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Is Photomontage Over? A Special Issue of *History of Photography*

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Is photomontage over? Does the juxtaposition of recontextualised photographic fragments, once the mainstay of critical avant-garde practice and radical activism in the burgeoning media age, carry any cultural and aesthetic urgency in the paradigm of the digital? Does the medium still have the power to rattle, agitate, or even shock with its pictorial and conceptual disjunctions? This special issue confronts such questions by exploring the possibility that photomontage has indeed run its course; that it may no longer serve as a point of critical inquiry, a potent object of historical research, or a forceful contemporary practice.

We borrow our query from a 2014 two-day symposium run by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art with the title 'Is Photography Over?' For those in attendance, the primary point of concern was a dramatically shifting photographic practice and culture that caused a sense of unease among photographers, curators, historians, and critics alike. A 2017 symposium we staged in response at the Developing Room, an academic working group at Rutgers University dedicated to photography research, proposed that the question equally holds for the practice of photomontage, particularly in the face of graphics editing programs such as Photoshop and filters like those available at Snapchat. In turn, this special issue now proffers that where image-makers once had to laboriously scour archives and cull illustrated periodicals for their images, and thereafter wield scissors, scalpels, and tweezers before applying glue with care, now all they need is a computer connected to the Internet. The mouse and pointer glide over the intangible where sharp blades once sliced through physical matter. The new conditions have democratised the production and distribution of montage. They have even transformed its name and conceptual origin – once aligned with specialised industrial labour – to 'mash-up' or 'meme', which implies the effortless, seamless overlays and recombinations typical of the information age. Once completed, a digitally manipulated image can sail through the Internet's ether and prompt further reconfigurations, modified by varying human contexts in a form of digital genetic mutation. Ten years ago, in an *Artforum* article we republish in this issue, photographer Charlie White provocatively suggested that montage has been denuded of its political edge as a result.¹ Where once John Heartfield and Martha Rosler used the technique as a public platform to challenge image regimes of fascism or of Cold War consensus, now younger makers avail themselves of this richness for shallow politics or quick personal expression. The new click and drag impatience, as White describes it, leads to political flops, missteps, and failures, such as when a 2001 jihadi demonstration in Bangladesh featured a poster that had accidentally appropriated a Bin Laden image from the satirical website Burt is Evil. In the global slapdash world of cut-and-paste ease, the innocence of *Sesame Street* inevitably meets Middle East and South Asian tumult over the grimacing mug of Burt.

1 – Charlie White, 'Cut and Paste: On the Collage Impulse Today', *Artforum* (March 2009), 210–15.

Parallel to such developments, White continues, Photoshop and the Internet have combined to create ‘a space where individual desire is articulated through the appropriation of popular images, products, and signs’. His model for this phenomenon is the now defunct website Polyvore, which allowed users to create dream figures composed of clothing items for sale. It also characterises Jeff Koons’s *EasyFun Ethereal* series, which features a near randomness of ‘gloss, glitter and goo’. As White asserts in his article, the collage impulse today is characterised by Photoshop’s digital splintering and layering of images, allowing the technique to move from the political to the consumerist, from the social to the individual. The results resemble the adolescent’s bedroom wall, ‘an autobiographical mood board indexing the teen self’s desires, rebellions, and defining traits’. When, he asks, ‘did juvenile expression trump art history in its influence on contemporary collage, transforming the practice into a purely commercial entity that is stricken with arrested development? Has collage become the visual language of the adolescent, similar in nature to SMS texts, emoticons, and avatars?’

We repeat White’s words and offer his article as provocation, a stimulus to the discussions we solicited for this special issue. Foremost in the minds of our contributors are the intervening ten years since White published his article, a period in which the political has returned to montage and its meme culture, restored with a vengeance in the global age of reactionary nationalisms. Where Polyvore allowed adolescents to construct dream images of themselves in the perfect outfit, meme culture on the Internet has now exploded with a political ferocity that bludgeons its opponents with crude force. The carefully considered critical interventions of artists like Heartfield and Rosler have now become the shrill rant of alt-right trolls and the careless darts of exasperated progressives. As White has recently suggested to the editors in retrospect, a space that offered limitless, although narcissistic, self-expression has now become a tactic of the nefarious. Given a new generation of users, platforms, and strategies, he explains, ‘contemporary image formation, exchange, intersection, and application have moved from the experimental forms of the far left [between the wars] to the weaponised tactics of the extreme right’. Such ‘repurposing, recombining, and retouching of images has affected and damaged society’s relation to photography and its role in culture’, he proffers.² Given such advents, our central question remains: has photomontage become exhausted in the process? Or do the harried conditions of today portend a new life for the practice that is no less critical in our contemporary visual culture and its manner of historical thinking?

