Arturo Herrera's Les Noces and the Unfathomable Quality of Fragments

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IMPURE ABSTRACTION

Over twenty years, Arturo Herrera has devoted himself to mastering a working method that allows him to adapt the history of abstraction and the myths that surround it to the liminal conditions of representation in the post-nation-state, particularly through his use of collage as a montage technique in which fragments of reality and everyday scrap materials are affixed to a two-dimensional surface. Collage is, fundamentally, a process by which the limits imposed by the binary distinctions of painting and sculpture—or, indeed, of fiction and reality—are overcome. Such a break with convention is achieved through the insertion of fragments that introduce multiple and alternate realities. Arguments for Herrera's recovery of the traditionally expressive possibilities of collage through his unusual combination of materials and use of strategies of representation that oppose the concept of waste have previously been put forth by a number of scholars.[1] I would add here that the artist has, in fact, succeeded in expanding upon these basic principles, adding multivalent layers of meaning to his works through the application of preexisting materials and discarded objects.

Unlike Carlos Cruz-Diez, Alejandro Otero, and Jesús Rafael Soto—the foundational triad of Venezuelan kinetic and geometrical abstract artists—whose designation of origin and all-encompassing narratives converged on the nation-state, Herrera's practice is put forward "along the borders of cultural integration"—that is, in the interstitial space formed by the amalgamation of trades and knowledge that result from the "process of transcultural negotiation."[2] Living in Chicago and New York, and, more recently, in Berlin, Herrera has since the 1990s been developing a body of work in which myriad comic-book characters, children's coloring books, and other mass-produced images are subjected to a process of fragmentation. The disintegration of form, incipient in his earlier works, has increased as the artist adds steps and detours to the basic process of cutting and pasting.

It is important to note that Herrera's work is not specific to any one medium, and he has created two-dimensional works using, among other materials, paper, felt, polyethylene, wood, wall paint, postcards, and silver-nitrate photographs, as well as sculptures in stainless steel and Formica and the digital projection *Les Noces* (2007). Herrera uses the historical process of collage as a starting point from which to elaborate upon artistic forms, which mutate from one medium to another in order to explore different aspects of the history of abstraction. In spite of their formal completeness, Herrera's works delve into the dispersion of meanings, the mixture of identities, and the viral dissemination of images as regulating principles that inform the visual arts at the present.

More interested "in the concept of abstraction,"[3] or, rather, in its archaeology, Herrera attests to the collapse and eventual disappearance of the premise of originality inherent in collage by exploring the technique's unfathomable possibilities. His excavations of such a loaded tradition have given rise to bi-dimensional works comprising graphite and coffee stains superimposed onto popular motifs or comic-book characters. *Plot* (2006), a massive, flat stainless-steel piece placed at the edge of a wall, formally recalls the methods of Action Painting, adopting the anonymous horizontality of a Carl Andre sculpture (perhaps the title alludes to the props made by Richard Serra?), while its paradoxical shape might hint at the outline of Walt Disney's Bambi.[4]

Further embracing strategies of appropriation and collaboration, Herrera has enlisted the help of professional illustrators, who airbrushed settings and landscapes from animated films as backgrounds onto which the artist juxtaposed additional materials. Herrera's collages are notably organized as puzzles, and even though collage is a technique that offers the possibility of either breaking up reality or reassembling fragments into a cohesive whole, his works eschew identification or recomposition, leaving these tasks to the polymorphous imagination of the public.[5]

For Herrera, his practice in relation to modern art and its concomitant modernisms serves to imbue abstraction with impurity: "The X-acto knife cuts everything into little bits, fragments that I then use to create new images. These are like little bits of modernism all around me. And the fragments have this hopeful connection to some ideal from before. Dislocating and destroying elements result in a hybrid that recalls and at the same time undercuts its origins. My fragmentation provides another view of the contamination or impurity of modernism."[6] The fragments thus form sediments, layered in time in series that not only reveal the mutations and eventual destruction of the forms and motifs that Herrera has systematically catalogued but also carry out a distinctive (and differential) dissection of abstraction as a language that shows the fissures in the avant-garde's universalist aspirations. As suggested by Homi Bhabba, "cultural difference, as a form of [postcolonial] intervention," represents the process of interpretation shaped by the perplexity of living in the "disjunctive and liminal space" of the nation, erasing "the harmonious totalities of the Culture."[7]

