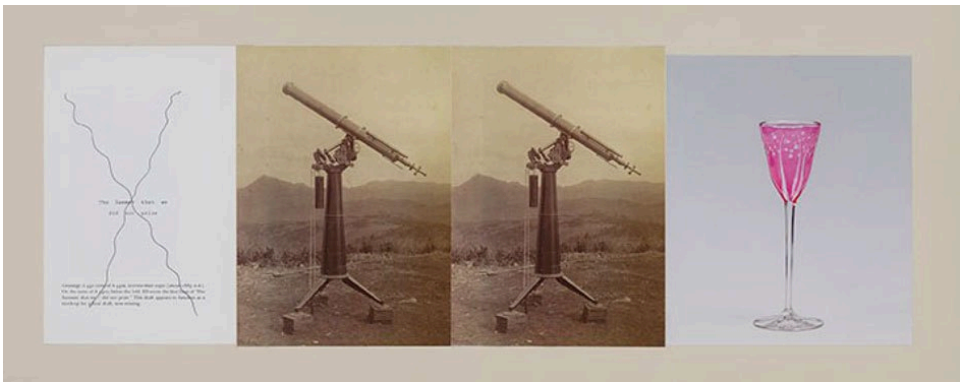
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Janet Malcolm's Cut-Up Books

Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Both Janet Malcolm's writing and her collages are preoccupied with what happens on the margins of knowing, or in its wake.

January 27, 2014



The summer that we did not prize, 2013, Paper collage, 9 x 26 inches

Janet Malcolm's fifth solo exhibition at Lori Bookstein Fine Art is called "The Emily Dickinson Series," a collection of collages assembled with construction paper, glassine, charts, photographs, and shards of poems. The collages were inspired by Marta Werner's book, *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing*, which pairs images of Dickinson's late scraps of paper—thought to be drafts of love letters—with typewritten transcripts on the facing page. In a correspondence printed in *Granta*, Malcolm wrote Werner to ask if she might buy a copy of the out-of-print book; Werner responded that she seemed to have only one copy left herself, but that she would be happy to send it along as a gift. Malcolm, staggered by Werner's generosity, accepted and sent

her a copy of her own book of art photographs of burdock leaves, *Burdock*, as thanks.

Malcolm and Werner were both surprised by how quickly their conversation became personal—the exchange is absorbing, and, as they quickly agree, uncanny. After receiving Werner's blessing to use her book for collage, Malcolm soon sent her photographs of the first of the works, in which she had set Werner's typescripts alongside, among other things, pages from an astronomical book, *The Transit of Venus, 1631 to the Present*. Yet unbeknownst to Malcolm, one of the scientists whose somber portrait she had included in her collages—an astronomer called David Peck Todd—was married to the woman responsible for the posthumous publication of Dickinson's poems, Mabel Loomis Todd. Mabel Todd, for her part, had carried on an affair with Austin Dickinson, the poet's brother. Werner thought Malcolm must have known this. Malcolm ends the correspondence with the question, "But what are we to make of my NOT knowing?"

Both Malcolm's writing and her collages are preoccupied with what happens on the margins of knowing, or in its wake. Malcolm has always had great confidence in what she's come to know—she writes with such a sure hand—yet at the same time she is well aware of the limits of what we might ever feel assured in saying. In "A House of One's Own," her essay on Bloomsbury, she writes that "we have to face the problem that every biographer faces and none can solve; namely that he is standing in quicksand as he writes. There is no floor under his enterprise, no basis for moral certainty." The abyss is there and she nods at it and goes about her business.

It seems right, then, that Malcolm would be drawn to Werner's attempt to translate the obscurity and idiosyncrasy of Dickinson's hand into the ostensibly neutral forms of an old machine. She has, in turn, set Werner's typescripts—with their detailed, academic captions—against imagery related to the opposite process: examples of how crystalline certainty (in this case, the scientific kind) decays with the passage of time into something altogether messier.

