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Author Iliescu, Sandra

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Beyond Cut-and-Paste: The Promise of Collage in Contemporary Design

Sanda Iliescu

The ease with which image fragments may be appropriated from the Web and other sources and the increasingly available methods for manipulating, blurring, and blending them have encouraged the wide use of digital "cut-and-paste" collage as a method of spatial representation in architecture and landscape architecture. Yet this convenient sampling process is not without risk. The uniformly digital and purely visual nature of these fragments can create a homogenized smoothness that robs such collages of the potential for double readings and multiple frames of reference. At their least successful, digital montages are strangely disembodied and weightless, suggesting placeless, amnesiac designs. The origins of fragments are suppressed, as are the particularities of place: sounds, scents, and the textures of physical materials.

Perhaps in compensation for this lack of sensory depth, digital montages often depict linear perspectives whose vertiginous vistas are punctuated by signifiers of motion, such as runners, cyclists and skateboarders. The absence of elderly, poor, disabled, or even ordinary-looking people perhaps hints at these compilations' underlying reductive ethos.

High-Tech Utopia vs. Historicist Nostalgia

Examples of this phenomenon were particularly evident in a highprofile international competition, held in 1999, to convert part of a 460-acre military base in northwest Toronto into a public venue called Downsview Park. The text for one proposal even described the new approach as a "fluid, liquid digital sensibility."¹ Unfortunately, this facile approach obscured the site's gritty textures, ignored its complex history, and downplayed the problems inherent in making a public park.

All five proposals in the competition depicted literally open (yet hardly public) spaces that were dominated by visual flows and high-tech systems but lacked any semblance of figurative space or place. Instead, the schemes highlighted the nonfigural network itself as an iconic, utopian figure. Thus, visual smoothness replaced what might have been developed as compelling formal relationships. Spatial hierarchies, edges, and distinctions were all suppressed, as were any considerations of social or political conflict.

In their singularity and literalness, such digital montages are antithetical to both the original intent of modernist collage and its subsequent role in postmodern critique. In abandoning collage's critical power to elicit multiple and potentially conflicting readings, contemporary digital "cutand-paste" collages reinforce the hegemony of singular, linear narratives, the very quality that modernist collage makers set out to contest.

A second form of contemporary collage seems a welcome departure from such fluidity. Socially rather than visually motivated, it centers on

Above: Emergent landscapes: "Energy Pathways and Activity Landscapes at Night." Digital montage depicting a proposal for Downsview Park, Toronto, 1999, by the team led by Brown + Storey Architects. **Opposite:** Landscapes of salvage: Green Project volunteer workers remove slate roof tiles from a house in New Orleans. Photo by Daniel Weiner.

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preservation, recycling, and adaptive reuse. Its fragments are not weightless images, but physical materials—the flotsam and jetsam of our decaying cities and abandoned factories. From old mantelpieces, Classical cornices, and cast-iron bathtubs to large-scale urban ruins, architects and builders are testing ways in which the old may be reborn.

Issues of sustainability drawn from an environmental agenda often underlie these efforts. For instance, workers with the ReClaim New Orleans Project have salvaged buildings destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, saving as much as 85 percent of their materials for future construction.² "If you come in and bulldoze everything and grind it up and throw it in the landfill," Shane Endicott, president of the Portland, Oregon, ReBuilding Center told the Washington Post, "you're throwing away tons and tons of opportunities to rebuild lives."3 Yet, while its social and environmental goals may be laudable, the aesthetic of such work is often governed by placid nostalgia or rigid preservationism. Relics from the past are assumed to be more beautiful than the designs we might realize today. Thus, as forms are designated either valuable because they are historic or trivial because they are contemporary, a worthy tactile appreciation for materials degenerates into fetishism. Similarly, respect for history succumbs to empty pastiche-to collage as picturesque image-making.

An Ethical-Aesthetic Overlap

In attempting to fix the unpredictable ebb and flow of human events into singular, idealized narratives—one privileging the future, the other the past—both these contemporary collage practices depend on closed, static conceptions of time that undervalue the present, with all its vivid contingencies and complex relationships. They reduce aesthetics to the production of objects of "calculated visual seduction," in the words of the architect Juhani Pallasmaa, and fail to fulfill architecture's profound existential potential.

