

[Note: This is the syllabus and introductory reading for a course on collage and montage that I've been teaching at ICP, CSI, TC, and elsewhere. It lays out the guiding thesis of the course and asks participants to engage with their practice at a deep level.]

Digital Projects: Collage-Montage-Composite

This workshop explores constructed design in photographic practice.

The collage/montage challenges us to see the edge of photography. That is, where straight photography relies on an invisible frame—that inviolable boundary between photo and non-photo—the collage/montage makes the edges visible. This visibility focuses us on the photographer's relationship to choices about subject, angle, exposure, and body position, to name just a few.

This foregrounding of choice, in turn, concentrates our attention on the real material of photography, the core issues at the heart of all photographic practice. That is, collage/montage practice requires that we acknowledge photographic choices about *framing*, and then it pushes us to newly engage and respond to the choices we've made.

Pictures on the Edge

For the collage/montage practitioner, then, the goal is to make framing visible by challenging its invisibility.

We begin by asking some simple questions: Where does the picture end? What's *inside* the picture; what's *outside*? What does that boundary zone between what's in and out *look* like? Is there meaning in that middle? Can photography capture it? If not, what happens when a picture's capacity for depiction is exceeded? That is, we trust in the proposition that photographs picture the world as it is, *truthfully*. But edges imply that something exists beyond the photograph, that the world is too large to be pictured. In photography, then, where does the excess go?

This is the proposition at the root of this workshop: the desire for total depiction creates a rupture, and this break has physical and psychological dimensions that unsettle and disrupt the placid surface of normality that we pretend our photographs can contain. This unresolvable tension introduces a pictorial imperative—to tell the truth—that is greater than the picture can sustain.

Can we picture the moment of collapse?

Rupture Points

This notion of pictorial collapse grounds the conversation and motivates new kinds of picture-making. Our conversation begins with the recognition that new materials, technologies, and meanings might prove to be larger than received traditions.

Five rupture points will be explored:

Impossible Excess: When the world was too much.
Market Dementia: Advertising, Publicity and Public Relations.

Mad as Hell: Propaganda and Protest.
Serial Obsessions: Time and Narrative.
Escape Psychosis: Fantasy, Surrealism, and Mysticism.

The character of each rupture will be illustrated with visual examples. Participants are encouraged to explore themes that resonate most strongly for their own practice.

Method

John Szarkowski famously said that the frame defines the content (*The Photographer's Eye*, 1964). Reworking that idea is at the foundation: i.e., the frame *is* the content.

Using examples from the history of art, with particular emphasis on photographic traditions, we'll explore the framed picture-edge as a pictorial element. Why is it visible in some pictures but not in others? In demonstrations and tutorials we'll chart the emergence of the collage/montage sensibility and explore modern and historical techniques. In individual activities you'll make pictures with edges that are fundamental to the overall gestalt of the work.

Technical demonstrations of digital and non-digital compositing will be presented in sessions, but participants are expected to bring their own pictures and materials.

Handouts

Handouts are posted at:

<http://seanjustice.com/courses/cmc/>

Handouts supplement in-class demonstrations. They do not replace hands-on exploration.

Preliminary Readings:

A.D. Coleman, *Mutant Media: Photo/Montage/Collage* (from *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media, and Lens Culture*, University of New Mexico Press 1998).

Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (Thames & Hudson, London & Pantheon Books, New York 1976).

Matthew S. Witkovsky, *The Cut and Paste World: Recovering from War* (Chapter 2 from *foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1919-1945*, Thames & Hudson, London, and National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 2007).

Outline

1. Definitions, re-definitions, history, motivations.
Summary of the Five Ruptures.
Tech Demos: Photoshop layers, masks, blending modes, layer effects. Canvas considerations.
2. Advertising, Publicity, Public Relations: history of printing, posters, the illustrated press, the rise of the industrial marketplace and modern desire to buy stuff.
Tech Demos: Type, vector vs. raster, shapes; Introduction to Adobe Illustrator.
3. Propaganda and Protest: the rise of the global war, dada, pictures vs. the system.
Tech Demos: scanning & transforming, dynamic design workflows.
4. Narrative, picturing time, the birth of the instant, and the desire to stop time.
Tech Demos: brushes & custom brushes, re-printing, re-photographing, substrate considerations.
5. Fantasy, Surrealism, Psychological Experimentation: history of surrealism and its continuity. Tech Demos: presenting the collage, either material or the printed page.

