

Artist's Book Yearbook 2018/19



Image 1. Detail: Feather and Prey, Peter Lyssiotis, 1997, Masterthief Enterprises, Melbourne. Photo: Doug Spowart



Image 2. Left and below: detail, *Illiers Combray*, Helen Douglas and Zoe Irvine, 2004, Weproductions, Scotland. Photo: Doug Spowart



Liminal Moments At The Edges: Reading Montage Narratives in Artists' Books

# Victoria Cooper

Each time I am drawn into the montage image as a reader, I experience a liminal moment - I am at a threshold where I will enter into an unknown space. Although I may recognise familiar characteristics in each fragment I am disorientated by their juxtaposition in these hybrid images. My focus for a Siganto Research Fellowship in the Australian Library of Art (ALA) collection, at the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) is to review and study this liminal reading of the montage through the edges and joins of the fragments. In this research I am guided by the writing of Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes and Sergei Eisenstein to orient myself in the reading and articulate my findings from the perspective of the reader. Also underpinning this research is the extensive history of combining, gluing, montaging, and collaging of image work in many mediums including film, photography and book making.

During my fellowship, I have reviewed over 100 artists' books and many artists' statements held in the ALA. The scope of this research was limited to particular works of Australian artists including Peter Lyssiotis, Gracia Haby and Louise Jennison. However selected works by British artist Helen Douglas and other international artists from the ALA collection were also considered in my research to include an international perspective. As I am a montage maker and thinker, I have decided to include some artists' books that - although by the artist's definition are collage - I 'read' as montage. My focus is on the visual 'reading' of the combined fragments through their edges and the spaces between. There are also considerations for the combination with mixed media including sound, photography and drawing. This investigation does not set out to define a lexicon for montage or collage for the maker1 and as such, in the writing, I will refer to the image works I am researching as montage/collage.

Exchanges at the edges; From Author to Reader
A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from
cultures and entering into mutual relations of
dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one
place where this multiplicity is focused and that
place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the
author (Barthes, 1977:148)

In the making of a montage/collage the artist identifies, separates and then recombines fragments

of images, texts and sometimes sound from a diversity of sources to create a visual expression as abstraction, poetry, political statement or whimsy. As I am reading, I become interested in the artist's making and purpose for their book works. Can the artist or author influence a specific reading by me, or any reader, of their visual work?

Barthes presents in his seminal essay, The Death of the Author (Barthes, 1977) 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.' (Barthes, 1977:148) After the artist's work is completed, the joined fragments of the montage/collage are in a kind of suspended state - waiting for a reader to imbue and inhabit with their own personal meaning. For me the reader is: 'that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted' (Barthes, 1977:148). So as I review the montage images and visual books, I 'read' them as if a language seeking insights that are resonant with me. In my research and reading, I now metaphorically remake the work of the artist as social scientist Pierre Bourdieu, in his book The Rules of Art, argued that a work of art has endless variety of interpretations dependent on the reader/ viewer's purpose for engaging with the artwork:

... in fact made not twice, but hundreds of times, thousands of times by all those who have an interest in it, who find a material or symbolic profit in reading it, classifying it, decoding it, commenting on it, reproducing it, criticizing it, combating it, knowing it, possessing it. (Bourdieu, 1996:177)

Although Barthes and Bourdieu have salient propositions, it is still important to recognise that for the reader to exist they require the artist to create work. Therefore I sought to reconcile this chasm or void between the author and the reader of the creative work where I found a bridge in the theoretical writing of Russian film-maker, Sergei Eisenstein². Rather than the 'author's death' or at least their inability to control the reader's response, I found a strong connection with Eisenstein's reasoning that the 'spectator' in viewing a film actually collaborates with the author.