"The role of architecture," Pallasmaa wrote, "is not to entertain or thrill us but to structure our understanding of the world and of our very existence, to articulate how the world touches us."⁴ As a design method, collage has much to offer. The poetics of collage are potent both because they make room for ordinary, crude, or fragmentary materials and because they represent a challenge to rigid or normative boundaries between art and life. Overly literal interpretations miss the most significant contribution of collage: its ability to both surprise us and change our way of looking at art and at the world.

As harmonious wholes and collections of disjunctive fragments, collages encourage a unique aesthetic experience, one in which sensations of conflict and reconciliation can recall similarly complex relationships in life. More insistently perhaps than "purer" art forms, collages can evoke thoughts and emotions outside the strictly aesthetic realm.

In bringing what is essentially an ethical mode of attentiveness into the aesthetic experience, collage may thus suggest ways to bridge that most paradigmatic of divides: between "good form" and form that contributes or attests to the "common good."

Private Memories and Civic Structures

We used only old material. A demolished shed gave us wonderful pieces of concrete, bricks, and tiles. We also used floor bricks from the stable of the old farmhouse. Still, we hadn't enough material, so we looked for bricks in the local area. Our neighbor restored his stable and gave us ceiling tiles. When a wall surrounding a nearby church was demolished, we got some very beautiful old bricks that now cap our new walls.

-Anneliese Latz, 2003⁵

The German landscape architects Peter and Anneliese Latz offer a contemporary example of the ways designers may explore collage's deeper contribution. Like that of early modernist collage makers, the Latzes' work addresses strict boundaries between conceptual categories-between the natural and the manmade, the public and the private, the everyday and the aesthetic. Their designs for both large public parks and intimate private gardens evoke a vivid sense of the past, one that encompasses the histories of particular sites and their immediate contexts as well as broader landscape traditions.

At the same time, the Latzes' designs may incorporate bold new technological solutions, and their inclusive spirit informs a similarly tolerant approach to materials, forms, and processes. Ordinary, inexpensive materials are usefully integrated with precious, expensive ones. The mundane coexists with and even engenders the sacred, and public places incorporate peculiarly private elements while defining shared, communal intentions.

In a Latz design, traditional manual techniques are juxtaposed with sophisticated digital technologies; socially and environmentally motivated practices, such as abiding by safety codes or recycling, suggest new aesthetic ways of arranging shapes, textures, and materials; and visual arrangements are considered in relation to equally compelling sounds, scents, textures, and visceral sensations such as an embodied awareness of weight, tension, or balance.

Designs by the Latzes provide more than a set of visual impressions. They also have a way of evoking memory and of reaching beyond themselves. As aesthetic forms they are not fixed, static objects but contingent, open structures profoundly intertwined with social, cultural, and ecological processes.

Walking through the garden the Latzes built for themselves at Ampertshousen, and to which the quote at the beginning of this section refers, one is struck by the vast array of colors, textures, and scents of its extensive walls. One can touch rough and pitted surfaces next to smooth or slippery ones, and smell wildflowers and fruits along with mildew, mud, and old dust. Yet the knowledge that these new walls are built entirely of used materials changes one's perception of these aesthetic delights. It becomes difficult to consider this place a complete or stable artifact. Rather, Ampertshousen points to places and experiences beyond itself. The garden is at once private and outward-looking, a kind of idiosyncratic architectural scrapbook with an uncanny way of stirring memories.

Collage Breakthroughs

In the summer and fall of 1912, Braque and Picasso invented not only a novel artistic technique but, more significantly, the dramatically new idea that discarded materials could be worthy of aesthetic contemplation.⁶ More perhaps than anything that preceded it in the development of modern art—more than cubism's splintering of subject matter or its conception of pictorial space as a series of flat frontal planes—the idea that bits of trash could have aesthetic merit represented modernism's most anti-traditional statement.

