

Re-Vision

By Nicky Enright, May, 2007

Collage: Models of Aesthetic and Social Construction

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Introduction

The desire to re-make, or remix, disparate elements into new totalities, thereby creating new meanings, is the defining characteristic of collage—the quintessential formal innovation of the 20th century. Named after the French word *coller* (to stick or to glue), collage arguably made its first appearance in Western art in 1912, courtesy of Pablo Picasso (Fig. 1). Less than a century later, the technique of collage is omnipresent; its adoption has been widespread in every field of the arts and beyond. Collage is fundamentally radical in its inherent suggestion that more than one reality can co-exist. Notions of time as well as truth can be seen to be multi-dimensional as opposed to sequentially evolved in a steady development. Because of this, collage calls into question traditional notions of reality, progress, and narrative.

Collage proposes diversity rather than singularity by exploring the possibilities of layering, compiling, intermixing, juxtaposing, duplicating, and assimilating media from an endless array of pre-existing sources; hence the concept of appropriation. From the very first examples, much of the *materia prima* of collage was what we would now call *appropriated*. This paper deals with some implications of appropriation in relation to early twenty-first century culture.

Ours is a culture where the aesthetics of television, film, advertising, music, technology, and political propaganda are all constantly appropriated, manipulated, subverted, and re-presented. Walter Benjamin's *Age of Mechanical Reproduction* has evolved into the age of digital reproduction, instigating further experiments with appropriation and possibly altering our wholesale relationship to culture. Moreover,

digital reproduction—or more specifically, digital appropriation—transforms social relations and perception itself, while creating a paradigm shift in art theory.

Having been born in 1971, concurrent with the rise of Postmodernism, I recognize that I have only known Modernism secondhand, as a massive historical shadow. And being, not-surprisingly, a multimedia artist and DJ who employs numerous collage strategies, I am particularly concerned with the history and consequences of the appropriation of art and culture, and the art and culture of appropriation. Recently, I have appropriated and transformed the ubiquitous *Support our Troops* ribbon (Fig. 2), a 1967 Martin Luther King Jr. speech (text and audio), and several Hollywood movies (for my *Macromix* project). I have also manipulated various images and video from the commons of the internet, and within my earlier work, appropriated idiomatic expressions of language (Fig. 3) and images drawn from the whole history of art (Fig. 4).

However, as I began to observe current art-making strategies, it became clear that art cannot exist in a vacuum any more than culture can; all works use appropriation, in one way or another. Some appropriation art is even commissioned, such as the recent reinterpretations of Richard Avedon's most famous 1957 photograph of Marilyn Monroe: "For the portrait's anniversary, *New York* [Magazine] asked contemporary photographers to rethink Avedon's Marilyn (Fig. 5)." And for mainstream parodic purposes and basic creative re-use, a large amount of appropriation is obviously needed, expected, encouraged, and sanctioned (e.g., *Saturday Night Live!*). Not surprisingly, this intermixing of art and commerce makes issues of "copyright-infringement" a difficult and persistent question. The fact that this and other questions pertaining to appropriation often end up in courtrooms is indicative of the predicament of contemporary culture.

While the examples discussed in this paper are emblematic, I should be clear that they were selected from a boundless array of choices.

The Origins of Appropriation

The citations that go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read; they are quotations without inverted commas.

—Roland Barthes, *From Work to Text*

The quandary of Modernist appropriation arguably began in 1917, when the hanging committee of the Society of Independent Artists received, from R. Mutt of Philadelphia, a signed and dated urinal flat on its back (Fig. 6). Entitled *Fountain*, it was the first controversial readymade by Marcel Duchamp. A readymade is essentially an appropriated object, recontextualized so as to challenge preconceived notions within the art world. Whatever one thinks about *Fountain*, one of the enduring concepts Duchamp introduced with the “condition of the readymade” was the notion of *choosing*: “First condition: to specify the readymades. In other words, to choose” (De Duve, 72). Duchamp made the following equation: “To make is to choose and always to choose” (De Duve, 72). And how does one go about choosing? Duchamp stated that “it chooses you, so to speak” (De Duve, 73).

“The equation art = making = choosing” (De Duve, 83) has had an ever-intensifying history, culminating in the present day realm of DJ culture. As a DJ, I’m likely to appropriate audio for use in a live setting, choosing what is fitting for the context and moment. In addition to the all-important choice, I am juxtaposing it with what came before and what will follow, and I am free to manipulate it by changing speeds and

durations, by looping, scratching, adding filters and effects, and by inserting additional material. DJ equipment is a powerful vehicle for collage, and in my current work, *Macromix*, I employ these same audio techniques with found and original video. All these methods have the potential to radically transform the meaning of images. This is reminiscent of what Levi-Strauss called the *bricoleur*; someone who uses "the means at hand," or "the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous" (Derrida, 284).

