

What key issues were at stake in Rosalind Krauss's analysis of Picasso's Cubist Collages and what implications does her argument have for collage work by Hannah Hoch produced in post-war context of Berlin Dada?

CULTURE & IDEOLOGY ESSAY

HANIA AFIFI

An oversized perfume bottle with a diamond cut-glass stopper rests on the left side of the dressing table, whilst a smooth goblet stands on the right side. In between these two pieces, sits the much prized signature box of 'Au Bon Marché', promising delicate delights from their lingerie section ... or is it a wine decanter that sits on the left side of a 'Au Bon Marché' tray whilst a peculiarly shaped wine glass which appears to hover in mid-air is placed on the right side of the scene depicted in this composition? Perhaps it is not a glass all together, but a lamp with its shade. Indeed, this is the 'messy' nature of collage work with its arbitrary multifunctional forms, its manipulation of traditional visual codes and its open field that encourages spectator participation that continues to invite art historians and critics to re-review its pieces.

Picasso's *Still Life Au Bon Marché* collage piece of 1913 (see Fig. 1), bears most key features common across his work – a heterogeneous composition of found objects such as newspaper clippings and paper cuts carefully placed onto a flat surface and intermingle with pencil/charcoal drawings with the odd paint brush stroke. However, this particular creation – significantly less analysed and critiqued by art historians – exhibits a number of curiosities that puts it at odds with his other more celebrated collage works. Careful examination of the work will reveal the underlying dynamics at

play in this intriguing piece.



Fig.1 Pablo Picasso, *Still Life – Au Bon Marché*, 1913
Mixed Media: Oil, cardboard, charcoal/print
23.5cm x 31cm
Ludwig Collection, Aachen, Germany

Picasso chose to paint a decorative uniform pattern on the entire cardboard plane, reminiscent of customary Edwardian-striped wallpaper, rather than adopt his more familiar method in collage creation, which is cutting-out an actual wallpaper piece and pasting it onto his working surface as in

Still Life Bottle of Vieux Marc of 1913 (see Fig. 2). Whilst Greenberg argued in his 1958 *Collage* essay that Picasso and Braque were keen to maintain the integrity of the flat surface as he wrote, “It was for this reason, and no other that I can see, that in September 1912, Braque took the radical and revolutionary step of pasting actual pieces of imitation-woodgrain wallpaper to a drawing on paper,

instead of trying to simulate its texture in paint”¹, Picasso’s 1913 *Au Bon Marché* collage returned to the tradition of illusion when he simulated the wallpaper texture. The decanter/perfume bottle figure is created by a shallow relief cut-out of the foreground (the painted cardboard), yet is pushed forward by Picasso’s addition of an illusionistic ‘real-like’ drop shadow.² Again almost in defiance of Greenberg’s shading overview analysis of collage³, *Au Bon Marché* retains the illusionistic shading technique. These could be some of the factors that discouraged modernists like Greenberg and the young Rosalind Krauss from analysing this particular piece.

We attain a sense of a table plane by the black translucent horizontal wash at the bottom centre of the artwork reinforced by the solid black opaque vertical blocks that run across the bottom of the work. These blocks also function as optical indicators for depth of space; most pronounced by the sharp angularly cut block on the right-hand side that helps in the realisation of a 3D box/trunk to the *Au Bon Marché* label occupying centre stage in this composition. It is not unusual for Picasso’s forms in his *papier collés* to serve a double function in order to establish a new coherence of surface and depth of space.

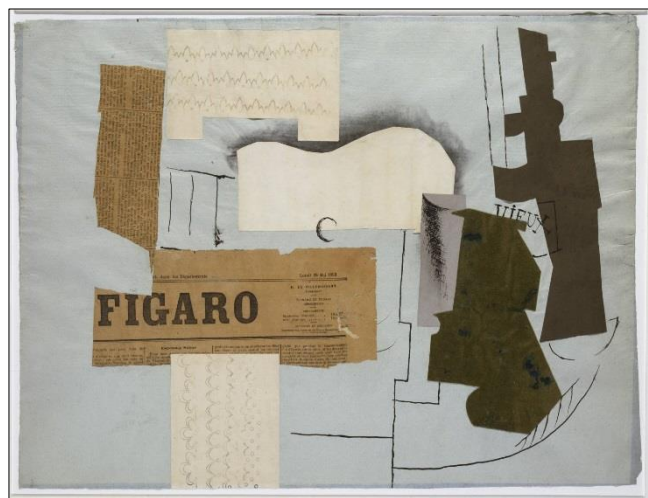


Fig.2 Pablo Picasso, *Still Life – Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, Guitar and Newspaper*, 1913
Collage – printed papers and ink on paper
46.7 cm x 62.5cm
Tate Collection

The intriguing cut-out goblet/wine glass is scarcely outlined in pencil/charcoal allowing it to represent the skeletal structure of bed-side lamp with a small shade; more befitting of a boudoir environment, thus bestowing upon the entire composition a coherent theme of a functional living space in the real world (the boudoir or bedroom).

