

9.4 Design exercise: remixing through the power of collage

Objective

This exercise aims to develop a theme through the collage of images composed outside the original context. In this way, images are forced into a new system of relationships to give shape to a world of sensations and emotions not easily expressed with ordinary forms.

Background

Try to explain what snow is to those who have never seen it. You could say that it is made of frozen water, but unlike ice, it is soft. It is wet as water, but unlike water that requires a container, we can make piles of it, it has the consistency of flour, but you can make balls and throw them. In short, it is complicated to communicate something that does not belong to the recipient's experience.

A similar problem was faced by the preachers of the Middle Ages, who wanted to communicate to illiterate people the fear of Hell and the gruesome experience of absolute evil. The artists who frescoed the basilicas with the old and new testament episodes had an even more difficult task: what visible form to give to evil, such as to arouse horror at first sight?

The solution was to combine fear and horror with the subversion of the existing order of creation. As the great Italian poet Dante Alighieri states in the *Divine Comedy*, Good has a precise formal order: 'Things all have order between them, and this is form that the universe to God resembles' (Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto I). So, Evil, on the contrary, is disorder, random a mixing of fragments of humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects.

The 'Triptych of the Temptations of St Anthony', painted in oil on a wood panel by Hieronymus Bosch, around 1505, clearly exemplifies the idea of dismemberment of the usual forms and the remixing of parts to create monsters and Evil itself (fig. 9.4a).



Fig. 9.4a – 'Triptych of Temptation of St Anthony', Hieronymus Bosch (1505).

André Breton, one of the leaders of the surrealist movement, defines surrealism as a 'pure psychic automatism to express, either verbally, or in writing, or in any other way, the real functioning of thought. Dictation of thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, outside of any aesthetic or moral concern.' (Breton, 1924). He adds: 'Surrealism is based on the idea of a higher degree of reality connected to certain forms of association hitherto neglected, on the omnipotence of the dream, on the selfless play of thought.' (ibidem).

One of the surrealist artists' favourite techniques is to unusually juxtapose images. The fundamental idea is that meaning comes from the interaction between the forms present in the users' current experience and their past knowledge. Memory provides a structure within which we can frame and catalogue new experiences. When known forms are juxtaposed in novel and unusual ways, the reality is enigmatic. We feel a cognitive shock, triggering the search for a possible new explanatory frame. After all, surrealists take some forms, isolate them from their context, and put them in an unusual context. They also alter the dimensional relationships between objects (e.g. by enlarging and shrinking forms out of their regular sizes) or violate the perspective and physical or biological laws. All these tricks create a sense of estrangement and wonder.

For surrealists, photography was one of the mediums to create enigmatic images through proper editing. See, for instance, Paul Nougé, *La Jongleuse*, in the series 'Subversion des images':

<http://mediation.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-subversion/ENS-subversion.html>

A second widely used technique was collaging images extracted from the original context and composed into a new configuration. See, for example, Marcel Mariën. *A André Breton hommage du lecteur* (1938) at:

<https://dantebea.com/2013/12/04/marcel-marien-4/>

and André Breton, Jacqueline Lamba, and Yves Tanguy's *Cadavres exquis* 1938 at:

<https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/ckXapBx>

The collage technique is used in art therapy to help people express themselves and develop a sense of wellbeing through the creative process. Expressing oneself through collage makes our feelings tangible and communicates what we cannot say through words (Malchiodi, 2017).

See an example of therapeutic collage at:

<https://aviaryrecoverycenter.com/self-expression-through-collage-and-journaling/>

Instructions

This exercise involves creating a new image through a collage that expresses your feelings about the relationships between human beings and nature. Almost every day, through the media, we are inundated with speeches, images, and videos that show how the balance between human activities and the natural system is dangerously altered. Using collage, compose an image that represents your feelings on this topic, following these instructions:

1. Get a magazine where you can find plenty of images. Use only images, words, and graphic signs you find in the magazine.
2. Take a white sheet or cardboard to use as a base. Cardboard works better.
3. Browse the magazine and choose images that attract your attention and intuition. The idea behind the remix strategy (typical of the surrealist approach) is that you need some overarching narrative in your mind to guide your eye in choosing. Do not worry if you do not have it. You can make sense of it as you go; a story will emerge.
4. Arrange the images on the sheet and move and rotate them until you obtain some eye-pleasing composition. Then paste them on the base.
5. Write one or two paragraphs to explain what the composition means.

References

Breton, A. (1924). *Manifeste du surréalisme*, Paris, Pauvert.

Malchiodi, C. (2017), Drawing a Picture of Health: An Art Therapy Guide

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/arts-and-health/201703/drawing-picture-health-art-therapy-guide>