

# Off Vendome

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## Montage

Barbara Kasten, Hilary Lloyd, John Miller, Stephen Willats  
Organized by Alex Kitnick  
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254 W 23rd St. #2, New York

I have made two other exhibitions—*Frottage* and *Massage*—and wanted to make a third. I was thinking about the word *Montage*; I don't know what made me think of it. Part of the pleasure of *Frottage* was that it's an overlooked quirk where *Montage* on the other hand is a dominant idea that connects large swaths of twentieth century art (and advertising). The Dadaists called their work photomontage because they wanted to distinguish it from cubist collage; montage had a more technical ring to it. Montage like *montieren* (to mount, to assemble): the word makes a metaphor between the way one might put together images and the way one joins a set of pipes. And, of course, photomontage ran alongside the most technologically advanced art of its time: no matter how different their work may be Eisenstein (1898-1948) and Vertov (1896-1954) both made it central to their filmmaking, fixing frames together in sharp ways that related directly to the form of the technology itself....

But I wanted to use *Montage* in another way....

One of the striking parts of this gallery, Off Vendome, is its relation to the city and street. If you visit on a nice day the windows—three on one side, and three mirroring ones on the other—will be open and the breeze blows through. The gallery sits high in an old brick building (built some time around 1880) on west 23<sup>rd</sup> street, one of New York's great thoroughfares, like 14<sup>th</sup> street, 34<sup>th</sup> street, 59<sup>th</sup> street, 72<sup>nd</sup> street, 86<sup>th</sup> street, etc. If you look out the south windows you see the backs of buildings gathering together, touching, and if you look out the front you see Boston Market, the subway, the spire of the Empire State building. There's a sense of exposure. It's a bit like being in a watchtower in this building: you feel connected and cut off at once; cut and pasted at the same time.... Somehow the gallery made me think of montage, the weird way in which it fits into the city....

And then kind of by chance I found this work by Stephen Willats online called *Wall Print* (1980). I had looked up Willats because his whole practice, for all these years, has been about the different ways in which the city and its people are connected, and put together.... He made this work in 1980; it consists of two images, one above the other, the simplest form of montage—with a stuck-on vinyl line connecting the two.... "Steve Willats is not a printmaker and this work is unique in his oeuvre," the Tate Gallery website states.

It was produced at the request of the Schweinebraden Gallery in East Berlin and followed a successful exhibition of Willats's 'Lurky Place' project held there in 1981.

The images on the print are a pair from a series discovered and developed by Willats during his period on a DAAD Scholarship in Berlin. He found that children in tower blocks had drawn on the concrete areas around the base depictions of idealised homes and smiling children. He contrasted one of these images with a photograph of the tower block on which it was made. Willats has published these pairs in 'Living in a concrete house' (see *Leben in vorgegebenen Grenzen - 4 Inseln in Berlin*, exhibition catalogue, Nationalgalerie, Berlin, December 1980–January 1981; the graffiti house in P07947 ill.p.15, with the tower block in which it was found). Willats prepared the print with two images disposed on the sheet; the line that connects the images was omitted since he anticipated that the completed print would not be allowed into East Berlin. He intended to carry the prints unfinished to the gallery and add a line in letraset by hand to each of them. In the event the border guards confiscated the unfinished prints and Willats was left with only a few sheets that he had decided not to take. As he wryly put it, 'the work is about a wall and suffered at the hands of a wall' (interview with the compiler, June 1986).

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It's really quite a story and it has left to wonder how the images work. I've wondered if Willats' work is a critique of the architecture of the East German state, and if the child's idealized drawing is meant to serve as an image of real desire, which gives the lie to the concrete architecture that functions as its support.... I've also wondered about the relation of the line to montage, what it means to cross frames as in a diagram, if the line is what makes (or made) the work subversive. If it's a desire line it might run in both directions, putting the bottom into the top.... Perhaps the concrete building can absorb all these desires and marks.... (Is the upper frame an enlargement of a detail on the image below?) One of the "rules" of montage is that it puts two things next to one another to create a third meaning, but the third meaning here seems to be an open one.

Around the time I was thinking about Willats I heard about a new PowerPoint work by John Miller in a press release from Richard Telles gallery in Los Angeles. I knew it dealt with New York and ideas of the public sphere, as well as PowerPoint, which flashes one image after another, and it seemed to me that maybe this was a contemporary, "square," and conventionalized form of montage.... I wanted to see this work, which is called *Reconstructing a Public Sphere* (2016). The work shows how New York has been put together through images, through land reclamation and real estate speculation, through public art, through memory, memorializing, and forgetting, and through barriers. And I

liked the idea of putting it across from the Willats to think about the relationship between east and west, and the strange throughlines connecting them, like security...

A little later it struck me that some of Barbara Kasten's photographs, and especially her *Architectural Sites* produced in the mid 1980s, might offer another glimpse at urban space as a kind of montage.<sup>1</sup> But to construct these works Kasten did her cutting and pasting in real space: employing a phalanx of mirrors and lights, she dressed up pieces of postmodern architecture like stage sets, picturing them askance and fracturing them as well. Strange geometries infect her spaces, swatches of ceiling brought down onto staircases, warped trees seemingly coming out of a nowhere cut in front of a Lichtenstein mural. Museums figure prominently in her typology of buildings. She trained her energies on Arata Isozaki's then new Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles— itself a compendium of architectural parts—and later brought the same surgical wit to the Whitney Museum of American Art (now the Met Breuer). We put this work on the western wall because the new Whitney is over there somewhere....

Somehow this brought me to the work of Hilary Lloyd, which I've admired for some time. (Like Willats Lloyd also has a predilection for bodies and concrete, and her work often focuses on the built structures of city life. Maybe it's an English thing?) Lloyd's use of the splitscreen in her video works functions as a kind of fixed montage, a static cut that stands in contrast to the succession of attractions typical of cinema. Occasionally she puts two monitors one above the other on her Unicol scaffolding supports as if to make a montage with hardware and software both.... But even in earlier works, such as *Untitled (Cutting Board)*, 2004, we see Lloyd's interest in the potential of cut-up images. Here pictures of bodies and fashions, glimpses of urban sights—a tie, a stereo, a Warning sign—appear to the viewer as so many tesserae in search of a unifying structure. There is a tension in this work between the private space of the collection and the public nature of the banner on which Lloyd has printed her scene. Later the work took on a new life as a slide projection *Untitled (Cut Outs)*, 2006, as if to teach us a lesson.... Here the images consist only of (male?) crotches.

I thought it would be a good idea to include the documentary *Montage and Modern Life, 1919-1942*, which was made in 1992 to accompany an exhibition, to provide some historical context (a link to the video has been embedded on the gallery website). I also thought it might help periodize montage and shed some light on our own moment. Montage has a relation to hard things and discrete units—parts have to be distinct to be cobbled together. They have to have a stable identity to be joined with something else and create a little moment of shock and surprise. Perhaps that's why montage feels somewhat anachronistic today in this time of ours when images are less steady, when the changes they undergo are just as likely to transform from within—on the level of the pixel.<sup>2</sup> And yet we still live in this montage city where we make comparisons and establish relationships and feel divisions between a wide range of different things.

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<sup>1</sup> I have an essay on this work called "Use your Illusion" in *Barbara Kasten: Stages* (2015).

<sup>2</sup> In a way I think of this show as an exhibition of "pre-Internet art."