

## Piece by Piece

### *Thoughts on the collages by Katrin Plavcak*

#### Introduction

It is no coincidence that collages developed as an artistic strategy in the context of “Mechanization Takes Command” (Siegfried Giedion)<sup>1</sup> during the rapidly progressing Industrialization at the beginning of the 20th century. Exactly then, when not just the work of art found itself “in the age of its mechanical reproduction” (Walter Benjamin)<sup>2</sup>, but also suddenly images of popular culture and, in fact, all printed material appeared on a massive scale. The result of new technical production methods was an inflation of “material of second degree” (Theodor W. Adorno)<sup>3</sup>, an abundance of pre-made materials that were available to the avant-garde of that time for artistic treatment. Above all, the artists of Dadaism – one thinks of Kurt Schwitters, John Heartfield or Hannah Höch – and of Surrealism – especially Max Ernst – established collage in the wide canon of avant-garde art.

The abundance of “material of second degree” and its virtually unlimited availability now allowed images and words to be combined in a way that was characterized by the possibility of all conceivable constellations: now in the image, simultaneously and side by side, existed that which not long ago remained separated in completely different contexts. “The chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella,”<sup>4</sup> to which the French writer Comte de Lautrémont referred to in his novel, “The Songs of the Maldoror”, 1868, became a part of Dadaists' and Surrealists' aspiration for collage to destroy conventional “bourgeois” contexts of meaning and to install new ways of thinking, feeling and seeing. In this sense, the Dada Merz artist Kurt Schwitters demanded from his own art in 1924: “Create relationships, ideally between all things in the world”<sup>5</sup>.

#### Main body

The dialectic of the destruction and construction of meaning makes up the inner tension of the collage. This tension is also found in the artistic work of Katrin Plavcak, and appears in various media. Painting, object, installation, drawing, collage, film and music are especially noteworthy. And all of the works in these media – not just the collages! – consistently feature collage-like moments; moments of fragmenting, arranging, citing, mounting, cutting “on the dissecting table” new relationships. However, hereafter the considerations of this text will concentrate on Katrin Plavcak’s collages. For example, one looks at the collage “Die Fernseh-Hand” (“The Television Hand”), 2014, in which two hands are visible, cut out by the artist from mechanically produced and technically

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<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*, ed. Frankfurt am Main 1982

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in: the same, *Illuminations*, Frankfurt am Main 1977, p. 136ff.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Trying to Understand Endgame*, in: *Notes to Literature II*, Frankfurt am Main 1981, p. 190

<sup>4</sup> Comte de Lautrémont, *The Songs of the Maldoror*, ed. Munich 1976, p. 206

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from: Kurt Schwitters, *Catalog*, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hannover 1986, p.10

reproduced photos from magazines, books and brochures collected by Plavcak. One hand holds a television set, which could be from the fifties, and the other holds an object, which is equally reminiscent of a remote control as of a cell phone. In addition, the picture of a satellite dish is visible in a corner of the image. The collage alludes to the novel "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts", 1954, by Amos Tutuola in which a ghost woman, living in the world of spirits, through the surface of her hand is able to escape her "virtual" existence and look into the "real" world. Plavcak translates this (mythological) story through her work to our postmodern world of new media that is shaped, among other things, by the desire for constant access to media and the simultaneity of the "real" and "virtual" world. The cell phone appears here as perpetual companion, as an almost corporeal communicator in these two worlds, which not only connects us there, but also constantly monitors us, signified by the satellite dish. This collage achieves an almost painterly character through the different color intensities of the collaged elements; these intensities result from, on the one hand, the different qualities of the originals, and on the other hand, from the more or less high degree of yellowing of each photo. Above all, however, the visual fragments, isolated from their original graphic context and then newly arranged, are – and this is typical for Katrin Plavcak's collages – not so much used to destroy meaning, but rather to produce, piece by piece, a new meaning, richer in relationships and references.

Something similar also applies to the work "Rock'n'Roll", 2011, from her series of "erotic collages". A naked female body against an orange background is on view in the center of the image. The nipples are each painted with a blue eye and the belly button is adorned with a woman's red mouth. It is a cut out piece from the album cover of the single "Angie", 1973, by the legendary rock band "The Rolling Stones". More naked people are glued around this torso; at the neck of the Stones' piece is the head of a blond model, on the lower part of the cover are two adult stars upside down, embracing each other, next to it a male stripper. Again, various semantic short circuits take place here, generating a narrative of diverse forms of sexual dependencies and desires. In the song "Angie" a young female groupie is cynically ridiculed; the stripper stands for the male body as a sex object, the adult stars stand for .... So instead of removing meaning, Katrin Plavcak again expands meaning in her series of "erotic collages"<sup>6</sup>, in that she doesn't just tell a story of the erotic, but also creates different relationships, presents various gender relations, however esoteric or absurd they may be. The images of women and men are put up for negotiation like various forms of sexual practice, definitely also with subtle as well as ideologically critical humor<sup>7</sup>.

## Conclusion

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<sup>6</sup>Incidentally, the collages were made in celebration of the release of "Sex und Befreiung" ("Sex and Freedom") by the sociological magazine "polar", Frankfurt am Main, 2013, where they were also first published.

<sup>7</sup>Hannah Höch's collage "Das schöne Mädchen" ("The Beautiful Girl") 1919 / 1920, may definitely be seen as the ancestor of these collages discussing gender issues. The collage criticized the stereotypes of the "New Woman" in the Weimar Republic with its combinations of women's bare legs, female short hairstyles, BMW logos and pocket.

The artist cuts for her collages, cuts out and off “material of second degree”, cuts up, thus she tailors. TEXT(ile)S<sup>8</sup> are then also the result of these artistic movements, narrations, like the two described above. However, cutting is also a task of the gardener – and with that I come to the rhizomatic character of these collages. Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari famously labeled the linking of knowledge as rhizome in reference to the botanical name for root systems, where information is no longer hierarchically organized, but rather at the same level so that each part (of knowledge) can be linked with each other<sup>9</sup>. And it is also exactly in this way that the cut out pieces in Plavcak’s collages are composed, namely allowing themselves to (semantically) relate to each other on multiple levels. This unhierarchical moment appears almost programmatically already in the title of the collage “Auf Augenhöhe mit der Aristokratie” (“On Eye Level with the Aristocracy”), 2011. The page shows in the upper left-hand corner a bird (of prey) with a human head – it is probably an older portrait of a likely aristocratic woman. This hermaphrodite sits on a branch, which is cut off on its right end – the proverbial sawed-off branch on which one sits? On the right half of the image are also bird bodies with human faces. These four hermaphrodites are more stable as, like the four Town Musicians of Bremen, they sit on top of each other and tower at exactly the eye level of the aristocratic woman. These four human heads are children’s heads, two “white” and two “black” children. And the linking of knowledge already begins to take on the form of TEXTile. Thoughts of solidarity become, for example, woven with those of the precariousness of societal power, these in turn with ideas about the relationship between man and animal, animal and animal, between old and young, history and present time. These links encounter each other again at eye level; they are equal and freely combinable. The collage becomes a model of a more just society.

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Translated by Emily Terényi

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<sup>8</sup>William Shakespeare already dealt with the not just etymological relationship between text and textile in his drama “Titus Andronicus”, 1594, in reference to Ovid’s “Metamorphoses”: Lavinia, who was raped and whose hands and tongue were also cut off, so that she may no longer write or speak, wove the family crest of her tormentors with her feet.

<sup>9</sup>In: Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, ed. Berlin 1992