

Anything Can Be Used: Notes on the synthesis of desire and knowledge

Henrik Sørliid, 2021

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*THE ONLY WAR THAT MATTERS IS THE WAR AGAINST THE IMAGINATION
ALL OTHER WARS ARE SUBSUMED IN IT*

-Diane Di Prima, "Rant"

Abstract

This thesis is centred on an analysis of collage and *détournement* as artistic and hermeneutic methodologies in a relatively wide sense. It focuses on how the political and theoretical dimensions of *détournement*, as defined by Situationist theory and practice, can be seen as parallel to - and amalgamated with - specific forms of occult practice and philosophy, particularly alchemy. Arguing that language, art and magic can be usefully understood and applied as technologies that partake in the continuous co-creation of the universe, it is proposed that occult philosophy offers the possibility of alternative forms of language, knowledge and embodiment than those enforced by the creeping totalitarianism of contemporary information technologies and their concomitant imperative to render the world in its totality into quantifiable and hence controllable units of data. Because technological control systems - including religion - are dependent upon a parasitic relationship to human bodies and desires, the critique and transformation of everyday life appears as the field where these issues must ultimately be manifested and brought to fruition.

Introduction

When I started out on my MA, I was preoccupied with the idea that I should use these two years to really figure out how to engage explicitly with *the occult* within my artistic practice, with an aim to develop a "contemporary, idiosyncratic visual language" with which to express or represent occult experience. It seemed to me that this would require me to find a precise way of relating to or making visible my own esoteric practice and "beliefs" within my artistic practice. Also, it seemed necessary to ground this visual language in my own lived experience in order to make it something else than a 'commentary' or exegesis on already existing systems. This caused me a lot of uncertainty regarding to what extent I really wanted or was prepared to make this part of my life visible and accessible to an audience - where should I draw the line, and did I really want to put on the 'role' of the artist who "actually believes that sort of stuff"? I also spent a lot of time worrying about how to bring the occult into the world of (contemporary) art more generally. I felt uneasy and skeptical about the prospect of artistic 'representation' of the occult, which could too easily lend itself to conceptualism and an analytical and ironical rationalising gaze, even a sort of exoticism. Likewise, I don't see the point in simply transplanting counter-cultural or subcultural practices directly into a contemporary art setting, unless that specific setting can accommodate a

specific cultural practice on its own terms (some artist-run exhibition spaces are perfect rave venues, for example). In fact my attitude to the institutionalised 'art world' is highly ambiguous, and for the whole first year I felt that there was an urgent need for me to define where, how and under what circumstances it would make sense for me to show my work and how to situate my practice more generally. Because the institutionalisation of art that is so often taken for granted as the desirable career trajectory of a professional artist so often involves an extractivist¹ dynamic, whereby artefacts and gestures that originate in everyday life and in specific cultural and social milieus are removed from their 'habitat' and transposed into an institutional setting that effectively neutralises them. Therefore, we must always be attentive to the question of what specific social and structural conditions allow art to become meaningful and enter into a 'real' relationship with life. I've been invested in questions like these for many years, not least through having been part of running the artist-led exhibition space Kurant in Tromsø between 2014-2018.²

However, these problems can not be conclusively 'solved', at least not in terms of an individual practice. Likewise, I realise that 'the occult' will be present in my work on its own accord, simply because it is one of my major preoccupations. More importantly, the practice of art must be developed on its own premises, whether or not we believe in the slightly absurd proposition that art can be only 'for its own sake'. I've come to suspect that how art may function as a form of esoteric practice in itself provides more nuanced, complex and interesting (but also paradoxical) strategies of transmission, transparency and subterfuge than I have previously realised. In the following, I will both try to unpack the esoteric dimensions of my own art practice as it exists, and work to develop through the text a deeper understanding of how hidden or disguised practices can be present and active within the work and how this subterfuge can in itself be a model for, or even a form of, radical political practice.

The Occult

Throughout this paper, I will use the terms occult/occultism and esoteric/esotericism more or less interchangeably. While this largely reflects common usage in modern Western occult/esoteric cultures, there are nonetheless nuances of meaning that are useful to clarify. Esotericism is a term whose origin lies within the academic study of religion, and it has to a certain extent avoided the negative connotations that its sister term occultism has accrued.³ It was coined as a term for "secret teachings" within religion and philosophy, and has been used as an umbrella term for a variety of medieval and modern beliefs, practices and philosophies in that has its roots in ancient religious and magical practices, Classical philosophy and so on, that historically has had a somewhat fraught relationship to religious orthodoxy and scientific rationalism. Esotericism has been adopted as a term of self-reference by occultists, but it is not originally an emic term.

¹ I am grateful to Åsa Sonjasdotter for making me aware of this analogy, even if I didn't understand when she explained it to me.

² Space does not allow me to enter into this in detail, but suffice to say that we emphasised Kurant's function as a social space for our community. There was also a desire that Kurant and similar spaces should be able to present the top-heavy hierarchies of the 'art world' with a horizontal alternative, instead of being just a stepping-stone on the career ladder of young artists. Just to mention one example, we initiated - in collaboration with Lofoten International Art Festival - the Lofoten International Congress of Artist-run Initiatives, which brings together artist-run spaces from across the Nordic-Baltic and Barents regions. The first congress was organised by myself and Camilla Fagerli in 2017.

³ Christopher Partridge (ed.), *The Occult World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 2.

Occultism in contrast could be seen as a specific form of esotericism, shaped by the specific circumstances of (Western) modernity and globalisation, and still being shaped by the unfolding of 'post-modernity' and what has been dubbed the 'anthropocene'. In its broadest sense, the modern occult designates a field of alternative spirituality and philosophy that, in the words of historian Alex Owen, rejects both the dogmatism of institutional religion as well as the ideals of rationality and scientific positivism.⁴ Strictly speaking a thoroughly modern phenomena, much of occultism grew out of a conscious rejection of the all-encompassing rationalisation and quantification symptomatic of capitalism.⁵ Although 'the occult' or 'occult science' was already well established by the 16th century as a general term for surviving pre-Christian or heterodox practices and beliefs, specifically "those ancient and medieval reputed sciences, held to involve the knowledge or use of a secret and mysterious nature"⁶, (ie. magic, astrology, and proto-sciences such as alchemy), occultism as a 'counterculture' arguably appeared in early-to-mid 19th century France,⁷ where it was connected to the ongoing development of socialist thought, particularly Fourierism.⁸ However, there is a continuity between the magical practices and occult philosophy of the Middle Ages and the 'occult revival' of the 19th century, and contemporary scholarship has largely abandoned the thesis that the Enlightenment represents a definite break in the European occult tradition.⁹ Nonetheless, it is important to remember that this canonical history of occultism - with its emphasis on historical developments in France and Britain - tends to forget that parallel developments happened all over the modern and colonial world, with specific conditions and outcomes in various places.

Even in this specific sense, occultism covers a wide range of sometimes irreconcilable positions and beliefs. Arguably the common element in all forms of occultism is that they preserve and continue to develop 'esoteric' practices and beliefs at the same time as they recognise the validity of empiricism and a rational, scientific and largely secular worldview. This means that the occult - both as a historical phenomenon and as a practice or body of knowledge - challenges simplistic ideas about the character of modernity and rationality. Rather than rejecting rationality, science and modernity, occultists have sought a synthesis of 'esoteric' and scientific worldviews. As such, it does not represent a straightforward 'survival' of archaic and 'irrational' belief, but an ongoing mutation and continual re-invention of a largely rejected body of knowledge that builds on and draws strength from surviving and re-animated magical traditions, while it remains at heart pragmatic, empirical and protean.¹⁰

⁴ Referenced in Tessel M. Baduin, Victoria Ferentinou and Daniel Zamani (eds.), *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous* (Routledge, 2020).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, "The Occult and the Modern World," in idem, *Essays in Comparative Religion*, 1976. Quoted in Baduin, Ferentinou and Zamani, *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics*.

⁷ Partridge, *The Occult World*, pp. 2-3.

