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Down Below: Powell's Pop Factory (Collages and Time Hacking)

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Dedicated to Chrissie Gibbs (1938-2018), my idea of a Master Love Peacock.

Synopsis

Anthony Powell lived for almost half a century in a beautiful, somewhat austere Regency country house in Somerset, The Chantry, set in a village of the same name, a few miles from Frome.

Down there, he led a very respectable life with wife Lady Violet, née Pakenham, and two sons aged about 5 and 11 when they moved in. Every room of the house corresponds to one's idea of an elegant heimlich home with family antiques and paraphernalia, the perfect environment for family life, and nice rooms in which to lock oneself up to write volumes of superb prose fiction and other "literary toenails".

Yet, paying a visit to "Tony and Violet" would inevitably lead to some gracious lunch or dinner with some irresistibly good (often French) wine, itself ending up with an unavoidable expedition to le lieu. The men's lavatory, also known as the Boiler Room because of the presence of a robust Britannia cauldron distributing what is known as central heating all around the House, first struck the visitor as some Dante's Inferno at the end of the corridor where an alarm clock discretely and mysteriously marked "p.o.u.s.s.i.n.t.s.u.o.r" hung on the left hand side of the wall.

Opening the door and entering the Boiler Room was nothing like entering a loo, however gothic, camp or luxurious it may be in other country houses, usually walled or paved with tiles and lined with wash basins, taps and the inevitable smart and slightly too predictable "right" image to shock or amuse the visitor. Down there, down below, for almost 20 years (from 1963 to the early 1980s), Anthony Powell covered every inch of the walls (pipes and ceiling included) with photographic reproductions (mostly taken from newspapers and magazines but not only, often showing faces of international icons, past and present, but not only), the arrangement of which he composed with a painter's eye and a musician's sense of rhythm.

The present study will explore the sources and aesthetic drives behind this immersive art form which resulted in such a gigantic collage or "exquisite corpse", turning the room into a mausoleum of sophisticated taste in arcane knowledge that curiously draws a bridge between modernist and pop sensibilities.

The great British novelist and writerly writer Anthony Powell (1905-2000) lived for almost half a century in a beautiful, somewhat austere Regency house, The Chantry, set in a village of the same name, a few miles from Frome, in Somerset. Down there, he led a very respectable life with wife Lady Violet and two sons aged about 5 and 11 when they moved in in the early fifties. Every single room of the house corresponds to one's idea of an elegant heimlich home with fine pictures, antiques and paraphernalia, in short the perfect environment for

family life and nice rooms in which to lock oneself up to produce volumes of superb prose fiction and other “literary toenails” as he called them.

Paying a visit to Tony and Violet would inevitably lead to some gracious lunch or dinner with some irresistibly good (sorry to say in these post-Brexit days, often French) wine, itself ending up with an unavoidable expedition to *le lieu*, down the basement corridor where an alarm-clock discretely and mysteriously marked “p.o.u.s.s.i.n.t.s.u.o.r” (clockwise) greeted you on the left hand-side of the wall. The Gents or Cloakroom at the far-right end of the corridor was also known as the Boiler Room because of the presence of a robust Britannia cauldron, an oil-fired boiler which succeeded in making the place warm but also in reducing the serious damp in the rest of the basement. The conditions were ideal for Anthony Powell to collage in all weathers, and he worked there especially in the afternoon, for a good twenty years (until the eighties), entirely absorbed by it. Do not let yourself be led astray, you are neither in Joseph Beuys’s workshop nor in Francis Bacon’s Reece Mews den, but in the basement room of one of the most respectable, self-disciplined and slightly withdrawn English Men of Letters of the twentieth century [Fig. 8.1].

The room first struck the visitor as if he had been hurled into some Dantesque Inferno: in Hilary Spurling’s words, “a monstrous collage of a size and surrealistic disturbance beyond anything he had so far attempted” [*Biography*, 386], Ferdinand Mount called it “a scrap of mural of almost Sistine proportions”,¹ an impression reinforced – I think – by the fact that the place was usually in semi-darkness, at least this is how I first discovered it [Fig. 8.3].

In his review of *The Kindly Ones* in *The Spectator* (29 June 1962), Evelyn Waugh spoke of an

old magic. As if you saw people come through the glass of a tank ... Friends and acquaintances approach or recede year by year ... Their presence has no particular significance. It is recorded as part of the permeating and inebriating atmosphere of the haphazard which is the essence of Mr Powell’s art.

Every word is important in this quotation, particularly the strange insistence on the pointlessness of the friends’ presence on the one hand and the haphazard, random factor at play on the other.

¹ Ferdinand Mount, *Cold Cream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008) 70.

Opening the door and entering the Boiler Room was nothing like entering a loo, however gothic, camp or luxurious it may be in other manor or country houses, with the inevitable smart and slightly conspicuous “right” image to shock or amuse the visitor. Down there, down below, Anthony Powell covered every inch of the walls (pipes and ceiling included) with photographic reproductions or prints (mostly taken from newspapers and magazines, but not only) often showing international icons, past and present, but not only; often focusing, but not always, on facial expressions, and the arrangement of which he composed with a painter’s eye and a musician’s sense of rhythm.

There were initially two important foundations to this tantalizing enterprise: the four large beautiful WWI French official posters (one by Guy Arnoux) and secondly, a fine gilt-edged mirror (now fronted by a sideboard) [Fig. 8.2] which was left by the previous owners of the house. The cubicle for the loo was already there when the family moved in in 1952. As the tide of images rose up the walls (but I personally have no idea what the actual progression on the walls was, did he go up and work on all four walls at the same time, or did he start with one particular wall and proceed clockwise or otherwise?²), some general visual effect was achieved which has remained quite the same to these days. Did he actually finish a general plan he initially had at the back of his mind? Or was it a work in progress never to be completed but with more and more images superimposed, inserted, replaced? So far, no one has been able to say for sure. Yet, when one does scrutinize the walls “in the flesh” so to speak, one quite naturally ends up wondering whether all this is really “surface” or something that has to be explored in depth, as a palimpsest? Be that what it may, nothing in Powell’s papers or intimates’ testimonies proves that the collage was some kind of mental or physical gymnastics to prepare oneself to be perfectly fit and focused for the current book in preparation: it clearly and progressively developed a life of its own.

