First-Year Writing Seminar:  
*Collage: From Art to Life (and Back)*

FIRST-UG 361

Fall 2011
Monday, Wednesday 2:00-3:15
1 Washington Place, Room 501

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**Introduction**

“What distinguishes [collage] from techniques of composition developed since the Renaissance,” writes the critic Peter Bürger, “is the insertion of reality fragments into the painting, i.e. the insertion of material that has been left unchanged by the artist.” Once inserted, the fragment assumes a dual existence: a constructive element of the new composition, it is also an independent entity that stubbornly retains its prior identity, its original context always perceivable alongside, behind or in front of its new role. In this class, we will explore the implications of making the new from the ready-made, of constructing one’s own from what was — and remains — somebody else’s. We will consider how collage-works are always reflections on both the specificity of artistic mediums and on the exchangeability of images — on the unique in the reproducible and the reproducible in the unique. And if collage truly aims at reintegrating art and life, we must keep our eyes always on the other half of this operation: what kind of life does collage art construct? Not passive imitation but active proposition, collage-work models a new society, an alternative system of human relations, and demands that the current one be remade in its image. We will be working with examples of both visual and verbal collage, using the idea of double origin — a new context superimposed on a prior one — to think about quotation and allusion (and the difference between them), and about writing as the juxtaposition of multiple registers of language. Once we have discussed some classic works of theory and practice, I will ask you to look for instances of collage in contemporary urban life — and, therefore, in your own.

**Writing**

Over the course of the semester, you will write four essays.
1. *The descriptive essay* (4-5 pages) will be a detailed analysis of a collage work of your choice. Your tasks will be (1) to *present* the salient *components* of the work as well as the way in which they are *organized* or *arranged* and (2) to *make an argument* about the relationship(s) between the discrete elements and the work as a whole. You will need to discuss the nature of the individual pieces: their material properties (what they are made of), their origins (where they come from), their significance (what they mean). And you will need to explore the relations the work establishes between them: how they complement, repeat, parallel, or contradict each other.

2. *The polemical essay* (4-5 pages) will interpret a collage work from at least three points of view; one of these points of view should be your own. To do this you will need to formulate a *controversial question* that the work invites or that has been (or could be) posed about it. Your essay will present several distinct answers to this question, ones that our authors might have given. That is, you will try to answer the question from the perspectives offered by our texts as well as from your own. As you present the question, you will need to explain both how the question is relevant to the object and why the question matters at all—its stakes. The collage work could be the same one you discussed in the descriptive essay but does not have to be.

3. *The literary-critical essay* (6-8 pages) will interpret a work of literature that makes use of collage techniques — a literary collage work. It will combine *close readings* of quotations with explanations of their role in the text as a whole. In this essay, you will make wide use of all the techniques of the previous essays — description and selection of significant details, presentation of ideas and arguments, and, of course, your own interpretation (close reading proper). While you are working on this essay, we will spend several classes discussing and practicing research skills: you will formulate research questions and search for secondary sources (i.e. scholarly criticism: journal articles or books) that might help you answer them. You will then write up a brief distillation of your research and deliver it to the class.

4. The final essay (4-5 pages) will be a *proposal for a collection*. In the last thematic unit of the course, we will explore the idea of the collection as a particular type of collage—an assemblage that foregrounds the historical origins of its elements (usually “primary documents”). Like the components of any collage, the elements of a collection are disparate objects gathered from diverse sites. Having lost whatever order or whole or totality they previously inhabited, they are now reordered in the hope that a new meaning will emerge from their new interrelations. A collection removes its objects from the flow of historical time, “liberating” them from practical use, circulation and exchange, and organizes them according to a particular understanding of the time and place that produced them. A collection may also be a kind of *archive*: a work of history writing—or re-writing—that interprets a region of the past in the act of arranging its traces.

For the purposes of this essay, whose structure I will leave largely up to you, you may think of a collection as any organized collection of objects, verbal or visual, that bear the mark of the past, however near or distant. These can be texts and images; drafts and fragments; public documents and private letters; notes, photographs, and souvenirs. You
will propose one such collection, explaining (1) your principle(s) of selection and (2) your principles of organization. You will survey this proposed collection, describing the objects to be found in it (their materials, dimensions, origins) and the ways in which they are to be arranged (categories, containers, sequences). You will also reflect on the meaning of this collection — the purpose of gathering these particulars in one place, the knowledge their gathering may yield (or conceal), and the relation that you have with the collection as its curator and custodian.

You will be writing drafts for the first three essays — at least one for each. I will read and comment on the drafts, and we will workshop them in class, either as a whole class or in small groups. These workshops will be a key part of the course, so please plan on having drafts done on time and ready to be workshopped. Please, also, be ready to share your work on other occasions as well; throughout the semester, I will be asking you to read your writing aloud in class or circulate it in small, informal groups. Additionally, I will assign several writing exercise, to be done at home, in preparation for class discussions, essay drafting, and workshops.

