



# PICTO Benelux

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## PHOTOMONTAGE WITH CONTACT MASKS

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### FOREWORD

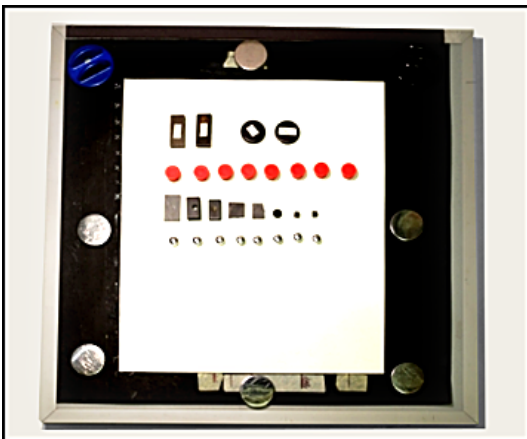
As a reminder, the principle of photomontage is to combine several images from various sources in order to reproduce them together on the same print, thus creating the illusion that all the elements are part of the same photographed scene. When this technique is done with an enlarger on silver gelatin prints, it often requires a lot of masking work.

When the masking is aerial (a mask held at a certain height between the enlarger lens and the photo-sensitive paper), it requires a great deal of experience to make a successful photomontage. This is done in particular by Jerry Uelsmann, a virtuoso of silver gelatin printing who uses up to 7 enlargers to compose a single photo. This subject is well documented (read e.g. in Tim Rudman's excellent "The Photographer's Master Printing Course", chapter "Multiple Printing").

Photomontage can also be done using masks and counter-masks placed in direct contact on the sensitive surface. Although less widespread, this method is, in my opinion, less random and more accessible than the previous one.

It deserves to be better known.

### NECESSARY EQUIPMENT



1- An iron plate will replace the masking easel.

Its dimensions must therefore be greater than those of the photographic paper used and it must have non-slip feet as well as a guide to reliably position the paper (personally I use a 45x45cm decorative board with magnets).

2- Lots of big powerful magnets (at least of the size of a 5€ coin) and smaller ones.

3- A DIY black cardboard frame with a window at the dimensions of the final print.

4- An enlarger, preferably with a film holder equipped with glass for the large format, so that the negative can be repositioned somewhat if necessary. A single camera is enough to make a successful photomontage. However, having several enlargers simplifies the work and above all offers more possibilities since allows to easily combine negatives of different formats and/or with different degrees of magnification.

5- Drawing paper at least as big as the black frame.

6- A sheet of unexposed RC photographic paper to make masks and counter-masks (fiberbase is to be excluded for this use because of its physical instability when washed).

7- An old fiberbase print of the same format, as flat as possible, to be placed under the RC sheet to guarantee that the masks are at the correct distance from the lens.

8- Adhesive masking tape for painters and strong canvas tape like TESA for instance.

- 9- Lots of black gouache (I use ECOLO de TALENS in 500ml bottle).
- 10- Fiberbase photographic paper.
- 11- A scalpel like X-ACTO and a good magnifying glass (frontal or standing).
- 12- LUGOL (I use a 5% iodine solution + 10% potassium iodide) and cotton swabs.
- 13- Spotting material (gouache, SPOTONE,... and brushes such as KOLINSKY 00).  
NB Checking the lab's safety light might be useful, considering the unusual length of the manipulations.

## PREPARATORY WORK

1. Choose a negative that will form the basis of the montage and look for other negatives whose elements can be combined with it in juxtaposition and/or as inlay. This is an opportunity to reconsider your old negatives from a new perspective or to make new images for this specific purpose. This is the most creative stage of the process and takes a lot of thought and maturation time.  
  