² Did he for example use Ed Burra’s way of painting, as he described it with loving and accurate meticulousness fifty years later: “What was always an immensely complicated design would be begun in the bottom right-hand corner of a large square of paper; from that angle moving in a diagonal sweep upward and leftward across the surface of the sheet, until the whole was covered with an intricate pattern of background and figures” [*Messengers*, 156-7]. If necessary, he would add something like four or five additional sheets that were later pasted together.

The materials used include photographs or painted portraits of everybody with some intellectual stature (Proust, Shelley, Baudelaire, Goya, and Balzac, to name but a few who appear several times, but also musicians, poets, architects, gods from Antiquity, from all cultures and latitudes), not so many intimate friends, no relations (to my knowledge) except distant relatives belonging to three or four generations earlier, much Edwardian and art nouveau printed material, several paintings of historical scenes, a few exotic landscape postcards serving as props or backgrounds, and many pictures of Black people that could be best described as conspicuously colonial (there are also a few Asian types, especially female ones), and obviously what strikes the viewer (and the Powell *aficionado*) first: many images from colour magazines, those new arrivals of the sixties, such as printed ads, catalogue clippings, movie stars in magazines, fashion models from the seventies, popular signers, even *Mireille Mathieu, la petite fille d'Avignon ...*

So yes, indeed the random juxtaposition of images is clearly part of the fascination for the viewer and for the artist. For that reason, the whole project may be for the moment described as kitsch (because of the latent excessive combination of icons and emblems) although this is not exactly the kind of adjective that spontaneously springs to your mind when you try to describe the art or lifestyle of the great novelist; but it certainly never becomes camp (the sexual dimension is not overwhelmingly or even disquietly pervasive as is often the case with avant-garde collages).

Alison Lurie saw her friend's collage as a giant metaphor for his sequence of novel(s). This is a bit too obvious to me and maybe quite wrong as nothing illustrative in the collage buttresses this view, whatever novel you pick up. Others see the activity involved as a healthy outlet for the concentration and physical immobility imposed by writing.³

³ As developed again in the latest article to date on The Chantry, published in the January 2019 issue of *The World of Interiors* where one can read about the same old theory: "a metaphor for the turbulent, disruptive many-peopled panorama of the great novel cycle". What is far more interesting in this issue of the magazine is the title, "Powell's Pin-Ups; Famous Faces Fill Novelist's Somerset Villa", given by Ruth Guilding, the author of the piece who also considers the other side to the question "or a route into the writer's unconscious mind", and the fact that it is followed by another article on an entirely different subject, "Wonder Down Under".

My first impression – equally false of course – transported my imagination to some pop-art installation in Andy Warhol's Factory or in Francis Bacon's studio now recreated at the Hugh Lane in Dublin, but even though Powell was a subtle and sharp connoisseur in the visual arts of all ages, I have come to the conclusion, after reading again all his non-fiction, that he was in no way trying to give another form to his creativity, but that he was driven by a far more uncontrolled and less conscious form of addiction, some activity *de pure dépense* ("free spending") to use the famous phrase coined by Georges Bataille, that took him beyond himself and which speaks volumes when dealing with somebody who in other aspects of his private or social life was so self-conscious and self-controlled.

I am much more sensitive to the parallel with Nicolas Poussin's painting drawn by Hilary Spurling in her celebrated biography of the novelist, when she writes of

the gyratory principle that holds individual figures in place of the novel, imparting both control and freedom to characters revolving at uneven speeds in unpredictable patterns, massing together, careering apart, stumbling, colliding, occasionally spinning out of control.

[*Biography*, 388]

In remembrance of things past, the arms of the clock will be wound back. The entry for 8 November 1983 in Anthony Powell's *Journal* reads as follows:

About 3 pm there was knock on front door. A tall man with a greying beard, wearing tam-o'-shanter, looking in his late fifties, stood on the doorstep, holding a cardboard carton about the size for, say, half a dozen wine bottles. He said: "I don't want to push myself forward, but I find I live a comparatively short way away, and I admire you so much I want to give you a present". He then opened the carton, to reveal a clock, perhaps slightly smaller than that hanging in every schoolroom in the country (probably every other country), otherwise identical. He said: "I made it myself. I have made lots of them. I wondered what to do with it. Then it struck me I should give it to you. I don't want in the least to force myself on you". I took the clock, attempted thanks. He brushed all gratitude aside, leapt into his car, drove away. The clock, which has an inscription to me with the words "for a masterpiece", my name round its face, is going, but seems to have no place for winding or adjustment; nor does it appear possible to open at any point. Perhaps the donor has discovered perpetual motion. [J82-86, 88-89] [Fig. 8.4]

Yet, if one looks closely at the object (emblem?) that guards the temple, one clearly sees that the name of the novelist does not appear “round its face” (but two other patronyms do: Poussin, clockwise, and Proust, anti-clockwise) but in the inscription below: “For A. Powell in gratitude for an artistic masterpiece of 1983”. It is difficult to imagine that Powell failed to decipher the two names chosen by his admirer (hopefully, still kicking and alive in Timsbury?) to adorn the face of the clock, but it is clear that the author preferred to concentrate on the generous votary gift story-line and on the notion of infinitude. There could be no better introduction to the gigantic collage or “exquisite corpse” than placing the clock in a corridor that leads to a room turned into a mausoleum of sophisticated taste in arcane knowledge, curiously drawing thought-provoking bridges between ancient, modern (I did not say modernist!) and contemporary sensibilities in a non-linear hypertextual environment.

