Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Pandemic Images and Gestalt Theory: Introspective Musings About a Series of Digital Art-works

Art is the imposing of a pattern on experience, and our esthetic enjoyment is the recognition of that pattern.

Alfred North Whitehead, *Dialogues* (Whitehead, 1956)

In early 2021, coincident with the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I began a series of computer-based montages. A century earlier, artworks of this kind were called *collage* or *papier collés* (if made by cut-and-paste paper techniques), or *photomontage* (if made by photographic means). But it now seems more appropriate to call them *digital montages* because they are composed entirely on a computer, and may or may not be finalized as printed works on paper.

This series could also be labeled *faux book spreads* because each work resembles the pages of an open book. But in truth, it is only a “virtual” book, since each montage is constructed by selecting, altering, and arranging a selection of digital images that are free to use and in the public domain.

In terms of personal history, I think of these works as historically linked to my Uncle Lud. A watchmaker and jeweler, he was born in 1871 in Vienna, Austria, and immigrated to the U.S. at age three with his parents. He was my great uncle because he was married briefly to my Aunt Ruby, my maternal grandfather’s sister. Lud was not his given name, but rather, his surname was Ludwig.

I myself never met Uncle Lud, but when he died in 1953 of advanced age, my family was given access to the discarded contents of his shop. I was 7 years old at the time, but I remember a truck being loaded with a large green wooden cabinet filled with thousands of tiny clockwork parts, such as gears, springs, and clock hands. These were stored in a building at our home, and for years after that, I spent endless hours sorting through and whimsically assembling these strange remnants, most of which I could not begin to identify. My imagination caught fire as I arranged these pieces into new configurations, or, as I might call them now, into “new Gestalts.” Today, almost seven decades later, I am reminded of Uncle Lud’s mechanical leavings as I arrange and thereby redefine unrelated fragments in this series of montages.

There is a second, more inclusive way in which these montages are personal. As early as I can remember, I have been equally interested in both literature and the visual arts. I have always loved reading and writing, and in fact, I still remember the day when, as a child, I finished reading a full-length book for the first time. But I have also found delight in looking at artworks, magazine illustrations, and photographs. As a youngster, I made drawings constantly, experimented with “trick photography,” read books and articles, wrote parodies and poetry, and (especially) collected jokes, which I then used in neighborhood comedy acts, including ventriloquism (Behrens, 2003).

In those years, had someone asked what I would be when I grew up, I would not have answered “fireman” (as children typically said at the time). Without hesitation, I would have replied that I wanted to be an artist, a writer, and, with less deliberation, a performer.

I did not become a performer, at least not professionally. But I did become a university professor, which I have always regarded as closely allied with acting, and—far too often, my students might say—with stand-up comedy. I am reminded of William James, whose students, when he was teaching at Harvard, repeatedly had to remind him “to be serious for a moment” (Hunt, 1993).

When I was an undergraduate university student, I majored in art education, with an emphasis on painting. I also read extensively in philosophy and aesthetics, including books by Herbert Read (Read, 1958), John Dewey (Dewey, 1958), and Susanne K. Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* (Langer, 1941). I also wrote for newspapers, took courses in creative writing and literature, and preferred the late-night company of students who intended to be writers. It was during those undergraduate years that I first read about Gestalt theory and began to write scholarly papers on art in relation to vision. I wrote my first academic paper, on “perception in the visual arts,” during my senior year, and it was published in a national peer-reviewed research journal in advance of receiving my bachelor’s degree.

I remember a conversation that year in which one of my art professors remarked that, at some point in the future, I would have to choose between being an artist or writer. In time, I became a graphic design professor, but I never strayed from either path. Now, at age seventy-five, and having retired from teaching, I have ample time to ask: Am I an artist or a writer? And if I cannot choose one or the other, how can these roles co-exist? Creating “faux book spreads” (by hand or on the computer) is one way I have found to blend my two-pronged allegiance to art and literature.

In retrospect, it was 30 years ago that I first made a series of artworks that resembled open books. At that time, my students and I were using desktop

Fig. 1. Roy R. Behrens (1992). *Oan*. Book collage.

computers to design publications, but I myself was still making “art” by hand. Produced in 1992, the first series was inspired by Japanese *Ukiyo-e* prints from the 19th century. They were made by cutting up and reassembling fragments from books and other sources. Each work began with an actual paperbound volume, which I opened as a two-page spread, then securely glued it to remain in that position. The fixed book spread was mounted on a platform in a box encased in glass, like a museum artifact, then hung on the wall like a painting (Figure 1).