Readings

Many of our texts will interpret specific collage works (and their makers) through their formal elements as well as through their art-historical, philosophical, and social contexts. In addition to analyzing specific works, they will also offer, either implicitly or explicitly, justification or explanation for the kinds of innovations in aesthetic form and content that collage represents — justifications aesthetic and political, formal and social. While most will address collage specifically, a few will not, but will provide you with the background and conceptual models crucial for making sense of modern “experimental” art and literature. These critical essays will be playing a dual role in the class: as well as sources of ideas and arguments, they will serve as possible models for your own writing. We will also read two literary collage-works.

In addition to the required readings, I encourage you to follow up whatever topics, authors, or texts particularly interest you. You could do this by looking up background information, searching for criticism, or getting further reading recommendations from me or your classmates.

Grading

I will base your grades on your class participation, the quality of your essays, your responses to the work of others (written and oral), and your brief presentation of your research. Each draft of your essay matters (though it will not get a separate grade). Presentation (i.e. grammar, proof-reading, MLA format) as well as style and substance counts.

Anticipated breakdown of assignments:

Descriptive essay: 15%
Polemical essay: 20%
Literary-critical essay: 30%
Collection proposal: 15%
Presentation of research: 5%
Participation: 15%

**Attendance**

If, due to illness, emergency, or religious holiday, you cannot attend class, please be in touch with me directly as soon as possible so that you can be prepared for the next class. Please be aware that more than two unexcused absences will jeopardize your course grade.

**A Note on Plagiarism**

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

**Required Texts**

You can buy our books at the NYU Bookstore. There will be links to all additional materials on our Blackboard site.


**Trips**

If there is time, we may go on two field trips. If not, I will suggest that you take them yourselves, at your leisure. One may be to MoMA (the Museum of Modern Art), where you will have a chance to see firsthand a lot of the twentieth-century art relevant to our topic. The other would be to Anthology Film Archives, the cinema-museum that regularly screens classic and contemporary avant-garde films.

**Syllabus**

1. *Description: Materials and Arrangement*

   *(Collage works by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Juan Gris)*
Week 1

Wed, Sep 7
- Introduction
- In-class writing/discussion: what is collage?

Week 2

Mon, Sep 12; Wed, Sep 14
- Reading: Robert Rosenblum, “Picasso and Braque, 1912-1924” (from *Cubism and Twentieth Century Art*, 1959)
- Writing exercise: descriptive terms/phrases
- In-class writing/discussion: noticing: what are the pieces (inventory) and how are they organized (arrangement)

Week 3

Mon, Sep 19; Wed, Sep 21
- In-class writing/discussion: working with descriptive terms/phrases
- Draft of descriptive essay due

Week 4

Mon, Sep 26; Wed, Sep 28
- Writing exercise/discussion: presenting a collage work (show & tell)
- Workshop

II. *Polemics: Points of View*

(Collage works by Robert Rauschenberg)

Week 5

Mon, Oct 3; Wed, Oct 5
- Reading: Leo Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism” (1972)
- Optional reading: Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” (1965)
- Writing exercise/discussion: identifying a debate/the controversial question
- Descriptive essay due

Week 6

Mon, Oct 10: No class

Wed, Oct 12
- Writing exercise: reverse outline
- Discussion: entering a debate

**Week 7**

Mon, Oct 17; Wed, Oct 19
- Reading: Roland Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image” (1964)
- Writing exercise/discussion: distilling an idea

**Week 8**

Mon, Oct 24; Wed, Oct 26
- Reading: “The Rhetoric of the Image”
- Writing exercise/discussion: applying an idea: analyzing a commercial image
- Draft of polemical essay due

**Week 9**

Mon, Oct 31; Wed, Nov 2
- Reading: Dick Hebdige, from *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979)
- Writing exercise/discussion:
  - Distilling an idea
  - Applying an idea: analyzing a subcultural object
- Workshop

III. *Literary Criticism: Cutting and Pasting*

*(Collage texts by T. S. Eliot, Susan Howe)*

**Week 10**

Mon, Nov 7; Wed, Nov 9
- Writing exercise: selecting and describing a passage (form, rhetoric, theme)
- Discussion: relating passages
- Polemical essay due

**Week 11**

Mon, Nov 14; Wed, Nov 16
- Reading: *The Waste Land*
- Writing exercise: formulating a question
- Discussion: researching a question

Week 12

Mon, Nov 21; Wed, Nov 23
- Reading: Susan Howe, The Liberties (1983)
- Presentations of research questions and answers

Thu, Nov 24: Thanksgiving

Week 13

Mon, Nov 28; Wed, Nov 30
- Reading: The Liberties
- Presentations of research questions and answers
- Draft of literary-critical essay due

Week 14

Mon, Dec 5; Wed, Dec 7
- In-class writing/discussion: answering your interpretive question
- Workshop

Week 15

Mon, Dec 12; Wed, Dec 14
- Reading: Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Collecting” (1931)
- Discussion: presenting a collected object (show & tell)
- Conclusion
- Literary-critical essay due

Fri, Dec 16
- Collection proposal due (hard copy in my mailbox or, if impossible, by email as a Word document)