

**John Rogers**  
**'John Russell: The Collagist'**  
**The Trade Apartment, London**  
**<http://www.johnrogers.co.uk/BRAINLOVE>**

**Excerpts from press release -**

"Aesthetics have exploded beyond their traditional institutional confines and ART IS CALLING INTO QUESTION its own status. Works of Art have lost their aura. Art is NO LONGER SEPARATE TO THE REST OF EXPERIENCE. Art has seeped out from under the gallery door. WARNING: Boundaries are being blurred and audiences are WIDENING. It's a VAST AND TERRIBLE ARTISTS' PLACEMENT SCHEME out there. A cat which had been lying on the wall, spews forth a green torrent of putrescent AESTHETICISM, teeming with reflected images of TORTURE and child slavery, sex and the tears of the obsessed. The street is knee-deep in blood, patrolled by a thousand sculptures - huge obelisks with connected body parts and FEMINIST INSTALLATIONS. A group of YORKSHIRE MINERS are fighting mutant children."

[...]

"There are a thousand Richard Serra sculptures and Louise Bourgeois Spiders silhouetted against the sinking sun. The sky is black. "WE ASK FOR YOUR COOPERATION AT THIS TIME ... PLEASE REMAIN CALM" ... Our eyes watch the spectacle. An exact replica of Mona Hatoum's body filled with maggots is conducting traffic and organising contra-flow systems. More and more, boundaries are being blurred and ACCESS is WIDENING - Barriers are disappearing. Gangs of SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE ARTISTS are hunting in packs down the Marylebone Road. THE MELANCHOLIC, IRONIC, ROMANTIC ARTISTS are musing over images of what-cannot-be, and of what-never-was but talk of what-might-be-but-never-can-be, one of them is carrying a carefully protected WEAK FLAME OF HOPE which flickers IRONICALLY in the cold wind."

The press release for John Russell's 'The Collagist' is a massive thing, a complex, rambling piece of philosophy-fiction-nonsense-theory-nightmare that forms a parallel with the cut-up image/context jigsaw technique that makes up his collages. It rants about the state of contemporary art, the closing of the traditional art/ mass cultural divide, oscillating between a statement on postmodern art and a Burroughs-esque cut-up horror story. If the effect of the bland, institutional statements that Russell lampooned in BANK's 'press release' show is to close down possibilities by spoon feeding meaning, then the effect of this press release is the opposite. Meaning seems to evaporate as soon as it is formed, or change from one image to the next, until inconstancy becomes the meaning.

The collages themselves are large (1x2m) glossy computer prints consisting of cut-and-pasted Photoshop imagery and backgrounds. The prints include printed frames around the outside - some ornate, gold and decorative, some plain strips of colour. These borders seem to oppressively contextualise the images, as if to remind us of the baggage that comes with looking at them. They are very self-aware objects, never letting us forget what they are - the weight of art history and theory has been put on display along with the work. The works are titled after the colours of their "frame" borders, suggesting that these strips

of colour are more important than the actual content of the image - everything we see in these images is subject to the oppressive contextualisation that exists elsewhere. Perhaps this is what the press release refers to in it's portrayal of the art world as an apocalyptic horror story - things have become so tangled and unclear that 'making sense' doesn't seem to make sense any more.

This uncomfortable context-content relationship underlines the work's subjectivity and interdependence with everything else that is going on around it. The use of other artists' work can be construed as satirical - in "Green/ Blue" (above) Jake and Dinos Chapman's sculpture becomes a drooling, hilarious B-movie monster, making us wonder how we could ever have taken it seriously in the first place. By appropriating images of other artists' work into the context of his own, Russell reframes them outside of their usual reassuring critical setting, opening them up to new lines of interpretation - and criticism.

How all these ideas and images fit together is not exactly clear (why does Peter Frampton have a giant bird head?) - but perhaps that is one of the points Russell is attempting to make. I think John Russell wants to portray some kind of truth in this work - and if the truth happens to be confusion, then so be it.

by John Rogers

John Russell was at The Trade Apartment, London, from 25th May - 29th June 2002.