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IS PHOTOMONTAGE OVER?

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Sabine T. Kriebel and Andrés Mario Zervigón

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Photomontage in the Present Perfect Continuous

Susan Laxton

In its first instance as art practice among the historical avant-garde, photomontage was considered indispensable for its claim to intervene in perceptual processes, stimulating a critical mode of apprehension that would redirect the viewer away from conventions of aesthetic experience and towards a lived reception of art with pronounced relevance to the sociopolitical landscape. The effect was understood as structural, that is, activated not so much by direct political content, but by the stark and shocking effects of juxtaposition. By this measure, one challenge to contemporary photomontage is clear: in a postindustrial and post-digital visual landscape dominated by the structural fragmentation of the attention economy, the 'simultaneity of the radically disparate' (as Peter Bürger put it) might no longer present as heterodoxy but rather threaten to sink into invisibility. Yet with the migration off-screen of the effects of electronic media, a new urgency around moving photomontage structures into physical, public space is rising in contemporary practices. Shannon Ebner's multi-part project *A Hudson Yard* (2014–15) is emblematic of the new ways in which artists are manipulating photomontage as a form of fully sensory experience that gives the medium room to play critically in both virtual and material space. By constructing subtle interruptions of naturalised commercial space, *A Hudson Yard* activates a *détournement* of instrumentalised language, using structures of juxtaposition to divert the discursive surfaces of public space away from consumption and towards what could be called a public *poesis*.

Keywords: *photomontage, public sphere,* détournement*, poesis, handbill, instrumentalisation, urban space, multimedia, performative, collaboration*

Email for correspondence: susan.laxton@ucr.edu

1 – For the full sequence of the events described here, see Shannon Ebner, *A Public Character*, 2015, digital colour video with sound, 13 minutes, ed. Erika Vogt, score Alex Waterman, photographs Timothy Schenck, https://vimeo.com/150562797 (accessed 27 December 2018).

In the early hours of the morning on 10 December 2014, a worker with the Wild Pasting company approached a temporary wall erected around the construction site at 515 W. 29th Street in Manhattan, and slapped up a large photographic poster of the letter 'A' next to the entrance point of the site (figure 1). Within minutes, the poster had its first viewer, a hard-hatted employee ready to start his working day. After a brief assessment, this worker grasped a side of the poster that had buckled free and began to pull, first with one hand, then with two, tearing down and across to destroy the picture.[1] It was a partial violation; the shredded, uppermost section of the poster remained (figure 2). But the incomplete effacement served to emphasise the violence of the gesture, offering a welter of messages in its wake: compliance (with enforcing the 'post no bills' rule), defiance (of that rule – and the futility of its prohibition), interruption (of the worker's routine and the developer's desire) and, above all, aggression (against that interruption, that is, against the inscrutability of a familiar image made strange). As an insertion of the inexplicable into the instrumentalised space of advertising, the poster rearranged language away from its usual function in the cityscape, momentarily diverting one worker's day towards a moment of looking, action and reaction. The performative

Figure 1. Shannon Ebner with David Reinfurt, A HUDSON YARD, 2014–2015, 12 posters, 72 x 48 inches each. Commissioned and produced by High Line Art. Presented by friends of the High Line and the New York City friends of the High Line and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Photographs by Timothy Schenck.

juxtaposition it formed recalled an avant-garde model updated for the new attention economy: the interventionist principle of montage, temporarily extended into built space – the space of action.

The posting was one of a series of twelve such dislocations installed and documented as components of Shannon Ebner's multi-part project *A Hudson Yard* (2014–15). Commissioned by High Line Art as part of the public art programme linked to the elevated High Line Park in Chelsea, NY, USA, the project used strategies of juxtaposition to redirect the discursive surfaces of public space away from consumption and towards what could be called an actively produced public *poesis*.[2] In constructing these subtle interruptions of naturalised commercial space, the project affirmed the political relevance of photomontage strategies at a moment when art must operate in a world dominated by the sub-rosa manipulations of a consciousness industry made pervasive by the Internet.

Ebner's choice of medium was canny and well informed. From the first decades of the twentieth century, when the avant-garde seized photomontage strategies from advertising, the medium was deployed as a vehicle by which apprehension, and, following that, life itself – subjectivity and social relations; our necessarily politicised experience of the world – might be radically reshaped.[3] Viewed in historical perspective, photomontage's signal structure, juxtaposition, was understood as revolutionary for its claim to intervene directly in perceptual processes, stimulating a critical mode of apprehension that would activate the viewer, refashioning them away from conventions of aesthetic experience and towards a lived reception of representation with pronounced relevance to the

2 – Documentation of the commission can be viewed in the archive of the High Line Art website: https://www.thehighline.org/art/projects/a-hudson-yard/ (accessed 7 September 2018).

3 – Avant-garde photomontage was preceded by use of the strategy in visual amusements and advertising; see Mia Fineman, *Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art 2012; and Matthew Biro (ed.), 'Photographic Montage Before the Historical Avant-Garde', special issue, *History of Photography*, 41:2 (2017).