In fact, every spectator, in correspondence with his individuality, and in his own way and out of his own experience-out of the womb of his fantasy, out of the warp and weft of his associations, all conditioned by the premises of his character, habits and social appurtenances, creates an image in accordance with the representational guidance suggested by the author, leading him to understanding and

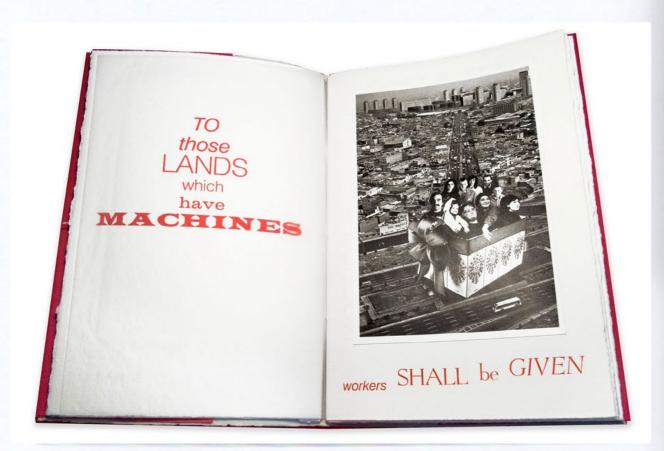


Image 3. Detail: Products of Wealth, Peter Lyssiotis, 1997, Masterthief Enterprises, Melbourne. Photo: Doug Spowart



Image 4. Detail: Brisbane: River City, Lorelei Clark 2010, Lagoongrass Press, Brisbane. Photo: Doug Spowart

experience of the author's theme.

This is the same image that was planned and created by the author, but this image is at the same time created also by the spectator himself.

(Eisenstein, 1943:35)

I propose that in reading a montage/collage in the form in the book can also be considered as a collaboration of the reader and the artist.

This proposition acknowledges both the reader and their lived experience with the artist as author and their *material thinking*<sup>3</sup> (Carter, 2004) as the work develops in the mind and hands of the artist.

Connecting with the artists' inspiration and their collaboration with the material process in creating the work is for me part of the transformative, layered experience of reading. In presenting a discussion on his work the poet Paul Valéry suggested that for him: "the process of manufacture is far more interesting than the work itself" (Valéry, 1964:137). Where 'the process' was not only the methodology of making but extended to the work's conceptual development within the social, environmental, psychological context of its making. Therefore as I read, I enter a space created by the author – acknowledging the work has an embedded history that is of the author – but also knowing that I, as a montage maker and reader, will find my own pathway through the work.

I have found that as I deeply consider the edges of the montage/collage fragments, the page begins to pull apart. I am metaphorically dissecting both the image and the page through the joins, transitions, edges and spaces. As I read their constructed images, the author had evoked in me questions, which I seek within both the book and myself to answer. I then re-construct the page, re-place the fragments in their *mise en page*<sup>5</sup> and continue reading with the turning page. The tension or frisson between the physical join and my reader's scrutiny creates energy that seduces my reader's resolve and imagination to participate in collaboration with the maker and their material thinking.

At the Edges and Beyond: Reading Fragments ... the fragment breaks up what I would call the smooth finish, the composition, discourse constructed to give a final meaning to what one says..... In relation to the smooth finish of a constructed discourse, the fragment is a spoilsport, discontinuous, establishing a kind of pulverization of sentences, images, thoughts, none of which "takes" definitively. (Barthes, 1985:209-210)

The fragments in Peter Lyssiotis' artists' books are

dissected from their original context<sup>6</sup> and then, carefully grafted into a photomontage. In these images the edges are seamless and any evidence relating to the fragment's previous context as a photographic document of a moment in time has been left behind. The seamlessness or invisibility of the edges suggests a naturalisation or assimilation of the migrant fragment within in the montage. More than just a visual language, Lyssiotis' work activates a kind poesis generating new and challenging entities for a multiplicity of readings. In a statement about his book, *Feather and Prey*, Lyssiotis writes:

In these images giant moths are nibbling away at the perfect mechanical reproduction that photography promises. They don't rely on the traditional borders of a photograph to tell them where to start and where to finish. They don't want to be a photograph; they would prefer to be maquettes for pieces of sculpture.<sup>7</sup>

Lyssiotis also places his photomontage images as fragments within the space of the page. In many of his artists' books he strategically utilises the white space of the page to combine photomontage and texts within a poetic reading. In the book, *Feather and Prey* (1997), Lyssiotis reflects on the white space in his books:

The white spaces here constitute something unassuming: a whiteness more like a whisper; something neutral.

