminded of his or her physical being and cognitive activity: this awareness is located in neither of the images separately, but only comes alive in the activity of correlation” (29). The viewer becomes an active participant making meaning through viewing/using/imagining the correlations between the individual elements of differing disciplines.

This concept of “user-based correlation” can be transferred onto the installation and display of my work. It’s important to note that my work is best displayed in sequence, rather than individually (see Figure 10). Although each work can function on its own, viewers are able to get a deeper sense of each one when encountered as a group. When a viewer recognizes a single symbol or signifier in multiple pieces, they can return to the other compositions to look for similar points of comparison. This act of searching for meaning *between* pieces creates another level of correlation and understanding outside of the individual compositions. The wall of the gallery performs as the whiteness of the printed page, leaving space to allow for the creation of alternate meanings in the gaps between the nodes of the diagrammic compositions, as well as between the gallery space and the physical body of the viewer.



Fig. 10: Monique Motut-Firth. Installation view. Mitchell Press Gallery, November 2014. Used by permission of the artist.

These visual correlations require a slow, complicated re-negotiation of image/object, system/diagram. The viewer is asked to imagine new subtle and intricate levels of connection for a more complex and nuanced position of understanding and questioning. The images depend on a thoughtful cognitive engagement between user and system. Potentially activating what Flusser meant when he wrote that the “*revolutionaries*”, working with technical images, will “manipulate images so that people begin to glimpse the possibility of using these images to initiate previously unimaginable interpersonal relationships....” (Flusser 67). My *scrap-systems* are a function of hacking into the outmoded print syntax of our culture, shattering historicity, and creating new matrixes of complexity. My images are structures that do not function as expected; they are loaded and held together with tenuous visual bonds, unfolding outwards towards new utopian meanings and at the same time, threatening collapse.

2.3 ANALYZING IMAGE TRACES

2.3.1 IMAGES BORN OF TEXT

As the diagram begins to increase in importance in my work, it becomes necessary that I define the significance, language and function of these hybrids. I describe them as hybrids because even though they appear to be simple accessible images, they are a type of technical image/object/symbol that exists in relation to, and as a result of, a text-based history.

Encyclopedia published in France in 1751 by Denis Diderot Jean Le Rond d'Alembert was one of the earliest examples of recorded and studied uses of diagrammatic imaging. Bender and Marrinan, who I cited earlier, have pointed out that the encyclopedia relied on strict protocols: sequentiality, indicative illustrations, print-making techniques, linear perspective, figures and legends, white space and the printed page. These protocols were employed to depict and explain a variety of objects and their potential for everyday usage (Bender 23-5). This dynamic property of the diagram to visually suggest an *active potential* as described by Deleuze in his writings on diagrammatic language (De Landa 2) seems important to understanding the intrinsic possibilities of diagrams to communicate and suggests again their hybrid nature.

A key aspect of Flusser's theory of images, is that contemporary images are not *traditional images* (pre-writing). Rather, they are reliant on the "text from which they have come" (Flusser 6). I find this definition elusive and fascinating. Diagrams are not photographs of 'real world' objective places, objects or happenings, but are typically designed to reveal the *unseeable* to a reader. They exist within a textual framework that relies on a combination of photography, imagination and illustration. They serve as a bridge between the readable, the visible and the invisible.



Fig. 11: Monique Motut-Firth. *Sliding-cone Clutch to Propeller Shaft*, 2014. 42 x 56", mixed paper collage. Used by permission of the artist.

Sliding-Cone Clutch to Propeller Shaft (Fig. 11) is a revealing example of one of my convoluted scrap-systems. Its large scale, containing hundreds of connection points, echoes the chaos and scale of the original print hoard. In this piece I assembled a mass of similar imagery, including; diagrammatic illustrations of mechanical apparatuses, architectural layouts, textbooks graphs, logos, graphic designs and fine arts paintings into an overwhelming confusion of instructions and meaning. This was my first attempt at collaging diagrams. My method was to look for connecting shapes and colours. It was in this piece that I saw a potential in the disorienting effect of the combined directives and spatial relationships of different diagrammatic systems. This *scrap-system* is intended to overwhelm the viewer with the sheer variety that lies within the tangles of its connections. It relies on the sense of weight in the cumulative oppression of the print paper hoard. Its intricacy emulates the complexity of an inter-subjective space where identities are layered between digital images: tiled, enlarged, centered, cut and pasted. Our psyches are assembled from a surplus of Hito Steyerl's poor images: "The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation...".