Figure 2. Shannon Ebner with David Reinfurt, A HUDSON YARD, 2014–2015, 12 posters, 72 x 48 inches each. Commissioned and produced by High Line Art. Presented by friends of the High Line and the New York City friends of the High Line and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Photographs by Timothy Schenck.

4 – For a concise summary of the links between graphic design, advertising and avant-garde photomontage grounded in primary texts, see Adrian Sudhalter, 'The Self-Reflectivity of Photomontage: Writing on and Exhibiting the Medium, 1920–1931', in *Photomontage Between the Wars*, Madrid: Fundación Juan March 2012, 8–22.
5 – For Breton, photomontage would always be understood as a form close to poetry, based on automatic writing's juxta-position effects, which were thought to have emerged unmediated from the unconscious, establishing language as the very material of unconscious processes. The surrealist model of the mind was grasped, in a sense, as photomontage: a series of memory fragments, pieced together to form an indeterminate set of meanings. For an account of Surrealism's 'primal scene', see Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1993, 41–45. Surrealism's commitment to photomontage was fairly obscure to the rest of Europe: Kurt Glaser, director of the Staatliche Kunstbibliotek at the time of the 1931 exhibition *Fotomontage*, mounted at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin (25 April–31 May), remarked on the absence of examples from France; see Sudhalter, 'Self-Reflectivity of Photomontage', 16.

sociopolitical landscape. Effectively, photomontage, as a strategy based in conflict, claimed that the role of art was as an agent of social change.

We see this readily in Dada shock and Constructivist estrangement, but it is also true of those figures and institutions that synthesised revolutionary means in order to introduce new forms to mass media and advertising, attempting to shape increasingly influential arenas of communication and mass production – for example, the Bauhaus work of Marianne Brandt and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.[4] John Heartfield, working the border between advertising and Dada provocation, would ultimately push the medium to its political limits with images poised at the tipping point between naturalism and absurdity. His work seems to have offered the most audacious and overtly political statements in the medium's history. The ghosts of these historical precedents hover at the edges of Ebner's project, particularly in the wit with which she frames her subjects.

But other avant-garde precedents step forward here as well. Surrealism, picking up Dada absurdity and pushing it deep into the psyche, offered another model for photomontage-as-intervention, and with it a politics rendered subtle by its poetic departures from the caustic formal severity of its predecessors. While the best-known surrealist examples of the form date from the 1930s, when Dora Maar, André Breton, Paul Eluard and Suzanne Muzard began to experiment with the medium, photomontage could be said to have been the very agent of the movement's inception, dated from the moment that Breton first gazed on Max Ernst and Hans Arp's *fatagagas*, grasping them as a visual analogue to the unconscious.[5] Strictly speaking, this would be Ernst's first and last set of photomontages, but as Rosalind Krauss has demonstrated, the method insinuated itself in every instance of Surrealist photography in defiance of photographic 'truth to nature': Surrealism's particular variant of photomontage exploited the medium's

radicalisation of 'spacing', or visually rendered syntax, as the precondition for meaning. Their approach validated modes of writing into a visual field so familiar that it had been understood as given – whether that field was city space, private space or the human body.[6] With their photographic extensions of wordplay, Surrealism made photomontage its own by convulsing the world into critical *poesis*, much as Ebner's rearrangement of found language would generate, nearly one hundred years later, a witty linguistic break in the continuum of the everyday.

Importantly, this characterisation of photomontage as an interruption of perceived space is based on what the medium does, not what it is, or even what it might look like. And the operation it carries out is a form of critical intervention that Louis Aragon would call (far in advance of the Situationist International) *détournement* – not negation, precisely, but an interleaving of new forms into old, by which each element is diverted from its meaning 'in order to awaken it to a new reality'.[7] The technique introduces ambiguity into the spaces of photographic certainty, a process which is, Aragon insists, 'absolutely analogous to that of poetic imagery'.[8] Photomontage, in this model, is not so much an exploitation of photography as it is a tool for reformation. But paradoxically, deploying this strategy renders useless the very tool that constitutes photomontage's material support: photography itself. This happens generally, due to the doubt photomontage instils in the transcriptive veracity of the medium, and it happens specifically as well, in photomontage's occupation and redirection of mass-media images from their original, commercial uses. The effect is that of playing against means-ends thinking.

This jamming of the channels of clear communication with sheer inscrutability is central to photomontage's critical potential, as it demands interpretation in place of facts, and active engagement as opposed to the passive acceptance of received meanings. It draws on a set of priorities that remains important to the relevance of contemporary practice, with the challenge for artists today to present poetic disorientation in such a way that it activates an array of options or proposals for a new reality, expressed as *détournements* of visual language that promise to direct subjectivity away from conventions of consumption that have become so naturalised that we can no longer perceive them.

