In Defense of The Simple Image

By

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Abstract

In Defense of The Simple Image, extends key theorist Hito Steyerl's poor image and suggests the simple image as a new construct to value images with. Steyerl suggests that the poor image creates a new value and hierarchic scale to view images, challenging our traditional notions associated with photography's rich images. My dissertation builds upon Steyerl, arguing instead for a simple image that re-imagines the role of images away from the overt-complexity that dominates our world. With this continual bombardment of manufactured realities, our shifts in focus to appearances rather than the product, function, or reality itself. For me the simple image allows us to rethink and reflect on the role of imagination, opening up new possibilities for imagined futures. Primarily using collage and collage aesthetics, my practice explores how fragmented worlds of a reconstructed past may challenge our notions of time and reshape our thinking of the future.

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A Short History of The Image

In our hyper-saturated, post-produced, image-rich world it is important to understand the barrage of visual language embedded in our perceptions of reality and modes of re-presentation. The role of images continues to shift from the modern image, which begins in the 19th century, to present-day images. My practice centres on the question of the image, in which I frequently ask what an image is, and what an image could be. Are images ubiquitous and inescapable? Have we become and will we remain images?

The study of images begins with the most basic question: what is an image? W.J.T. Mitchell finds an image in "any likeness, figure, motif, or form that appears in some medium or other" (xiii). For John V. Kulvicki an image is "one of several kinds of representation, including pictures, non-pictorial images, and merely isomorphic representations." He continues by noting that a representation is "something that stands for, or is about, something else" (195, 198). Focusing on the truth in representation, Susan Sontag states, "to possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to reexperience the unreality and remoteness of the real" (177). At the most basic level, an image is a representation that point to the world in some manner, which for me is important because image do not simply re-present 'the real' but, especially in contemporary culture, they create our sense of reality.

Michel Foucault challenges the history of representation through Edouard Manet's advancements of the modern image. He asserts that during the 19th Century, "Manet reinvents (or perhaps he invents) the picture-object, the picture as a materiality, the picture as something coloured which clarifies an external light and in front of which, or about which, the viewer revolves" (Foucault 31). Foucault's interest is in the experience of reality and the viewer's relationship with the physical object of the image. Through the picture-object as Nicolas

Bourriaud states "Manet invents the figure of the modern viewer, questioned by a pictorial object which renders him conscious of his presence and of his position within a much larger system" (Bourriaud in Foucault 17). Manet's playful representation of reality with multiple warped perspectives and the closed depth from behind, seen in Bar the Folies-Bergère 1882, controls the position and distance of the observer to a specific location within the space. Jeff Wall's Picture for Women, 1979, pays tribute to Manet's work and further reinforces the idea of the picture-object and the rectangular surface highlighted through his use of scale. The modern image is seen in Manet's imagined representation of images, shifts our perspectives and helps challenge our understanding of what images are and what they can be.

Figure 1: Manet, Edouard. *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*, 1882, Courtauld Gallery, London. Oil on Canvas.

Figure 2: Wall, Jeff. *Picture for Women,* Collection of the artist. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. Transparent cometographic photograph in light box.

Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" was developed in response to modernity, and the growing mechanical reproducibility of images for the masses; accelerated with lithography, advancements in photography, and the modernization of the printing press. Benjamin observed that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (169). Benjamin suggested that the authority of the original, which carries with it a personal history, and 'wear and tear', is lost when reproduced. The value of art traditionally embedded with aura, ritual, and cult value, shifts as images are copied, shared, edited, and commodified. The increase of access and excess of images nourishes a new capitalist

society, where images have now become an unlimited resource (Sontag 195). This opens up new possibilities for the production, reproduction and presentation of images in art, specifically the development of papier collie, collage and photomontage.

Building on Benjamin's ideas, Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* defines the image in and through his notion of spectacle. "The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images," Debord states (17). The sheer repetition of images stimulates our hunger to consume capital, with a desire to showcase appearance depicted in the images, verses for function, and need. A continual bombardment of manufactured realities shifts our focus, to appearances, rather than the product, function, or reality itself, which is further reinforced and perpetuated through 'liking' these images with a push of a button. Circulating the image's power correlates to their ability to pique the populous' desires. Despite the fact that Debord's text was written nearly fifty years ago, it is unequivocally relevant in our consumer-obsessed, image-rich world in which we continually produce, reproduce and consume the spectacle as information.

Martha Rosler's provocative photomontages are a perfect example of the spectacle. The two series *House Beautiful Bringing War Home* 1967-1972 and 2004-2008, comment on post-war imagery, specifically, mass-produced/consumed advertising that idealized women in the domestic sphere, contrasted with the public realities of war and the male's assumed role as a soldier. In Rosler's *Photo Op*, 2004, a thin woman in the forefront is duplicated, on her phone, wearing a revealing dress, showcasing appearance (spectacle), she is juxtaposed with the soldiers battling in the war directly outside her window. In spite of the intense fluorescent colours of the harsh reality of war outside, we are drawn to the foreground's protagonist and the idealized

reality. As Christine Filippone tell us, "Rosler's combinations are a reminder that all images in the media, whether of brutal war or pleasing domestic furnishings, are presented to the American view for consumption as spectacle" (4). As an ingenious critique of society, Rosler uses the image culture of the spectacle as source material in her photomontages.

Figure 3: Rosler, Martha. Photo Op From the series Bringing War Home: House Beautiful, new series 2004, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin/Cologne. Photomontage.

We see Debord's conception of the image developed in different ways by several more contemporary thinkers, notably Jean Baudrillard, Hito Steyerl and Byung-Chul Han. For Baudrillard, "It is the promiscuity and this ubiquity of images, this viral contamination of things by images, which are the fatal characteristics of our culture" in which, "images cannot be

prevented from proliferating indefinitely" (35, 36). The internet is the ultimate hotbed for images; for Steyerl poor images and Han smooth images. As we shift into a world mediated by screen culture, the role and function of images become more complex. Baudrillard proposes that "there is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and the functional surface of communication" which results in "the surrounding universe and our very bodies are becoming monitoring screens" (20). In agreement, Han could apply Baudrillard's words to argue that a smooth image is "a pure screen, a pure absorption and resorption surface of influent networks" in which negativity is smoothed out. (30). Steyerl on the other hand challenges Baudrillard's assumptions of images being absorbed by screens and suggests the movements of images on and off screens into our reality.

Society should consider the roles we play with image construction, circulation, manipulation, and reproduction online, resulting in what Steyerl coin's as 'poor images'. Steyerl suggests, within "In Defense of The Poor Image," that the poor image creates a new value and hierarchic scale to view images, challenging our traditional notions associated with photography's rich images (2009). Our post-produced reality is represented as poor images cycled through the internet, become a new image, and a new entity in and of itself. Our perspectives can shift as "the condition of the images speaks not only of countless transfers and reformattings, but also of the countless people who cared enough about them to convert them over and over again, to add subtitles, reddit, or upload them" (2009). "Users become the editors, critics, translators, and (co-) authors of poor images ... sometimes even losing names and credits along the way" (2009). For Han, he sees this as a moment of smoothness as "the sharing economy also makes 'ownership' superfluous by substituting it with access. The digital medium resembles the characterless sea on which no fixed lines and markings can be engraved" Han calls

this "the man without character, characterless smoothness" (50). For both Steyerl and Han, the movements of images online ask the questions, if an image at its most basic level is a representation, what do the smooth image and poor image represent?

Han questions our society's obsession with the hyper positivity of the smooth image and the disappearance of beauty in our post-internet world. "The smooth is the signature of the present time. It connects the sculptures of Jeff Koons, iPhones and Brazilian waxing" (1). Screen culture has flattened, transformed and smoothed images beyond aesthetics into a society of the smooth, into an age that Han associates with the social media 'like'. Smooth consumption of information, capital, communication and experience have been reinforced and perpetuated through 'liking' images with a push of a button; void of any resistance or negativity, the smooth image "reaches its maximum speed where like reacts to like" (10). It has become impossible to escape our consumer culture in which we devour smooth images and images smooth conceal reality. "The greedy consumption of images makes it impossible to close the eyes" (38-39). Digitization smooths and redefines experience, meaning and beauty through our ongoing consumption.

