Imagine that! Yuval Etgar in conversation with John Stezaker.

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Abstract: John Stezaker, one of the most prolific collage artists of our time in conversation with Yuval Etgar about the distinction between photomontage and photocollage, and the role of found photographic materials from the dawn of the digital age in the late 1970s to the present day.

YE: Stezaker is an unusual family name, isn't it? Is there a story behind it?

JS: Yes, Stezaker is actually a combination of a Norse name 'Sterz' (misspelt in the 19th Century as 'Stez') and the Old English word for area of land or acre: 'aker'. The Sterzes were Vikings who, on trying to reach Ireland, were shipwrecked off the coast of Lancashire and ended up settling 30 miles inland. Many of the place names around there still bear the family name in a variety of spellings.

YE: For me the name Stezaker is somewhat of a synonym to the word photocollage. If I am not mistaken you employ this term in order to locate your practice and distinguish it from photomontage, appropriation, and collage, is that correct?

JS: Well, photocollage is a significant part of my practice but it doesn't describe my entire practice. At any rate, I should start by saying that Dawn
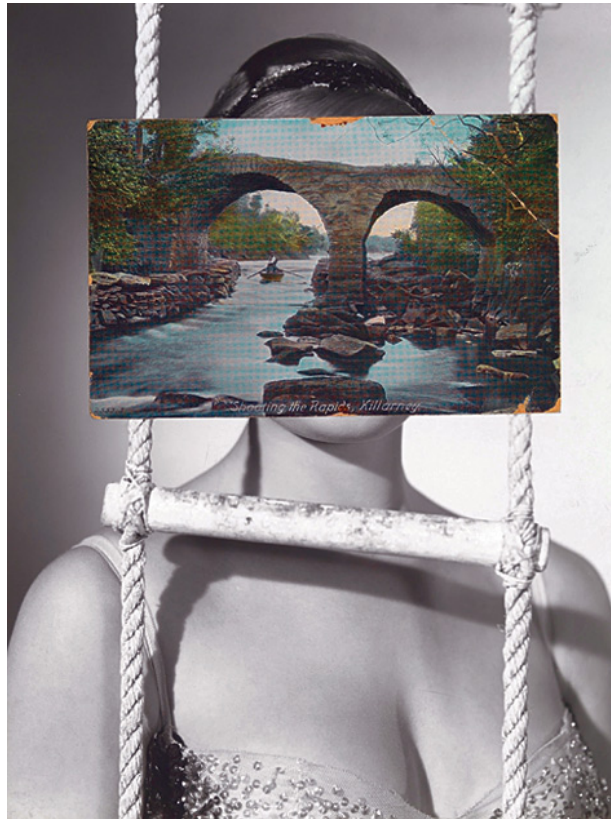
Figure 1: John Stezaker: Mask X, postcard and photograph collage, 1982.

Ades, who is somewhat of an expert on this subject, claims that my distinction between the terms photocollage and photomontage has no basis outside of my own use of the terms.[1] And indeed there is no clear historical division of these categories. But the way I see it, the term photocollage enables me to distinguish my work from a kind of deluge of works that we see today that is making use of found images. It goes by the name of collage but to me it is photomontage. I'll explain. I consider montage as a mainstream intercutting of images that sets out to create a seamless continuum of some kind; intercutting images in a way that reduces them to narrative legibility. This tradition goes back to Hollywood as much as it does to the films of Sergei Eisenstein who pioneered montage. By contrast, collage for me is about opening up the space between images, liberating them from their instrumental use. This is a gesture that I trace back to Dziga Vertov more than to Eisenstein. It is a way of trying to reveal something of the abyss or the hidden void within this continuum of image culture or the montage of everyday life. I see collage as a way of encountering the image as empty. I am not expressing this very well but you see, collage is a way of opening things up and revealing this emptiness, this void that lies behind the "box of representation" as Didi-Huberman refers to it.[2] It is a kind of resistance to mainstream culture. A lot of so-

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called collages that I see these days, even though they have the appearance of fracture, they are simply mobilising images for another social function, taking images from one task to another and creating a seamless and digestible image. But now, what seems to have blurred the difference between these two approaches to the image more than anything has been the digital era. I feel this keenly in my work. The sense and the space of the image as opacity rather than transparent legibility seems more than ever endangered.

