

Rona Cran, *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature, and Culture: Joseph Cornell, William Burroughs, Frank O'Hara, and Bob Dylan* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014, £65). Pp 258. ISBN 978-1-4724-3096-0.

Kevin J. Hunt / Nottingham Trent University

Rona Cran's *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature, and Culture* offers a broad title for what is really a quite specialist study focussing upon the four key cultural figures identified in the book's subtitle. The introduction, 'Catalysing Encounters', provides a selective but detailed overview of existing literature that clearly articulates the significance of collage, throughout the twentieth century, as a creative process and parataxical format for presenting and developing ideas.

Centred around the concept that collage is about encounters, Cran initially sets out a comprehensive interpretive scope that reiterates Pierre Joris's assertion that 'there isn't a 20th century art that was not touched, rethought or merely revamped by the use of [collage]' (40, 132, 213). As a way of imposing a structure and putting some boundaries on this otherwise highly inclusive approach, Cran develops chapter by chapter case studies of selected works by Joseph Cornell, William Burroughs, Frank O'Hara, and Bob Dylan to identify how their specific engagement with collage or collage-esque creativity can be contextualised within the bigger cultural picture, informed by Gregory Ulmer's observation that (by most accounts) collage constitutes the twentieth century's 'single most revolutionary formal innovation in artistic expression' (4).

A key part of Cran's thesis is to suggest that collage is not merely incidental to each artists's work but is instead a significant and even fundamental part of their creative process. Given the range of media to engage with – from Cornell's 2D collages through to his celebrated 3D boxes, Burroughs's literary 'cut-up' technique from *Junky* to *Nova Express*, O'Hara's formal and intuitive experiments with poetry and Dylan's explorations beyond the composition of music and lyrics to the linguistic games of *Tarantula* and even aspects of his shifting public identity – it is necessary to acknowledge the role of chance and serendipity in mapping the multitude of connections that emerge. As such, the basic principle used for defining the influence of collage relies upon the presence of 'experimentation with and linking of disparate phenomena: democratically, arbitrarily, and even unintentionally' (40).

By focussing upon the democratic, the arbitrary and the unintentional, Cran presents the shared context or experience of New York City as a backdrop to the creative enterprise of each artist. Despite none of the four artists being native to Manhattan, the spirit of New York is evoked through the vernacular glances of modern urban life provided by their work as well as their comparable abilities to be inspired by the 'junk materials of industrial capitalism' (Jameson in Cran, 31). As an interpretive idea it is generally easier to see the urban context in the fragmented visual imagery of Cornell, Burroughs, O'Hara and Dylan rather than specifically New York City, except where the connection is made explicit by a given artwork. But that is not to say Cran's contextualising of the significance of collage within New York is not convincing, suggesting that from about 1930 onward the 'European brand of collage could be approached with a degree of detachment' (27) by artists working in America, especially as the use of cut paper as an artistic form 'prospered in New York City over the following two and a half decades' (27).

The notion of detachment is a purposeful one, suggestive of how the creative qualities of collage can easily become disengaged from pasted paper, painterly and plastic arts to be applied to the conceptual and experiential exploration of ideas across media and disciplines. This provides a broad model for the breadth of impact already associated with collage as well as helping to connect the four artists under consideration. A 'catch 22' with this type of study, focussing upon four very different artists whose work collectively spans at least nine decades, is that each chapter (one for each artist) is relatively short whilst to single out and focus upon just one artist in a monograph would lose the main argument and network of associations across media and time. The reader is therefore required to be open to the breadth of research and ideas being drawn upon, following the direction the author takes us in even when a critical interpretive leap may be part of what takes us there.

As Cran suggests, the connections presented through her close analysis and the implicit logic of her interpretations are developed from an 'impressionistic critical style' that 'demands a conceptual attitude toward art and literature that values multiplicity and subjectivity' (40). Put another way, this study employs a certain amount of intellectual

bricolage as a methodology (with a knowing nod to Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of the 'bricoleur') and it is inherently aware that the process of structuring, quoting and analysing such a wide range of works (and contextualising factors) is in itself conceptually akin to an act of collage.

This element of the subjective and the impressionistic may frustrate some readers who prefer a more objectively positioned type of analysis, but what this unconventional approach encourages is the foregrounding of interpretive ideas. While there is perhaps nothing especially new about the broader significance of collage presented in this study, the individual chapters on Cornell, Burroughs, O'Hara and Dylan are engagingly written and provide insightful and interesting close analysis. The chapters on Burroughs and O'Hara are slightly longer than those on Cornell and Dylan, suggesting a slight lean towards literary analysis over the other media being considered. Each of the chapters feels as though there is still more that could be said, particularly about the shared thematic associations between them, giving weight to the central argument that each artist's relationship with collage is a valid area of enquiry.

A recurrent theme is the implied sensorial and experiential engagement with the lived environment. As an area of consideration in relation to collage and urban experience, the immersive qualities of collage as an 'attitude of mind' (138) that is transcribed and shared through the experience of the resulting artwork (whether it is an assemblage, a poem, a novel, a song or something else) comes through clearly. Cran, in effect, uses her impressionistic interpretation of selected artworks as a way of curating an exhibition-like concept in book form. It is something of a paradox that the author, who has immersed herself in research about the versatility of collage to bring together an intriguing set of ideas, is somewhat limited by the linear structure of a conventional book. Reading this ambitious study what comes to mind is how fascinating it would be to see and hear the works under discussion in the context of an exhibition, enabling the tacit collaged qualities central to each artist's work to be more immediately experienced across the range of disciplines and styles that communicate their 'catalysing encounters'.