In "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead," Steyerl observes that with the development of technology, specifically the internet, images have proliferated, flooding our reality. Images "are rather nodes of energy and matter that migrate across different supports" (2013). As we move beyond the screen's traditional borders, the flood of images results in continuous unwitting consumption. Images have moved faster and circulated immeasurably, barraging a larger and larger population. Steyerl proposes that we no longer need to be plugged into the internet to experience it: the internet is now omnipresent. "The internet is probably not dead. It has rather

gone all-out. Or more precisely: It is all over" (2013)! Perfectly edited individuals no longer were limited to the screen but could be seen in our every day, walking down the street. "They walk through, fall off, and fade back into the screens" (2013). Images exist everywhere, are a part of everything, and have thus invaded all aspects of our everyday lives. In this sense, we have become images.

It is important to understand the impacts of the internet and the barrage of visual language on our perceptions of reality. Post-war desires began a continual cycle of Debord's spectacle, in which, as he writes: "Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (7). The cycle of images occur and reoccur, and through this the presented becomes the represented. As Sontag suggests, "To consume means to burn up, to use up – and, therefore, to need to be replenished. As we make images and consume them, we need still more images, and still more" (194-195). While we move beyond the screen's traditional borders, the proliferation of images results in continuous unwitting consumption of spectacle. As we are trapped in a hamster wheel of representation and presentation, our capacity to stay vigilant in our cognizance of the post-produced world is questioned. For me the solution to this problem was to turn to what I call simple images.

A Fragmented History of Collage

Paul Cézanne's paintings from the 1870s onwards depart from the limitations of Impressionism by embracing a fragmented image quality. Jon Kear notes that for Cézanne, "A premium was placed on the process of perception itself as a richly complex field of exploration rather than any associational content of the landscape" in which elements were "often radically fragmented and occluded to the point of illegibility" (116). Cézanne's new approach to images requires the modern viewer to imagine and complete the work. A good example of this shift can be seen in Cézanne's *The Large Bathers* (*Grandes Baigneuses*), 1906, where he depicts a group of bathers with multiple distorted proportions, perspectives and angles. His short brushstrokes are fragmented, broken and constructive. We can also observe that he left many unresolved, unfinished areas.

Figure 4: Cézanne, Paul. *The Large Bathers (Grandes Baigneuses),* 1900-1906, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Oil on Canvas.

As Timothy. J. Clark observes: "Never … has a picture declared itself so openly - so awkwardly - as made out of separate, overdetermined parts coexist only on sufferance" (140). Looking closely at the center foreground, we are presented with a figure with an unrecognizable paint smear where her hands are meant to be, on the far-right another figure is reduced to shapes and implied lines and yet, we can easily envision a completed composition. Cézanne plays an important role in the development of Cubist collage specifically, through this extreme fragmentation of the surface.

The founders of Cubism, Georges Baraque and Pablo Picasso, "were concerned with everyday 'reality', with the sensations and surfaces that made up their world" as Brandon Taylor suggests, which was becoming increasingly fragmented with the arrival of Modernism in the early 1900s (17). In mirroring this evident shift in perspective and the multitude of represented surfaces around them, the cubists were attempting to challenge their viewers to consider their perception, understanding and relationship to reality. The precursor to Cubism is seen in the continuation of the fragmented image in Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, created a year after Cezanne's Bather series. Picasso presents us with five nude prostitutes using simplified geometric forms and a multitude of planes and surfaces. The warm colours allow the figures to move forward away from the cool background tones, conventional perspective was not used.

Figure 5: Picasso, Pablo. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,* 1907, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Oil on Canvas.

With Modernism also came growing access to print media and consumer products which inspired Picasso and Baraque to begin experimenting with adding the debris of modernity, "reality fragments" as Peter Burger terms them, onto the picture plane (72 - 73). Baraque's still life *Fruit Dish and Glass*, 1912 is frequently celebrated as the first cubist collage. He combined pieces of woodgrain wallpaper onto the fractured surface to represent the table, drawer and background while the fruit is sketched in charcoal. Picasso adopted Baraque's innovative technique into his own practice, demonstrating the significant roles and representations the materials held. For example, in Guitar, Sheet Music and Glass created by Picasso in 1912, we see

Picasso's use of shapes, implied lines and his specific paper selection -wood grain, musical

scores, coloured paper and text from the newspaper together depict a guitar and suggest the

playing of music.

Figure 6 (Left)
Braque, George. *Fruit Dish and Glass, 1912,* Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Charcoal
and cut-and-pasted printed wallpaper with gouache on white laid paper; subsequently mounted
on paperboard.

Figure 7 (Right)
Picasso, Pablo. *Guitar, Sheet Music and Glass,* 1912, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio. Cut-
and-pasted wallpaper, newspaper, sheet music, coloured paper, paper and hand-printed faux boix
paper, charcoal, and gouache on paperboard.

The Zürich Dada movement emerged in 1916, at the Cabaret Voltaire, in Zürich, neutral

Switzerland in response to the heightened political and social climate experienced during WWI.

The Cabaret, created by poet Hugo Ball and cabaret performer Emmy Hemmings, featured

impromptu performances and art exhibitions which as David Hopkins states: "revelled in the chaos and the fragmentation of modern life" (II). Dada values that embodied anti-art, anti-bourgeois, and anti-enlightenment materialized. The Dadaists were conscious of the experience of the viewer and hoped to influence and shift the public perceptions of reality. The value of art was challenged as images were made for immediate consumption on stage as opposed to having a lasting value as a traditional art object. The collective ideals broke down the category of art proper and shifted away from 'great' art and making art for the institutions of art and art history; as Taylor asserts, "representation in the old manner was at an end" (38). The Dadaists were particularly adamant in reimagining our relationship with art, reality, and modernity.

The highly politicized agenda of Zürich Dada gained momentum. Dada photomontage and collage developed as artists were drawn to as Hopkins suggests "the very act of cutting up and recombining imagery from newspapers and magazines bearing connotations of cutting into (and further fragmenting) the fabric of social reality" (77). The immediate consumption of mass media, popular knowledge source material made the collaged imagery easily recognizable and relevant to a specific moment, time and place. Debord in the 1960s will address this growing production and consumption of images. "The spectacle is both the result and the project of the dominant mode of production," he notes: "It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. In both form and content, the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system" (10). The Dadaists used the ongoing assumed consumption of controlled images to their advantage during a time of wartime censorship, as collage and photomontage allowed for legal criticism and commentary - a reimagining of society and destruction of reality. Taylor observes, "Dada's reinvention photo-fragments functioned as

witness of the contemporary urban life" (41). The Berlin Dadaist members working with collage include Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, Wieland Herzfeld. John Heartfiel and George Grosz.

Hannah Höch's powerful Berlin Dada collages critique society and politics, with an agenda to transform the representations of reality and the societal status of women to be equal to men. Her work requires the modern viewer, who can easily identify the mass-produced image fragments and is asked to take an active role to interpret the open-ended, harsh juxtapositions. The work entitled *Cut with a Kitchen Knife* as Maud Lavin states, "functions as a Dadaist manifesto on the politics of Weimar Society" (19).

Figure 8: Höch, Hannah. *Cut with a Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany*, 1919, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Collage.

Höch cuts into the material representations of consumer culture and presents us with a new future. The women are dancers and figure skaters, dynamic, moving and changing, while the men are static and conforming, making clear the gender hierarchy in Weimar society. Circular machines parts such as wheels and gears suggest the continual advancements of modernity. The textual elements echo propaganda and sales strategies, recruiting followers to "join Dada," shouting: "world of the Dadaists," "Dada is not an art trend." Höch celebrates the modern image fragment highlighting irregular scale, printing material and cut lines while maintaining a balanced thoughtful placement of her characteristic disjointed faces and truncated bodies.

