

# MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

Virtual programme accompanying the exhibition *John Heartfield – Photography plus Dynamite* at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2 June – 23 August 2020

## “The camera is like a pair of scissors”

In the context of the John Heartfield exhibition at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, we are interested in looking at “montage” in different art forms, reflecting on new visual forms in the face of digital imagery. On the other hand we are also interested in looking at images of atrocities, which Heartfield also collected as montage material but very rarely used for his political photomontages.

Christian Marclay in conversation with Angela Lammert

Angela Lammert Last year, at the Venice Biennale, I saw your video work *48 War Movies* (2019) and was truly impressed. I am intrigued by your montage technique with films, the formal strength of the work, and your use of sound. Could you talk about the relationship and differences between acoustic and visual montage?

Christian Marclay Sound is a lot easier to mix. Because there is no limit to sound, it can be layered in ways that images can't. With photography and moving images the montage is always visible. In film the cut is visible, part of the editing process, and part of the final aesthetic of montage. Images are read in a more linear way, one after the other. The cut is unavoidable, while with sound it's always a mixture of many sound sources; a polyphony of simultaneous events. When you play music, there are many different instruments blending, yet they come together as a unified sound. Music is also very abstract. And you can change the interpretation of images with music. In photomontage the collage is not abstract, it's composed of images from real things, and you can't hide the cuts and seams. That's what makes it so powerful, it's at once recognizable as real, because of photography, and yet fictitious because of the unreal juxtapositions.

AL I experienced your work *48 War Movies* (2019) in some sense as an *Anti-Clock* in relation to your well-known video installation *The Clock* (2010), and also as a continuation and condensing of it.

CM The two works are very different, but maybe one similarity is that they are both sort of structural films. They both have a structure that determines the content. *48 War Movies* incorporates sound and image, but you can't match the sound to the image because the image track is unrecognisable due to its fragmentation. The image becomes abstract, and the layering of 48 soundtracks, one on top of the other creates a cacophony. So you have an image which is rendered abstract and a sound that is even more abstract.

There is no way to identify the films, and to match the action with the sound. The soundtrack is not illustrating anything: there is no synch, there is no identifiable diegetic sound. The viewer is lost, therefore I found that when installing the work I needed a sound system that would compensate for that confusion, and make the sound feel as if it was coming from the centre of the projection, in order to help the viewer understand that all the sounds – music, dialogues, sound effects – are linked to the films and not coming from another source. Sound in traditional cinema only comes together in post-production, to give a realistic and wider sense of space. You can create the illusion of a sync sound very easily. When, for example, you see a door slamming, that sound effect could be anything. It could be someone hitting a desk and you would interpret it as a door slamming if it matches the door's movement. It doesn't even have to be realistic to make you believe in it. But in *48 War Movies*, you don't have that audiovisual connection. It's very disorienting. Therefore, I had to really work with the speakers in the exhibition space, as a way to make up for the lack of visual identification. I only used a slight stereo effect. I could not use surround sounds or exaggerated stereo, otherwise the viewer would not understand why a sound coming from the back of the room is related to the abstracted image. It's a very strange experience. We all watch movies in poor conditions, such as on our little computer screens, with a small internal speaker, and yet we believe that the sound is coming from the image, even if it doesn't, because we can see the action generating the sound.

AL What you are saying about abstraction in relation to film and the space at the centre of the image, where the sound emerges, but where the image is absent, reminds me that rhythm can bring about a strong and unconscious relationship between sounds and images. Especially in *48 War Movies* but also in *The Clock*, they remind me of a heartbeat, imbuing the experience with a sense of dread, or a stifling feeling, a conundrum without reso-

lution or without a narrative story. Is your method of editing a reaction against the culture of music video, in which the images follow the rhythm of the sound and the editing uses a lot of fast jump-cutting?

CM Rhythmically the works are different. *48 War Movies* doesn't really have a rhythm, except maybe visually with its concentric geometry. *The Clock* repeats the rhythm of the day, every 24 hours, seamlessly in an endless loop that is always the same. Every day at 3 pm you'll see the same footage, but what changes are the people watching it – their lives are changing every day. One similarity is that the two videos have no beginning and no ending. You can enter at any moment, it doesn't matter when you start watching, and you can leave at any time. *48 War Movies* was not as labour intensive as *The Clock*, because it has a simple structure: the layering of 48 war films with no edits. I only removed the credits so that no text would help identify the movies. I don't want people to recognize the films. It's not necessary, since they could be any kind of war movies. And because they all have different lengths, the films' relationship keeps shifting in infinite ways, because they start looping at different times in endless permutations. That's how I wanted it, but the reality is that technically it's not yet possible today. My computer is not fast enough to do this *ad infinitum*. Therefore I had to create a twelve-hour video version on a continuous loop. The truth is that nobody is going to notice. But conceptually it is very important to me, and eventually I will make this a permanent installation where the relation between the films keeps slowly shifting and changing and never playing the same way twice.