Many of the images are overlaid with folded and torn strips of yellowing glassine, the thin transparent paper used as a preservative cover in archives; here it preserves nothing, has itself become archival. Other collages feature matters of

accounting—a mileage chart or a dry-cleaning ticket—now freed of the burden of use. After enough time, these collages imply, even something as dry as an actuarial table takes on the air of the recondite. This is especially true of superseded science. It once seemed so clinical, so controlled, and now appears so representative of the fashions of an era. A recurring image is a telescopic photo of the 1874 Transit of Venus: tiny black circles on large white ones, the beautiful form of an obsolete technology.

Malcolm's collages, with their tears and seams and allusive overlaps, seem almost explicitly designed as companion pieces to the sure-handedness of her writing. They are, after all, made of cut-up books.

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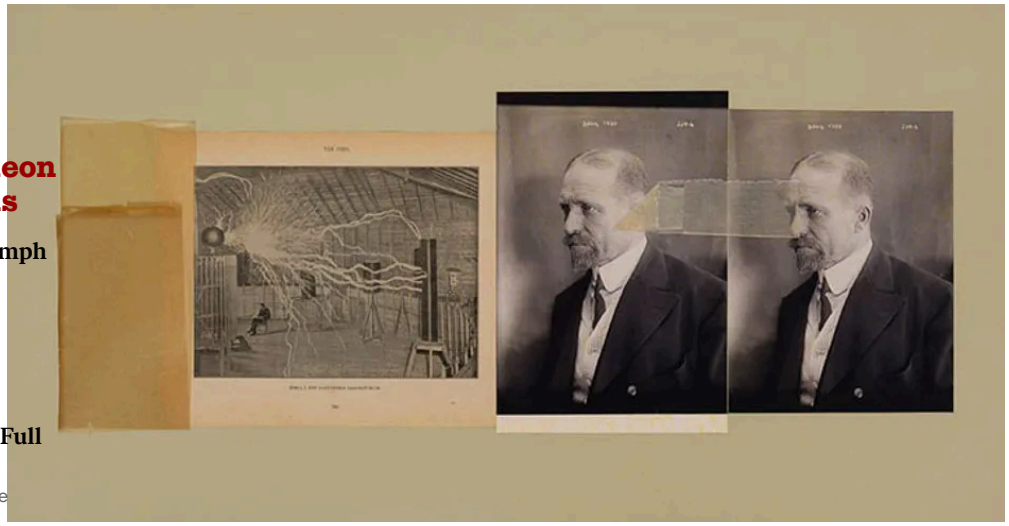
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Language, 2013, Paper collage, 12 x 18 inches



Improbable, 2013, Paper Collage, 18 x 26 inches



David Todd, 2013, Paper collage, 8 1/2 x 22 inches

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January 8, 2015 issue

Dragooned into Solidarity
July 10, 2014 issue

Philip Roth: 'The Full Arc'?
December 19, 2013 issue



Common Sense, 2013, Paper Collage, 9 x 18 3/4 inches

"Janet Malcolm: The Emily Dickinson Series" is on view at Lori Bookstein Fine Art through February 8.

Submit a letter:

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Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is the author of *A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful*. He was the coeditor, with Arnold Eisen, of Philip Rieff's *Sacred Order/Social Order III*. (January 2015)

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Janet Malcolm, with Hilton Als

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November 8, 2013

Sanford Schwartz

Luc Tuymans: A Retrospective

In "Gray Magic," from the February 11 issue of The New York Review, *Sanford Schwartz writes about the Luc Tuymans retrospective, which will be on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from February 6 to May 2. (It originated at the Wexner Center for the Arts in...*

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In "The Best Faces of the Enlightenment," from the April 8 issue of The New York Review, Willibald Sauerländer writes about a new exhibition of the work of Jean-Antoine Houdon, whom he calls "the last and probably greatest French sculptor of the eighteenth century." In his works—a selection of which...

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January 8, 2010

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February 16, 2010

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