In the whiteness there are things the photographic paper has not been allowed to reveal; these are not omissions, they are commissions ... of sins, failed intentions, of habit.<sup>8</sup>

As I turn the pages of this book, they 'whisper', as Lyssiotis suggests, of something hidden-only hints and clues are evident as the photomontage emerges through the white space. On one page a cherub holds a curtain rope that perhaps reveals only a narrow view of the sky hidden under or behind the page. The white space hides knowledge from the reader as if in a whiteout or a fog (See image 1).

As mentioned in Eisenstein's discussion on the spectator earlier, is Lyssiotis creating through the use of white space, a collaborative place where the reader brings their own narrative or composition? The texts also have no apparent edges, but float in the page like soundless words from a silent orator. Lyssiotis' texts are evocative, poetic and political, appearing sparingly in different places on each page. In *Feather and Prey* Lyssiotis signals the shifting meanings and poetic readings arising from these text fragments and their visual placement on the page.



Image 5. Detail: *The very first book of fish*, Jack Oudyn, c.1990s, Micro Press, Ormiston, Queensland. Photo: Doug Spowart



Image 6. Left and below: detail, *And we stood alone in the silent night*, Gracia Haby and Louise Jennison, 2008, Gracia & Louise, Melbourne. Photo: Doug Spowart



The spatial positioning of the text, whether emphatically centered or as a quiet suggestion positioned subservient to white space at the bottom of a page, evokes different tonal readings. Within the narrative of *Feather and Prey* Lyssiotis suggests that:

Words always arrange themselves to tell The same story: that things will change But words are heretics and later, In the fire they will deny it all.<sup>9</sup>

#### Smooth and Subversive

Can the reading of the montage be influenced by the edges and joins whether visible or not and the overlapping, adjacent or more distant spaces between the fragments? The attention of readers may seem to flow uninterrupted across the seamless edge of montages whereas the obvious or visible edge may interfere with the flow of reading. However the intrinsic subject matter in each of the combined fragments can also clash to disturb the flow. As I read, I am seduced by the smoothness of the montage/collage and my mind becomes absorbed into the strange unnatural space of the image or page. I then stop to consider the uncanny nature of the smooth space and in a process of conjecture, pull apart and reassemble each fragment as suggested in Eisenstein's discussion on the spectator of a film:

A work of art, understood dynamically, is just this process of arranging images in the feelings and mind of the spectator ...

... Hence the image of a scene, a sequence, of a whole creation, exists not as something fixed and ready-made. It has to arise, to unfold before the senses of the spectator. (Eisenstein, 1943:25)

In Illiers Combray (2004), Helen Douglas weaves<sup>10</sup> together interventions, that refer to other times and places, into a seamless visual narrative - rather like the flow of fragments through dreams or memory (See image 2). Reading this book is a seduction. I am initially drawn into a garden but, as I spend time reading, I begin to see the added fragments woven into the visual narrative rather like a tapestry. There is a street scene that time-shifts elements and people from one blended fragment to the next. The sound art by Zoe Irvine that accompanies the book extends the spatial dimension of reading with collected montaged sounds that included people, animals and other recordings and created music. The book's psychological space created a sensation of moving forwards and backwards through space and time. The visual and sonic interventions of the added fragments referenced other times and places to hold my reader's curiosity; I contemplate and analyse their placement in the visual narrative. Even though these added elements of sound and images were

the disruptive, the seamlessness of the woven visual narrative placed me in a dreamlike experience of everyday life as it 'unfolded'. Reading this book was both an intellectual and corporeal experience.

