Appropriation: A Contribution to Revolutionary Struggle

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The evolution of avant-garde art movements throughout the 20th and 21st centuries reveals a relationship between collage and progressive mass movements. Since its inception, avant-garde artists have been impassioned by the political struggle of their time. In the first decade of the 20th century Hannah Hoch -- a Dadaist -- worked to dismantle the mysticism surrounding the idea of the “New Woman” as well as advocating for shifting gender roles, political discourse, and adrongony. In the 1950’s, The Situationist International attacked political, social, and economic institutions to subvert their authority and create revolutionary consciousness. In the latter half of the 20th century the Punk movement -- more specifically Riot Grrrl --- rejected the “normal” person as being white, cis-gendered, middle-class, young, and able-bodies and resisted all forms of objectification. Martha Rosler, who began her career in the 1970s and is still active today, focused on the contradiction between everyday life and the violence that is necessary to keep it together. While the approaches of these movements and the approaches of each artist varied widely, each of them utilized collage. Collage is effective for unifying art and politics because of its unique accessibility.

The only way for art to advance political struggle in collaboration with popular movements is by being accessible. An accessible piece of art conveys its meaning to an audience without a formal art education. It does so by constantly considering its audience and providing them with the tools to understand the artist’s intention within the art itself. Speaking on appropriation art Cicily Callazo writes,

“The ability of appropriation art to move the viewer into interpreting the image as one that questions the traditional standards of society is what allows appropriation art and
through the connection of artist and audience, accessible art can rouse emotions and become an important site of political education. Collage does this through the appropriation and recontextualization of familiar images.

“What collage offers artists that cannot be found in flat work alone is the opportunity to add commentary through familiar imagery and objects. It adds to the dimension of the pieces and can further illustrate a point” (Gersh-Nesic 1).

By observing the history of collage in the avant-garde, this paper will position this paper will both consider and critique its contemporary value.

Dada, as a byproduct of avant-garde, has always been inherently revolutionary. The relationship between Dada and revolutionary struggle was solidified when Tristan Tzara -- a central figure of the movement -- published his version of the “Dada Manifesto” and wrote,

“Every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family is DADA; a protest with the fists of its whole being engaged in destructive action: DADA...of every social hierarchy and equation set up for the sake of values by our valets: DADA: every object, all objects, sentiments, obscurities, apparitions and the precise clash of parallel lines are weapons for the fight: DADA; abolition of prophets: DADA; abolition of the future: DADA... Freedom: DADA DADA DADA…” (Tzara).

With the relationship between the movement and progressive politics established, Dadaists could now begin to experiment with different approaches to their art. At the start of the movement, members were inspired by predecessors like Marcel Duchamp and utilized manufactured everyday objects as their art (known as readymades). Expanding on this, assemblage was another approach in which they utilized trash and everyday objects for the construction of 3D collages.
However, these forms of art were not allowing viewers to fully grasp the revolutionary sentiments at the heart of their work. Many artists turned to collage. In “Dada, Collage, and Photomontage”, Johanna Drucker highlights the differences between this sculptural approach with their use of images, or collage, by saying,

“In this respect, both made use of fragmentation to construct a [work] with certain features of visible wholeness, but ... images function to reveal the fissures and contradictions in the social structure…” (Drucker 3)

By creating work that is comprised of familiar facets, the Dadaists could begin to effectively spread their message in a language that the public could grasp. This artistic approach is best exemplified by the Dada artist Hannah Hoch. Hoch is widely known for her collages -- and more specifically, photomontages -- that worked to dismantle the mysticism surrounding the idea of the “New Woman” as well as advocating for shifting gender roles, political discourse, and adrongony. Johanna Drucker characterizes her work as, “…Hoch was involved with investigating the intersection between the private imaginary and the production of identity as a social category” (Drucker 3). She goes on to describe her relationship to appropriation:

“Hoch’s work was both political and personal, produced from mass-media materials but exhibited as artistic origins, suturing an individual imagery from the stuff of illustrated papers made for wide public consumptions, shows that Dada offered versatile formal solutions, not merely formulas, to the artists for whom it had been a formative experience” (4).

Hannah Hoch’s use of collage enabled her to spread her radical milieu and contribute to revolutionary struggle by providing her with a platform that could effectively share these beliefs. There is no contribution being made to the struggle if these theories and thinking are kept to
oneself. So, by utilizing collage as her primary medium, she was able to successfully develop these thinking within her art and share them in a way that resonated with the public. The Dadaists were one of the first examples of this action being put into effect -- though definitely not the most successful example. The Situationist International, which were inspired and grew out of the Dada movement, took collage to the next level -- contributing to one of the most tangible examples of revolution yet.