The Surrealist movement lead by the poet Andre Breton, was inspired by Cubism and was primary made up of the individuals who formed Paris Dada. Advancements in psychology, specifically Sigmund Freud's publication *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900 also played a role in the foundation of the movement. Freud's theories centered around the human psyche, suggesting the need to be cognizant of our unconscious, irritational unrealities, void of reason. The Surrealists aimed to make the subconscious world visible by accessing their dreams and developing chance operations, awakening intuition and imagination. As Taylor notes, "The terrain of Surrealism was not public protest but a profoundly inward meditation on the psyche itself revealed through uncanny moments of everyday life" (136). Or, as Breton would define in his *Manifesto of Surrealism,* 'real life' (3). The movement is often referenced with the simile from *Les Chants de Maldoror* by the Comte de Lautréamont/Isidore Ducasse, "beautiful as a chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella" (Lautréamont, in Taylor 20). As Lautréamont makes clear, the collage aesthetic plays a significant role within the movement, specifically through unexpected juxtapositions.

Max Ernst bridges both the Dada and Surrealist movements. Through bizarre juxtapositions and Freudian undertones, his practice invites us into the realm of the imaginary, of dreams and nightmares, of alternative realities and worlds. Ernst defines collage as "the complete transmutation, followed by pure act, as that of love, (which) will make itself known naturally every time the conditions are rendered favorable by the given facts: the coupling of two realities irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them" (13). Ernst's collage novels, novels *Une Semaine de Bonté* (*A Week of Kindness*) 1934, *La Femme 100 Têtes* (*The Hundred Headless Woman*) 1929 and *Rêve d'une Petite Fille Qui Voulut Entrer au Carmel* (*A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*) 1930, illustrate his theory of collage and are held up as a paragon and forerunner for expertly juxtaposing and merging images together seamlessly. In order to conceal the image fragments and flatten the image, Ernst skillfully selected and cut imagery from limited source material; specifically, the magazines *La Nature*, *Kolumbus-Eier* and *Le Magasin Pittoreque* and then photographed the work (Taylor 68). These aesthetic strategies reflect the core ideals for the simple image.

Figure 9: Ernst, Max, Collage From: *A Week of Kindness*. 1976.

During Surrealism, the collage aesthetic also appears in painting and assemblage. The beginning of this shift can be understood through Giorgio de Chirico's paintings where he combines fragments to create unreal, unprobeable spaces that could exist. A key example of which is *Portrait [prémonitoire] de Guillaume Apollinaire*, 1914. We understand that it is possible to experience a bust with sunglasses, an oversized baking pan and a silhouette of a man with a hat together, however, for these elements to exist in the way de Chirico presented them is unlikely. Throughout de Chirico practice, we can see the surrealist ideas of the real and unreal – the conscious and unconscious.

Figure 10: De Chirico, Giorgio. *Portrait [prémonitoire] de Guillaume Apollinaire (Ritratto [premonitore] di Guillaume Apollinaire),* 1914, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

De Chirico's style inspired Ernst to expand his vocabulary and add collage juxtapositions within his paintings. In Ernst's painting *Odepipus Rex*, 1922, it appears almost as if it is a collage. We see weapons piercing an emerging hand holding a walnut shell on the left, two bird like heads trapped in a hole on the right, and a tiny hot air balloon in the distance.
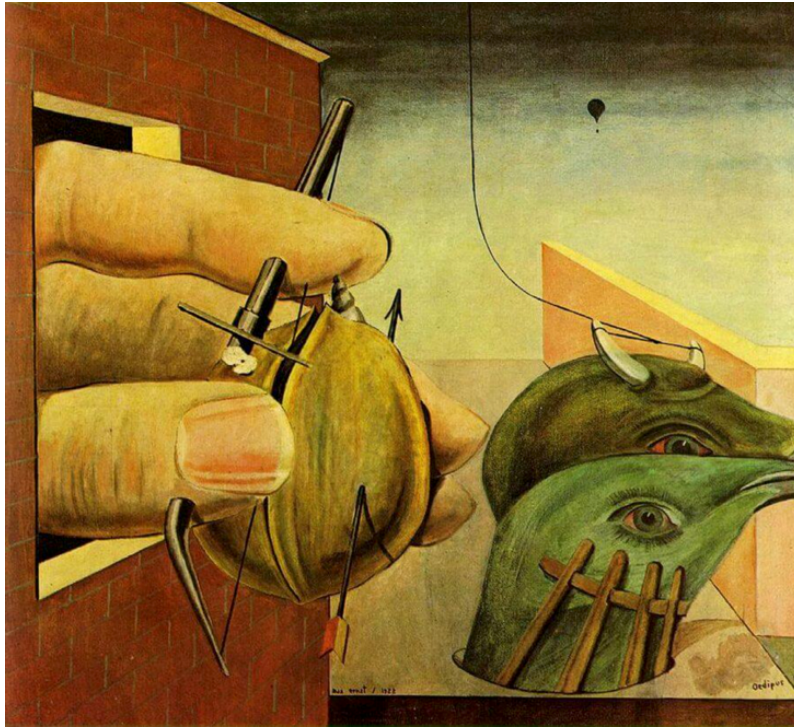

Figure 11: Ernst, Max. *Oedipus Rex*, 1922, Private Collection. Oil on Canvas.

In Ernst's work *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale*, 1924, the collage aesthetic takes a three-dimensional form though the addition of a miniature gate and miniature front of a house added to his illusionist painting.

Figure 12: Ernst, Max. *Two children Are Threatened by a Nightingale (Deux Enfants sont menaces par un rossignol)*, 1924, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Oil with painted wood elements and cut-and-pasted printed paper on wood with wood frame.

Another key artist who was influenced by both de Chirico and Ernst, is Joseph Cornell. In the 1930s Cornell creates a series of sixteen collages in tribute to Ernst titled *Story without a Name – For Max Ernst* published in View 1942 (Hussey in Richebourg 27). Among this collection, Untitled, 1930's by Cornell showcases his appreciation for Ernst to the extent that it could seamlessly continue the narrative in Ernst's novel *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*. The piece it would be in dialogue with is *Tell me who am I: me or my sister* with Cornell's work would be depicting the sister.

Figure 13 (Left): Cornell, Joseph. *Untitled*, 1930's, *part of 1-16 collages published in View 1942" Story without a Name – For Max Ernst, Collage* Ernst, Max, "Tell me who am I: me or my sister" published in *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*, 1982.

Figure 14 (Right): Ernst, Max, "Tell me who am I: me or my sister" published in *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*, 1982.

Cornell also expands the collages aesthetic through developing his trademark assemblage boxes. He incorporates found objects into shallow boxes, creating contained imagined worlds. The first created is *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*, 1948. Cornell shares his ideas and object associations for the Soap Bubble sets in the Copley Gallery exhibition catalogue from 1948:

Shadow boxes become poetic theatres or settings wherein are metamorphosed the elements of a childhood pastime. The fragile, shimmering globules become the shimmering but more enduring planets—a connotation of moon and tides—the association of water less subtle, as when driftwood pieces make up a proscenium to set off the dazzling white of seafoam and billowy cloud crystallized in a pipe of fancy. (12)

Figure 15: Cornell, Joseph. *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set),* 1948, Art Institute of Chicago, Box construction.

As Surrealist poet Louis Argon tells us, collage has become a 'philosophical operation' moving 'beyond painting'. "The principle of collage once admitted, painters had unknowingly passed from white to black magic. It was too late to retreat" (Argon, quoted in Taylor 71). The Dada and Surrealist uses of collage, especially in response to the advance of images in contemporary society, develops into a series of vocabularies that define high modernism and eventually postmodernism. The expanding collage aesthetic takes on a psychological formation in a number of practices.

The Situationist International takes the collage aesthetic and politicizes it. It's foundation critiques modern society's social systems and passive consumption of Guy Debord's 'accumulation of spectacle'. Debord states in his text "Report on the construction of the situations," in "Situationist International Anthology," "Our situations will be ephemeral,

without a future. Passageways. Our only concern is real life; we care nothing about the permeance of art or of anything else" (41). One of the 'situations' that the SI practiced was collaging reality fragments into psycho geographical reimagined maps of the city; through this strategy as David Banash claims, "the city becomes malleable, something they can reinvent by cutting into it" (146). This new collage aesthetic can be seen in the *Psychogeographic Guide to Paris*, 1956 by Guy Debord and Asger Jorn. The map does contain the regular components of any official city map, such as a compass rose, scale indicator, legend and grid. Instead, we are presented with fragmented rearranged shapes of the city cut from commercial maps, connected with red arrows pointing in numerous directions.

