Collectanea

Some Assembly Required: Collage, Creativity, and the Self in Everyday Life

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The pages before me are a noisy mass of images and materials. Three color photos—tacked with brittle tape and black corners—command immediate attention. But other objects catch my eye as well: browned newspaper clippings, a stretch of film negative, captions typed on yellowing grade-school paper. A hummingbird cut from an old Ranger Rick points its beak toward a sepia diagram of the human brain. Handwritten paragraphs—dotted here and there with curly doodles or inked block letters—warm the pages’ white space. Occasionally, the scrawled prose is also interrupted by phrases culled from magazines; each strip bears the wobbly edges of a freehand scissor-job. And at the bottom right, peeking out from behind a dog-eared corner, is a phrase made by a handheld label-maker—the kind where you dial a letter, squeeze, and watch as raised white words slowly emerge on a strip of gummed plastic. The label says, “Just Do It”; the “scrapbook” is an advertisement for Nike shoes (“If You’re Wearing Running Shoes” 1999:60–61). The images are twice embedded, in fact, since the Nike ad is actually a photograph of a scrapbook lying open; I can see the entire book within the advertisement’s frame.

More than an advertisement, however, the two-page spread is also an example of bricolage. Claude Lévi-Strauss used the term to describe the general process of selecting and manipulating found materials in order to create new “relations” and meanings (1966:18). In concrete form, bricolage becomes collage: the physical juxtaposition of disparate materials, symbols, images, and voices. And it is everywhere these days. A shoe advertisement in the form of an open scrapbook should not be surprising; it could, in fact, be viewed as an appeal to what Budd Hopkins calls the modern “collage aesthetic.” He maintains that this pervasive “philosophical attitude”
encourages modern individuals to seek coherency amidst daily discontinuities. According to Hopkins,

Ours is a disturbingly pluralistic world in which we deal with infinitely more information, more contradictory social roles, more diverse "realities" than in any previous century. The smooth, continuous, unruffled space of older representational art is not appropriate to the disjunctions of our typical life experience. Consciously or unconsciously, contemporary artists work to create harmony from distinctly jarring material. (1997:6)

Though theorists debate the nature of the perceived gap between "modernity" and the more distant past, it is nevertheless true that disjunctions of space and time, at least, are readily observable today. Telephones provide speech without physical presence; email collapses the distance that "snailmail" betrays; airline travel becomes "an immediate juxtaposition of locations," a "collage of places" rather than a geographically-contiguous process (Hopkins 1997:12).

Formal representations have reflected these conditions. Cinema and television, for instance, are replete with collage techniques. Works of modern literature, like T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland, often present a wide array of voices, settings, and "cultural resonances" that offer no obvious resolution or connection between ideas (Duffy 1997:2). And Broadway musicals like Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat eschew "historical accuracy" in favor of divergent song styles, costumes, and characters. In one recent production of this version of the Biblical story, Potiphar was a cigar-smoking Prohibition gangster; Pharaoh acted like any Las Vegas Elvis impersonator; and a re-creation of Rowan and Martin's "Laugh-in" cast discoed to "Go Go Go Joseph." Of course, collage emerges in media other than film, literature or drama: visual artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Joan Leonard combine text, snapshots, and objects like x-rays and astrological charts in their works (Duffy 1997; Leonard 1994); others create assemblage, or "sculpture done with found objects, a kind of three-dimensional collage" (Santino 1992a:158).

Yet, as the Nike ad suggests, the collage aesthetic has its place in everyday life as well as in the professional art world. Jack Santino, for example, has advocated holistic analysis of outdoor decorative displays, those neighborhood examples of "folk assemblage" that group cultural symbols like pumpkins and skeletons in unique and meaningful ways (1992b). In addition, scrapbooks and photo albums have flourished in everyday life since the Victorian era; individuals started bringing together magazine illustrations, greeting cards, wallpaper samples, snapshots, "trade cards" and pre-printed...
die-cuts in creative arrangements years before Picasso painted “art history’s first collage” in 1911 (Hartigan 1993; Simonelli 1998; Hopkins 1997:5). But material bricolage also occurs in supermarkets, journals, textiles, refrigerator doors, homemade calendars, bulletin boards, sidewalk gardens, snapshots, and desktops. Every day, people bring together diverse objects in ways that express unique meaning and result in creative combinations of color, texture, symbol, and substance.

