

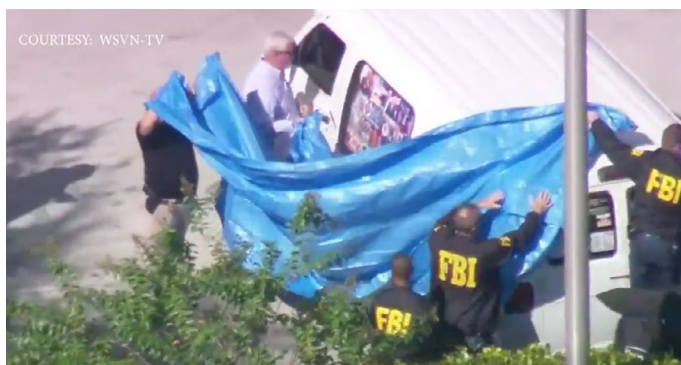
# MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

Virtual programme accompanying the exhibition *John Heartfield – Photography plus Dynamite* at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2 June – 23 August 2020

## Window/Screen: The MAGA Bomber Van, Montaged

Virginia McBride



1 – Screenshot from footage of FBI agents shrouding Cesar Sayoc's van in tarp following his arrest, 26 October 2018. Courtesy of WSVN-TV Miami

When Cesar Sayoc, Jr., the man accused – and later convicted – of mailing pipe bombs to prominent Democrats in 2018, was arrested in a South Florida parking lot, police seized the van in which he had been living. The vehicle was plastered in photographic decals deemed so provocative that the officers covered them with tarp (ill. 1). Sayoc's bombs turned out to be haphazard assemblages of household chemicals, never designed to explode. Far more incendiary was the van itself; across its tinted windows, photographic decals of Republican leaders and right-wing memes illustrated the dubious motives of the so-called "MAGA Bomber," who became, for a while at least, America's most notorious photomonteur.<sup>1</sup>

Before Sayoc's co-workers and classmates could be reached for comment, before his pseudonymous tweets were read on the news, there was only the van: its dense network of imagery seemed poised to reveal his intent. Journalists, Redditors, and later attorneys attempted visual analyses of the van's montage.<sup>2</sup> But aside from a few obvious allusions to Sayoc's crime (Democratic officials pictured in crosshairs, for one), the van resists a straightforward reading. A typical window composition scrambles 4chan memes with Trump campaign ads and photos of jiu-jitsu fighters (ill. 2). To follow the clues assembled on its windows is to participate in Sayoc's ongoing delusion. From the decals, we might gather that he was a pro martial artist, a Seminole tribesman, and an employee of the Hard Rock Hotel.<sup>3</sup> But Sayoc is none of these things. His windows constitute a living document of a troubled mind, which never coheres

into a cogent manifesto. By turns, their assembled images instead reveal an unsteady political screed and an ersatz self-portrait. Though many have attempted to make sense of the van, only a fellow artist has come close, by first tracing the online sources of Sayoc's montage, and then reconstituting it in digital and analogue iterations.

Since spring of 2019, the multimedia maker known professionally as visitor design has been painstakingly re-creating each of the vehicle's eight illustrated windows (ill. 3). His project is essentially a montage in reverse: working backwards from press photos of the van, he has deciphered its individual stickers and identified their source imagery.<sup>4</sup> To make some of the original decals, Sayoc had repurposed and edited existing memes from sites like 4chan. For other custom designs, he overlaid found images with idiosyncratic text (ill. 4)<sup>5</sup> – layouts which visitor reassembled in Adobe Illustrator.<sup>6</sup> "I used a combination of image scraping tools, a neural net, and long hours of detective work in Yandex's reverse image search," he explained in an email. With the help of this image recognition software, visitor located files for all but two of the photos adhered to the van. One of these – a scanned family photo – he described recreating from an image of a van window "at a high enough resolution to extract and upsample that sticker, clone out the text, undistort the image, and reapply the text as vectors."<sup>7</sup> He sourced other images from Sayoc's social media accounts before they were disabled by the FBI. By combing through the internet's vast database of visual detritus, visitor was able to re-create Sayoc's decals in exacting detail.<sup>8,9</sup> Attending to the layout of the images and their



2 – Detail of Sayoc van window (via sun-sentinel.com) with graphic source identified in a tweet by visitor design. Courtesy of @visitordesign, 20 April 2019