Probably, the best definition of collage comes from Max Ernst in *Beyond Painting* (1947):

Collage is the noble conquest of the irrational, the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them.⁴

In other words, cross-cutting, overlapping, interleaving techniques, the acceleration of mental associations for an express travel in time or across heterogeneous contexts, themes which are central to Powell’s fictional narratives but also æsthétic and artistic processes with which he was perfectly conversant. He did have a true and genuine eye for modern art and was no philistine in such artistic matters. He certainly was not an amateurish art critic either and was well aware of how collage was regarded in the wider art world. This became quite obvious to me when I translated *Under Review* and *Miscellaneous Verdicts* into French. To take but one example, his reviews of books on Gertrude Stein include a laudatory article on John Malcolm Brinnin’s biography *The Third Rose: Gertrude Stein and her World*, in which he shrewdly underlines the fact that “Stein was not, in one sense, a modern figure. She was the last stuttering of the Enlightenment”, or otherwise formidable pieces on James McNeill Whistler, Aubrey Beardsley, Augustus John, or Wyndham Lewis. He would usually go straight to the point in precise, no nonsense and extremely detailed analyses. A remarkable instance of such expertise can be appreciated

⁴ Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting and Other Writings* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), 17.

when he says that some of Wyndham Lewis's "Egyptian" style drawings seem to have had influence on Graham Sutherland's work [MV, 152].

Giving shape, order and texture to the anarchy and chaos that life, social lives, private lives, and even the mere biological and physiological process of being alive are made of is at the core of Powell's art of fiction and that it is why it combines so well, in a TS Eliot kind of way,⁵ with modernist issues in the visual arts, and most revealingly, with the art history of collages [Fig. 8.5].

But before dealing with the avant-garde, it should be noted that there is an Edwardian tradition of collages, notwithstanding the fact that the next generation to which Powell belonged took to scrapbooks and *romans-photos* with a vengeance; in Hilary Spurling's words, and I think this is a very clever way of putting it, it represented "an English nursery form of surrealism" for Bright Young Things before the war. It makes even more sense if we think of Brian Howard and his photo albums with some of the Mitford girls in Munich, Stephen Tennant's sketchbooks or Gerald Berners'. Anthony Powell's own photo albums of the late twenties or early thirties already show a certain taste for twisted visual narratives and role-playing. His first scrapbook, begun in 1928, was entitled *Dream Memories*, and the so-called Red Scrapbook, completed in the mid-fifties, with the Powell's Puppet Show, included the dwarfish puppeteer type in curled wig (Martin Powell, in fact, from the 1770s). Some of its pages are filled with interesting photographs, the Mr Can and Mr Cant series in particular, showing Constant Lambert and Anthony Powell in their respective roles; or at week-ends spent at Woodgate with Reitlinger and friends, with Tony, for instance, playing the role of Sir William Gordon-Cumming at what was remembered as the Tranby Croft Baccarat Scandal. With routines such as these (and which could be compared to the Beatniks' sessions near Columbia University, had a little bit of Benzedrine and heroin added to the cocktails, and where a certain William Burroughs was such a haunting figure for younger men playing the game), Tony could probably more easily have impersonated the sublimated roles he might have enjoyed living up to, had he let excess take him over. But as James Lees-Milne put it: "Some people find him

⁵ "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of utility and anarchy which is contemporary history" [TS Eliot in "Ulysses, Order and Myth", *The Dial*, LXXV (November 1923)].

sinister. He is not in the least so; but he is inscrutable behind his very affable manner. It is his form of defence”⁶

This penetrating hindsight is now echoed by many historical testimonies: Barbara Ker Seymer wrote to him: “Nobody could get the impression of you, because you don’t give anything to go on!” [*Biography*, 121] or Mary Manning in 1934: “Get down to it now and write something terrific, staggering, a knockout, anything you like, but disclose the bleeding heart shamelessly” [*Biography*, 187]. Michael Barber in his own biography, *Anthony Powell. A Life* (2005) also illustrates this shyness when he tentatively suggests Powell did not go in for travel writing because he lacked what Paul Fussell in *Abroad* has identified as the necessary “powerful strain of lawless eccentricity and flagrant individualism” as the hallmark of travel writers such as Robert Byron, Evelyn Waugh or Norman Douglas (or indeed Alan Price Jones in *Devoid of Shyness*). When compared to DH Lawrence, we realize that although equally talented if not more, Anthony Powell does not – indeed – go all the way.

Nevertheless, in the late roaring twenties, Anthony Powell was definitely a young man of his times, and he was also the living proof of what Louis Aragon in his *Writings on Modern Art* made so clear. After WWI, artists of all kinds were sensitive to the force of immediacy in visual discourses that went far beyond the traditional linear narratives of written stories. Visual poetry, dream sequences, the first cinematographic sequences were cutting the thread of a linear written tradition, and the example in Paris of the *Surrealistic Revolution* magazine was the exact antidote to the plain black and white typographic layout of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* for instance. Only images could lead to genuine revolutions, because of the force and the speed that this new syntax provided. In *A Wave of Dreams (Une vague de rêves, 1924)*, but also in his formidable *Henri Matisse: Roman* published much later (1971), Louis Aragon advocated the irresistible force of images that have a life of their own, subjectivity and idealism were *passé*; and when he described automatic writing productions or exquisite corpses, Aragon did so with “images shot dead like game in a hunting spree”⁷

⁶ James Lees-Milne, *Through wood and dale : diaries, 1975-1978* (London: John Murray, 1998), 66.

⁷ In the French original: “*images abattues dans une partie de chasse ... Nous éprouvions toute la force des images. Nous avons perdu le pouvoir de les manier. Nous étions devenus leur domaine, leur monture. Dans un lit au moment de dormir, dans la rue les yeux grands ouverts, avec tout l'appareil de la terreur, nous donnions la main aux fantômes*”.

In the wider perspective of modern communication, collage became an experimental challenge to painting and art in general, because of the heterotopia of incompatible *loci* offering a richer and more intense tension than idealized utopias, it represented – to use a typical surrealist image of the day – the “spark of an electric orb” that galvanized all avant-garde artists, futurists, suprematists, Dadaists and surrealists alike. The specificity of Powell’s collages is maybe that sense of artificiality combined with a multi-subjective excess of real pathos. His other earlier activities in collage were carried out under the influence or with the actual collaboration of Lady Violet. One cannot ignore the curious collection of snapshots taken of his future wife during the Pakenham Hall week, collected later together in an album with a final, most amusing and disquieting phrase that almost sounds like one of Marcel Duchamp’s best aphorisms “Violets grow like weeds”. The collage for the screen which still stands in the Boiler Room was done by Tony and Violet right after their marriage, but it entirely lacks the erratic and æsthetic tension that one feels when looking at the collaged walls. This screen or the trunk in Powell’s study on the first floor are not dissimilar to the kinds of Edwardian collage one finds in many country houses in England.