I have been interested in these kinds of cultural expressions for years. As a sixth-grader growing up in Columbus, Ohio, I constructed photo collages that I slipped into the clear plastic covers of my three-ring binders. My friends, classmates, and I used these binders to express who we were, individually and as groups. Years later, at college in Utah, I learned that one of my roommates (also from the Midwest) and her friends at home had created and exchanged collages for years. These collages included photographs, but they also incorporated phrases cut from magazines—word strips like “What cramps?” “Who says nothing’s perfect?” and “Women aren’t opposed to a good line—it just all depends on what it’s attached to.” These phrases indexed inside jokes, shared attitudes and activities, and characteristics associated with the recipients’ personalities. My friend gave me a framed collage of my own when we moved out of the dorms at the end of our first year.

My own experience, then, has made me cognizant of the ways people employ the process of bricolage to create a variety of expressive forms. Aware of my interest, family, colleagues, and friends have also graciously shared how they, or others in their communities, combine found materials in order to display personal values, interests, and talents. What follows, then, are descriptions of “texts” that individuals have assembled from a variety of media, as well as possible strategies for interpreting such texts. In no way does my discussion here purport to be exhaustive or even very inclusive; instead, it demonstrates the range of creative self-expression that emerges from even a cursory survey of a limited study sample.

Supermarkets, Textiles, and Tabloids: Sites and Materials of Everyday Creativity

Robert Murray has been creating art with radishes, carrots, artichokes, and summer squash for the last thirty-one years. Murray, who has described himself as “the gray-headed guy in Produce,” works as Night Produce Clerk at a large supermarket in Bloomington, Indiana, where he spends six evenings a week transforming jumbled heaps of vegetables into meticulous mosaics. The late hours of Murray’s shift allow him to work relatively undisturbed,
and he quickly remedies any disarray left in the wake of sleepless shoppers. Although part of his job is to create order, remove damaged produce and stock fresh goods, Murray also pays attention to color, texture, shape, and line when he does his work.

Consider, for example, the cut carrots which Murray stacks (bald tops out) to a uniform height; in his words, they create a bright orange “color break” in the corner between glossy zucchini and crinkled mounds of parsley. Nearby, the variegated maroon leaves of red Boston lettuce contrast with a loose green leaf variety on one side and more compact heads—upturned to highlight their white undersides—on the other. Stripes of red radishes and bunch carrots break the monotony of celery hearts and exotic salad greens; the smooth white ends of leeks lead the viewer’s eye to a tactile bounty of broccoli, artichoke heads, and asparagus spears (Photo 1).

One of the most visually striking areas of Murray’s botanical canvas is a multi-colored checkerboard composed of red radishes, yellow Belgian endive, dark greens, baby peeled carrots, and small, light green heads of Bibb lettuce. This section includes more than just a variety of colors, however. The three by three grid is balanced by bright, loose vegetables in each bottom corner: heaps of round radishes on the left and a pleasantly informal arrangement of elongated baby carrots on the right. Directly between these two are rigid rows of upturned lettuce. The top right two-thirds of the square is a bed of loose, dark greens, while the remaining top left third is a stand of Belgian endive, each individual head upright and angled to the left. The result is a vegetable mosaic that is appealing on a variety of levels (Photo 2).

Murray’s careful attention to detail—such as fanning the green onions or arranging rhubarb stems vertically rather than horizontally—has several practical aims. Customers, of course, are drawn to the colorful, symmetrical arrangements; furthermore, depending on his mode of presentation, Murray can attract attention to specific items that the store needs to sell quickly. And yet, for three decades, the work has also engaged Murray creatively. “I’m the kind of guy,” he says, “who likes to look back and see what I’ve done.” When he leaves his shift at 6 a.m. every day, the “green rack” is fully stocked: no holes in the endive bin, no “hills and hollers” in the stacks of lettuce, no errant beet greens. Murray has “made do” with found objects and produced an aesthetically rich creation.