Moreover, Guy Debord's theory of *Détournement*, "the re-use of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble" in order to render altered, and even opposite meanings, is applicable here (7). *Détournement* is a technique whereby images are used in a different way than originally intended. Here we enter the intentionally subversive role of appropriation, where images can be repurposed "in order to present alternative critical perspectives" (Thompson, 18, 21). Debord contended that "all the elements of the cultural past must be 'reinvested' or disappear" (8). Therefore, *Détournement* is a "resistant strategy... a way to rediscover a common language... [a] community of dialogue, and game with time" (Bowen, 537).

According to Debord, culture can have an "inexhaustible potential for re-use" (Debord, 7). And this re-use is inherently charged politically; it is an intervention. Notions of "re-use" are consistent with Herbert Marcuse's idea that the imagination has "regenerative abilities to remain uncolonized by the prevailing ideology, continue to

generate new ideas, and reconfigure the familiar” (Becker, 114). Marcuse added that “the creative process *is* resistance. In the process of making images, they can be transformed, utilized, co-opted, inverted, diverted, [and] subverted” (Becker, 114).

A very valuable and influential reconsideration of Modernism was articulated in Robert Venturi’s 1966 “Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,” which took aim at Modernist architecture and championed complexity and richness over clarity and purity. Venturi proposed the idea of the vestigial element where bygone components co-exist with contemporary building to create new meanings, and thereby portray a model for Postmodernism. Rather than declare an *either/or* approach, Venturi campaigned for a *both/and* attitude: historical citation and new contexts; complexity and irony; contradiction and paradox. It is not difficult to see that appropriation and collage are the subtext here.

Of course, discussions involving appropriation are nearly as varied as they are frequent. Michael Newman’s list of typical—and pluralist—postmodern strategies includes appropriation, along with allegory, parody, irony, and bricolage (the combination of quoted fragments in a single work of art). Jameson defines the postmodern tendency towards pastiche as involving imitation without parody or satire, where one actually speaks through other’s voices and masks. Warhol is also often cited as cogently representative of Postmodernism due to the obvious relationship of high culture to mass culture within his work (Fig. 7). Taken together, this eclectic confusion of codes clearly indicates that not all mass culture is kitsch, and that pop culture indeed has artistic potential. Moreover, these artists, architects, and critics evidence an extensive use of appropriation.

In Common

Creators here and everywhere are always and at all times building upon the creativity that went before and that surrounds them now.

—Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture*

The whole field of art history is a cultural commons of sorts, relying on citation and appropriation— for slide lectures, reproductions in books, catalogs, texts, and websites. Indeed—returning to the correspondance between appropriation and Duchamp’s notion of choice—we are now witnessing the emergence of celebrity contemporary curators who function more like artists because of their primary importance as choosers. Although their art world could hardly be said to be democratic, it is assumed that those involved steward a widespread knowledge that does not belong to anyone—something like “the commons of a language: altered by every contributor, expanded by even the most passive user” (Lethem, 66). Continuing with this simile, we should realize that even though “language is a commons doesn't mean that the community owns it; rather it belongs between people, possessed by no one, not even by society as a whole” (Lethem, 66). The notion of a public commons, although constantly and contentiously revised, arguably extends from nature preserves and airwaves, to public parks and cultural works in the public domain. Under capitalism, it all comes down to issues of personal property.

The idea that culture is *intellectual* property was used to justify the infringement suit brought by the estate of Margaret Mitchell against the publishers of Alice Randall's 2001 book, *The Wind Done Gone* (Fig. 8). According to Jay McInerney, *The Wind Done Gone* (a revision of Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 *Gone with the Wind*, where the classic story is retold from a slave’s perspective) is “a brilliant meditation on a modern myth, a

revisionist version of our history which is utterly convincing and compelling.” (Randall, back cover) Randall's book caused a controversial lawsuit that ended with an out-of-court settlement. But questions remain: “Why should [copyright law] extend to Mitchell or her heirs a private license to censor public discourse” (Munshi, 6)? And would a ruling against publishing *The Wind Done Gone* reveal a “government-granted monopoly on the use of creative results” (Lethem, 64)? A partial answer to these questions is contained with the following: “Any text that has infiltrated the common mind to the extent of *Gone With the Wind* or *Lolita* or *Ulysses* inexorably joins the language of culture. A map-turned-to-landscape, it has moved to a place beyond enclosure or control. The authors and their heirs should consider the subsequent parodies, refractions, quotations, and revisions an honor, or at least the price of a rare success” (Lethem, 68).