Antagonistic incursions and displacement
Works with torn edges, overlapping fragments and lack of white space create quite a different reading to the smooth transitions and wide white spaces experienced in Feather and Prey. The montages in Lyssiotis', Products of Wealth<sup>11</sup> (1997), present as hostile where the political presence of the author cannot be ignored. In this book the photomontages are not embedded in the page but rather placed over or 'tipped-in' the white space where the page becomes the carrier rather than part of the message.

These images were like windows looking into a montaged hybrid world that may seem alien to us but paradoxically is of us. Each page continues with more views of terrifying and perhaps even diabolic territories where the reader is challenged to enter and find their space. As I look into each image I find there is no space between the edges and there is a sense of claustrophobia. My imagination or interpretation seems unwelcome as this communication has its own story to tell through photomontages loaded with implications for the human condition. So I reposition myself outside the image looking in, acquiescent, as these images are crying out to me, pleading to be heard (See image 3).

The edges of fragments take on another psychological reading in the densely layered work, Brisbane: River City (2010), by Lorelei Clark. These roughly torn or cut edges seem to separate the elements, which disturbs the flow of reading much like a jump-cut12 edit in a film. These layered fragments interrupt the reader's flow much like the experience of walking the streets of the city bombarded with sounds, people talking, dodging and weaving through the crowd. The elements combined in this way also demand separate attention and focus on individual parts of the narrative or idea presented. As the source material is advertising leaflets, glossy magazines or pictorial publications, these edges could represent a critique on social issues that affect the human condition. In many ways the reading is unsettling. Rather like the Peter Lyssiotis' political montages, they shout at the reader (See image 4).

In other books I have read, not all of these torn fragments are hostile. In the ALA collection I viewed both an original collage and its reproduction into a multiple edition zine/artists' book. I compared the rough-cut fragments in the original collage or paste-



Image 7. Detail: Gentlemen from a deck of Salvaged Relatives, Gracia Haby, 2015, Gracia & Louise, Melbourne. Photo courtesy of the artists

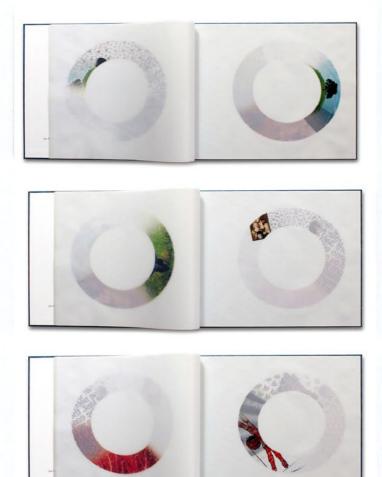


Image 8. Detail: Three open page views of 20 minutes, Lyn Ashby, 2011, ThisTooPress, Victoria. Photo courtesy of the artist

up of Jack Oudyn's, *The very first book of fish* (199-?), with their reading in the book form. Rather than the compositional elements being attached to the surface as tactile cut out objects as in the original collages, the reproduction process for making the book fuses the elements into the page and transforms the reading of the text and images. As I read these little books I am submerged within the blue/watery space of the narrative and the rough edged elements seem to float around inside the image like the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life (See image 5).

# The theatre of the page

Gracia Haby and Louise Jennison's book, And we stood alone in the silent night (2008), presents the reader with an enchanted narrative through the composition of images and poetic texts across the pages. Underpinning the reading is the smooth and seamless joins of the elements creating a surreal landscape with a theatre of colourful inhabitants. The compositional elements draw the reader into an imaginary landscape or dreamscape, where the turning page emulates the scenes of a paper movie<sup>13</sup>. The small size text comes through the reading as a poetic aside to underscore the scene (See image 6).

In their original collages and zine production series, *Salvaged Relatives* editions (2014 - 2015), Haby and Jennison's careful cutting and pasting of added elements over or alongside the original photographic image creates a surreal intervention of animals and birds in unlikely scenarios relative to the person or place in the photograph. Through the artists' meticulous work, the transitions between the fragments go unnoticed by the reader and these added elements seem to now colonise the interior space and time of the original photograph. As I read these works I am reminded of theatrical sets and imaginary scenes from animated movies (See image 7).