So it's very different from *The Clock* where everything is in order, and it took me three years to edit. It wasn't easy to find all these edit points and bridges between thousands of unrelated scenes, and create an illusion of continuity for 24 hours. The music plays an important role in that illusion, allowing scenes from different films to be linked and helping to create a more traditional flow. As I said, sound has that fluid quality that image doesn't have. And music in most films is there to manipulate the emotions. It's artificial and added later, as a way to fuse fragments together into a scene.

AL My question about the different lengths of the fragments is about rhythm: Are these varying lengths an element of the rhythm? You have often used very short film clips sequenced to condense space and time, and elegantly montaged them with precision. In *48 War Movies* you use the full lengths of the films – to achieve ever-new random combinations of the looping imagery. Is the cacophony you mention your way of expressing a sense of menace? And is the never-ending loop, which also symbolises the never-ending continuity of war, how you take a counterposition to Hollywood portrayals of war?

CM *48 War Movies* is definitely anti-war and anti-Hollywood. *The Clock* is not a protest video and it's rather celebratory of Hollywood. The editing was dictated by two things: the rigidity of real time and the emotional structure of the scenes. I had to stay on time but the found footage also dictated the structure, I was restricted by what I found. The found material is always central to my work – my music, my collages, analog or digital. The aleatory nature of what I find dictates what I can do with it. Even when I have a plan I'm never sure if something found along the way will change my direction. I really never know what the final outcome is going to be. What I find will suggest a direction, a course of action. I try to apply this approach in all my work.

You can also feel it in John Heartfield's work, because some of his strongest images are photomontages composed of different photographic sources. Not just found material, as he sometimes photographed his own subjects. But there's always that magic moment when you put two images side by side and something unexpected appears. The war images he used were found; they came from libraries or magazines. But when a new meaning comes out of an unexpected juxtaposition, there is always an element of chance at play, which is too often underacknowledged. The montage process deals not only with the images at hand, but their various scales, reproduction quality, colour or black-and-white. Scale is an interesting thing when you do collage, because every image is printed on a different scale.



Christian Marclay, *48 War Movies* (excerpt), 2019, Single-channel video installation, color and stereo sound, Continuous loop, Dimensions variable. Steven Probert © Christian Marclay. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

So a face may be too large and not fit exactly on a small body, or maybe what you need is a small face on a big body to express what you want. These jumps in scale appear often in Heartfield's photomontages. And that is really part of the production – a creative process that embraces chance. You never know what is going to happen until you start assembling the parts together.

AL Can a parallel be made between the variations in size of individual elements used for a photomontage and the differing lengths of the films you used in *48 War Movies*? In comparison to the work *The Clock*, which is characterised by a temporal succession of film fragments, the simultaneous overlapping or layering of the different films in *48 War Movies* produces a certain merging or "blending effect".

CM This blending effect is not natural to moving images. Yes, you can have multiple exposures, have two or more layers blending together, cross fades and dissolves, but this is used in cinema to express a dream, or memory flashbacks to express the irrational. So, in a way, the structure of *48 War Movies* has more to do with old-fashion collage using scissors rather than the mixing board. Each film layer hides part of the one beneath. They overlap in receding size, partially hiding each other, cutting out the centre. You can only see the outer edges of the films, I'm not showing you the centre where the main action happens. We're usually so focused on the central action that we never pay much attention to the edges. We naturally tend to pay attention to things that are in front of us rather than on the periphery.

The camera is like a pair of scissors: it's cutting, framing, cropping reality. It doesn't let you see what has been cut out. That's why I always felt that photography is sort of a violent medium, the way it chops up the world into a rectangular shape. The camera isolates and frames what it sees. So maybe looking at the edge is almost like looking beyond the edge. That borderline is what really interests me, it's a transitional space. That's why I like watching films in airplanes with the sound off, because I'm not focusing on the action at the centre of the screen. My eyes can drift and notices things on the edges, not having the sound telling me where to focus my attention. The silence allows my eyes to wander around unanchored.

