

A TAXONOMY OF COLLECTING

JOHN A. SCHWEITZER'S BENJAMIN'S ALPHABET: DIARY OF A SERIES

No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener.
Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*¹

John A. Schweitzer's love of literature and the printed word has marked his artistic production since his graduation from Western University, London, Ontario in 1974. This is not surprising, in view of his ambition to "be a writer" upon enrolling in Western's English literature program. However, a 1971 summer course in visual arts re-directed his vocation. This "epiphanic" moment, as the artist calls it, led him to realize the possibilities of melding both creative interests—text and image—in the making of art.

John Schweitzer, LLD, OSA, RCA, has explored a variety of media, which have included sculpture, installation work, photography, cinematography, performance art, and painting. His artistic practice has been coloured with parallel activities as art dealer, curator, collector, and critic. *Collage-maker*, however, is the most accurate way of describing Schweitzer's true vocation of over thirty years, one that has been extremely fruitful. From 1991 to the present, the artist has produced ten collage series, beginning with *Sunt Lacrimæ Rerum* and culminating in *The Snows of Ruskin*. In 2005, Schweitzer celebrated the work of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin [1892-1940]—one of the twentieth-century's most influential advocates of literary collage and montage—in a series entitled *Benjamin's Alphabet*. In the same year, these collages were exhibited at Montreal's Galerie d'art d'Outremont. This year, at Western's John A. Schweitzer Gallery, the exhibition *John A. Schweitzer's Benjamin's Alphabet: Diary of a Series* is a gathering of certain works from that itinerant show. Complemented by related documents and other material culture and artefacts, this curatorial exercise illustrates and explicates the form-making process that sustains the artist's oeuvre.

Schweitzer's *Alphabet* utilizes Benjamin's 1939 book, *Das Passagen-Werk*, as a literary montage—a point of departure, with which to articulate his thematic interest in the French tradition of the *flâneur*, or stroller, and the promenade, in his investigation of nineteenth-century French art and the genesis of modernism. Exploring this ambulatory notion in the context of the Parisian *vitrine*, or store-front, Benjamin's philosophical ruminations on the commercial arcade are mimetically reflected in the viewer's engagement in the actual act of looking at the exhibition. Schweitzer, as *artiste-cum-flâneur*, captures the mystery of this historic quotidian, through contemporary *objets trouvés*, evoking the collage ethos of the book.

Two interconnected aspects help qualify Schweitzer's work. One is his constant use of *Syndesis* from the Greek *Σύνδεση*,² which means connection, the other his predilection for the medium of collage. A clear and overt example of his *Syndetic* approach was, for instance, the pairing of

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 69.

² Carlos Ivan Rueda-Plata and Robert Mellin, two of my colleagues, and I have recently examined the concept. See *Syndetic Modernisms* (Bogotá: Universidad Piloto, 2012).

his own work with that of other artists in his private collection—received influences—cogently evident in his 2008 show entitled *Acute Liasons* at McGill University, Montreal. Works by Joseph Beuys, Anthony Caro, Joan Mitchell, and Robert Motherwell, among others, explicated the varied stylistic language inherent in the medium of collage, embracing assemblage, construction, montage, and sculptural relief. As Schweitzer openly stated, these alluring juxtapositions could be considered “a form of play” in the medium of collage. “Play,” which in the Motherwellian sense, requires a predisposition towards the “joyful” manipulation of plastic elements. Significantly, it should also be noted here that Motherwell, his avowed “spiritual father,” integrated words and phrases into his Abstract Expressionist paintings and collages as early as the 1950s and 1960s.

Schweitzer has been very explicit about his adoption of collage as an expressive strategy. He stated in his credo:

“Throughout my career as a visual artist, I have utilized the medium of collage to investigate the *paragone* of text and image. My formative explorations of the “process of making” have subsequently led to my ongoing strategy of seriation, juxtaposing found objects with text-based ephemera, to revivify and subvert the modernist canon.”

The artist’s use of the Italian word *paragone* is revealing since it means ‘comparison’ in English; furthermore, when combined with the word *pietra* (stone) and the preposition *di*—*pietra di paragone* translates into ‘touchstone’ or ‘yardstick.’