In a subsequent series, I used the same handmade approach, but turned from Japanese prints to other image sources, especially vintage photographs. I also used deeper, clothbound books, which made it possible to create different levels by cutting into the page surfaces. The subject themes, as in the *Ukiyo-e* works, were deliberately ambiguous, unsettling, and (to some or most observers) annoyingly unresolved.

When a viewer encounters such puzzling works, the process of *closure* is triggered, and any definitive meaning becomes “open to interpretation.” If the title is no less puzzling than the work, that can compound the frustration. On the other hand, the title might serve as a “bread crumb” that provides a clue for the closure. One of my favorite works from this second series is suggestive of a sneezing man (which may have been influenced by Thomas Edison’s early film of the same subject). After completing this collage, I playfully gave it the title *Donfé Cachoo* (Figure 2).

Fig. 2. Roy R. Behrens (1994). *Donfé cachoo*. Book collage. Collection of Luther College.

The third series of open book artworks was completed in 2004. These resulted from my decision to cease making art by hand and to construct it on a computer instead. This may seem a trivial matter to anyone unacquainted with the so-called “world of art,” whether in academic settings, museums, or commercial art galleries. Until recently (and no doubt still ongoing), any work made by hand was admissible to competitions as “art,” while anything made on a computer could be rejected for the same reason. This reignited a firestorm fought throughout the twentieth century by photographers, whose work was often undervalued and rejected as legitimate art because it was not made by hand. This was (and is) a factor in qualifying for competitions, in selling one’s artwork, and in the value assessments of art collectors and dealers.

Determined not to acquiesce, I decided to make “art” by using the same computer techniques that my students used in the classroom to make less sacrosanct “designs.” I began a series of digital montage book spreads. For these, I first scanned an open book, then used appropriate software to delete the content, and manipulated and arranged public domain image components. Of these, undoubtedly one of my favorites is *Insect Aside* (Figure 3).

While my current montages were anticipated by these earlier attempts, there were other precedents as well. For example, I was undoubtedly influenced by my years of experience, as a graphic designer, in designing actual published books, which consist of a sequence of page spreads. Since the 1970s, I had also been using

Fig. 3. Roy R. Behrens (2004). *Insect aside*. Digital montage.

collage to illustrate works of or about literary fiction, among them, for example, the cover of *The Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosinski (Behrens, 1996), *The Life of Fiction* by literary critic Jerome Klinkowitz, Guy Davenport's "Christ Preaching at the Henley Regatta" (Behrens, 2005a), and various short stories by Margaret Atwood, Joyce Carol Oates, and others.

As a design history teacher, I was also acutely aware of the influence of such iconic publications as the Vorticist magazine called *Blast* (Beckett, 2000); El Lissitzky's famous book of Vladimir Mayakovsky's poems, titled *For the Voice* (*Dlia golosa*) (Mayakovsky, 2000); and the *collage novels* of Max Ernst (Ernst, 1976). Other influences were more recent, such as the short stories of Donald Barthelme (Barthelme, 2021), which he illustrated with steel engraving collages; the amazing (if largely unknown) photographs of decaying layered billboards by British humorist and theatre director Jonathan Miller, as collected in *Nowhere in Particular* (Miller, 2001); and the collaged African scrapbook diaries of the photographer Peter Beard (Bowermaster, 1993).

During these same years, I was corresponding frequently with Walter Hamady, an American artist widely known for his collage-like, handmade letterpress books, especially a series called *Gabberjabbs* (Behrens, 2005b). I was also exchanging letters with Gestalt psychologist and art theorist Rudolf Arnheim (whose books I had read as an undergraduate) (Behrens, 2004); and with essayist Guy Davenport, who, among the many things he shared, introduced me to Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky's concept of "making the familiar strange" (*ostranenie*), which mirrored my childhood experiments of using Uncle Ludwig's clockwork parts in "making the strange familiar" (Behrens, 2005a).

It was as an undergraduate that I began to understand how creativity can reliably be enriched at moments when one is confronted by unfamiliar artifacts, the identity and purpose of which are far from clearly understood. As psychologist Adelbert Ames II surmised, our conscious moments are made up of dynamic “transactions” in which we reach conclusions about the identities of things, their names, and how they function. It is efficient to do this quickly, or, by preconception, to do it even in advance. But that can easily lead to mistakes, as Ames “demonstrated” with his famous laboratory set-ups (Behrens, 2010). Or, as Gestaltist Karl Duncker found in his studies of problem-solving, our preconceptions are often so inflexible that invention is all but paralyzed by what he called “functional fixedness” (Behrens, 1974).

