

## Notes on Photomontage

Traduction

Grete Stern and Anat Falbel for the introduction in English and French

Translator: Anat Falbel

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## Introduction (English)

- 1 Grete Stern (Wuppertal, 1904-Buenos Aires, 1999) was a disciple of Walter Peterhans, the proponent of the Neues Sehen (New Vision), who was responsible for the first course on photography at the Bauhaus (Dessau, 1929). In Berlin, at the beginning of the 1930s, she associated with Ellen Rosenberg (later Auerbach) in the photographic studio ringl+pit, where they operated with photomontage and photocollage in advertising and portrait following the experiments of the New Vision and New Objectivity. In 1936, fleeing Nazism, she went into exile in Buenos Aires with her companion Horacio Coppola.
- 2 Until her involvement with the magazine *Idilio - La revista juvenil e femenina*, [Idyll, the youth and women magazine], and the production of *Sueños* [Dreams], Stern had few opportunities to work on photomontage in Argentina, as the medium had no significant antecedents there. Indeed, the first known photomontages in the country were produced by Antonio Pozzo, the pioneer daguerreotypist and one of the most recognized Argentinian photographers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and later in the 1930s, although without much repercussion, two magazines had already experimented with photomontage: *Caras y Caretas* and *Viva Cien Años*.
- 3 As explained by Stern in the article “Notes on Photomontage” (1967), the complete series comprehending 140 photomontages were published from 1948 to 1951 in Argentina by the Editorial Abril, led by the Italian exiled César Civita. The photomontage was Stern’s proposition to visually represent the magazine’s page “El psicoanálisis le ayudara,” created by sociologist Gino Germani and editor Enrique Butelman, interested in analytical psychology under the pseudonym Richard Rest. Stern recognized that if the analysis of dreams sent to *Idilio*—usually by women— had

roots in Freudian and Jungian practices, the photographer used the strong tradition of expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism to criticize the oppression and manipulation of women in the male chauvinist Argentinean society of the time.

- 4 The source of Stern's images was her archive, and apparently, the photographer did not keep the originals of her photomontages that were given to the publisher. Nevertheless, when presenting part of that production in later exhibitions, the first of them in 1967, Stern would sometimes modify her negatives and change the original titles given by Germani, moving them away from the original contexts for which they were elaborated, stressing the importance of the word, as justified in her article.
- 5 Despite being published weekly for three years, Grete Stern's photomontages were utterly ignored in their time because of the lack of photographic criticism in the Argentinean mass media and the lack of prestige of photomontage among art critics<sup>1</sup>.

## Introduction (français)

- 6 Grete Stern (Wuppertal, 1904-Buenos Aires, 1999) était une disciple de Walter Peterhans, le promoteur de la *Neues Sehen* (Nouvelle vision), responsable du premier cours de photographie au Bauhaus (Dessau, 1929). À Berlin, au début des années 1930, elle s'associe avec Ellen Rosenberg (Auerbach) dans le studio photographique *ringl+pit*, où elles opèrent avec le photomontage et le photocollage dans la publicité et le portrait suite aux expérimentations de la Nouvelle Vision et de la Nouvelle Objectivité. En 1936, fuyant le nazisme, elle s'exile à Buenos Aires avec son compagnon Horacio Coppola.
- 7 Jusqu'à son implication dans le magazine *Idilio - La revista juvenil e femenina* [Idylle, le magazine des jeunes et des femmes], et la production de *Sueños* [Rêves], Stern a eu peu d'occasions de travailler sur le photomontage en Argentine, car le médium n'y avait pas d'antécédents significatifs. En effet, les premiers photomontages connus dans le pays ont été réalisés par le daguerréotypiste pionnier Antonio Pozzo, un des photographes argentins les plus reconnus du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle et plus tard dans les années 1930, bien que sans grand retentissement, deux magazines avaient déjà expérimenté le photomontage : *Caras y Caretas* et *Viva Cien Años*.
- 8 Comme l'explique Stern dans son article « Notes sur le photomontage » (1967), la série complète comprenant 140 photomontages a été publiée de 1948 à 1951 en Argentine par L'Editorial Abril dirigée par l'exilé italien César Civita. L'utilisation du photomontage était une proposition de Stern pour représenter visuellement la page du magazine *El psicoanálisis le ayudara*, créée par the sociologue Gino Germani et l'éditeur Enrique Butelman intéressé par la psychologie analytique, sous le pseudonyme de Richard Rest. Stern a reconnu que si l'analyse des rêves envoyés à *Idilio* — généralement par des femmes — avait des racines dans les pratiques freudiennes et jungiennes, la photographe a utilisé la forte tradition de l'expressionnisme, du dadaïsme et du surréalisme pour critiquer l'oppression et la manipulation des femmes dans la société machiste argentine de l'époque.
- 9 Les images de Stern provenaient de ses archives, et apparemment, la photographe n'a pas conservé les originaux de ses photomontages qui ont été remis à l'éditeur. Néanmoins, lors de la présentation d'une partie de cette production dans des expositions ultérieures, la première d'entre elles en 1967, Stern a parfois modifié ses négatifs et changé titres originaux donnés par Germani, les éloignant des contextes