The Situationist International, which were inspired and grew out of the Dada movement, took collage to the next level -- contributing to one of the most tangible examples of revolution yet. The SI’s direct link to avant-garde connects the group to revolutionary struggle from the beginning. The evolution of prior groups and their artistic approaches allowed the SI to quickly become one of the most radical groups in pursuit of revolution. Of course, this was not accidental. When looking closer at the Situationist International and the approaches they took to art-making, it becomes clear why they are known for having a major influence and role in the May 1968 French student protests. Their approach to the appropriation and recontextualization of images was coined “detournement” by Situationist International founder and leader Guy Debord. In French, detournement translates literally to “hijacking” but is defined by the Situationists as “the integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu” (Debord and Gilman). Essentially, detournement calls on artists to subvert pieces of mass media in order to fulfill their revolutionary desires. Guy Debord expanded on this definition in “A User’s Guide to Detournement” by explaining the benefits of detourning:

“Détournement not only leads to the discovery of new aspects of talent; in addition, clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, it cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of a real class struggle. The cheapness of its products is the
heavy artillery that breaks through all the Chinese walls of understanding. It is a real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step toward a literary communism”.

The creation of Detournement was bred out of the need for a more effective and successful way of incorporating Situationist milieu into their artwork. As an evolution of past groups, Debord recognized that more needed to be done. He stated this in “A User’s Guide to Detournement”:

“...opposition to the bourgeois notion of art and artistic genius has become pretty much old hat, [Marcel Duchamp’s] drawing of a mustache on the Mona Lisa is no more interesting than the original version of that painting. We must now push this process to the point of negating the negation.”

Detournement proved successful in aiding revolutionary change when put to use during the French student revolt of 1968. In “A Situation for Revolt: A Study of the Situationist Internationals Influence on French Students During the Revolt of 1968” the author, Cicily Collazo, fights back against the popular belief that the SI did not have an involvement in the student protests:

“While some may contend that the Situationists’ influence on France’s social unrest of 1968 was limited, there is much evidence to suggest that this belief is mistaken. Although it can be suggested that the Situationists were acting separately from the majority, because some of the graffiti, posters, and leaflets produced during the revolt were made by the hands of the Situationists themselves, is also true that the sheer number of Situationist-inspired posters and the thousands of instances of graffiti were not just the work of the small group of Situationists. Such a volume of work would suggest that many anonymous individuals participated in expressing and promoting Situationist ideas” (53)

Collazo is not allowing the power of the SI’s art and actions to be taken away from their involvement in France during 1968. She is displaying the different ways the group was involved and had direct influence on the revolutionary struggle during this time. Of course, this influence
and involvement could have not been achieved without the detournement approach to art-making. The use of detournement is what lent their thoughts to the French students. If they were to have present it in any other way, it would not have been accessible or easy to understand -- and therefore, not employed. In this circumstance, as with many others, appropriation and recontextualization is what aided the group in revolutionary change.

This pattern is revealed again when looking at the Punk movement of the late 70’s and the groups that arose from their conception.

Punk, and the artists within the movement, also utilized collage for revolutionary change. In Rick Poyor’s “The Art of Punk and the Punk Aesthetic.” he traces punk’s connection to early art movements: “Punk’s precursors and putative influences include Dadaist collage, the Situationist International... the graphics of counter-culture protest, and the 1960s underground press” (Poyor). Seeing as both Dada and the Situationists, as mentioned previously, appropriated and recontextualized images in pursuit of revolution, it is no surprise that Punk -- who the author claims to take direct influence from the two -- would engage in the same artistic practices. Poyor, continues: “in the act of dismembering and reassembling the very images that were supposed to keep you down and ignorant, it was possible to counteract the violence of The Spectacle and to refashion the world around you”. “The Spectacle” here is a direct reference to Guy Debord’s “The Society of the Spectacle” further proving the direct link between the movements, and more specifically, the direct link between collage and revolution as it evolved throughout the twentieth century. Riot Grrrl, a political and musical movement that grew out of punk in the 1990s also utilized collage in their revolutionary struggle. In the article, “Riot Grrrl, Zines, and the Power
A. Kendra ties Riot Grrrl’s use of collage with their revolutionary pursuit -- based in gender politics.