Related to this, as an undergraduate, I ran across an odd Edwardian-era book (a collage novel in a sense) titled *What a Life!* by E. V. Lucas and George Morrow (Lucas, 1911). It was a fictional autobiography made by writing mismatched captions for illustrations the authors found in the mail order catalog for Whiteley’s, London’s first department store. My favorite two-page spread from the book is retrieved from pages 28 and 29 (Figure 4). There, an illustration of an elaborate bird cage is “mistakenly” presumed to be the Crystal Palace; an iron for pressing clothing is confused with an animal; and a combined clothes hanger for both coat and trousers is referred to as a game of leapfrog.

I found another peculiar book at about the same time. It consisted of drawings and nonsense verse, titled *How to tell the birds from the flowers*, by a prominent American physicist, Robert Williams Wood (Wood, 1959). Originally published in 1917, each page features side-by-side a pair of amateur drawings of an animal and a plant. In truth, its title should have been *How to confuse the birds with the flowers*, since the line drawings (he can’t resist calling them “Woodcuts”) were fashioned to make the plants and animals look absurdly similar (Figure 5). The names (The Parrot and The Carrot, or The Clover and The Plover) and accompanying verses make use of every comic ploy to increase the confusion of species.

As an undergraduate, I witnessed something similar when I attended a slide talk by one of my favorite professors. He used two slide projectors, to show two images side by side, just as in the book by Wood. As the slide pairs were projected, he said so little that one could hardly call it a talk. Instead, he simply juxtaposed the images, with no titles or additional text. The audience was beside themselves as he projected each pair for about 30 seconds, before moving on to the next pair. Initially, I was as baffled as everyone else. But I soon caught on when I noticed that my mind was searching for closure, like it or not. As soon as a pair was projected, my brain began to “compare and contrast” to find the connections between these two images, to understand why they were together on screen. This was nearly fifty

Fig. 4. Pages 28 and 29 from *What a life!* (Lucas, 1911). Public domain.

Fig. 5. Page 5 from *How to tell the birds from the flowers* (Wood, 1959). Public domain.

years ago, and by now I can only remember one of the slide pairs projected that day: *The Raft of Medusa* by Theodore Gericault (c1819) was juxtaposed with *The Sea of Ice* by Caspar David Friedrich (1824).

Fig. 6. Roy R. Behrens (2021). *Moon river dog*. Digital montage.

I am forever grateful that the speaker was the same professor (Kenneth Gogel) who, during my senior year, served as my advisor as I independently read and wrote about perception concerning art. He had been a student of the well-known Vienna-trained professor of art education, Victor Lowenfeld.

In constructing my current montages, I make a purposeful effort to make the familiar strange (thereby provoking closure) and to make the strange familiar (by suggesting surprising connections between odd bedfellows). That is especially evident when focusing on the pictorial content or subject of the montage. The moon may resemble a baseball by placing it in the air above a baseball player's glove, as seen in my montage called *Moon River Dog* (Figure 6). Antique nails and wires initially might appear to be food, when positioned on a dinner plate, as in *Moll on Floss* (Figure 7).

It is one thing to use "planned confusions" like these in one's own work by way of metaphors, puns, and jokes. But it is a greater challenge to teach one's students to see and think "creatively," since they are more often rewarded for proper, adult preconceptions, in promoting "no-nonsense" behavior. Nevertheless, during more than four decades of teaching at universities and art schools, I continued to pass on these concepts to students, and to share my methods with other teachers, through published books and articles (see Behrens, 1974, 1998b, 2002b).

There is an aspect of these montages that has so far gone unmentioned. This may be worrisome since it could be the most important of all, especially if one is intending to make "strong designs." It also pertains to Gestalt theory more than

Fig. 7. Roy R. Behrens (2021). *Moll on floss*. Digital montage.

any other (see Wertheimer, 1939). That aspect is the “layout” of these works, the selection of components and their subsequent arrangement. This is what designers mean when they use the word “design,” and it is the rock bottom process I taught for forty-five years. If it can be simply stated, it consists of using one’s hard-wired organizing tendencies (*similarity grouping*, *proximity grouping*, *continuity*, and *closure*) in the hope of enabling a viewer to intuitively decipher a clandestine structural plan.

For decades, I have tried to write about how I and others make use of what Wolfgang Metzger called the “laws of seeing” (Metzger, 2006) or what Fritz Heider preferred to call “unit-forming factors” (Heider, 1983). It is not a mere coincidence that both men were among the many who came to realize that these same grouping tendencies are the “laws” that underlie camouflage too (see Behrens, 1998a, 2002a, 2011, 2013).

