

SILENCE



This is the first time they have been shown in an art gallery, where their status as poems is rendered equivocal. Modest and minimal, they nevertheless command the space, and they do somehow work as poems, though I have no idea how.

As with the first Text Festival exhibition, the interrelating disposition of works within the gallery spaces is carefully considered, but here it does not always work. A poem with no word spaces by Trehy has been taken off the page by Helmut Lemke and wound around a small fishing reel, exhibited as a central point around which the exhibition is supposed to revolve, like TS Eliot's 'still point in the turning world'. But it does not have as much presence as the early 19th-century long-case clock from the museum collection that appears incongruously but effectively misplaced nearby.

The intrepid resistance of the exhibition's curator to the threat of a different sort of textual layer – the interpretive exhibition label – is laudable. However, going to the opposite extreme works against many of the exhibits. In Bury's gallery of Victorian paintings, the faint ghostly voices that can intermittently be heard floating from above are from a new work by Nick Thurston, who has endlessly shuffled recordings of the mysterious 'numbers stations' – sequences of coded numbers that are read out slowly by women and child readers on short-wave radio. Nowhere is information about the work available to the passing gallery visitor. Instead of a catalogue, the gallery has published a stand-alone publication of new works created for the page, with no commentary. Unlike the first Text Festival exhibition, which included an anti-library of experimental literature, there is no referential material provided to point towards the 'long history of forms' that Robert Grenier has referred to in relation to his visual poetry. However, a different sort of referent has been created in the Bury Archives, in the form of 'Signs of the Times', a beautifully achieved accompanying exhibition in which text art by contemporary artists, including Jenny Holzer and the visual poet Geof Huth, has been interpolated among historical textual documents and objects, causing them to become 'intrinsically beautiful out of their time', as the gallery programme poetically puts it.

In the main exhibition, a work by David Alker & Peter Liddell takes the form of an illuminated 'Silence' sign, positioned high up on the gallery wall. Apparently, it reconstructs the sign that appears in Andy Warhol's 'Electric Chair' paintings. But for me, not knowing this, it evoked old-fashioned public libraries and the title of Cage's 1961 book again, in turn recalling TS Eliot's definition of poetry as 'words on a page with a lot of silence'. ■

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■ Collage London/New York

Fred London 6 August to 27 September

Collage, which was seen for some time as a minor and faintly anachronistic art form, has in recent years made a comeback. In London, Tate Modern and Bloomberg Space have put on collage shows, as has Gagosian Gallery in New York. Artists who have long used collage, such as John Stezaker and Linder Sterling, have seen a surge of interest in their work, while the collages of younger but established artists, such as Collier Schorr and Tariq Alvi, have been widely displayed. A number of impressive emerging artists, including Josephine Meckseper, also work in the medium. Collage figured prominently in the last Documenta, which did European visitors the favour of introducing them to the astute and nervy work of CK Rajan. A slew of new books have also been published on the subject, including Brandon Taylor's comprehensive study.

It is tempting to attribute this trend to the current economic climate but, while the recession may be one reason for the appeal of collage to dealers and collectors, the revival began a couple of years before its onset. A more plausible explanation would touch on a number of other factors. First, the return of collage is plainly one facet of a broader reaction to the scale and

Mark Colburn

David Alker & Peter Liddell
Fabrications Ornamentales
2000

Spencer Roberts
Beckett Machine 2007

Erik Blinderman 'Sounds of the Sea and Shops'

5 September to 17 October 2009



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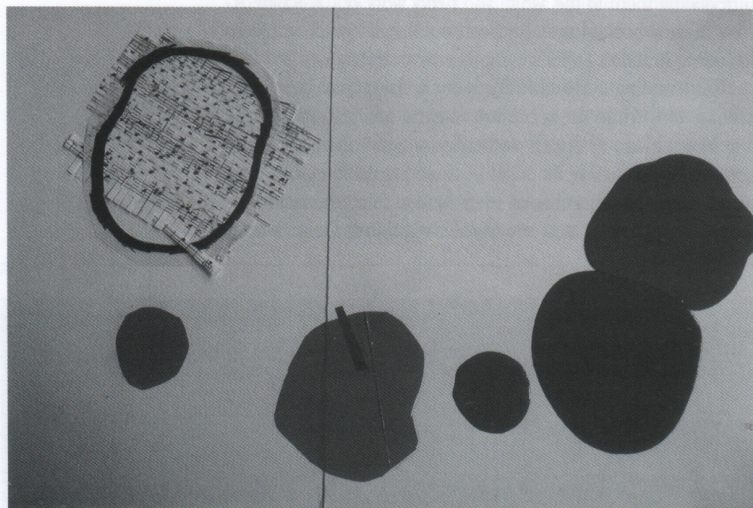
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polish of so much recent work. Second, it is in many instances animated by a keen appreciation of modernist collage; the dislocations of cubist and futurist collage and the biting satirical work of dadaists like John Heartfield chime with the concerns of many contemporary artists, Alvi and Meckseper among them. And third, collage bears, in its discontinuous structure, a clear affinity with some of the dominant forms of contemporary mass culture, resonating, for instance, with the choppy, non-linear character of TV programming and website architecture. At its worst, collage simply incorporates the forms and reproduces the strategies of contemporary commercial culture; at other times, it provides an effective means of reflecting on them.