By 1913, Braque felt sufficiently confident in this new aesthetic that he produced *Still Life with Tenora*, a four-foot-wide composition in which pieces of newsprint, faux-bois, and construction paper were mounted on stretched linen, painting's most conventional of supports.⁷ In its merging of delicate, classical pencil drawing with crude paper fragments, Braque's work redefined the still life. *Still Life with Tenora* was not an illusion of bounded objects in stable relations to each other and a neutral ground, but rather a field of geometric linkages and complex figure-ground reversals.

The achievement of Peter and Anneliese Latz in challenging and shifting aesthetic preconceptions of the public park is analogous to the emergence of collage as an acceptable artistic form. The Latzes' first radical conception for a large urban park was realized in Saarbrucken, in the 1980s. Built on the banks of the river Saar, Hafeninsel, or Harbor Island, incorporated the site's war rubble and remnants of nineteenth-century coal docks to produce extensive new walls, allées, and garden plots.

Similar strategies appeared in Duisburg-Nord, a 568-acre park opened in 1994 on industrial wasteland in the Ruhr district. Here, steel plates once lining the walls of a foundry were used to pave a new "Piazza Metallica"; old concrete bunker walls were recycled as supports for a new footbridge; and a former iron and manganese storage shed was converted into a playground.⁸

And at Kirchberg Park, built in Luxembourg in the 1990s, spoil from road construction was piled into dune-like earthworks. Footpaths were then created between them leading to spiral-shaped meadows and basins, rendering the site's water retention and drainage system a tangible aesthetic presence.⁹

These parks' fragments convey an inescapable sense of the past. ¹⁰ Yet

Left: Georges Braque, *Still Life with Tenoru*, 1913 (pasted paper, charcoal, chalk, and oil on canvas) © ARS, NY / ADAGP, Paris / MOMA NY. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

Right: Hafeninsel (River Port Island Park), Saarbrucken City Park, Germany (1985–1989). Plan and photo by Latz + Partner.

because there are so many remnants, because so much remains unknown about each one, and because they are all treated with the same care and equanimity, the parks' insistent harkening back avoids nostalgia and instead conveys a broader, more general idea of memory. Who can tell why, in one of Hafeninsel's walls, a square rosecolored block came to be right next to a circular millstone? Or why this millstone was once painted blue?

New inventions figure prominently too. Set alongside the old fragments, their presence can be striking—as in the case of a gleaming steel faucet installed above a medieval drain in the Latzes' landscape for the Windberg College dormitories.

Left: Recycled wall, Hafeninsel (Harbor Island), Saarbrucken, Germany (1985–1989). Right (top and bottom): Recycled garden walls, Hafeninsel (Island Park), Saarbrucken, Germany (1985–1989). Among the fragments incorporated in these walls are a millstone, segments of circular sewer pipes, and an old bicycle seat. Photos by Elissa Rosenberg.

Like random memories or dream images, projects by the Latzes weave together old and new and convey an evolving sense of time, one in which past colors present, and present alters ideas of the past. Like the collages of the American artist Joseph Cornell, such designs suggest that who we are and what we do today are continuations of countless and (for the most part) unexceptional threads that lead backward. Allusions to nonidealized pasts may also alter the effect of individual, idiosyncratic fragments and suggest a public life that is intertwined with private events.

Forms That Reach Beyond Themselves

Essential to such a balance of private sensibility and shared civic intention is an emphasis on networks of movement, visibility, and accessibility. In Latz designs, traditional garden tropes such as spiral meadows, clipped hedges, and bosques of flowering fruit trees are aggressively integrated within larger fields. Like Braque's figure-ground reversals, the projects can be read both as sets of recognizable figures and as syntactical fields connecting diverse locations and reaching out toward existing buildings, roads, and footpaths. Thus, at Saarbrucken, new garden paths align with infrastructure and frame vistas of the old city's landmarks. And in a recent landfill rehabilitation proposal for Hiriya, Israel, an array of pedestrian bridges connect the landfill's figural mound to multiple surrounding locations.

Such compositions are less about forms than the relationship between forms. In this sense they recall the early 1950s collages of Franz Kline. Kline created dozens of such works using discarded telephone book pages, collages that dazzled the eye with their complex oscillating shifts between figure and ground, between shapes that simultaneously recede and project.