Technical and aesthetic rules must be respected when making these choices, if you want to keep the montage looking natural. Above all, pay attention to:
  - select only negatives of similar grain and ISO sensitivity (ideally of the same brand);
  - harmonize the position of the light source of each element to keep a minimum of homogeneity in the lighting of the whole;
  - avoid juxtaposing bright value areas. The dividing line between them would be too visible and difficult to retouch. A clear sky will be all the easier to shoot, the darker the earth's horizon is next to it.
2. Project the basic negative onto a drawing paper on the iron plate and focus at the chosen magnification and framing. Using a soft pencil, draw the main lines of the image, emphasizing the contours of the areas that will be replaced by another image.
3. Project each other negative successively onto the drawing paper still being in place and, by moving the iron plate and/or the negative in the film holder, check whether it fits satisfactorily into the area intended for it. This is the stage when a negative may need to be discarded and replaced by another not originally intended.
4. Replace the sketch with an old, stretched taut with adhesive tape, fiberbase print (its back towards the objective) to form the necessary thickness. Check the final focus and, if possible, block it until the end of the process.
5. After a test strip, place an RC sheet on this thickness and expose it with soft filtering to obtain the most detailed image possible while avoiding dark values. If necessary, the edges of the sheet are weighted down with a few magnets..
6. Develop, fix, and wash the RC sheet briefly. If the print is suitable, the old fiberbase thickness is no longer necessary and can be removed. After drying, use a brush to apply black gouache to the back of the RC sheet.  
One well smoothed coat will be enough.
7. After the gouache has dried, cut out very carefully the outline of the masks and counter-masks with a scalpel, using a magnifying glass and a good front lighting.
8. Once the test strips have been taken, determine the exposure time, the multigrade filtering and, if necessary, the appropriate burning-dodging corrections for each negative involved in the photomontage. This is another creative step where the values of the negative are weighed carefully.

## **MAKING OF THE PHOTOMONTAGE**

9. Securely attach with adhesive at all four corners an unexposed sheet of fiberbase paper to the plate. Reinsert the base negative into the film holder, fully open the diaphragm, remove the multigrade filter and put on the red filter. Turn on the enlarger and center the plate to find the desired framing. Then turn off the power.
10. The RC sheet is reconstituted by reassembling all masks and counter-masks very carefully, and applied accurately onto the fiberbase paper. The whole thing is fixed with a few magnets. The perfection of each joint must be checked with the fingertips.
11. Switch on the enlarger. It may be necessary to move the iron plate slightly until the two images coincide exactly with each other, paying particular attention to the coincidence of details at the opposite ends of the image. The care taken at this stage will be decisive for the amount of post-production work and the quality of the final result. During this phase, I usually turn off the safety light. Turn off the enlarger, setn the working diaphragm and replace the multigrade filter. Remove the red filter.
12. Remove the mask covering the area to be exposed through the base negative, and weight the counter-mask around this area with magnets. Attach the black frame over the whole with magnets. Expose for the desired time. Remove the black frame and reinsert the mask into the RC sheet with the same care.
13. Replace the base negative with the second negative, fully open the diaphragm, remove the multigrade filter and put on the red filter. Remove the mask from the area to be affected by the new negative, put magnets on the counter-mask, and reattach the black frame over the whole with magnets. Turn on the enlarger and move the plate to frame the second image.  

Turn off the enlarger, set the working diaphragm and replace the multigrade filter. Remove the red filter. Expose for the desired time.
14. Repeat this process with any other negatives.
15. Detach the black frame, all masks and the exposed paper. Develop, fix, wash for at least 5 minutes and dry.

## **POST-PRODUCTION**

16. The outline of the various combined parts from the negatives will inevitably appear on the print as black lines. They will have to be softened or even bleached out with LUGOL. Several passes will probably be necessary; the action of the product can always be stopped with a little fixative on a cotton swab. This precision work is best done with the print fixed on a glass pane and under good lighting.
17. Dip the print for a few moments in the fixer and then wash it thoroughly. Let it dry and possibly put it under a press. Finally, do the necessary spotting work.

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(translation: J. Kevers)