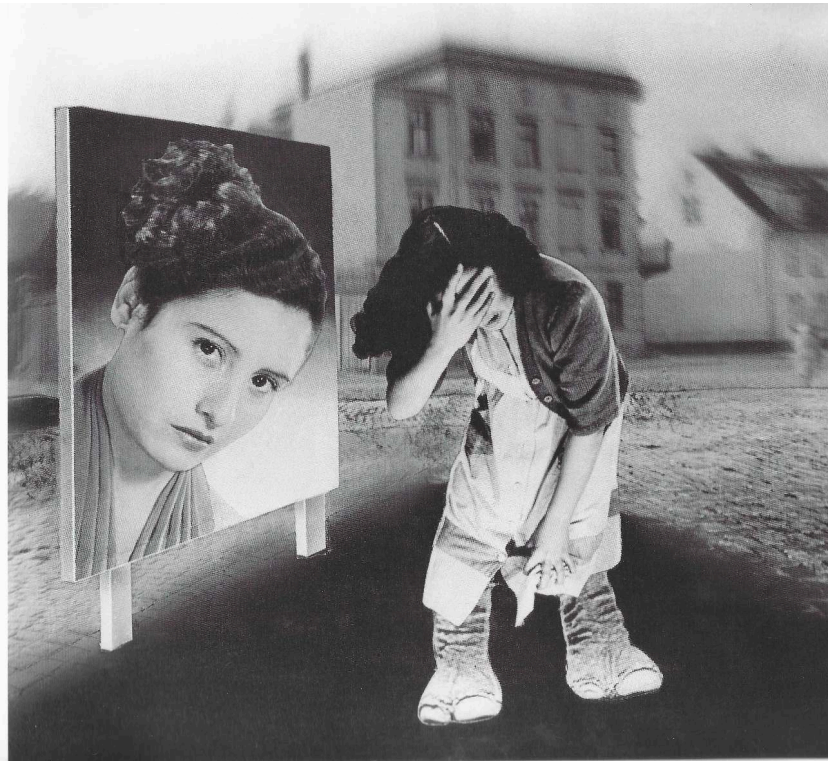
originaux pour lesquels ils ont été élaborés, soulignant l'importance du mot, comme le justifie son article.

- 10 Bien qu'ils aient été publiés chaque semaine pendant trois ans, les photomontages de Grete Stern ont été totalement ignorés à leur époque en raison du manque de critique photographique dans les médias argentins et du manque de prestige du photomontage auprès des critiques d'art<sup>1</sup>.

