

# The Cut of the Kitschen Knife

Catalogue Essay for "Confessions of a Dadaist  
The Era of Existence, 1979 - 2005, Part II"  
at Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, IL  
by  
James R. Hugunin

*The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be — the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.*

— André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*

*[F]or Baudrillard collecting performs the same homeostatic functions as dreaming . . .*

— Naomi Shor, "Collecting Paris"

*Seek not whether a man is a Catholic or a Protestant, a Darwinist or a Fundamentalist, a Liberal or a Conservative. Ask him what objects he collects.*

— John Windsor, "Identity Parades"



Graphic from poster used for Part I of this Exhibition (2004), Prince George Community College

I

In his novel *Nadja* (1928), Surrealist writer, André Breton, reports searching France's Saint-Ouen fleamarket "for objects that can be found nowhere else: old fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse." Here's a fascination with what Celeste Olalquiaga in *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (1998) calls the "shattered aura," a feeling of uniqueness enabling the historical experience of that object's loss. Many of such objects/images — *kitsch*, "vulgarily reproduced artistic rubbish" as Gillo Dorfles dubs them in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (1969) — were anathema to elite taste. The term *kitsch* is of German origin and began to be used in the mid-1800s in Munich to denigrate certain forms of art; its etymology includes *verkitschen*, to make cheap, and *kitschen*, to collect junk from the street. Dorfles lists the sins of kitsch as: ". . . substitution of untrue for true feelings, exploitation of trite social clichés, abuse of patriotic, religious and mystic themes out of their proper contexts, and so on." Concerning such questionable items of popular culture, economist Thorstein Veblen denominates a style he terms "barbarian normal"; Frank Wedekind, founder of German Expressionist drama, writes of kitsch as the Gothic or the Baroque of our age; while modernist critic, Clement Green-

berg, in his seminal essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (1939), sought to expose it as a pernicious, false culture imposed on, rather than organically arising from, society. "Kitsch," writes Olalquiaga, "is these scattered fragments of the aura, traces of dream images turned loose from their matrix, multiplied by the incessant beat of industrialization, covering the emptiness left by both the aura's demise and modernity failure to deliver its promise of a radiant future." Smith-Romer recalls that, like her, theorist-collector Walter Benjamin was passionately drawn to the petrified, obsolete elements of civilization; small glass balls containing a landscape upon which snow fell when shook were among his favorite objects. During the 1950s, Helene



Fountain of iron in the shape of dolphins, shells, and aquatic plants, Crystal Palace Exposition, London, 1851.

Smith-Romer's parents owned (and lived behind) their own Mom 'n Pop toy/candy/fountain store (and later owned an art/magazine/card store) while her uncle made his own candy and sold it in his magazine/novelty store. Helene fondly recalls her father bringing home such glass snowballs. She credits her playful immersion in these family enterprises as keying her into the material she mines for her aesthetic productions and her love of play-as-art, art-as-play.

The protagonist in Zola's *Nana* (1880) predates Breton's fascination with such

popular artifacts; strolling through a famous Parisian arcade:

"She was taken especially by the pressing attraction of cheap knick-knacks, requisites in walnut-shells, necessities in small containers, rag-picker's baskets for tooth-picks, Vendôme columns and obelisks containing thermometers."

A contemporary Nana ever on the search for such "modern hieroglyphs," Smith-Romer, in her astute collage works and wittily recycled found objects (her "Pop Alreadymades"), in her apocryphal narratives, wacky mail-art leaflets, brochures,

placards, and other oddball enclosures, continues to valorize the concept of the decontextualized (or recontextualized)

object/image. For over twenty years, this Chicago artist has



An Avon Decanter, a Pop Alreadymade

reveled in the plethora of commercial production; stuff usually defamed as "kitsch," but of which artist and collector Katherine Dreier in *Western Art in the New Era* (1923) observes: "One is constantly being asked in America, what is Dadaism? One might say in response that almost any form of our modern advertisements, which are essentially American and original, is some form of natural Dadaism in our country. We in America often appear natural-born Dadaists as regards art . . ."

