

## Arturo Herrera's Fragmented Wholeness

Jeffrey Saletnik

In December 2007, Arturo Herrera visited Villa Planchart (1953-57) in Caracas, Venezuela with camera in hand at the request of the editor of *Domus*. He had been commissioned to photograph the site for a special issue of the magazine devoted to its founder, and the villa's architect, Gio Ponti. Twelve reproductions of the artist's black and white photographs, along with a text by Friedrich Meschede, appeared in the magazine in February 2008.<sup>1</sup> Herrera later used other photographs made during his visit to the villa in the series *Villa Planchart/Gio Ponti* (2007-10), comprised of twenty-four black and white gelatin silver prints that he marked with various pigments of airbrushed gouache. And, more recently, in considering the painting of Morris Louis (also from the late 1950s), he returned to this corpus of images in crafting a series entitled *10 Louis/Ponti Collages* (2018). In each collage, he situated a photograph of the villa in relation to a page removed from the catalogue for a 1991 exhibition of Louis's paintings at Galerie Neuendorf, which Herrera found at a Berlin flea market. Each collage is bounded by a unique wooden frame painted in assorted hues that recall Ponti's color scheme for the villa and Louis's palette.

*Villa Planchart/Gio Ponti* and *10 Louis/Ponti Collages* exhibit strikingly minimal material manipulation, which is quite unlike much of Herrera's work from the previous decade—for instance, his monumental abstract collages constructed of thousands of elements as well as visually dense paintings, prints, and printed books comprised of layers of appropriated images and painterly gestures. Yet each of the *10 Louis/Ponti Collages* consists of only two distinct elements. This is not to say that they and images from the series *Villa Planchart/Gio Ponti* are lacking in creative labor; rather, it is that much of the work was done—by Ponti, Louis, and Herrera—in advance of the artist articulating passages of gouache or positioning book leaf and photograph. Indeed, these series—as well as the artist's more sparing images generally—demonstrate what, in writing

<sup>1</sup> See Arturo Herrera, "Arturo Herrera: Villa Planchart, Caracas," *Domus*, no. 911 (2008): 30–41. Herrera submitted a selection of photographs to the editor, who determined the number of images reproduced in the magazine as well as their sequence.

about Herrera's psychologically charged work from the late-1990s, Pablo Helguera described as his "innate ability to take the most minimum elements and exploit them to the maximum."<sup>2</sup> This undoubtedly is true; but there is nothing "innate" about it. Herrera's images—then as now—are the product of and demonstrate the work of an artist's precise and confident vision.

For Herrera, the camera lens is "a tool for fragmentation."<sup>3</sup> But unlike the X-acto knife he wields when cutting print and other media to pieces and hence transforming the "little bits of modernism all around [him]" into raw materials for his collages,<sup>4</sup> the camera allows him to frame and excerpt constellations of form directly from his field of vision. At Villa Planchart, he discovered a rich array of materials—various woods, patterned planes of marble and ceramic tile, painted surfaces, custom cabinetry, furnishings, and the shape of building itself—put into ready-made juxtaposition by Ponti for his lens. Among the photographs Herrera made of the villa, one finds, for example, an eye-level shot of two minimal metal-legged dining chairs positioned before a wall. The parallel lines of each chair's design contrast with the oblique lines of the villa's marble flooring as well as the organicism of its striation. These chairs reappear in abstract images that show views through their metal armature from floor-level and as reflected by the marble upon which they sit.<sup>5</sup> In another photograph, the lines of the villa's abstract multi-colored marble flooring merge with the geometric form and upholstery pattern of one of Ponti's Mariposa lounge chairs (1952-53). And—as framed by Herrera—the point at which a staircase stringer meets the floor, or the architecture of the villa's carpark as juxtaposed with its circular mosaic pavement, are abstracted to such

<sup>2</sup> Pablo Helguera, "Arturo Herrera: The Edges of the Invisible," *Art Nexus*, no. 33 (1999): 49. On this work, composed of images from children's books, cartoons, and advertisements, see Jessica Morgan, "Portfolio: Arturo Herrera," *Grand Street*, no. 66 (Secrets) (1998): 224–29; Hamza Walker, "A Gentle Trauma" (Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1998), <http://www.renaissancesociety.org/publishing/80/a-gentle-trauma/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ralf Christofori, "On Arturo Herrera's Photographs," in *Arturo Herrera Photographs*, trans. Steven Lindberg (Torino: Galleria Franco Noero et. al., 2004), n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Josiah McElheny, "Arturo Herrera," *Bomb*, no. 93 (2005): 71.

<sup>5</sup> See Herrera, "Arturo Herrera: Villa Planchart, Caracas," 37.

an extent that, initially, they read as forms without evident referents. Their effect as such is further accentuated when photographs are rotated by ninety degrees, as Herrera presents some of them in *10 Louis/Ponti Collages*.