“Once a dry and seemingly mechanical area of the American legal system, copyright [and intellectual property] can now be found at the center of major disputes in the arts, sciences, and politics” (Boynton, 2). Nicolas Bourriaud asserts that “no public image should benefit from impunity, for whatever reason” (Bourriaud, 93). Like him or not, Mickey Mouse is one of the most contentious symbols in the dilemmas of copyright law because Walt Disney was adamantly opposed to allowing unauthorized use of the character in any way whatsoever. This despite the fact that “the Walt Disney Company has drawn an astonishing catalogue from the work of others: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Fantasia*, *Pinocchio*, *Dumbo*, *Bambi*, *Song of the South*, *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Robin Hood*, *Peter Pan*, *Lady and the Tramp*, *Mulan*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Jungle Book*, and, alas, *Treasure Planet*, a legacy of cultural sampling that Shakespeare, or De La Soul, could get behind” (Lessig, 23). A story or

character co-opted from the commons and then owned by Disney will no longer be available for others to do the same.

The free appropriation of so-called Third-World artworks and forms by the more privileged is characteristic and has been noted from Picasso's use of "primitive" African sculpture to David Byrne's and Paul Simon's albums. When the results benefit a sole or corporate owner this constitutes a kind of "imperial plagiarism" (Lethem, 65).

Conversely, sometimes appropriation can be a re-claiming, or re-appropriation. The Cameroonian artist Barthelemy Toguo, for example, "treats contemporary art as a sort of lending library, borrowing from the work of Boetti, Clemente and Cragg, among others. His deft appropriations may be seen as an inversion of the historic pillaging Africa underwent during the colonial period" (Rochette, 1). Regarding the recently-deceased historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., Lewis H. Lapham (the editor of *Harper's Magazine* for over thirty years) said "he was [always] at pains to construe history as a means rather than an end, the constant making and remaking of the past intended to revise the present in order to better imagine the future" (9). Furthering striking a chord of "re-appropriation", Derrida stated "history is always the unity of a becoming" (293). Collectively, this historical stance presents a stark contrast to those who view culture as a market in which everything of value should be owned by someone.

As alluded to earlier, collage and appropriation have been central to a series of movements in the twentieth century: futurism, cubism, dada, musique concrète, situationism, and pop art, just to name a few. Because much of this work evidences a *sampling* from commercial commodity culture, copyright concepts and laws have been subjected to drastic change: "Copyright is an ongoing social negotiation, tenuously

forged, endlessly revised, and imperfect in its every incarnation.” (Lethem, 63) Taking a less equanimous view, Lessig states, “the distinctive feature of modern American copyright law is its almost limitless bloating—its expansion in both scope and duration” (106). Yet, while copyright law becomes ever-more restrictive, technology is rendering those restrictions arbitrary. Open-source software, html code, freeware, and file-sharing capabilities call traditional concepts into question. Not only do “new media and technology expose the artificiality of copyright’s constraints on creativity and expression,” and “enable the proliferation and dissemination of ideas, expression, and exchange,” but they also “encourage the pluralization and democratization of authorship, interpretation, revision, and renovation” (Munshi, 6). Ultimately, those on the receiving end of culture—the public—are becoming increasingly sophisticated in how to handle the relentless mass-media flow.

It is clear that much culture is given away, so to speak, in the sense that one can hear “free” music on the radio, and see “free” art in galleries, the internet, and the like. It is also clear that issues arise when the recipient of culture is inspired enough to build upon this “free” art in a public forum (online, in a gallery, etc.). According to Lethem, “industries of cultural capital, who profit not from creating but from distributing, see the sale of culture as a zero-sum game” (64). Even when the second-use result is a parody or critique, “artists and their surrogates who fall into the trap of seeking recompense for every possible second use end up attacking their own best audience members for the crime of exalting and enshrining their work” (Lethem, 65). Indeed, these artists fail to see that appropriation can be viewed as an acknowledgment.

Evidencing appropriation as acknowledgement, Glenn Ligon has for a long time now “filtered his artistic voice through existing imagery and words written by other people” (Nichols, 155). His is a practice of quoting other authors, whereby he “borrows meaningful passages from the writings of Mary Shelley, Jean Genet and a number of African American authors [such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin]. . . . While often *paying tribute to the past*, Ligon’s text-based paintings and prints transcend their specific historical sources to more broadly express the power and shortcomings of the written word” (Nichols 156-7, my italics). Nichols has also said that Ligon is “a shrewd recycler of existing texts and imagery, a nimble ventriloquist of other people’s voices . . . [and Ligon’s works] speak to the value of making new sense of enshrined cultural heroes in a contemporary context” (189) (Fig. 9).