I believe this is crucial in the field of collage or montage where the artist or writer is usually involved with the activity of collecting—in Benjamin’s case, citations, quotations, and aphorisms, while in Schweitzer’s case, textual ephemera such as ‘autobiographical’ envelopes, cards, labels, postcards, newspaper clippings, receipts, musical scores. X [Fig. 1], for example, relates elliptically the tragic tale of Benjamin’s suicide in 1940 at the Hotel de Francia in Port-Bou, Spain, while escaping Nazi-occupied Paris. The prominently stencilled letter “X” in black paint is glued over the ground of a non-specific European cityscape. An additional paper shard, that reads *Kontrolliert*, together with an official bilingual directive (in English and German)—*!!Handwritten corrections are disallowed!!*—are juxtaposed with a vintage painting label that identifies the Artist as “Unknown.” All of these elements become the basis for the syndetic process where the necessary connections between object and object, mediated or bridged by intangible concepts, take shape. And this highly selective process of collecting requires, in turn, a series of touchstones, or *pietre di paragone*, as it were, which facilitate, or better yet, induce the creation of the works.

The eminent literary critic Northrop Frye, upon visiting the artist’s Montreal studio in 1990, observed that Schweitzer’s formal language was both “linear and vertical.” The classic Schweitzerian “L” leitmotiv addresses a conceptual confluence of horizontal and vertical dimensions. In other words, the horizontality suggests a Western “reading” of serialism and narrativity counterbalanced by the verticality that speaks of a lyrical Eastern component in the Hogarthian “line of beauty.”

This distilled process of viewing is further amplified by Schweitzer's predisposition to working within a serial construct. The thematic framework, replete with literary allusions, lends itself to its characteristic "interanimating" quality, a concept first introduced by the sixteenth-century English poet John Donne. The artist subscribes to this notion in which individual works of art are configured to create a certain dialogue within the structure of seriation. Another allegorical parenthesis, as it were. For example, one can clearly 'read' the urban affinities inherent in *The Artist in the Arcade* [Fig. 2]—perhaps, a youthful portrait of both the artist Schweitzer and author Benjamin—and *Le Jardin des Tuileries* [Fig. 3], with its image of an unidentified bearded mature male in the public Parisian garden. Both works also allude to the notion of 'covering up,' which occurs in the most literal sense of collage-making: the process of gluing juxtaposed ephemera, as well as, here, in the literary context, a personal concealment.

There is more: the tacit 'target/elicit' connections, many of which result through a serendipitous act of discovery. First and foremost, are the artist's ongoing research themes, which have a corresponding expression in his various series. For example, in the already completed series: concerns with animism appear in *Sunt Lacrimæ Rerum* [1991] inspired by Virgil's *Aeneid*; anthroposophy (*pace* Rudolf Steiner's "spiritual science") in *The Pilgrimage* [1997]; interanimation (*pace* John Donne) in *Of Porphyry* [1998]; the construct of seriation in *The Erehwön Cycle* [1999]; the physiology of colour (*pace* Goethe and Hans Hofmann) in *The Arcadian Suite* [1999]; Eros and Thanatos (from Sappho to Foucault) in *Lust and Delight* [2001]; entropy in *Fresh Kills* [2003]; the *paragone* in *Benjamin's Alphabet* [2005]; the nature|culture dialectic in *Vallum Hadrianus* [2010]; and finally, the notion of the unfinished in T.S. Eliot via Hiroshige through Whistler in *The Snows of Ruskin* [2014]. Works in progress are informed by Schweitzer's interest in: narrativity in *Nero*; synaesthesia and Gesamtkunstwerk in *Cosima auf der Welt*; synthetism from Cubism to Donald Barthelme's notion of collage in *Re-Making The Making of Americans*; natural metamorphoses in *Wabi Sabi*.