The two most controversial elements within this collage piece occupy the top and bottom centre grounds. To the top, a cut-out clipping of a newspaper print advertisement for ‘La Samaritain’; a renown shopping department store in Paris flagged by the fragmented visible word ‘SAMA’, depicts

¹ Clement Greenberg. ‘Collage’ in *Collage* in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4, Modernism with a Vengeance 1957 – 1969*, (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1998), pp.

² Due to the fact that I am undertaking the visual analysis of this piece from a photograph rather than the actual work, there maybe inaccuracies whereby what appears to be a shallow relief/cut-out in the photograph is actually a painted layer or a pasted newspaper cutting is in fact a painted on layer. Nevertheless, the underlying principle of depth and surface tension evident in Picasso’s collage work is the notion I am exploring.

³ Clement Greenberg. ‘Collage’ in *The Collected Essays*, Greenberg wrote, “In collage, shading though restored to specific shapes or silhouettes, lost its power to act as modelling because it became a specific shape in itself. This is how and why shading, as means to illusion, disappeared from the collages of Braque and Picasso, and from their Cubism, never really to appear.” pp.

a woman's bust at the left corner and reads out "Facilites de paiement 20 mois" (payment facility of 20 months) in addition to the word "massage"⁴. The bottom space is occupied by a relatively narrow but short vertical cut-out strip that reveals the flagrant white background onto which carefully placed newspaper cuts were arranged to read out, "L un B trou ici" (The B hole is here). There have been many interpretations of this particular phrase as Krauss notes,

"Nowhere is this naturalising tendency more vulgar than in Edward Fry's reading of "Au Bon Marché", which taking off from Rosenblum's earlier suggestion that Picasso is punning with the prominent placement of the word trou, sees this "hole" as the linchpin of the collages's putative depiction of "a woman of apparently easy virtue" seated behind a café table, her legs beneath the table [indicated] by clippings with the pun 'LUN B TROU ICI'"⁵.

Whilst Krauss maybe correct about Rosenblum's misreading of this particular element, the discourse generated by it, demonstrates that it is imperative that we examine all visual components of any collage composition before undertaking any analysis exercise or interpretive reading. Collage⁶ - often regarded as part of or emerged from Synthetic Cubism and developed by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso between 1912 – 14, hinges on the notion that all elements in existence can be simplified into basic geometrical planes visually identified by the colour, shape and texture differentiation between them on the flat surface.

Such formalist outlook on art lends itself to modernist critique and review. In her celebrated essay of 1981, 'In the Name of Picasso', Rosalind Krauss notes that "Modernism's goal is to objectify the formal constituents of a given medium, making these beginning with the very ground that is the origin of their existence".⁷ Krauss, a zealous modernist in her early years, not only recognised the fluidity by which Picasso's collage work can be analysed using a structural approach when she writes, "As a system, collage inaugurates a play of differences which is both about sustained by an absent origin: the forced absence of the original plane by the superimposition of another plane, effacing the first in order to represent it"⁸, she attacks alternative postmodernist approaches to the reading of collage, particularly the auto-biographical. She viewed collage in the same manner that Saussure

⁴ A post-modernist Krauss review of collage in 1998, suggests that the paper advertisement and the suggestive "massage" word allude to the idea that women during this period of time were torn between two personas. On the one hand is the girl "who shops the white sales ... thinks about her trousseau, her undergarments (and) the young middle-class girl taught from the age of fifteen to think about nothing but love and flirtation, who then marries into coldness and boredom but lives "in a city overflowing with sexual excitement"" from 'The Circulation of the Sign' in Krauss *The Picasso Papers* (Thames and Hudson, Great Britain, 1998), pp. 61 – 62.

⁵ Rosalind Krauss. 'The Circulation of the Sign' in Krauss *The Picasso Papers* (Thames and Hudson, Great Britain, 1998), pp. 69

⁶ For the purpose of this essay, I will only consider *papier collés* in collage and refrain from referencing any full 3D collage sculptures. Hence, when mentioning collage, it will always be in reference to *papier collés*.

⁷ Rosalind Krauss. 'In the Name of Picasso' in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1986), pp. 38.