The Artistic Use of the World

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal.
—T .S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*

Artists are now employing techniques that include “quotation, excerptation, framing, staging, repetition, and critical juxtaposition of elements” (Bowen, 538). To that list I would add re-making, remixing, layering, compiling, recycling, merging, manipulating, and re-arranging. More importantly, “digital media’s malleability makes a new order of meaning possible, a new order of memory” (Bowen, 547), where technologically-based appropriation allows “a new relation between past and present to emerge” (Bowen, 551). This is evident in the “ever increasing number of artworks [that] have been created on the basis of preexisting works; more and more artists interpret, reproduce, re-exhibit, or use

works made by others or available cultural products” (Bourriaud, 13). There are so many artists to choose from in this respect, such as Jeff Koons, Jenny Holzer, and Barbara Kruger to Hans Haacke and Martha Rosler (Fig. 10 – 14). According to Bourriaud,

Artists who insert their work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy. . . . Notions of originality are slowly blurred in this new cultural landscape marked by the twin figures of the DJ and the programmer, both of whom have the task of selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new contexts. (13)

Because “appropriation involves staging a confrontation with memory,” it results in a reconsideration of the traditional concepts of history “as somehow over, gone, vanished” (Bowen, 551). New cultural narratives are constituted, erased, and rewritten as they circulate, in a macro version of the game *Telephone*, where what was originally said changes by being repeated: “Artists no longer consider the artistic field a museum containing works that must be cited or “surpassed,” as the modernist ideology of originality would have it, but as so many storehouses filled with tools that should be used, stockpiles of data to manipulate and [re]present” (Bourriaud, 17). Indeed, I remember distinctly when I embarked on my *Art History* series in the late 90’s, feeling a strong urge to make my art history books breathe (Fig. 15).

In addition, art develops from the so-called “autonomous” object to become a “path through culture; [an] original pathway through signs” (Bourriaud 18). This further represents a transformation of the status of the work of art to imply a “culture of use” (Bourriaud, 19). “It is a matter of seizing all the codes of culture, all the forms of everyday life, the works of the global patrimony, and making them function (Bourriaud, 18). . . . rather than transfigure a raw element (blank canvas, clay, etc.), they remix

available forms and make use of data” (Bourriaud, 17). Bourriaud further elaborates on the methods of what he calls *postproduction*: “reprogramming existing works” (e.g., Duchamp’s *Mona Lisa with a mustache*); “inhabiting historicized styles and forms” (e.g., Sturtevant’s or Sherrie Levine’s exact replicas); “making use of images” (e.g., Douglas Gordon’s *24 hour psycho*); and “using society as a catalog of forms” (appropriated logos for instance) (Bourriaud, 16) (Fig. 16 - 22).

Yet, no matter what we call the forms and techniques of appropriation, it is clear that artists build on what came before. One assumes that—even if one does not recognize the reference—art is filled with nods, winks, and elegies to the past. The very titles of artworks are indicative of this, such as Maya Angelou’s novel *I Know Why the Caged bird Sings*, which refers to the poem *Sympathy* by Paul Laurence Dunbar; Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, taken from "Meditation XVII," in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, a 1624 poem by John Donne; Michael Moore’s movie *Fahrenheit 911*, after Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*; the movies *Mona Lisa Smile* and *The Da Vinci Code*, not to mention the “J-horror” movies which appropriate much more than just a title from Japan (*The Ring*, *Dark Water*, *The Grudge*, *Pulse*)

All Riots Reserved

By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Letters and Social Aims*

In 2003, the artist Joy Garnett created a series of paintings called “Riot,” in which she appropriated photographs of people experiencing extreme emotional or physical states. For the painting *Molotov* (Fig. 23), Garnett sourced a photograph that originally appeared

in Susan Meiselas's 1979 photo essay on the Nicaraguan revolution. Once the painting was exhibited, Garnett was contacted by a lawyer representing Meiselas, who accused her of copyright infringement. Although Garnett was intimidated and therefore removed the image of the painting from her website, other artists had created "mirror" pages on their own sites—in solidarity—most notably on the server Rhizome.org. More specifically, these artists made "copyfight" images based on *Molotov* (Fig. 24), and the campaign came to be known as "Joywar" (Fig. 25), a pun based on "Toywar", which was an earlier battle between the arts collective etoy and the online toy retailer eToys. Eventually, the story went global as more and more artists posted *Molotov Man* appropriations to rhizome.org and other sites.