The fragments Herrera uses to create his collages represent "cultural debris,"[8] through which the artist has configured his own archive of cultural differences within the all-encompassing narratives of modern art. The fragment, lacking authorial identity, behaves as a virus that

mutates so as to undermine the narrative potential of a specific image, shape, or motif. What Herrera "fragments, dislocates, or recomposes isn't the image itself but its legibility," considering that "what moves the artist to appropriate serially produced images is the ability of the reproduction to be readily recognized and consumed by a collective audience."[9]

As T. S. Eliot wrote, "We had the experience but missed the meaning. And approach to the meaning restores the experience."[10] Although "meaning" forms part of the collective memory of an audience made dissolute through the overconsumption of images, like childhood it becomes ungraspable or lost when it becomes remote, abstruse, or illegible. However, within the society of spectacle, an approach to meaning does not restore experience. On the other hand, a collage functions as a sophisticated process that masks narrative while at the same time allowing the haptic experience to unfold, thus transforming the image into a kind of *Kammerspiel*.[11] So, while Snow White's dwarves, Bambi's hindquarters, Dumbo's ears, and many of the other motifs that have been fragmented and deconstructed by Herrera are still recognizable and, therefore, generate unconscious (and libidinal) associations from their remnants, they produce a feeling of puzzlement because they are presented as defamiliarized forms.

DISMEMBERED GESAMTKUNSTWERK

Herrera works from a vast archive of images that make reference not only to the most unknown and revealing chapters of the various modernist movements but also to banal stories and episodes of lesser narrative intensity. Over the course of two decades, this idea has developed in his work, the constituent components of which could only be compared to a book of quotations wherein the grand narratives of literature mix with mass-market fiction, philosophy, advertising, art history, and self-help texts.

Herrera's explorations of different strategies of collage have transformed this cultish and self-referential type of artwork through a more direct use of photography and video—ideal conduits for the "optical unconscious." By fusing "visual and emotional joys," these new forms of artistic media articulated a powerful collectivist utopia at the dawn of the twentieth century and caused a paradigm shift in modern art.[12] "The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as psychoanalysis does to unconscious impulses,"[13] indicated Walter Benjamin, who announced the appearance of an expert though a distracted spectator whose waning attention did not prevent intellection and analysis of the movement on the film screen.[14]

In 1998, Herrera presented a black-and-white photograph of a landscape in a solo exhibition of his work at the Renaissance Society, Chicago. The image—defined as "neither spectacular

nor banal, … caught between the symbolic and the pictorial, an abstract grimace of blazing light and closing darkness"—corresponds to a generalized, almost kitsch forest landscape.[15] By pointing a mirror into the camera's interior, which generated a reflection of the horizon line of the visual field, Herrera captured an image by emphasizing the effects of light and shadow. In addition to evoking Robert Smithson's specular analysis, Herrera's use of the mirror suggests a *mise en abyme,* or a duplication based upon the coexistence of a photograph within a photograph, and with it the reflection of the photograph's infinite reproducibility and the hypothetical potential of this medium to generate an unlimited number of copies and a chain of subsequent reduplications.[16]

The series *Untitled* (2004), comprising eighty gelatin-silver prints, and the digital work *Les Noces* (2007), which pairs projected images from the abovementioned photographic series with an eponymous musical composition by Igor Stravinsky, show Herrera's ambivalent stance in relation to the spectator and the legibility of the image. This ambiguity suggests the exacerbated distance between the society of the spectacle and the conventions of modern painting as an anachronistic and self-contained expression of individual contemplation. However, it is, paradoxically, through the principle of infinite duplication that Herrera recovers the analytical potential of the means of mechanical reproduction to serve as cultural artifacts.[17]

It was not by accident that the artist came to appropriate Stravinsky's *Les Noces,* which was composed for a ballet of the same name that is widely considered to be one of the few successful *Gesamtkunstwerk* experiments produced by Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes. The music was categorized by some critics as "primitive" for its cryptic and symbolic use of folk culture, and Herrera has used its legacy as a matrix upon which to create a digitally animated photomontage/photocollage. Stravinsky noted the "intransigent" quality of his piece, describing the composition, which he began in 1912, as "perfectly homogenous, impersonal, and mechanical."[18] The score, arranged for solo vocalists, a chorus, four pianos, and percussion, was based on a book of Russian folk songs for peasant weddings. Herrera organized the structure of his work according to the soundtrack of this difficult modern ballet, originally choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska with set design and costumes by the Russian Cubo-Futurist Natalia Goncharova.