⁸ "Not only were there occult socialists, but modern occultism appears to have first emerged in early, pre-Marxist socialist circles. [...] The success of Marxism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with its prominent atheist, secularist, and materialist tendencies, has obscured the fact that the beginnings of socialism in France in the wake of the revolution of the 1790s and during the Bourbon restoration period was heavily religious in nature. [...] The Fourierist phalanxes in the United States were, for example, not only laboratories of free love and cooperative economics, but also [...] important conduits of Western esoteric ideas in the Americas." (Egil Asprem, "The Socialist Roots of Occultism," *Heterodoxology*, accessed 11.15.2021.) <https://heterodoxology.com/2016/05/11/the-socialist-roots-of-occultism/>

⁹ Martin Önnorfors, "Illuminism", in Partridge, *The Occult World*, pp. 173-181.

¹⁰ "A magical tradition can be understood as a semiotic territory within which magicians learn to interpret their experiences. [...] Belief in a codified system subjectively maps the territory within and by which the ritual and

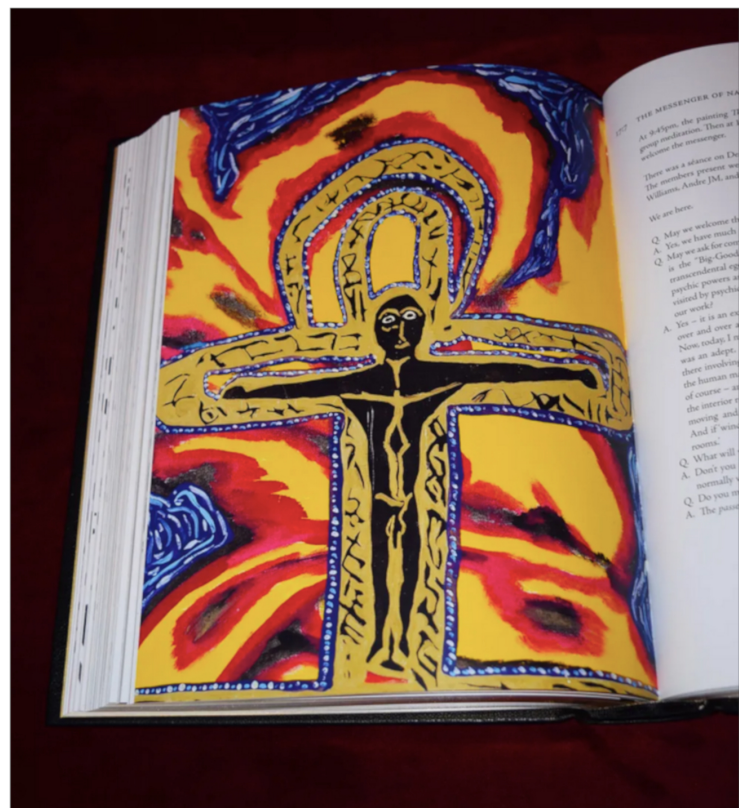


Left: *Macanda, Haitian Witch Goddess of the Crossroads and her Id-familiar*, Michael Bertiaux, 1968

Below: *The Messenger of Naana*, Michael Bertiaux, 1969.

Both images reproduced in Micheal Bertiaux, *Ontological Graffiti* (Fulgur Limited, 2016).

Michael Bertiaux (born 1935) is an artist and esotericist based in Chicago. The paintings shown here are mediumistic portrayals of entities contacted during the meetings of the Hyde Park Lodge, an esoteric research group within the Vodou community of Haitian expats in Illinois, led by Dr. Hector Jean-Maine. The paintings and other artworks made by Bertiaux in connection with the research activities of the lodge were intended for ritual and meditative use by the members, and only much later published in the book *Ontological Graffiti*, which also includes transcripts of seances, descriptions of rituals and theoretical and historical contextualisation. These works is one example of how art can take on very specific, almost technical functions within the context of practical occultism.





Le Sorcier de l'Océan, Wifredo Lam, 1947.

Cuban artist Wifredo Lam sought to preserve and vitalise the African cultural and spiritual heritage in Cuba through a Modernist rendition of Afro-Cuban mythology and ritual. He explicitly referred to himself as a Trojan Horse, "that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters" (Interview with Max-Pol Fouchet, quoted on Wikipedia).



(Note that many esotericists, particularly those subscribing to Perennialist or Traditionalist views, would disagree vehemently).¹¹

Magic as Technology and Cosmology

My own personal occult experience and orientation is largely rooted in a critical reception of Thelema - the mystical and magical system of Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), which represents a post-Christian, modernist and to some extent rationalising revision of the classical Western esoteric sources, influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism. I am also influenced by Chaos Magick¹² and other post-modern/contemporary approaches to the occult influenced by post-structuralist philosophy, media theory, cultural studies and so on. Encounters with Buddhism (in Europe and Japan) and Candomblé (in Brazil) have also influenced my ideas and practice. I see myself as situated within a countercultural tradition that is both in a certain sense specifically Western, deeply indebted to South and East Asian cultural and intellectual influences, and also a specific instance of a broader form of spirituality or religiosity defined by structural similarities rather than actual historical connections.¹³ I am keen to emphasise that the history of occultism in the West has been shaped by both imperialist and anti-imperialist attitudes, and that the counter-hegemonic potentials of occultism within late capitalism can not be taken for granted, but requires cultivation. I am cautiously optimistic about some current trends within Western occultism, including the proposals brought forth by Jake Stratton-Kent and others, that Western occultists have much to learn from African diaspora religions.¹⁴ These traditions share many of the same characteristics as Western occultism, but their social and political capacities are perhaps in some ways more pronounced than those of Western esotericists who may tend - for social and structural reasons - towards accommodation with the 'spiritual supermarket' and liberal pseudo-individualism. But this can also be an oversimplification, and I would be a fool to make too strong statements about these wide-ranging issues.

I don't buy into puritanically anti-Christian attitudes, but I am committed to the project of extracting the core principles of occult practice from the residue of Christian beliefs and habits, which still cling to much of the esoteric corpus. To me, this ties in with a desire to dismantle the spiritual hegemony and pervasive influence of idealism and monotheism in

practices of that system function, and by mapping the territory the system is then given a creative space in which to observably perform." (Rowan Elizabeth Cabrales, "Asthetophysicks and the Anti-Dialectical Hyperoccultation of Disenchanted Representation: Hyperstitional Esoterrorism as Occultural Accelerationism" (MA thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2019) p. 20.)

¹¹ To be brief, perennialist and Traditionalist currents in esotericism, as well as 'religionist' scholarship under their influence, "aimed at establishing cross-cultural similarities pointing to a universal 'esoteric core' of all religions." (Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism", *Correspondences* 2.1 (2014), p. 5).

¹² Including sources peripherally connected to the development of Chaos Magick, such as Austin Osman Spare's Zos Kia-cultus, and the experimental practices developed by Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs.

¹³ "The 'Western' in 'Western esotericism' has received increased critical attention in recent years. A growing number of studies critique the fluid boundaries of 'the West' as a category, and bring attention to 'esoteric' currents that seem to challenge such classification [...] The combined evidence provides a strong case for dismissing the categorisation of esotericism as intrinsically Western, on historical and terminological grounds. There is, however, also another [...] way to go about critiquing this classification. This second way proceeds by pointing to *structural similarities* with phenomena that originate in other historical, cultural and geographic contexts. [...] Why, despite evident structural similarities, are Indian Tantric groups, yogic practice, Zen Buddhism, Taoist alchemy, Amerindian 'shamanic' practices, or Melanesian initiatic societies automatically excluded from analysis in terms of 'esotericism'?" (Ibid. pp. 4-5.)

¹⁴ Jake Stratton-Kent, *Geosophia: The Argo of Magic, vol. I* (Scarlet Imprint, 2010), pp. 118-120.



THE THUMB CONCENTRATION



THOUGHT-BODY AND ITS SIGIL.

Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956) was a British artist and occultist whose life-long experiments with the intersection of magic, language and art has had a lasting impact on contemporary forms of occultism. These figures are taken from Spare's *The Book of Pleasure (Self-Love): The Psychology of Ecstasy*, first published 1913.

society at large. Not so much out of an antipathy to Christianity or any other religion as such, but because I believe that the ubiquitous one-eyed transcendentalist metaphysics of Christian spirituality (that also underpins authoritarian and millenarian forms of transhumanism) has been programmed into our so-called 'civilisation' as a self-fulfilling apocalyptic script that drives ecological and social destruction in the name of messianic 'progress'. The problem is not 'Christianity' as such, but the transcendental, idealist spirituality and the catastrophic eschatology that capitalism has inherited from Christian metaphysics and transformed in the crucible of an ostensible materialism and techno-scientific naturalism.

Even as 19th century models of occultism and their contemporary offspring may be 'tainted' by their historical origins, I believe that they contain important resources - both methodological and conceptual - for escaping and eventually overthrowing the confines of the metaphysical universe we have inherited along with the late-capitalist world that is its 'material' correlate. I see the 'cosmopolitical' potentials of occultism as two-fold. On the one hand, I believe that what remains of the 'occult sciences' (magic and mysticism) provides a technological basis for a radically different libidinal economy than the repressive desublimation of 'liberal' capitalism. Secondly, the construction of occultism as an alternative 'current' within Western so-called civilisation provides for a radical, systematic and tactical re-evaluation and appropriative re-reading of the entire 'Western' cultural tradition and its concomitant symbolic systems and all the metaphysical baggage of this accumulated cultural history. I believe that a profane and self-consciously anachronistic hermeneutical transformation is necessary to overcome and leave behind the dying and self-destroying world of techno-scientific capitalism, which to me represents a doomed attempt to materially create the spiritual world implied by Christian metaphysics.

It seems significant to me in this regard that the construction of occultism-as-counterculture in 19th century France is so closely tied to Fourierism, considering Fourier's critique of the French Jacobins and his proposal that socialism, in order to actually succeed in transforming society and human existence, must develop as its spiritual correlate a hedonistic religion of pleasure,¹⁵ which would be able to challenge and ultimately supplant conventional Christianity.¹⁶ Of course, contemporary capitalism has to a not insignificant degree become independent of its roots in Puritan Protestantism. And I don't believe that politics can be reduced to a question of metaphysics and ontology, and I'm critical of what I perceive as a tendency among some intellectuals to "ontologise" politics. Capitalism is highly adaptive, and can adjust itself 'rhizomatically' to different socio-cultural assemblages. I do not believe for one second that capitalism depends on the integrity of 'organic wholes', even though it benefits from the post-fascist appeal to such fantasies. Even as it is intimately connected to and must utilise specific forms of chauvinism and regimes of discrimination, capitalism itself is so to speak of a higher order, it is a protean blob which feeds on its own inherent

¹⁵ McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages out of the 20th Century* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 61-83.

¹⁶ I suspect that the failures of political socialism to date can in part be traced to its failure to systematically overcome the libidinal structures of transcendental spirituality, particularly the Christian ideals of sacrifice and self-abnegation, which resonates with the asceticism and puritanism favoured by authoritarian strands of socialist thought, in particular Leninism. It is this same asceticism and puritanism that informs moralistic attitudes towards poverty, work, enjoyment and 'success' in capitalist societies. Note also that the Soviet Union embraced a form of Taylorism/scientific management of labour, thus reproducing an intensified, secularised form of Protestant work ethics.

contradictions. This is what makes it such a powerful and resilient enemy - it is by nature dysfunctional and has an enormous capacity to absorb and digest what appears inimical or antithetical to it. With this in mind, the struggle for life on this planet must be broad-spectred and specific in it's applications, and avoid giving in to totalising abstractions.¹⁷

Concomitant to - but also relatively independent of my ideas about the 'cosmopolitical' possibilities latent in occultism, I personally consider the following points central to my own conception of the occult at the time of writing:

The body is the place where the occult in the sense of the 'hidden' qualities or properties of nature becomes known and legible to human consciousness. But the idea of what the body as such is, is drastically enlarged and problematised compared to a materialistic or naturalistic conception. Significantly, both ancient 'mystery religions' and modern forms of occultism - even those that maintain a more or less traditional idea of divinity - tend to deny a categorically unbreachable ontological dichotomy between the divine, human subjectivity and 'nature' in general. This is why personal, direct experience of the 'spiritual' or 'divine' is the central issue and more important than theological or philosophical doctrine.¹⁸ In my view, to practice 'occult science' requires a commitment to radical skepticism, and I am deeply suspicious about the whole concept of 'belief' as it has been construed in conventional (Western) religion.¹⁹

Based on personal experience, I assume the existence of *something* that would traditionally be called a 'spiritual' world, inhabited by entities particular to this world, which is intertwined with what is normally understood as the 'material' world, and available to human consciousness and perception under the right circumstances. However, I believe that this 'spiritual' world, at least how it appears to and is made available to humans, is not entirely unaffected by our use of language and cultural/aesthetic forms. Instead of a 'naive realism', I assume that the concrete forms and qualities of 'spiritual' entities depend in part on cultural and conceptual 'scripts'. On the other hand, I am not at all convinced that the 'spiritual' world is a purely meta-linguistic construct - it seems more reasonable to me that language, symbolism and myth forms part of an arguably 'technological' interface that facilitates communication and interaction between what is normally understood as human and non-human entities, or between different 'worlds'. The 'medium' gives form to realities that perhaps may not 'exist', even though they have some sort of 'being', and which would

¹⁷ "[Capitalism] is not a single thing or a single logic, which simply asserts itself as if pushed by some ghostly hand, but a specific way of production, which must constantly branch off, re-establish itself, and adapt in order to find a footing and eventually assert itself in completely different social formations. In other words, one can never see capitalism in its pure form and the word is therefore only conditionally suitable as a term in political struggle[.]" (Nicolas Siepen, "DáidDaDacademia", in Camilla Fagerli and Henrik Sørlied (ed.), *Dream Academy*, Archive Books, forthcoming 2021/2022, p. 292.)

¹⁸ "[...] in reality it is impossible to distinguish results with *Abramelin* from results with *Liber Samekh*. We may be inclined to do so, merely because the interpretation or theology differs along with our personal preferences[.] It is a given - from my perspective - that while interpretations differ (as do theological preferences) results tend to resemble one another." (Stratton-Kent, *Geosophia*, pp. 189-190).

¹⁹ "In this book it is spoken of the Sephiroth, and the Paths, of Spirits and Conjurations; of Gods, Spheres, Planes, and many other things which may or may not exist. It is immaterial whether they exist or not. By doing certain things certain results follow; students are most earnestly warned against attributing reality or philosophical validity to any of them." (Aleister Crowley, "Liber O vel Manus et Sagittae", reprinted in Aleister Crowley, Leila Waddell and Mary Desti, *Magick, Liber ABA, Book 4, parts I-IV*, Weiser Books, 1997.)

remain formless without the act of communication and embodiment.²⁰ The deliberate construction and manipulation of this interface is what I refer to when I talk about ‘magic’.

The dualistic division between matter and spirit, even though it is common enough in the jargon of occult traditions, is ultimately an academic issue of little practical consequence. I don’t really believe in ‘spirit’ in the classic idealist sense, but I also don’t really believe in ‘matter’ as such. I assume that these terms are more indicative of different modes of perception, and/or perhaps different ‘phase transitions’ of a more fundamental reality or substance, which may perhaps be nothing at all. I still think that some strands of materialist philosophy, particularly some forms of contemporary ‘weird’ or dynamic/vitalistic materialism, but also Marxian forms of historical or cultural materialism, can provide conceptual tools and building blocks that can be useful in the further development of contemporary occult philosophy.