These words could have been uttered by Smith-Romer. With a keen eye for aesthetics and socio-political concerns (i.e., how such objects reveal our collective attitudes, whether that be racism, militarism, religions, etc), she roams through the cultural detritus that surrounds us, awakening their congealed life. Her drifting through the flotsam and jetsam of our commodities results in not only a spectacular collection of oddments, but also provides her with the materials for her myriad collage-works. A dialectical "engager" of popular culture, she is both participant and

100  
Marilyn  
The Fremont Collection

100  
Marilyn  
The Fremont Collection

100  
Marilyn  
The Fremont Collection



critic. As participant, she is an obsessed collector fascinated in the afterlife of the object/image, in what has already been mediated by memory; on the objects she collects, she performs a baptism of oblivion, consecrates it to the eternity of memory, and gives us an opportunity to share her passion for the weird, the incongruous. Yet at the same time she wittily critiques our society through *what* she collects and *how* she manipulates these objects/images; junk becomes grist (like in Dadaist Kurt Schwitter's work) for aesthetic beauty and social comment: a box of Ubangi cocktail mixers (labeled as "A Laugh Mixer") touches on the issue of racism, while a model's commercial smile found in an artifact becomes what it *essentially* is, the contorted grin of the victim in which the sexism and cheap eroticism of our society is foregrounded. Even Gillo Dorfles admits in his aforementioned book that, "some of



*Ubangi Cocktail Mixers, a Pop Alreadymade*

the most ghastly objects can be transformed into artistically positive elements, if not masterpieces, if used in a certain way . . . if they are de-mythified and used in a different context and atmosphere." (Today, Dorfles might point to both Japanese artist Takashi Murakami and Helene Smith-Romer as art production that mixes up high and low culture in instances of de-mythification and recontextualization). In "Aldous Huxley and Utopia," Marxist theorist Theodor Adorno captures something I sense lies behind Smith-Romer's

philosophy *vis-à-vis* the popular: "It is ridiculous to reproach chewing gum for diminishing the propensity of metaphysics, but it could probably be shown that Wrigley's profits and his Chicago palace have their roots in the social function of reconciling people to bad conditions and thus diverting them from criticism. It is not that chewing gum undermines metaphysics but that it *is* metaphysics . . ." It is this perceptive turn of commercial crud into a philosophy worth sharing with us that marks the ingeniousness of Helene's artistic production over these many years.



# Annette Cut-Out Paper Doll Book

\$ 45.00

For both Dada/Surrealism and Poststructuralism, meaning is understood as being produced through the juxtaposition of images, heteroclitic materials, and the clash of associations, rather than deriving from some ideal correspondence between sign and referent. Dadaist Hannah Höch and Surrealist André Breton were among a handful of aesthetic rebels in the 1920s to first explore the implications of such juxtapositions exemplified by the qualities of instability and spontaneity, where a dialectic between accident and intention reigned. And German theorist Walter Benjamin (using a collage-like literary strategy) expostulated on the phantasmagoric aspects of the material world under capitalism, examining the impact of mass reproduction and media, factors that increasingly turned our world into fragments. This, our social world, has been described in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) by French Situationist, Guy Debord thus: "Under the shimmering diversions of the spectacle, *banalization* dominates modern society the world over and at every point where the developed consumption of commodities has seemingly multiplied the roles and objects to choose from. . . . The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the *seemingly lived*; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specialization which are actually lived." Society has, indeed, become wholly absurd, surreal, or "hyperreal," is Jean Baudrillard's take on our postmodern condition, where objects and images become empty signs circulating with ever greater intensity. This process of disintegration and reintegration — noted earlier by Benjamin, reacted to by Dadaism and Surrealism, and carried out as a material process in Smith-Romer's artworks — has now become a defining characteristic of our age. Complexity and chaos have even become the hallmarks of cutting-edge science.

The question that Höch, Breton, and Benjamin ended up probing in their respective practices was: Could montage as the formal principle of the new machine/media technologies be itself used to reconstruct an experiential world so that it provided a coherence of vision necessary for aesthetic/activist/philosophical reflection? From the parts could one reconstitute a whole? Benjamin writes of his unfinished study of commercial society, his Arcades Project, that he wants to "discover the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, particular





moments." In other words, he saw in the kitsch of the nineteenth century the image of future tyranny. But this project of interpretation leads to the circularity of understanding known in philosophy as the "hermeneutic circle": one cannot understand the whole unless one understands the parts, and the parts cannot be understood without the whole. This back-and-forth from parts to whole, whole to parts, is exemplified in the production of the montage/collage.

Contemporary German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, suggests that at its most basic, the process of interpretation requires establishing distance, rendering the strange familiar, the familiar strange. It is in the space *between* the strange and the familiar that interpretation has its play. Such distance is established by moving objects/images into strange contexts that provoke new understandings. The *bricolaged* artworks of Smith-Romer — articulated as dis/integrated elements — take place in that ludic space between the strange and the familiar. Whereas Benjamin found his "dialectical images" in the Parisian arcades and wrote his observations in musty libraries, Smith-Romer finds hers in musty attics, estate sales, fleamarkets, toy stores like Uncle Fun's in Chicago, and various second-hand stores. She then frequently reproduces her collages, artist books, and enclosures in that ubiquitous commercial establishment — Kinko's. Just as Max Ernst photographed his collages, seeing the final photo as the finished work, not the original collage, Smith-Romer most often copies her cut-and-paste assemblages in order to give them a unified surface.

