

Phil 130
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On collage

“One of the first artistic acts I remember is cutting things out. As a child, I would draw tiny people and cut them out with scissors, mostly for the purpose of tucking them inside the fold of a paper boat. . . . [T]his love of collection . . . showed up again in the fragmented, nonlinear essays I wrote in college and in the collages of cutouts from Google Earth I started making in grad school.

. . . what I love about collage: it’s not something from nothing, but something from something. The ingredients don’t just hang together in a new way; they truly become something else. . . . In the paste-ups, each piece, each participant, each “word,” takes its meaning from other pieces. It is all selection and placement.

[The process includes] not just cutting and pasting, but noticing, first of all. [Jess, a collagist, said] that he salvaged most of his imagery from books, magazines, and postcards wasting away in thrift stores, but that images could also be salvaged from ‘a possible obscurity’ if they had ‘spoken up out of the matrix of images that surround them.’ [He] treated his scraps like family heirlooms and would sometimes hold on to a clipping for more than 20 years. While 90 percent of his filed-away scraps never made it into a piece, Jess would ‘ritualistically continue the process of searching, finding, and filing.’

Searching, finding, and filing—especially in seclusion, as Jess often worked—are what sense-making looks like to me. I grew up in a time of grotesquely proliferating information, easier than ever to access and with a seemingly total lack of structuring narrative. For me, collection and arrangement were a response, a necessary adaptation: you could give up and live in a senseless world, or you could set about building sense from whatever scraps you could find.

In the pandemic years, . . . I sometimes returned to the humble art of making collages from whatever magazines were lying around. . . . I did this not as an art practice, but as a writing practice. Collage reminded me that even in nonfiction, there are so many more ways for things to be related than in a linear, causal manner. . . . not so much a traditional argument as an arrangement, what Jess might’ve called ‘a matrix for the imagination.’

[T]o me, the most generous thing an artist can do—regardless of medium—is to create a distinctive space, a kind of ego-less garden in which a visitor finds her own way ‘There are many stories. I really would not want to tell you what I see and that often changes anyway—because that would limit your seeing.’ The works was, for [Jess], “not a narrative, but more a dialogue of presences.”

[At Berkeley] I emerged from the building only to find myself in a different collage. The paved walkway was straight, but the campus was made out of fractal paths of noticing, each with its own surprising details: the perfectly constructed beehive outside the library, the man in a skeleton costume posing for a photo in front of the science building, the peregrine falcon shrieking overhead while he did. Every oak leaf, edges backlit by the afternoon sun; every tired shoe crossing Oxford Street; every menu item outside the Persian restaurant; every metal pipe along the ceiling of the BART station; every plastic curve of the AC Transit bus; every scratch on the window through which I saw every stucco wall and peeling billboard. In the visual frame left to me by Jess, the meaning was to be found not in the things themselves, but in the dialogue of their presences. It’s a language I’m still learning how to see and write in.”

Jenny Odell, “On collage and the practice of searching, finding, and filing,” *13 Ways of Looking: Jenny Odell*, Pioneer Works Broadcast, September 21, 2023.