Gallatin School of Individualized Study
New York University

First-Year Writing Seminar:
*Collage: From Art to Life (and Back)*
FIRST-UG 361

Fall 2014
Monday, Wednesday 2:00-3:15
1 Washington Place, Room 501

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Introduction

This writing seminar 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. Collage aims at reintegrating art and life, so we will examine
collage works that comment on existing society, critique its values and forms of
representation and demand their revision. By selecting heterogeneous elements
from remote areas of culture, high and low, and juxtaposing them on a single
plane, collage disrupts conventional associations and traditional narratives,
collapses oppositions, scrambles classifications, and levels hierarchies. What
new meanings do the fragments and quotations acquire from these radical
juxtapositions, and how does their assemblage contest the mythologies of the
culture from which they were taken? The class will consist of several case
studies in verbal and visual collage placed in relation to a set of political and
aesthetic ideas, which we will derive from a series of theoretical texts.

Course Objectives

To construct original critical arguments, grounded in specific textual and
visual evidence, and develop them through a series of questions

To closely read (describe and interpret) artworks in multiple mediums:
painting, photography, poetry, and prose
To explore a central principle of modern aesthetics: the juxtaposition of heterogeneous materials and elements extracted from prior wholes and reassembled into new discontinuous compositions

**Writing**

Over the course of the semester, you will write three essays.

1. *The art-critical 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. To make this argument, 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 point-of-view essay* (4-5 pages) will interpret a collage work from one (or more) of the perspectives presented in our critical texts. You will need to formulate an *interpretive question* that the work invites and then answer it from the point of view of one of our authors. 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.

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. Here you will make use of all the techniques you worked on in the previous essays: identify significant details, pose interpretive questions, and use at least one of the ideas or theories of collage we’ve encountered to interpret the text.

You will be writing drafts for all 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 plan on having drafts done on time and ready to be workshopped. Please 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 exercises, to be done at home, in preparation for class discussions, essay drafting, and workshops. I may not always collect them, but you will often be sharing them in class and sometimes posting them to NYU Classes. Your work on these will figure into your participation grade.

**Readings**

Many of our texts will interpret collage works 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 three 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.

This course is a seminar, so your regular, active participation in our discussions is crucial. I will expect you to come to class prepared with questions and comments on the day’s reading.

**Grading**

I will base your grade on your class participation, the quality of your essays, and your responses to the work of others, both written and oral. 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:

Art-critical essay: 25%
Point-of-view essay: 25%
Literary-critical essay: 25%
Participation: 25%

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](http://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. All other readings will be posted throughout the semester to the Resources folder of our NYU Classes site. Please print these out and bring a hard copy to class.


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.

Schedule

I. *Texts and Textures*

**Week 1**

Wed, Sep 3
- Introduction
- In-class reading: Charles Bernstein and Susan B. Laufer, “Style” (1978)
- In-class writing: noticing
- Discussion: received ideas

**Week 2**

Mon, Sep 8; Wed, Sep 10
- Reading: Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” (1968); Viktor Shklovsky, “Regarding Texture and Counter-Reliefs” (from *Knight’s Move* [1923], pp. 65-68)
- Writing exercise: argument distillation
- Discussions: the meaning of originality; perceivable form (texture)

II. *Pasting Papers: Cubism*

**Week 3**

Mon, Sep 15; Wed, Sep 17
- Reading: John Berger, “The Moment of Cubism” (1985); Alfred H. Barr, Jr., “Texture: *collage* (paper-pasting)” (from *Cubism and Abstract Art* [1936], pp. 77-82)
- Discussion: the relation between art and society
- Group work/presentations: comparative analysis of Cubist works

**Week 4**
Mon, Sep 22; Wed, Sep 24
- Group work/presentations: comparative analysis of Cubist works
- Draft of art-critical essay due (Wed)
- Workshop

Week 5

Mon, Sep 29; Wed, Oct 1
- Reading: Fernand Léger, “Ballet Mécanique” (1924)
- Ballet Mécanique (film; dir. Fernand Léger; 1924)
- Discussions: the machine and the human; use and misuse

III. Cutting Pictures: Photomontage

Week 6

Mon, Oct 6; Wed, Oct 8
- Reading: Dawn Ades, Photomontage (1986), Introduction (pp 7-17); Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde (1974), ch. 4 (pp. 55-82) [focus on the section on “Montage,” pp. 73-82]
- Discussions: the mass-produced image; the avant-garde work
- Art-critical essay due (Wed)

Week 7

Mon, Oct 13: Fall Break

Wed, Oct 15
- Group work/presentations: photomontage then and now
- Discussion: the politics of fragmentation; seeing (and not seeing) the seams

Week 8

Mon, Oct 20; Wed, Oct 22
- Writing exercise: reverse outline
- Discussion: what is bricolage?
IV. Voices, Fragments, Ruins: Collage Poetry

Week 9

Mon, Oct 27; Wed, Oct 29
- Writing exercise: selecting and describing a passage (form, rhetoric, theme)
- Group work/discussion: junctures, juxtapositions, cuts
- **Draft of point-of-view essay due (Wed)**

Week 10

Mon, Nov 3; Wed, Nov 5
- Reading: Langston Hughes, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951)
- Writing exercise/discussion: close-reading a poem
- Workshop

Week 11

Mon, Nov 10; Wed, Nov 12
- Reading: *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (continued)
- Group work/discussion: tracking a motif
- **Point-of-view essay due (Wed)**

Week 12

Mon, Nov 17; Wed, Nov 19
- Reading: Susan Howe, *The Liberties* (1983)
- Optional reading: Susan Howe, “There Are Not Leaves Enough to Crown to Cover to Crown to Cover” (1990)
- Writing exercise: identifying a formal device/strategy
- Discussion: the relation between form and content (theme)

V. Reuse and Misuse: Punk

Week 13
Mon, Nov 24; Wed, Nov 26
- Reading: *The Liberties* (continued)
- Discussion: reading the illegible
- Draft of literary-critical essay due (Wed)

Thu, Nov 27: Thanksgiving

**Week 14**

Mon, Dec 1; Wed, Dec 3
- Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), ch. 7 (pp. 100-112)
- Writing exercises/discussions: what is style? what is punk style?
- Workshop

**Week 15**

Mon, Dec 8; Wed, Dec 10
- Group work/presentations: contemporary subcultures
- Discussion: subculture today

Mon, Dec 15
- **Literary-critical essay due** (hard copy in my mailbox or, if impossible, by email as a Word document)