⁸ Rosalind Krauss. 'In the Name of Picasso', *Originality of Avant-Garde*, pp. 38

regarded language⁹. In true Greenbergian fashion, Krauss chooses to disregard any allusion that the artwork in question can be affected by its creator or refer to an object outside itself; as she argues in her essay,

“this manoeuvre of finding an exact (historical) referent for every pictorial sign, thereby fixing and limiting the play of meaning, should be questionable with regard to art in general is obvious. But that it should be applied to Picasso in particular is highly objectionable, and to collage – the very system inaugurated on the indeterminacy of the referent, and on absence – is grotesque. For it is collage that raises the investigation of the impersonal workings of the pictorial form, begun in analytic cubism, onto another level: the impersonal operations of language that are the subject of collage.”¹⁰

Krauss’s argument may endure when analysing most of Picasso’s collage pieces where arbitrary elements have been assembled together without necessarily conjuring a cohesive theme. However, in *Still Life Au Bon Marché*, there appears to be an underlying thematic layer which although not vociferously pronounced, should not be overlooked. The feminine signifiers of, department store and shopping, lingerie, a suspected perfume bottle and bed-side table lamp point towards a female consumerist world. Perhaps this explains the reason behind Krauss’s reluctance to undertake an analysis of this composition in her 1981 essay when modernism was on the threshold of an inevitable clash with postmodernist theories of representation. Krauss felt obliged to defend modernism values, of maintaining the integrity of the picture plane and its boundaries and reignite modernism’s flare in the early 80s, however, her views were subdued in the late 90s and thus she was more willing to tackle this piece.

⁹ Christine Poggi. *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism and the Invention of Collage*, (Yale University Press, New York, 1993), pp. 48. Poggi explains Saussurian structural approach to language as “a self-governing system of relational values or differences, which establishes the possibility of meaning at every level of linguistic articulation, from the smallest phoneme to larger syntactical units”. If we replace the language by collage, the meaning this sentence implies will ring true to Krauss’s point of view. The ‘smallest phoneme’ will be replaced by the line or mark and ‘larger syntactical units’ will be replaced by forms.

¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss. ‘In the Name of Picasso’, *Originality of Avant-Garde*, pp. 39

Further, Krauss's 1981 collage reading fails to factor in the resemblance aspect the viewer encounters in collage work, which by default compels him/her to engage with visual phenomena outside the pictorial boundaries. Whilst the forms in Picasso's artwork may be articulated "into an aggregate of discrete pictorial or plastic signs ... which can be redistributed within a composition: by making it possible to read a given shape (or an entire configuration) as referring to more than one object at once"¹¹, many of these elements resemble objects outside the picture frame, particularly in his composition of *Au Bon Marché*. There is no doubt that the female bust in advertisement poster/paper resembles the classic woman figure in the early teens of the 20th century, nor will there be any hesitation for a 1913 viewer of this collage to recognise the *Au Bon Marché* label which was used on their packaging (*see Fig. 3*). Again, such views run against modernism proper and thus were not addressed at length in the 1981 essay.



Fig. 3 *Au Bon Marché* Packaging Box

Hannah Hoch's photomontage *Pretty Girl* of 1920 combines printed cut-outs of women and machine components photographs from mass publications with a repeated BMW badge 4-colour painted drawing.¹² The various elements have been assembled tightly with many overlapping forms that obscure the actual image underneath whilst leaving the border edges untouched. Such arrangement creates a singular collective body dramatically enhanced by the desolate emptiness of the surrounding background (*see Fig. 4*).

Unlike her most celebrated collage piece *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Beer Belly of the Weimar Republic* of 1919, *Pretty Girl* possesses a clear visual hierarchy where a cut-out of a female blonde hair-mane holds central stage. The woman's face is obscured by a newspaper cut-out where we glimpse a partial view of the letterings, however, unlike Picasso's 'SAMA', not enough is revealed to conjecture a proper word.¹³

¹¹ Christine Poggi. *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism and the Invention of Collage*, (Yale University Press, New York, 1993), pp. 51.

¹² Like the Picasso Collage, I am analysing this photomontage from a photograph of the work and thus unable to certify whether the BMW badge is a drawn painting or a coloured magazine cut-out.