While I surmise that the issue of academic post-humanism in itself is largely situated within the academic institution, and performs an epistemic struggle that is defined and limited by its oppositional relation to this institution and its conservative policing of epistemological and ontological boundaries, I find Rosi Braidotti’s proposal of a “neo-Spinozist monistic ontology”²¹ to be an exciting and promising proposal for occult philosophy to work with, in order to overcome the traditional dichotomy of spirit and matter that haunts so many aspects of occult discourse. One can easily see Braidotti’s vision of the “primacy of intelligent and self-organising matter”²² complement the seemingly idealist monism of a contemporary occult scholar like Helen Kirkby, who writes that “not only does spirit embody matter, but matter *by its own volition* draws spirit into the manifest planes[.]”²³ Furthermore, the idea that the unmanifest world of spirit seeks its fulfilment and completion in the process or act of materialisation and manifestation mirrors Braidotti’s proposal that “vital matter is driven by the ontological desire for the expression of its innermost freedom[.]”²⁴ I.e. the undifferentiated and all-encompassing ‘seed’ of ‘pure spirit’ is immanent in material reality and the two are in effect different aspects of the same reality²⁵ - a synthetic polarity that establishes a

²⁰ A possible philosophical route to understand this aspect of occult practice is to say that it provides tools for enunciation, in the sense of Felix Guattari’s use of the word. Religious historian Erik Davis describes this enunciation as “[...] a form of expression that releases the power of both signs and material forces. Enunciation mobilizes language, in other words, but it also expresses material or energetic forces that are not linguistic or semiotic. A particular shade of blue or a complex harmony, for example, may function as signs within a work of art, signifying emotions or alluding to other works of art. But such meanings also ride atop what Guattari calls ‘a-signifying’ (non-semiotic) forces, especially vibrations.” Furthermore, “[...] the combination of signs and a-signifying processes boots up something radical for the being who enunciates: a zone of nondual fusion that precedes the usual split between subject and object, psyche and environment. [...] For Guattari, these territories also call forth new ‘universes of value,’ fresh folds in the aesthetic tapestry of reality. Guattari calls these universes ‘incorporeal domains of entities we detect at the same time that we produce them, and which appear to have always been there, from the moment we engender them.” (Erik Davis, *High Weirdness*, MIT Press/Strange Attractor Press, 2019. Guattari quotes are from *Chaosmosis*, Indiana University Press, 1995)

²¹ Rosi Braidotti, “A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities” in *Theory, Culture & Society* vol. 36(6) (2019), p. 31.

²² Ibid. p. 31.

²³ Helen Kirkby, *The Brazen Serpent*, Nephilim Press, 2017, p. 34. Emphasis added. See also Brian Cotnoir’s comments on the *Emerald Tablet* towards the end of this chapter.

²⁴ Braidotti, p. 34.

²⁵ “All matter or substance being one and immanent to itself, it is intelligent and self-organizing in both human and non-human organisms.” Ibid. p. 34.

comprehensive system of energetic transduction between them and which is ultimately resolved back into the nothingness from which it emerged.²⁶

The Methodology of Détournement

Cut-ups are for everyone. Anybody can make cut-ups. It is experimental in the sense of being something to do. Right here right now. Not something to talk and argue about.

-William S. Burroughs²⁷

Collage, cut-ups and détournement are approaches to artistic and cultural creation, analysis and epistemology that has become central to my work, both in terms of technique or craft, as tools for critical enquiry and as methodologies with which to develop a systematic and generative understanding of the production of art and life. While they often come together under the general rubric of collage in my practice, it is expedient to consider each as a specific aspect or tool of what I will argue is an essentially alchemical craft.

Collage literally means to glue stuff together, and in its widest application it is indistinguishable from assemblage, in the sense of assembling and arranging different objects and materials, binding them together into a composite object. The artificial conjunction of disparate materials (or meanings, in the case of textual or semiotic collage) creates a tension or dynamic between the objects and materials thus conjoined, and in the case of drastically recontextualised or displaced materials, the resulting cognitive dissonance elicits or even demands a creative and equally synthetic re-reading when engaging with the work. The realisation that objects or materials removed from their 'original' context and recontextualised within a synthetic assemblage would acquire radically different and sometimes unexpected meanings, readings and/or resonances is the root of the concept of *détournement*, which was coined by the Situationists, developed on the basis of the poetics of the Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse, 1846-1870), who 'plagiarised' and re-contextualised earlier writers like the Comte du Buffon in his famous collection of prose poetry, *Les Chants du Maldoror*.²⁸ Guy Debord and Gil Wolman describes the implications of Lautreumont's poetics in their 1956 article "A User's Guide to Détournement," which is worth quoting at some length:

"Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can serve in making new combinations. The discoveries of modern poetry regarding the analogical structure of images demonstrate that when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed. [...] The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the bringing together of two independent expressions, supercedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organisation of greater efficacy. Anything can be used."²⁹

²⁶ "For I am divided for love's sake, for the chance of union." (Aleister Crowley, *Liber Al vel Legis* (Boston: Red Wheel/Weiser, 1976).

²⁷ From *The Third Mind*, with Brion Gysin. Quoted in Oliver Harris, "Cutting Up Politics," in Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh (eds.), *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 176.

²⁸ McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, Verso, 2011, pp. 33-35.

²⁹ Quoted in Timothy S. Murphy, "Exposing the Reality Film: William S. Burroughs Among the Situationists," in Schneiderman and Walsh, *Retaking the Universe*, pp. 37-38).



Synthetische Blumen, Hannah Höch, 1952

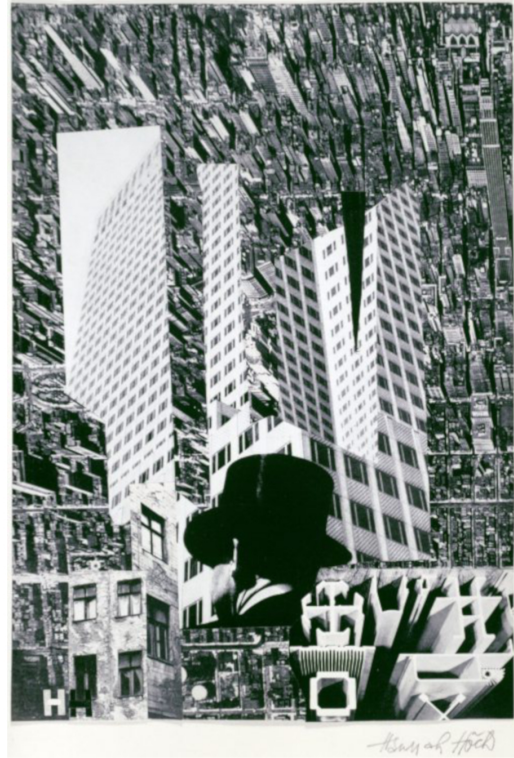


Kleine Sonne, Hannah Höch, 1969

German Dadaist Hannah Höch (1889-1978) is widely regarded as one of the originators of photomontage or collage, although she herself explained that the Dadaists learned the technique from contemporary mass media, and adapted it to their own needs. Höch's works and writings had a decisive impact on me when I started to work systematically with collage, and for many years I regarded her as my spiritual "grandmother."



Den Männern gewidmet, die den Mond eroberten, Hannah Höch, 1969



Fortgeschritten, Hannah Höch, c. 1958



Dada-Rundschau, Hannah Höch, 1919

McKenzie Wark, in her 2013 book *The Beach Beneath the Street*, elaborates upon the concept of *détournement* through tracing its development as a practice from the poetics of Lautreamont through the Surrealists, and particularly by highlighting the divergence of the Situationist understanding and use of *détournement*, as distinct from the usage the Surrealists made of these 'chance encounters'. According to Wark, "for past works to become resources for the present requires their use in the present in a quite particular way. It requires their appropriation as a collective inheritance, not as private property. All culture is *derivative*."³⁰ Wark also stresses the crucial fact that:

"*détournement* is the opposite of quotation. Like *détournement*, quotation brings the past into the present, but it does so entirely within a regime of the proper use of proper names. The key to *détournement* is its challenge to private property. *Détournement* attacks a kind of fetishism, where the products of collective human labor in the cultural realm can become a mere individual's property. But what is distinctive about this fetishism is that it does not rest directly on the status of the thing as a commodity. It is rather a fetishism of memory. [...] In place of collective remembrance, the fetish of the proper name."³¹

When I first got seriously involved with collage around 2009, I was motivated by both a desire to develop a more complex visual vocabulary than what I felt was possible for me at the time in painting, a wish to speed up the image-making process, but also a desire to "destroy the authority of photography," as I formulated it at the time. By which I meant the idea that photography, through its technical replication of optical phenomena, had a privileged position in saying something 'true' about reality and the world. While photography undeniably 'captures' visual phenomena and indeed can convey precise information about material reality, there is something about this deep distrust of the idea of an 'objective' mediation of reality and the invisibility of that (technical and aesthetic) mediation that resonates with me to this day. This distrust is also linked to an antagonistic attitude towards the prevailing image economy, what might perhaps be called 'semiotic capitalism'³² and the enforced continuous representation that is required of us to make our existence accessible and legible/readable to automated systems of surveillance and control. Despite her blind spots, I found Susan Sontag's essays in *On Photography* (1977) useful in developing a deeper understanding of my own resentment and skepticism towards photography.