Since Marshall McLuhan – and, later, Vilém Flusser – observed that media work society over, retraining apprehension, the idea that subjectivity is shaped not by the specific content of any given message but by the structure and vehicle through which it is delivered to the beholder has become commonplace.[9] Montage, in its composite and variable structure, is particularly effective in expressing the suppressed diversity by which subjectivity constitutes itself. Yet this very multiplicity is the greatest challenge to the efficacy of contemporary photomontage: in a postindustrial and postdigital visual landscape dominated by the fragmentation of the attention economy, the 'simultaneity of the radically disparate' (as Peter Bürger put it) might no longer present as heterodoxy but rather threaten to sink into invisibility.[10] The shattering of attention so important to early avant-garde models has long been instrumentalised (as Adorno predicted early on), yet there is no question of returning to a modernist illusion of wholeness and unity.[11] To be effective now, what photomontage's *poesis* must 'do' is both invoke and question media channels of distribution, wresting the power of juxtaposition and interaction from commerce and returning it to a model freed from communicative action and instrumentalised logic.

Given the medium's roots in media critique and social change, any contemporary manifestation of photomontage that aspires to intervene in the status quo must find its effects in the public sphere. By public sphere I mean, following revisions of Jürgen Habermas's original formulation, an arena of discursive debate made complex by multiple and intersectional publics and 'counter-publics' set against a dominant realm that identifies itself as democratic but ultimately furthers the aims of capitalist gain.[12] Mass communication, in all of its constantly shifting

6 – See Rosalind Krauss, 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism', *October* 19 (Winter 1981), 19–21.

7 – Louis Aragon, 'Max Ernst, peintre des illusions' [1923], in *Les collages*, Paris: Hermann 1965, 26. The statement ascribed *détournement* as a critical structure specifically in reference to Max Ernst's Dada collages of 1921. While these are photomontages (and, although unacknowledged by Aragon, collaborations with Hans Arp), they had not yet been given that name, and Aragon refers to them as '*dessin*' throughout, although he does make the point (ibid., 25) that their elements come from mass-media sources.
8 – Ibid., 25–26.

9 – Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, Harmondsworth: Allen Lane/ Penguin Books 1967, 18; and Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London: Reaktion Books 2000, 16–20.
10 – Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Snow, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1984, 169.
11 – Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1984, 223.
12 – My understanding of the public sphere draws on Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1962], Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1989; Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993; Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York and Cambridge, MA: Zone Books 2002; *Counterpublics and the State*, ed. Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, Albany: State University of New York Press 2001; and Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text* 25/26 (1990), 56–80.

forms, provides not only a widely disseminated conduit for hegemonic culture, but a forum for dissent, and as such it is still the default site for the public sphere – a fragmented and amorphous territory as inclined to political inaction as it is to action. This is not the arena of ideal consensus and rational harmony first proposed by Habermas, but rather a sphere pocked with alternate and conflicting arenas of perception and interaction that have the potential to challenge existing apparatuses of production and distribution, and to expose as flawed many of the assumptions on which we have based our idea of political participation, but are part of an apparatus that does not distinguish 'fake news' from 'real news'. Increasingly, the Internet and its manifestations in the screen-based attention economy perform the role of delivering the public sphere, raising additional issues of access and participation, as well as exacerbating already existing problems having to do with surveillance and privacy. Faced with such a collision of conflicting interests, a number of contemporary artists have turned to digital photomontage as the only technical form with flexibility adequate to the apparatus it must confront. That is to say, the very fragmentation that threatens montage with invisibility also has the potential to pry open and expose the means-ends underpinnings of the Internet, a system whose content is determined by algorithms that aim for maximum profitability, promoting a 'normal' homogeneous public as 'The Public', and ignoring minority counter-publics that could potentially be given voice there.[13]

For any artistic technique – particularly those dependent on appropriation of mass-media sources – to retain its critical vitality without becoming a mere shill to the art market, the technique must also respond to shifts in the structural determinants of the public sphere. In the context of the massive media and technological changes of the past 70 years, art historians and critics have identified a number of different forms photomontage took in the second half of the twentieth century: the 'flatbed' characterisation of mass-media juxtaposition in Neo-Dada works; the tabular, in reference to the pinboard aesthetic in British Pop; and the archival, in acknowledgement of photomontage's absorption into conceptual art strategies.[14] This is a schematic and necessarily incomplete survey, but each of these fresh characterisations of the medium and its effects emphasise the mutability built into photomontage at the level of its materiality, an evocation of the haptic against optical illusionism that would become increasingly important as photomontage turned to address the immateriality and apparently limitless generality of the World Wide Web and its viewers.[15]

The pervasiveness of electronic media, and their recent self-assertions as the new public sphere, call for fresh assessments of photomontage and what it might be capable of right now. The apparently uncritical delight in technological means among a new generation of users would seem to point to the inevitability of photomontage practices to completely acquiesce to a virtual existence. Yet in certain contemporary practices, the haptic quality of photomontage's interrupted surfaces is exposed and exacerbated, raising awareness of the loss of physical experience in a screen-dominated public sphere, but still evoking and preserving, through its absorption of digital strategies and techniques, the ephemerality and virtuality necessary to maintain its relevance. Ebner's *A Hudson Yard* gives full expression to this effort to recover photomontage as a form of multisensory experience in physical space, combining montage, installation, performance and video in a fragment-based reinvention of the medium itself that gives photomontage room to act in both virtual and material space. The project effectively overwrites public space with discursive material from the public sphere, activating a *détournement* of instrumentalised language that constructs (at a construction site) a performative intervention – it seeks to incite, or to divert the viewer's action by suspending, if only for a moment, the lived course of the everyday.