Smith-Romer's penchant for collecting, imposing an order by means of an arbitrary scheme, and her work in collage are analogous activities. In *The Cultures of Collecting* (1994) edited by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, Cardinal makes explicit in "Collecting and Collage-making: The Case of Kurt Schwitters": "To recognize that the components of a given collage have corporate impact is to acknowledge that they form a systematic ensemble. It follows that the collage is in fact a collection — by which I mean *a concerted gathering of selected items which manifest themselves as a pattern or set, thereby reconciling their divergent origins with a collective discourse.* [That aforementioned circularity between parts to whole.] . . . Both ultimately exist to be *shown*, and implicitly to be shown to impress."

Smith-Romer's presentation of her collages are various: laser-copier prints from both Kinko's and Lab One (some enlarged 400 per cent via "tiling" and carefully mounted on board and sprayed with a matte finish), conventional C-prints, and inkjet



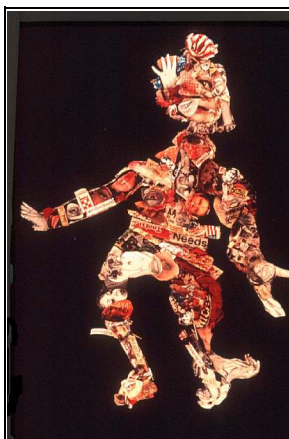
digital prints done at home on an Epson 800 inkjet printer after scanning from a C-print. Yet the differences between these processes is hard to distinguish in the final result. The composite parts to these collages (e.g., from her "Dis/Integration Series: Homage to 4 Women Dadaists: Hannah Höch, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Mina Loy, and Mary Reynolds," 1992 - 2005) range from the use of large fragments (*Woman*), to smaller fragments (*Tootsie Needs*), to extremely fine bits of diverse materials (*Me and Him*). Overall, the creative thrust of her artwork is from *many* to *one*, producing a novel entity that is other than the *many* that gave rise to it and which becomes part of a new *many* in turn productive of new novel entities. Here we have a rhythmic alternation as a process between *many* and *one*.



*Woman*



*Me and Him*



*Tootsie Needs*



*Detail of Him*

In relationship to the items in her collection of Pop Alreadymades, the latter two types of collage are akin to holograms in that in a small fragment of the collage

one spies something of the whole structure of stuff collected on her website. Or, reversing the process: going from her collection of gross objects to her “dis/integrated” collages one traces something akin to the recursive, self-same structure of fractals. We get what looks like copies of copies, cultural detritus *ad infinitum*.



I dueart4youmuseum Xmas Flyer (2001)

### III

In his famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1937), Benjamin traces the replacement of the original by the copy, the impact of modern technologies on art, art-making, and its consumption by a mass audience. A dialectician, he sees both the upside and downside of the impact of photography, photo-mechanical reproduction, and film. For instance, he notes the subversive potential of photography as a proletarian art form in terms of both its production (mass access, ease of use) and consumption (multiple, inexpensive

“original” prints for plural consumption). Had the Xerox copier been invented then, Benjamin would have certainly seen it as an accessible, fast, inexpensive purveyor of images analogous to that of the camera. How appropriate, then, that Smith-Romer, trained in photography, should graduate to using the color copier. “Kinko’s as an artist studio,” is how she succinctly puts it, meaning her mode of production debunks the aura of the traditional artist’s studio as a singular, unique place, as that special site of cultist concern (the proverbial studio visit, all those photographs shot in famous artists’ studios, the significant street address, etc.).

Appropriate, too, is Smith-Romer’s key vehicle of dissemination — besides her mailings — the World Wide Web. Her website, “The I Due Art 4 You Museum” ([www.idueart4youmuseum.com](http://www.idueart4youmuseum.com)), updates André Malraux’s notion of the Imaginary Museum into the digital age as a Virtual Museum of which one may become a member. Here are found scanned versions of her various collages (originals range from 4 x 5 to 20 x 24 inches) and her collection of for-sale oddments (ranging from