Rupture 1

Impossible Excess: When the world was too much.

Manipulation of the photograph is as old as photography itself.
Dawn Ades, *Photomontage*, 1976 (p. 7)

What's wrong with this picture? It doesn't look like the world, or like pictures of the world.

The desire (and need) to include what could not be pictured appeared early in the history of photography. We can trace it to certain limitations of mid-19th Century photographic technology (e.g., blue sensitive emulsions which could not render detail in highlights and shadows simultaneously), and perhaps more fundamentally, to the photographic activity itself—that is, to the desire for factuality (aka, realism, objectivity, and indexicality) that captivated the earliest inventors, critics, and practitioners.



Timothy O'Sullivan, 1867 *Vermillion Point*



JMW Turner, 1842
Snow Storm — Steamboat off a harbor's mouth.



John Constable, 1819, *The White Horse*

Part One: The failure of technology — The desire for pictures that look like pictures.

Nineteenth Century technology could not render detail across a high dynamic range of brightness values. Consequently, blue-sensitive emulsions produced flat white, detail-less skies. Viewers asked, Where did the clouds go? The world was too big to be contained in photographic pictures. For a society bred on the atmospherics of Constable and Turner, this was wrong, impossible, and strange.

A simple solution that fixed landscape genre pictures was to double-print the sky with a separate image of clouds, as in this Civil War illustration. The result is a photographic picture that resembles the pictorial conventions of the time (as embodied by Constable's clouds).

Taken to the next level (i.e., beyond simple landscapes), for more elaborate genre scenes the contrast problem of shadow and highlight detail was solved by elaborate combination printing that sometimes involved up to a dozen different negatives.



Barnard 1864, *Rebel works in front of Atlanta*
(combination print)



Vermeer, 1657
Girl reading letter



H.P. Robinson, 1885
The Valentine (combination print)

H.P. Robinson, one of the best-known and most prolific photographic illustrators of the time, adhered to the conventions of his age—established by genre pictorialists like Vermeer—with photographic compositions that were built with elaborate combinations of multiple negatives. For more on Robinson and his influences, motivations and pictorial successors, see Margaret Harker's extensively illustrated biography and analysis, *Henry Peach Robinson: Master of Photographic Art 1830-1901* (Basil Blackwell, 1988).

Similarly, with regard to the depiction of motion, the world was too much to picture.



Gustave Le Gray, c. 1857
The Broken Wave

As described by Phillip Prodger in *Time Stands Still: Muybridge and the Instantaneous Photography Movement* (2003), the challenge of depicting moving objects with the slow emulsions and shutter speeds of the time led to impossible contradictions. In this example, although Le Gray captured the surf, a moving boat, and a breaking wave (with some minimal motion blur), he was criticized because the angle of the sun (which made the exposure possible in the first place) produced a picture which appeared false to contemporary viewers (Prodger, p. 26).

In other words, photographs did not always look like other pictures. This is a key realization for us today: whereas we begin from an *assumption* that photographic pictures are inherently faithful to the world, audiences at the time of photography's first appearance had a different opinion. For them, photographs looked strange because the conventions of photographic faithfulness did not exist. In other words, photographs didn't look like other pictures, and neither did they look like photographs—because a photographic “look” had not yet emerged.

As with the problem of shadow and highlight contrast, once again the solution was combination printing. In this Robinson & Cherrill collaboration, the seagulls and clouds have been added to make the picture corresponded with the contemporary imagination—the seascape appears complete, recognizable, and comfortably in line with pictorial expectations.



HP Robinson & Nelson King Cherrill, 1870
The Beached Margent of the Sea
(combination print with gulls added)

Part Two: The desire for pictures of pictures, and the emergence of History.

Edges appeared inside the picture when photographs themselves became the objects of pictorial desire.

Before the availability of technology that permitted reproductions of individual pictures (eventually perfected with the negative/positive process invented by Fox Talbot), the only way to make copies of a photograph was to re-photograph it. In the Southworth & Hawes example, a unique, one-of-a-kind, polished metal plate (known as a Daguerrotype, invented by Louis Daguerre) that depicts a mother and child portrait becomes the subject of another unique, polished metal plate.