Of all avant-garde collages, I think Cubist ones have little to do with what is under scrutiny here. The main idea behind Cubist collages by let’s say Braque, Picasso or Gris was to fight against the flatness of painting, and to respond to the challenge that pre-manufactured trivial goods or artefacts offered because they were probably more engrossed with the real than paint, colour and composition. In short, Cubist collages are exploring the potentialities of the foreign body into art, but this is not something that seems to be of particular relevance in Powell’s Boiler Room. Nevertheless, the Cubist idea of movement and depth (as opposed to surface) is there because it plays on the interaction with the viewer’s perceptions in real time.

Dadaist or suprematist collages seem to be much closer to what Powell achieved with his collaged grotto, first and foremost because he did not draw or create any of the figures or images that appear in this room. This seems obvious but it is essential as the novelist had a certain ability as a draughtsman and he could have intervened with sketches of his own, or with added colours here or there. There is this Dadaist idea of making choices among found artefacts, not creating or producing original forms. The juxtaposition in itself is the creative gesture, hence the question of authorship and originality.

As important is the recourse to what is more precisely called photomontages (with pioneers such as Kurt Schwitters and Raoul Hausmann, and his *ABCD* for instance, pasted together in 1924 and now at the Pompidou Centre in Paris). The great semiotic challenge was no longer to trace back the forms that speak for the signs, but how to interpret them in one's life, in one's reality. It is true many of the Dadaist collages were also political acts meant to disrupt and debunk propaganda discourses. With suprematists such as Alexander Rodchenko or Kasimir Malevitch, it was a matter of clearing one's way of thinking of its idealistic "weaknesses"; among the futurists, the aim was to reach vertigo by speeding up mental associations and reasoning to a point when the intellect is no longer functional. With Max Ernst, the whole project had always seemed to hide signs under so many layers (especially after 1921, when his montages would pass almost unnoticed) that one is brought back to a foetus-like consciousness. That explains probably why Ernst is so much more of a poet than just a visual artist. His works are like fractal digressions (something not far from what Powell achieved too) and represent a descent into every stage in the representation, producing an image that takes you to an unlimited number of sub-images and every dose of that visual poetry brings about a new niche of reality. Interestingly enough, Max Ernst did the same voyage but in reverse, he ended up producing some of the first graphic novels such as *La Femme cent têtes*, *la Semaine de bonté*, or *La Petite fille qui voulait entrer au carmel* (1929-34). In Max Ernst's words: "*Si ce sont les plumes qui font le plumage, ce n'est pas la colle qui fait le collage*".

Surrealist collage objects (Victor Brauner's *Wolf Table*, Francis Picabia's bric-à-brac or Meret Oppenheim's *Fur Cup*, to take a few emblematic ones at random) are something quite different from what Anthony Powell has conjured up at The Chantry because they contain something which is more directly provocative. What is more fascinating is the link that might be established, as already alluded to, between Marcel Duchamp and Anthony Powell, all the more so as I have never found any direct reference to the great chess-player in any of Powell's articles or comments. Duchamp, although considered as a visual artist, fed on linguistic puns and literature in general. A spiritual heir to Raymond Roussel, Alfred Jarry and Isidore Ducasse, comte de Lautréamont, he was also playing at a very early date with portmanteaux words and the parallel with James Joyce here is inevitable. But as early as 1914, he also gave an impetus (and a terminal stop at the same time according to some critics) to art history by playing with his first ready-mades. His most emblematic sculpture, *Fountain* 1917, was a

ceramics urinal of the most ordinary kind, and because the Boiler Room is also a loo, myths maybe ought to go down the drain [Fig. 8.6]. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of articles have been written on this “object” or rather “nobject” but huge inconsistencies around its genesis have recently emerged. Indeed, Duchamp always claimed he bought the original thing at JL Mott’s in New York City but it is now an established fact that this shop did not sell that particular type of urinal, and there is this very weird letter dated 11 April 1917, which he sent two days after the piece was rejected by the organizing committee, to his sister in Paris (while she served as a nurse during the war). In it, he wrote that one of his female friends (and this is not Rose Sélavy, Duchamp’s transvestite *alter ego*, as “she” only came into this world around the year 1920!) had sent a urinal signed Richard Mutt. The fact it was rejected on grounds of indecency made Duchamp furious, hence his resignation and because of the scandal it created, the sculpture was always associated with his name as “author”.⁸ As a matter of fact, the female friend in question is most probably Elsa von Freytag Leringhoven [Fig. 8.7], nicknamed the Dada Baroness by her friends in New York City, who became adamant when the United States declared war on her native Germany. She vented her rage against the Society of Independent Artists who had always ignored her as an artist. The famous signature, Richard Mutt, actually appears as “R Mutt”, and in a handwriting that is much closer to hers than Duchamp’s. Moreover, when pronounced in German, R Mutt sounds like *Armut*, meaning financial destitution or intellectual misery. Like all her other artistic productions (the sculpture [Fig. 8.8] is entitled “Portrait of Marcel Duchamp”, 1915-1920, private collection), Elsa von Freytag’s urinal is a sardonic subversive piece of melancholy which I could well imagine standing in Tony Powell’s *Merzbau*.

Kurt Schwitters is another Dada artist with whom Powell the iconoclast could be associated. Schwitters, in comparison with other Dada artists, had a more

