

The Best of...Anita Witek

Photomontage is an unusual sort of practice since the artist does not take photographs using a camera, but rather literally takes them from books, contemporary and historical magazines, newspapers, film stills, posters, postcards, etc. The artist cuts into the found photographs, sometimes from very different sources, and coaxes the fragments into uncomfortable alliances. Photomontage had great currency amongst the early avant-gardes, particularly in Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism and, later, in Pop art.

It also had a post-conceptual moment that formed part of the 1970's and 80's appropriation and recycling of mass-media imagery. These diverse practices have certain features in common, including the conviction that social values and attitudes that sustain political power are carried by mass-produced print and other media like a virus. The art of photomontage is a way of making visible those embedded notions by taking a sharply critical knife or pair of scissors to the material and re-arranging the parts. Passive consumption of images is in this way replaced by active engagement. Anita Witek follows in this tradition and builds on it.

Born in Vienna, and trained as a painter there, Witek came to live in London in 1997. During her stay, she studied newspapers and other periodicals as a means of becoming familiar with the new culture. She made the series of montages called 'Polaroids of Places that Never Existed' (1998), using clippings of real estate ads from newspapers and their supplements. This was one of the works that, a year later, gained her entry to the MA in Photography at the Royal College of Art where she studied with Olivier Richon. Her thesis was supervised by John Stezaker, an artist most famous for his photomontages of film stills. However, Witek's work differs from Stezaker's, most noticeably in her focus on interiors rather than the human figure. Also, Stezaker tends to limit his montages to the uneasy marriage of two images, whereas Witek's technique involves building up a semi-coherent, near-abstract space by assembling many fragments and rephotographing the result. Yet both artists see their role as reflecting on the place of mass-produced print media in our cultural and fantasy life.

The Constructed Image

Photomontage aims at opening up a gap between image and reality. It turns the all too easily consumed transparency of the image into something opaque and full of gaps. The seamlessness of the photographic print is liable to encourage credulity in the truth of what is shown. Apparently operating without linguistic mediation or artistic convention, photography's promise of objectivity seems secured by its indexical genesis, that is, by its being a product of light reflected off objects onto light sensitive paper. Without some intervention, the photograph is likely to give us an illusory sense of direct access to reality. Countering this tendency, the photomontagist transforms the transparent image into one that requires time to explore and decipher. Anita Witek's distinctive practice of rephotographing her montages using analogue film creates a tension between the smooth surface of the photograph and the fragmented image. Her hands-on technique goes against the grain of contemporary digital photographic technologies. She cuts the paper, making it fold, ruck and crease. These are accidental signs of the material's resistance, something that is lost in 'cut and paste' digital manipulation. She prints the negatives by hand as well, again savouring the inevitable imperfections and motes of dust. Photographing a horizontal arrangement of fragments means she does not need to use glue and this enables her to re-use the same elements, gradually building up more complex, layered constructions. It also allows her to blow up the image to fill a wall, rather than retaining the original magazine-size format of the source-photographs. Finally, rephotography makes it possible to duplicate a piece and display the two side by side, as she does in *The Best of..* series, in order to remind the viewer of the inherent reproducibility of the medium.

Building Cuts

Anita Witek's images recall the photographic documentation of Gordon Matta-Clark's famous building cuts. He made temporary art installations in buildings slated for demolition by cutting apertures in walls, floors and ceilings, putting the inside in touch with the outside and generally creating in a simple modernist or industrial space a kind of baroque construction. Witek's images have a similar effect of turbulent energy and spatial disruption. One in The Best of.. series has a central receding core similar to his Conical Intersect (1975), a spiralling cut in the exterior and interior walls of a building overlooking the Pompidou Centre under construction. He also made montages out of his photo-documents in an effort to convey something of the disorienting effect of being inside the installation. Both Matta-Clark and Witek reveal the many layers that make up a single architectural plane surface.

Bland Style

Studying The Best of .. series closely, Witek's technique becomes clearer. She does not so much cut up imagery of interiors as dissect or cut out certain elements which were the initial focus of the image. As she noted in correspondence with me, 'By doing so, I want to shift attention away from the obvious content and towards whatever surrounds that content, including the background, the colour ranges, the things which are in the image, but which we don't even notice.' The imagery for the series had two sources: the interior design magazine *Schöner Wohnen* and a book of soft-focus photographs of semi-clad girls called *The Best of David Hamilton, 1976*. Both are exemplary, for Witek, of 1970's visual culture. In her response to my questions about these sources, she said:

I would not so much consider what is conveyed in *Schöner Wohnen* as glamorous life style, but rather tame suggestions about how people should put their life in order. That was what attracted me. I wanted to interweave this kind of material with something that was circulating on living room coffee tables at the same time as David Hamilton's books of soft focus imagery. Hamilton makes other suggestions for relationships. I wanted to strip all that imagery bare of its content and use the atmosphere, the backdrops, to layer fragments on top of each other, the way one's thoughts are loosely layered, when thinking back at that time.

