Look:
On the Collages of Arturo Herrera

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The following remarks concern a very specific group of works within Arturo Herrera's varied oeuvre: a series of collages from the year 2002. Viewed alongside his paintings, objects, and, above all, his monumental wall paintings, we immediately notice the relatively standardized paper size of these works. Herrera uses pages from illustrated books as the bases for his collages. For some, he even has small-format paintings made to his specifications, in order to cover them with layers of cutout pictorial elements and so create a composition: a collage. He also applies paint freely, extending the classical definition of collage to include elements of painting as well.

Derived from the French, the word *collage* literally means "glue," but also refers to the process of gluing on and of gluing together. In art history, the term refers to a technique that assembles and combines cutout, torn-out, or found pieces of paper. Here is where the fascinating and unique aspect of Herrera's collages begins; for the artist extends our previous awareness of the medium's possibilities by using not only worthless found pieces of paper but also commissioned paintings. Though previous texts on the artist have made reference to the long and varied history of the art of collage,[1] I will nevertheless briefly examine it in order to clarify Herrera's artistic approach.

A Short History of Collage

The history of collage is generally said to begin with a Cubist pencil drawing made by Pablo Picasso in 1912.[2] This work is a still life entitled *Table with Bottle, Wineglass, and Newspaper*, and it now belongs to the collection of the Musée nationale d'art moderne at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. The table, the bottle, and the wineglass are drawn; the newspaper is real. Picasso stuck a rectangular section of newsprint into the pencil outlines of the objects in the title such that a fragment of the newspaper's name could be read—URNAL for "*Journal*"—as well as part of the current headline—UN COUP DE THÉ [atre]—and also the subtitle—LA BULGARIE, LA SERBIE, LE MONTÉNEGRO SIGN [ent l'Armitiée]. This particular newspaper clipping referred to a political event that took place on December 4, 1912, related to the war in the Balkans—a bit of news that has become relevant again today. But as Robert Rosenblum has clearly demonstrated, Picasso chose the clipping to encourage a play on words and their double (if not multiple) meanings.[3]

Formally, the drawing is compositionally unified in the relationship of foreground to background: The newsprint constitutes a solid area within the linear contours of the drawing and is simultaneously overlapped by them. Since the added paper is so obviously recognizable as a newspaper, it forces everyday life, the present tense, even the unique historical moment of this daily reportage into the timeless subject of a still-life arrangement. Above all, the newspaper fragment is to be read as text in order to heighten ambiguity as much as possible, for clarity is obviously lost as a result of the cutting. Picasso not only

employs an image within the image, he also engages a type of information quite apart from the arrangement of lines and forms. Looking at this nearly one-hundred-year-old collage, we find ourselves in an epoch that recognizes the pictorial value of graphic advertising, of public life in the metropolis. Picasso is not just pointing to the existence of a reality outside of the picture—he is literally giving us visible reality. Writing, its typography, and its printing become elements of the image, as they did for some of Picasso's contemporaries. The word fragment URNAL, the signifier of a journal/newspaper, is also found in certain works by Georges Braque and Juan Gris from the same period.

The victory march of collage, begun in Paris before the First World War, was resumed with an emphasis on typographic design by the Futurists Carlo Carra, Filippo Marinetti, Giacomo Balla, and their circle. After the war, Dadaist groups in Zurich and Berlin, centered around Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch, employed collage techniques to express their socially critical positions. One remaining link with the early stages of collage was the intention to present a legible message conveyed via the written word; this message became increasingly pointed, thereby adding to the motif of an image within the image. From today's art-historical perspective, it seems only logical that the collage motifs of Kurt Schwitters (who worked under the influence of Russian Constructivism, in which typography was also of considerable significance) functioned as a constructed pictorial element. Finally, this creative technique became pure photocollage in the works of Robert Michel, thus returning the medium to one in which photographic images of visible reality are converted into a kind of pic-

ture puzzle. The image is returned to the image. In the biomorphous silhouette collages of Jean Arp and the figuration of Henri Matisse's late works, abstraction was celebrated as such—an image with no reference to reality. Here collage is a craft technique employing different cutout, abstract areas of color.

This briefly sketched history of the genre is a necessary preliminary to any understanding of the particular quality of Arturo Herrera's collages. Having indicated the diversity of artistic conception developed during the first half of the twentieth century, it represents a collective achievement that constitutes a challenge—possibly even a stumbling block—for any contemporary artist wishing to develop this technique further. And never mind the new pictorial ideas that date from the second half of the twentieth century![4] Nonetheless, I maintain that Herrera has succeeded in interpreting the means and the methods of collage in a new way. A visit to his studio gives some initial insight into the conception of his work.