⁸ “*Les indépendants sont ouverts ici avec gros succès. Une de mes amies sous un pseudonyme masculin, Richard Mutt, avait envoyé une pissotière en porcelaine comme sculpture. Ce n’était pas du tout indécent, aucune raison pour la refuser. Le comité a décidé de refuser d’exposer cette chose. J’ai donné ma démission et c’est un potin qui aura sa valeur dans New York. J’avais envie de faire une exposition spéciale des refusés aux Indépendants. Mais ce serait un pléonasme! Et la pissotière aurait été ‘lonely’. à bientôt affect. Marcel*”. [Marcel Duchamp, *Affectionately Marcel, The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp* (Ghent: Ludion Press, 1999), 47]

realistic and materialistic standpoint. He recycled the remains, debris and junk resulting from the War in his collages,⁹ but his most intriguing *opus* remains the transformation between 1919 and 1933 of his house in Hanover into what he called himself the *Merzbau*. The neologism derives from *Bau* (a building) and *Mertz*, referring to anything that is discharged or dumped, some kind of junk or chaos but also maybe some possible intimation of the Id. Several original photographs, taken by the artist's son in the thirties, still exist and can be viewed on the Internet. They show details of the eight rooms he filled with collages that sometimes pierce through the ceiling into other rooms, with what he called himself caves and grottoes and where he would store objects and other collages by himself but also by other artist friends. He never stopped rebuilding this *Merzbau*, in Norway near Oslo where he fled from the Nazis, and in Great Britain in 1951 where he lived in exile, encouraged by Alfred Barr, then MoMA's director.¹⁰ Everything has been destroyed and today nothing remains, except for one of the walls that can still be seen in the Hatton Gallery at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and another replica of the original *Merzbau* is on display at the Sprengel Museum in Hanover. In a chronicle compiled in the early 1980s from earlier notes, Margaret Barr recounted:

At Kurt Schwitters's house a young man opens the door. He is the artist's son, a photographer of animals. Schwitters himself is already in Norway. Passing the cold, tiled kitchen where he has been eating bread and liverwurst, he shows the way to the famous *Merzbau*, installed in a back room by his father. It is like a cave; the stalactites and stalagmites of wood

⁹ *"Le collage oppose une béance, une distance à franchir ; il lézarde la belle apparence ordinairement lisse, annonce une poétique du décombre et de la deconstruction ... Je suis le bijoutier des matières déchues, le sertisseur des déchets sans employ."* [Louis Aragon, *Traité du style*]

¹⁰ Alfred H Barr, Jr the MoMA's founding director, never failed to acknowledge his debt to Katherine Dreier for her first-hand knowledge of many contemporary artists whose original works she saw in exhibitions at the Société Anonyme. Dreier recommended that Barr visit Schwitters in Hanover in 1935 to see his extraordinary *Merzbau*. Each summer, Barr and his wife Margaret Scolari Barr, would sail to Europe in search of loans for upcoming exhibitions. In 1935, they sought works to be included in "Cubism and Abstract Art," an ambitious survey of some four hundred works intended to represent the historical development of geometric abstraction as derived from Cubism. The Barrs sailed to Hamburg and began their "campaign," as Barr called these trips, with a visit to Schwitters. Unfortunately, Schwitters was away in Norway when they arrived, but they were greeted by the artist's seventeen-year old son, Ernst, who showed them the *Merzbau*.

junk and stray rubbish picked from the streets are joined together to fill the whole room from floor to ceiling and walls to walls. The effect is mesmerizing. How did the artist intend to display it? The final question was of particular concern.¹¹

Clearly the Barrs recognized the Merzbau to be a significant work on the spot, but its nature prevented its inclusion in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan.

These installations or immersive artistic spaces are very much discussed today on the contemporary scene, but Schwitters's is really emblematic, together with Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donné* (1946-66, today in Philadelphia Museum of Art), Fortunato Depero's *Edificio di stile rumorista trasformabile* (1915), and some of John Cage's installations. Bearing in mind Baroness Dada's play on words mentioned before, it is remarkable that the *Merzbau* was also often referred to by the artist Kurt Schwitters as *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*. Of course, Anthony Powell never went as far as exposing himself in really embarrassing situations, or allowing himself to "go all the way", letting the creative frenzy or madness show. There were no mistakes to be made. The most he would admit was that "All sex life sooner or later lands you in what, for want of a better word, I would call trouble".¹² But trouble never transpires on the walls of The Chantry, although he could have inserted a few *risqué* pictures, let's say dishevelled dirty grubby girls that he was not insensitive to¹³ or a few whips or bondage gadgets for instance. After all, those years were the Seventies. Yet, he did not.

Quite early on, Louis Aragon in *Le Paysan de Paris* insisted on the fact that "the motif was no longer essential in collages because art could no longer be opposed to the real". Almost one century later, the lesson is still vibrant and Bernard Guelton reminds his readers, in a volume of essays devoted to contemporary *Figures of Immersion*, that the real is to be understood as the opposite of the fictional, and not that of the virtual. This is exactly what Powell's collage room

¹¹ Margaret Scolari Barr, "Our Campaigns: Alfred H Barr and The Museum of Modern Art, a Biographical Chronicle of the Years 1930-1944", *The New Criterion*, special issue (Summer 1987), 39-43.

¹² *Punch*, 27 April 1955.

¹³ Lees-Milne wondered how young men could possibly fancy today's grubby girls. Tony said he understood. He had always been attracted by girls who looked as if they had slept under a bush for a week. [Barber, 89]

or *Merzbau* is: a virtual juxtaposition of hardly contingent historical realities, and that is maybe the key to understand the kind of magic that operates within those walls: by being entirely immersed the viewer cannot control or direct his attention in one single direction, driven by the sheer rationality of his will or focus, s/he acts and perceives at the same time and it is the visual, physical iconoclastic environment that imposes itself on the subject-onlooker. His/her attention becomes fragmented and diffused (attaining sometimes a kind of musement stage in the Peircian sense) because it hooks on several stimuli simultaneously, exactly as everyone does in their daily responses to the “real reality” if one will excuse this apparent tautology. As Aragon said, “We can no longer restrict ourselves to painting as such. Art takes place today in a world where so many things are going on”.¹⁴ And this is even truer today with permanent real-time connection via our mobiles and other portable devices that even adds further – for better or worse – to the cacophony and to the deluge of information and data signals in our everyday existence.¹⁵

This kind of immersive art does reconnect Man to the real, or *if one will* to the Naked Lunch at the end of the fork! This is the Real: waking thoughts, memories, bits and scraps of conversations that you hear from a distance or that blare at you as you try to talk on the phone, while some music is being played somewhere but still other acoustic sources make you prick your ears while your eyes are caught by some attractive face on the other side of the road and your own brain is hyperactively thinking about how to find the nearest tube station, *ad libitum*. Human beings are indeed multi-task sensual machines moving around in sensual spheres (Waugh’s fish tank metaphor?) which are on top of it all malleable, porous and quite formless, sometimes. The overall impression is that of being in a cave, or in a bubble, with millions of eyes watching you watching them. And when they are not watching you, they are staring at somebody or something intensely. Indeed facial expressions are strong and