### Time and Seduction

In Lyn Ashby's book, 20 minutes (2011), the transparency of the pages and the movement of the montaged images around a circular path are imbued with the passing of time and the small segments of life's experience along that path (See image 8). Ashby says in his artist's statement:

Segments of images appear in a 120 degree arc around a circle, or about 20 minutes on a clock, in an ongoing circular panoramic sequence. This book presents the history of everything in small slices...<sup>14</sup>

The turning of these transparent pages and the smooth transition from fragment to fragment

present the reading of this book as a filmic experience. There is a strong similarity with the film's use of montage where smooth fading from one scene to another signals the passing of time. But, as I read this book, I find no concrete space to locate myself: the transparency of the pages provides a view to the next; the circular image with seamlessly montaged small fragments of moments in time creates a sense of time passing so fast that it is hard to interpret the moment as it passes. This rapidly moving time and space places me, the reader, in a constant liminal state in the turning page.

## Reading the Rhythm of the Montage

In film, the montage is an immersive corporeal experience where the reader's visual and aural senses are heightened. In reading the physical book, there is also a bodily experience that is sensed through touch and sight. In Dianne Fogwell's, *Gene Pool* (2000), as with *Illiers Combray*, I found that the isolation of all sound except for that provided by the artist located me within an extended reading space of reading.

Engaging with *Gene Pool* provides insights into the rhythm of reading through the interplay of the musical and visual storytelling of Dianne Fogwell. This artist is not only a printmaker and artist's book maker but also a recorded jazz singer. It is the music of jazz that has an influence in reading of this book that explores and reflects on her life and the lives of her five sisters. The book is divided into six sections, each has a montage image and portrait of each sister including herself, along with a freeform arrangement of letterpress texts from songs that have a relationship to each of the women. While listening to the artist sing each of the songs, I am also reading the cadence of the text as it changes in size and emphasis (See image 9).

My 'reading' is then drawn into the dark spaces of the portrait image and then moves across the fragments. Like a voyeur of the shadows, I read the visual fragments montaged to create each of her sibling's stories. As Lyssiotis suggests in Feather and Prey: "In the whiteness there are things the photographic paper has not been allowed to reveal", perhaps the shadows are the private unspoken places in these stories. The shadows allow a space for the reader to reflect on and bring their own memories of family life. The sound of singing then disturbs the voyeuristic reading by the intervention of the artist's voice bringing humour, parody and melancholy. Again Eisenstein's spectator's layered viewing and listening experience has resonance with the reading of this book, creating a unique conversation between the visual and audio fragments; between the reader's senses and memory and Fogwell, the author.



Above: Image 9a.

Gene Pool, Dianne
Fogwell, 2000, Edition
& Artist Book Studio,
Canberra School of Art,
Canberra. Photo:
Doug Spowart

Right: Image 9b. Detail Gene Pool. Photo: Doug Spowart

Below: Image 9c. Author listening to the sound track on the CD accompanying the book *Gene Pool*. Photo: Doug Spowart





## Liminal readings

Through the making of these books the author, perhaps in their Barthesian death, has bequeathed a physical and psychological space for the reader to engage with and reflect on the fragments in the montages in images and on the page.

Whether the edges of the grafted fragments are visible and over lapping, or the transitions smooth within a chasm of white space, there is a transformative moment experienced in my reader's mind. It is in this liminal moment and in the space created by the artist that my imagination, memory and life experience inhabits and animates my reading of the visual narrative.

Dr Victoria Cooper, is an artist, independent researcher and academic, and a Siganto Foundation Research Fellow 2015-2016. Her project was made possible with the generous support of the Siganto Foundation, the Australian Library of Art at State Library of Queensland and the Queensland Library Foundation.