John Elderfield likened Kline's black marks to an abstract "visual carpentry," reverberating and expanding the paper's rectilinear geometry.¹¹

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printed text. Often both conditions occur simultaneously, bluish-black and creamy-white shapes forming a poised, dance-like equilibrium.

Tactile, Visceral Experiences

It is impossible to regard projects by the Latzes as purely visual compositions. Their scents, sounds, and textures, as well as a sense of their weight and tensions, are central to one's experience of them. Such physicality recalls the tactility of all physical montages, but most particularly the collages of Alberto Burri.

Burri constructed his *Sacco* series of the early 1950s, not by gluing bits of paper but by meticulously stitching and darning fragments of old, stained burlap. Stretched across gaping holes, Burri's strings literally held the canvas together. Their tension provided both a useful force and an aesthetic quality to be experienced viscerally as connecting otherwise disjunctive patterns and forms.

At Ampertshousen, whose retaining walls are three feet thick at the base, a visitor encounters the same visceral aesthetic force. This is not the tension of Burri's strings, but its inverse load-bearing compression. In these "dry" walls, no mortar or cement glues pieces together. Instead, the fabric is made structurally sound through the careful fitting of salvaged fragments.

Top: Hafeninsel (Harbor Island), Saarbrucken, Germany (1985–1989). Courtesy of Latz + Partner. Bottom: Franz Kline, *Untitled II*, c. 1952 (ink and oil on cut-and-pasted telephone book pages) © ARS, NY/MOMA NY. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

One moment Kline's black strokes figure prominently in our imagination, while the next our focus shifts unexpectedly to outlined figures of

Many Latz designs also embody a painstaking process of sorting remnants into categories for both practical and aesthetic effect. Fragments that once belonged together usually remain together, forming coherent groups. Yet the arrangements do not follow inflexible rules. Thus, in a wooded area at Hafeninsel, small bricks and stones nestle within gaps between cyclopean blocks. In these recycled walls, any one thing is ready to give way and adjust itself to the demands of its neighbors.

Such a pragmatist attitude evokes a spirit of accommodation, a deference to the specific needs of each fragment. This, too, was evident in the collages of Burri, who meticulously worked with preexisting holes, tears and stains, adjusting and incorporating new bits within and around old formations.

Ethics and the Poetics of Collage

Underlying the Latzes' design method is a tendency, evident in the work of each of these other collage artists, to expand the boundaries of what is traditionally considered aesthetic.¹² What makes a collage surprising, but also meaningful, is its open invitation to the presence of worldly, "unaesthetic" things within the artistic frame.

It is exactly this openness that has led some to brand the Latzes' approach a "junk aesthetic." Yet, spanning this difficult divide between art and nonart, between the aesthetic and the worldly, is collage's greatest achievement. When we experience a Latz park or look at a collage by Braque, Kline, or Burri, we sense a kind of transparency, as aesthetic impressions and other more worldly phenomena come forth and then recede. As this happens, one may be touched unexpectedly by emotions as personal and even spiritual as they are aesthetic.

Perhaps the most rudimentary way in which a collage may kindle a sense of "goodness" or "hope" comes in its attention to old, worn objects. Something that was simply "garbage" has been saved: lifted out, cared for, repaired, and accorded new aesthetic value. Collage's aesthetic "saving" can speak to us as a story of survival, a sign that things—and, by analogy ourselves—may withstand difficulties and be renewed.

For instance, Kurt Schwitters collected street trash, old posters, and discarded theater tickets, which he reassembled into richly nuanced color compositions. Similarly, Jessie T. Pettway, a quilter in Alabama's Gees' Bend community, created rhythmic fields from fabric remnants and patches of used clothing. Her

<sup>Left: Alberto Burri, Sacco B (detail), 1953, ©
Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini, Collezione Burri. Photo courtesy of Scala / Art Resource, NY.
Center and Right: Recycled wall, Latz Garden,
Ampertshausen, Germany. Photos by Anneliese Latz.</sup>

"good to do." But there is another ethical dimension that transcends such specific environmentalist messages, one that is shared with other collage artists.

