

## **WHAM! BLAM! HOW POP ART STORMED THE HIGH-ART CITADEL AND WHAT THE CRITICS SAID**

*Steven Henry Madoff*

The image slyly disturbs, and yet it is brightly vacuous. *Marilyn (Three Times)*. The hair is a molded mound of brass, the lips smeared with red. The eyes, weighted with two technicolor slabs of makeup, a parody of makeup, have the opiated look of someone who has stared too long into the camera's flash, who no longer sees anything but the packaged good she has become. The portrait in the picture is multiplied (here by three, by six in a similar silkscreen job, by a hundred in another) so that we may learn one thing above all else: that the painting's author, Andy Warhol, knows she is a packaged good – pumped-up, electric-hued, and hollow – and adores what she is. He wants to be every bit like her and, even more so, like the world that made her.

Warhol is in his studio (the Factory, he calls it), emulating that world, that glittering engine of the fabulous and the jaded, which, like his picture, offers up a star who fabricates feelings for a living, but whose own feelings get hidden inside the package, get lost in the repeated, endless manufacture. He likes what he sees. He states as much in an oft-quoted remark meant to announce his distance from Jackson Pollock's proclamation, "I am nature." Flatly, Warhol says, "I want to be a machine." There is irony here and a willing blankness. There is something vapid, but also something oracular. He only wants to be what Marilyn already is, what America clearly wants her to be in the year of her death, the year he paints the picture. It is 1962.

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With the explosive unburdening of the 1960s, as the Eisenhower-and-McCarthy years fell away at light speed, a new kind of art happened. It didn't bow before Abstract Expressionism, which had brought America its great cultural victory after the Second World War. This new art was not held back by the monklike asceticism, the purity of feeling so brilliantly presented by Newman and Rothko. It wasn't fazed by the pictures of Pollock and de Kooning, all densely packed and psychologically charged.

In fact, this new art did not seem to advertise anything in the least bit worried. The art was extroverted. It projected an air of intoxication; a sense that here in New York, in the rising elation of the Kennedy years (and in the nostalgia for that elation after the president's assassination), a world of plain and sharply colored objects, of Brillo boxes and billboards, spelled out the youthful buoyancy of America's unchecked global climb. It announced that here in the metropolis of great fame, in the capital of art and of commerce, too, was not only a jazzed-up bounty of vital subject matter but a ready-made way of visualizing things just waiting to be grasped.

This new work, it turned out, took more than a little from the abstract art it kicked over. That was part of what made it tick – and it ticked loudly, riotously, wonderfully to some, shockingly to others. It ticked with the energy of the suddenly discovered. And what made it tick most jarringly of all was that the populace, looked down upon from the high citadel of the art world's sense of its own singularity, took up this new vision with satisfaction, at times with ebullience. Here was what the people had suspected all along, that they *could* understand vanguard art if it were not so opaque, so willfully unrecognizable. The world that people knew, that they worked in and looked at every day, was the subject of the most contemporary painting and sculpture again.

The character of this art shared with television a cool sense of distance matched only by overt sentimentality. That should come as no surprise. In an art that gleefully espoused the importance of the packaged good, that the exterior life of things was far more interesting than the interior, true sentiment gave way easily to sentimentality – emotions, identity, landscapes, everyday objects, and scenes of war all presented as high-gloss, no-stain products. Television was not the only popular source that put a gloss on the world and made it so palatable, so light. Comic strips offered a still simpler flattening of things. In the strips, Lichtenstein and Warhol, and other artists as well, found a lively graphic style and a formality of feeling that somehow always ended with an exclamation point: an anti-solemnity that was right for the times.

The leaching away of emotions and the projection of an enormous energy onto the antic figure of Mickey Mouse, onto sprightly beach balls and blown-up ice cream cones, was at once a statement of innocence retaken and a provocation. This new work's mixture of comic-strip goofiness, gargantuanism, and exposé spoke of an impulse that a certain kind of radical art of the 19th and 20th centuries had already hinted at, from Edouard Manet's brazen *Olympia* to John Sloan's denizens of lower-class New York: a grating realism meant to be impolite, to be inclusive of parts of society deemed outré or fallen, and so to push the limits of what art could show.

Yet unlike that earlier work, which was met with initial outrage, the new art had the clever strategy to impose on its realism nothing more fallen or impolite than what culture already was. If the esthetes who had embraced Abstract Expressionism were inflamed, others were not. Here was a realism that thrust itself knowingly in the face of a society that liked its garishness larger than life; a society ineluctably drawn to cartoon romance and tabloid scandal, to that particular species of glamour – in parts lurid, sexual, and tragic – that was embodied by Elvis and Marilyn and Jackie. Pop, as this new kind of art came to be called, was a diminutive of the word “popular.” It was not a technical term, a bit of off-putting art-historical jargon meant to exclude. And like pop music, beneath its raucous or laughing or shimmering surfaces, its craft was sophisticated. Its beat was calculated. It swung.

