

MashUp: The Birth of Modern Culture. VANCOUVER ART GALLERY.
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The notion of archival context – formalized in the principles of provenance and original order – is so central to archival thinking that the suggestion that a body of records may encompass multiple creators, different orders of arrangement, or alternate interpretations of ownership can generate heated philosophical arguments. But increasingly the archival conversation has begun to include speculation that the origins of a fonds may not be unilateral, that the order of items within that fonds (if fonds there be) may not be fixed, and that archives should not be seen as bound within the confines of space or time.

MashUp: The Birth of Modern Culture provided ample evidence that, no matter how archivists interpret (or revere) a unified approach to context, artists have for decades wilfully challenged the idea, breaking apart seemingly coherent entities, documentary or otherwise, to interrogate, unsettle, and provoke. The term “mash-up” is an evolution of the concept of collage, first coined by the avant-garde artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in the early 20th century to refer to the act of incorporating “found” objects – existing images, sounds, artifacts, and words – into paintings, music, film, sculpture, and other creative works.

The Vancouver Art Gallery’s most ambitious exhibition to date, *MashUp* filled the building’s entire 35,000 square feet of space. Thirty curators from around the world selected 371 artworks by 156 artists, musicians, architects, and others, including artists such as Picasso and Braque, Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, and Brian Jungen; filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, Joyce Wieland, and Arthur Lipsett; and musicians from Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage to Brian Eno and David Byrne.

The show was structured into four separate but thematically integrated exhibits, displayed on each of the gallery’s four floors. Presented chronologically, the exhibit began with “Early 20th Century: Collage, Montage and Readymade at the Birth of Modern Culture,” which introduced the concept of collage and considered its impact from the late 19th century to the end of the Second World War. Pride of place was given to Picasso’s *Guitar on a Table* (ca. 1912) and *Nature morte, bouteille et verre* (1913), collages integrating wallpaper and newsprint into charcoal sketches. Two of Canadian photographer William Notman’s composite photographs from the 1880s demonstrated how mechanical reproduction technologies such as steel engraving and offset lithography upset the perception of photographic authenticity. Hannah Höch’s photomontages from the 1920s and 1930s rework everyday images from magazines and journals to create distorted images of human bodies, questioning accepted perceptions of beauty.

In the second part of the exhibit, “The Post-War: Cut, Copy and Quotation in the Age of Mass Media,” mid-20th-century artists, filmmakers, and

musicians such as Robert Rauschenberg, Guy Debord, and John Cage use documentary images, archival film footage, and natural sounds to demonstrate even more forcefully the disruptive influence of art. Andy Warhol – whose iconic screen prints of Marilyn Monroe, Chairman Mao, and the Kennedy assassination, produced in the 1960s and 1970s, were given significant space here – is credited with “pilfering” found images as a way of condemning consumerist culture. Feminist artist Dara Birnbaum’s 1979 video *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* deconstructs film footage from the *Wonder Woman* television program to challenge stereotypical images of gender. Also included were pieces that reworked photographs, films, music, and paintings in order to “hijack” or “reroute” original messages, establish new metaphors, and express disenchantment with the status quo.

The third section, “Late 20th Century: Splicing, Sampling and the Street in the Age of Appropriation,” highlighted a much more skeptical, politically charged cultural period, from the 1980s to the end of the 20th century. The works here decontextualized found objects, including an increasing number of documentary items, in order to undermine traditional power structures and social hierarchies. For instance, selections from Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans* (1981) revealed her intention to challenge notions of the ownership of and authority behind art production, as Levine rephotographs Depression-era images originally taken by the photographer Walker Evans and claims those new images as her own. Similarly, in compositions from the 1970s and 1980s, American conceptual artist John Baldessari intentionally removes photographs from their original context, which he calls their “baggage,” with the goal of “undermining the authority” of the creator of the original images.