Southworth & Hawes, 1850
Copy of a Daguerrotype

That is, the photographic picture, a new material presence in the world of material things, stood outside reproduction, and so had to be photographed as an object in its own right. At the beginning, one couldn't make *more* photographs, but only *new* photographs. This desire for copies created an edge within the picture itself, which then became a marker of a new kind of meaning. The photographic object as object, indicated by its edges, spoke about a doubled desire for pictures. More than just another picture, the photo within a photo accented an emerging consciousness of the individual as unique, as an irreducible presence, as an indisputable *fact* with historic importance.

From 1857: "No photographic picture that was ever taken...is [lacking] of an historic interest. ... Here, therefore, the much-lauded and much-abused agent called Photography takes her legitimate stand. Her business is to give

evidence of fact, as minutely and as impartially as, to our shame, only an unreasoning machine can give." – Lady Eastlake ("A Review in the London Quarterly Review" reprinted in *Photography in Print*, Vicki Goldberg, ed., 1981, p. 97)

Part Three: The desire for portraits, and the emergence of Taxonomy.

The mania for portraits accelerated in the mid 19th Century, spurred on in part by newly robust mobility between the cities of Europe and America, and by the markets that threw strangers from different social classes together in unprecedented and unexpected ways. Photographs, as markers of a new and broadly dispersed need to anchor oneself in that stream of social upheaval, became objects of trade and identification. As new technologies enabled paper portraits to be affixed to passports and other official documents, the photographic calling card, known as a *carte-de-viste*, became a hugely popular and, in fact, essential artifact of contemporary life.



Carte-de-Visite, Cabinet Card size,
late 19th C.
photographer unknown



Carte-de-Visite, Cabinet card size, mid 19th C.,
photographers unknown

And when markets demanded more efficient production of the *carte-de-visite* portraits, new edges appeared—in 1854, Disderi, a French photographer and entrepreneur, invented and patented a camera attachment that permitted the creation of eight sequential portraits. (The sheet was then cut and each individual photograph was mounted on a sturdy cardboard backing.)



Andre Adolphe Eugene Disderi, c. 1862
Princess Gabrielli, uncut albumen print from *carte-de-visite* negative (cited in *A World History of Photography*, Naomi Rosenblum, 1984)



Nadar (Gaspard-Felix Tournachon)
c. 1864, *Series Self-Portrait*

Here we see Nadar, famous for his portraits of elite French society, playing a game with the grid lines produced by the *carte-de-visite* camera in order to explore seriality, motion and identity.

In that same period we see the first indications of the non-pictorial edge, and its resultant grid, becoming adopted and standardized by the scientific community in its efforts to explain (and constrain) the explosion of knowledge produced by the industrial revolution.

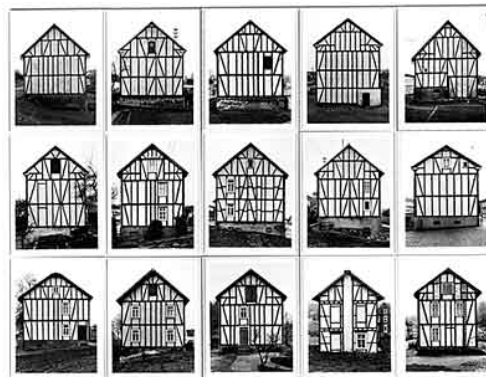


Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand
Duchenne de Boulogne (French) a page from
Mécanisme de la Physionomie Humaine,
1856 - 1862



From Wikipedia: “Like physiognomists and phrenologists before him, Duchenne believed that the human face was a map the features of which could be codified into universal taxonomies of inner states; he was convinced that the expressions of the human face were a gateway to the soul of man” (from the article “Mécanisme de la Physionomie Humaine”).

In other words, the edge introduced into photographic practice by Disderi in 1854 had become itself a picture of rationalized desire. In fact, the grid as an image of a natural order, a taxonomy of normalized relationships, came to feel indexical and, as such, an indisputable representation of the world—an idea that is still very much part of our modern consciousness, of course.