YE: I see what you mean, we are living in a time where the terms 'cut' and 'paste' have completely lost their referents since they are now signifiers of a digital operation. This however, in my view, fits perfectly with the period in which you began making photocollages in the late 1970s at the dawn of the digital age, where the overwhelming abundance of images began to unfold this new kind of reality; one where the manual gesture of the artist is distanced infinitely further from the artefact itself.

JS: That's right. You could say that what I am doing is trying to find a way of regaining an intimacy with the image, trying to manipulate it at that infinite distance. The more we are enmeshed in this kind of image culture, the image strangely becomes something we cannot see at all. My son for example cannot live without two or three screens in operation at all times. Everything he sees is reduced to readability and I can't imagine him encountering the image as a kind of mystery, the way I did. He has become used to living between a multiplicity of narratives. Perhaps in time this will create new mysteries of the image, but I find it difficult to imagine how this generation will ever find a position beyond the mesh of narratives that in many ways has become their primary reality.

YE: This mystery to me is exactly what your photocollages set out to explore by placing two pictures in an impossible relationship. Especially the series of works that you call *Inserts* and its later development into the series of *Masks* [see fig. 1]. In both of these cases you place an entire postcard—usually one that depicts a landscape or another kind of space—on top of a film still photograph of an eventful scene or a portrait of a film star.

JS: Well, I see the *Inserts* as windows, as apertures looking through the image. Predominantly, in this series, I use postcards that were produced a generation earlier than their surrounding image. The film stills tend to be from the 1940s and the postcards tend to be anywhere between 1910 and the 1930s. This distinction makes the postcards into some kind of a window that allows me to look backwards. As soon as I did the first *Insert* photocollage I became aware that my real inclination was to set in motion a kind of regression.

YE: And how did the Inserts come about? Is there a story behind their genealogy too?

JS: Actually, there is. The origin of the term insert came from a friend of mine, an Austrian designer who in the mid '70s was referring to my use of images inside images. It took me a while to realise that he was referring to

the word 'inset', but because of his pronunciation I heard 'insert' and decided that I preferred it.

But the origins of the idea itself date back to 1973 on a trip I made to Italy. I suddenly saw early Italian Renaissance art in a new light, Fra Angelico in particular. And on the same trip I also became aware of Giorgio de Chirico's work. He showed me a different way of looking at these early narrative paintings by somehow subtracting the narrative. It was then that I started working on a series of *Dream Allegories* [now lost]. I was using Italian photoromans that I collected at the time as my source of imagery. I took away most of the texts, and used the empty spaces created by the absent thought and speech bubbles as holes to introduce other pictorial elements behind. It started by looking at the image on the next page of the photoroman, but what seems to have persisted was a juxtaposition which created colour images in the thought and speech bubbles of a black and white photoroman page. That's the origin of the colour postcard insert into a black and white film still. It was with this series that I realised that I was more interested in the black and white legacy of photographed images than with that of colour. Since contemporary photoromans were in colour by the mid '70s, I felt an obligation to use the colour ones, but my fascination drew me towards black and white. I remember feeling that I had partially reconciled myself to the dilemma by looking outside the mainstream of Italian photoroman production into the marginal photoroman cultures of Spain, Portugal and Belgium that still employed black and white reproduction. The heroes also had more sensible haircuts. I have always found it difficult to use '70s haircuts and sideburns. Later, I became braver in confronting the regressive aspect of my fascination for images. I was reading Walter Benjamin's ideas on obsolescence, and later Blanchot, which gave me the insight into what I was pursuing—the hidden underside of the image.[3]

YE: And what led you to move on from the photoromans and start using old film still photographs and film star portraits?

