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book review of

Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage by
Elizabeth Siegel

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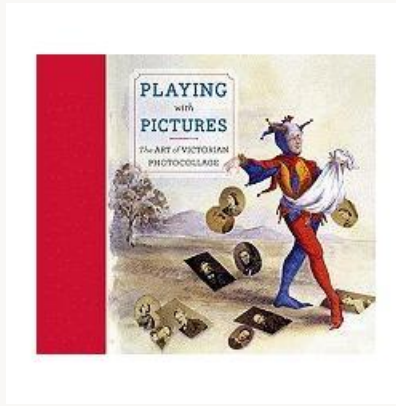
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Elizabeth Siegel,

Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage.

Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press, 2009.

200 pp.; 40 b&w illus.; 140 color illus.; artist and album index.

\$45.00 (cloth)

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Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage is one of two catalogues published in conjunction with the Art Institute of Chicago's 2009 exhibit of the same name.^[1] This exhibit focused on the Victorian photocollage albums made primarily by aristocratic women.^[2] In these albums, photographs (largely taken from the popular *cartes de visite*) were cut up and inserted into a watercolor painting. This mixed media approach resulted in a new kind of art, one that rejected the flawless representation of reality found in paintings and photography. Though many of the collages create a convincing illusion of space and a *trompe l'oeil* effect, the integration of photographs and watercolors is never completely seamless. In some cases, the collage maker doesn't attempt to create a 'realistic' scene, instead reveling in the contrast between the media and the creative possibilities it affords. The resultant images are striking, often amusing and thought-provoking, and provide new insight into Victorian culture.

Playing with Pictures takes as its starting point a rejection of collage as primarily a twentieth-century avant-garde technique and instead asserts that its origins lie with aristocratic women in Victorian society. Its overall premise is that collage was a way for Society women to express their elevated social position and connections while at the same time reimagining their world, often in fantastical terms.^[3] The albums were multivalent, and the images created within them could be interpreted in a variety of ways. Among other things, photocollages could be a vehicle for identity expression, societal critique, shared jokes among friends, or familial pride.

The catalogue contains three essays; 135 color plates of album pages; a brief history of each album and its likely maker(s); and an artist and album index. The three essays, "Society Cutups," by Elizabeth Siegel; "The Page as Stage," by Marta Weiss; and Patrizia Di Bello's "Photocollage, Fun, and Flirtations," are each brief and engaging, written intellectually, but

without assuming a great deal of subject expertise on the reader's part. Siegel's essay examines the history of photocollage, its general uses in Victorian society, the artistic technique of collage and the prevalent themes displayed in the albums. Weiss and Di Bello's essays build upon her foundation, taking as their starting points specific aspects of Society that are mirrored in the photocollages, performance and feminine agency, respectively.

The plates are thematically organized to emphasize the commonalities between the albums, a visual argument for album-making as a collective practice shared by aristocratic women and not simply a vehicle for self-expression. As Siegel says, "Photocollage is here presented as a visual practice specific to a particular class, rather than a revolutionary female act in a repressive male world" (14). In fact, many of the themes relate directly to class, and the luxurious lifestyle the makers of these albums enjoyed. There are scenes of croquet, hunting, and house parties; drawing rooms and family estates; images inserted into china, fine jewelry, and family crests. Many of the makers, in other words, used their photocollages to showcase their social status. These albums were kept in drawing rooms where visitors could peruse them, making the album both a private and a public object. While some of the images appear quite personal, many of them are deliberately fantastical or contrived, suggesting the maker was creating an image or situation with an audience already in mind. In other words, makers were not only creating albums for themselves; the anticipated viewer was vitally important.

Elizabeth Siegel's essay, "Society Cutups," makes this point as part of her argument that the art of photocollage was a way of distinguishing the aristocracy from the up-and-coming middle classes. While photographs and *carte de visites* were widely available and well within the means of the middle classes, they did not have the same leisure to devote to album making as Society women. Thus, "photocollage albums were removed from the commerce of the masses and became vehicles to display aristocratic female accomplishments. . . . While photographs for the middle classes conveyed stability, gentility, family, and social acceptance, photocollages gleefully signaled wit, leisure, cultural references, social status, and exclusivity" (22).

Siegel goes on to briefly explore the process of making a photocollage using the ubiquitous *cartes de visites*, before she examines the major themes found within the albums. These include leisure activities, but also responses to new scientific ideas such as a few that seem to reference Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and his theories of evolution, cultural references to popular literature like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1866), or the "everyday." Siegel links these themes to ideas and practices within Victorian society, giving the reader greater insight into the meaning and use of these images, and encouraging our understanding of the wit and intelligence that went into their making.

Siegel concludes with a discussion of the nature of the photograph and the photocollage, noting that while portrait photographs were meant to show the realistic and truthful image of a person, and perhaps convey an idea of their personality or profession, photocollages were able to disrupt this image, taking the sitters out of their narrow portrait context and placing them within an entirely new, unrelated and completely imagined scene. The photograph thus becomes "an object to be played with at will" (33). In their play, album-makers experimented with multiple perspectives, scale changes, visual puns, and fantastical imagery. Images could be naturalistic or surreal, but through the photocollage technique, these makers anticipated many of the concerns of the twentieth-century avant-garde. The albums were produced

primarily in the 1860s and 1870s, with a few tiptoeing into the 1880s. There is no indication in the text that these albums were known to Georges Braque (1882–1963), Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), or any other avant-garde artist. Siegel does not claim any direct link between the albums and the artists who came later; rather, she suggests that through a recognition of a similar visual aesthetic, the reader might revise any previously held opinions on the passivity, austerity or lack of agency of Victorian women. Siegel convincingly argues that these figures were both completely of their time, and ahead of it.

