

THE FRAGMENT AND THE WHOLE

John Corbett and Arturo Herrera in Conversation

J.C.: I'm thinking about connections between collage and opera. It seems like there are several points of convergence, in particular the idea of pulling together disparate elements into a composite, the process of transformation of material. In opera, the different media—music, theater, poetry—are integrated, while in collage diverse fragments are compiled into a new, transfigured whole. As an avid opera fan and a collagist, how do you see the relationship?

A.H.: The aim of collage is to juxtapose a variety of fragments that have their own rich references to create a new image. Opera functions in a similar way. A writer turns a story with characters and a plot into a working libretto, which in turn is set to music by a composer. A conductor is chosen, as well as a theater, orchestra, singers, chorus, costume designer, set designer, and a director whose function is to construct a unified work from scratch. The resulting production allows us to experience each of the elements assembled together as a whole in real time. So opera is a collective enterprise fusing several media, while collage reflects the concerns of an individual artist working with fragments. Combining disparate parts will always generate both drama and harmony, conflict and desire. Opera is our portrait larger than life. Collage is our portrait of life rearranged and reordered.

J.C.: Those rich references you mention sometimes include humor, for instance in places where you might truncate a figure. It can be a sort of brutal humor, it's deeply funny, but it's very different in nature from the kind of nasty humor in Dada collage. How important is the comic or humorous in your collages?

A.H.: All the series were created with literally hundreds of fragments of printed and hand-painted paper. Working with these many elements generates combinations that, in some cases, run the gamut from the humorous to the perverse. However, I concentrated less on isolated figurative or funny configurations and more on the potential of collage to create images that are neither totally legible nor totally abstract.

J.C.: What defines a series for you? Some of these occur in groups as small as a diptych, which is fewer elements than some might think of for the idea of a series. But in your work the individual pieces are so incredibly rich, I can imagine that two might make a complete and fulfilling series.

A.H.: A series allows me to delve deeper into a set of images that share an underlying content within certain formal parameters. The key words are grouping, correlation, continuity. Series function like a musical ensemble where each element is considered in relation to the whole. I have been working with diptychs for a long time now and the same methodology applies to a work in two or twenty parts.

J.C.: Is the notion of a sequence part of the definition? That was such a key part of the musical notion of the serial. Schönberg figured out different ways to use the twelve tones by keeping them in strict sequence, the tone row. How strict are you?

A.H.: I am not able to read a musical score and I don't know exactly how the original twelve-tone system, with its strict order and sequencing, works. The series in the shows don't rely on a numbered succession but instead are more like free variations on a theme. I like the capacity for change that a certain motif offers.

J.C.: I love the way that the idea of fragment and whole is connected here. Within each collage there is the inevitable relationship between the elements of the fragment and the whole, but also between the piece and the series there is a relationship of part to whole. In a certain respect, the series becomes like a macro collage, a collage of collages.

A.H.: A series brings together individual works in surprising combinations. This kind of engagement allows for a more complex associative linking between parts and the entire group: a collage of collages, as you suggested. However, the sense of unity that hovers in a series is threatened by the disorienting nature of each work. Uprooted and dissected from original sources, elements full of references are reassembled into new images. All series remain basically fragmented and complete at the same time.

J.C.: It has so much to do with collecting, sorting, grouping, arranging. And it seems like the principle can be expanded even further, from the collage and the series to the gallery exhibition and in this case the collaboration between two galleries. Are you thinking, while you work on an individual collage, about how all these parts fit together, or does that process of exploring connections occur after the collages are made?

A.H.: Creating an exhibition in which two galleries are involved requires a bit of planning. Each space has its own architectural configuration that determines which works will go where and how they will be exhibited. The shows concentrate solely on series and on the formal and conceptual correspondences among them. Hopefully the audience will be able to embrace multiple points of entry and different affinities in narratives that aren't always linear.

J.C.: I love that idea of series without linear narrative, the idea that you can enter from many possible places. I was thinking about Roland Barthes, about how much an issue that is for him in his conception of reading, especially as he articulates it in *S/Z*. He's insistent that conventional linear narrative is a limited way of reading a text, that it's necessary to find alternative ways to break the work up and enter it, which really reminds me of the fundamental idea behind collage, particularly as you practice it. You constantly find new, unexpected, surprising ways into the material—collage as breaking and entering.

A.H.: Collage is about grasping relationships. How we manage to do that is directly related to our history and connection to the fragments that constitute the image. Collage reinforces contradiction and discontinuity, and its non-linearity is essential for the viewer. Multiple stories are up for grabs and their fluidity, while disconcerting at times, empowers the individual to construct her or his own reading of the piece.