For Susan Meiselas, it was important that the image—which she calls *Molotov Man*—be contextualized within a critical moment in Nicaraguan history, when the Sandinistas took power in 1979. The man in the picture, Pablo Arauz, became a Sandinista hero in part due to Meiselas's photograph, which has been reproduced all over Nicaragua—from murals to T-shirts. Over the years, *Molotov Man* has been re-appropriated countless times "by different players for different purposes" (Meiselas, 57). An image of *Molotov Man* became the symbol of the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of the Sandinista uprising in 2004 (Fig. 26). Even the Contras used the image for their fund-raising campaign ironically geared towards acquiring U.S. support to fight the Sandinistas. According to Meiselas, although "there is no denying in this digital age that images are increasingly dislocated and far more easily decontextualized," artists should "work all the harder to reclaim that context." (Meiselas, 58) She continues, "it would be a betrayal of [Arauz] if I did not at least protest the *diminishment* of his act of defiance"

(Meiselas, 58, my italics).

Meiselas never did sue Garnett, or collect a licensing fee, but the episode led to a lot of interesting questions: Does the author of a documentary photograph—a document whose mission is, in part, to provide the public with a record of events of social and historical value—have the right to control the content of this document for all time?; should artists be allowed to decide who can comment on their work, and how?; can copyright law, as it stands, function in any way except as a gag order?; and, as one blogger asked, “Who owns the rights to this man’s struggle,” and was his “act of defiance” appropriated by Meiselas, in a classic Western way, the second she pressed the shutter of her camera (Garnett, 55)?

(In)Appropriate

Consumption is simultaneously also production, just as in nature the production of a plant involves the consumption of elemental forces and chemical materials.

-Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*

Recent technological changes have major implications for contemporary art and culture, and copyright law is out of sync with the capabilities of the times. For instance, Apple Computer’s slogan “rip, mix, burn” is emblematic of current norms, yet this practice is generally illegal. It is clear that new perspectives are required for the future, especially in terms of the relationship between culture and capitalism. For example, while conditioned to view certain attempts at public art as vandalism (i.e., graffiti, wheat-paste posters, stickers, etc.), the public accepts the escalating onslaught of commercial advertising with conventional complacency. The notion that perhaps corporations should not have the major voice in determining the future of our “public domain” seems as radical as it is

rational. Multimedia artist DJ Spooky asserts that “the basic fabric of 21st century life will be public domain culture, whether corporations like it or not. They will have to evolve their formula” (1). He recently created a work entitled *Re-birth of a Nation* (Fig. 27) by remixing D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* (which is legally now in the public domain).

With this new “expanded field” of art, the potential for a work’s meaning(s) can multiply, since it can have as much to do with the work’s *use* as with the artist’s intentions. The use of an object or image is necessarily an *interpretation* of it; it is also necessarily an *intervention* in culture, no matter its tone. Bourriaud asks a radical and pertinent question: “what if artistic creation today could be compared to a collective sport, far from the classical mythology of the solitary effort” (Bourriaud, 20)? The role of appropriation in culture (and the re-appropriation of culture), even if deemed “inappropriate” by some, may continue to be controversial, but it can be expected to continue.

For a DJ, to listen to recorded audio becomes work in itself, reducing the divide between reception and practice, “the scrambling of boundaries between consumption and production” (Bourriaud, 19). Although this concept is not new, it is manifest in contemporary society. What we are observing is a transition from passive consumer culture to a culture of activity and (re)production. “Since we write while reading, and produce artwork as viewers, the receiver becomes the central figure of culture to the detriment of the cult of the author” (Bourriaud, 88). Almost one hundred years ago, Duchamp said “It’s the viewer who makes the pictures” (De Duve, 77). Like Marx, “Duchamp started from the principle that consumption was also a mode of production”

(Bourriaud, 23).

Furthermore, as has been pointed out, the appropriation of the past offers innovative models for a dynamic relationship to history. Speaking of his *Re-Birth of a Nation*, DJ Spooky says “we Americans have so much amnesia that we forget that the past is still present with us” (1). If true, appropriation may be necessary to both honor and rethink the public record, even when it appears to misrepresent, parody, or question it. Because the urge to re-arrange, re-make and re-mix is essentially the creative urge to re-imagine and *interrogate*, appropriation could be an effective way to bring suppressed voices to light while simultaneously keep history alive and vital.

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