In brief, Sontag argues that photographic reproduction engenders a sort of universalised, bargain basement pseudo-Surrealism that turns everything in the world into a 'relic' and therefore 'collectible'. She criticises the resulting 'fetishistic' accumulation of fragments' and how it comes to replace the construction of a 'whole' history or vision of the world. More importantly, she argues that "photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding[.] All possibility of

³⁰ Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, p. 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³² "The cognitive transformation of production and the creation of a semio-capitalist sphere has opened a new possibility for expansion - and for a few years in the 1990s the economy was able to expand euphorically, while the Internet economy was expected to furnish a new landscape of infinite growth. It was a deception, because even if the general intellect is infinitely productive, the limits to growth are inscribed in the affective body of cognitive work: limits of attention, of psychic energy, of sensibility." (Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), p. 77).

understanding is rooted in the ability to say no.”³³ Sontag’s arguments are both seductive to me, yet also dubious, as she bases her criticism of photography on an elitist disdain for mass culture.³⁴

I would pose the question if the so-called accumulation of fragments have by now created an opaque ‘whole’? The ostensible ‘democratisation’ of the means of digital communication and production has engendered a frantic overproduction of images - a congested world of images and text paralleling the wastefulness of industrial production. The result, at least according to Berardi’s analysis, is ‘semiotic inflation’ - “you need more signs, words, and information to buy less meaning.”³⁵ *Détournement* is perhaps particularly useful in this environment - to some extent it can also be said to represent a clarification of how signs and cultural elements ‘naturally’ undergo a process of mutation and self-estrangement as they migrate across temporal, cultural and social registers. If *détournement* can be deemed a ‘countercultural’ or ‘oppositional’ practice, it is to the extent that it unravels dominant discourses of wholeness, of the integrity of tradition and the security of meaning. The seemingly disruptive tactics of *détournement* and collage may indeed be read as a form of symbolic or virtual violence directed against epistemological and cultural hierarchies, but this disruptive power comes precisely from the fact that *détournement* is working *with* the processes of history, nature and cultural creation, not against them. Nothing works the way it was intended, because tradition in itself is a living chain of misinterpretation, mistranslation, falsification, and exaptation. This is not specific to the so-called ‘postmodern’ condition, but a fundamental fact of cultural evolution which has been vehemently denied by parties invested in the construction of a monolithic and hegemonic model of culture - the grandiose fictions of ‘Western civilisation’ and so on, who must establish their material and metaphysical existence on the ruins of a thousand other worlds which it destroys, and even denies existence. That the unravelling of ‘grand narratives’ of history causes a bit of moral panic is in itself of no concern. What does concern me is that the very secularism and post-Enlightenment ‘rationalism’ that contributed so much to a realistically ‘molecular’ understanding of history is itself being constructed as a new totalising system, wherein a scientific belief in the universality of Reason - and the embodiment of Reason as computation - is congealing into a thick miasma of transcendental metaphysics combining free-market fundamentalism, techno-utopian accelerationism and elitist transhumanism, all covered in a glossy, sticky translucent film of seemingly benign individualistic liberalism.

This techno-utopianism may or may not be identifiable in academic terms as a ‘religion’ in the strict sense, but it clearly has preserved and developed in new directions some of the worst, most fundamentally anti-cosmic metaphysical and eschatological underpinnings of Christianity and even anti-cosmic forms of Gnosticism and Manichaeism. Just to take a very pristine example of what I’m getting at, the Iranian neo-rationalist philosopher Reza Negarestani sees Reason as a ‘Messianic’ force that will eventually ‘liberate’ humanity from what he perceives as the indignities of a fleshy, material existence.³⁶ That the ‘liberation’ engendered by the intimate fusion of human consciousness and artificial intelligence is

³³ Quoted in Liam Kennedy, *Susan Sontag: Mind As Passion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 97.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-100.

³⁵ Berardi, *The Uprising*, p. 96.

³⁶ Paraphrased from my own memory of Negarestani’s lecture series at the 2014 Spring Meeting at Performing Arts Forum, St. Erme, France.



Unknown Title, Kurt Schwitters, 1925

On this and the following pages, I include a few examples of some collage artists whose works have had an influence on my own practice, whether in terms of style, formal solutions, narrative or theoretical orientation. Kurt Schwitters taught me composition. Romare Bearden teaches narrative drive and dynamics. Penny Slinger demonstrates how humour can contribute to the transformative powers of détournement, without losing sight of her zany New Age spirituality and commitment to her own pleasure.



City of Brass, Romare Bearden, 1965



The Walls of Jericho, Romare Bearden, 1964



Pittsburgh Memory, Romare Bearden, 1964



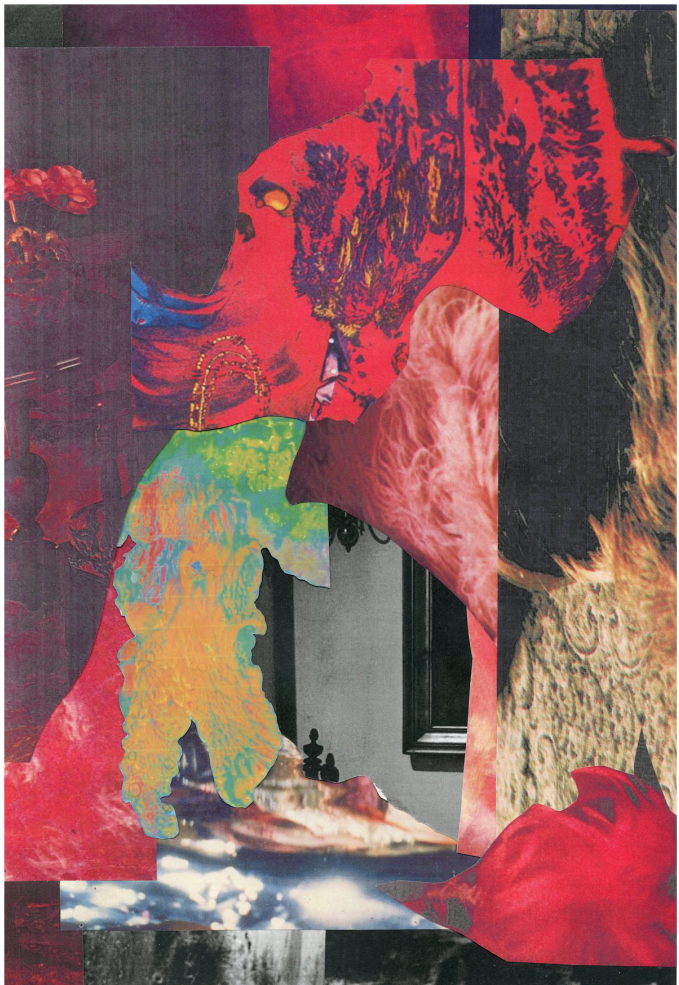
Transformation Crystal Palace, Penny Slinger, 1976-77



Birth, Penny Slinger, 1978

This page and next: Excerpts from my collage series *Operating Chambers* (2018-2019). While the compositions themselves are predicated on experiments with the alchemical use of colour, and the evocation of colour as sentient beings, the raw material comes from a wide variety of pop cultural and art historical sources, including underground media, advertisement, cinema, soft pornography, visual anthropology and popular magazines. The selection of material was in part inspired by reading Herbert Marcuse's critique of what he called "repressive desublimation", namely a fake 'sexual liberation' in service to freemarket capitalism. *Operating Chambers* did not engage directly with Marcuse's theories, but used them as a launchpad into outer space.





envisaged in religious terms is also made clear by 'futurist' Ray Kurzweil's tongue-in-cheek comment, "Does God exist? I would say, 'Not yet.'"³⁷ The eschatological myth of technological singularity and the god-like powers of General AI probably does not reflect the actual potentials of future technology, but that is somewhat beside the point for the current discussion. It is at any rate a mythology,³⁸ a narrative that is being propped up in order to justify the ongoing devastation and destruction of the earthly biosphere in the name of profit and continued economic growth. Regardless of the reality of the claims of the techno-utopians and their corporate cohorts, they are asking us to comply with an ideology of sacrifice and the abnegation of the living flesh in return for abstract rewards in a transcendental realm, where by some miracle technology will deliver on all the grandiose promises of Christian eschatology.