¹³ Patricia Leighton and Robert Rosenblum had argued that Picasso's fragmented words and news in his paper clippings were not accidental, but carefully constructed and assembled to reflect his political sympathies and ideology discreetly. As Taylor Brandon notes, "Patricia Leighton has worked out that of Picasso's fifty-two *papier collés* ... about half ... refer to the military conflict in the Balkans ... Leighton's suggestion is that Picasso was showing us his anarchist syndicalist sympathies", in Brandon Taylor. *Collage: The Making of Modern Art*, (Thames & Hudson, London, 2004), pp. 20



Fig.4 Hannah Hoch, *Pretty Girl*, 1920
Mixed Media Collage

To the right side, a chromatic photograph depicting the face of another blonde woman captures our eyes due to the vast difference in tonality vis a vis all the other elements in the composition. Although all photos used are essentially black & white, they appear to be rendered with an orange/pink sepia tint except for the top right woman's face mentioned earlier and the centre bulb-like figure in the middle of the composition. This artistic technique enables Hoch to highlight the parts she deems more important.

Only one eye is visible in the top right-cornered face, since the other eye is obscured by a BMW badge. The eye

appears to be of a play doll that was cut out and pasted onto the face of the woman. A sense of hollowness is achieved by the oversized dark pupil and dramatized by the contrasting grayscale tonality of this figure in relation to the rest of the montage. Clearly, Hoch wishes to signify a particular meaning by establishing a hierarchical opposition where a "single form or means of representation emerges as superior or truer than any other".¹⁴

The light-bulb form which replaces the seated woman's head is significantly accentuated by its brazen whiteness against the warm hue of the composition. Whilst the underlying uniform pink tone that is spread across the various elements (be that the tire, hair-mane, metal gears, rotating lever or even 4-coloured BMW badges) invites our eyes to gently move between the forms, the severe whiteness of the light-bulb and to a lesser extend the doll-eyed face on the top right corner holds our gaze. According to Lacanian theory, any object that holds the gaze, inevitably compels the viewer to engage in a cognitive process whereby his/her subjectivity will come into play. Since these

¹⁴ Christine Poggi. In *Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism and the Invention of Collage*, (Yale University Press, New York, 1993), pp. 19. Poggi argued that Picasso was adamant about establishing a non-hierarchical visual relation between the various elements in his composition, so as to function as independent pictorial units that acquire meaning in their relation to other pictorial units in the same way language is constructed. However, it is evident, that this was not a method adopted by Hoch in her photomontage pieces.

two highlighted elements are representative of 'real-life' objects, by default the viewer becomes engaged with the artwork outside the pictorial frame, like they would be in Picasso's *Au Bon Marché*.

Before progressing with the signification and interpreted meanings, we must note the repeated BMW car badge scattered in between the female signifying elements and the machine/mechanical parts depicted. The only coloured and repeated component in the composition, is the BMW badge, which in itself acts as a signifier to the highly coveted and much revered car. Within the contextual framework of the photomontage it also serves as a constant visual cue that prompts the viewer to connect the badge with other depicted elements the eyes may linger on since it is placed as a filler between the various elements.

Hoch's use of the BMW badge in her photomontage suggests that her artwork is non-autonomous since she is already engaging with external economic and political factors outside the pictorial field. Moreover, unlike Picasso's collages - which for the greater part constituted abstract geometrical forms that may or may not represent a visual phenomenon in the 'real' world – Hoch used actual photographs that already act as representative images of external objects. Such use serves as an indicator that Hoch regarded her artwork as medium by which she can express her own views about the world she lives in. Thus a strictly modernist approach like Greenberg's to reading her photomontage will fail to realise the highly political nature of her artistic endeavour that probes industrialisation and gender issues during Weimer Germany. As Jeff Wallace notes,

"Hoch combines images of female sexuality with parts of a BMW (Bavarian Motor Company) car, exploiting comparisons between sexual and mechanical performance and highlighting the processes of commodification ... The composite image opens out surgically, as if to expose the capitalist system that evaluates women and cars together".¹⁵

We must note the fact that, unlike Picasso, Hoch was an active partaker in the Berlin Dada movement, whose artistic agenda extends beyond the pictorial properties of an image and its construction. Its activists have just sprung out of the devastating WWI which left a lasting trauma on their emotional status and compelled them to question the prevailing norms, establishments and reason. According to Eddie Wolfram, "Hoch used her collages to hold up a distorting mirror in the face of the immediate post-war years. Her style was to poke exuberant fun at the anachronisms of the decaying feudal order of Kaiser Wilhelm and the newly-emerging age of the metropolis powered by industrial juggernauts".¹⁶

¹⁵ Jeff Wallace. *Beginning Modernism*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2011), pp. 60 – 61.

