activate

Title: The Edge of Writing: John Stezaker's 'Cinema 1 II'

Author(s): Nathan Walker

Source: *activate*, Issue 1, Volume 1 (Spring 2011).
URL: http://www.thisisactivate.net/2011/05/14/the-edge-of-writing/

Copyright in this work remains with the author(s).

The Edge of Writing: John Stezaker's 'Cinema 1 II'

Nathan Walker

Image credits: Stezaker, John. 2005. Cinema 1 II [Collage] The Approach, London.

Introduction

This article will consider the creation of a collage as an event. This event is constituted in and by the relationship, meeting and arrangement of two or more elements, usually paper-based and often associated with both gluing – which is the origin of the word 'collage' – and cutting. For the purpose of my analysis here, I propose that collage can be understood using the language of writing because, as I see it, collage *is* writing.

By deconstructing John Stezaker's collage 'Cinema 1 II' (2005) I will explore the event of a postcard of 'Cliffs at Beltinge Herne Bay' being placed onto a black and white photograph of two men, that hides their faces. I will consider how disappearance through the act of placing one image on-top of another can be considered as a writing event. Using Roland Barthes' ideas of the 'text of bliss' put forward in *The Pleasure of the Text*. I will consider how language is (re)distributed in the event of 'Cinema 1 II'. Since the early 1970s Stezaker has worked with found images and printed matter, creating collages which are both familiar and strange - transforming the practice of collage in the last century and developing the form. In 2011 he exhibited a retrospective from 30 years of artistic practice of over 90 collages at London's Whitechapel Gallery (29 January – 31 March), and in many cases he explored collage without using a physical cut. 'I work always towards minimal intervention' (Personal Communication 11th January 2011). He says, employing a guiding maxim, 'minimum mutilation'. This is most evident in his series of 'Unassisted Readymades'*,* a collection of found portrait photographs and film stills (Published In: MONO #3, August 2010).

Writing the Collage

'Cinema 1 II' (2005) is an example of this methodology of placing a postcard on top of a photograph. The photograph is the largest part of the work, 19cm x 24cm, and the postcard is much smaller – approximately 9cm x 14cm – meaning the work is only around 6 cm less than A4. The scale of the work is important to our reading of it as writing, as Stezaker works on a scale similar in size and physicality to the traditional act of writing with a pen and paper - his work no bigger than a book. Furthermore, the artist has discussed the importance of the table in collage saying that 'collage is a tabletop practice' (Stezaker 2008, p.20) akin to writing, reading and working at the scale of the hand. Thus we can imagine Stezaker writing with non-language based signifiers, arranging images as carefully as a poet arranges words in a line. Poetry is a useful comparison to our discussion of the collage as writing, as the reading of it (either out-loud or to oneself) is a difficult practice that relies upon visual properties of line breaks. The line break interrupts the flow of language visually and distinguishes poetry from

prose.

'Cinema 1 II' consists of two parts, a background Photographic film still and a superimposed foreground postcard. The postcard obscures the photo by hiding the central part of the image and replacing it with a layer that creates an inside edge and, in-turn, an outside frame. The postcard depicts a coastal scene of cliffs, there is a horizon line one quarter from the top of the card punctuated on the left-hand side of the card by a tiny cluster of houses. The other three quarters of the card are filled with charcoal coloured cliffs, topped with yellowish tufts of grass and moss that join the sloping embankment that run down to the sea shore. There is a small triangle (an inverted right-angle triangle) of sea in the right hand corner of the image, the horizon-line of the sea is unusually straight and joins the cliff top perfectly creating a clear break between the top quarter and the bottom three quarters of the postcard.

Two men sit facing each other at a table, we cannot see their faces because the postcard conceals them but we can see their arms, their backs, two hands (one for each man) and their elbows, it appears that they are arm wrestling. We can see the tops of their heads, a tuft of hair for the man on the right and a swept back length of darker hair for the man on the left. The landscape orientation of both the postcard and the photograph elongates the images, the headless bodies and the sweeping cliffs are both cinematic in their appearance. A literal reading might be that a cliff 'face' is standing in for/replacing two faces, that are themselves facing each other, however I am more interested here with the visual poetics of arrangement in collage; not a literal reading of language signifiers but a performative writing of the arrangement *as* text. The photograph is obscured, it appears that the important part of the 'scene' is missing, we can guess at what is not visible by using what is visible. It becomes a writerly text, one in which we as readers must write and read into. The interruption allows, or rather, requires a performative writing into the text, doubled by the knowledge that this is a photographic film still, created by re-staging the scene for a stills camera (See Stezaker 2006). The visibility of a watermarked record 'DP-40' in the lower left hand corner of the photograph confirms that the base image has not been altered