¹⁴ The French original reads: “On ne peut pas ne parler que peinture. La peinture se fait aujourd’hui dans un monde où il se passe tant de choses”. [Louis Aragon, *Les Écrits d’Aragon sur l’Art* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981), 173]

¹⁵ “Mais l’immersion en situation réelle peut aussi être comprise en opposition à une conscience ordinaire dans laquelle l’attention du sujet est diffuse, fragmentée ou attentive à plusieurs objets à la fois”. Bernard Guelton in *Figures de l’immersion* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014) 11.

brutal, turning the viewer into a pointless witness, maybe the dwarfish puppeteer alter ego, or the rakish Napoleonic guardsman [*Biography*, 49], Powell's first published drawing in the *Eton Candle*, which might be considered as his first collage, since he drew incongruous flowers and vegetables in the left-hand bottom corner and inserted an eighteenth-century sketch of two lovers in the right-hand corner.

The installation can also be appreciated in philosophical terms. In Peter Sloterdijk's trilogy *Bubbles, Spheres, and Foam*, the concept of inspiration (not the more or less divine source of imagination, but the actual process of breathing in and out) is used to introduce the philosopher's ambitious goal. The author then uses the trope of spheres and bubbles to reconsider what makes us both human and humane beings. Spheres, bubbles are like glass, happiness, mental and physical spaces that hold things together while being extremely fragile and prone to break into indistinct bits and pieces. In Chapter two ("Between Faces") of the first volume entitled *Bubbles*, the author talks of the intimate interfacial sphere which makes it possible for human beings to develop care for others or for otherness. He uses the term protraction and I think this can also be applied to The Chantry's basement room. Sloterdijk resorts to the Greek concept of *prosopon*, according to which a face is first and foremost what makes others' vision palpable, hence a lesson in humanity by dissolving the creator/artist's ego into something that speaks to everyone, intellectually prepared or not. I think this is most relevant to the delightfully monstrous cave at The Chantry.

In the incipit of the book actually entitled *Collages* (and published in 1965 by Hermann), Aragon did not believe at all in a clear distinction between the written word (made of letters) and the image (as the sublimated or refined representation of something seen or imagined). The Egyptians and the Aztecs for instance were using signs which were not far from the syntax of myths, giving birth to malleable mental spaces of mute *graphie* that take you back to such an infant stage of art history, and that is precisely something that collages achieve. Apparently as early as 1914, a work of art should no longer stand as a sublimated object, always prone to veer towards the decorative. The collage technique also helps because of the "drama of the frame", as Aragon brilliantly discussed as early as 1918. By framing an image, you lift it up to the level of something beyond reality; you tend to turn it into something sacred. On the contrary, Dada and later Pop-art artists had to build a world that was imaginary for sure, but **still** co-existing with the real world. In fact, the three components

of such immersive art pieces must clearly be apprehended and made conspicuous by the viewer: the real, the virtual and a small dose of inevitable fiction. On this topic, in an article advocating “non-transparent immersion” Bruno Trentini recommends that while hyperrealism is obviously to be avoided, the piece must artificially look like something real by inserting elements that belong to multiple alternative realities. In fact, the seams MUST show! In Powell’s case, those realities are alternative **historical** realities as he was not prepared either to use psychedelic drugs or let his unreason or his most private daemons take the upper hand, as is the case for instance with artists such as Yayoi Kuzama or Joseph Cornell.

Trentini¹⁶ suggestively insists on the fact that the experience of a successful immersion must be that of contingency, and this is not to be understood in metaphysical terms, but as praxis, even if praxis can sometimes take a poetical turn as I think it does in The Chantry. The process appeals to all the senses but it is also a haptic phenomenon, it “talks” to your body (the famous notion of protraction Sloterdijk focuses on in *Bubbles*, as those faces go towards you or towards something, your body wants to be “with it”, even if in Powell’s case his installation is not ergotic in the least (*ie.* no action of the viewer changes the work itself, which is something that contemporary immersive installations play a lot on), the viewer’s positioning in the room is also crucial.

If the juxtaposition and the kaleidoscope effect are left aside for a moment, science confirms the presence of a double body in everyone’s brains, a virtual body that may be perceived in three different manners: autoscopy (one “sees” oneself or “another” self as if in a mirror), heautoscopy (one sees oneself as if standing opposite), and what is usually regrouped under the term of Out of the Body Experiments, OBEs (the most common version being hovering over oneself).¹⁷ With today’s Virtual Reality technology, it has become rather banal

¹⁶ “L’expérience de l’immersion est une expérience de la contingence” 37 il ne s’agit pas de ressembler au monde habituel “Il ne doit lui ressembler que dans sa vraisemblance au sens où si on mettait de côté tout ce qui est, mais qui aurait pu ne pas être – autrement dit ce qui est contingent – ce monde aurait été possible. Expérimenter la contingence n’est pas qu’une expérience métaphysique, elle en est aussi une pratique”. [B Trentini, “Pour une immersion non transparente”, in B Guelcon (ed), *Les figures de l’immersion* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 25-38]

¹⁷ Alain Berthoz “La notion d’immersion dans les relations du cerveau, du corps et de l’espace”, Guerton, *Figures de l’Immersion*, 111-120.

to see the projections of oneself (some would say one's extensions) thanks to avatars. But in Anthony Powell's *Zeit Merzbau* (a time capsule, as a matter fact), I don't think anybody would see avatars or multiple impersonators of an individual called Anthony Powell, but rather thanks to the potential hypertexts provided, the viewers rather tend to see themselves in some of the figures pasted on the wall, or at least they take back the routes of mental associations that these icons have conjured up in them in the past.

In *The Art of Immersion*, Frank Rose reminds his readers how anthropologically speaking, story-telling is central to human experience in any culture.

It involves a symbiotic exchange between teller and listener – an exchange we learn to negotiate in infancy. Just as the brain detects patterns in the visual forms of nature – a face, a figure, a flower – and in sound, so too it detects patterns in information. Stories are recognizable patterns, and in those patterns we find meaning. We use stories to make sense of our world and to share that understanding with others. They are the signal within the noise ...