“The body is seen as an object. The images also create the “normal” person as being white, cis-gendered, middle-class, young, and able-bodied. The anxieties that are attached to the feeling of being “looked at” play out in the Riot Grrrl narrative. Body images people were cut out and placed in collages in resistance to this objectification” (Kendra)

In the case of Riot Grrrl, the ability to represent their desire for revolutionary change is a result of collage. There is a clear connection between their approach to art-making and the message that viewers should take away. The author acknowledges the role and power that collage has in this process by writing,

“The art form of collage helps artists critique norms because they use the same images the mainstream media and advertising produce. The artist… gives a new perspective. Collage also gives the artist the opportunity to reconstruct meaning. They pull the world apart (or cut it up) and put it back together again, in their own way. The roots of collage have been revolutionary in the art world. The collage in these zines (and others) are there to take the power back” (Kendra).

Without this medium, the pursuit of revolution would be more difficult for artists, and in this case, Punk artists. This approach to art-making clearly allows them to contribute to the struggle by providing them with a platform that articulately expresses their beliefs to the public. The artist's ability to spread this message and engage the public in the struggle for revolutionary change is a contribution in it’s own right.

Though Dada, the Situationist International, and Punk may seem removed from the current moment, there are artists who, more recently, work towards revolution through through the appropriation and recontextualization of images. Martha Rosler is known for her dedication
to the struggle, and when observing her work, it becomes clear she is known because of her successful artistic approach.

Martha Rosler has approached the art-making process in a variety of ways throughout her career as an artist. Rosler has always intertwined her milieu with her work, but it is most effective and successful when presented through collage. In “Martha Rosler’s Powerful Collages Are a Wake-Up Call to America” Alina Cohen explains this by writing,

“She decodes how images work by taking them apart, which is what a collage structure does—quite literally taking them apart and putting them back together again, often in really jarring configurations” (Cohen).

For Rosler, collage enables her to convey the messages within her art in a way that the public can understand. She does so by using images from mass media which are familiar, and transforms them into a new visual language. The author of the above article goes into detail about one of her collages which helps the reader see how this medium furthered her message. She writes,

“She used a Xerox machine to create new collages, which she handed out at rallies. Entitled “House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home” (1967–72), they juxtapose Time magazine’s shots of the Vietnam conflict with images culled from House Beautiful, a home décor publication” (Cohen).

By juxtaposing images from time Time magazine with images from Vietnam, Rosler is laying out her revolutionary agenda for all to see. Without the use of collage, this may have never been fully realized by the viewer. Using imagery that is all too familiar for the viewers allows them to immediately grasp and process the message Rosler is putting forth.

The appropriation and recontextualization of images is a medium that many artists who pursue revolutionary struggle find themselves engaging with. This is no coincidence. After
examining various radical art movements and groups throughout the twentieth century, as well as
the meaning and implication of collage, it is clear that working with appropriated imagery allows
artists to fully aid to the struggle -- where other mediums would fail. As mentioned, this is the
result of familiar imagery creating a visual language the public can mutually understand and
engage with. By outlining the various movements use of collage, a direct link has been
established and it shows how, time and time again, they resort back to the use of appropriated
imagery for similar purposes. This comprehensive history has shown the importance and power
in approaches like collage and allows for artists to pursue revolutionary struggle in a similar
way, with confidence that they are contributing to something greater than themselves.

Researching the use of collage within 20th and 21st century radical avant-garde art
movements reflects the intersection of the two things I’m most inspired/impassioned by --
revolutionary politics and collage art. With a depository of knowledge on revolutionary collage
art now stored in my brain and on my computer, I could finally begin the process of synthesizing
this information in pursuit of a final project. Unsurprisingly, the biggest developments came after
the research phase had begun. However, I still made critical decisions during the fall semester
that were adjusted and developed but, nonetheless, represented in my finished piece. For
example, this semester I decided that my exhibition space would include a floor to ceiling
collage. I didn’t think too much about the logistics of this, or the content if I’m being frank, but I
knew that my senior project would end up being a large-scale collage. This initial idea is what
pushed my project through the uncertainty of the beginning stages. It was hard to discuss my
project, or even think about it, with the glaring lack of content. I began to slowly hone in on what
I wanted and each month I would add more descriptive words to my idea -- halfway through the semester I was telling everyone I wanted to make a “large-scale Marxist-art collage” but still had no idea what that could even be or what it would look like. I ended a semester of reading scholarly articles with a lot of issues I wanted to talk about and injustices I wanted to address but a complete lack of confidence on how to do so. I was inspired by the artists that made up my research, but also incredulous over the ease in which they eloquently represented their radical political beliefs through their art. I was afraid of every move that I inevitably had to make -- saying the wrong thing, saying the right thing in the wrong way. This fear paralyzed my art-making process and stuck with me until the beginning of the spring semester. I’m not sure how I would have shaken this feeling had I not found the “Situationist International Anthology”. The Situationists were a group I had researched prior to this incident and felt an immediate connection with. Where I lacked the words and confidence in my art -- they articulated and executed it perfectly. I have never experienced the feeling of “I wish I did that” but, I wish I did that. Reading this anthology allowed me to feel validated both in my art process and in the shared political ideology. There was a lot of interesting information and ideas in the book which spoke to me personally, but in regards to my project, I needed to stay focused. Though there was a lot of entries about collage and detournement which would have helped my project conceptually, the most exciting find for me in the novel were two sections entitled “Slogans to be Spread Now by Every Means” and “Graffiti”. In this section were slogans and quotes constructed to grab your attention. They were worded in a way that would make them easy to remember and easily spread. I agreed completely with the thinking behind each and every one of them and felt
as though they were saying everything I wanted to in a better way. This realization is what pushed me towards incorporating their exact quotes into my work. I couldn’t have said it better myself so I let them speak for themselves. Once I decided to definitely incorporate this into my senior project, it became time to think about actually constructing and creating it.