Collage also emerges from other materials. For instance, one sidewalk garden in Bloomington, Indiana, includes plants like Sweet William, peppermint, and Impatiens, but it also boasts a collection of other objects. Placed amidst the greenery are a variety of shells; split geodes and pieces of quartz; bright red, yellow, and cobalt-blue glass (many pieces of which had
previous lives as ashtrays); and figurines of cats, castles, and even snowmen. Farther north in the state, Sheri Page of Gary, Indiana, creates a remarkable series of interior and exterior "exhibits." One outdoor grouping includes old-time farming implements and tools such as washboards and potato planters; the rest of the yard is devoted to a nautical theme. A full-size Marlin hangs from the eave of her house, and pier posts strung with rope line her front walk. The yard includes displays of an overflowing "treasure chest," driftwood, wooden fish, rubber flippers, sea shells, and other items arranged on a "sea" of blue rocks and glass. Inside, more treasures await, including a "bridal room" and rooms devoted to seasonal displays.

Susan Peterson of St. Louis, Missouri, presented her oldest daughter with a textile collage when she graduated from university. Jodi's College Years is a forty-three by sixty-six and one-half inch quilt that incorporates more than the usual variety of fabrics, textures, colors, and shapes; it also combines various needlework techniques such as piecework, quilting, applique, and embroidery. In addition, Peterson integrated materials like ceramics, buttons, ribbon, cloth badges, and photographic images. The quilt contains symbols that would be recognizable to many: a blue-and-white Star of David, for instance, symbolizing her daughter's study abroad in Israel; a pair of skis; a graduation mortarboard. Yet some representations are more personal: the prominent long, hooded parka, for example, represents Jodi's status as an intercollegiate diver; the toothpaste and toothbrush indicate both her father's profession and her ambition for dental school; the white Jeep headed for Moab, Utah, symbolizes road trips generally and red-rock mountain bike adventures in particular (Photo 3).

More transitory collage appears in a variety of quotidian guises. Bulletin boards, for example, allow an ever-changing and sometimes incongruous juxtaposition of materials. They can be scrupulously tidy—arranged in straight rows on a fabric background, with a minimum of overlapping items—or more spontaneous, mixing plastic bags, beads, embroidered sachets, concert posters, comics, buttons, and snapshots in no particular order (Photo 4). And ephemeral collage need not hang on the wall. For many years one professor at Indiana University's Folklore Institute maintained a collage under the glass top of her desk; it included calendars, postcards, cartoons, bumper stickers, and even a personalized woven textile (Photo 5).

Collages also seem to gravitate to doors: office doors, locker doors, refrigerator doors, dorm room doors. Even the doors of the Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Provo, Utah—a language learning facility for American Mormon missionaries—are sites for bricolage. The MTC is part boot camp, part monastery, and part freshman dorm. The days are long and
tightly scheduled, the work is serious and often lonely, and yet those studying in the MTC—mostly men and women between the ages of nineteen and twenty-one—maintain a constant undercurrent of energy and activity. Jokes, pranks, and other forms of creative entertainment abound. One 1993 door collage, for instance, created by a set of nine missionaries bound for Switzerland, poked fun at the MTC experience. The carefully-crafted door tags in the collage’s center were “borrowed” from a language classroom down the hall; a Pepto-Bismol box commented on the cafeteria food, while a Subway napkin, a Pizza Hut box, and a KFC plate pointed to more sumptuous fare “smuggled in” from “the outside.” A hackey-sack package and a “27-inch inflatable heart” reflected the contents of coveted care packages, but they simultaneously alluded to activities—sports and dating—that would be peripheral to the young men’s lives during their two-year assignments. This collage also included a collection of overexposed or otherwise poor photographs culled from the plethora of pictures—serious, silly, and sentimental—that inevitably emerge from a stay in the MTC. And finally, a Swiss flag and a box of “Swiss Cheese” crackers represented a half-joking attempt to create a connection between the Americans and the place that would be their home for the next two years.

