Essay on collage, montage and the avant-garde

Art & Culture, Painting

For the vast majority of the history of art, protest has been limited to the written forms. Whether it is the ancient story of Antigone, calling the codes of honor of ancient Greece into question, or Boccaccio's Decameron, ridiculing the high horse atop which the Catholic Church attempted to perch during the Black Plague, or the portrait of infinite government surveillance in Orwell's 1984 that still chills readers today, the tradition of protest is much older in writing than in visual arts. This should not be taken to suggest that artists in other genres did not have the same ideas questioning the authority of their day. Rather, the creation of the visual arts requires more material support than it does to write; rendering objects out of bronze or stone, as well as painting with costly oils on expensive canvases, takes more money than writing down one's thoughts, even on papyrus. Throughout most of the history of art, that money has come from patrons who are commissioning certain topics. Michelangelo's sculptures and paintings are masterworks, but their subjects, mostly religious in nature, were not wholly his choice; he was completing commissions that his patrons gave him. This means that, well into the 1800s, the visual artists who had the means to work freely were few and far between. With the dissolution of the absolute monarchy, though, in the 1800s, there was a greater freedom to express dissident ideas. One of the first targets was the vast inequality between socioeconomic groups, and the existing power structures that began to appear in the capitalist democracies was not a satisfying substitute for the prior structure of the divinely inspired monarchy. The dissolution of the absolute monarchy meant that there were sources of funding and display that were not subject to the control of the political authority. As a result, people with means began to

fund works of visual art that had dissident subjects, and artists also began to develop dissident works through their own means. The result was a new movement – the avant-garde.

The term avant-garde literally means “ vanguard” or “ advance guard”(Dictionary. com). However, the commonly associated meaning has to do with innovative or experimental works of art or people. The term refers to a stretching of the normal boundaries of what is culturally accepted. This notion is considered by many to be one of the prevailing aspects of modernism. From the Dadaists to the Language poets of the 1980s, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries featured many different movements that considered themselves to be part of this change. The first person to use this term was Simonian Olinde Rodrigues, who called on artists to “ serve as [the people’s] avant-garde,” asserting that “ the power of the arts is indeed the most immediate and fastest way” to reform on social, economic and political levels (Calinescu, 18). Two of the art forms that developed in various avant-garde schools, collage and montage, were particularly groundbreaking in that they took all technical skill out of the creation of art. Suddenly, anyone who had the vision to take found objects or images and combine them in a way to produce a new vision could become a recognized artist. The implications of this for the communication of social protest were immense in the visual arts.

Futurism sought to erode all of the lines between the performer/performance and the audience. Setting aside the claims of naturalism and realism, the practitioners of futurism wanted to move even further, using technologies such as electricity to create visual effects in performance. A lot of the time

the human body would either be converted to a machine or hidden inside one; the futurist movement provided much of the inspiration for the science fiction movement. In any event, the futurist aesthetic was all about bringing the audience in closer, asking it to engage authentically with the performance. In the case of theater, for example, the goal was to " excite its audience, that is make it forget the monotony of daily life, by careening through a labyrinth of sensations imprinted with the most exacerbated originality and combined in unpredictable ways" (Marinetti, Settimelli & Corra).

A montage that exemplifies the Futurist ideas is Gino Severini's The Dance of the Pan-Pan at the " Monico." The entire perspective in the painting has compressed, and the whole idea of three-dimensional reality has vanished. It is impossible to find walls for this dance venue, because the painting itself is a kaleidoscope of faces, dresses, black jackets, arms, legs, tables and pieces of the floor. The viewpoint on the painting is so narrow that it is clear that the room is much larger than the field of the canvas. However, there is enough distance from the perspective to even the closest face for the viewer to realize that this is an immense space being portrayed. The implication, then, is that the " Monico" is much larger than a typical dance club; indeed, it may be that the viewer is part of the dancing, part of the scene. This would dovetail with the ideals of Futurist art. The sizing of the bodies is not done consistently, which plays games with the visual perspective, to the point where depth perception itself is called into question. This dance may well never end. The shredding of perspective definitely brings audience opinion into the situation.

Given that print media is on the decline, the impact of the headline is dwindling in popular culture. People no longer read the morning paper on the way to work and the evening paper on the way home; they no longer walk by newsstands as young boys hawk special editions in giant font about special events that happened. Now, the communication methods for vital news include social media and news websites on smartphones. Nonetheless, collages involving headlines are an important part of the Futurist legacy. Nanni Balestrini's collage Contro il pericolo takes Italian headlines involving " una bomba" (bomb), " missili" (missiles), " per salvare" (to save) and " la paura" (fear). The headline fonts grow larger as you move your eyes toward the center of the collage, and the largest fonts all involve " la paura." The implication is that modern times are one of fear, and the " security" that missiles and bombs are said to provide a nation have failed in that mission. The repetition of the words highlights how often those words appear in the mass media; the use of growing fonts shows how the different terms are affecting society. The audience sees its own feelings on the headlines, again blurring that line between the object and the viewer; indeed, those headlines could have come from newspapers that the viewer of the day had recently read and thrown away.