The actual, physical work behind my project was a process that gradually became more intensive as the year progressed. One of the first steps I took was compiling the images for my collage. I had become very familiar with the process of searching for images and had several sources at my disposal. I like to shuffle between Tumblr, are.na, photo archives, and scans from books. Towards the beginning of my process, I would simply save pictures that were inspiring to me. Unsure if I was going to incorporate them into my collage, I saved a variety of different types of images -- posters, stock images, png’s, vintage ads, anything. I have become familiar with digital collage but before this project, had never attempted anything physical or on the scale I was aiming for. Each time I came in contact with collages out in the real world, I would take a picture and look to it for inspiration.

Fig. 1. Collage in VA. Photo By Author.
At a certain point, however, I had to acknowledge that searching for inspiration and compiling images was an elaborate form of procrastination. I was putting off the hard part: where I actually had to create my own images through the combination of my materials through the combination of my materials. I didn’t know where to start. I had the Situationist International’s slogans as a guide, but doubted my ability to make physical collages that I was happy with. I began instead to create collages in Photoshop so that I could have control over all the details. I really enjoyed planning the collages in Photoshop first as opposed to creating them for the first time physically. This process allowed me to go back into the image and fix parts if I didn’t like it or add something later on. I feel as though this approach is even better than physical collage -- to an extent -- for artists because it allows you to best represent what you’re trying to say with your work. You can take time to decide what you want to say with your images and still utilize physical collage as a medium.
As quickly as I started the collages, I soon found myself done with the digital work and at a loss for what to do next. Transferring my collages from the digital space to the real world -- and an exhibition space -- was the greatest complication for the project.

My initial vision for the installation was a floor to ceiling collage. In retrospect, this was very naive. First I was told the gallery wouldn’t be happy with me messing with the walls in that way. Also, the more I thought about this plan, the more I realized it would require an amount of
content that I could not produce in the amount of time left before the show. I felt as though I was running out of time. There were two months until the show and I had no idea how the collages I created on my computer would exist in the gallery space. I thought perhaps I would just print them out with a large format printer and hang them on the wall. The more I thought about this idea, however, the more I hated it. I felt as though I put a lot of time into these collages and just printing them out on a large sheet of paper wouldn’t do them any justice. To add depth to my piece, I decided instead to use large format prints for only one portion of my project. With this approach I planned to print the backgrounds out on a large format printer and then actually collage on top of that with smaller images and glue. Talking this over with advisors and friends, I soon realized that this approach also had some complications that I had to address: specifically, the potential sloppiness of the juxtaposition of the Photoshop collage with this physical collage. I wanted to represent these collages that I worked so hard on in the best way and this approach was making it really difficult for me to do so. I went back into the text and photo archiving for inspiration. The Situationist International’s “Graffiti” text lead me to think alot about graffiti and street art and the different ways in which street artists approach the physical aspect of their work. This lead me to think about wheatpasting. I looked up videos on how to make wheatpaste, how to use wheatpaste, and different forums where individuals were offering their best advice. I was so excited at the prospects of finally having an idea that could work for me -- and reflect the work of my project -- that I went to Home Depot on the same day and bought a 5x4 plywood board to wheatpaste on.
From here I began the wheatpasting process. I began by covering the entirety of the board with grey sheets of paper that I wanted to use as a background for the collages. While I was confident with the direction I now chose to go in, the unpredictability of a collage was still making me nervous, and I was afraid to actually begin the work of reproducing my collage in real life. To work around this, I got very technical with my reproduction. Each square of the collage is around 9 inches by 8 inches and I measured out each square on the board, which is equal to 24 collages in total. From there, I would fill in each square with the collage numbered in that section and progress from there. Mapping it out by the size of the collage and taking it one section at a time
really allowed me to stay organized and helped me get through the overwhelming work of filling the entire board.