and that the centering of the postcard corresponding with the hidden faces of the couple in the image is a deliberate part of Stezaker's composition of two original and unaltered elements. This a controlled interruption: interrupting the narrative of the photographic still (itself already an interruption of the narrative of a film); and redistributing our reading to imply (un)certain reasons for the marriage of these two seemingly unrelated elements.

Visual Rhyme

How do we read this juxtaposition through the positioning of a postcard of sea-front cliffs in the center of an apparent arm-wrestle between two inmates of a prison? What are the connections between these two images? Their connection is poetic, similar to rhyme in poetry, a controlled interruption, like the line-break. 'Cinema 1 II' 'works' because of the similarities of visual rhyme, a term I am using to describe those parts of the images that are similar in shape and sometimes in content. The hair on the men's heads visually rhyme the grass tufts on the cliff-tops and the folds of the men's shirts rhyming the lines of the cliff face. Connections are made through compositional rhyme, on the postcard this is the small triangle of sea above the sloping edge of the cliff running down to the shore and in the photograph the triangle of wall behind the man on the right-hand side of the table in correlation to the sloping of his back. The unusually straight horizon line of the sea in this case rhymes the perfect top edge of the photographic print. On the left-hand side of the table the man's arm rhyme the shape of the cliffs that slope downwards to the edge of the shore line, his arm to the edge of the table. These parts of the images are different, but they look the same, they are part of the same shape and symbolically reference each other.

Visual rhyme is not the only discourse we can borrow from poetics when considering 'Cinema 1 II', in fact rhyme, ellipses, syntax, palimpsest, the line break, all of these protocols of poetics are applicable. I prefer this approach of reading Stezakers collage, not only because of an interest in the difficulties and complexities of reading poetry (live or to oneself) but also because of the

performative qualities it evokes. How do we 'read' collage? How would we perform it? How does it perform writing? Barthes defines two types of text: text of pleasure and text of bliss. He explains 'Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading.' (1973, p.14). We can use Barthes' theory of the text of bliss to consider Stezaker's collage as text:

> '[T]he text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts...unsettles the reader's historical cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.' (Barthes 1973, p.14)

We cannot read this photograph conventionally through content alone, we must consider it in context, its materiality and its presentation as well as its re-composition of two elements. 'Cinema 1 II' can be considered as a text of bliss in which we become readers of the seam of the two edges: the edges of the print; the edges of the cliffs; the edge of the table; the seams of the men's sleeves; the edge of seeing and not seeing; the edges as original and collaged. We see these edges as the interstice of bliss which, as Barthes says, occurs in the volume of the languages; in the uttering (interruption), not the sequence of utterances: 'not to devour...but to graze, to browse scrupulously, to rediscover' (1973, p.13). By 'grazing' (this concept indeed allusory to the grass on the cliff tops) the image we discover the subtle rhyme of text(ure) from one element into the other. The juxtaposition of these two elements, achieved through interruption, the event of the collage produces a new reading of the collage as a text. Barthes states that all works contain two edges but the edge of the text of bliss 'is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the dissolve which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss.' (1973, p.7). By placing one edge inside another Stezaker creates a new, subversive edge, which in 'Cinema 1 II' becomes the site of interruption. Interruption is a common trait in collage usually through cutting and distorting the elements within the work. Cutting in 'Cinema 1 II' is not the kind of cutting that we