In the Studio

Arranged across several tables, we find thousands of pieces of paper cut from magazines, illustrated books, and publications offering daily news and entertainment. Among them are bits of paper painted with poster paints or watercolors, as well as colored cardboard. Every manner of shape is represented. Fragile, hand-size paper elements with rounded, fluid, latticelike contours and interior structures appear to consist of outlines alone; they constitute raw material, the artist's store for future collages. In many of these paper scraps,

the original can no longer be recognized, though of course something always remains visible, for only printed paper has been used, save for those few pieces of cardboard. Basic, recurrent motifs are organized on the tables. Here and there, specific paper cutouts have been placed in careful layers on uncut sheets of paper. A collage is emerging, somewhere between disorder and order.

The artist begins with an entire page from an illustrated book. Sometimes he commissions an illustrator friend to produce these pictures, which serve as a base, a bottom layer, for his collages. These specially-made images are produced with an airbrush. Though the fundamental principle of collage is the transformation of found, rejected materials and the subsequent creation of surprising levels of meaning, it is precisely this notion that Arturo Herrera questions when he takes a pictorial original as his starting point and deliberately destroys it by adding on other pictorial elements. The paper cutouts described above overlap the valuable original in several layers, but the open structure means that what lies beneath is left partly visible. Herein lies the astonishingly simple but utterly different character of Herrera's collages. The creative technique of collage provides him with a means by which to grasp the principles of the genre for what they are—that is, an application of layers of cut-up images—and more: It enables him to destroy images and reject any level of meaning that might originate in their content.

Hybrid Abstraction

The airbrush paintings on paper of idealized landscapes and interiors that Arturo Herrera commissioned for his 2002 series of works resemble still lifes borrowed from the pictorial stores of animated film. As a rule, such films illustrate a specific story, depicting figures and details that constitute the narrative quality of this world of motifs. They are themselves a system of collage, by virtue of the animator's technique of using the same background in each cell, changing the foreground elements only. In his instructions for the commission, Herrera requested that all narrative pictorial elements be eliminated. As a result, the images and spaces—wiped free of narrative aspects and drama—appear static, idealized, and abstract. They resemble those landscapes familiar from Italian Renaissance frescoes since Giotto, or the late French Gothic tradition of book illustration. Thus the original paintings—conceived but not produced by Herrera—represent a stage set for further creative work. The additional steps in his process serve to make the originals unrecognizable. First comes the conceptual destruction of the image, with the aim of fashioning a new one that no longer permits any direct associations.

Looking carefully, it is sometimes possible to decipher fragments of motifs: for example, the original setting of an animated film, or the outlines of an animal illustration by the nineteenth-century draftsman and scientist John James Audubon. But this keen, almost forensic observation betrays nothing of the understanding of the pictures' actual effects, especially as the complexity of the pictorial elements prevents any deep contemplation of isolated insights.

Some deciphering is always possible, even in the smallest details, given the artist's use of materials taken from magazines and preprinted illustrations. Furthermore, it is in the nature of how we view images that associations can never be entirely avoided. Ultimately, however, the hybridity of these pictorial elements serves Herrera as a means by which to overcome, in his collages, preconceived notions and familiar pictorial memories by means of multiple, uncontrollable associations. The abstract cutout forms he employs represent a free and open pictorial vocabulary; no metaphorically encoded or psychologically interpretable depths are presented. The choice of forms and their cutout shapes are decided from an exclusively aesthetic standpoint.

The search for his own, new image leads Herrera to an actual destruction of original pictures and forces him to the hybridity of multiple and ambivalent associations. With these collages, he aims to find his way to an image that depicts the interrelations between destruction and construction, grasping the tension between order and disorder as a moment not yet depicted—neither order, disorder, nor a balance between the two, for that would be entropic. New areas constantly become visible on the surface as a result of pasting over, painting over, covering up. The desire to extinguish an image automatically creates a new image. In this way, Herrera creates a superfluity of information, opening up references on all conceivable levels. But it is only possible to grasp the completed work on the basis of artistic rules inherent in the picture: As the German philosopher Konrad Fiedler first said in 1912, the same year that Picasso

invented the collage, "The content of art is no more than creativity itself."[5]