JS: Availability. These images were suddenly everywhere. I found my way to film still photographs in the mid '70s, when the big cinema chains were closing down as TV impacted on cinema consumption and the weekly ritual of Saturday night movie was gradually disappearing. So many of these film stills and portraits of movie stars ended up in junk shops and at first people did not quite know what to do with them or how to evaluate them. Initially, strangely, just because they were bromide prints of famous film stars the portraits were given ridiculous value, but film stills you could buy for next to nothing. So I was working with the film stills first and I only had one or two portraits. At first, I hadn't even thought of combining the portraits with the postcards. To me, the postcards in combination with the film stills meant dealing with a kind of a space behind somehow, I felt that it was an alternative to the cuts I was making, the removals. They offered a kind of absence, which I thought of as a metaphorical absence, rather than a metonymic absence.

An absolute absence. And this was much more interesting because it started engaging with multiple realities and the idea of one being behind the other in time as well as space, and creating scenes of interiors punctuated by exteriors. Bachelard was a big influence on me then: The Poetics of Space and his idea of a 'dialectics of inside and outside'.[4] I saw myself reversing the outside and the inside, bringing the outside into the inside. I still consider the postcard insert as being a sort of spatial insert rather than having anything to do with the face itself. To me it had to do with interiors, exteriors, and that sort of dialogue that was going on between presence and looking back. Sort of a rear-view window feeling about it. Thinking both forwards and backwards simultaneously. The *Masks* came a couple of years later when their price dropped as the scale of their mass production was realised. But this shifted the dialectic of inside and outside from the landscape to the portrait and from place to psyche.

YE: Is there a particular film still or portrait that you remember triggering your interest?

JS: There were a few, but there is one image in particular that really set this whole thing off; a film still photograph of a man and a woman by a piano that was standing on my mantlepiece since 1972 [fig. 2] and this was the one that challenged me the most, that made me ask myself how to confront obsolescence. In fact, I couldn't find a way to deal with it for a long while and it remained standing on the mantle piece. It seemed to belong to a different era, the 1930s, and so I associated it with surrealism. My interest in the portraits coincided with my awakening to the literature of surrealism and to Benjamin and to the whole tradition that recognises that the image only comes alive when it sheds the instrumental connections it has with the world, with language and with meaning. A lot of things then started fitting into place for me, among others were the writings of Susan Sontag. That was 1976-77. A crucial year. Prior to 1976, I was still looking for some kind of a Blakeian marriage of image and text, but afterwards, I first got the confidence to let go of language altogether and show what had previously been considered as purely experimental photocollages.

YE: And instead of juxtaposing image and text you started combining image and image, and most often film stills and postcards?

JS: Yes, I had been doing it for a while, but it took me some time to see it as anything more than preparatory work. I also felt more comfortable with the earlier, purely subtractive collages, which did not raise the spectre of surrealism as much. The moment you begin to use juxtaposition and contraposition, surrealism becomes an issue and at the height of conceptual art this was somewhat taboo territory. But in the end, I gave up caring about such things and allowed my image fascination full reign. But anyway, this image combination is in fact only one small portion of my work. It seems to be the one that people remember the most. It's interesting that you mention this at a moment where I am just revisiting exactly this kind of combination

Figure 2: John Stezaker: Untitled, appropriated film still photograph, 1977.

after a very long time without doing so and I can't tell you the pleasure it gives me. There is something about the postcard and the film still that they seem destined to be married in this way. First, one is exactly a quarter of the size of the other, they have the same proportions approximately, and it goes back to a particular format of photography which relates to what they call 'end prints' and '10 x 8' so they have this kind of geometrical relationship to begin with which is very satisfying. And then secondarily, they are images that relate to mobility in different ways. So obviously the film stills relate to the temporality of cinema, and the portraits of movie stars to the fluidity of the face and to the momentary nature of the portrait. And the postcards feel like the opposite because they depict spaces and they seem like they anchor the mobile scene of the film still. But at the same time they are of course mobile images too, images that are sent around the world and they bear the imprint of that, you know, on the edges that have been worn away; they have been eroded through movement.