What, after all, is salvage, and how do we recognize it? We do so by perceiving a form in two very distinct ways: first, as what it used to be, and second, as what it presently is. Thus, two contrasting states—old and new, worthless and worthy—are perceived simultaneously.

Collages can make other similarly unexpected associations—for example, between different forms of expression (written words and visual shapes), and different cultural realms (the mundane and the artistic, the conceptual and the perceptual, the natural and the technological). Such

quilts offer a glimpse into the life of a rural African-American community, of poverty and hardship—yet also a human capacity to transform life's meager mementoes.¹³

At Duisburg-Nord, the Latzes created a poignant example of this practice by lining the edges of new garden plots with salvaged iron beams. Some beds are planted with fresh soil and flowers; in others, vividly colored lichens thrive in the acidic soils of industrial waste. Still others display not plants but carefully sorted industrial junk: old screws, pellets, and scrapmetal. Here, among fields of varying blacks, browns, and purple-grays, visitors may discover a different kind of flowering: of rust and microscopic molds growing in the grooves of precisely machined gears, nuts, and bolts.¹⁴

Such a design strategy goes well beyond normal ecological practices. Practices like recycling are clearly Left: Kurt Schwitters, *Untited (ereid)*, 1929 paper on paper © ARS, NY Photo: Kurt Schwitters Archive at the Sprengel Museum Hannover. Photographer: Michael Herling/Aline Gwose.

Right: Jessie T. Pettway, "Housetop" Quilt (nine-block "Log Cabin" variation), ca. 1960 (cotton: corduroy, twill, printed shirt and dress material, seersucker). Courtesy of Jessie T. Pettway and Tinnwood Media / Matt and Paul Arnett. associations can strike us with both their strangeness and their equally powerful sense of congruity.

Narratives of salvage are thus but one manifestation of a collage's more general capacity to connect what is disconnected. In so doing, collages may evoke the conflicts and tensions, as well as the potential for reconciliation, that we associate with real life. This peculiar voice is not didactic; it does not speak with any specific message-that recycling is "good," for instance. Rather, it touches us in much the same way as metaphor. It evokes a sense of the precarious balance or harmony we experience in real life-a hard-won, defiant harmony: harmony against the odds.

The Problem and the Promise

That so many architects and designers practicing today have turned to collage is perhaps a good thing, a sign of their interest in exploring concerns not traditionally found in the field, and therefore in breaking with worn-out precedent. However, I am not sure that the kind of work with which I began this essay delivers on this promise. Too often eye-catching digital montages succumb to the sensational—to simple flash and purely visual qualities. Meanwhile, historicist montages tend to diminish the inherent conflicts of collage, and instead harness its aesthetic in the service of some straightforward, narrow message. Rather than metaphor, what we get from this kind of work is cliché. What we lose is collage's power to summon feelings that span the fertile territory between art and life.

Above: Climbers, Duisburg-Nord, Germany. Photo by Manfred Vollmer, courtesy of Michael Hough. Originally published in Michael Hough, *Cities and Natural Process* (London: Routledge, 1995).

A particularly evocative instance of this power can be seen at Duisburg-Nord, where a series of concrete walls were fitted with footholds, transforming an industrial ruin into an airy, joyful arena for climbers. Neither suppressed nor entirely transformed, the old walls are now reframed by new life, becoming both continuous with and dislocated from the present. In the process, old wall and new activity become strangely harmonious. And as the aesthetic gap between old and new begins to dissolve, the divide between the concepts they represent begins to lose its meaning. Strict oppositions between disjunctive realms-industry and leisure, decay and new growth, nature and construction—give way.