## « Notes on photomontage » by Grete Stern

“Notes on Photomontage” was initially read by Grete Stern at a meeting at the Foto Club Argentino in Buenos Aires, in September 1967, and published in *Fotomundo*, n° 310, Buenos Aires, February, 1994. The present translation was based on Stern's text published in the catalog *Os sonhos de Grete Stern*, Lasar Segall Museum/Institute Moreira Salles, 2009, p. 62-67.

Figure 1. *Dream 36: Fractures* [title given by Germani], *Idyll*, n° 30, 06/14/1949- *Dreams with contrasts* [title given by Grete Stern]



Grete Stern

- 11 A few years ago, the magazine *Idilio*, edited by Editora Abril, dedicated one of its pages entitled “Psychoanalysis Will Help You” to interpreting dreams. It was a time when the concepts of psychoanalytic ideas penetrated all social strata, and these pages were welcomed by the primarily female readership.
- 12 I remember that the literary-interpretative part of the new section was directed by Professor Gino Germani, well-known in the academic milieu, who signed the texts using

the pseudonym Richard Rest. Editorial Abril requested my collaboration for the photographic illustration of the interpreted dreams. I proposed using photomontages.

- 13 The work went more or less like this: Germani handed me the text of the dream; in most cases, a faithful copy of one of the many letters sent to Editora Abril requesting interpretation. Sometimes, before starting my work, I would talk to him about the interpretation. In general, Germani would present me with requests regarding the layout: it should be horizontal or vertical, with a foreground darker than the background or representing uneasy forms. On other occasions, he indicated that such a figure should appear doing this or that; or insisted on applying floral or animal elements.
- 14 That said, what is a photomontage? An approximate definition: the joining of different photographs, preexisting or taken for this purpose, to create a new photographic composition with these elements. In this way, numerous possibilities for composition arise, among them that of joining implausible elements. For example, a woman in a bathing suit, in a ballroom, leading an elephant. In addition, the proportions of the components used in the assembly can be distorted. In this way, it is not unusual to find a child sitting on a fly representing an airplane flying over a forest of cabbages.
- 15 Perspective can also be distorted: a man photographed from above observes towers or trees photographed from below. The distorted perspective will always create the effect of something uncertain and implausible. It should be added that, in contrast, a correct perspective is essential for other cases, such as the child riding the fly, since the exact perspective graphically increases the veracity.
- 16 There are several techniques for carrying out photomontage. Its composing elements can be projected, for example, directly onto photographic paper using the enlarger: the enlarger is placed according to the desired size; the paper that receives the projection is moved according to the space that the image must occupy; parts of the negative or the paper are covered so as not to project the entire negative, or in order to leave blank spaces on the paper to receive other projections and prevent one photograph from covering the other, the latter often being the effect sought.
- 17 The montages that I exhibit were completed differently. First, I prepare a sketch, a pencil drawing that indicates the layout and photographic elements that will compose the montage. Let's see: a background of clouds, a sandy beach in the foreground, in which there lies a glass bottle with a girl trapped inside it. I enlarge the negatives according to this sketch. I find the clouds and the beach among the negatives in my archive. I take a photo of a girl sitting in the same position as the sketch. I enlarge it to a size that allows it to be placed behind the actual bottle, to create the impression that the girl is trapped inside. I photograph the assemblage and then cut it. Then I experiment with the tone of the backgrounds—the sky with clouds and the sandy beach—so that they emphasize the bottle. I also experiment with the size of the bottle using the backdrop, testing which shade and relative size suit me. I tend towards this system, which allows me to decide visually instead of intellectually, moving and changing photographic elements until getting the composition that satisfies me. Then I paste the photographs in the chosen order. If I understand it as essential, I add graphic elements, such as shadows, highlighted borders, etc. Retouching in montage, meaning adding or deleting what you want, is also helpful. In this case, one faces a combination of graphic and photographic elements.