YE: To me, alongside this mobility, there is another aspect that comes up from the juxtaposition of these two media, namely the play of size. Postcards have an amazing ability to compress gigantic or monumental sites into a miniature compact format that can be transported from one place in the

world to another, and then on the other hand films can enlarge the smallest of details or the most mundane thing in life and give them huge and fantastic presence. Is that contrast part of what binds these two media together?

JS: Oh yes, of course. You are absolutely right. In fact, I haven't thought about it in exactly those terms but you are right. I mean, I love postcards, it is a pictorial culture that I was interested in from a very early age, and my postcard collection goes back to my teen years and the Big Ben postcard that I used in my work *The End* from 1975. Compression is right. Bachelard used the phrase 'intimate immensity', which was something like what I felt about that Big Ben image fragment. I have always been fascinated by their miniaturisation of the world. The idea of putting these inside a film image really excited me because it was a kind of inversion where instead of an event taking place inside a space I was reversing it so that the space was inside the happening. I thought of it a bit in terms of a caravan being pulled along by the narrative, it had a weirdness about that idea of covering the events that were in fact the centre of the attention in the film stills and replace them with an image of a space which anchored it. But also, as I mentioned earlier, the postcards tended to come from an earlier period than the film stills historically so it was kind of a reversal of time, a regression. But I think you have put your finger on something important about their combination. Postcards are as you say compressed, miniaturised images whose function is to expand, whereas film stills are enlargements, whose function is to compress a narrative into a single image. Also, thinking about the temporal dimension, postcards are carriers of space, images designed to travel, whereas film stills are representations of time, images designed to be still.

YE: And the binary of two images, two media, two points of view. Did this start as a conscious decision? A kind of rule for the game? A way to resist the flow of a narrative?

JS: It's interesting that you mention this. I just recently had the opportunity to question and to rethink this twofold principle in my work. You see, I was invited to participate in an exhibition at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg, Germany. The show focused on modern and contemporary artists whose work is in dialogue with Picasso [without showing a single work of Picasso himself]. I was asked to send some of my early eighties pieces from a series that I call *Marriage*, each of them is made from two or three photographic portraits of film stars joined together. The *Marriage* pieces are very much influenced by Picasso's 1940s portraits of women, which in turn were influenced by his frequent visits to the cinema during the time of the war. The colour in these portraits is exactly like Technicolor. So, Dirk Luckow, the curator of the Picasso show and his team recognised the dialogue and asked me if I would exhibit some of these in the show, but I said that the interesting difference is that Picasso's portraits would always include three points of view: front, side, and three quarters view, always three. Just like Francis Bacon did after him. Both Picasso and Bacon enjoyed having this dialectic going on, but always

Figure 3: John Stezaker: Untitled (Film Portrait Collage) XXXIV, 2007.

with a synthesis intervening. Bacon loved triptychs. He enjoyed the triple. He found in Picasso a way to unify three views of the face into one thing, into a kind of blurring of these three facets. So for the show in Hamburg I proposed that I would try to make collages based on this principle of three facets, which is exactly how I had started this series in the eighties but had only very few successful examples to show, and ... well ... it failed. I tried, and tried, and I managed to make two, but I mean, I destroyed hundreds of photographs. I realised that my work is fundamentally about pairing. But the interesting thing is that the two successful works that came out of this project have a quality which is very interesting to me, and I can't help but feel enticed by them. They also taught me another thing which is that Picasso would never combine male and female together—the hermaphrodite figure was an anathema to him. He was too macho. He found it easier to do his kind of deconstruction of the portrait with a female figure.

YE: But Picasso's portraits from the '40s were not collages right? They were paintings.

JS: I always maintained that Picasso remained a collage artist his entire life but he just did it through painting. The forties pieces are just so much like collage. The cuts simply become virtual, the edges less defined.