What Pop took from the canvases of Pollock and Rothko was their physical size, their all-over patterns and repeated images. But bigness meant something different to Lichtenstein and Oldenburg and Warhol. Exchanging world-weary spirituality for smiling (or smirking) worldliness, the Pop artists went at bigness in their canvases as the expression of a society enjoying its imperial swagger on a transcontinental scale. Bigness in Pop pictures reflected America's self-delighted astonishment in what seemed a never-ending pile of freshly minted goods sprawling across the planet. What this translated into, in Rosenquist's billboard-inspired collages of Pepsodent-gleaming teeth and fighter jets, in Warhol's acid images of colossal flowers, cows, and electric chairs, was finally a very different purity of feeling from Rothko & Company's. It was a feeling of pure ambiguity, an ambivalence that the war-generation Abstract Expressionists could never allow themselves. It was the luxurious pleasure of facile unconcern: the ability to look into the conscience of America's commercial culture, find the glint of shiny metal no more than an inch thick, and mirror it brilliantly.

For the writers of the day, the new sensibility was in turns bewildering, affronting, thrilling, and an opportunity. There were many critics, among them Hilton Kramer and John Canaday, who found in Pop a decline. Expecting moral urgency, they confronted an art that freely traded soul-searching for what appeared to be a genre of social anthropology. Here, in their eyes, was little more than trivial subject matter, hymns to bubble-

headed excess. They followed the pronouncement of Clement Greenberg, Abstract Expressionism's master spokesman, judging that nothing technically interesting happened in this new work: the Pop artists retreated from formal innovation.

Still, this old guard of opinion was opposed by an array of critics who argued that something fundamental had changed in culture. The Pop artists were both reflecting and defining that change. Lawrence Alloway, who coined the term "Pop"; Thomas Hess, an influential editor at *Art News*; Gene Swenson, that magazine's most ardent champion of the movement; the brilliant young critic Barbara Rose; and, later, the (then) West Coast painter and writer Peter Plagens all saw in Pop art a new freedom, a savvy analysis of the new society, a cheekiness, and true invention.

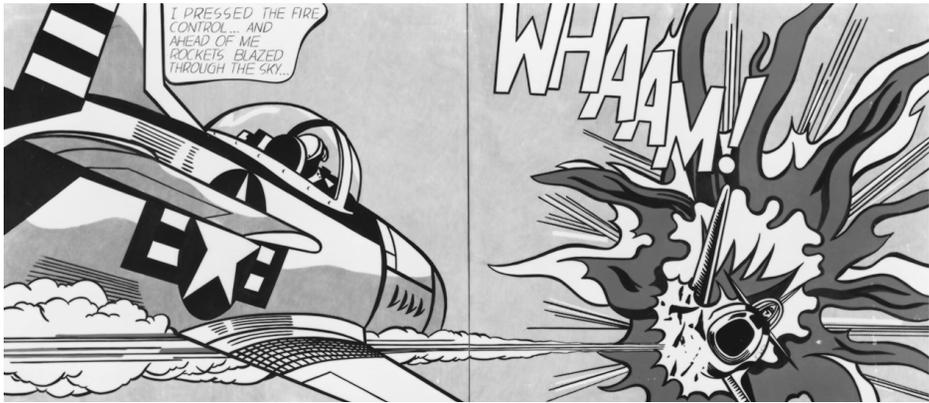
There were still others – such men as Sidney Tillim and Max Kozloff – who lived between these camps, who were as much appalled as intrigued by, in Kozloff's phrase, the "new vulgarians." And yet it was this ability to appall, this candy-colored vulgarity that drew the corps of writers that made Pop's name with the public. In hindsight, it is easy to say that the popular press naturally had an easier time with Pop. Its subject matter and social chic were no difficulty at all for writers who were used to the journalistic bread-and-butter of covering fashion, music, and the year's auto styles.

What the writers in *Time* and *Newsweek* saw and passed on to the American public was a bauble of leisure that had all the charm of college boys stuffing themselves into phone booths to see how many would fit. After the eminent gravity of Abstract Expressionism, these journalists wrote about the giddiness and cool displayed in the oversize images of Lichtenstein's golf ball and Robert Indiana's jaunty "LOVE." This was a story the press could deliver with the same wonderment that drove their coverage of the Beatles: harmless, fun-loving, sometimes silly, but smart all the way to the bank.

What was publicized and debated was driven in turn by a rising power nexus in the art world of new collectors and such art dealers as Leo Castelli, Virginia Dwan, and Sidney Janis. The critics could say what they wished, but for this instantly formed firmament of collectors, most famously represented by Robert Scull, the New York taxi baron, the new art was similar indeed to their new money. It was not involved with the past. It was involved with climbing a fresh ladder into the social heavens. The work was about what these men could get straight away: products and power with a bold gleam. This doesn't mean that staring at a Warhol double car crash, or even at a mammoth hamburger by Oldenburg, didn't raise questions about the industrial complex and its dire plethora of waste. But Pop put this new world in a light of hyperbole that made the right kind of sense to these collectors and their huge ambitions, offering equal amounts of levity, indifference to what had come before, and candid, unembarrassed voyeurism.