Figure 16: Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, The Situationist International. *Psychogeographic Guide to Paris*, 1956, Multiple on paper.

In Memories, 1959 the two artists use paint marks on an existing map combined with pasted reality fragments not only to modify the existing map's structure, but also a situation. The SI

aimed to shift our understanding of how we experience and perceive the urban landscape in which our capitalist consumer society is built. As Tom McDonough notes in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, "Debord's map images a fragmented city that is both the result of multiple restructurings of a capitalist society and the very form of a radical critique of this society" (253). It is important to understand this in relation to Debord's spectacle as he states, "is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12). The SI was interested in the possibility of new social connections that emerged through their collaged maps, which speak not only about fragmentation of the image but the larger fragmentation of perceptions of society more broadly.
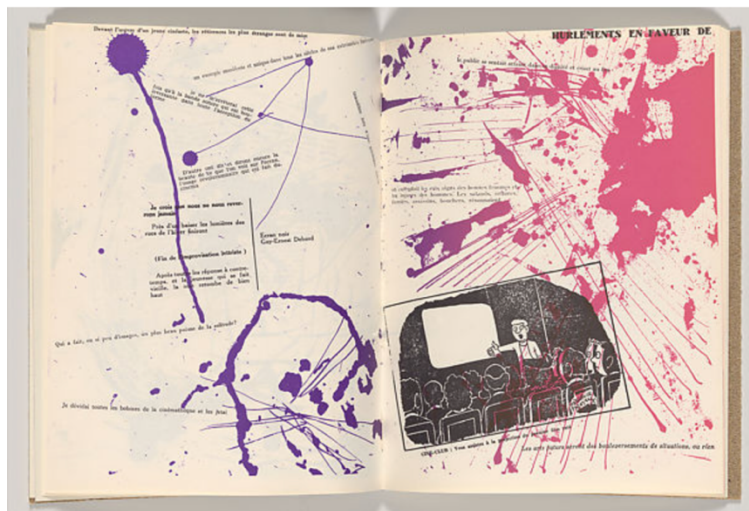

Figure 17: Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, The Situationist International. *Memories*, 1956, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Illustrated Artist Book.

Generally speaking, we can talk about contemporary collage beginning when the college aesthetic shifts from reality fragments to expanded material explorations. After Pop Art, Assemblage and Conceptualism, we see a distinct change in the approach to collage, specifically in terms of an overwhelming abundance of visual information that is made readily accessible

through the rise of the internet and digital media. This is what Hito Steyerl suggests when she speaks about the proliferation of images crossing our screens into reality.

Byung Chul Han's ideas of the smooth can be applied to contemporary collage, specifically the way that it helps us describe a key quality of how these images are meant to be consumed. Han observes that: "Immediate presence becomes total. It pushes out any latency. Everything has to be available at once" (38-39). Production becomes geared toward our conditioning to consume for instantaneous gratification of spectacle. As a result, within much of contemporary collage practice the image becomes obvious, trendy even, as common tropes are leaned on to the point where juxtapositions no longer require an active viewer who must interpret; images are presented as pre-interpreted. Imagination and curiosity are, for the most part lost within images imbedded within images. In Stezaker words, "All the multimedia that's around now, to me that's montage. Everything is montage, we live within a montage, and to me that's terrifying." (Stezaker in Bushch 31). For me, this is the core problem, that faces the predominate collage work being produce and exhibited today. As a contemporary collage artist, my practice aims to work against this, towards what I define as the simple image.

Many of the images created in contemporary collage can be called complex images. Some of the key qualities emerging in complex images, specifically in collage include: an overuse or overabundance of imagery, visible cutlines, rips and material depth, a separation or neglect of relationship between fragments, over curation and reference to our screen culture and digital consumption.

Geoffrey Farmer's work *Leaves of Grass*, 2012 is a prime example. The work consists of 16,000 double sided fragments sampled from *Life Magazine* from 1935-1985. The images are mounted on wooden posts and arranged in chronological order as a three-dimensional

collage. In an Interview with Rosemary Heather for *Canadian Art*, 2012, Farmer talks about the

concluding images, a tiny 1cmx1cm image of *On Photography* book by Susan Sontag and a

small image of Lady Dianna saying "I think, in some ways, the piece is dedicated to Sontag

and to her writing. Not to say there is a warning there, but perhaps there is" (Farmer in

Rosemary) As powerful as this sentiment between the two images may be, due to the vast

amount of visual information presented, for many, these connections become lost and the

collage functions as a spectacle of consumer culture through the lens Farmer and *Life

Magazine*. In other words, due to the over saturation of images what Farmer perceives as the

unifying moment in the work is in reality overshadowed by his overly complex collage

method.

Figure 18: Farmer, Geoffery, *Leaves of Grass,* 2012. Installation view at Neue Galerie Kassel,
commissioned and co-produced by dOCUMENTA (13)

The series of collages I made for my MFA actively attempt to resist this cultural

insistence on the complex image, specifically by developing what I am calling a simple image

aesthetic. Part of the purpose for going through this history of collage is to show what are for

me the important qualities of this medium, which is tied to social and cultural critique, as well

as questions of the present and the future. In my opinion too much of contemporary collage has forgotten about the future, as we see in Farmer's insistence on, to borrow Han's term, a swarm of images. In the next section I will define and discuss my idea of the simple image, sharing my vision of it as seen in my collage works.

In Defense of The Simple Image

In Defense of The Simple Image directly builds upon Hito Steyerl, arguing for a simple image that re-imagines the role of images away from the overt-complexity that dominates our world. The traditional hierarchy associated with a rich image's value is challenged by Steyerl's idea of the poor image. I propose that the simple image aesthetic may give us new constructs to view and interpret images, with a specific focus on how we interact with images in the contemporary world and the different ways of making and understanding images at their most basic, as simple cultural products. The simple image in collage aims to work against the complex image by materially and conceptually focusing on 'simple' qualities of the image and image making. The spectrum to examine the simple image will be explored through my collage practice in conversation with Max Ernst, Martha Rosler, John Stezaker and Henrik Olesen. In a world that privileges complexity and hyper-curated images that function through spectacle, I believe the simple image allows us to rethink and reflect on the role of imagination.

For me, the simple image is defined by a number of key qualities: (1) presenting the images as a flat seamless surface, (2) visually similar source material, (3) limiting the number of images used and (4) embracing subtly. While all these qualities are not present in every simple image collage, they define the core of this aesthetic. One key purpose is to create intentional dialogues among fragments that focus the work, with the specific aim of encouraging the viewer to spend time with the work; it is not the immediacy of the image that interests me, but rather the possibility of multiple meanings that can only be accessed through intentional focused viewing. To define what I mean by the simple image and how I have used it in my own practice, I will present several direct comparisons between historical and contemporary examples of works that I

consider to be simple images and my own collage works, focusing on the key qualities outlined above.

In Max Ernst's collages we see two of these qualities foregrounded. The most prominent is the seamless flat quality that allows the viewer to imagine freely the possibility of the image. Ernst accomplishes this by rephotographing his collages in order to unify the image fragments, eliminate the cut lines and reduce the colour and texture variances. As Deborah Wye suggests, "he wanted to create an illusion that the fabricated illogical reality existed" (7). This simple image aesthetic in Ernst is also achieved through his limited source material, often selecting woodgrain reproductions, and combining two or three images. For example, in Untitled (*Dimanchie 7*) 1934, the viewer is unable to detect the seams and the fragments, this shifts the attention to the implied narrative of a woman with a box of spoons escaping the fast-approaching authorities. My collage practice takes on a similar method of making as Ernst, where I combine a small number of images to shift the pre-existing representation and reproduce the image to create smooth uniformity.

Figure 19: Ernst, Max. *Untitled (Dimanchie 7)* from *Un Semaine De Bonte (A Week of Kindness)*, 1934, Collage.

In Ernst's *Her smile of fire* and my work *Explorer* we can observe similar shapes and simple image strategies used. It is also interesting to see Ernst's vison of a space craft in *And Images will descend to the ground,* 1929 in comparison to the similar shape I used in *Mission Alpha 653,* 2020. In both there is an obvious attempt to draw the viewer into a different world, one defined through questions of imagination. For Ernst this is tied to Surrealism, which at its core is about imagining different realities, an approach that I also use to form alternative worlds or futures.