In *Les Noces* Herrera does not seek simply to illustrate Stravinsky's arrhythmic composition with his digitized photographs; rather, he uses the score to emphasize the difficulty of constructive a coherent narrative from the eighty abstract and figurative black-and-white images that serve as his source material, and which follow one another in a twenty-seven-minute loop controlled by software that combines them at random and projects them onto two screens. The animated images are made up of drawings and graphic "leftovers" recorded by the artist in his studio, where random elements intervened in the film-development process.[19] The software that controls the loops, which was created by a programmer hired by Herrera, is designed so that the cuts between images are purposefully asynchronous with the beats of the music. This method of stop-gap editing produces a space-time disruption between visuals and sounds, as well as a mechanism of estrangement from the viewer. Moreover, this conceptual approach corresponds to Stravinsky's compositional intentions. Conceived shortly after *The Rite of Spring* (1912), *Les Noces* is structured as a number of cells that produce a pattern of mechanical repetition. Drawing contrasts between the score and the atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg, Theodor Adorno deemed Stravinsky's repetition of motifs and the mechanization of time as destructive and anti-humanist. He criticized Stravinsky for creating a "metric disruption" consistent with the substitution of "expressive time" (which he defined as a metronymic adherence to rhythm) in exchange for the absence of any "expressive subjective fluctuation of the rhythm."[20]

Juxtaposing Stravinsky's arrhythmic composition with his own series of black-and-white photographs, Herrera manages to show the subjective, dramatic, and personal mechanism of

the music, which he has transformed into a soundtrack for a digital animation—arguably the most suitable genre for this modern composition. To do so, the artist has masterfully exploited the hybrid nature of the source material, the rhythmic movement of the images (which is, nonetheless, running at its own, arrhythmic pace in relation to the music), the binary structure of the two-channel video presentation, and the transposition of a photo-mechanic image into an electronic one—that is, the move from analog to digital. His interventions aim to suspend the intentionally mechanistic and impersonal nature of Stravinsky's composition, instead eliciting a state of commotion and distraction in the spectator using imagery that is both deeply moving and the spontaneous result of the workings of chance. Furthermore, Stravinsky's use of cells in the composition implied a dialogue between stasis and movement that Herrera expanded through the use of animation.

Neither fiction nor documentary, figuration nor abstraction, animation is a spurious genre that strips bare the binary distinctions of its logic. Herrera further complicates the issue by animating two fields of paired images.[21] As reproductions of fragments of the artist's own works and of his inventory of recycled materials that erode the "analogical perfection" of photography, these images have an indicative quality that refers us back to the heart of the issue examined by Benjamin: the historical adaptation of art to the changes wrought by the technological revolution vis-à-vis the exploration of art's new functions and needs from a technological standpoint. It is against this background that the tensions inherent in the photocollage and photomontage—considered experimental procedures at the beginning of the twentieth century, and which were initially employed in advertising and later in propaganda that embodied the aesthetic, political, and social dilemmas distinguishing the individual from the collective—are played out. Some critics have noted Herrera's resistance to calling his wall paintings murals, a refusal they attribute to his dependence on the logic of modern pictorial conventions.[22] I would argue that Herrera's refusal to use the label is instead due to the political and ideological co-opting of the mural by modernist movements, and to the artist's desire not to restrict a rather complex mode of expression to the parameters prescribed by the dialectical forces of the personal and the collective, the individual and the public.