Analogue to this material (and hence spiritual) destruction of the biosphere, the fabric of collective and individual psychosomatic life is being destroyed by a machinery of representation, in order to render the opaque and furtive materiality of social and affective life readable and legible to the machinic intelligence of computation, as a transparent, deterministic, and hence controllable world of 'data'. Even if causal determinism may very well not be the 'ultimate truth' of the physical world, a knowledge-system presupposing such a world can - through the technologies that embodies it - create this world, or impose this sort of reality onto the world. It achieves this through a matrix of quantifiable and computable data which renders living flesh susceptible to the operations of automated intelligences through the creation of virtual simulacra - digitally mediated 'magical twins' of actual entities.³⁹

Against this regime of representation and mediation as an interface for cybernetic and technocratic control systems, it is necessary to insist on different languages, and the possibility of different forms of knowledge that are not transparent - forms of knowledge that are specific to the singularity of a world of flesh and affect, of embodied intelligence, desire and imagination. Languages incompatible with the ostensible universality of a 'disembodied' perspective.⁴⁰ Because language - even if it is a technology of control and possibly even a "virus from outer space"⁴¹ that thrives on the subjugation and extortion of the body - is still our birthright and a beautiful and (perhaps?) even necessary path of embodiment and materialisation for desire and intelligence. In this regard, Debord and Wolman's astute observation that the compository mode of detournement is inherently synthetic and creates, as I read it, new "worlds of feeling" that supercedes those worlds that have been thrown into the mix, is important. Collage or detournement is not at all purely analytic, critical or 'ironic' -

³⁷ Quoted in John Rennie, "The Immortal Ambitions of Ray Kurzweil: A Review of Transcendent Man," *Scientific American*, February 15, 2011.

³⁸ "Night is also a sun", and the absence of myth is also a myth: the coldest, the purest, the only *true* myth." (Georges Bataille, "The Absence of Myth" in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, edited and translated by Michael Richardson (Verso, 1994), p. 48).

³⁹ "[T]echnology is a commodity and Science is an industry, their entanglements reverberating Epistemically, Ontologically, and Multi-Temporally[.] The technoscientific reification of Material-Rationalism through a filter of productive commodification has commodified representation itself, conditioning a reality represented by and through objects with productive and monetary values [...] infecting not just Ontological, Epistemic, and technological navigations, but Aesthetics, affective biopsychic life, and Time itself." (Cabral, "Aesthetaphysics", pp. 7-8.)

⁴⁰ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599.

⁴¹ William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), pp. 49-54.

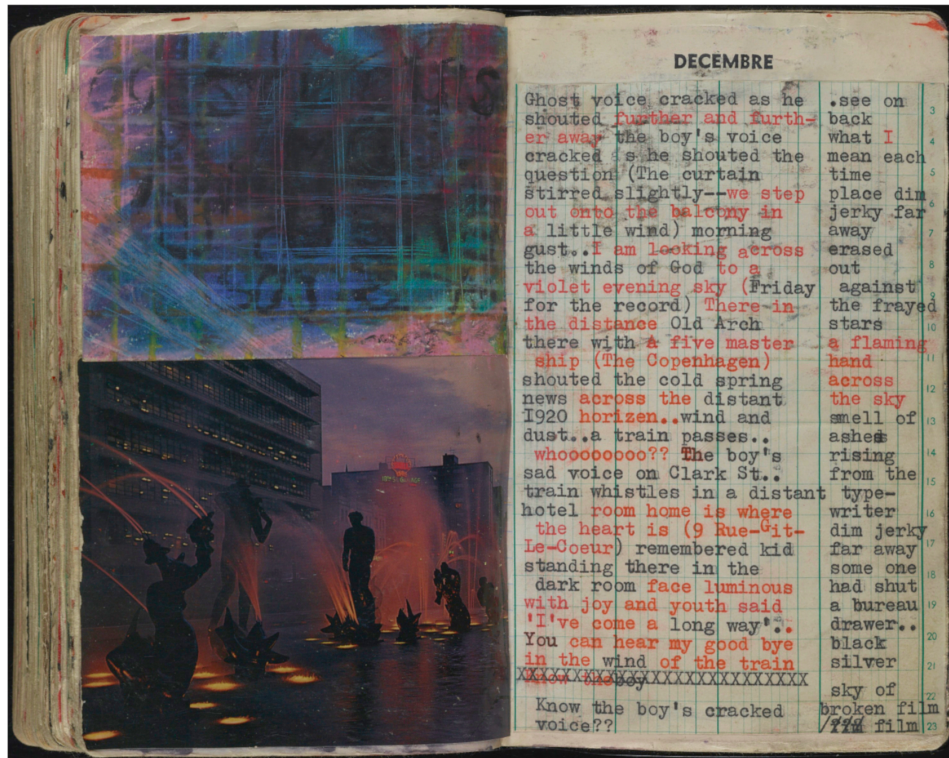
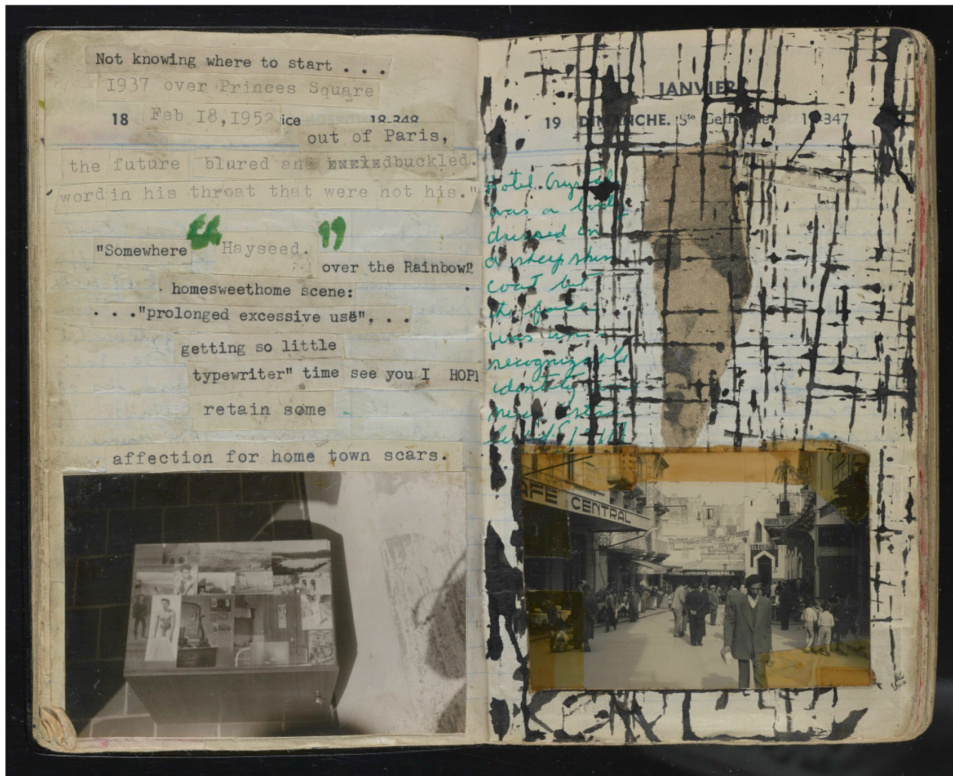
it is a method whereby new “universes of value and meaning” can be brought to light, and new languages developed on the basis of a deliberate perversion of existing regimes of signification. That these worlds are created precisely on the basis of a re-adjustment, co-option or ‘misuse’ or mutation of whatever material happens to be at hand gives the practice of detournement a versatile tactical advantage and provides for an engagement with the ‘real world’ of material and social facts that nonetheless resists capture by the virulent logic of these existent facts. It also means that collage and detournement can be meaningfully seen as a form of alchemy, in that it is concerned with the transformation of ‘base materials’ in ways that are simultaneously and interdependently material, spiritual and intellectual. It is on this basis that I approach the ‘offspring’ of this process as gateways to other dimensions, or as the living hieroglyphs of a grimoire yet to be deciphered.