3 – visitor design, untitled side passenger doors, 2019. Laminated decals on tinted glass. Courtesy of via @visitordesign

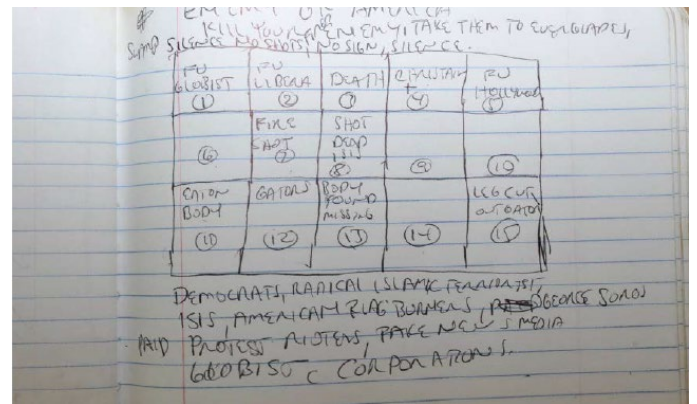
infinitesimal evolution over time, he engages a new archival mode of montage, particularly suited to digital experience.

If, for photomonteurs of the last century, the technique's decisive action was the decontextualising cut, the operative gesture of today's digital montage is surely Ctrl+V, the paste function. As visitor's project illustrates, it is increasingly impossible to dislocate a digital image – even one printed IRL, absent its identifying code. For modernist monteurs, the displacement and synthesis of unlike forms could shock viewers out of complacency, and ideally convert them to a new way of thinking. But today, photomontage is everywhere and nowhere: so pervasive that it evades notice.<sup>10</sup> As Sabine Kriebel has recently argued, the method, particularly when deployed in a meme, is now more likely to affirm existing opinions than to change minds.<sup>11</sup> Though images circulate freely online, the visual language of the internet depends on a sparse vernacular of repetitive symbols, whose connotations shift and expand daily. Thus, every Shiba Inu online conjures a Doge meme, but the meme's tonal register is unfixed, contingent on internet affairs du jour. While the memes' image macros are concise, their variable implications are tricky to trace. By fabricating and amalgamating every graphic on the MAGA Bomber van in an encyclopaedic paste-up, visitor retraces Sayoc's journey around the web, restoring a modicum of the context in which he encountered each image.

After visitor reproduces the decal designs, he uses a plotter to print them to scale, then laminates and adheres them to the windows of 1994 Dodge Ram vans – the same make and model driven by Sayoc.<sup>12</sup> They have not yet received a public showing, thanks in part, it seems, to material scarcities: the

windows are even harder to find than the images.<sup>13</sup> It is a fitting conundrum for a project interpolating digital worlds into physical space. While Sayoc exercised unbounded (some might say unhinged) creativity online, in daily life, delivering pizzas and managing a steroid addiction, he enjoyed few of the freedoms exercised by his digital avatars.<sup>14</sup> These irreconcilable worlds collide on the van, where Sayoc – and then visitor – manifested virtual ephemera on its physical surface. The results are unsettling, not simply for their extremist tone (echoed by many a mass-market bumper sticker), but for their transgressive intermediality.<sup>15</sup> Memes are notable for their digital mobility, but Sayoc may have been the first to retro-fit them for the open road.

When Sayoc was arrested, the police found folders of photographic fragments in his van (ill. 5). These cut-outs (mostly headshots of his victims) were entered into evidence for his trial.<sup>16</sup> "Is what has been preserved in the archives a kind of diary of unused possibilities?", Angela Lammert has asked, reflecting on a cache of John Heartfield's clippings. "Do 'ghosts from the past' become visible that make us rethink our view of the subject...?"<sup>17</sup> In light of Sayoc's bombing spree, the possibilities here are a shade more ominous than in Heartfield's case, but her questions still merit consideration. visitor recreates Sayoc's archive in absentia, assembling images not as clues to his crime, but as keys to his practice. His is not a montage of formal wit, or even



4 – Cesar Sayoc, Sketch for a custom window decal, from Sentencing Submission, United States v. Cesar Altieri Sayoc, p. 20, filed 22 June 2019



5 – Photographic materials found in Sayoc's van. Courtesy of ABC News

especially shrewd juxtaposition, but it invites consideration for the broader patterns of image retrieval and use that it reflects. In visitor's project, perhaps it is possible to consider the rigor and inventiveness of Sayoc's process independently from his message of hate.