AL While talking about Walt Disney's *Fantasia* – for which Oscar Fishinger made some of the initial drawings – the dramatist Heiner Müller once said that he hated the way the animation becomes an illustration of the music, because you could no longer see the images without the sound.<sup>1</sup>

CM Without sound I can create my own narrative. In *48 War Movies* you can never identify with the actors and the action. The actors are invisible, especially the main characters because they are in the centre of the frame. You

might see a few faces on the edges, but they're mostly extras, never the stars. Therefore you can never identify with the hero. And a lot of war films are stories about heroism and personal sacrifice for someone, or for a country. They often tend to romanticize war, and are used as a kind of propaganda. *48 War Movies* is not about heroes – there's no room for a narrative or for any mythology. There's no room for identification. War becomes abstract.

AL You've often spoke about how you didn't make the selection of the films yourself but in discussion with your assistant, because any war movie would work. You often rely on this process of finding things randomly. Is that right? How does the selection of your material come about?

CM Making *48 War Movies* was a little like making a minimalist sculpture by sending a sketch to a factory. I started with a formal idea of the target-like structure of films stacked on top of each other, cancelling each other by overlapping concentrically in receding scale. There was no sentimental attachment to any of these films and most of them I have never even seen. It's not a genre that I like. The choices were very pragmatic, I wanted the highest resolution DVDs available on the consumer market, so I only used films available on Blu-ray discs. I wanted consistency in the image quality, and the format 16:9, the widescreen aspect ratio. And then the number of movies really came down to how many films I could fit to screen, as I wanted the last film, the centre one, to be small enough so you wouldn't be able to recognize it. The centre film is the only one that's not cropped; you're seeing the whole image rather than just the edges. Then I had to figure out an order, and that was also determined by the resolution quality, the older films versus the newer ones. So the films are layered in chronological order of when they were made, regardless of the period depicted. The most recent is the largest one on the outside edge. The resolution quality is most important on the larger films, the most visible ones, and as they get smaller you see less of the image and the resolution is less important. The ordering of the films didn't really matter otherwise, because you can't really see them. And finally I wanted all the films to be in colour, to feel more unified. The composite image is very dense and active, there's so much movement from the actions, the camera movements, and the edits. It looks like a giant kaleidoscope or an abstract stained glass window, always changing. And all 48 soundtracks overlap, the density of which guaranties that there is always some kind of battle sounds, screams, machine guns, and explosions obscuring the quieter parts. The dialogues are incomprehensible, and the music is unrecognizable. A romance going on in the middle of the war will be obliterated.



Christian Marclay, *Scream (Shaking Red)*, 2019, color woodcut, 228.5 x 121.5 cm. © Christian Marclay. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

AL It was interesting to see your woodcuts in another exhibition space – in Venice. And, at the time, I asked myself about the colours of these giant prints. You just explained about using colour and line to unify. I also see these elements in this abstract video montage. Can you say more about the relationship of sound waves to the lines in your woodcut prints? Or, for instance, between comic books and Edvard Munch's *The Scream*? Did you also exhibit the woodcuts to show that your work goes beyond video and sound art? What concepts were behind these very different presentations in different exhibition spaces?

CM The curator Ralph Rugoff wanted each artist presented in the Arsenale to also showcase a different work in the Central Pavilion, to reveal the variety of materials and approaches that artists use today. We don't need to be limited to one medium, and I certainly don't. Making woodcuts and referencing Munch felt right for me at this time. The woodcuts are very different from *48 War Movies*, but both works reflect on the fear and anxiety that we are all experiencing now, with the erosion of democracy, the rise of authoritarian leaders, and the damage to our environment. It's interesting that you underline the colour in the woodcuts as a unifying device between the fragments. Colour

plays different roles, sometimes unifying the fragments of the comic book imagery, and sometimes differentiating them, by accentuating the rupture. I used large sheets of plywood as woodblocks, selected because of their wood grain. The mouth screaming is kind of amplified by the wood grain patterns, or growth rings, which sometimes look like sound waves, or how we tend to represent sound visually. I was always a fan of Edvard Munch's woodcuts and how he reveals his medium, the woodblock imperfections, and uses it expressively. In his famous black-and-white lithograph of *The Scream*, there are almost concentric lines echoing out of the mouth like a ripple effect, giving the invisible sound a visual and dynamic presence. Wood grows very slowly and the wood rings are yearly markers of this growth. The lines in the wood are traces of time passing. Sound is the opposite, it's fast and ephemeral. It only exists in the present, lasting fractions of a second. I really enjoy this huge discrepancy between the slow growth of a tree and the speed of sound.

AL How did you make these large woodcuts? Where does the imagery come from?