Fig. 7. Physical Collage In Progress. Photo By Author.

I kept following this guide until I began to steadily make my way through the board. It seemed like a daunting task, but by breaking it down and completing it one step at a time, I found myself easily getting through the most difficult part of my project.

Looking back on my project, I am really happy with the final results. It was so exciting (though nerve wracking) to watch my initial idea take shape as the year progressed. I could have never envisioned how the final piece ended up turning out.

Fig. 8. Final Collage. Photo By Author.
I feel as though this project represents me both artistically and politically, which is a synthesis I stressed and strived for from the beginning. The content is everything I could have wanted to say and more. Artistically, I am also pleased with how the collage turned out. This is the first time I have ever wheatpasted and it’s definitely something I am looking forward to using in my work again. With regards to the exhibition, there are definitely aspects that in retrospect I would have paid more attention to. Overall I liked how my gallery space looked. However, if I had more time I would have paid more attention to details. For example, I could’ve worked more with the podiums-- painting them and cleaning them. That’s definitely a small detail that makes a big difference in the long run. In addition to this, I would’ve been more detail-oriented in my exhibition. Like I said, I was really happy with the three pieces of work I showed, however, I felt as though my gallery space was just that. I can’t really pinpoint what exact details I would have changed, but maybe along the lines of continuing the collage off the board and on to the wall or maybe down the podiums. I think the little details of the exhibition space could have made it look even better than it already is and more put together. Despite the changes I would make, I was really happy with the end result. For someone who is generally anxious about showing their work to other people the gallery space felt liberating and validating.

I was really interested in the audience’s feedback and reaction from this project. I had never put my work up in a gallery before so this was my first opportunity to see how different individuals would respond to what I made. I watched people approach my exhibition space, listened to them talk about it amongst themselves, had conversations about it with those who went to see it and posted it online. Basically, I was really interested to hear what people thought.
One sentiment that was expressed to me pretty often was how “cool/interesting/fun” the collage looked and how that made them want to look closer. This is actually the best feedback I could have gotten from anyone! It was the best because it literally confirmed my research within the confines of my project. I talked a lot about how collage is a great medium to share your political agenda with because it uses familiar imagery that the general public has come in contact with before in order to grab their attention and force them to engage more with the piece. From the comments I gathered from people who went to see my work, it seems like that exact process was happening! It’s so exciting and cool to see the ideas and themes I was thinking a lot about this year manifested in real life. I saw the power of collage and the universality of the medium engage all kinds of people which allowed for me to effectively spread the slogans “now by every means”. In addition to this, I could also see the power of collage and the art style I was using through the little zines I put out. At the beginning of the show I put out around 50 small zines on the podium hoping people would take them. When I came to deinstall on Sunday, there were only 6 zines left which is a nice physical form of validation I wasn’t expecting.

Fig. 9. Little Zines in Exhibition Space. Photo By Author.
I had an interesting conversation with a friend who came to see my exhibition about the connection between the three different pieces I had on display. He was alluding to the fact that people might be confused about how the three pieces of work connected. While I disagreed with him and tried to argue the connection doesn’t matter, it brought up an interesting point. I’m not sure how I would make a greater connection between the pieces of work in a way that would inform the viewers. Taking it further, I would start by referring back to the exhibition space. Like I said earlier, I would have worked on the exhibition space longer and paid more attention to detail in pursuit of a more connected body of work. Though the constructive criticism isn’t something I thought about or expected, it was interesting to get another perspective and forced me to think about my project in a different way. Overall, the experience of completing a senior project was intensive, emotional, but also rewarding. I synthesized all this research, material, and history in pursuit of my own project. By researching the intersection of collage and revolutionary politics in the 20th and 21st centuries I was able to become more familiar with the Situationist International and their body of work which led to the inspiration for my gallery based art project. By collagining familiar imagery I was successfully able to spread the slogans “now by every means” just as the SI urged in 1968. The wheatpaste reflected back the graffiti and street art nature of the content and I was able to combine both mediums in my final piece of work. The experience of putting my work up in an exhibition space was both frightening and exciting. Despite the stress of the process, it ultimately is so rewarding to be able to share your art with others that lead to criticism, discussion, and action.
WORKS CITED


Figure 2.
Figure 3.
Figure 4.

A COP SLEEPS INSIDE EACH ONE OF US, WE MUST KILL HIM.
Figure 5.
Figure 6.
Figure 8.
Figure 9.