Figure 20 (Left): Ernst, Max. *Son sourire, le feu, tombera sous forme de gelee noire ett de rouille blanche sur les flancs de la montage (Her smile of fire on the mountain sides in the form of black jelly and white rust),* from *Le femme 100tetes* (*The Hundred Headless Woman),* 1929, Collage.

Figure 21 (Right): Longair, Elyse. *Explorer* 2020, Collage.

Figure 22: Ernst, Max. *Ett les iamges s'abaisseront ju squ;au sol (And images will descend to the ground),* from *Le femme 100tetes* (*The Hundred Headless Woman)* 1929, Collage.

Figure 23: Longair, Elyse. *Mission Alpha 653,* 2020, Collage

The contemporary collage artist Henrik Olesen parallels the qualities of the simple image

we saw in Ernst, specifically in the ways he re-imagines Ernst's collage novels *La femme 100*

tetes and *Une semaine de bonte*. In his collage book *Anthologie de l'Amour Sulime,* 2003-2007, Olesen inserts an additional homosexual pornographic image into the composition of Ernst's original collage, very subtly changing the image. Through this minor intervention Olesen calls attention to the narrowed heterosexual erotic representations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The attention to scale, colour and placement of Olesen's additions, along with reproducing the work as c-prints, makes the work convincing and engaging. For example, in *417 [Tafel 99]* the viewer must spend time to discover that the parlor image is replaced with a shirtless man tied up and in *418 [Tafel 1010]* the nude bent over man being struck appears as part of the original composition and intent.
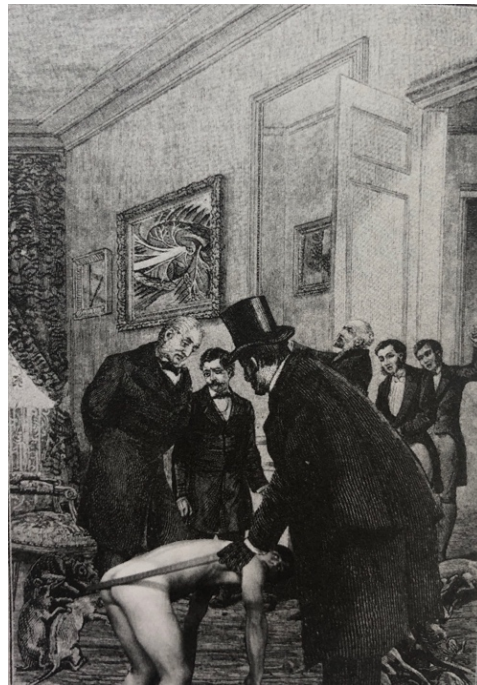

Figure 24 (Left): Olesen, Henrik. *417 [Tafel 99]* in *Anthologie de l'Amour Sulime,* 2003-2007, Collage.

Figure 25 (Right): Olesen, Henrik. *418 [Tafel 1010]* in *Anthologie de l'Amour Sulime,* 2003-2007, Collage.

The reason I want to include Olesen is to highlight his understanding of the significance of power of the simple image, as demonstrated through the way he takes Ernst's open ended collage imagery and, through the addition of a single image, makes an alternative history visible.

Martha Rosler's series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, 1967-72 and 2004-2008* is a key example of the first three qualities of the simple image. Her collages in this series combine two or three images, limiting herself to images from *Life* and *House Beautiful* magazines. She uses this approach to generate potent commentary, specifically through the juxtaposition of images of different realities: the idealized reality presented in mass culture versus the violent reality of war. Through this conflict of imagery Rosler challenges the spectacle of gender stereotypes embedded in political, social, and cultural systems. As she states, "I was trying to show that the 'here' and the 'there' of our world picture, defined by our naturalized accounts as separate or even opposite, were one" (Rosler in Stoops 58). What I like most about Rosler's work is her smart use of images, demonstrating how limiting the source material pushes the viewer to negotiate between the obvious images and those that are more subtle. While I do not typically use juxtapositions in this manner, Rosler's understanding of how images can be put into dialogue and her ability to use such a limited number to say so much resonates with me because this strategy reflects my own beliefs on the necessity of the simple image. Instead of mere passive consumption and proliferation, which is embedded in us through our engagements with images in consumer culture, both Rosler and I in our own ways give the images space to take on different meanings, to open up the possibility for different experiences.

Let us look at two examples of Rosler's simple image aesthetic. In *Red Stripe Kitchen* 1967-72 we see a strong juxtaposition between the source material used. Rosler adds soldiers (from *Life* magazine) invading a kitchen which is set up for cooking with ingredients and a

cookbook with dishes set out to prepare for a dinner party (*House Beautiful* magazine). In Rosler's *The Grey Drape,* 2008, we are presented with a designer room, with an idealized woman in a silky grey gown, long pink gloves and matching necklace. She is airing out the drapes which begin to cover the reality of the soldiers fighting war outside her window, the scorched ground and blazing fire smoking and a wounded individual crying.

Figure 26 (Left): Rosler, Martha. *Red Stripe Kitchen* from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home,* 1967-72, Museum of Modern Art, Photomontage.

*F*igure 27 (Right): Rosler, Martha. *The Grey Drape* 2008 from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home,* 2004-2008, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, Photomontage.

If we compare Rosler's *Cleaning the Drapes* 1967-72 with my collage *Space Time Warp,* 2020, there is a lot of visual overlap in terms of the overall composition. In both works we are looking at a person who is looking out a window, the colour palette is muted, and the cut lines

are minimized. In my collage I use two images, one of a person engaging with some type of machine, who is looking out a window that I have cut out, through which is seen a second image of a landscape with a tree. Yet for me the way Rosler juxtaposes her images implies specific political meanings, which goes against my own methodology. What is important to my own simple image aesthetic is not to impose any readings onto my collages, or to indicate what changes have been or not been made to the images I use, because I want the viewer to imagine the image for themselves.

Figure 28: Rosler, Martha. *Cleaning the Drapes* from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, 1967-72, Museum of Modern Art, Photomontage.*

Figure 29: Longair, Elyse. *Space Time Warp,* 2020. Collage.

The simple image relies upon profound understandings of the images being used, with the ability to see beyond the realities and meanings of the original image, as well as to recognize powerful relationships made possible through (re)imagining already existing images in the world. Each of the key qualities of the simple image helps accomplish this in different ways.

If we look at John Stezaker's collages, specifically from his mask series, he uses two images that act as inventions on each other: a black and white film-still with a colored postcard positioned on top. The placement and dialogue of the fragments is significant because it is subtle yet powerful, proposing any number of meanings through a simple juxtaposition. There is a clear fragmentation that is highlighted by the fact that the two images visually remain separate, with the frame of the postcards being left visible – especially since the postcard conceals part of the image on which it is mounted. In *Collage: The Unmonumental Picture*, contemporary curator Laura Hoptman addresses Stezaker's fragmented yet unified collage strategy: "Individual elements do not, in the worlds of the photo collage maker John Stezaker "disappear into their use," but rather, retain their identity even as they contribute to a larger narrative" (Hoptman in Phillips 10). Throughout this series we can see the way Stezaker uses patterning to create a subtle moment of visual overlap. We see this in *Untitled (Film Still Collage) LIV, 2013*, where the shape of the waves directly mimics the woman's curls and the rock in the background suggests the top of the man's head. The inclusion of the wave also suggests the crashing together of these two bodies.

Figure 30: Stezaker, John. *Untitled (Film Still Collage) LIV,* 2013, Collage.

This is also seen in *Old Mask VII* (of 8), 2006 in which the expert alignment of the overlaid image and the subtly suggesting the man's face encourages the viewer to spend time closely detecting the image. As cultural critic and theorist Parveen Adams observes, "Stezaker takes care to create false continuities and sever existing ones" (269). I also use *false continuities*, but for me they become merged within the larger images I create. The cutline in my fragment disappears as it merges into the colored image seamlessly while the edges of Stezaker's postcard and the difference in hues are knowingly visible.