But linear story telling has its limits, and clearly, THE IDEA OF BRANCHING nonlinear narrative has lodged itself in our brains. And the author rightly wonders: "But has our consciousness been warped by hypertexts? Or is hypertext a product of our consciousness – a natural representation of the way we think? That's the question that ultimately came up when I asked David Lynch why so many of his films employ nonlinear story lines. "It's the nature of life now," Lynch replied. "In one day we are in Iraq, in Pakistan, in New York City, in a car. Memories are coming in and birds are flying".¹⁸

In fact, it is contingency and instability that lead to the hypertext. Just as Ted Nelson invented Xanadu, the ultimate hypertext information system, in order to keep track of the frantic multiplication of associations his brain produced and left him lost and confused, Powell is using portraits and images to conjure up the divergent paths of his thinking and writing. Other early hummingbird minds like his include William Burroughs, William Gibson and contemporary young artists such as the members of the Dumb Type collective (Ryoji Ikeda, Teiji Furuhashi, Toru Yamanaka, Toru Koyamada and Yhkihiro Hozumi) who wander in the literally unfathomable matrix of available data. Their videos and installation look and sound like a stroll into a very weird and yet very real

¹⁸ Frank Rose, *The Art of Immersion*, (New York: Norton, 2011), 12 & 65.

digital garden. In the quotation above, Frank Rose mentions noise, not as an acoustic phenomenon but rather as a semiotic trope which is at the core of this study in the art of immersion. The imprints of the music of the dance are turning into noise in The Chantry Time Capsule.

One should not forget that Powell started working on this collage after a good dozen of years devoted to gardening, trimming and shaping what has become the park around the House. He was particularly busy with the grottoes he wanted to restore to magnificent picturesqueness and even created one additional grotto that was not there in the first place. So there must be a link between these two activities: collages and gardening, at least if the energy and the determination he put in the two projects are taken into consideration, but also because so many common denominators exist between these two human activities and crafts, both requiring a lot of thinking and dreaming before action, and some kind of surrender to the power of the hand once one starts it going. After all, if the modern garden became not only a reservoir of emotions, but also now a new form of encyclopaedia, it became a virtual space where mind and body could err or wander, sometimes immersing itself into it. In 1754, Montesquieu, whom Powell appreciated so much, described the *je ne sais quoi* abode in his *Essai sur le goût*. Disorder, chaos, transience, the passing of time are what makes the place unique and so meaningful because this is again a place of contingency between art and nature and one is absorbed in their intersections. Later Diderot and Rousseau both agreed on the fact that individuals do not have this visual predominance over the landscape, they too are invaded and looked upon by nature. This explains why *vedute* were to become so popular. *Empfindigkeit* does not only affect music at that time, landscapes are no longer represented as seen by an external observer, but several realities of the same environment seen from slightly different perspectives as the painter moves on. Likewise, Powell's gardener's spirit infuses his art of fiction.

Instead of a conclusion, a few lines from a poem by Andrew Marvell may galvanize our human capacities to "be with", maybe a poetic experience of Heidegger's *Dasein*. In our present milieu of image superabundance and data proliferation, what I have called Tony Powell's *Zeit Mertzbau*, his time capsule, can problematize culture in an unexpected contemporary way and hence enliven us to the privacy, the intimacy, of the human condition in lieu of the fabulously constructed social spectacle that engulfs and supposedly controls every individual. My view is that deep, deep down and under many disguises and efforts to remain self-contained and withdrawn, Powell like Ulrich the Man

without qualities was in fact the embodiment of some ontological anarchy, poised between pure benevolent observation and absolute melancholy.

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness;
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find,
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.

... ..

Such was that happy garden-state,
While man there walk'd without a mate;
After a place so pure and sweet,
What other help could yet be meet!
But 'twas beyond a mortal's share
To wander solitary there:
Two paradises 'twere in one
To live in paradise alone.

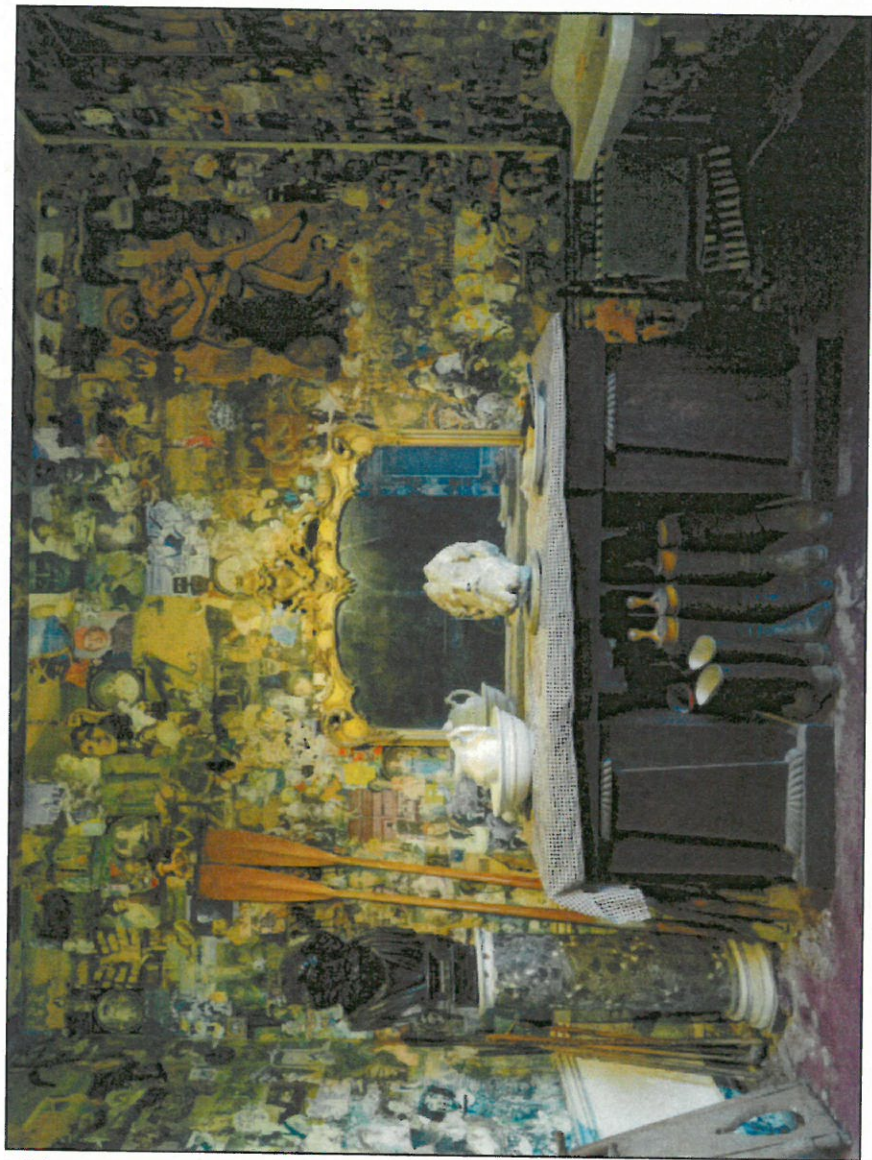
... ..