Of course, collage also suggests that there remain insoluble problems. Trash incorporated in a public park remains trash; toxic soil remains dangerous, even when visually impressive in coloration or monumental accumulation. At Duisburg-Nord, not all the park's canals were transformed into active waterways; some were left empty, to stand as incomplete traces of a complex, ambiguous past.¹⁵

As the contemporary montage artist Thomas Hirschhorn has suggested, collage also suggests a paradox, "an attempt to connect that which cannot be connected."¹⁶

Notes

 The proposal was by Tschumi/Revington/Finlayson.
 For a full text, see "The Digital and the Coyote," in Julia Czerniak, ed., *Case: Downsview Park Toronto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Graduate School of Design; and Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2001), p. 82.
 The ReClaim New Orleans Project is sponsored by two nonprofit organizations based in Portland, Oregon: Mercy Corps and The Rebuilding Center.
 See http://www.mercycorps.org/countries/ unitedstates/1009 (accessed June 5, 2006) and //www. thegreenproject.org/ (accessed March 3, 2008).
 As cited in Martha McNeil Hamilton, "New Orleans' Deconstruction Zone: Groups Salvage Materials, Memories by Carefully Dismantling Houses," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 17, 2005, p. F14. 4. Juhani Pallasmaa, "Our Image Culture and Its Misguided Ideas about Freedom," in *Architectural Record*, Vol. 189, No. 1 (Jan. 2001), p. 51. 5. Anneliese Latz, quote from 2003 letter to author. The text refers to the construction of retaining walls at Ampertshousen.

6. "My dear friend Braque, I am using your latest paperistic and powdery procedures. I am in the process of conceiving a guitar and I use a little dust against our horrible canvas." Pablo Picasso, letter to Georges Braque, Oct. 9, 1912. The text is published in Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, "Braque, la lenteur de la peinture," in Monod-Fontaine, ed., *Georges Braque, les Papiers Collés* (Paris: Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, 1982), p. 40.

7. This collage, in the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art, was formerly known as *Clarinet*. Lewis Kachur recently discovered that the woodwind depicted in this picture is in fact not a clarinet, but a tenora, a folkloric instrument from Catalonia. See Robert Rosenblum, "Cubism as Pop Art," in Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, eds., *Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in Higb & Low* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 126.
8. Luis Fernandez-Galiano, "Parque Duisburg Norte, Duisburg (Alemania)," in Fernandez-Galiano, ed., *AV Monografias: Pragmatismo y Paisage* (Madrid: Arquitectura Viva, 2001), pp. 82-85.

9. "Thinking Big: Latz and Partner Like to Work on a Grand Scale," *Landscape Design*, No. 307 (Feb. 2002), pp. 26-28.

10. Peter Latz, "The Idea of Making Time Visible," *Topos European Landscape Magazine*, No. 33 (Dec. 2000), pp. 94-99.

11. See John Elderfield, *The Modern Drawing* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), p. 198.
12. For an accessible introduction to the relationship of ethics and aesthetics, see Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

13. See John Beardsley, "River Island," and Jane Livingston, "Reflections on the Art of Gee's Bend," in William and Paul Arnett, eds., *Gee's Bend: the Women and Their Quilts* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books in association with the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), pp. 22-35, 52-61, 104. 14. A polarity deeply ingrained in the contemporary imagination is that between natural and industrial processes. By juxtaposing and overlapping these two processes in surprising ways, the Latzes' projects reveal them as deeply intertwined: there is nature in industrial decay, just as human processes and technologies can profoundly alter nature. See Mara Miller, The Garden as an Art (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 25. Also see Elissa Rosenberg, "Gardens and Nature: Duisburg-Nord, Germany, Latz + Partner," in Sanda Iliescu, ed., The Hand and the Soul: Aesthetics and Ethics in Art and Architecture (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, forthcoming). 15. Michael Hough, Cities and Natural Process (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 148-152. Also see Peter Latz, "Landscape Park, Duisburg-Nord: the Metamorphosis of an Industrial Site," in Niall Kirkwood, ed., Manufactured Sites: Rethinking the Post-Industrial Landscape (London and New York: Spon Press, 2001), pp. 150-61.

16. A poignant critique of consumerism, planned obsolescence, and waste, Hirschhorn's startling accumulations of common, everyday materials plastic pails, aluminum foil tentacles, metal chains, shattered mirrors—strive to connect disjunctive forms to each other and to a world outside. "In essence, Hirschhorn creates three-dimensional collages, a practice historically associated with political polemic and protest," wrote Susan Snodgrass in "The Rubbish Heap of History," *Art in America* (May 2000), pp. 156–57, 177. For a more recent analysis of Hirschhorn's work, see Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, No. 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 3-22.