2.3.2 DIAGRAM: OBJECT OF THOUGHT?

The diagram. A tool of thought, a technical text-based image used to illustrate systems of knowledge. Diagrams offer us a chance to interact; we enter by in-putting our own experiences and knowledge specificity thereby activating them, creating meaning in the thought process. "The diagram is evidence of an idea being structured - it is not the *idea* but a model of it..." (Albarn 7). Diagrams function as a device for thinking; we generate new theories by applying working concepts to them. Diagrammatic tools and tropes include any combination of changes in scale, illustration, text, symbols (e.g. arrows), line, colours, cut-aways, legends and graphs. They also play with linear perspective: isometric, one, two and three-point perspective. The viewer's position can be flexible, interchangeable and disorienting. Diagrams are visual aids with

the unique capabilities of imaging that which we cannot see. They reveal the invisible: the macroscopic, microscopic, the unimaginable (Bender 60); the *cutaway* exposes the PSI pressures of fluids, vapors and voltage; illustrations track the trajectory and flow of electrons and city buses; charts plot and graph financial speculations and population densities; blueprints predict and affirm the dimensions of imagined materials.

Internationally renowned inter-disciplinary artist Wangechi Mutu uses diagrams to great effect. She performs as one of what Sally O'Reilly has called "unethical anthropologists" (19) in her early portrait collage series *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumour*, (2004-5). For an example of this series see Fig. 12, *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix* (2005). Mutu collages images of women's bodies, chosen from pornography and beauty magazines on top of antique Victorian medical diagrams of women's internal reproductive organs. The results are beautifully bizarre portraits. She keeps her content consistent: imagery depicting women, while widely varying the nature and the era of her source material. Mutu collapses time; the diagram is from a vintage medical text and the beauty magazine shots are current fare. The diagram in this case can be understood as demonstrating the medicalization of women, while the glossy magazine images speak to the consumption of the female body in pornography and fashion.

[Figure 12 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is a reproduction of Wangechi Mutu's *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix*, 2005.]

Fig. 12: Wangechi Mutu. *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix*, 2005. 45.7 x 32.4 cm. Collage on found medical illustration paper http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/wangechi_mutu_articles.htm

These clashes of dissimilar image families speak to the public discourse, presentation and dissection of *woman*. The diagram acts as a stand-in for institutional knowledge and objective science and the magazines are seen as throwaway or culturally irrelevant. In this one image, Mutu brings together the private and the public, objective and subjective, the past and the present, the valuable and the discarded. I am most intrigued by this work in its use of the diagram, recognizing that its visual language belongs to a European, androcentric, and medically specialized sphere of knowledge. For example, the diagram, *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix*, *speaks* a particular language of authority that is not buried in the past, but instead, functions as the foundation for our contemporary systems of understanding in the sphere of female anatomy and medical knowledge (Pizzini). This language of *objective authority* found in diagrams and infographics is one that I am exploring by attempting to uncover, trace, expand, complicate and re-cypher subjectively in my work.

When Mutu uses different material sources (images of women both consumerist and scientific) to represent the same contextual subject – woman, she succeeds in juxtaposing different pictorial languages. Whereas, Rosler in her *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* series juxtaposes very different depictions of place, Mutu, for me, in this series, effectively contrasts the language of pictures (medical illustrations versus stylized photographs). Similar to Mutu, I am attempting to investigate identity and representation through the language of media images, but I am interested in a reversal of the variable held constant. I hold the element of *formal concerns* constant (instead of content) in order to map an understanding of linked pictorial similarities. Where Mutu focuses pointedly on the depiction of the female body (particularly on the media representations of women of colour) my approach is markedly more abstract. I prefer a diverse range of image culture omitting the figure. Instead of picturing the female body, I am using my tools and construction style to assert a feminist critique. There are certain risks associated with undertaking a more abstract approach to understanding gendered identity. The work may be misinterpreted or the viewer may ‘miss’ the underlying *femininity* (I am specifically referring to Höch’s use of handcrafted textile techniques in collage) embedded in the construction style but I welcome these ‘errors’ in interpretation as they also serve to better frame the larger question of just what it means to build a heterogeneous identity built on slippage and misunderstanding.

