

# CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

and the

# POLITICS of PHOTOMONTAGE

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Since its beginnings, there have been strands of photographic practice that resist the medium's dominant function as a factual record by manipulating and combining photographs to make artistic and political statements. Some of these practices hide their seams and appear as documents of non-existing realities; sometimes with the hope of fooling their viewers (fakes) and sometimes to offer convincing visions of possible worlds. A different strand of this practice emphasizes the resulting image's constructed-ness by highlighting the seams where the photographs are put together. During the First World War, Dada artists developed this set of practices into photomontage and gave it an explicitly political slant. In the Weimar period, artists, including Hanna Hoch and John Heartfield, refined photomontage as an artistic form with political impact. In our current era of hyper-realistic CGI spectacles and deepfakes, manipulated photographs are commonplace and more convincing than ever before. In this context, photomontage's insistence on showing the seams has increased possibilities to be politically disruptive.

In its updated use of the aesthetics and techniques of photomontage, the artwork in Sebastien Miller's *Civil Disobedience* is political both in its content and its construction. The importance of this dual level of politicization to the work can be clearly seen in *The Flood* (2019). The piece is presented as a GIF in the exhibition and shows a scene of flying saucers hovering over a mountain landscape. The saucers are tractor-beaming up pairs of threatened and endangered species. Scattered around the image are bald eagles, rhinos, mountain gorillas, pandas, elephants, polar bears, and humpback whales. The only humans in the image are protestors in tiny vignettes at the bottom. The title frames this as an updated Noah's ark; it transforms the alien interventions from abductions to rescues. Yet, for an image titled *The Flood*, there is a curious lack of water; all we see is fire. In addition to a bar of flames across the lower edge, the image includes scenes of burning buildings and a gorilla in a burning ring of fire.

While the narrative of aliens rescuing animals threatened by the Climate Emergency is relatively straightforward, the space of the image is complex. The multiple layers of mountains that are combined in the image give a sense of deep space to the top and middle of the scene; the band of flames and interposed political scenes create a very shallow sense of space at the work's bottom. In other words, the scene initially appears coherent but the closer we look at it the more it resists resolving into a coherent space. Reading across the exhibition and placing the image in the context of *X's* (2016) depiction of flying saucers visiting the pyramids, locates the flying saucers as an Afro-futurist version of Noah's ark.

Noah collected animals to save them from God's wrath, releasing them from the Ark when the waters subsided. In this version, the Climate Emergency's production of environmental catastrophe necessitates a solution in which the animals need to Get Out of the Earth. This trip to space is not Elon Musk's solution of the rich decamping to Mars but instead depicts an outside force coming to save other species with no clear sense of when or if they'll be back. The inclusion of the protest march, along with other scenes, at the base of the image hints at deeper roots to the depicted catastrophe; one might wonder are they additional victims? Or the cause of the fire? The difficulty of resolving the elements into a single narrative is supported by the fragmentary structure of the image's construction; disparate things have been put together to form an image that tries to make sense of their relationships. The seams and the gaps remind us that what we are seeing

required work to put together. Like the animals on their way to the spaceships, the image hovers between readings. The image offers a way out but doesn't tell us exactly where they or we might be going.

Perhaps seeing where it's possible to go requires seeing what has been. Where *The Flood* invites viewers to see into the image (and then defers that invitation), *Bohemian Grove* (2021) is an artwork that looks back (in both senses of the word). The image literally looks back at us through the multiple gazes embedded in its collected figures. The majority of the figures look out of the image at the viewer. Some look straight on, some with side eye, some are glaring, some imploring, some are coming on, some are impassive, and some sneering. The multiple gazes unsettle the image's visual order and create a complex and unresolvable, or unstable, articulation of pictorial space. *Bohemian Grove* also looks back through the complex positions in social, cultural, and political history the figures reference. The histories, legacies, and mythologies of the assembled Black men bring with them multi-faceted, complicated, and sometimes-contradictory articulations of achievement and masculinity. Through its careful arrangement of these important figures, *Bohemian Grove* uses photomontage to create a political space that is as much social and temporal (historical) as it is visual.

At first glance, the image appears to belong to a recognizable genre: the square format, collage of important figures, and superimposed title suggests that this is an album cover and a riff on Sgt Pepper's. In that reading, the figures would be brought together to honor the artistic genealogy of Miller and celebrate his influences and the cue to reading the image would be deciphering the figures' identities. Above the figures, invoking the space of the grove, is a dark forest and a light sky. The title is superimposed at the top left in arched red letters that follow the tree line. The dense forest both creates a sense of deep recession (in its fading out) and flat space (in its indiscernibility). The bottom of the image is framed by overlapping, gold-toned, fire logs. The logs could read as a fence around the grove, the edge of a stage, or as a sign that this is glamping. The artist writes, "Them being gold is symbolic of wealth, luxury and strength."

Their rough arrangement in rows gives the figures the appearance of an audience in an amphitheater (making us the spectacle). The left side has a greater sense of depth and clearer rows. In the middle of the back row, the spatial recession



built into the portrait of the Wu Tang Clan anchors the image; the lenticular perspective of the source imagery fights against photomontage's assertion of flatness; The right side is flatter and contains more black and white imagery. The size disparities among the figures suggest a secondary spatial logic similar to medieval paintings in which scale relates to importance. The relative size of the figures speaks to their cultural weight and not just to their imagined distance from us in perspectival space.

What does it mean to name the space of the image *Bohemian Grove*? The original *Bohemian Grove* is a men-only campground in Northern California for the social and political elite. It has hosted multiple US Presidents and played a role in the Manhattan Project. Given its secrecy and documented ties to power, the Grove is a rich site for conspiracy theories. Given this controversial history, how can we understand the relation between these figures and this space? Are the assembled figures the men who should be running the world behind the scenes? Are they presented as images of Black masculinity that the artist finds empowering? Personally, I read the work's reframing of the Grove as a space of black masculinity as indicating that the work's secrets are not fully available to me; the logs mark a space I can't enter. Interestingly, this sense of the inaccessibility of the work's final meaning neither particularly disturbs me nor makes me want to stop looking. Like the rest of the works in the exhibition *Bohemian Grove* creates a politically charged space of representation that reveals tensions and possibilities without offering easy resolution; the works are unsettling because the issues they take up are not, in fact, settled. Keeping these conflicts open creates space for civil disobedience.