Figure 31: Stezaker, John, *Old Mask VII* (of 8), 2006, Collage.

Focusing on image choices and combinations, we can compare Stezaker's collage, *Bird-Mask-II* and my work *Polar Sensing* through the role of the fragment. We both use a limited number of images and both works include a similar shape in the of natural elements, rocks in

Stezaker's collage, and the iceberg in mine. The success of this particular series by Stezaker is the way he makes visible overlaps between what are otherwise disparate images. However, the way in which the collage is constructed remains as an unreality that can never be entered. In my case, it is very important that the spaces are believable and curious enough for viewers to imaginatively enter into the world in my collages, which function as alternative realities.

Figure 32 (Left): Stezaker, John. *Bird Mask II*, 2006, Collage.

Figure 33 (Right): Longair, Elyse. *Polar Sensing,* 2020, Collage.

Portfolio

The portfolio that follows highlights my theory of the simple image demonstrated through the collages I have created during my IAMD Master of Fine Arts. Throughout this series my aim was to explore how fragmented worlds of a reconstructed past may question our notions of time and reshape our thinking of future possibilities. In *The Future*, Jennifer Gidley writes, "if we explore 'the past of the future' and its links with 'present-day futures' we will be prepared to create wiser futures for tomorrow" (20). One of the key qualities of my practice is to present open-ended images that allow viewers to imagine multiple possibilities and meanings, inviting them to actively experience alternate futures that may forward our consideration for the future. The simple image aesthetic allows me to make space for a viewer to experience an alternate future from the past, or distant future, specifically by leaving room for imagination.

Elyse Longair, *Planetoid X*, 2020, Collage, 36 x 25
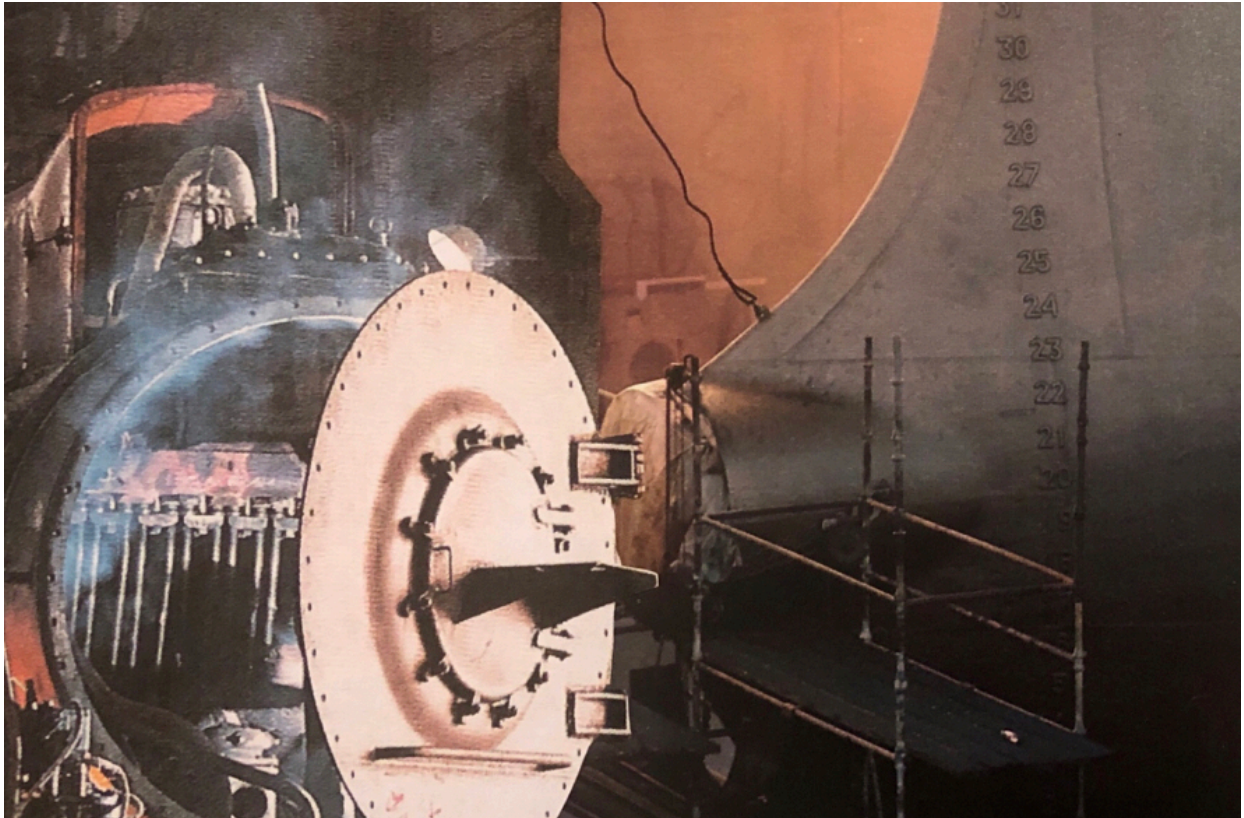
Elyse Longair, *Master Machine*, 2020, Collage, 36 x 54

Elyse Longair, *Cryopreservation Birth Chamber*, 2020, Collage, 36 x 24

Elyse Longair, *After The Anthropocene*, 2020, Collage, 36 x 26

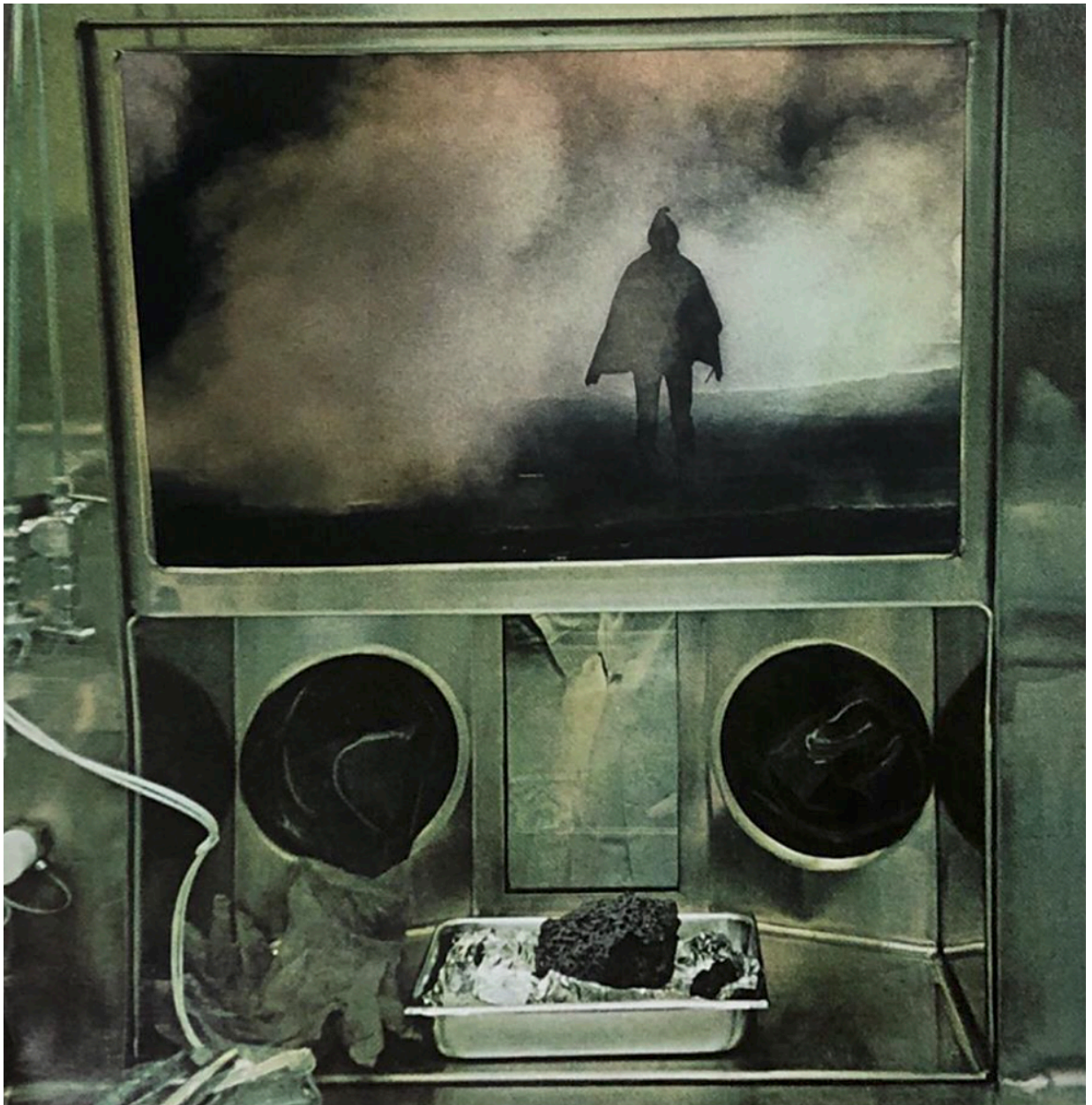*Elyse Longair, Communication Cave,2020, Collage, 36 x 46*