Benjamin believed that his unfinished magnum opus *Das Passagen-Werk* "must develop to the highest point the art of citing without citation marks. Its theory connects most closely with that of montage."³ He also claimed: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall appropriate no ingenious formulations, purloin no valuables. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not describe but put on display."⁴

In her lucid exegesis of Benjamin's work, Hannah Arendt, referring to his passion for collecting, articulates:

"From the Goethe essay on, quotations are at the center of every work of Benjamin's....like the later notebooks, this collection was not an accumulation of excerpts intended to facilitate the writing of the study but constituted the main work, with the writing as something secondary. The main work consisted of tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh in such way that they

³ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* [1989]. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1991), p. 67.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated from *Das Passagen-Werk* by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin; prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 860.

illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d'être* in a free-floating state, as it were. It definitely was a sort of surrealistic montage.”⁵

Visually quoting this literary source, Schweitzer's collage *Vanitas IV* [Fig. 4] actually contains an opened book cover bearing the profile of the Surrealist artist Jean Cocteau beneath the inside cover of the same book with a facsimile of Cocteau's own calligraphy. Schweitzer's restrained additions of a suggestive pen shape in black paint, together with a mimetic gestural arc in the lower register, all point to the reverence the artist holds for the written word.

The analogies between Benjamin's literary approach to montage/collage and Schweitzer's plastic representational strategies seem evident after juxtaposing Arendt's concept with the artist's collages and his cherished documents in this exhibition. Inasmuch as his work is understandably a direct homage to Benjamin's writings, Schweitzer's enjoyment of the Romantic verse of Goethe represents a more tortuous tribute, a subtext perhaps, in his ongoing thematic explorations of love, loss, and death. An aphorism by the German author, fundamental to the collagist's approach, continues to nourish his oeuvre: “All my works are merely fragments of a great confession.”

Moreover, a relevant source of inspiration for the artist consists of textual material, which he has collected, culled, and compiled throughout his forty-year practice. Schweitzer maintains a corpus of journals, which consists of “a multiplicity of fragments” [*pace* T.S. Eliot], as he prefers to call them—cropped quotations, eclectic citations (from politics to pop culture)—concurrent with a handwritten diary of musings and drawings. I have decided to include a list of the entries that form part of this diary as they appear:

1. *Walter Benjamin's Archive*, 2007
2. Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913-1927
3. Postcard, Construction of the Eiffel Tower, 1888, photograph by Pierre Petit
4. *Album photographique : Exposition 1900*, Paris, 1900
5. Envelope, Paris and France ephemera, selections from the Kenneth Dow Archive, St. Augustine, Florida (acquired by Schweitzer in 2011)
6. Lecture notes, from conference by John Elderfield (Chief Curator of the Museum of Modern Art, New York) at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 23 October 2005
7. Course prospectus, *In the Footsteps of the Impressionists*, Dr. Paul Davenport, Western University, Fall 2004 [Fig. 5]
8. Robert J. Niess, *Zola, Cézanne and Manet*, 1968
9. Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust*, 1996
10. Herman J. Wechsler, *French Impressionists*, 1955
11. Michael Easton, *Artists and Writers in Paris*, 1964
12. Claude Gandelman, *Studies on Voltaire*, 1991
13. Germaine Brée, *An Age of fiction*, 1957
14. Adam Gopnik, *Paris to the Moon*, 2001
15. Anne Coffin Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition*, 1977
16. Erika Naginski, *Sculpture and Enlightenment*, 2009

⁵ Arendt, p. 47.

17. *The Death of French Culture*, Time Magazine, December 3, 2007

18. *et al...*

Among these references, there is one significant lacuna that is curiously unlisted, but seems to occupy an important place in Schweitzer's oeuvre of the past decade: the literature of the German author G.W. Sebald.

Max G.W. Sebald [1944-2001] is undoubtedly one of the most significant prose writers of the late twentieth-century. Born in a village in the Bavarian Alps—incidentally, Schweitzer's genealogy traces back to the same region—he created few, but powerful works, in which memory and forgetfulness become the leading themes. Such works allow the writer to orchestrate complex narratives, wherein one event, one character, one place may elicit an immediate connection that propels the story. His four novels—*Vertigo* [1990], *The Emigrants* [1992], *The Rings of Saturn* [1995], and *Austerlitz* [2001]—defy description and categorization: they may be viewed simultaneously as biographical, anecdotal, local and topographical histories, in which the author makes connections as the characters and places move through the literary space.