CM I first made small collages with fragments of screaming heads, found in comic books and Japanese Manga. They were blown up and carved into the plywood with a comput-



Christian Marclay, *Scream (Flaming Shards)*, 2019, color woodcut, 183 x 116.5 cm. © Christian Marclay. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

er-controlled cutting machine. Again it's very much about that relation between the different fragments, the points where lines meet and connect, to give an illusion of a unified whole. Today with Photoshop or any digital editing software, we are losing that rough edge, the edit gets smoothed out to hide the joint, and it becomes more of a visual trick. It's more about fooling someone rather than being critical and really showing how things are made. I'm always trying to acknowledge and negotiate those joints, to find the right bridge between unrelated things, to create a push and pull tension between a unified illusion and an obvious edit. To allow the viewer to understand and identify with the process. Today it's really hard to recognize fakery. More and more digital tools are used to fool us, and we can't tell what's real or what's fake anymore. That's why it's important for me to show the seams, to show the cuts, to show the construct. Everything around us is dependent on these connecting points, these borders, where one thing ends and something else starts. It's where the road meets the sidewalk, where the floor meets the wall, the wall meets the painting, or even the edits between scenes in a film. We find meaning in these connections, and it doesn't matter how they are made, by accident or intentionally. These meeting edges are everywhere and are always being interpreted and mitigated.

AL It is such a pity that you can't see the Heartfield retrospective in Berlin because in London it will be quite a different exhibition, as many of the original montages won't be travelling. Even for me, having worked with Heartfield for so long, it was so interesting to see the haptic quality, the "resistance of the material" in the original montages. The Berlin exhibition reveals Heartfield's production process – from his source materials to his pasted and retouched original montages, as well as the works' interim photographic stages, and the artist's unused collections of images.

CM Just before the coronavirus lockdown, I saw an interesting Picasso exhibition at the Royal Academy,<sup>2</sup> about his use of paper, not only his Cubist collages, but many experimentations, from doodles to sculptures. There were lots of works that have not been seen much, because they are not necessarily considered finished works, or completed masterpieces. The less important works are so revealing of the exploration, the hesitations, the failures. It's thrilling and energizing to see the immediacy and inventiveness that paper allowed Picasso. You see how creative he was with whatever piece of scrap was in front of him, whether a napkin or a newspaper. That playfulness also exists with Heartfield, because even though his photomontages are very carefully constructed, you sense a playfulness which is intrinsic to collage. Things happens that you couldn't have predicted, because you're dealing with existing images, it doesn't necessarily start in the imagination, but in the phys-

ical act of combining readymade fragments. When you play with cut-outs there are often these moments of accidental discoveries. Artists like Picasso and Heartfield were able to see and react to these unexpected transformations. It's not just their skills as draftsmen or painters, or photographers, but their ability to see what's there, to listen to the found material and work with it.

AL Do you prefer to use the concept of collage as opposed to the concept of montage? You talk a lot about collage, but many critics refer to montage instead.

CM For me, montage is more related to cinema. Collage is a more all-encompassing word. Any two things you force together becomes a collage, two dimensional or three-dimensional. The physical quality of collage is appealing to me, maybe it's a reaction to the intangibility of the digital. Right now, while in confinement, I mostly use my digital tools to communicate with people – like we are doing right now – and this technology becomes a lifeline with the world, but for my current work I tend to stay away from the computer and have gone back to low-tech collages, using paper, scissors, and glue.

AL I have a very personal question: In an article by Daniel Zalewski he talks about your "collagist instinct" that came early to you, in part because the mix of languages in your family home when you were growing up caused you to somehow distrust language and to rely more on images. And you had a grammar school teacher who encouraged you to draw on large books of wallpaper samples.<sup>3</sup>

CM Actually that was in primary school. Those wallpaper samplers were so much fun to draw on. I still remember the great pleasure of that experience. The surfaces had different textures and printed motifs already there. I'm sure all these things have influenced me, and strangely in retrospect, as I get older, I'm more aware of certain patterns in the way I approach making art. I need to react to something that already exists. So maybe I'm more of an observer than an innovator. My role is to make art with what is around me, with what I see and experience.

- 1 Heiner Muller, quoted in Babak A. Ebrahimian, *The Cinematic Theater*, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD, 2004
- 2 *Picasso and Paper* exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London (25 January – 2 August 2020)
- 3 Daniel Zalewski, – The Hours: How Christian Marclay Created the Ultimate Digital Mosaic", *The New Yorker Magazine*, 5 March 2012