Elyse Longair, Neuron Forcing House, 2020, Collage, 36 x 22

Elyse Longair, *Plume,* 2021, Collage, 36 x 22

Elyse Longair, *Specimen Control*, 2020, Collage, 36 x 35

Elyse Longair, *Mercury Mountain,* 2020, Collage, 36 x 26

Elyse Longair, *Bunker,* 2020, Collage, 36 x 54

Elyse Longair, *Time Machine*, 2020, Collage, 36 x 23.5

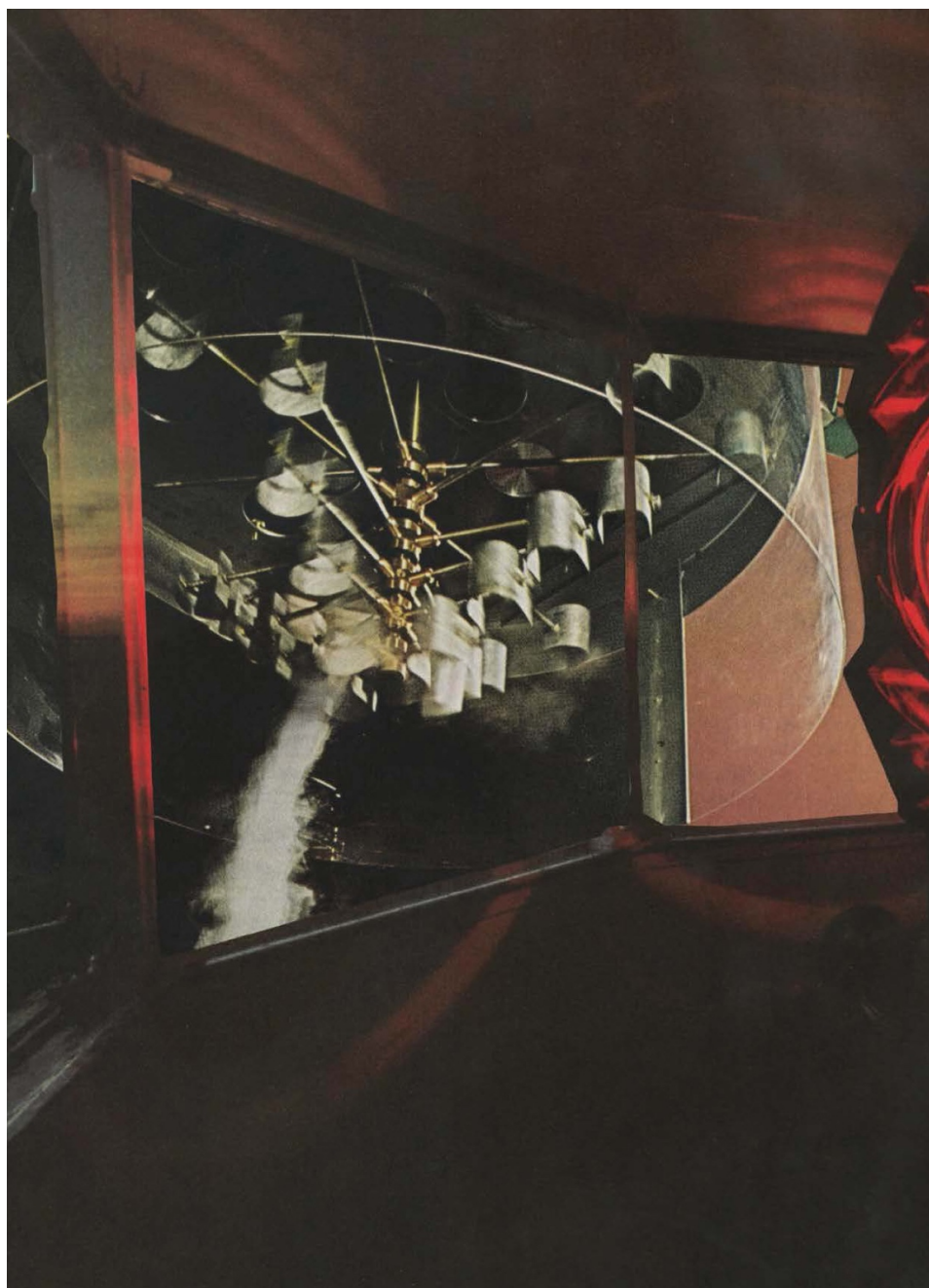Elyse Longair, *Impact Craters,* 2020, Collage, 36 x 32