The current show at Fred, which was organised in collaboration with the New York gallerist Pavel Zoubok, shows pieces by contemporary artists alongside works by early- and mid-20th-century artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Robert Motherwell. Those few modernist pieces are doubly valuable in this context because many of the more recent works on display are patently energised by modernist precedents. Kate Davis's *Duende II*, 2009, for instance, is a breezy and nicely judged tribute to Duchamp. It carries a shiny pool of nail varnish and a cut-up musical score, while a cigar is delicately balanced on its frame like a cigarette on a urinal. Effortlessly conjuring the atmosphere of a bar or cabaret and the tenor of male banter, it hints at Duchamp's taste for sexual innuendo and at his conception of the artwork as a kind of rebus. In Davis's eyes, it would seem, the medium of collage is at once passé and deeply seductive. Elsewhere in the show, Motherwell's *Cabaret No 8*, 1974, with its muted formal drama (and its cigar labels), seems both to look back to Duchamp and the cubists and to anticipate Davis.

A strong current of sexual yearning, already discernible in *Duende II*, courses through the show. Alongside such hackneyed images as India Evans' triptych of Victorian nudes emerging from luxuriant thickets are a number of more compelling works, including Gilbert & George's *Flower Prince*, 1981, in which identical postcards of a tanned young Prince Charles form a crucifix against a backdrop of flowers in bloom. The artists turn the royal into a gay idol while offering a mock-sentimental meditation on the fleeting character of youth and desire. Andrew Mania strikes a more febrile note in a delicately drawn image of a nubile young man, criss-crossing the surface of the picture with bands of aluminium tape that suggest contradictory reactions to the man's good looks – a desire to cherish and protect (even gift-wrap) on the one hand and an impulse to slash and obscure on the other. In these works the image becomes a kind of votive offering to a remote heartthrob who is partially displaced as a love-object by the image itself.

Kate Davis
Duende II 2009



As the pieces of Davis, Gilbert & George and Mania all show, collage is given to irony; in particular, it is given to commenting ironically on the power of images. A few of the other works in the show take a different tack, drawing on the brutal visions of Heartfield and Hannah Höch rather than on Duchamp's teasing humour. Of those, the most remarkable are the pieces of Ion Birladeanu, who involves Nicolae Ceaușescu and assorted Bond girls, apparatchiks and businessmen in scenes of Punch and Judy violence. Made in the 1980s and 90s, these images tap the symbolic repertoire of carnival and the visual resources of propaganda and advertising as they comment with ferocious wit on Cold War rivalries and on the score-settling and disappointments that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Empire.

If, in contemporary collage, one current is descended from Duchamp and another from the likes of Heartfield and Höch, it is clear from the show that a third and less promising current exists, one that can be traced back to the precious late-surrealist confections of Joseph Cornell, of which a few are on display in the gallery. Among the more recent examples of this tendency are the dainty pictures of John Digby, who has superimposed old adventure book illustrations on images of winged insects, the similarly intricate work of Maritta Tapanainen, with her neatly arrayed biological and botanical diagrams, and the fastidious, colour-co-ordinated arrangements of Michael Cooper and Chris Kenny. After Davis's sharpness and Birladeanu's outrageous verve, these pieces come across as formally fussy and conceptually thin. Still, the show as a whole makes a strong case for the continued relevance and vitality of collage. As the best passages here demonstrate, the medium, with its parasitical basis and readily ironic engagements, is ideally suited to examining the changing face of a world that is overrun with images – a world in which, as Guy Debord famously put it, 'all that was once directly lived has become mere representation'. ■

MARCUS VERHAGEN is an art historian and critic.

■ Quiet Revolution

Milton Keynes Gallery 4 July to 30 August

In his oft-quoted journal entry of 15 May 1824, Eugène Delacroix wrote: 'What moves men of genius, or rather, what inspires their work, is not new ideas, but their obsession with the idea that what has already been said is still not enough.' For much of the time afterwards this was a deeply unfashionable viewpoint, as cultural historians continued to cling to the belief (evident as far back as the writings of Vasari) that art was locked in a neat teleology that saw the best of each generation improve upon and decisively break with the discoveries of their forefathers. More recently, though, the idea of inevitable progress has been challenged in the writings of Bruno Latour, Michel Serres, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who have maintained that intellectual endeavour is inherently non-linear and philosophies from different eras can resurface, combine and disappear in unpredictable ways. In *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, 1995, Michel Serres argued that: 'Every historical era is likewise multitemporal, simultaneously drawing from the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic. An object, a circumstance, is thus polychronic ... and reveals a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats.'

This may be so, but there still seems to be something unquestionably different – not necessarily derivative, just different – when an idea is encountered for the second, third or umpteenth time rather than the first. This thought was reinforced by visiting 'Quiet Revolution' at Milton Keynes Gallery.