That material alchemical operations may engender a transmutation in the consciousness or subjectivity of the operator is predicated on the Hermetic principle of correspondences, wherein “generation is expressed as a cause and effect, a call and response, a resonance. This implies a reciprocal effect: and object that is acted on by a force has a reciprocal effect on the subject, or agent, of the action being undertaken[.]”⁴² Artist and alchemical scholar Brian Cotnoir emphasises that in the Arabic original of *The Emerald Tablet*, perhaps the foundational text of Western esotericism as it exists today, the phrase most often rendered in modern English as “as above so below, as below so above” should more accurately be translated as “the highest is from the lowest and the lowest is from the highest.” Cotnoir: “the heavens are made of the below, the sublunary, and [...] the sublunary is made from the heavens - they originate one from the other. This suggests a view of the cosmos in constant generation, constant unfolding and constant devouring - an eternal becoming at every moment[.]”⁴³ It is this liminal space - a perfectly balanced yet ever-shifting tipping point between creation and destruction - that I try to embody in my collage work. Collage becomes emblematic of the cosmic forces of creative destruction when the construction of a functionally coherent image or picture plane from an assorted assembly of semi-random cut-out fragments maintains a precarious and unsettling balance between decomposition and reformation. Here, the image becomes something like a vortex or whirlpool in the stream of energies vacillating between creation and destruction. Partaking of both, the collage work is not merely the product of the process, but a generative machine that maintains the process or rather the astral space or ‘operating chamber’ where the process can be activated. The operating chamber is something like a hole or rupture in the fabric of reality, opening up the reified material reality to the void of non-existence. Although essentially the symptoms of a process of decay or putrefaction, these holes allow the material reality to ‘breathe’ - and to receive the influx of forces or entities from ‘beyond’. This ‘folding’ of inside and outside - or being and non-being - is essential for the ‘germination’ or ‘fermentation’ stage⁴⁴ for which the putrefaction of the base material is the initial preparation. However, as Davis’ reading of Guattari reminds us, it is problematic to assert the ontological primacy of dichotomies such as ‘before’ and ‘after’ or ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, as the process itself works in part through destabilising these distinctions. Even though the traditional technical jargon of alchemy speaks of the ‘purification’ and ‘perfection’ of the ‘base’ material through the transformative power of the Philosopher’s Stone (or alternatively the Red Tincture, Violet

⁴² Brian Cotnoir, *Alchemy: The Poetry of Matter* (New York: Khepri Press, 2017), p. 43.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁴ “This is the ripening of the prima materia, after it is broken down, washed and whitened, it is primed for color, where the forces unleashed through its purification now evolves to its final state.” *Ibid.*, p. 87.



Collaborative collaged notebook by William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, 1963-1964. Burroughs and Gysin wrote extensively on 'cut-ups' as a sorcerous method for disrupting and hijacking psycho-linguistic systems of control. They ascribed the authorship of their collaborative works to an entity they called the "third mind", a more or less autonomous intelligence born from the act of collaboration.

Rust, Green Lion, etc.), it is a mistake to read these terms as indicating a strict dualism between matter and spirit. It is even more misleading to see the alchemical process as a self-made form of 'Messianic' salvation. To illustrate this point, it is worth quoting the "Epistle on the Mineral Fire" by Dutch alchemist and cartographer Johannes Pontanus at some length:

"For it [the Philosopher's stone] is watery, airy, fiery and earthy; phlegmatic, choleric and melancholy; it is sulphureous, and is likewise argent vive: and has many superfluities in it: all which, by the living God, are turned into a true essence, our fire mediating: And he that separates any thing from the subject thinking that necessary, knows nothing in philosophy; because whatever is superfluous, unclean, foul or feculent, finally the whole substance of the subject is perfected to a spiritual body fixed, by mediation of our fire. And this the Philosophers never revealed, and therefore few come at the art, thinking there is some such superfluous nature to be removed."⁴⁵

The 'mineral' (or in some translations, 'secret') fire that 'mediates' the process is equated in the text with the Philosopher's Stone or the Great Elixir, and "the invention of it is artificial: it is a compendium without cost, or with very little."⁴⁶ Having described in the beginning of the text how he for years tried various complex and laborious chemical processes without success, Pontanus then tells us "[...] that fire is found only by profound imagination; and then it may be comprehended in the books, and not before."⁴⁷

Whereas the most well-known allegory for the goal of the alchemical process is the transmutation of base materials into gold, it is more relevant for the current discussion to consider the equivalent figure of the divine androgyne, as well as other 'monstrous' composite creatures engendered by processes that are in some medieval and early modern manuscripts couched in sexual iconographies.⁴⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore the implications of the 'union of opposites' engendering the alchemical hermaphrodite, it may be sufficient to refer back to Debord and Wolman's description of *detournement*, which we can now see as a model for philosophical practice, or as a model for 'technologies of the self', to use a conveniently, but perhaps deceptively, secular term. The hermaphrodite is an embodied subject that transgresses against the false dichotomies of male and female, darkness and light, matter and spirit, reason and unreason, intellect and emotion.⁴⁹ While the hermaphrodite resolves these dichotomies into (qualitatively) new and alien registers of being and affect, this state of 'perfection' remains composite - a multitude whose internal contradictions are not necessarily extinguished, even though they are united in a 'self-engendered' mutant subject liquifying the boundaries of its constituent parts.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Johannes Isacius Pontanus, "Epistle on the Mineral Fire," in *Cheiragogia Heliana* (London, 1659). <https://archive.org/details/PontanusEpistleOnTheMineralFire/page/n1/mode/2up>. Accessed 20.11.2021.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See for example the *Rosarium Philosophorum* (Frankfurt, 1550).

⁴⁹ "When the Male is joined with the Female, they both constitute a complete body, and all the Universe is in a state of happiness, because all things receive blessing from Their perfect body." (Samuel 'MacGregor' Mathers, *Kabbala Denudata* (1887), quoted in Amy Hale, *Genius of the Fern Loved Gully: The Supersensual Life of Ithell Colquhoun, artist and occultist* (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2020), p. 188).

⁵⁰ "[...] the stubborn resistance of differences and incommensurabilities may mean that paradox, absurdity, and overt enormity are more characteristic of union than is androgynous wholeness or the harmony of the *unus mundus*, or unitary world. The alchemical conjunction [...] is more like an absurd pun or the joy of a joke than the

While it may be slightly anachronistic to retrospectively project a 'queer spirituality' onto medieval and early modern alchemical theory and practice, the development of alchemical thought beyond the confines of a heteronormative worldview has been ongoing for a long time.⁵¹

Imagination and the Opacity of Desire

Central to everything I have written so far, the concept of the imagination deserves to be examined in more detail, as it is the key to the whole apparatus being constructed in this text. My own understanding of what the imagination is or does is of course based on occult anthropology, and elaborated through my work as an artist. Desire remains a complex, unequivocal and at times problematic concept, so I will limit its definition somewhat. In the afterword to our book *Dream Academy*, Camilla Fagerli and I described the imagination as "the actively creative intelligence which may connect the intelligence of critical reason with the intelligence of dreams and intuition."⁵² We wanted to emphasise the imagination as a faculty of the mind that connects the social, psychic and somatic realities of life, and contributes to the range of possible experience and knowledge - indeed, the imagination may, if it is connected with the body and lived experience, and cultivated with equal amounts of carefulness and reckless abandon, contribute to a radical redefinition of the limits of reality, experience and knowledge. We developed this understanding of the imagination based on our investigation of knowledge politics in higher art education, and also inspired by Diane di Prima's poem "Rant".⁵³ In this sense, the imagination can be seen as intimately connected to desire, considered as a positive and creative force. I am thinking here in part of Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between desire and need - where need is the expression of a definitive lack, while desire is rather something that pushes us towards new horizons and may in fact enhance or clarify our vision. This notion of desire is readily translatable into occult terms, as the power of magic is indeed the power of an ontologically primitive or 'polymorphous' sexuality that precedes the arising or creation of specific images of desire and sexuality, and can be understood as the both virtual and intensely concrete potentiality underlying the specific and always provisional images, forms or 'identities' which it employs for its expression and realisation in this world.⁵⁴

Based on the assumption that this 'ancient' sexuality is indeed contingently available to human experience as a 'Gnostic' event, I am confident in asserting that by retracing our steps back into the night - back into the darkness of unknowing from which our so-called waking consciousness is continuously arising - we may nourish ourselves at Hecate's

bliss of opposites transcended." (Stanton Marlan, *The Black Sun: The Alchemy and Art of Darkness* (Texas A&M University Press, 2005), p. 155.