If Herrera wants to build “solid structure[s] out of fragments” or “powerful image[s]” through collage, then it stands to reason that strong source material would yield the best, most efficient



*Untitled, 1997-98*  
Cut-and-pasted paper on envelope  
Dimensions: 30.2 x 22.5 cm  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York,  
Gift of Susan and Lewis Manilow

results.<sup>6</sup> A house built out of bricks (rather than of straw or sticks) can withstand the advance of the Big Bad Wolf most effectively, after all. Herrera shows one how this is so with respect to collage. The jaunty gait of Donald Duck’s recognizable lower half does a lot of work for the artist when he positions it next to an inverted fragment cut from an advertisement for a Häagen-Dazs ice cream stickbar. With ice cream novelty put in place of Donald’s upper body, the hybrid figure reads as headless. Herrera pasted just two additional collage elements to the object’s surface to locate the figure in space. No more work was required to prompt the viewer to invest something of their own psychology in the image—for Herrera to craft a powerful image.

Ponti’s architecture and interior design for Villa Planchart function similarly for Herrera, who long ago moved beyond comic iconography. Unlike the ubiquitous duck and ice cream bar, the villa is not immediately recognizable, nor is it laden with emotional or psycho-sexual charge, yet Ponti’s design does present one with a masterclass in how to employ a diversity of color, texture, and form to compose a comprehensive design. Indeed, the architect did not describe the structure as a home, but as “an abstract sculpture on an enormous scale, not to be looked at from the outside, but to be looked at from the inside [by]

<sup>6</sup> McElheny, “Arturo Herrera,” 72.

penetrating and traversing it: made to be observed by the continuously moving eye.”<sup>7</sup> It certainly was strong source material for Herrera’s astute gaze.

The images Herrera excerpted from Villa Planchart are so exactly composed that the photographs he used in the series *Villa Planchart/Gio Ponti* required only a few passes of air-brushed gouache to complete; and those used as collage material in *10 Louis/Ponti Collages* have been trimmed minimally, if at all, with some merely rotated into position upon an illustration of one of Louis’s paintings. In each of the *10 Louis/Ponti Collages*, Herrera situated a photograph such that the visual weight of the image is consistent with the gravity (established as thinned paint moved across the canvas) of its corresponding Louis painting. In some instances, Louis’s painting elaborates the compositional logic of Herrera’s photograph, as the visible edges of *Dalet Taf* (1958) do the photograph that nearly obscures the painting’s image entirely. But this placement also could be seen as Herrera adding dimension and texture to one of Louis’s “veil” paintings, which, in the Greenbergian sense, are evidently flat and entirely optical in their reception.<sup>8</sup> This is made more explicit in a collage in which Herrera’s addition of a photograph to a partially obscured illustration of *Late Flowering* (1961), one of Louis’s “stripe” paintings, appears to augment and extend the linearity of Louis’s vertical stripes dramatically into space as the perspective shown in the photograph recedes simultaneously. And, in another collage, the content of a photograph harmonizes with the visual logic of one of Louis’s “unfurled” paintings (at least what



*Villa Planchart/Gio Ponti*  
(24 elements), 2007-10  
Airbrushed gouache on gelatin  
silver print  
Dimensions: 21 cm x 29,7 cm

<sup>7</sup> Gio Ponti, “Una Villa ‘Fiorentia,’” *Domus*, no. 375 (1961): 1. “... una scultura astratta in scala enorme, non da guardare dal di fuori, ma da guardare dal di dentro, penetrandovi e percorrendola: fatta per essere osservata girando continuamente l’occhio.”

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961): 103–8.

Herrera allows one to see of it) as the pattern of split philodendron leaves shown in Herrera's photograph is viewed alongside an image of *Delta Zeta* (1960).

Through his *10 Louis/Ponti Collages*, Herrera intervenes with Louis's paintings, which have been described as resisting wholeness insofar as the marks left by the rivulets of paint that crossed their surfaces remain independent from one another, rather than function as parts contributing to a pictorial whole.<sup>9</sup> In contrasting his photographs of Villa Planchart—in which every element contributes to the totality of Ponti's design—with Louis's paintings, Herrera transforms the paintings from existing as an array of autonomous marks to being one part of his visually rigorous work. *10 Louis/Ponti Collages* bring the artist's precise gaze into high relief for the viewer. And, in doing so, they challenge one to see Herrera's more visually dense work in this regard—as masterful formal demonstrations that engage a modernist discourse.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See John Elderfield, *Morris Louis* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986), 61–64.

<sup>10</sup> On Herrera's relationship to Modernism, see McElheny, "Arturo Herrera"; Graham Bader, "Between Forest and Wall," in *Arturo Herrera: Boy and Dwarf* (Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2006), 81–86; David Schutter, "A Picture, Restlessly Unbecoming," in *Arturo Herrera Series*, by Jens Asthoff et. al. (Chicago: Corbett vs. Dempsey et. al., 2012), 133–37.