Candy Jernigan’s Rejectamenta: Collage, Photography, and (Discarded) Body Memory

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**Bio:**

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Abstract:
Candy Jernigan was a collage/assemblage artist who was little known outside of the New York art scene of the 1980s. In her short lifetime, she created a body of work that was brimming with wit and maturity. In Blood of a Vagrant, she uses photography, text, and collage on paper to remember the death of a homeless man who died near her apartment complex. I argue that her work is distinguished by the way she refashioned memories out of her materials, and how she refused to let them perish in anonymity. By looking at semiotic theory and the historical similarities of collage and photography, we can come to appreciate how Blood of a Vagrant acts as a meditative act of remembrance for an expired body.
Introduction

A multi-media artist little known outside the New York art scene of the 1980s, Candy Jernigan (1952-1991) seemed to understand the habit of collecting quite well, even obsessively according to those who knew her. She used collage to provide “any and all physical ‘proof’ that [she] had been there…anything that would add information about a moment or a place, so that a viewer could make a new picture from the remnants.”¹ I contend that what distinguishes Jernigan’s work from the assemblage and collage techniques used by postmodern artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, whom she admired, was her preoccupation with the personhood of her materials, and the ways in which her process could refashion and “re-member” a human presence. Found at their moment of death and rejection, Jernigan transformed discarded body parts into musings on the fragility and mortality of the human body. The act of collage has often been discussed in terms of its oppositional quality, for example, in its subversive potential to dismantle elements of modernism. In this paper, I contend that Jernigan used collage, photography, and text to refashion new memories out of a panoply of discarded objects, memories that, without Jernigan’s process, would have been dismissed, and the people that they memorialized, gone as well.

Use of the Physical Human Body

Specific to my purpose is the body, with its ability to understand and be marked by a place and time. The body speaks eloquently about the places it has been, through scars, skin pigmentation, fractures, and the like. In this way, the body shows its collected memories, and is “subject to acts of registration, of inscription and contextualization.”² Marcel Proust tells us poetically that “the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls bearing resiliently, on tiny and almost impalpable drops of their essence, the immense edifice of memory.”³ Indeed, the relationship between olfaction and memory is an area of developing
scholarship, and much research has been produced by scholars at Harvard University and other prestigious institutions in an attempt to uncover the mysteries of this long-standing association.\textsuperscript{4} Wolfgang Ernst’s words, however, point more broadly to many kinds of objects that might be displayed in museums. Only peripherally does he mention how a body part, a bone, for example, may be used as part of an archive because it is an affected object; that is, it is a fragment of part of a body that experienced a history. However, the idea is inherently conflicted because we typically think of a museum as an objective archive. The body, on the other hand, and a decomposed one at that, is fraught with sentimentality; that is to say, how might we preserve and remember a physical being that has expired, yet avoid accusations of morbidity, distaste, and disrespect for what it once was? It is an issue that I contend was handled respectfully by Jernigan, whose process and content can be broken up in one particular work by its use of collage, photography, and text.

\textit{Blood of A Vagrant}

In \textit{Blood of Vagrant}, produced in 1986, (Figure 1), Jernigan uses the actual blood of a homeless man who was stabbed to death near her home in New York City. Composed as a two page spread, the left side of the work shows a fading blood sample from the anonymous man, a miniscule drip placed inside a time stamp. On the opposite side, Jernigan glued a Polaroid photograph of the street pavement looking down. Small arrows in the picture point to the location of both the ambulance and the man’s pool of blood, not much bigger or more noticeable than some of the other detritus on the street. A meticulous annotator, Jernigan writes underneath the blood smear:

\begin{quote}
An unknown man, apparently the victim of a knife attack, collapsed on the sidewalk where he lay motionless until an ambulance took him, in a greatly weakened and in fact
unconscious state, to a nearby hospital. The voluminous quantity of blood that he left behind gradually seeped into the sidewalk and was further diminished, two or three days later, by an early morning rain. [On the opposite page, it reads] Third Street at Second Avenue/Sunday, April 13, 1986/Approximately 10:30 p.m.  

What is striking about Blood of a Vagrant is its explicit reference to the erasure of a body and a notation that is all but invisible. A friend recounts that “there was nothing cynical about Candy’s transformation of a scene of horror into art.” It was not uncommon, however, for her process to elicit distaste in its early stages. For instance, the artist obtained a friend’s fetomaternal organ or placenta, which she collected for use in a future work, but it was lost when a squeamish family member threw it out of the shared family refrigerator. The negative attitudes that many present before a work has been completed are contrasted with the critical responses once finished; her completed works create a response of contemplation and warmth instead of repulsion. Part of her technique for overcoming the critical response to her work is found in her use of photography, which she uses quite ostentatiously in Blood of a Vagrant. Discussion of the topic of photographing scenes of horror is not uncommon among artists; for example, Susan Sontag warns of the evils that come with its excessive use: “images anesthetize….after repeated exposure to images, it also becomes less…making the horrible seem more ordinary—making it appear familiar, remote, inevitable.” Remembering the decayed body is indeed a difficult dilemma, and one related to the difficulty of using photographs to represent horror.