13 – Certainly, that was the hope, and it remains the rationale behind resisting the imposition of regulations that inhibit freedom of expression on the Internet. See, for example, Tauel Harper, 'The Big Data Public and its Problems: Big Data and the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere', *New Media and Society* 19:9 (2017), 1424–39.

14 – See Leo Steinberg, 'Other Criteria: The Flatbed Picture Plane' [1972], in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, London: Oxford University Press 1975, 61–98; Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2012, 17–61; and Benjamin Buchloh, 'Warburg's Paragon? The End of Collage and Photomontage in Postwar Europe', in *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen, Munich: Prestel 1998, 50–60.

15 – Elizabeth Otto, 'A Schooling of the Senses: Post-Dada Visual Experiments in the Bauhaus Photomontages of László Moholy-Nagy and Marianne Brandt', *New German Critique* 107:36 (2009), 123.

The project unfolded as a series of events, emphasising the performative nature of the work. First, in collaboration with David Reinfurt, Ebner selected twelve photographs of the letter 'A' that she had already made for a previous project, *Black Box Collision A* (2013–ongoing) (figure 3), each an image culled from commercial signage; each image collapsing photograph and text into a variation on Tretiakov and Telingater's politically framed expansion of photomontage form as photograph-plus-caption.[16] This move entailed a double appropriation, the first carried out when the 'A' photographs were made, an operation that isolated and clipped a fragment from a complete word located in the everyday visual field, diverting it from its communicative (commercial) function. The second (self-)appropriation occurred when Ebner and Reinfurt chose already-made photographs to recontextualise in this new project, rather than creating a new set of photographs. These gestures alone ground *A Hudson Yard* in two characteristic devices in the photomonteur's toolbox: the snip and the selection. But stretching further into the photomontage domain, the 'A' photographs were then converted into large posters of four by six feet (122 cm × 183 cm), evoking that other history of photomontage, the one anchored by graphic design and the 'paste-up' processes of advertising and mass-media publicity.[17] The association with paste-up was then literalised, and brought out of the studio and back into the street, when the commercial wheat-pasting company, Wild Pasting, was hired to mount the posters, one per month for a year, at random sites near the construction of a monumental luxury real-estate development then going up at the north end of the High Line Park: The Hudson Yards. The seams and joins of these public cut-and-paste sites were then documented when yet another collaborator, photographer Timothy Schenck, photographed the installations on the days they were posted. Two additional photomontage operations came into play with these events: pasting and rephotography. A fourth collaborator, Alex Waterman, composed a song, 'Clouds and Crowds', which, on its performance at the final exhibition of Schenck's photographs, poet Eileen Myles has described as a lived, anti-synthetic montage, 'an unraveling rather than a happening'.[18] At the end of the project's run on 4 June 2015, photomontage juxtaposition was evoked yet again with the splitting open of gentrified urban space by the exhibition of Schenck's photographs in an ad-hoc open gallery in the High Line Park itself, in a passage suspended over 14th Street, the epicentre of the redevelopment of New York's former meatpacking district. Since the posters themselves disappeared within a day to a week of having been pasted up, in a kind of serendipitous *neo-décollage* performance that set ephemeral art forms against

16 – For a genealogy of the work, see Shannon Ebner, 'A Hudson Yard', in *A Public Character*, Miami: ICA Art, and Amsterdam: ROMA Publications 2016, 103–31. Tretiakov and Telinger's statement on photomontage was made in reference to John Heartfield's pointedly political work: 'a photomontage is not necessarily a montage of photographs. No – it may be a photo and a photo, a photo and a text, a photo and paint, a photo and a drawing'. Sergei Tretiakov and Solomon Telingater, *John Heartfield*, Moscow: Ogis 1936; cf. *John Heartfield*, ed. Peter Pachnicke and Klaus Honnef, New York: Abrams 1992, 291.

17 – For a very detailed overview of this process, see Jennifer Quick, 'Pasteup Pictures: Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*', *The Art Bulletin* 100:2 (2018), 125–52.

18 – Eileen Myles, 'Passing "A"', in Ebner, *Public Character*, 106. The composition 'Clouds and Crowds' is reproduced in this volume. Ibid., 117–20.

the permanence of the electronic archive, the project lives on now in virtual form. Yet the boundaries of the project bleed not only backwards in time to Ebner's first iteration of the *Black Box Collision A* images, but forward to her exhibition at ICA Miami, *A Public Character*, and to the eponymous montage video, produced with an additional collaborator, artist Erika Vogt, that appeared for the first time there, offering a further gloss on the work.[19] All of this is to say that the project is itself an open-ended agglomerate that probably will never be grasped as a whole. It flows on in what Ebner might call the 'present perfect continuous', a piece that has ostensibly ended but whose implications carry forward into time, particularly in its evocations of electronic structures. Thus, *A Hudson Yard*, in its flux, its sidelong jumps into other contexts, and its composite and collaborative nature, aligns photomontage's recombinant ethos with the multiplicity and open dialogue that characterises the Web at its best: as an arena for multivocal debate.