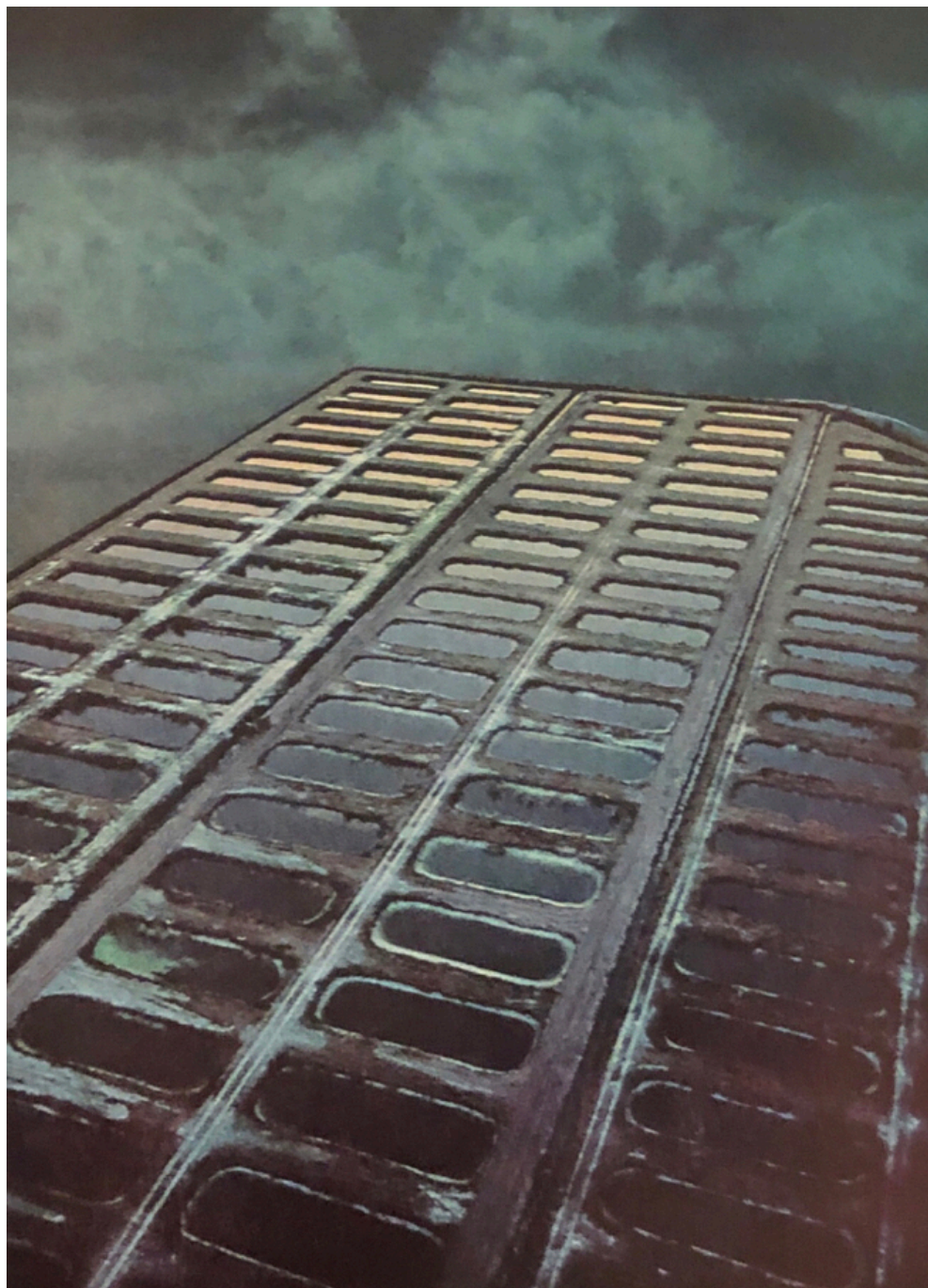Elyse Longair, *Mission Control,* 2020, Collage, 36 x 30
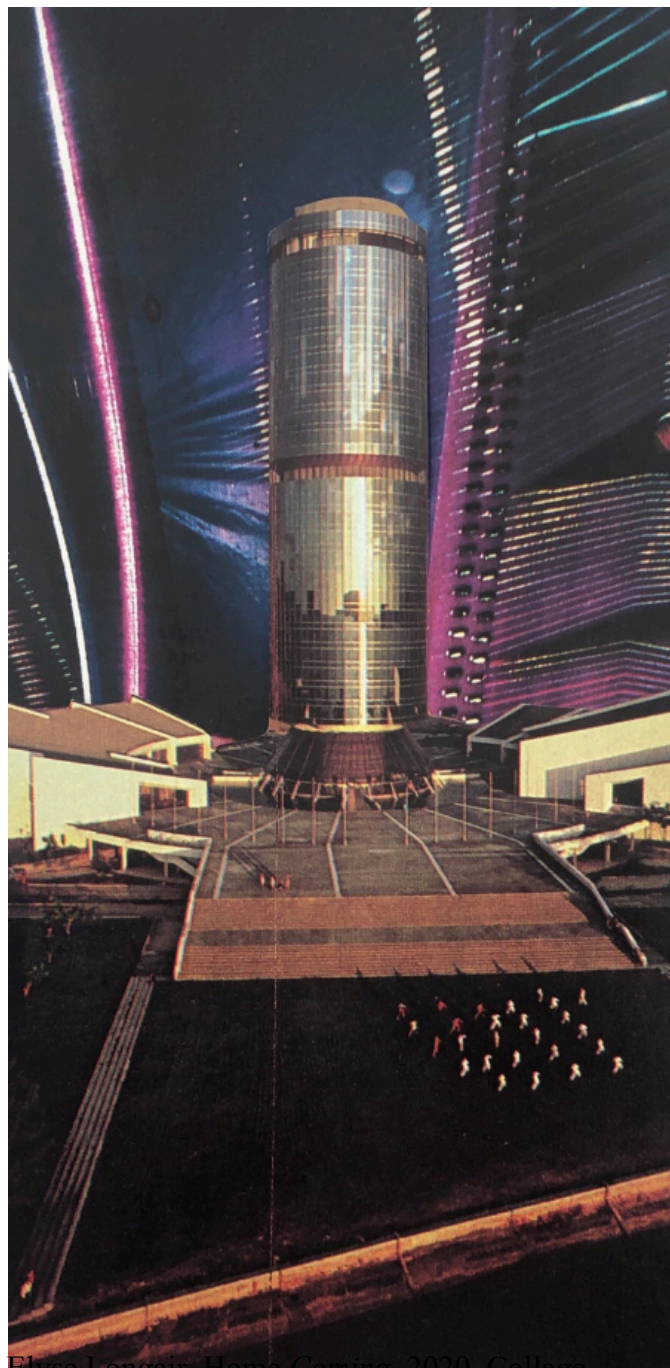
Elyse Longair, Home *Coming*, 2020, Collage,
36 x 18

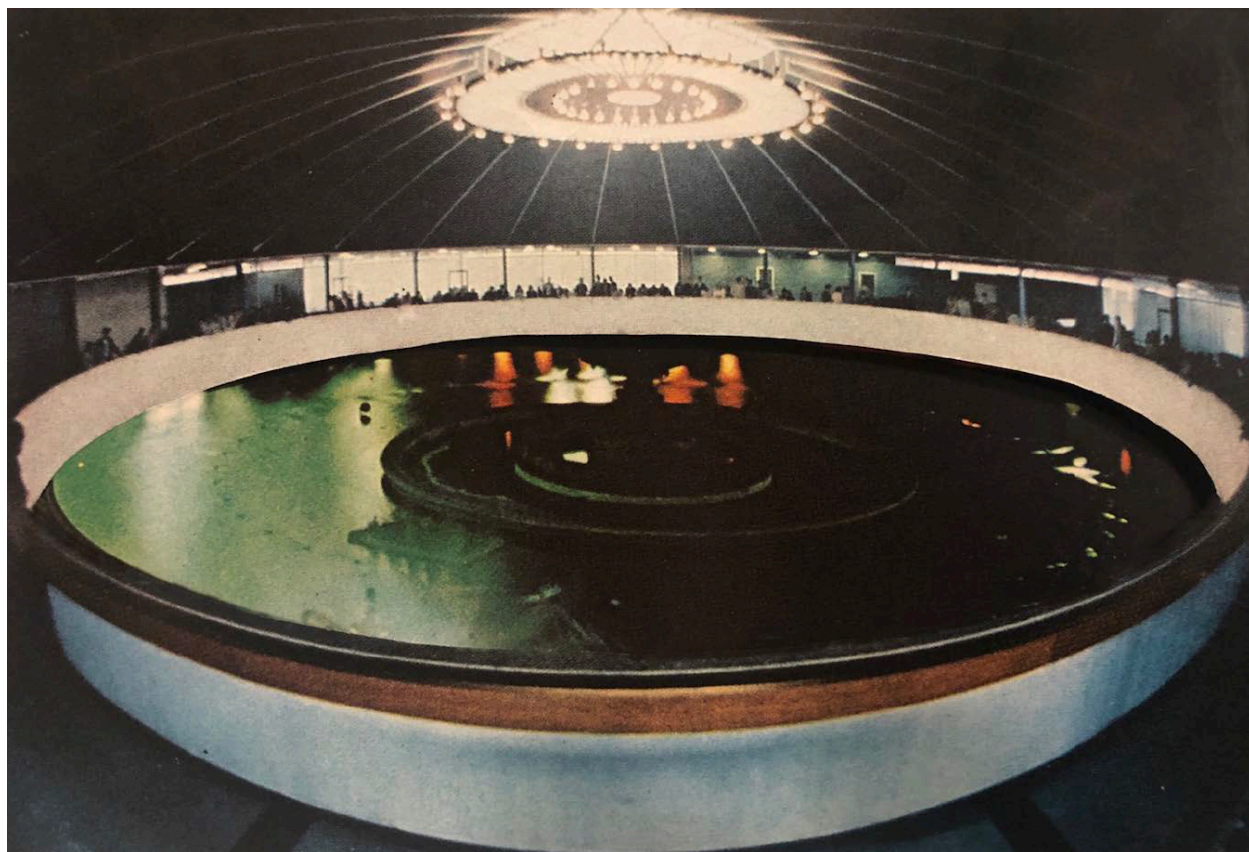Elyse Longair, *Test Control Room*, 2019, Collage, 36 x 26

Elyse Longair, *Sky Lift,* 2020, Collage, 36 x 27

Elyse Longair, *Explorer*, 2020, Collage, 36 x 27

Elyse Longair, *Flash Portal*, 2020, Collage, 36 x 53

Elyse Longair, *Rise Again,* 2020, Collage, 36 x 53

Elyse Longair, *Home Coming,* 2020, Collage, 36 x 25

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