The last section, “The Digital Age: Hacking, Remix and the Archive in the Age of Post-Production,” considered mash-up culture in the age of JPGs, MP3s, DVDs, the Internet, and mass printing. As new technologies have simplified the creation, circulation, and consumption of culture, and as digitization allows much easier access to large collections of archival sources, contemporary artists are embracing the potential for repurposing common objects or images. Artists are actively making use of what they define as “archives” – a term interpreted here much more broadly than it would be within the archival milieu – in order to explore the “instability of images and the volatility of meaning” at a time when anything, from any source, can be manipulated, revised, and reinterpreted.

Perhaps the most “archival” work in this section was Geoffrey Farmer’s *The Squatting Scribe* (2016), a fabricated mock-up of an archival book scanner, accompanied by a list of the names of computers found in literature and film. The piece, which implies that the very tools we use to preserve and share our documentary legacy are themselves fictitious, offers a direct challenge to the authority of social and historical memory. Similarly, in *Red White Blue* (2000–), Hong Kong artist Stanley Wong has transformed the multi-purpose

striped sheeting so common in Africa and Southeast Asia, turning the plastic bags into chairs, lampshades, and wall and floor coverings, undermining our sense of the “appropriate” use for these ubiquitous objects. Other works included in this section repurposed newspaper advertisements, natural sounds, and household objects such as blenders, drills, and vacuums, with the goal of interrogating our expectations of reality.

Faced with the mash-up world so comprehensively presented in this exhibit, which included works constructed from both analog and digital resources, archivists cannot avoid questioning the archival tenets of provenance, original order, and context. The immense power of artistic interpretation was amply demonstrated as the narratives found in static archival resources were deconstructed over and over again. For example, French artist Peter Huyghe’s film *The Third Memory* (1999) juxtaposes excerpts from Sidney Lumet’s 1975 movie *Dog Day Afternoon* with oral history footage of convicted robber John Wojtowicz recounting the 1972 bank robbery. The two-channel video raises troubling questions about the fragility of memory, as Wojtowicz’s depiction of events seems to have been influenced by the commercial film. One is left asking which is more authentic, the bank robber’s memory or the Hollywood recreation?



Geoffrey Farmer, *The Squatting Scribe*, 2016. Photograph by Maegan Hill-Carroll, Vancouver Art Gallery.

Similarly, South Korean artist Haegue Yang's wallpaper mural *Field of Teleportation* (2011), created in collaboration with designer Manuel Raeder, is a collage of images of several of her two- and three-dimensional works, disconnected from their historical context and presented instead as "floating and drifting throughout the room in a non-hierarchical archive." The images of Yang's art – unnervingly reminiscent of the mirror scene in Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) – leave the viewer searching for an elusive truth. Is this piece actual evidence of Yang's art, or is the authenticity disrupted by the intentionally fragmented, "out-of-original-order" order of presentation?

Of course, it is not up to the archivist to question how source materials are used. The whole purpose of archives is that they *are* used. *How* is, or should be, of no consequence. As long as another user can return to those materials and find them whole, the archivist plays no role in their use, reuse, or – some might argue – misuse. Archives are archives; art is art. Still, it is a challenge to see a work such as French fashion designer Martin Margiela's *Press Clippings Jacket* (2008–9) – a jacket made of strips of newspaper press clippings about Margiela himself – and wonder if anyone viewing the final artwork appreciates the (now shattered) archival whole behind the shredded parts. This disruption of norms is the point, of course, but the sight cannot help but jangle the archival soul.

MashUp served to remind archivists that concepts of order and stability, so precious in an archival context, can be challenged to good effect by artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and others. Archivists have to make peace with this. In an ephemeral age, we may have to fight ever harder to protect some essence of order within archives. But we also need to acknowledge the potential for greater understanding that can come when someone disrupts "our" order and opens the door to multiple variations on originality.

Ironically, none of the pieces in *MashUp* seemed to incorporate actual archival documents; most of the "archives" on display appeared to be reproductions. Is there still, in the deep recesses of even the most provocative of artistic minds, some inherent respect for the uniqueness of archival materials?

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