- 1 After Sayoc's arrest brought the van to national attention, many Floridians recalled having previously seen and photographed the vehicle. One of his past employers reported that the van interfered with his job as a pizza delivery driver – the decals prompted so many customer complaints that she only allowed him to work at night. Richard Luscombe, "Cesar Sayoc: Details of pipe bomb suspect's past emerge before court date," *The Guardian*, 27 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/27/cesar-sayoc-pipe-bomb-suspect-court-date-trump>
- 2 Aaron Mak, "The Many Right-Wing Memes Covering the Suspected Mail Bomber's Van," *Slate.com*, 26 October 2018, <https://slate.com/technology/2018/10/cesar-sayoc-suspected-bomber-van-right-wing-trump-memes.html>
- 3 Sayoc play-acted still other identities on Facebook, managing (now defunct) pages for a number of imagined businesses. A characteristic post from his fictitious "Chippen Fellas" strip club shows Sayoc flexing amid a stock gallery of shirtless men. "Chippen Fellas," *Facebook*, 2 June 2015, via *Archive.Today* 26 October 2018, <http://archive.is/iWfVx>
- 4 visitor design shared details about his process via email. Additional information about his methods is sourced from his Twitter and Instagram accounts, where he has documented the Sayoc project extensively.
- 5 Sentencing Submission, United States v. Cesar Altieri Sayoc 18 Cr. 820 (JSR), pp. 14, 20
- 6 visitor design, Twitter post, 10 May 2019, 1:48 pm, <https://twitter.com/visitor/design/status/1126906937101123585>
- 7 visitor created a facsimile for the other missing image, a photographic grid of soccer players, but his search for the original continues. visitor design, email message to the author, 25 June 2020
- 8 visitor design, Twitter posts, 20 April 2019, 5:35 pm. <https://twitter.com/visitor/design/status/1119716118837518338>; 11 May 2019, 12:50 am, <https://twitter.com/visitor/design/status/1127073571728236544>
- 9 Tracking Sayoc's changing window compositions, visitor extended and systematised efforts first begun in the same forums where Sayoc once sourced his memes. Following his arrest, other users crowdsourced satellite and street views of the van, using images of its increasingly embellished windows to track his political radicalisation.
- 10 Virginia McBride, "The Snapchat Monteur? New Platforms for Photomontage", *History of Photography*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2019), pp. 206–220, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2019.1682834>
- 11 Sabine T. Kriebel, "Sparks of Discomfiture: On the Promise of Photomontage (or Back to Suture)", *History of Photography*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2019), pp. 222–223, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2019.1691863>
- 12 visitor design, email message to the author, 25 June 2020
- 13 On Twitter, visitor has repeatedly lamented the difficulty of locating these windows. Though he has managed to assemble and sticker a full set, his plans for alternate panes showing the chronological evolution of Sayoc's designs are on evidently on hold until more windows become available. visitor design, Twitter posts, 8 April 2019, 1:00 am, <https://twitter.com/visitor/design/status/1115117300980568064>; 15 May 2019, 9:53 am, <https://twitter.com/visitor/design/status/1128659656853921794>
- 14 Indeed, visitor has marveled at Sayoc's ability to sustain even his sticker habit, writing on Instagram "still not sure how an illiterate recreational body builder/sometimes-stripper living in his van was able to afford the constant addendums, refreshes, and reconfigurations he made to these windows – all of which were laminated for weather resistance and some of which were printed as very large single-piece (expensive) stickers." visitor design, Instagram post, 5 August 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B0zqX0HldI6>
- 15 Along with decals, Sayoc designed at least one T-shirt with montaged memes. visitor followed suit, making a pair of pants printed with Sayoc's memes. He has also created a limited edition sticker album. visitor design, Twitter posts, 20 May 2019, 7:30 pm, <https://twitter.com/visitor/design/status/1130616872553127938>; 13 August 2019, 2:14 pm, <https://twitter.com/visitor/design/status/1161340384037023745>
- 16 Jack Date, "Mail bomber Cesar Sayoc obsessed with Trump, Fox News, chilling new court filings show," *ABC News*, 23 July 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/mail-bomber-cesar-sayoc-obsessed-trump-fox-news/story?id=64500598>
- 17 Angela Lammert, "Material – Procedure – Archive," in *John Heartfield: Photography Plus Dynamite*, Berlin: Hirmer Verlag and The Akademie der Künste), p. 69