flat to dimensional). This section of collectibles (recalling those cabinets of curiosities, *Wunderkammern*, of old) includes her Pop Alreadymades, those items of popular culture Smith-Romer intuits as modern hieroglyphs, and a myriad of bizarre gifts. Among the latter are rubber stamps, which Helene sees as a pop version of elitist print-making; by stamp-of-hand, choice verbal tidbits become easily reiterated graffiti, sayings ranging from the political to the absurd. They are either quotations by notables (“ ‘To be an artist a woman must have the will of the devil’ - Alice Neel,” and “ ‘Once a specific crime has appeared for the first time, its reappearance is more likely than its initial emergence could ever have been’ - Hannah Arendt”) or witty blurbs written by the artist herself (“John Ashcroft gives me nightmares,” and “Barking is not allowed unless accompanied by an adult”). As if all this wasn’t enough, Smith-Romer provides web surfers with various narratives. Click on the NEW icon and you are offered video clips of Helene discussing Part I of her recent retrospective exhibitions (of which this is Part II) and reading one of her visual books, *Conversations with Elmer*. Click on “The Harry Family” and you encounter a rambling, apocryphal autobiographical account (illustrated with personal family documents and studio portraits culled from bins at antique stores, including photo of the family dog) by a Madame S. Harry and her daughter, Beatrice, concerning their well-heeled, far-traveled Harry family, who, we are told, had a fascinating involvement with early European avant-garde art and artists. “I traveled throughout Europe,” writes Madame S. Harry, “when I was quite young, only fifteen or sixteen, with my cousin and good friend Grace Kennedy. Since Grace was then a quite famous silent screen star, she introduced me to the artistic circle and life in Europe. We met an array of European avant-garde artists from Hugo Ball to Pablo Picasso to Hannah Höch.” And her daughter, Beatrice, comments: “In retrospect, I can trace my obsession with artists and collecting to those precious early years. We constantly wandered the world and breathed in our experience, our education was provided by partaking in life.” Here, of course, Smith-Romer, in veiled form, through these female “avatars,” traces her own artistic influences.

At first seeming ancillary to the collection on her site, narrating and collecting are actually related activities. Mieke Bal’s essay in *The Cultures of Collecting*, “Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting,” explains: “I will discuss collecting as a narrative; not as a process about which a narrative can be told, but as itself a narrative. . . . Collecting comes to mean collecting precisely when a series of

haphazard purchases or gifts suddenly becomes a meaningful sequence. That is the moment when a self-conscious narrator begins to 'tell' its [the collection's] story . . . ." Another recent narrative added to the site relates Smith-Romer's fortuitous discovery of another Hélène Smith (1861 - 1932), a famous Swiss medium who claimed (among other bizarre things) she'd been in contact with Martians and who became a famous case study for a prominent colleague of C. G. Jung's, Théodore Flournoy. Smith-Romer appropriates this medium as her own "namesake," dubbing her "The First Surrealist Woman" since a deck of playing cards drawn by the Surrealists during WWII depicts her. Victor Brauner imaged her as the trump card, the Queen of Spades.

Surfing "The I Due Art 4 You Museum" site, we are given a provocative juxtaposition of diverse particularities from which we attempt to wrestle a sense of the whole: fictions masked as histories, true histories that seem fictional, meticulously-crafted collages, "comicalities" such as a King Kong Silk Tie, an Avon Lady Decanter, a Campbell Soup dress inspired by Warhol, a Jesus Christ thermometer, an America: Love it or Leave Car Air Freshener, a Connect-the-Dots book featuring nude males, old group shots of soldiers, hand-colored photos of Mexican wrestlers, and postcard of a young and dorky-looking Bill and Hillary Clinton; but there are more disturbing items: a box for of Saddam Hussein Condoms as used by U.S. troops with sexist remarks aimed at Iraqi women, a souvenir bottle of Desert Storm Sand from Iraq, various wearable bejeweled pins saying "Jesus" and "Bitch, a postcard circa 1900 of Blacks Laboring in a Southern Cotton Field; and then there are those thought-provoking rubber stamps.

Mere "junk"? Or are these *artificialia* images of our social unconscious? Helene Smith-Romer would agree with Kurt Schwitters's concept of *Merz* that meaning does lurk in such cultural detritus. Just as Schwitters's famous Merzbau installation in his Hannover studio was an ongoing collection of everything that was of importance to him, a constructed autobiography exemplifying his belief in the equal rights of all materials, Smith-Romer's website strives to become, as she puts it, "a Merzbau-without-borders," a virtual version of that long-sought for entity called the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total, or complete, artwork). Moreover, just as it was under the pressure of the changing political situation in Germany that Schwitters's *Merzbau* became for him a freeing alternative to an increasingly restrictive social reality,

MEMBER

S  
!



HELENE SMITH

HELENE SMITH  
!

THE I DUE ART 4 YOU

!



Smith-Romer's all-encompassing website is a welcome detour from the depressing trajectory of post-9/11 society.

— The End —