Ebner's project is paradigmatic of some of the most critically aware photographic work to emerge in recent years, in part because it is collaborative and cross-disciplinary, pushing back against the heroic self-reliance and self-regulation foisted upon workers of all kinds by the neoliberal programme. The project manages to insist that no single element can be understood in isolation from the others, even as it permits each element of the composite – the montage – to refer back to its own history of shifting contexts. In this way it preserves the structure and operations of photomontage, extending photography's power into the dimensional space of public experience. The 'A's, for example, have been emphatically diverted from their original context as commercial signage, digitally altered to drain them of colour, blown up as posters and pasted into a new context to produce new meaning, but, still, each 'A' retains its original background, complete with signs of wear, signs that, in their contrast with their new context, point to their previous placement and function. Thus, in spite of the homogeneity of scale, composition and monochrome that Ebner has imposed upon them, once installed in public space the images operate as interruptions of the everyday, eruptions of uselessness and unlikelihood on a monumental scale within a field in the process of being re-instrumentalised to meet the requirements of new levels of consumerism. In this way, *A Hudson Yard* evokes not merely the spacing of photomontage in general, but the specific nature of surrealist photomontage and its *détournement* of the cityscape, from a field organised for optimum use to a site prone to eruptions of irrational phenomena, expressed through the ludic possibilities of poetic language inscribed onto the means-ends surfaces of the city.

It is significant in this regard that the project arose out of a rejection of High Line Art's original invitation to Ebner: to contribute to their billboard series. The work she ultimately made scatters the consolidated blare of the billboard, refusing to confine itself to an officially bounded discursive space. Her handbills instead squeeze a furtive language of resistance from the sites of commercial branding, taking on the appearance of, in Ebner's words, 'a most anemic advertising campaign'.[20] They are designed to catch the eye of the passerby, not the motorist – although it is apparent from Schenck's photographs that just as many people miss them as notice them. *A Hudson Yard* waited patiently for viewers to look up, opening themselves to the jolt of poetic language intervening in the spaces of commerce.

Given that, in today's attention economy, advertising has come in off the street and onto the screen (in increasingly pernicious ways), any instance of language inserted into dimensional, everyday space is fairly likely to be, as Eileen Myles has put it, 'passed'.[21] This is not the only reference to desuetude in this project; as another critic has pointed out, *A Hudson Yard* was installed at the site of 'a central institution of the neoliberal globalising financialization of the art world' (also known as Manhattan's Chelsea gallery district), and thus directly summons the art market's complicity with gentrification.[22] As a luxury project that converts long unused city space into 'a triumph of culture, commerce and cuisine', the Hudson Yards

19 – Shannon Ebner, *A Public Character*, digital colour video with sound, 13 min. Edited by Erika Vogt, score by Alex Waterman, photographs by Timothy Schenck. https://vimeo.com/150562797, 0:03, accessed December 27, 2018.

20 – Shannon Ebner, https://www.thehigh line.org/art/projects/a-hudson-yard/ (accessed 7 September 2018). It was Alfred Döblin who, in 1929, identified advertising signage as the 'people's poetry', 'the most authentic living language of the modern city spoken by, as opposed to at, the little man'; see Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2001, 98. But this observation had been preceded by the delight Surrealism took in the poetic incongruities of advertising slogans juxtaposed with newspaper headlines as evidence of unconscious intervention; see André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, ed. and trans., Richard Seaver and Helen Lane, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1972, 41–43.

21 – Myles, 'Passing "A"', 106–31.

22 – Griselda Pollock, 'Action, Activism, and Art and/as Thought: A Dialogue with the Artworking of Sonia Khurana and Sutapa Biswas and the Political Theory of Hannah Arendt', *eflux Journal* 92, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/92/204726/action-activism-and-art-and-as-thought-a-dialogue-with-the-artworking-of-sonia-khurana-and-sutapa-biswas-and-the-political-theory-of-hannah-arendt/ (accessed 7 September 2018).

redevelopment project is a culmination of a transformative process that began when galleries first moved out of SoHo and into the isolated area west of Chelsea, which at the time was a prime locus of illicit sexual liaison.[23] The High Line Park itself, built by 'starchitects' and landscaped by a maverick designer who has made native plantings fashionable, is a stylish outcome of this process, an example of an outdated space resuscitated into something 'artful' – not art exactly, but a site of visual pleasure made to be useful in a new and specifically capital-friendly way. Ebner's references to obsolete forms – greyscale photography, handbills and even the temporary exploitation of material, rather than electronic space – become a trenchant form of institutional critique in this context, not merely because the space of exhibition has been dispersed and then disintegrated (constituting, given High Line Art's complicity with gentrification, a wry decommission rather than a commission), but because the project successfully recuses itself from contributing to the concentration of art in support of displacement and redevelopment. In their ephemerality, the posters align with the old Hudson Railyard, now in the process of being overbuilt, calling attention to this redevelopment project as an allegory of the postindustrial. Wheat pasting, after all, is a method associated not just with immediately outdated event announcements (mounted in unpaid advertising space), but with direct-action strategies of sedition. For the brief time the images were up, Ebner rendered this compromised public space into an alternative public sphere: a space of discourse established by writing on the city.