Before embarking on the question of montage’s potential obsolescence in our global, digital age, a clarification of terminology is useful. Photomontage at its heart is a medium of material and photographic recombination that trades on the frisson of incongruity – an aesthetics of disagreement that can range from subtle cognitive unease to outright violent conflict. The same is true of photo-collage to the point that the distinction between the two is difficult to define, as contributor David Evans observes. Montage for English speakers may suggest the rephotographed and disseminated work of a handmade collage. The latter, in turn, is generally understood to be a physical object of cut and arranged fragments, the sort of unique art work that MoMA curator William Rubin esteemed in his famous *Dada and Surrealism* exhibition of 1968.³ But this distinction can easily break down and become confusing if one considers the use of both words over the twentieth century. The term photomontage as coined in Germany between the wars invokes *montieren* or assembly, rather than rephotographing. While Berlin’s Dadaists stressed the industrial nature of the term, billing themselves as engineers in a misunderstanding of the Russian Constructivism they emulated, it nonetheless highlighted the same sort of handmade cut-and-paste object that we also associate with photo-collage. The difference between the two may ultimately be semantic, although an upcoming conference at the Tate Britain entitled ‘Cutting Edge:

2 – In conversation with one of the editors in February 2018, and a statement to both editors offered thereafter.

3 – William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage*, New York: Museum of Modern Art 1968.

Collage in Britain, 1900 to Now' may rethink the vocabulary. In our special issue, we prefer the term montage over collage as an embrace of numerous practices and conceptual stances.

Depending on how the craft of recombination is managed, the passage from one recontextualised semiotic unit to another can range from stealth to overt, from cognitive to visceral. When executed with deliberation, this aesthetics of transition has the capacity to unsettle, delight, awaken the senses, and rouse the mind. Rooted in the body, 'aesthetics' – from the Greek *aisthētikos* – means perceptive by feeling, an embodied experience that exceeds vision. The repetition of visual tactics tends to weaken their effect, however, numbing the sensorium to impulses that were once potent. Does, for instance, Dada photomontage still shock? It seems that the aesthetics of pictorial rupture has become artillery for a visual vocabulary that signifies ludic edginess in current commercial contexts. Any aesthetic charge is thus dependent on change and innovation, which arguably is fundamental to the medium of photomontage, as artist Raoul Hausmann noted nearly a century ago. The practice feeds on the transformation of social structures and psychological superstructures that are constantly shifting. In its implementation of the photographic, photomontage – however fantastic or abstracted – roots that visual experience in some form of lived real or outwardness.

In this increasingly mediated, screen-oriented world, however, does montage's most viable future reside in the screen or in the tactile, cacophonous world? Is the power of aesthetic conflict to be found in its hapticity – in the conflation of textures and surfaces that jar us with their delicacy, their subtlety, or their unfamiliarity? Does it reside, for instance, in Miranda Lichtenstein's work, which features overlays and compressions of analogue and digital practices that generate screens, shadows, and other infrathin overlays to destabilise our sense of reality? Might we find it in the work of Shannon Ebner, as contributor Susan Laxton argues, which intervenes in naturalised commercial space in ways that are haptic even for viewers rushing by? Might, or is, the medium's future to be found in spaces where montage is applied across multiple surfaces, over objects and human bodies, as in the work of Jean-Luc Moulène recently shown at the Venice Biennale or in the case of Sheida Soleimani as discussed by Matthew Biro in this issue? Might it still reside in the traditional cut-and-paste objects analysed by Evans in his article? Or is it to be found in the illusionistic, ephemeral screen world of technology mediated through Snapchat and other social media, the subject of contributor Virginia McBride's article and of Sabine Kriebel's coda? Or might the future of montage be in the diverging trajectories of the haptic and the virtual? Also, what about montage's strength as a subject of historical inquiry? Does scholarship into the technique still maintain its earlier tendentiousness, highlighting the possibility of radical art and politics as located in the frisson of incongruity of the past? Or might investigations now relieved of this burden find a longer historical arc for the practice, highlighting overlooked continuities spanning nineteenth-century pictorial amusements through twentieth-century avant-garde practices, as Jindrich Toman does in his contribution and as Matt Biro, following varied lines of inquiry, found in his recent issue of this journal titled *Photographic Montage before the Avant-Garde*? Might we also now have the distance of time to reconsider the postmodern critique of photography that prised historical and contemporary montage in the 1980s, as Andrés Zervigón asks in his article?

The two editors of this special issue have long been scholars of John Heartfield's political photomontage and have thereby developed a standing interest in the technique's paradoxes and destiny. Fundamental to our engagement with montage has been the brilliant scholarship of David Evans, who published on Heartfield with critical aplomb in the 1990s. His work laid an indispensable foundation and inspired a new generation of scholars, whom he continued to sustain with his ongoing commitment to cultural subversion. While preparing this special issue, Evans died, leaving his family, friends, and colleagues far too early. We dedicate this issue to his memory.