Walt Disney contributed to the development of a powerful cultural industry by gathering and animating the work of extraordinary illustrators and draftsmen. In the early series known as *Silly Symphonies* (1929–39), Disney animated folk- and fairytales, pushing the boundaries of the cartoon template with a storyline that explored unusual aspects of children's psyches, even the most banal and moralistic.[23] Moreover, the *Silly Symphonies* pioneered the

development of a compelling visual narrative through spatial structures that provided a tension with the storytelling (i.e "pumpkin homes that resemble collapsible trailers, tree apartments with leaf welcome mats."[24])

Even if Herrera's recovery of Disney's forgotten heritage is by and large part of a vast archive of images, together with other fragments that are as abstract or representative as an animation, it also recovers the potentialities of the genre. Using complex and varied archaeological procedures, the artist restates the legacy of modern art and modernist movements as well as the spurious machinery of fragments.

[1] See in particular Friedrich Meschede, *Abstracciones híbridas. Comentarios sobre una serie de collages de Arturo Herrera,* in exh. cat., *Arturo Herrera* (Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporáneo, 2005), pp. 27–31; and idem, "Look: On the Collages of Arturo Herrera," in Friedrich Meschede, ed., *Arturo Herrera: You Go First* (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2005) n.p.

[2] See Homi K. Bhabba, "DisseminNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in idem, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 312–13.

[3] Ralf Christofori, *Arturo Herrera: Photographs* (Torino: Galleria Franco Noero and New York: Sikkema Jenkins & Co., 2004), n.p.

[4] Moreover, *Plot* is a heavy steel floor piece that was produced in Germany, which ties the piece in more than one direction to Serra's sculptural practice.

[5] With this in mind, the exhaustive jumble and fragmentation of the mass cultural forms and motifs chosen by Herrera in more recent works (for example, *Boy and Dwarf,* 2007) perhaps respond to excessively psychoanalytical interpretations of his work, for which, see Maria Tatar, "Arturo Herrera's Fabulous Monsters," in *Arturo Herrera* (Chicago: Renaissance Society, 1998), pp. 19–24, and Neville Wakefield, "Mix Not Match Not," in ibid., p. 11.

[6] Arturo Herrera as interviewed by Josiah McElheny, *Bomb Magazine* 93 (Fall 2005), p. 71.

[7] Bhabba, "DisseminNation," p. 312

[8] As designated by Tatar, "Arturo Herrera's Fabulous Monsters," pp. 19–24.

[9] See Juan Ledezma, "Neither Legible nor Abstract: Arturo Herrera's Work Under the Sign of Ambiguity," in exh. cat., *Arturo Herrera* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2007), p. 66.

[10] T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York, San Diego, and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1991), p. 194.

[11] According to Walter Benjamin, Dada collage "hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of the Mechanical Reproduction," in John Hanhardt, ed., *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (New York: Peregrine Smith Books, 1986), p. 43.

[12] Ibid., p. 40.

[13] Ibid., p. 43.

[14] For Benjamin Buchloh the incorporation of the technical advancements brought about by photography, film, billboards, and other mass modes of agitprop caused a radical paradigm shift within modern art; see Benjamin Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 (Autumn 1984), pp. 82–119.

[15] Wakefield, "Mix Not Match Not," p. 11

[16] Craig Owens examines the deconstructive relationship between reduplication and the specular duplication of photography in his seminal essay "Photography en Abyme," *October* 5 (Summer, 1978), pp. 73–88

[17] Perhaps the archaeological treatment that Herrera confers to photography and in a lesser degree to film suggests the anachronistic condition of these modes of expression in the digital era.

[18] See Pieter C. van der Toorn, "Stravinsky's Les Noces (Svadebka) and the Prohibition Against Expressive Timing," *The Journal of Musicology* 20, no. 2 (2003), pp. 285–304

[19] The film underwent a three- to fourteen-day wash in water before the application of the developing bath, leaving the negative exposed to dust and light.

[20] See van der Toorn, "The Prohibition Against Expressive Timing," p. 286

[21] A preliminary version of the installation considered four projections.

[22] See Ingrid Schaffner, "Cut Up: The Art of Arturo Herrera," in exh. cat., *Arturo Herrera* (Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, 2005), p. 134

[23] Walt Disney's *Silly Symphonies* were animated, musical short-feature films based on free adaptations of classic fairytales. The series showcased stories featuring different protagonists and whose story-lines illustrated a sensitivity towards psychological themes relevant to children.

[24] Russell Merritt, "Lost on Pleasure Island: Storytelling in Disney's *Silly Symphonies.*" *Film Quarterly* 59, no.1 (Fall 2005), p. 8.