Marta Weiss's essay, "The Page as Stage," centers on the idea of performance. As she says, "Many album-makers treated collage as a form of staging. . . . Photocollage albums were imbued with theatricality," in different forms (37). For instance, the process of creating the image could be likened to a form of staging, ultimately controlled by the maker; sometimes an image was conceived of *as* a stage, with the cut-out figures acting as players upon it; and sometimes the theme suggested theatricality and performance, either on an intimate drawing-room scale or in a 'public' performance. For instance, an anonymous album from the 1880's, now in the J. Paul Getty Museum Collection, shows a photocollage of two people placed within a painted stage, complete with footlights in the foreground and a curtain up above. In the *Berkeley Album* (1866/71), Georgina Berkeley painted a trapeze show in sepia tones and placed within it two photocollaged figures as the acrobats, while a scene within the *Bouverie Album* (1872/77) shows a country house party playing badminton, each head deliberately oversized for comic effect, while on the left, a young woman looks directly at the viewer, smiling slightly as if to let them in on the fun.

Weiss connects the idea of staging to both the original photographic portrait and to the photocollage. In the photography studio, props, painted backdrops and even costumes created settings for the subject; on the album page, another kind of staging took place, "with the help of scissors, paste, and watercolor" (41).

Weiss's essay is an interesting examination of performance, from the daily performance of Victorian social roles to that of amateur theatricals to popular entertainments of the time. Weiss clearly establishes a connection between the images and the importance of performance in Victorian society. She argues that the photocollage was a place where the makers could act out fantasies, without the constraints or difficulties involved with dealing with live people: "The makers of collage albums enjoyed the freedom not only to restage fragmented photographs according to whim, but also to recast them as they wished, whether in a plausible setting . . . , as fantastical half-human creature, or even as inanimate objects such as playing cards or parasols" (40).

The idea of performance is not limited to the images themselves; the albums play a role as a prop in the activities of the Victorian drawing room as well, furnishing conversation and the opportunity for flirtation. This aspect of the photocollage album is taken up by Patrizia Di Bello in the final essay, "Photocollage, Fun, and Flirtations." While Weiss's essay stays focused on performance, whether in the photograph or the photocollage, Di Bello's essay is wider ranging, examining the notions of Victorian femininity, ambiguity, the various roles women played, and the uses of flirtation as an act of agency, all joined within the pages of the photocollage album. She likens the art of photocollage to a sort of embroidery, stating, "If cutting and fragmenting photographs were acts of separation, watercolor and glue were the

threads that reconnected, embroidering photographs to the page and highlighting the makers' skills as weavers of people and motifs" (51). Di Bello's essay, while thought-provoking, also feels unfocused and fragmented, particularly in the first half where she sets the reader up for the thrust of the essay—flirting, as revealed by an image from the *Filmer Album* (mid-1860s).

Flirting in Victorian elite society could be viewed as a pastime, "playacting for the benefit of an audience," but Di Bello makes the point that while sanctioned, taking it too far could still result in societal disaster (56). Photocollages provided women a way to subtly flirt with Society (and perhaps with particular viewers) without crossing a line. Many images in the albums reference the act of looking, and portray real or imagined relationships between people. For instance, thanks to photographic reproduction, "the Prince of Wales was free to walk into young women's bedrooms and able to appear as a prince, king, or object of desire, social or otherwise, in anyone's album" (58). Through the albums, and the subtly flirtatious imagery, Di Bello argues that women were empowering themselves, using visual strategies to comment upon and shape their world.

Without disagreeing with the essay's major points, Di Bello's conclusion broadly states, "In Victorian albums, photographs were manipulated not for artistic purpose, but for the pleasurable and empowering strategy of refusing to deal with meaning seriously, in favor of the delights of play" (60). While this might very well be the case for some, it is difficult to ascribe this meaning for all. Surely some makers were concerned with artistic purpose, something suggested by the multiple examples of imagery appropriated from illustrators of the time, such as John Tenniel (1820–1914), or by the number of images that recall Romantic landscape paintings. Notwithstanding this small criticism, Di Bello's essay is enlightening and does inspire closer inspection of the photocollages and their potential meanings within the context of Victorian society.

All three scholars draw upon primary and secondary sources and make strong connections between the photocollage themes and the social, cultural and political climate of Victorian England. While women are at the center of the essays as the makers of most of the albums, and as such, a discussion of women's concerns cannot be ignored, in general the essays reflect a social methodology rather than an overtly feminist one. Siegel's essay provides a useful overview, while Weiss and Di Bello impart deeper meaning. The combination of the accessible essays and the organization of the plates make it easy for the reader to grasp the authors' points, while the sheer artistry of the plates themselves encourage prolonged looking. The catalogue is not a definitive work, but rather an engaging introduction to the largely unknown practice of Victorian photocollage. This topic will offer myriad opportunities for other scholars who may further our knowledge of Victorian photocollages as well as the people who made them.

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[1] The other catalogue, Elizabeth Siegel and Martha Packer, *The Marvelous Album of Madame B: Being the Handiwork of a Victorian lady of Considerable Talent* (New York: Scala Publishers, 2009), examines the Art Institute's recent acquisition of the *Madame B Album* (1870s) for their permanent collection.

[2] There appear to have been a few men who made albums too, but they were exceptions, not the rule.

[3] I use the term Society to denote the fashionable and exclusive world of the Victorian elite.