While some two-dimensional collages include a balance of words and images, some contain primarily one or the other. As part of a 1992 high school response journal, for example, one Central Ohio student leafed through a tabloid and cut out every word in a headline that was followed by an exclamation mark (Photo 6). The words and phrases, which range from “awful singing!” to “goats!” to “old lady’s teeth!” create a chaotic absurdity that seems representative of the tabloid genre as a whole. Another collage, created in 1978 by Eve Despain of West Lafayette, Indiana, is almost entirely images, with very little text (Photo 7). “I think this collage,” she remarked years later, “is of things that I thought were ‘cute.’” The collage’s background is a magazine page that features an assortment of toys like crocheted lions and wooden blocks. This page is almost entirely obscured by other images: a pen-and-ink cartoon of talking centipedes, a photo of plush stuffed animals, an ice cream sundae, a card with an enormous cartoon hippo, and a posed photograph of several stuffed kittens “playing” with a ball of string. Yet the piece also includes the mostly-obscured face of Barry Manilow, as well as a picture of Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta from the final scene of the 1978 movie Grease (Newton-John wears black leather and stiletto heels). The collage, with its combination of stuffed animals and sex symbols, betrays the age of the maker: a 12 year-old on the cusp of adolescence.
The descriptions and brief interpretations offered here only scratch the surface of variation and meaning in everyday material bricolage. Office bulletin boards become showcases for departmental pride, self-deprecation, and inside jokes; extended families produce photo-collage calendars that they distribute as gifts to relatives around the country; photo albums and scrapbooks reveal different combinations of materials, text, and techniques (Photos 8–12). Even snapshots can reveal a sense of bricolage in composition, as in a mid-1980s photo in which a college student spontaneously tried to capture the personalities of her friends by taking a “group picture” of their shoes—toddler sneakers, “moccasins,” plain white Keds, and tennis shoes laced in red. In a sense, she created a temporary, “living” collage, then preserved it on film.

What Next? Analyzing Assembled Objects

Interpretive approaches to collage are as varied as the materials themselves. Jean Duffy suggests that would-be analysts consider how “the processes of selection, juxtaposition, combination, and integration” produce meaning in individual collage pieces (1997:96). When dealing with photo collage, Leonard proposes looking “around the photographs, at the context and texts from which they have been severed,” in order to recover context, history, and narrative (1994:658). And Santino advocates consideration of metaphor and metonym in collections of found objects; he also suggests that scholars should evaluate the internal ratios of individual items, as well as the larger context in which the work is presented, the origin of materials, and deviations from their prescribed usage (1992a). In addition, Santino does not shy away from investigating the use of mass-produced items; he writes that such materials “are usually used as part of a larger, tasteful, holistic assemblage. They are cut up and recombined according to a particular aesthetic and personal vision” (162).

Collage can also be explored in the larger social context in which it is produced. Most analyses of scrapbooks and photo albums, for instance, have focused on an end-product: a historical, instrumental object. Scholars have investigated scrapbooks in order to explore patterns in popular and family photography (Masteller 1980; Zeitlin, et al. 1982), to mine historical data (Simonelli 1998; Stevenson 1984), or to study modes of self-presentation (Buckler and Leeper 1991; Katriel and Farrell 1991). However, the process of making scrapbooks can also be viewed as a behavior resulting in social “products” that are just as valuable as the scrapbook itself. Recently, my own fieldwork with a Bloomington, Indiana scrapbook club has indicated that “scrapbooking” encourages women to establish social networks in which
they can negotiate and control personal economies, exchange creative ideas, and foster peer relationships (Lindquist 1999).

It seems, then, as if the possibilities for identifying and interpreting collage in everyday life are extensive and intriguingly varied. In fact, just a few pages after the Nike “scrapbook” layout mentioned above, an advertisement for “Comfort Bath” (a rinse-free full-body cleanser) incorporates a “snapshot” collage layout. These “photos” arranged casually on the page feature less-mobile individuals: an African-American male professional leaning on crutches, an elderly Caucasian woman using a walker, a group of children signing a friend’s cast, and a young male athlete grinning from a racing wheelchair. The advertisement copy promises comfort to “all those who can’t bathe or shower.” Taken as text alone, this promise might evoke only images of the unwashed bed-ridden. Yet the informal collage arrangement in which the text is embedded—as well as the range of ages, genders, and ethnicities represented in the photos—implies that “everyday” people could benefit from this product (See Cooking Light July/August 1999: 67). Through an appeal to a familiar form, perhaps the promoters of Comfort Bath hope to lessen the distaste or sense of strangeness that might initially accompany thoughts of a rinse-free body cleanser. Like the executives at Nike, the creators of this ad also appear to realize that the “simultaneous harmony and disjunction” inherent in material bricolage is not a hindrance to meaning-making (Hopkins 1997: 10); rather, individuals embrace it as a form for creative expression in a variety of everyday contexts. As such, the processes and products of bricolage deserve continued attention by those who study culture.