¹⁶ Eddie Wolfram. *History of Collage: An Anthology of Collage, Assemblage and Event Structures*, (Studio Vista, London, 1975), pp. 82

Thus, with this heavily politicised artistic drive in Hoch collage work, Krauss's structuralism¹⁷ is not truly applicable, nor can such an approach be used when reviewing any Dada artwork since every element in photomontage resembles an idea that the artist chose to question. As Wolfram notes, "The most original aspect of the collage work of the Berlin Dadaists was their vivid propagandist use of photomontage, real-life documentation which in this way could be ridiculed or stripped of its pretensions, laying bare some previously hidden truths of its essential character".¹⁸

In reviewing both collage pieces, one cannot help but note the similarities and differences encountered. As indicated earlier, both compositions address the female gender and her position within a capitalist society. It may appear as though Hoch's composition is purely an attack on the objectification of women and a critique of the male-centric consumerist regard of her sex, a postmodernist viewpoint like Maud Lavin's will demonstrate the plurality of meanings the composition may convey,

"well documented by German women's historians ... women's lives in Weimar were a contradictory mix of emancipation and deprivation ... Hoch's montages, conveying a compelling mix of anger and pleasure ... Hoch didn't have all the answers, but she had some great wide-opened questions ... gave viewers room for complex, ambiguous emotional responses".¹⁹

Indeed, a single dimension view will fail to notice the irony implied in both collage works: Picasso's possible play on the word 'TROU' as Krauss notes in her 1998 essay, "and even more nastily he (Picasso) has "trousseau" play associations with "trou" – as in Apollinaire's early pornographic novel *Mirely, or The Little Low-Priced Hole*"²⁰, and Hoch's female light-bulb head which may signify that woman is both an inventor of ideas and contributor to the society, whilst being objectified as an item of male desire. Essentially, both Picasso and Hoch were forced into a "straitjacket dichotomy"²¹: where Picasso collage work is recognised as an objective exploration of pictorial structure and Hoch's work as political condemnation of women's placement in Weimer society.

¹⁷ whereby meaning is acquired through negation since it is established solely through the process of differentiation to other elements within the system, suggesting that each element does not hold a value in its own right

¹⁸ Eddie Wolfram. *History of Collage*, pp. 80

¹⁹ Maud Lavin. 'The Mess of History or the Unclean Hannah Hoch' in Catherine De Zegher *Inside The Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* (MIT Press, Boston, 1996) pp. 119

²⁰ Rosalind Krauss. 'The Circulation of the Sign' in *The Picasso Papers*, pp. 62

²¹ Maud Lavin. *Hannah Hoch*, pp. 118. Lavin created this term to refer to the simplistic judgemental view art critics and historians utilise when reviewing an artist's work and his/her motives and life in general. She resented the prevailing US viewpoint that Hoch recognised that women's lives in Weimer Germany were miserable and Hoch, the saviour was addressing the issue. In her words, "this argument makes me want to throw up". Indeed, formalist, structuralist and modernist historians are always keen to categorise artists and box them in particular frameworks, however with the advent of postmodernist deconstruction theories, where the opposing dynamics were thoroughly reviewed, art historians and critics became less inclined to reach a definitive conclusion about an artwork or an artist.

Over and above, these two creations, have fused the boundaries between high-art and low-art. As Krauss notes in her 1998 essay,

“The defiance of high art ... into this “pasted paper revolution” most visibly by the use of newsprint ... the cigarette packs, the matchbooks, the wallpaper, the department store and bottle labels – flaunt their connection to a mass cultural source just as openly, thereby shrugging their shoulders at the sacred preserve of high culture and its values.”²²

We may argue that collage, instigated by Picasso and Braque, reinforced by the Dadaists was a prelude to Pop Art, where the distinction between mass and high culture was openly and widely questioned in the 60s. The Cubists, the Dadaists and the Pop Artists appear to have a similar motivation and an underlying rejection of bourgeois values, but this drive was manifested differently in varying styles.

In conclusion, we must note the problematic nature of collage and realise that a single-focused viewpoint or reading will fail to capture its compositional intention. Krauss realised this in her later years in *The Picasso Papers*, but philosophers like Schleiermacher had long advocated the merits of regarding the entirety of any phenomena in order to understand it correctly. His most notable contribution is when he states, “Good interpretation can only be approximated ... no individual inspection of a work ever exhausts its meaning; interpretation can always be rectified”.²³ This rings true today in this postmodernist era where questions prevail replacing the absolute definitive precepts and whether it is a collage by Picasso or Hoch, one can always revisit the work and extract new meaning.

²² Rosalind Krauss. ‘The Circulation of the Sign’ in *The Picasso Papers*, pp. 71

²³ Friedrich Schleiermacher. ‘From Hermeneutics: From Outline of the 1819 Lectures’ in Vincent B. Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, Barbara E. Johnson and John McGowan, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (W.W.Norton & Company, New York, 2010), pp. 535

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