⁵¹ For example, in the view of British artist and occultist Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988), "alchemical conjunction is not merely about the *Hieros Gamos*, the union of opposites through sacred marriage, but it is about the power of transcending the limitations of gender." (Ibid., p. 199).

⁵² Fagerli and Sørliid, *Dream Academy*, p. 426

⁵³ "w/out imagination there is no memory / w/out imagination there is no sensation / w/out imagination there is no will, desire / history is a living weapon in yr hand [...] history is the dream of what can be [...] The imagination is not only holy, it is precise / it is not only fierce, it is practical / men die everyday for the lack of it, / it is vast & elegant." (Diane di Prima, "Rant", p. 159-161.)

⁵⁴ Sexuality as a concrete fact of life must of of course be considered as a social artefact and not as something preordained or "God-given", but the findings of occultists, as well as the sexual detournement practices of queer erotics, demonstrates that we need not and should never accept a simple determinism, whether metaphysical or naturalistic. There are always secret and neglected passages that desire can uncover. Sometimes, it may even burrow new tunnels through the mummified flesh of dead gods.

Fountain.⁵⁵ Which is to say that there are deeply buried resources and realities inherent in our living flesh that remain inaccessible to positivistic conceptions of knowledge. But the question remains how these 'secret worlds' can gain traction in *this* world, as a counterforce against the totalising ambitions of semiotic capitalism and cybernetic transcendentalism? One must be aware of the possibility of escapist lines of flight, that typically deny or denigrate the value of the 'real' world and idealises a transcendent realm of 'pure' forms, 'pure' affect - anything at all, as long as it's 'pure!' - but it is equally important to understand that some things - some inner worlds of affect, imagination and intuitive understanding must also remain hidden and opaque; secret germs planted in the composted soil of the body-as-a-whole and brought to fruition secretly. Flowering in the living flesh. A monstrous flesh that yearns for the elaboration of it's potentialities and for freedom both beyond and within time, space and knowledge. From a conventionally 'human' and rationalistic perspective, this flowering entails seemingly impossible acts of communication and intercourse with entities that are radically 'other' - not only non-human but unearthly - even if they cannot to the best of my knowledge be decisively disentangled from the subjectivity of the human that becomes their conduit into this world.

This destabilises the notion or 'image' of the 'human', which is not without a certain risk, but it enables us to apprehend the fact that we are on a certain level the creators of our own universe, through the image of the world that we are synthesising from sensorial experience and the porous vehicle of flesh and tidally surging secretions through which we apprehend and indeed become an integral part of an ostensibly 'unknowable' 'outer' reality.

These are not intellectual or conceptual metaphors meant to convey a theoretical metaphysics - I see these ideas as tools, as the scaffolding for practical experiments and for provisionally making sense of experiences that would otherwise be too easily written off as religious fantasy, psychopathology, or other inconsequential lapses of a rational subjectivity. While I suspect that there is a form of life or of being that is almighty in its idiotic simplicity, and which resides in silence, as living human beings we must also contend with the fact that language is both partially constitutive of our existence, as well as an ambiguous technology of reality manipulation working largely through the reification of desire. Language captures the energetic and viscous flows of desire so that it can exist in a parasitic relationship with the images of desire that language forms and propagates. It is inevitable therefore that magic - whose field of operation is the entirety of the 'human' being - must concern itself with language, detour it and employ it for its own ends. As have already been described, this includes the construction of myth or fiction as a 'technological interface' for engaging with otherworldly forces that are in themselves not strictly or exclusively semiotic in nature. I use the term 'technology' in part to emphasise that I am not talking about 'fiction' as a metaphor for ethical, cultural or political ideals that could just as well have been rendered in a cut-and-dry, rational language. "Fiction is not the invention of an imaginary world, but it is the creation of a framework within which subjects, things, and situations can be perceived as co-existing in a common world, and within which events can be meaningfully identified and interconnected. Fiction is always at work when a sense of reality has to be established."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ "In the left side of Hecate is a fountain of Virtue, which remaineth entirely within her, not sending forth its virginity." Chaldean Oracle quoted in Kenneth Grant, *Hecate's Fountain* (London: Starfire Publishing, 2014). Hecate is a controversial and polymorphous Greek goddess, often described as the Queen of witches.

⁵⁶ Jacques Rancière, quoted in Siepen, "DáidDaDacademia", p. 292.

In this sense I can argue that art's relation to the occult in my own practice is constructionist and not mere representation. But what about wider social implications that go beyond my own personal use? What is it I am trying to give to the audience? Maybe I cannot tell you anything you don't already know. And I certainly don't want to make you desire anything you wouldn't otherwise desire of your own will. But if there is any purpose to my work as an artist, it is to encourage your love for the unknown and unknowable. This unknowable unknown that you may discover that you have always loved is not an absence, as it might seem. It is more like that acid they use in the printing presses of Hell.⁵⁷

I realise while working on this text that something that is lacking to a certain extent in my approach is a more direct and practical consideration of the body as such, as well as the social fabric of everyday life.⁵⁸ While the problems considered in this text in no way exhausts my political and philosophical desires, the 'occultation' of desire and the molecular resistance to semiotic capitalism (or whatever one might call the emergent cybernetic totalitarianism) must by necessity be played out in everyday life. The synthesis of occultism and political radicalism that I pursue in my work also cannot remain purely a theoretical endeavor, but must be manifested in the terrain of the everyday. According to Silvia Federici, "from a feminist viewpoint it became possible to recognize that 'everyday life' is not a generic complex of events, attitudes and experiences searching for an order. It is a structured reality, organized around a specific process of production, the production of human beings, which, as Marx and Engels pointed out, is 'the first historical act[.]'"⁵⁹ While it is possible and indeed highly relevant to read this in terms of the biological production of human beings, as well as the care work that is necessary to maintain the work force in capitalist society, it can also be taken to mean the everyday, ongoing production of human subjectivity. If we take this work for granted, if we neglect it as a creative endeavour, we will in effect outsource it to machines, and to absent-bodied people who might as well be machines themselves. We ourselves might do the job just as badly, but I believe the key lies in recognising and understanding the distinction between embodied knowledge - which ultimately is the basis of Gnostic knowledge or 'occult science' - and the mimetic and/or conceptual knowledge that may be useful in specific circumstances, but all too easily becomes a cosmic prison. To me, there is a key to this problem in something McKenzie Wark says towards the end of the chapter on détournement in *The Beach Beneath the Street*: "[W]hat if one challenged the organization of knowledge itself? What if, rather than knowledge as a representation of another life, it is that other life?"⁶⁰

⁵⁷ William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 188.

⁵⁸ "Everyday life is the primary terrain of social change, and within it we find a critique of institutional and political orthodoxy that has a long history. As early as *The German Ideology* (1848), Marx contrasted the study of the material conditions of our existence to the speculations of the neo-Hegelians." (Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, PM Press, 2019), p. 175).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁶⁰ Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, p. 41.



Untitled (Germs from the Equinox series), Henrik Sørliid, 2021



Untitled (Germs from the Equinox series), Henrik Sorlid, 2021

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