How well the skillful gard'ner drew
Of flow'rs and herbs this dial new,
Where from above the milder sun
Does through a fragrant zodiac run;
And as it works, th' industrious bee
Computes its time as well as we.¹⁹

¹⁹ From Andrew Marvell, *The Garden* (1650-52).

8.2 Boiler Room collage: the gilt mirror behind a sideboard.

Image: Hugh Gilbert.



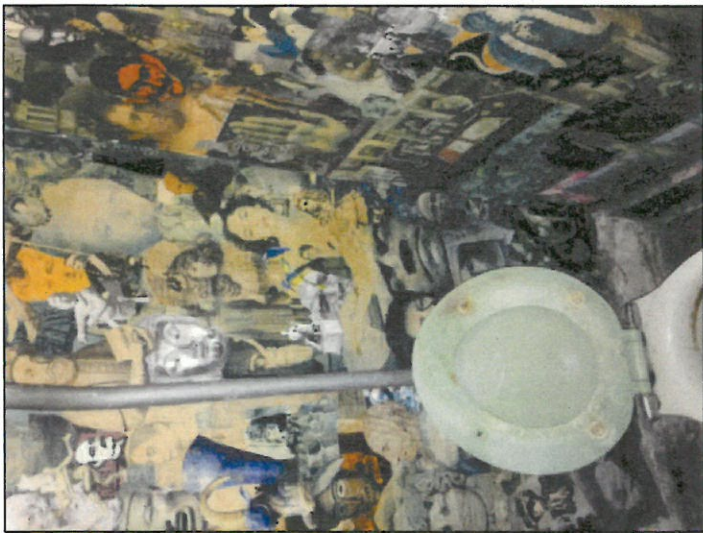
8.3 Prof. Girard investigates the collages.



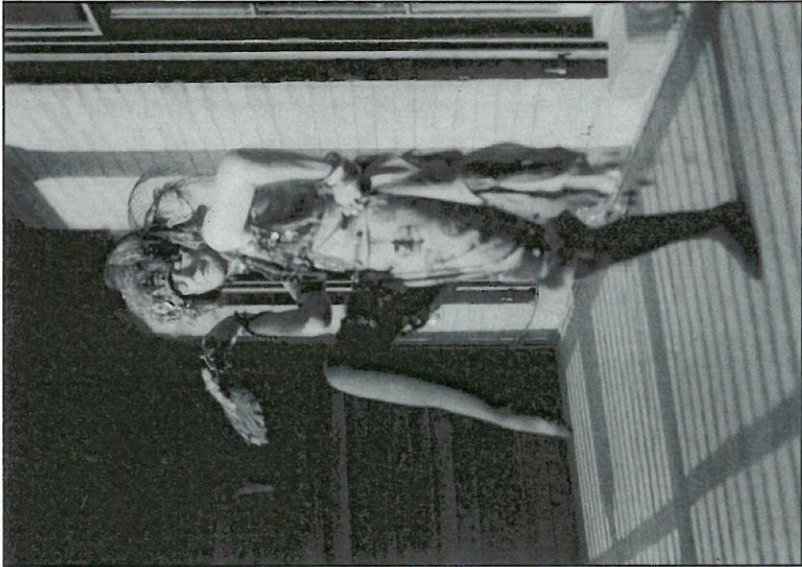
8.4 The clock presented to Anthony Powell by a well-wisher.



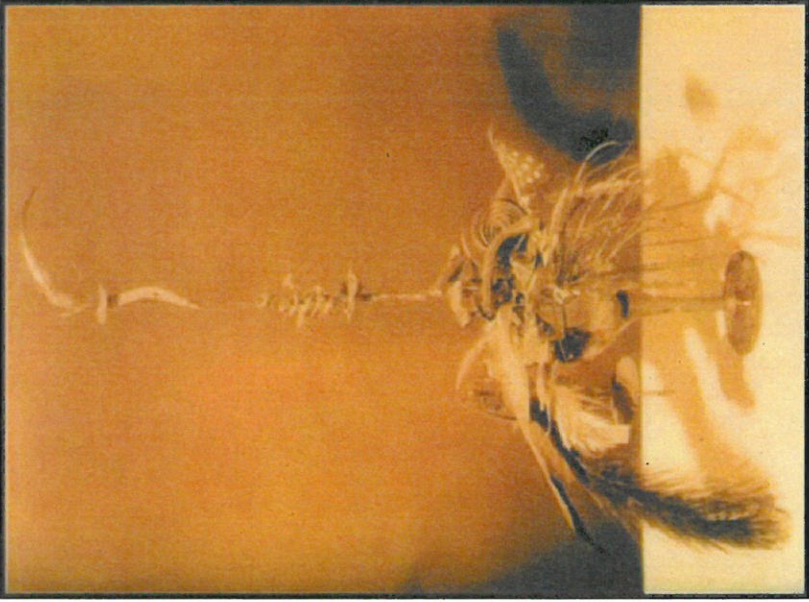
8.5 Another view of the collages, with the (now replaced) boiler.
Image: Hugh Gilbert.



8.6 Even the toilet cubicle is covered in collage.



8.7 Elsa von Freytag Leringhoven, 1900.
George Grantham Bain Collection.
Image: Wikimedia Commons.



8.8 Elsa von Freytag Leringhoven sculpture *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*.