The course of my own practice has led me from overt figurative imagery to more abstract representations of identity. It is the formal voice of the diagram that now directs my focus. My inquiries explore questions surrounding what could be understood as an inherent masculine voice embedded within diagrammatic language, the aesthetic offspring of a scientifically objective regime defined by patriarchy.

To further investigate this avenue of research I am searching for visually similar imagery linking different types of diagrams: illustrative, photographic, infographics etcetera... with other familial image types including, abstract painting, photography, advertising and the graphic arts. Diagrams are also often used to simplify, to make complex theories seem more palatable, to promote discussion and often to supersede differences in language and reading skills. I would argue that there is also a public consensus that the diagram is somehow *truthful*, simple and open, as well as a popular reliance on them to instruct the viewer in the *correct way* to navigate, behave, park or assemble their IKEA chair and honestly- it can be difficult to argue with a diagram.

In the composition below, *Toys for the Younger You* (Fig 13), I used the colour red to guide my initial choices. Thematically this composition connects a number of diagram-like images, including, abstract paintings, punctuation marks, graphic design letter formats, carpentry instructions, heating systems, postage requirements and nail polish colours. The resulting effect of combining these images into one composition is a convoluted tangle of directives bridging one distinct discipline with another across time. It reveals that repeatedly, we rely on the same formal and technically objective image-types to give our surroundings meaning although taken together as a whole they produce a jumbled omission of certainty.

3. CONCLUSIONS: Quilting New Alphabets

[S]uppose we thought of representation, not as a homogeneous field or grid of relationships governed by a single principle, but as a multidimensional and heterogeneous terrain, a collage or patchwork quilt assembled over time out of fragments as mementos, as “presents” re-presented in the ongoing process of assemblage, of stitching in and tearing out... (Mitchell 419).

I see my practice as currently enmeshed in the physical *patchwork* that Mitchell describes above, a continual restitching of materials. Each incarnation brings to bear a new set of questions only to be snipped apart and reimagined within another paradigm of relationships. In my larger compositions I am at once attempting to visually represent the staggering chaos and surplus of the physical hoard and at the same time sift, sort and archive a disingenuous representation of print history. I have also begun building smaller and smaller compositions from discrete sections of the larger pieces refiguring them into alternate compositions of understanding. Here, I am stacking image upon image into smaller and smaller pictorial spaces; their reduction in size belies the increasingly condensed complexity of their collaged interactions. I am slowly distilling the hoard into smaller and smaller constellations, towards the formation of a novel alphabet. I want to communicate, disorientate and re-present the tangled spectrum of relations between image culture and identity.

By surrendering pre-conceived intentions and allowing the images to lead me into the fray, I have arrived at a new challenge, that of the nuanced language of pictorial and diagrammatic representation. Newer lines of questioning have arisen from my preliminary investigations. What if I begin to use the actual instructional layout language of the diagrams to physically build my own interpretive three-dimensional structures? How can I at once push and collapse the sign-systems of machine motion and painterly gesture into compelling compositions of fantastical visual machine-like image/objects? Or, better yet, how might I exploit the inherent three-dimensional qualities of product shots and perspective drawings to build scrap-systems that somehow mimic and de-center real-world structures?

I see these new guiding questions as the unexpected products of a carefully observant and patient artistic research effort. It is as though through each new seam stitched between image edges a new proposition emerges and as I pursue this tiny revelation it quickly and quietly unravels and reveals to me a multitude of more subtle questions I had not thought to ask. This has been one of the most intriguing aspects of my thesis project. I sense an urgency behind my cautious abandonment to the chaos of the hoard and my willingness to be pulled blind into the image universe. Ironically, my new maps of understanding (which figure in the title of this paper) are made only of more questions.



Fig. 14: Monique Motut-Firth, *Untitled*, 2015. Dimensions unknown. Used by the permission of the artist.

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