Further Examples and Explanations

Marianne Hirsch helps to elucidate Jernigan’s meaning in the Polaroid picture. Hirsch maintains that for photographs to keep their visual power, they must have a “sparse use.” She notes that Holocaust images, as treated by Art Spiegelman in his famous comic book adaption of
his father’s stories, are there to “...produce a more permeable and multiple text that may recast the problematics of Holocaust representation and definitively eradicate any clear-cut distinction between documentary and aesthetic.”9

She contends that visual/aesthetic and verbal/documentary images can be placed together to create a kind of dissonance that mediates loss, and, therefore, can be seen to act as a kind of buffer to Sontag’s warning of the overly aestheticized image. For Hirsch, this means that the text in Spiegelman’s comic book takes something away from what might be an ineffective representation of memories of the Holocaust because it hides blunt realities. A similar situation can be observed in Jernigan’s Blood of a Vagrant, in which, literally, a textual testimonial of the event at hand is coupled with both the photograph and the vagrant’s blood. This coupling helps to create a memory of the death as less anesthetized and more tender. Moreover, the photograph itself is quite sparse. Candidly taken, almost in complete disregard of aesthetics, it was captured by that quintessential spontaneous technology that revolutionized photographic imagery in the later part of the 20th century—the Polaroid. Its use in this work suggests that Jernigan was not interested in “beautifying” a death. Instead, a kind of sincerity was desired, and one that aggregates with her detailed notation.

I would also argue that the “multiple text” discussed in Hirsch’s analysis can be similarly applied to collage, with its many similarities to photography. By its very nature, collage is a medium of dissonance and multiplicity. It is a process that involves cutting, finding, dividing, and adding a number of discordant material sources. It came to art world prominence and the modern art movement with Picasso and Braque, and “would soon extend to and be taken up by the Surrealists, Dadaists, and Pop artists.”10 My interest in collage is in its copulation with photography, and how it might aid in understanding Jernigan’s collage-photographic pairing,
which might appear calculated or frigidly opportunistic if one were to put too much emphasis on the “ick-factor” of the blood.

Like photography, collage has varying degrees of indexicality, as it is, quite literally, a relic, a piece of a larger pie, in which “the original identity of the fragment or object and all of the history” is brought to bear.\textsuperscript{11} By indexicality, of course, I am largely alluding to Charles Sanders Peirce’s contributions to semiotics, whose writings did more for photographic theory than this paper can fully explore. Although his taxonomical list of sign types went into the thousands, for the most part it is popularly divided into the tripartite grouping of icon, index, and symbol.\textsuperscript{12} Indexical signs, the most important of the three for our purposes, have a cause and effect relationship, and refer or point to an event. Jernigan’s use of photography and collage are both indexical in that they point to the death of the homeless man in very frank terms. A physical presence, even, is brought to bear with his blood.

Collage also developed alongside photography’s history. Distilled to its beginnings, it was pushed by “gifted amateurs who devoted endless hours to collecting memorabilia. They share with the more fledgling medium of photography a fascination with capturing a real moment in time.”\textsuperscript{13} It was collage, moreover, that gave photography the fine art credentials it needed, in no small part to Man Ray, Hannah Hoch, and Oscar Rejlander, whose pioneering techniques in photomontage, double exposure, and combination printing did a lot to disrupt a medium immobilized by positivist, ethnographic, and anthropological documentation.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, semiotics, photography, and collage have a lot in common, and combined, are powerful tools for memory, as any avid scrapbook enthusiast can attest.

In a very poetic way, Jernigan can be seen to digest these historical origins and a fair amount of semiotic theory, and repurpose them for the memory of an individual she never knew.
As sophisticated forms of scrapbooks, if one would choose to call them this, Jernigan used “singularized discarded objects for the stories they held…. [I]n this way, her art was like photography as it is described by critic John Berger; photographs are there to remind us of what we forget.”¹⁵ Her objects combined photography, collage, and memory in a sentimentally powerful study of the people that might have touched them. They refused to remain anonymous. In *Blood of a Vagrant*, Jernigan lends her manner of remembering to a victim of urban neglect. Like her abundant diaries and travel journals, she transformed the death into a scene of meditation and remembrance.

An industrious process comes across in her gathered materials and it suggests a labor done out of kindness. One cannot help but think of Jernigan as a kind of militant collector who evaded police arrest and strange looks for a man of no connection to her. She did so, nevertheless, to remember what she affectionately referred to as the “rejectamenta” of life; those insignificant materials that we have discarded in the midst of our rapid modernity. This might be the closest explanation why collage, under Jernigan’s hands, came to the aid of remembering the body discarded. With a process of finding and making sense of the source, Jernigan acted as the archivist, committing to paper (or other surface) an organized, new vision of something that inherently wanted to defy preservation and, more importantly, remembrance.
1 Laurie Dolphin, ed. Evidence: The Art of Candy Jernigan. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999).
2 Wolfgang Ernst, “Archi(ve) Textures of Museology,” Museums and Memory, ed. Susan A. Crane (Stanford: University Press, 2000), 28.
3 Marcel Proust, The Remembrance of Things Past (New York: Random House, 1934).
4 William J. Cromie, “Researchers Sniff Out Secrets of Smell,” The Harvard University Gazette (1999 April 8) 13 July 2012 http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/1999/04.08/smell.html
5 Laurie Dolphin, Evidence. 58-59.
6 Laurie Dolphin, Evidence, 10.
7 Stokes Howell, “Introduction,” Evidence: the Art of Candy Jernigan, ed. Laurie Dolphin (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 10.
8 Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” On Photography (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 21-22.
9 Marianne Hirsch, “Mourning and Postmemory,” Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 25.
10 Craig Blanche, ed. “Introduction,” in Collage: Assembling Contemporary Art (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2008), 7.
11 Diane Waldman, “Introduction,” in Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.:1992), 11.
12 Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, “Semiotics, “Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 209-210.
13 Diane Waldman, 14-15.
14 Robert Hirsch, “A New Medium of Communication,” Seizing the Light: A Social History of Photography (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009) 98-105.
15 Peter Hall, “Souvenirs of Life,” Print 54, No. 3 (Summer 2000):88.
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Waldman, Diane. “Introduction.” Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object. 8-15. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.:1992.
Figure 1. Candy Jernigan. *Blood of a Vagrant*. 1986

Images courtesy of John Bigelow Taylor and the estate of the artist.