Notes

1 When collage meets film, the montage results. Collage is ubiquitous in modern cinema and television commercials: editing techniques rely heavily on non-linear sequences, rapid cuts, varied points of view, and fragmented images. Hopkins notes that modern “methods of reproduction”—cameras, record players, tape recorders, and video—have made it simple to reorder and re-envision time: this technology allows individuals to make the past co-exist with the present (Hopkins 1997: 9).

2 This interpretation of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat was performed in July 1999 at Tuacahn, an outdoor amphitheater near St. George, Utah. Music by Andrew Lloyd Weber, lyrics by Tim Rice.

3 Simon J. Bronner explores another kind of physical, everyday bricolage: more-or-less permanent embellishment of a home’s exterior using such items as painted cans, recycled awnings, carpet, and wooden designs (1992).
Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discusses how “ensembles” of domestic objects—from miniatures arranged in tableaux to rag-rug stair runners—can embody memory and act as a form of “life review” (1989).

4 Picasso’s work is entitled Still Life with Chair Caning; in it, a Cubist still life is partly layered over a piece of oilcloth glued to the canvas. The oilcloth is covered with a photographic reproduction of chair caning, which produces the illusion of a perforated canvas. Picasso “framed” the piece by attaching a piece of rope around its edges.

5 Names have been changed to maintain the privacy of the individuals mentioned in this article.

6 In between their studies, missionaries often initiate a variety of harmless and deliberately silly activities in the MTC. These include orchestrating pseudo-athletic tournaments such as “sudden death four-square,” stacking bunkbeds three-high, wearing neckties backwards, pulling practical jokes, and leaving their marks on the MTC’s physical facilities. See Georges and Jones 1995:188 for an example of personalized ceiling tiles left behind by missionaries; see also Wilson 1981.

7 The scrapbook page in Photo 8 was made in 1966 by my mother, Pamela Little, when she was a high school junior in Ontario, Oregon; it contains a variety of materials, including three-dimensional elements like a pin and a felt badge. The page in Photo 9, an overlapping collage of memorabilia (including a packet of sugar from a favorite restaurant) was created in 1972 by my father, Richard Christensen, when he was living in Santa Clara, California, and finishing work as a doctoral student in Engineering. Photos 10-12 depict scrapbook pages made by young mothers in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1998. Using numerous photos, the first (Photo 10) documents a family clean-up party that occurred after one woman’s husband nearly torched her parents’ home during a welding mishap. The second (Photo 11) is about another party in a different family; in this layout, the shape of the photographs balances reinforces their content: a child’s first birthday party. Finally, the third scrapbook page designed by a young mother (Photo 12) attempts to capture ordinary family activities. Note also this woman’s creative use of commercial paper punches: she has used a “snowflake” punch to produce yellow stars and an “apple” punch to construct butterflies (3 red apples are overlapped to create each butterfly).

8 Some published books also replicate the form of a scrapbook; popular children’s author and illustrator William Joyce, for instance, recently published a “picture book” in which he explains his life and art through a collage of snapshots, sketches, and informal first-person prose (Joyce 1997). Scrapbooks exist in virtual reality, too: the staff of the Smithsonian’s American Art Museum have created a virtual scrapbook, complete with virtual “pages,” to exhibit the life of artist Edward Hopper (http://nmaa-ryder.si.edu/collections/exhibits/hopper/). The “scrapbook”
includes items like newspaper clippings and business cards that can be viewed easily by linking to a series of pop-up windows. Scrapbooks also exist for virtual people: the vintage “Barbie Scrapbook” in “original old store stock” currently sells for ninety-six dollars (http://www.dsodolls.com/booklets.htm).

References Cited


Photo 1
Photo 6
Photo 10
Photo 11
Photo 12