In Schweitzer's world, a quote, an article, or a journal *drôlerie*—like Proust's madeleine—can trigger a nascent theme for a series. Several years may pass in this gestation period, which often involves arcane research in his extensive personal library and archive, focused travel, and pointed discussions with fellow artists, critics, authors, and architects. It should be mentioned here that Schweitzer maintains collegial relationships with authors Margaret Atwood in Toronto, Adam Gopnik in New York, and William Weintraub in Montreal. He attributes the title of “mentor” to his generous, longstanding friend, the late Hugo A. McPherson, art critic and trustee at *artscanada* and founder of McGill's Department of Communications, who, in turn, introduced him to Northrop Frye and Mordecai Richler. All told, these seemingly disparate tangents coalesce into the totality of a realized work.

However, despite this catholic and pluralist enquiry, it is Schweitzer's masterful capacity to inject an autobiographical dimension into his visual narratives, as structurally complex as those of Benjamin and Sebald, that is his singular contribution to the ever-relevant story of collage. *Rococo I & II* [Fig. 6], for example, is a diptych that prominently features his Mother's primary school exercises in cursive penmanship. These collaged fragments of lined paper, recalling Cy Twombly's own gestural notations (an artist whose work Schweitzer greatly valorizes), link, in explicit and exquisite graphic form, the physical act of writing with the exigencies of craftsmanship inherent in artmaking.

And again, like the syndetic makers, Benjamin and Sebald, Schweitzer's modernist leanings preclude the necessity of revealing the “process of making” and the visual scaffolding of the work. In other words, the logic of its procedural architecture is manifest in the physical execution of the work. Therein lies the final step, according to the artist.

The creative adventure that begins quietly in Pascal's contemplative room yields to a clear, well-lit studio—a working arena stocked only with archival boxes of ephemera and empty vintage frames, surrounded by older works draped in silent white sheets. The physical act of cutting,

tearing, gluing, and painting generates a cathartic potency in this vigorous *furia* of fabrication. In place of Pascal's withering forecast of misery—due to one's inability to remain static—Schweitzer, the alchemist, with profound visual and verbal literacy, conjures up collages charged with a rigorous brio from the improbable dross of ephemera.

Indeed, Benjamin and Sebald serve as eloquent models for the hybrid creation of Schweitzer's beguiling works, evident in this *Diary of a Series*, yet it is the artist's own inspired prescription to mine the archaeology of text and image that activates *Benjamin's Alphabet*,—and captivates the viewer in this celebration of Schweitzer's graduation from Western University forty years ago.

Ricardo L. Castro, Guest Curator
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RICARDO L. CASTRO, a Fellow of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (FRAIC), received the degree of Arquitecto from the Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá. He earned an M.A. in Art History and an M.Arch at the University of Oregon. He has taught at the Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá, the University of Oregon, Kansas State University and l'Université Laval, where he received the equivalence of a doctorate in 1977. He is currently an Associate Professor of Architecture at McGill University in Montréal, where, since 1982, he has been teaching architectural design, media, history, and criticism, and concurrently participating in photographic exhibitions in Canada, Colombia, and the United States.

Author of two monographs, Salmona (1998) and Rogelio Salmona: A Tribute (2008), and co-author with Nicholas Olsberg of Arthur Erickson: Critical Works (2006), Castro has also contributed to numerous anthologies of art and architecture. In 2014, he published an essay with his own photographs on the work of Chilean landscape architect Teresa Moller, entitled Punta Pite: A Ceremonial Path among Rocks, Sun, Wind, and Words. This is the first volume of Syndetic Modernisms, to be followed in the same year by Castro's A Story of An Archeology of the Future: Alberto Burri's Gibellina (also illustrated with the critic's photographs), forming the second volume of the same series, published by Universidad Piloto, Bogotá.

Since 1989, Castro has extensively written on the work of Canadian artist John A. Schweitzer. His critical publications on the artist's oeuvre include, among others, John A. Schweitzer: The Shapes of Time, 1991-2001, the monograph for the artist's 2001 retrospective exhibition at the Visual Arts Centre, Westmount, Quebec, and Acute Liaisons, published by the McGill School of Architecture, Montréal, in 2009.