By 'writing on the city' I mean that in *A Hudson Yard* Ebner is both writing on (inscribing) the city surface and writing on (about) the city surface, not just as public space but as a renewed public sphere. The politics of the project are 'hidden in plain sight' as wordplay, a facet that is revealed in the subsequent collaborative video, *A Public Character* (2015).[24] Completed in the year that *A Hudson Yard* closed, the video operates as a kind of Duchampian *Green Box*, a montage of notes interleaving photographic references to the project with puns and linguistic permutations that open the viewer to a multitude of interpretations. Here, the public character of the project is made explicit, as well as the radically (and I mean this literally, 'from the root') aggregate structure of it, which is reiterated in every contribution to the video. Once again, multiple authors ensure that the production maintains heterogeneity: in addition to Ebner's text and direction, the work comprises an urban soundscape by Waterman, Schenk's photographs of the Ebner/Reinfeld collaboration and vigorous editing from Vogt. Each of these elements maintains the montage ethos; each is a reminder that photomontage itself developed as an expression of urban fragmentation and cacophony, with one eye on the avant-garde critique of cinema. Waterman's soundscape, for example, is constructed from urban scraps lifted from the site: footsteps; conversations in a mix of languages, some echoing off the architecture; a tour guide holding forth on water; birdsong; the inevitable siren; and the chant-like performance of 'Clouds and Crowds'; all underpinned with the babbled white noise of the city streets. Notably, there are few mechanical sounds – Waterman evokes, for the most part, the human voice of public space. Animated as well is Vogt's editing, which juxtaposes Schenk's photographs with Ebner's text to draw out the capacity of time-based montage to produce the illusion of simultaneity through afterimage, with a series of texts and images in rapid succession. Text here is literally doubled: layered in rapidly alternating frames that flash between various and sometimes conflicting meanings: 'A IS AN INDEFINITE ARTICLE/A IS A DEFINITE ARTICLE'. Reversals and spatial layering challenge the convention of linear progress as the only possible temporal mode of time-based media; language here is rendered as at once image and content – the writing in space associated with photomontage since the time of the surrealists.

The video's layered montage effect, which after all had been present from the project's inception with the violent jostling of images evoked by the source

23 – https://www.hudsonyardsnewyork.com/ (accessed 7 September 2018).

24 – Shannon Ebner, *A Public Character*, https://vimeo.com/150562797, 9:23, accessed December 27, 2018.

of the original 'A' photographs, *Black Box Collision A*, and subsequently borne out in the interruptive quality of the poster installations, is amply present as well in the black and white site photographs, which, while they are still images, emphasise the presence of the living montage of urban experience. Schenck made anywhere from fifty to 150 images of each of the installations, enabling a variety of cropped and adjusted images to appear in the video, in addition to those that had been made into a second set of posters for display on the High Line.[25] From the beginning of this series, photomontage is evoked in a number of ways that operate on the viewer to emphasise the juxtaposition of poster and site. These build in complexity over the span of the installations. For example, in the first image, made in May 2015, Schenck complicated a fairly 'straight' photograph of the subject (a man passing the first 'A' poster, engrossed in his cell phone) by shooting through what appears to be a chain-link fence, its presence signalled by shadowy lines crossing the surface of the print (figure 4). In July, another poster was photographed conjoined with the detritus of stripped handbills, which contrast with the clean glass surfaces of the buildings beyond the construction barrier (figure 5). By October, these effects were rendered complex to the point of spatial irrationality: the jaunty, top-hatted 'A' pictured in figure 6 is flanked on the right by an extreme flattening of a utility pole in the foreground, and on the left by the mysterious appearance of an elegant woman rising hieratically from behind a construction barrier amid a cloud of Twombly-esque graffiti (figure 6). An odd, dark halation outlines the figure, suggesting that she is trespassing both in private space and natural photographic space. The March 2015 'A' (figure 7) was photographed through layers of reflection in a parked car's windows, accelerating the photomontage effect as the project drew to a close; and in the final image of the series, the discontinuity of the installation in the cityscape is thickened by incongruous

25 – The selection of twelve images for posters was later published in Ebner's book *A Public Character* as representative of *A Hudson Yard*. Ebner, *Public Character*, 103–32. But these and other images were selected by Ebner and Reinfurt out of the thousands Schenck made, and were licensed to Ebner for alteration, thus complicating ownership of the photomontage quality as well as the sequence I am describing. In this way, the project incorporates the 'legalese' that besets contemporary photomontage appropriation. Email exchange with the artist, 17 September 2018.