### Notes

- 1. See my blog post for the Australian Library of Art, State Library of Queensland, http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/ala/2016/05/27/reading-montages-perceptions-dilemmas-edges-and-resolution/
- 2. Sergei Eisenstein in the early 20th century wrote extensively on the topic of montage principally in film.
- 3. Material Thinking is a concept proposed by Paul Carter in a book by the same title to philosophically and poetically discuss how artists work with materials and how they think through the construction and concept of their work through their material process.
- 4. When questioned by a member of the French Philosophical Society, Poet and Philosopher Paul Valéry responded from his point of view as an artist and poet who is interested in the imagining and creative thinking behind the artists work. In his answer, Valéry gave an example of a proposed body of work where he wrote about how it would be created and imagined.

- 5. This references the *mise en scène* in cinema theory and can be a group of elements/fragments/space that make up the page and their position on the page in a visual narrative or illustration.
- Peter Lyssiotis sources image fragments from everyday publications including magazines and popular journals.
- 7. In the ALA original Materials Archive there are several boxes of Peter Lyssiotis papers. This quote is cited from unpublished writing discussing his book *Feather and Prey*, Call Number: item #2935813 box # 13331.
- 8. Ibid.
- 9. A text from the artist's book Feather and Prey.
- 10. In an email correspondence with the author, 23rd August 2016, Douglas describes making her digital montage work as:

In my making I often use textile terms. I refer to weaving my narrative, stitching my images together, creating a seamless narrative, threading my visual thoughts. Embroidering, embellishing and teasing out - as a teasel - the qualities of the image to the surface, to give surface bloom as print on the page.

- 11. Interestingly *Products of Wealth* was produced in the same year as *Feather and Prey*.
- 12. Film makers Jean-Luke Godard and Sergei Eisenstein championed the use of discontinuity devices such as jump cuts in scenes to disrupt the flow of the cinematic narrative and create the illusion of moving through time and space. This was intended to engage the viewer proactively to think about the issues surrounding the scene.
- 13. Lou Stoumen is the author of visual books including *Can't Argue With Sunrise: A Paper Movie* (1975).
- 14. An extract of Lyn Ashby's artist's statement published in the SLQ catalogue entry.

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## Contents

pookartbookshop Tanya Peixoto	4	Artist's Book Dealers	96
ntroduction Sarah Bodman	5	Artist's Page Tricia Treacy	98
Endangered Species of Book		Artist's Book Galleries & Centres	99
ohn Bently	7		
		Artist's Page Sarah Jacobs	107-108
Artist's Page Hazel Roberts	13	Collections, Libraries & Archives	109
Liminal Moments At The Edges: Reading Montage		Concentions, Environment	
Narratives in Artists' Books		Artist's Book Fairs and Events	125
Victoria Cooper	15		
•		Book Arts Courses and Workshops	131
Artist's Page Claire Yspol	25		
		Design, Print & Bind	138
Exhibition Review - Press & Release 2016:			
Technology and the Evolution of The Artist's Book		Print and Papermaking Studios	143
Peter Seddon	27		
		Journals and Magazines	149
The Artists' Books Critical Index Project			
osh Hockensmith	35	New Reference Publications	152
Artist's Page Kellie Hindmarch	39	Organisations, People, Projects and Societies	158
n the Space of Time		Artists' Books Listings	166
notes on book space as "time" metaphor in artists	,		
pooks from Prescriptions collection)		End page Stephan Erasmus	240
Egidija Čiricaitė	41		
ınfoldingthinking -			
Making Book Art with Scientists			
Les Bicknell	55		
What if my artist's book is not really an object			
Anna Juchnowicz	61		
BEEZER: Library Interventions			
Nick Norton	65		
Un-Flattened: Book Arts and the Artist's Map			
Rosie Sherwood	75		
Rosic offer wood	, 5		
Artist's Page Contributors	80		
Artist's Page Sophie Loss 8	1-82		
Artist's Page Gloria Glitzer	84		
Artist's Book Publishers & Presses	85		
Bookshops for artists' books	91		

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