YE: But your interest in the 1940s goes beyond Picasso. Is this a conceptual decision? An aesthetic one?

JS: I think that we are all fascinated by the world as it was immediately before we were born—the world without us. It is not nostalgic attachment for a lost home, but in a way the opposite, an attachment to the space of no home. But also, cinema reached a height and power in the 1940s that I think a lot of people recognised as its apotheosis. It was the only time in his life that Picasso was enticed away from his work by it. I first came in contact with 1940s film stills on the outside of cinemas as a teenager, when I saw advertisements for films that I couldn't go and see because I was too young, X-rated films that were off course very tempting for teenagers. This evoked a world of eroticism but also an underworld that really fascinated me. When I turned fifteen or sixteen I was finally able to go see these movies, which in those days were still called the 'B-features'. You had the main feature in colour and then a film from a slightly earlier period in black and white. I discovered that I lost interest in colour very quickly and I started frequenting the cinema just for the B movies. But I found that they were never quite as exciting as the film stills outside the theatre. These would seem stranger and more other-worldly than the film itself, and in fact they weren't exactly still frames from the movie itself. You know I would go back after seeing the film and look at the stills thinking 'where did that happen?' or 'I never saw that!'. But of course these were taken by another photographer and from another angle. And that is when it first dawned on me that there is a distinction between my fascination with film still images and my fascination with film. It was just a bit after that period that I started my studies at the Slade School of Art and my hall of residence happened to be within a few minutes of the main film production area in London at the time on Newman Street. I used to go down there on a Friday night and collect films just from the dustbins and try making collage movies from them. One time I remember going to the Edgware Road Odeon which was one of the last large single screen conventional cinemas. I remember sitting there on an afternoon thinking that it can't go on like this any longer, there's only me inside this gigantic cinema watching this 1940s movie. And then I turned around and looked back and I saw that right behind me were Gilbert and George sitting there. The only other two city flâneurs of the time. Imagine that!

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NOTES

1. Among her numerous writings, Dawn Ades 1976 wrote an extensive survey of the medium and its history.
2. Didi-Huberman 1990. In this context, Didi-Huberman suggests that all visual representation has an 'underside' in which seemingly intelligible forms lose their clarity and defy rational understanding. Art historians, he claims, tend to disregard

this aspect by which images produce contradictions, because their discipline relies on the assumption that visual representation is made up of legible signs and lends itself to rational scholarly deciphering. As a way to access images and so to speak 'smash the box of representation', Didi-Huberman proposes Freud's concept of the 'dreamwork', not as a code of interpretation, but rather as a way to begin thinking about representation as a mobile process that often involves substitution and contradiction.

3. Benjamin's concern with the notion of 'obsolescence' (more commonly translated to English as 'the outmoded'), has a strong link to John Stezaker's work and to the history of collage at large. In his writings on surrealism Benjamin suggests that the outmoded is one outcome resulting from the acceleration of temporal experience; objects that were only recently in fashion, or naturally a part of our culture, and now seem archaic. The outmoded, Benjamin writes, is found in 'the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them'. Benjamin 1995, 181. As for Blanchot, in an earlier interview with Michael Bracewell for *Frieze* magazine, John Stezaker remarked: 'I'm very much a follower of Maurice Blanchot's ideas when it comes to image and fascination; he sees it as a necessary series of deaths that the image has to go through in order to become visible and disconnected from its ordinary referent. I don't know whether that's an ideal, but I suppose it could be a guiding principle.' Michael Bracewell, John Stezaker, 'Demand the Impossible', 2005 (Accessed May, 16, 2017).

4. According to Bachelard, the notions of 'inside and outside' form a dialectics of division. Yet, despite their mutual resistance, Bachelard argues that both inside and outside depend on each other for the sake of preserving their identities. Furthermore, aesthetic experience or playful use of the imagination can undermine the boundaries that distinguish these two dimensions.

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