As the dust (and mustard gas) from the Great War settled, the Dadaist art movement emerged. The choice of the word " Dada" had to do with the fact that the word appears in just about every language, but meant something different in each of them. As Hugo Ball wrote, in the Dada Manifesto, " How does one achieve eternal bliss? By saying dada. How does one become famous? By saying dada. Dada is the heart of words. Each thing has its word,

but the word has become a thing by itselfThe word, the word, the word outside your domain, your stuffiness, this laughable impotence, your stupendous smugness, outside all the parrotry of your self-evident limitedness” (Ball). The fact that the Industrial Revolution had come, failing not only to save humanity but even to preserve basic dignity, combined with the fact that humanity had just conspired to blow thousands and thousands of its members up without anything significant changing on the fields of Europe and North Asia, made much of life meaningless to many; to the Dadaists, the primacy of the word was what became meaningless. If language fails, then there is not much else left structurally holding matters together, as the collages and montages that Dadaists would produce demonstrated.

Hans Arp’s Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance looks anything but like what one would have considered art in the decades before the Great War. Presented in 1917, it demonstrates the shattering of status quos that this element of the avant-garde was prepared to produce. There are 15 pieces of blue and white paper, torn into random sizes, in squarish and almost rectangular shapes, and pasted onto a gray, rectangular piece of paper. Just as the title indicates, there is no rhyme or reason to the placement of the pieces. About this piece, Arp wrote that “ these works, like nature, were ordered according to the laws of chance, chance being for me a limited part of an unfathomable raison d’etre” When the existing orders of the West had failed, all that was left was the arbitrary and the random. Chance, then, became the defining ethic, the defining structure of the day. This is what gives this collage such resonance.

Claude Duchamp’s The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors (The Green Box) is a particularly intriguing work of Dadaism. This collage features a green cardboard box and 94 different works on paper, involving ink, collotype and lithographs. The documents all explain different elements of his thought that went into the creation of another work entitled The Large Glass. The notes are left loose in the collection to that no two readers would encounter them in the same order, or in the same placement. This variety of presentation was groundbreaking in art of the day; in the vast majority of cases, art works are presented in a fixed state. Here, though, the approach was at random. Also, while studies were commonly displayed, supporting documents were not. This takes a new step in the relationship between artist and viewer, also showing that the “ words” that go into the artwork itself are just as important, or unimportant, as the final work.

Cubism, of course, was one of the earliest segments of modernism that started to turn perspective on its head. The cubists were primarily interested in using painting to yield results that were more similar to sculpture, or turning a two-dimensional medium into a three-dimensional product. This might mean that the end result would not look realistic, but it was painting’s protest at its own flatness.

One of the Cubist works that heralded the coming promise of the collage as a combination of different textures, items and format is Juan Gris’ Breakfast. The still life, of course, dates back several centuries as an art form, but this painting takes the still life and turns it on its head. This collage shows the same table from different perspectives at apparently different times in just one image. The coffee cup moves; part of the newspaper is there, but that

image seems to have been caught mid-second; other dishes appear and move. The table even appears from several different points of view at once. The overall effect is one of attempted three-dimensionality; however, another effect of this is showing the same table from different actual perspectives. This is another side effect of the Cubist aesthetic; not only does one see the same object from different points, but also from different times. This idea would inform the philosophy of the post-structuralists later, who argued that there was no such thing as a universal experience of a work of art. Instead, each piece of art could (and did) appear differently each time a viewer saw it; indeed, every time a viewer accessed the same piece of art, it would be a different " text." The effect of this collage is to show that effect all in one image.

The Cubist version of the montage appears in Fernand Leger's Nudes in the Forest. This is similar to the Futurist montage presented earlier, with the difference that it pays more attention to attempting a three-dimensional representation of the figures. While the earlier work resulted in more of a kaleidoscopic result, in this work the different figures appear to bulge out of the canvas. The bodies are brown, and some of them appear to have the texture of trees rather than skin. They are interspersed with white objects that appear to be skirts, as though the forms are shedding their clothing in order to return to nature. The chaos of leaving the social order behind is one thematic implication of this piece.

The purpose of the avant-garde was to bring to public attention the different social and political agendas that needed attention that the mainstream media, including the arts, were unwilling to bring to the attention of the

public. The importance of an avant-garde’s existence in contemporary times is made only too apparent by the hordes of the wealthy and privileged who will drive their luxury cars down to the inner city to attend performances of Shakespeare or Beethoven or view retrospectives of Gauguin and Picasso, only to hop right back into their cars and head to their suburbs unchanged. The purpose of the avant-garde is one of protest, one of demanding change. When that no longer happens in society, then no matter how many “ free” elections countries hold, and no matter how “ free” the press is, society will be just as captive as it was under Augustus Caesar or Henry VIII. Avant-garde is a necessary corrective to the ills that society creates for itself.

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