

MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

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Cut and Physicality: How Can We Draw on John Heartfield's Legacy Today?

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Instagram-Posts by the DJs Suede the Remix God and iMarkkeyz on Johnniqua Charles' Rap *You about to lose your job*, 4 June 2020

Thinking about how we can build on John Heartfield's work today (besides the fact that all media are inherently based on montage techniques), three questions come to mind:

First, there is the question of art, i.e. what role does cutting/editing play in montage today, which Cubism and Dada carried over from the temporal arrangement of film to become a method for organising surfaces? (Heartfield's montages are quite likely to have been profoundly influenced by his work as a filmmaker for the UFA cultural department). Then there is the question of activist image practices: What potential does the distortion and recontextualisation of found images hold? Both questions are related to the third question, namely: How has the impact of images and way they are circulated changed over time?

1 Circulation

The increasing bandwidth of the mobile internet at the end of the aughts and diversification of methods by which images can

be generated with camera phones and circulated on social media has seen to it that simply any event can be brought to the attention of the global public, any time, anywhere. A fascinating, current example is the video of a temporary arrest outside a South Carolina strip club. Hands cuffed behind her back, arm firmly gripped by a security guard, Johnniqua Charles, an African American woman, protesting angrily, suddenly breaks into an impromptu rap, which she accentuates with a shimmy: "You about to lose your job / cause you're detaining me / for nothing." The nocturnal parking lot scene, which took place just a few months before the murder of George Floyd, and was uploaded by the security guard himself, was discovered during protests against police violence in June 2020 by DJs Suede the Remix God and iMarkkeyz. They looped Charles' words to a hyped-up trap rhythm,¹ created an accompanying music video with Charles dancing, and synced up footage of two current highlights of black culture, Beyoncé's legendary 2018 Coachella festival performance and Childish Gambino's music video *This is America*. They synchronised the various excerpts to look as if they were dancing to the same beat as Johnniqua Charles, who was completely unknown until then. Next to a dancing Elmo from Sesame Street, arrest photos of the four Minneapolis policemen involved in the murder of George Floyd's scroll upwards.

The video spawned numerous copycat videos, in which regular people danced the handcuff dance, also in front of an image of the current Republican president. Charles' ability to transform and take back a threatening, overpowering situation with a cultural gesture became a symbol of the new balance of power, where the self-evident existence of the police as an institution is suddenly called into question.

Soon videos were popping up that showed people at demonstrations pogoing and breakdancing to the tune of *You about to lose your job*. And there were also new remixes that took all the power out of it and turned it into a travesty.

In her essay on John Heartfield's montages in the exhibition catalogue, Tacita Dean emphasises precisely this aspect of manual artisanship and physical resistance, so very different to the ease with which memes are brought into circulation. Never-

theless, as Boaz Levin states in his symposium essay, I also see them as a contemporary equivalent to Heartfield's montages. The above-mentioned video is also a meme. It is precisely the randomness of this parking lot scene that lends itself to being used as the comical basis of a viral, visual practice that cannot be ascribed to one single, individual creator – where the role of the artist is limited to appropriation and passing it on. It creates a moment when a principally open, participative audience celebrates its agency to act and to decide as a collective entity what this video, which is relatively open to interpretation, means and what objective it has.

Charles uses the last recourse she has – culture. The value of her gesture for others is rooted in its reference to the cultural backdrop of rap, on the one hand, and the shared experience of racism-driven police violence on the other (without that being the case here: the security guard is neither a policeman, nor is he “white”). Her visual practice is physical. Mediated via images, it is imitated and commented on by others. For Heartfield, making images was a physical act of resistance; today the effortless circulation of images enables the distance between images and (human) bodies to grow increasingly smaller. And unlike Tacita Dean, it is precisely here that I see the possibility for smoother, perhaps particularly efficacious changes, which rely more on the activation of collective intuition rather than rationalisations.

2 Activism

This point follows on seamlessly from my first conclusion: the meme is the dominant form in political visual practice. Demonstration signs are informed by it, and are also its historic precursors. In our current age, no image can claim final authority, except in autocratic regimes. On the internet images will always be vulnerable to distortion, malapropism and recontextualisation. Online presentations are aware of this impermanence. At the same time, I'm not sure if the impact images have hasn't begun to shift: Whether caricatures of Donald Trump, for instance, don't actually increase his representational power.² Because images are much more loosely linked to their original context than they were in the past, they seem to increasingly communicate their ideas more independently.

This was demonstrated in one motif for a poster campaign commissioned by *Der Spiegel* magazine, which was designed by the advertising agency Serviceplan. It shows the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) politician Alice Weidel giving an impassioned speech. The image has been mirrored, so the two figures are back to back. The image facing left has been captioned “The base is downplaying the right wing of the party”; the figure facing right states “The right wing is becoming the base of the party”, and underneath in red is the caption: “We hold the mirror [*Spiegel*]

up to the world.” In fact, the poster had a “magnifying” effect, enlarging the visual power of the AfD, instead of diminishing it. By the time viewers managed to catch up with the ad agency's train of thought, they had already had to time to habituate themselves to the image of unfettered populist rage, effectively staged against a dark backdrop.

While viewing the Heartfield exhibition I came to an abrupt halt before the montage *Reservations – Jews driven like cattle*, created in 1939 for *Reynold's News*. The way in which Heinrich Himmler plods through a montaged herd of people, brandishing a whip and dagger, exudes a strange aloofness between the accuser and the victims, and a certain complicity with the violence presented here. But perhaps it is only my generation looking through me that is colouring my perception.

3 Art

To me, cutting/editing feels like the most pervasive formal intervention in use in contemporary art. I'm thinking of the work of Arthur Jafa, who primarily works with montage: over the course of 8:22 minutes, his film *Apex* uncomprisingly edits together hundreds of images, from Marcel Duchamp's urinal to African masks, scenes from *Alien* and other films. As in *The White Album*, for which the artist was awarded a Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2019, Jafa tears images out of their contexts and relocates them in a limbo, where they are forced to look at one another. It becomes all too apparent that a truly universalistic universalism must in fact take into account the differences between “white” and “black” perspectives. Both also come into confrontation, so that viewers are made aware of their own preconceptions. It is interesting that, as can be seen in the video of Charles, Suede and iMarkkeyz, this happens more by way of identification rather than by indoctrination.

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=800Jpb5zWo&feature=emb_title, accessed 17 June 2020

2 See Kolja Reichert, “The Trump-Balenciaga-Complex”, 032c, 13 May 2020, online: <https://032c.com/trump-balenciaga-complex>, accessed 17 June 2020