might imagine when discussing collage, cutting without scissors or scalpel, nor any kind of cut that might damage the materials, but cutting both as removing and replacing. Materials (photograph and postcard) are removed from one, original, context and placed, carefully together, into another. We may also call this lifting, but lifting troubles our use of the word 'placing' which suggests the act of placing items down, onto one another is an important part of our discussion of the event of collage. This is also the event of writing, 'Cinema 1 II' imitates writing through the use of poetic forms of visual rhyme and line breaks that intrinsically perform language through interruption. When cutting happens in 'Cinema 1 II' by replacing one image onto and with another, the postcard interrupts the photograph. Interruption here performs writing, a textual exploration of visual material that is not language but is read through the redistribution of signs. In 'The Pleasure of the text' Barthes states that 'redistribution is always achieved by cutting' (1973, p.7), and he goes on to discuss culture always recurring as an edge. 'Cinema 1 II' (2005) has two edges: the outside edge of the photograph and the inside edge of the postcard on top of the photograph. These two edges create a frame around the postcard of the photograph underneath and bring an awareness of the double edge within the collage: 'Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge...and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed' (Barthes 1973, p.7). Michael Bracewell states that the 'horizons, sight-lines and image edges thus become synaptics in Stezaker's collages, enabling simultaneously both connection and disconnection' (2010, p.16). The eye level of this collage is just above center, we are presented with the horizon-line of the foregrounded postcard, Bracewell calls this the 'host' image (2010, p.15), which hides the actual eye-line of the two men in the background it is attached to. Perhaps this is the ghostly absence of the two men in the host of the horizon of the sea and its cliffs. If the two men are looking at each other, the viewer's eye-line matches theirs in the photograph but it also matches that part of the image that we are drawn to, because it is hidden. This concealment is what Barthes refers to as language imitating itself. It's the part of

the collage that imitates loss, but through imitation, it replicates loss with something that is different: concealing as interruption. A representation of loss as interruption in this case becomes significant to us reading the arrangement because we are faced with a different kind of desire from the desire for two original images: a tactile desire. This is not real loss, but appears so, as in fact the image of the two men has not been cut away and discarded but has been hidden behind another image. The postcard and the photograph are touching, they are layered and they have within their arrangement the impression (literal) of the event of placing one thing onto another. Our desire to redistribute the layers, to see beneath the postcard is our writerly position as readers to perform the text, to reverse the event of making through the event of reading.

Conclusion

 As a writer of this particular text Stezaker has control over the original photographic image/object, and has created a new text event by appropriating two old ones. This text event hides parts of the old one by rearranging and concealing parts of the image, words. '[C]ollage reveals a complicated relationship with the realm of desire' (Gioni 2007, p.13). There is the desire of the reader to view the hidden areas of 'Cinema 1 II', to undo the cut. Barthes says that a writer, Stezaker in this case must seek out his reader using desire, 'These two edges, *the compromise they bring about*, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault...which becomes so.' (1973, p.7 original emphasis). Stezaker creates a desire to see the original, to reveal that which the interruption conceals. This interruption forces us to consider what we cannot see and compare that to what we can. In the case of the two apparently arm wrestling men, we can use Barthes statement that 'It is the flash itself that seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance as disappearance.' (1973, p.10) And we can apply this to the idea of collage as a table-top practice. Like writing and like performance it is 'an arena for this presence of absence' (Stezaker 2008, p.20). Writing processes often utilise the methods of collage, perhaps without knowing it, through the use of found

language, reference and syntactic decision making. When we write we arrange structures for the purpose of reading, the structures are performative because, like collage, they are connected to the event of their creation and the event of their reading.

The event of collage, like the event of writing, is a physical and visual exploration of syntax. 'Cinema 1 II' is a writing that layers, the postcard is a subordinate clause, the photograph is an interrupted narrative that, instead of a linear structure, becomes a framing mechanism for poetic collage-practice.

Bibliography

Barthes, Roland. 1973. *The Pleasure of the Text*. London: Hill and Press.

Bracewell, Michael. 2010. 'Behind the Lines: The Art of John Stezaker' In *John Stezaker*. 10-20. London: Whitechapel Gallery & Riding House.

Gioni, Massimiliano. 2007. 'Its Not the Glue that Makes the Collage' In Flood, Richard & Hoptman, Laura (ed.), *Collage: The Un-monumental Picture*, 11-15. London: Merrell.

Stezaker, John. 2006. 'The Film-Still and its Double: Reflections on the "Found" Film-Still' In Green, David & Lowry, Joanna. *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image,* 113 – 127. Brighton; Photoworks.

Stezaker, John. 2008. 'A Conversation with John Stezaker' Lillington, David. In Craig, Blanche (ed.). *Collage: Assembling Contemporary Art*, 20 – 31. London: Black Dog Publishing.