- 18 Another way of working that is more complicated than the one I have just described—but which produces sound effects of space, light, shadow, and verisimilitude—is as follows: the different photographs that make up the montage are placed either loosely, between glass surfaces, or supported by sticks or boxes, in their corresponding order, as if forming a stage set. If necessary, I can leave some elements out of focus. The clouds are in the background, the sandy beach is closer to the camera, and the little bottle with the girl is placed at the end of the beach, or between the beach and the clouds.
- 19 The photographs do not touch one another, which creates the possibility of producing new effects through lighting. The next step is to photograph the whole scene. Photomontage is also used for other purposes. Architects, sculptors and decorators use it frequently—particularly those in theater. Its operation requires fine control of perspective and proportion. In connection with what has been said, I will describe a case that I find interesting. A sculptor designed a monument to be erected in a particular place in the city. In a specific contest, he presented the reduced image and added a photomontage in which the sculpture could be seen already installed in the place it was destined for. To execute the photomontage, it was first necessary to photograph the mentioned place. The sculptor chose the point of view, and the photographer then had to decide: 1) How high from the ground should the camera be placed? 2) What should be the sun's position at the time of the photo? The photographer took two pictures: one in which the background or distant areas were as sharp as the close areas, and the second left the distant areas out of focus.
- 20 The second photograph was of the small monument. Here, too, the sculptor chose the angle to be observed. The photographer had to calculate the height of the small monument in order to place the camera lens and, in addition, select the position of the lamps so that the effect to be produced corresponded to the effect of the sun in the previous photographic view. Again, two pictures were taken: one with the background in focus and the other with the rear out of focus. For the final image, the photograph of the monument was not pasted over the photo of the city but in front of it, thus obtaining a significant effect of volume.
- 21 The photomontage is also used for advertising purposes; albeit nowadays with less intensity than ten or fifteen years ago. But it is still interesting for book covers, advertisements and posters. Outside the catalog, I present here some of my work done for advertising.
- 22 A few days ago, I saw a book in a bookstore that recommends and explains the application of photomontage. I could observe some unusual montages: combining different parts of different faces, achieving unexpected expressions. For montage work, having a comprehensive collection of magazines is extremely useful. Regarding many photographs opens up space for suggestions and stimulates ideas.
- 23 When the photomontage is intended for publication, we must be careful not to use faces or images of people without their authorization. Once, in a montage for Editora Abril, I showed the face of a girl looking at her hand. The image of a different man replaced each of her fingers. For this work, I used figures of models from my archive, whose consent I had secured. But I lacked the image of a man for the thumb, who I wanted to be short, fat, and without a hat. I recalled a photograph of a group of workmen I had taken a few years ago, one of which corresponded to the characteristics sought. I pasted his photo over the girl's thumb and delivered the work. Days after the



magazine was launched, the publisher informed me that a widowed lady, very offended, had come forward asking where they had obtained the photo of her late husband—the thumb—who had previously authorized its reproduction. I explained the case details to Abril's management, and they gave the woman my name and telephone number. I was willing to assume the responsibilities of a somewhat unforeseen situation, but the lady never came to me.