It's not the actual subjects of the advertising or life-style imagery that interests her, but rather what appears in the margins. For her, what is ultimately conveyed is not so much information about specific clothes or furniture, as a whole conformist, bland ethos of how one should live and consume – or, how one should live to consume.

Witek explores this cultural unconscious using her technique of foregrounding the marginal or unnoticed. Her aim is not dissimilar to that of the British pioneer of pop art Richard Hamilton, especially his collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different so appealing (1956)*, which shows a living room crowded with American luxuries only dreamt of in dreary post-war Britain. Hamilton has said that this image is allegorical of a certain state of mind, one that was optimistic about the future and technological advances. In fact, it was made for the 1956 exhibition *This is Tomorrow* held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. However, the very excess of Hamilton's montage suggests the hangover to come. In Witek's series, we witness the effects of the hangover; her montages reveal another sort of dream in the uniformly bland life-style purveyed by the 1970s interiors magazine intercut with fragments of David Hamilton nauseating book of photographs of sexualized pubescent girls disporting themselves in the French countryside or lolling in interiors decked with rattan chairs, potted palms, lace shawls and flowered straw hats. The text accompanying these images suggests that the pictures represent 'a

lost paradise' – 'an escape for the modern world where man can find refuge only in nostalgia and reverie' – a far cry from the optimism of *This is Tomorrow*.

Witek's use of this imagery, with the girls carefully excised, is perhaps meant to bring out the element of soft porn in the diffused lighting, soft focus and creamy pink shades of the dream-interiors: the David Hamilton fragments are still irradiated by the missing imagery. This sort of photography was common currency in mass media visual culture during the 1970, that is, during Witek's formative years. The temporal lag is interesting and, again, puts her work in touch with Stezaker's whose sources, such as film stills, are largely from the 40s and 50s. However, neither artist looks backward. Rather, they both seek in their work to comment on today's collective cultural unconscious. *The Best of ...* series includes pieces in which interiors seems to be invaded by the exterior and others where strips of dark paper are twisted and overlaid like tangled wire or metal. In these latter pieces, we seem to have descended into some infernal hidden space under the floorboards. The series is related to an earlier one, *Before and After* (2003), which takes images of the photographic studio as its subject. By assuming a distanced point of view, these collages reveal the complex apparatus required to make a perfect portrait or fashion shoot. In both series, Witek complicates our sense of the nature of commercial photography by focusing on the normally unseen margins.

At L'étrangère, Witek is also showing a series of nearly abstract, small scale, hand-crafted prints called *Ordinary Subjects Larger than Life*, 2010, which makes use of very dark source photography. The dark printed page allows her to create white lines at the edges of the cuts in order to articulate a sense of space. She also made a wall-size installation piece in the gallery. This is a partially 3D collage constructed out of large billboard advertising posters for a global clothing retailer. Entering the gallery is like entering the space of one of her photomontages – a space invaded by signage, but also one where we may begin to reflect on our surroundings. The vast proliferation of popular visual imagery and the insinuation of mass media in the most intimate aspects of our lives put the artist in a difficult position: to ignore mass media is to risk irrelevance, yet to appropriate it is to risk complicity. The practice of photomontage is poised on the horns of this dilemma. It takes this imagery as its raw material, but its techniques are aimed at making it reveal its materiality, artifice and implicit messages.

Margaret Iversen

Margaret Iversen is one of the leading international authorities in the field of art theory and contemporary art. Her first book was on one of the founders of Art History as a discipline: Alois Riegl: *Art History and Theory* (1993). Since then she has continued to write occasionally about the history of art history ('Retrieving Warburg's Tradition'), but has made her main areas of study psychoanalytic art theory, publishing *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes* (2007) and book to be called *Photography, Trace and Trauma* (2017). Her present and future research is devoted to the overlapping fields of photography and contemporary art. She was director of a large AHRC research project called *Aesthetics after Photography* (2007-2010), an interdisciplinary project in partnership with Diarmuid Costello of the Philosophy Department, University of Warwick. Other publications include a monograph on the contemporary artist Mary Kelly and an essay on the American painter Edward Hopper which appears in the catalogue of the 2004 Tate Modern exhibition of his work. Recently published work includes a book called *Writing Art History* (with Stephen Melville) and a number of articles including 'Analogue: On Zoe Leonard and Tacita Dean', 'Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace,' 'Desire and the Diagrammatic,' and 'The World without a Self: Edward Hopper and Chantal Akerman.'