Figure 4. Shannon Ebner with David Reinfurt, A HUDSON YARD, 2014 - 2015, 12 posters, 72 x 48 inches each. Commissioned and produced by High Line Art. Presented by friends of the High Line and the New York City friends of the High Line and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Photographs by Timothy Schenck.
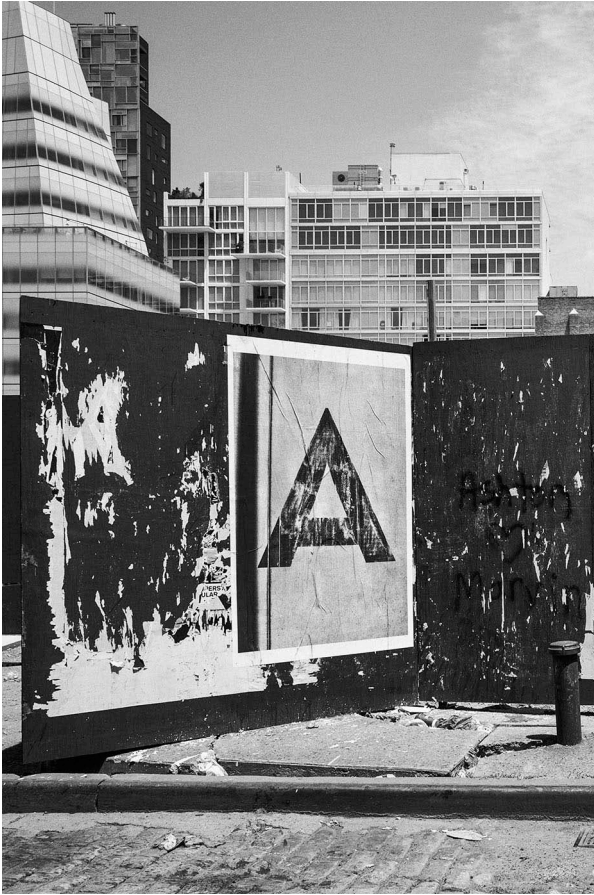
Figure 5. Shannon Ebner with David Reinfurt, A HUDSON YARD, 2014 - 2015, 12 posters, 72 x 48 inches each. Commissioned and produced by High Line Art. Presented by friends of the High Line and the New York City friends of the High Line and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Photographs by Timothy Schenck.

Figure 6. Shannon Ebner with David Reinfurt, A HUDSON YARD, 2014 - 2015, 12 posters, 72 x 48 inches each. Commissioned and produced by High Line Art. Presented by friends of the High Line and the New York City friends of the High Line and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Photographs by Timothy Schenck.

Figure 7. Shannon Ebner with David Reinfurt, A HUDSON YARD, 2014 - 2015, 12 posters, 72 x 48 inches each. Commissioned and produced by High Line Art. Presented by friends of the High Line and the New York City friends of the High Line and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Photographs by Timothy Schenck.

Figure 8. Shannon Ebner with David Reinfurt, A HUDSON YARD, 2014 – 2015, 12 posters, 72 x 48 inches each. Commissioned and produced by High Line Art. Presented by friends of the High Line and the New York City friends of the High Line and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Photographs by Timothy Schenck.

spots of blurred white that suggest specular reflections – although their texture belies this first impression (figure 8). The effect of the series is of a mounting inscrutability that marks a gradual drift from archival documentary (the contrast in legibility with the promotional images on the High Line Art website is marked) under the influence of Ebner's language fragments. The transformation of photographic effects over the course of the series is one example of photomontage doing something in lived space: opening apprehension to the complexity of the field.

The building inscrutability of the 'documentary' photographs is echoed in the video's text, which features alternating rounds of rapidly flashing image-series of varying legibility. When Tretiakov first established that the politically informed conjoining of photograph with text constituted photomontage, he had in mind the dumb, transcriptive qualities of photography – the sense that in its naturalism, photography could only present an indefinite message without revolutionary impact. Photomontage, on the other hand, could behave politically because it limited the photographic message to the most direct form of communication possible. But in this video, Ebner and her collaborators have presented photomontage as a new form of screen *poesis*: text is juxtaposed with photography not to narrow meaning but to open it up, to allow it to play. The strategy forces a renewed appreciation of photography's availability to multiple meanings, its constant drift from unambiguous communication. This call to ludic proliferation – in this case, a *détournement* of the means-ends language of advertising – is most explicit in the wordplay generated by those flashing layers of text which conflate multiple terms through their common forms, suggesting new and hybrid conceptual compounds. Like the selection of Schenck images, these begin simply but pointedly: 'THIS IS A PHOTO-GRAPH' (the word is split, evoking photography-as-inscription) overlaid with 'A PHOTOGRAPHY' (a neologism formed by the action of the article 'A') (figure 9), and then proceeds to link the composite nature of the site photographs with linguistic ambiguity by presenting multiple simultaneous characterisations of the letter 'A': 'A IS AN ARTICLE/A IS A DEFINITE ARTICLE/A IS AN INDEFINITE ARTICLE' flash interchangeably on the screen. A short series of still images and text tick by, as if part of a slide show, and then we are introduced to the politics of the project, with a series of connotations aligned with the term 'public', each superimposed onto a view of a *Hudson Yard* site:

> A PUBLIC CHARACTER/A PUBLIC ASSET/A PUBLIC DISCLOSURE/A PUBLIC DISPLAY/A PUBLIC DISCOURSE/A PUBLIC FORUM/A PUBLIC HEARING/A PUBLIC INTEREST/A PUBLIC LAND/A PUBLIC

Figure 9. Shannon Ebner, A PUBLIC CHARACTER, 2015, Digital color video with sound, 13 minutes. Edited by Erika Vogt. Score by Alex Waterman. Photographs by Timothy Schenck. Courtesy of the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London.