- 24 Photographers were not the first to make this game with photos a globally recognized graphic medium; but rather, it was visual artists part of the Dada and Surrealist movements. They found photography a new and different element for accomplishing their compositions in combination with drawing and painting.
- 25 Dada was an artistic movement created in Zurich, Switzerland, in early 1919; that is, shortly after the end of World War I. Young visual artists and writers from various European countries gathered daily, in a cabaret called Voltaire. They opposed war and nationalism, inviting artists from all currents and the public to participate with suggestions and questions. Among the first were Picasso and Marinetti. Actually, Dada performed against all existing isms: Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, etc. It was intended to unsettle the public, and that purpose was largely achieved. In the cabaret, the presentations were made so strange and so eccentric, that they caused reactions of great violence from the public.
- 26 In Berlin, Dada had a more political tone. Huelsenbeck, a known leader of this movement, oversaw the Fine Arts of the German Revolution. Other internationally renowned collaborators were George Grosz, an extraordinary draftsman, and John Heartfield, who used photomontage for the covers of his publishing house (Malik) and applied arbitrary typography to posters containing political statements. Another collaborator was Kurt Schwitters, a draftsman painter and poet who was not politically engaged. He wrote long poems composed only of sounds, which he recited himself by singing, shouting, whistling, and dancing around a statue in an art gallery in Hannover, where he lived. All this was similar to the presentations held in Zurich and constitutes, fifty years apart, the direct antecedent of what today is usually called happening. Schwitters created montages using photographs, small pieces of paper, buttons, or any other object he found during his walks.
- 27 The photographer Man Ray also belonged to Dada. He was North American but took up residence in Paris. He presented rayograms, photographs without a camera; that is, the play of light and shadow of objects on negative and positive material.
- 28 In 1924, poets and visual artists—all of them young people, among whom were some teenagers—founded the Surrealist movement, which can be understood as an extension of Dada, with greater importance and attraction in terms of its influence, demands and, consequently, what it produced. I will mention some of the best-known visual artists of Surrealism: Dali, Tanguy, Magritte, and, once again, the photographer Man Ray. One of his most popular montages represents the beautiful lips of a woman against a sky covered with small clouds over a dark, neutral landscape. He called it *À l'heure de l'observatoire—les amoureux (Observatory Time—The Lovers)*. A detail to be emphasized: the title of a photomontage always plays a very important role.
- 29 In one of the movement's statements, André Breton, head of Surrealism, said: "To me, the strongest image is that which presents the greatest degree of arbitrariness." An interpretation of these words would be the following: in Dada and Surrealism, remnants of the romanticism of the last century are presented, with the rejection of

everything that is known and with an enormous appreciation for invention. Today we live in the era of inventions: flying saucers, machines that replace man's daily tasks, and other things that no one thought possible in 1930.

- 30 A year before the birth of Surrealism, another movement emerged in Germany called *Die neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), which sought to present an objective image against all sentimentality.
- 31 Indeed, photography can offer an objective representation of a thing, especially if shown without an environment. Many Dada artists made self-portraits combining the objectivity of a cropped photo with a personal romantic-inventive gesture. In the work entitled *Mask to Insult the Aesthetes*, we see half a woman's body, her low-cut dress adorned with a rose, and the oval of the face covered with a montage of photographs and newspaper clippings.
- 32 Finally, I will describe advertisements—photomontages—reproduced in a book dedicated to Dada and Surrealism. The first advertisement is from 1906, from an English magazine, carried out with apparent naivety. A crowd of well-dressed men and women can be seen along with a factory and its chimneys in the background. In the grey sky, a corset with garters—as women wore then—looms over the whole ensemble. The caption reads *Party in the Garden of the Royal Corset Company*. The second advertisement is from a 1936 women's clothing magazine. It is presented with advertising skill. One can observe the oval shape of a face, cut from smooth fabric: woolen threads form the hair, two buttons in place of eyes; another thread suggests the nose, and a small half-open zipper is the mouth. The caption reads: "Most slide fasteners suffer from exposure." The translation isn't easy, as it gives way to a double interpretation. It could mean that most zippers remain open or that the very "active" ones suffer precisely for being too "active."
- 33 Discussing whether or not photography is an art seems to me a waste of time, because the field of definitions is infinite, known and controversial, and no explanation can deny the importance that photography has in the social, political and expressive life of people today.
- 34 In any case, photography is a means with which I express myself and that requires, as Julio Cortázar states in his short story *Las babas do diabo* [The Devil's Drool], that one has "discipline, aesthetic education and steady hands."

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## NOTES

1. Luis Príamo, “Os sonhos de Grete Stern”, in *Os Sonhos de Grete Stern: fotomontagens*, São Paulo, Museu Lasar Segall/Imprensa Oficial, Instituto Moreira Salles, 2009, p. 50-61; Jorge Schwartz, “Introdução”, in *Os Sonhos de Grete Stern: fotomontagens*, São Paulo, Museu Lasar Segall/Imprensa Oficial, Instituto Moreira Salles, 2009.