Spheres of Resonance

When a particular form is chosen among many experiments, the range of motifs and information evident in the studio and concentrated in the collage can only be transformed into one specific artistic work. This single collage is then given over to permanent viewing; in an interplay between contemplation, visual attraction, and the dynamics of color and form, it is set into the expectant state of what Fiedler called "visual seeing."[6] But when, precisely, is any picture finished? Who declares an incomplete creative process artistically complete? The first to illustrate this problem was Paul Cézanne, primarily in his watercolors and paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire. In certain works by Herrera this theme is also relevant, particularly when seemingly fragmented pictorial forms reveal a specific proportional relationship to the format of the ground, and when overpainting draws a boundary between the recognizable and the abstract, thereby revealing Herrera as the "painter" of his collages. It is precisely this additional process of painting, of adding color streaks and so forth—and of the momentary, chance, and decisive aspects of their arrangement—that is evoked on the threshold of what Umberto Eco has called the "open work of art," a notion of perception he first developed in 1962 in relation to contemporary music.[7]

At this point, the viewer is also challenged to become involved through a process of active looking. The artist has done everything he can to drive

any meaning out of the originals, to combine them into a multiple sheaf of references, and to provide a flood of images causing irritation. Finally he decides in favor of one new image that is able to manifest a fresh idea. This transfer of individual looking can only take place if the viewer is consciously prepared to accept her role. An analogy to music and its metaphors offers a means of expressing this process. We refer to "resonance" when sound waves with the same frequency of oscillation cause other systems to vibrate and thus produce a sound. Even though a sound is invisible, nearby bodies may still visibly oscillate. This effect is what Herrera aims to achieve via pictorial means: a sphere of resonance within which a picture he deems finished triggers reverberations. The colors, the paper elements, and the forms represent nothing more or less than what they represent; their aim is to affirm an image. The elements of the picture develop into a system of their own accord, such that only the exclusively aesthetic criteria of form, proportion, shape, and coloration justify the end product as an expression of the artist's desire to provide a moment of resonance for the viewer.

"Can we afford to exhibit no curiosity?" Rudolf Arnheim asks in *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order.*[8] The understanding I am proposing of Arturo Herrera's works as "images of perception" refers back to Arnheim and the process outlined in his book *Kunst und Sehen* (Art and Visual Perception). Herrera's works challenge us to see and to think about seeing in order to arrive at "visual thinking," in Arnheim's words, or "visual seeing" (*sehendes Sehen*), as Fiedler referred to it.

According to Arnheim, "All perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention."[9] Arturo Herrera enters into this process as the creator of the collages reproduced here. Yet though I have made several observations about and outlined the structure of his work, I have not described a single one in detail. But it is Herrera who does not give specific titles to his collages. In other words, all are evaluated in the same way; all remain *Untitled*. This fact confirms the starting point for my comments: Herrera's collages are intended as instructions for the creative, thoughtful, visual observation of all images. Ultimately it explains the simple title of this text, which is also a recommended method: LOOK!

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Translated from German by Lucinda Rennison, Berlin

Notes

1 See Maria Tatar, "Arturo Herrera's Fabulous Monsters," *Arturo Herrera* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 1998); Jessica Morgan, "Arturo Herrera," *Grand Street* 66 (1998); and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arturo Herrera* (Los Angeles: UCLA Hammer Museum, 2001).

2 It is impossible to say for certain which was the first collage Pablo Picasso made in 1912. A collage in the Marion Kogler McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas, entitled *Guitar, Street Music, and Glass*, is also sometimes considered his first collage.

3 See Robert Rosenblum, "A Brazen Can-Can in the Temple of Art," in *High and Low: Modern Art—Popular Culture*, eds. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 37.

4 See Florian Rodari, *Collage: Pasted, Cut, and Torn Papers* (Geneva and New York: Skira/Rizzoli, 1988).

5 Konrad Fiedler quoted in Max Imdahl, *Bildautonomieund Wirklichkeit: Zur Theoretischen Begründung moderner Malerei* (Mittenwald, Germany: Mäander Kunstverlag, 1981), 14.

6 Ibid.

7 Umberto Eco writes about this idea in *Opera Aperta*, first published in Italian in 1962.

8 Rudolf Arnheim, *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 27.

9 Rudolf Arnheim, *Kunst und Sehen: Eine Psychologie des schöpferischen Auges*, 3rd ed., trans. Hans Hermann, with a foreword by Michael Diers (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000).