Bernd & Hilla Becher, Vakwerkh, Half-
timbered Houses, 1959-1974



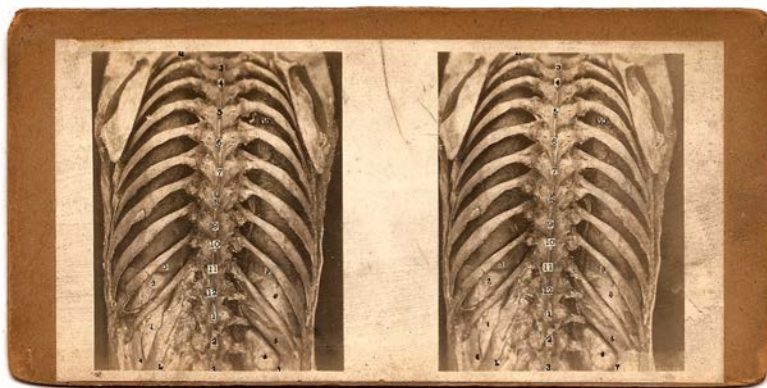
Tomoko Sawada, Bride,
2007

Part Four: Beyond the boundaries of two-dimensions, and the desire for individual experience.

By 1851, a short couple of decades after its invention, photography was routinely praised and also criticized for its relationship to reality—and in fact we can perhaps even see a new sense of reality crystallizing around the newly available “evidence” that photography provided. A key development in society’s enthusiasm (both positive and negative) was the invention of the stereograph and stereoscope, and the enhanced sense of immersion they provided.



In fact, nearly as soon as the magic of photography had been made public by Daguerre and Talbot, the photographic enterprise grabbed hold of society’s imagination. But the immersive “reality” of the stereoscope ratcheted the mania to new heights.



And though scientists saw photographic technology as an aid to exploration and to the creation of knowledge, and the newly emerging middle class were thrilled to own portraits of themselves and their loved ones for the first time in history, by far photography’s most important use was as a type of entertainment that had no rivals. In the minds of at least few critics, though, this love affair was anything but simple, or culturally beneficial.

In 1859 Charles Baudelaire denounced the widespread enthusiasm:

A revengeful God has given ear to the prayers of the multitude. Daguerre was his Messiah. And now the faithful says to himself: ‘Since Photography gives us every guarantee of exactitude that we could desire (they really believe that, the mad fools!), then Photography and Art are the same thing.’ From that moment our squalid society rushed, Narcissus to a man, to gaze at its trivial image on a scrap of metal. (“Review of the Salon of 1859” reprinted in *Photography in Print*, Vicki Goldberg ed., 1981, p. 124)

Obviously, not everyone felt this way. The very same year that Baudelaire wrote his scathing complaint, Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of the inventors of the stereoscopic craze, predicted a monumental shift in human-material relations:

Form is henceforth divorced from matter. In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please. ("The Stereoscope and the Stereograph" reprinted in *Photography in Print*, Vicki Goldberg ed., 1981, p. 112)



This cultural tension between form and matter has played out in many ways since the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition in London, where stereoscopic view cards were introduced. Naomi Rosenblum has written that "the purchase, exchange, and viewing of stereographs became a veritable mania" (*A World History of Photography*, 1984, p. 35), and has suggested that the influence of that new-fangled invention deserves serious study for its role in the creation of today's popular culture.

And, at the boundary between the 2nd and 3rd dimension—staring us right in the face, as it were—another pictorial edge appears: the slim gap between the two slightly skewed photographs on the stereograph card. But unlike the edges discussed so far, this new edge created a fundamentally different pictorial experience, 3D immersion, and a specific rearrangement of pictorial desire.



For as the stereoscope was lifted to the face, momentarily obscuring peripheral vision and depositing the viewer into the middle of a foreign tableau, a profound and visceral experience of duplication emerged. That is, as viewers felt themselves transported beyond their immediate surroundings, they confronted the fact that their lives were isolated and individualized, that even as they lived and breathed amongst neighbors, friends, and family, their own waking experiences were, in fact, irredeemably, their own. In this sense, the stereographic edge might be the most important edge of all, because as it was experienced by millions of consumers, the momentary privacy of the stereoscopic experience reified society's dawning sense of the importance of the individual point of view, and, as such, perhaps as much as any other industrial development, helped establish the culture of individualism that still envelops us today.

Part Five: The edge of agency—photography as the recognition of the impossible.

In the early 19th Century, when photographers began pointing cameras at the world, they quickly discovered that the world was too big to be pictured. Unlike their picture-making brethren from centuries immemorial—i.e., painters and sculptors and architects, etc.—lens-based picture-makers had to negotiate specific viewpoints and subjectivities. They had to choose, very carefully, what to include in

their pictures based on negotiations with an apparatus (seen broadly as a suite of technologies: cameras, lenses, shutters, emulsions, and the whole process of photographic picture-making which included transport of the equipment, preparation and processing of the materials, and even distribution and display of the resulting pictures). That is, instead of assembling a picture experientially from multiple vantage points built up during extended observations, as a painter might, a photographer's process included an obligation to select a "frame"—just one!—from the multitude of possibilities.