Metzger wrote at length about camouflage, and Heider published a paper on cubism, camouflage, and Gestalt theory. There are other briefer references to Gestalt and camouflage by Wolfgang Köhler (Köhler, 1947), Kurt Koffka (Koffka, 1935), Kurt Gottschaldt (Behrens, 2000), Rudolf Arnheim (Arnheim, 1974), and others. I myself have written about art, design, and camouflage since the late 1960s, after having been inspired by György Kepes’ influential book, *Language of Vision* (Kepes, 1944), as well as by an anthology called *Aspects of Form*, edited by Lancelot Law Whyte (Whyte, 1951). Kepes, who taught camouflage courses at the New Bauhaus in Chicago (then later moved to MIT), began his book by admitting his indebtedness to the Gestalt psychologists. In Whyte’s book, there

are essays on art and Gestalt theory, animal camouflage, ethology, and mimetic representation in art.

An open book is an optimal form in which to build a montage. Two empty pages stand side by side. As identical unmarked playing fields, they constitute—until other factors are introduced—what is commonly called *bilateral symmetry*. But strict symmetry is redundant; given one half, we also know the other as well. As a result, while symmetry is pervasive in the appearance of plants and animals, it is not so readily found in page layouts or in well-designed works of art. The power of symmetry is undeniable, but that is precisely why it is usually forcibly challenged. It could be said that the desired result—in designing these montages and comparable artworks—is not symmetry but *broken symmetry*. As one of my colleagues, a painter, would say, the goal in making works of art is to keep the observer forever engaged, to extend the encounter's duration.

A blood relative of design is close-up magic or sleight-of-hand (as well as pick-pocketing), in which the most reliable ploy is misdirection. But that is in a way a misnomer since it consists of directing the audience to a non-essential *figure* while the trick is being carried out on the *ground*, a peripheral region. Magicians use pointing devices, typically a magic wand, to direct (or thwart) the viewer's gaze. Likewise, artists and designers use all manner of diversionary tactics, such as directional arrows, conspicuous distracting forms, and shapes that serve as pointing hands. Attribute rhymes (called *similarity grouping* in Gestalt theory) are among the artist-designer's most powerful tools, as is the simple strategy of literal grouping, of positioning things together or near one another in space (called *proximity grouping*).

Much of this is taken for granted by non-practitioners. It goes unsaid or unnoticed, such as aligning the edges of shapes (designers commonly use the term *grids* or *grid lines* in referring to paths of alignment), so that even as shapes are positioned apart, an implied connection still remains because they line up in space.

Earlier, I made purposeful use of the term “playing field” because Gestalt's organizing principles are not only fundamental in art but also in common activities such as watching sports events. We can “make sense” of events in a football game in part because of the functioning of these unit-forming (and unit-breaking) biases. It is obvious why members of a team are dressed to look alike, but equally important is the conspicuous difference between the uniforms of the two teams. When the players are poised in formation, the two teams lean toward opposite goals, while each team is seen as a unit because its players are aligned in space. It goes without saying that marching bands make equivalent use of these Gestalt organizing principles, as do soldiers in parades.

More than thirty-five years have passed since I published two college-level textbooks, in both of which I tried to show how artists and other designers make constant and deliberate use of perceptual organizing principles. One of those books was *Design in the Visual Arts* (Behrens, 1984), and the second was *Illustration as an Art* (Behrens, 1986). My thoughts moved on in subsequent years, and I went on to publish additional books and articles on art, architecture, graphic design, and camouflage concerning Gestalt theory—as well as, at the moment, to replenish my skills as an artist by creating “pandemic montages.”

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Postscript

Of the digital montages referred to in this essay, more than sixty examples can be found online at <<https://northerniowa.academia.edu/RoyBehrens/Montages>>, as accessed on May 30, 2021. After completing this paper, the author went on to write, produce, and narrate a related 30-minute video titled *Art, Gestalt, and Camouflage* (2021). It is available online at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nS2ZwYxy1Y>>, as accessed on September 27, 2021.

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Summary

In this paper, the author shares his thoughts about the precedents, process, and significance of a series of “digital montage” artworks that he originated during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, he talks about the indebtedness of these works to Gestalt theory, and particularly their use of what is sometimes known as “laws of seeing,” “unit-forming factors,” or inherent “grouping tendencies.”

Keywords: Gestalt theory, montage, perceptual organizing principles, creative process, camouflage

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag teilt der Autor mit uns seine Gedanken über die Vorläufer, den Prozess und die Bedeutung einer Reihe von künstlerischen „digitalen Montagen“, die er während der COVID-19-Pandemie geschaffen hat. Er arbeitet heraus, dass diese Werke der Gestalttheorie verpflichtet sind, vor allem durch die bewusste Nutzung der Kenntnisse dessen, was man manchmal als „Gesetze des Sehens“, „zusammenhangsbildende Faktoren“ oder inhärente „Gruppierungstendenzen“ bezeichnet.

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