PROCESS/A PUBLIC SECTOR/A PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE/A PUBLIC
CONVERSATION.

These terms are linked to the 'A' posters in the next series, which plays on the
designation of 'A' as a 'character', anthropomorphising the letter and further
expanding the possibilities of meaning ascribed to the single motif:

A TIME/A FACE/A SOUNDING OUT OF THE LETTER A/IS/A AND NOT
A/A BODY/A TYPE/A SELF/A SOCIAL.

Soon these phrases are flashing by so rapidly that their afterimages form an
illegible montage which simultaneously evokes sameness and diversity in form
and meaning. This montage strategy is repeated throughout the video, alternating
with Schenk's photographs, and like the photographs it accelerates in complexity
to arrive at the key sequence of the video, initiated with the words 'ACTIVE
VERSUS PASSIVE'. Here, the photographic message is delivered with telling
clarity: it is the series depicting the construction worker 'actively' tearing off the
poster at 515 W. 29th Street shortly after it has been mounted (figure 10), followed
by a series of people 'passively' moving past the scene of violence without noticing
it; in turn followed by the appearance of another construction worker who seems
to regard the eviscerated site thoughtfully as he opens the door of the construction
barrier. The immediacy with which the poster is deemed intolerable is compelling,
and made more so by the fact that this particular poster was the only image to
include a realistically rendered human element: a mannequin's hand raised in
salute against the large 'A' (figure 11). This was the section of the image that was
most thoroughly molested (for by now the viewer has accepted the 'A's as
humanised 'characters'), leaving only a few stripes at the top of the poster to
indicate the full figure that was once there.

Ebner's text at this point ruminates on language, history and the possibilities
for change, and given her novel expansion of photomontage, bears implications
for what the medium might be capable of doing now. For the words overlaid onto
the images in this segment of the video are a series of verb tenses, and they
foreground the inseparability of construction and destruction that underpins both
the means by which photomontage is produced and the process, on a monumental
scale, of the redevelopment of public space: 'A SIMPLE PRESENT' (the action is
happening now), 'PRESENT CONTINUOUS' (to emphasise that it is still happen-
ing, that we are in the present indefinite), 'SIMPLE PAST' (the destruction is
complete), 'PAST CONTINUOUS' (but it is ongoing), 'PRESENT PERFECT' (the
present is inseparable from the past), 'PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS'

Figure 10. Shannon Ebner, A PUBLIC
CHARACTER, 2015, Digital color video
with sound, 13 minutes. Edited by Erika
Vogt. Score by Alex Waterman.
Photographs by Timothy Schenck.
Courtesy of the artist and Sadie Coles HQ,
London.

(what started in the past continues in the present), 'FUTURE CONTINUOUS'
(expect more to come) and 'FUTURE PERFECT CONTINUOUS' (but at some
point it must end). Whether this end will be the outcome of productive activism or
global self-annihilation through the mindless pursuit of capital is left unresolved.

The last lines of the video suggest an inconclusive bad end: 'A WAR' and 'A
CITIZEN'S PUBLIC' superimpose for a full 30 seconds to allude to 'A citizen's
war', pointing towards domestic conflict to come, even if that is deployed in the
name of rights and protections of the state. With this, the project attests to
sustained artistic faith in the power of photomontage and the arena of productive
agonism it sustains. It is important to the relevance of the project, to its ongoing
détournement of the uses of visual language, that this intervention must now
happen in public space. Specifically, it is important that here public space is
defined as a crucial component of the appearances of an increasingly virtual public

sphere. For electronic media will find its effects in the material world: data structures are already slipping off the screen and becoming real. They are transforming what we do, in the form of 'smart homes'; in the increased acceptance of surveillance, naturalised by terror; in the collapse of firm boundaries between labour and play, public and private. With this in mind, *A Hudson Yard*'s most effective critique may well be its most subtle: a commentary on the off-line migration of Internet structures that has rendered desirable 'live/work/play/shop' redevelopment projects like its eponymous subject. The nightmare of the figure who prefers to starve rather than abandon the glowing screen has materialised as the figure who has blurred the boundaries of consumption and production to the extent that she will never leave her commercial compound. Targeting the Hudson Yard redevelopment as emblematic of the rational outcome of the shift from industrial to postindustrial, neoliberal consolidation, and asserting instead unregulated, if ephemeral, freedom of significance in public space can only affirm photomontage's role in the present perfect continuous.