The surviving remnant of this process is the frame itself, the edge of what was included or excluded at the time the photograph was exposed. For the photographer, the edge of the image was indexical—not of a world—but of one particular decision or reaction to a world. And while the photographer came to understand the deep subjectivity of this activity, the audience for photographs ignored the edges altogether, and came to focus narrowly on the more obvious and extravagant pictorial details contained within them.



Eadweard Muybridge, Mammoth Plate Panorama of San Francisco, 1878.
13 plates measuring 16" x 24" each, for a total width of 17'4"

Importantly, perhaps ironically, this contradictory dynamic is in fact at the root of our broadly diffused assumptions about photography's factuality—we believe that the photograph depicts the world to the extent that we don't see the edges; and the photographer insists on the photograph as an act of invention to the extent that the edges have been made visible.

This is the push and pull of the creative enterprise that collage/montage practice illuminates.

From the beginning photographers have rebelled against the incessant narrowing of reality, the thin and fragile slice contained within their pictures: "the attack on the assumed inviolable realism of the photograph has been first and foremost *creative impulses*; they originated with picture-makers" (Coleman, *Mutant Media*, p. 76). That is, they realized—some of them did—that their practice itself created the basic conditions against which they struggled. In their success, and in their technology's success, the world became more and more factualized, atomized, and self-contained, even as their experience with the process taught them that the world was, in fact, too extreme, too unbridled, and too big to ever be fully pictured.

Yet another result of these tensions (in addition to those discussed above) is the panorama photograph—and its multiple edges—which came into society’s visual consciousness within a decade of photography’s invention.

In this example (above) we glimpse Eadweard Muybridge’s sublime meditation on the underlying inconsistencies of the photographic process itself. In *Motion Studies: Time, Space, and Eadweard Muybridge* (2003) Rebecca Solnit has argued that the picture “is not what it appears. To the casual eye, the panorama seems to be what Hollis Frampton described, ‘an impossible simultaneity.’ [But] to the careful observer, this great panorama is a discontinuity that appears to be a continuity,” (Solnit, 2003, p. 176).

The rupture occurs in the center of the image, Plate 7—the fulcrum of the picture’s broad sweep—which is out of sequence with the other images. In the otherwise seamless mapping of the path of the sun across the sky, which can be read by the clear demarcation of shadows and highlights as they change from left to right, Plate 7 goes backwards. It has been “made later in the day, creating a clash of shadows” (Solnit, p. 175) which disrupt the fabricated illusion. Mark Klett, whom Solnit calls the “most careful observer of the panorama in modern times” has written that this picture “blows holes in the notion of a seamless and omnipotent view and opens the door on space and time” (p. 176).

Concluding Thoughts

The edge, the frame, the boundary—between what can be pictured and what cannot be pictured—as a formal characteristic of pictures emerged with photographic industrialization, continued market privatization, and the solidification of a broadly rationalized and scientific mindset. These cultural constructions cast a light on pictorial limitations and led to the collage/montage sensibility that we live with today. Among picture-makers, from the beginning, the desire to circumvent a newly perceived failure of depiction under ordinary means provided the motivation to exceed the tools. That is, to answer pictorial desires which pre-existed photography by centuries—desires which might be considered at the root of human experience itself—photographers made the photograph as photograph the object of their attentions.

Historically these pictorial excesses and their particular edges can be traced to a number of contradictions: a) photography’s technical characteristics produced pictures that didn’t *look* right, i.e., like other pictures; b) photographs, as objects, could not be duplicated; c) market efficiency created non-indexical photographs, i.e., the taxonomic grid; d) the enthusiasm of 3D illusionism resulted in a highly interior individualism; and e) the expansive power of photographic depiction ironically diminished personal agency because it forced practitioners to come to terms with their specific subjectivities.

Ironically, these characteristics didn’t appear until photography had enabled its peculiar and inherent contradictions to be visualized—that is, on the one hand, photography created and accentuated the desire for pictures of a factual world; and on the other hand, simultaneously, photography declared that making such pictures was, ultimately, impossible.

These ruminations about history, photography, and the desire to believe in a world that can be known rationally, are at the foundation of this workshop. As we explore the tools available to today’s collage/montage artist, I hope you’ll let the conversation guide your curiosity.