The combination of wealth, influential dealers, and the epic outpouring of words from writers of every stripe contributed to the ostentatious success of these artists among the widest audience that any avant-garde movement in the visual arts has experienced at its inception (matched only in the 1980s, whose money-fueled Neo-Expressionist art stars could not have existed without the advent of Pop). The postwar artists' community of spirit, once replaced by the '60s' collective attention to style among the middle class and nouveau riche alike, now gave way to marketing in full heat. The dealers had a new art on their hands that collectors wanted. The newspapers, weeklies, and glossies had a new subject. The rapid sales, the clever write-ups in *Life* and *Vogue*, the titillation of Warhol's seedy glamour, along with the fervent demolition and defense of the movement among serious critics, all led to Pop's ascent.

This new community, lofted by its embraceable subject matter, galvanized culture



Roy Lichtenstein, *Whaam!*, oil and magna on canvas, two panels, 68 × 83 inches each, 1963. Tate Gallery, London

beyond those small precincts of the art world that paid obeisance to the shibboleths of Formalism and the Universal Soul. The Pop artists – whose techniques and esthetics settled quickly – hit the *Zeitgeist* dead on. Theirs was the same flare as mod fashion's. History, for their moment, was not the operative issue. History had shown its compulsion to repeat in the traumatic war of the last generation, then slept it off in the '50s. No, the historical impulse was specifically not essential. The issue was the *un*-history of a very contemporary world: a process of leaning impulsively into the present. So much of this art, for all its suggestion of high energy, has an airlessness about it that is the condition of this single-minded focus. The still life of the un-historical? A profusion of objects meant to last only as long as it takes to spend or consume them. Thus, a Warhol roll of bills; Lichtenstein's rounds of ammunition fired from a blazing warplane; a mountainous slice of cake by Oldenburg; Wesselmann's impossibly pink nude stepping from a bath into the viewers' arms; or, in Warhol again, a flood of images of death – an obsession with death in which life is the presumed consumable and time no longer matters, time is spent.



There is a pointed irony that emerges from this notion of Pop's paean to the un-historical in the light of making this anthology. An anthology is a consequence of the general human yearning to capture and classify the past, to construct a history. And while the forward-looking Pop artists and the culture of their day wanted nothing more than to see their father figures shrink to specks in the rear-view mirror, it is inescapable that Pop arose as a response to the art that directly preceded it. To formulate what critical documents best record the era of Pop and to bracket those documents between dates that presumably open and terminate its era is an act of historical imagination. So there is an inevitable, ironic pull between the artists' ambitions and the anthologist's duty that underlies the project of this book.

Yet to construct this history was straightforward enough. It begins with critical writings of the 1950s and early '60s that set the stage for American Pop. A number of these writings focus on the British investigation of popular culture that gave rise to British Pop art as it came into being in the early '50s under the aegis of the Independent Group. This marginal congregation of the like-minded and intellectually curious included the architects Alison and Peter Smithson, the writers Lawrence Alloway and Reyner Banham, and

the artists Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi. They looked out at the drear of '50s London and shuddered. They found their art world blinkered, driven back into its own past, unwilling to address what the postwar world order meant to the creation of art in that place at that time.

The theory, art, and criticism that the IG put forward is entirely influenced by the melancholy of England's social state and a desire to compensate for the material duress of their postwar scene. The ideas and imaginative works they made embraced the notion of a new culture built upon the promises of science, the fantasies of comics and science fiction, and the gleam of new products – many from America.

It is crucial to read, as a backdrop to American Pop, what the British thought and did. It is equally crucial to note that the sources and effects of the two arts are substantially different. While British Pop emerges from England's wartime devastation and its social ramifications, American Pop artists were never forced to deal with that landscape and its meanings. Warhol, Lichtenstein, and Rosenquist started with the sheen of their own landscape at the optimistic center of the globe. When you compare the works of these two movements, two things are striking. First, the size of British works is typically small; still tied to the European easel tradition. Second, and more telling, there is nothing defensive in the works of American Pop. Its invention is not a declaration of reconstruction or escape, of *elsewhere*, as it was for the British. No, its invention declares arrival – a cool-eyed assurance, crisp and aggressive, laying claim to the *here* of America's productive powers.

These sorts of differences point in a larger way to the rationale for this anthology as it is. While it was tempting to consider a far broader collection of writings that covered German and French, Italian and Scandinavian, and South American strains of Pop art, it finally seemed not only impractical but removed from the primary intention of the Documents of Twentieth Century Art series, which focuses on the central activities of an art historical movement. There is a definite fascination in looking out from the promontory of retrospective time on these international artists to see the ways in which they adapted Pop, mixed it with their own cultures' pasts, then moved on to something else. Yet that would be another book; one that might be of real curiosity to scholars and connoisseurs. It would be about artists (with the exception of the British) who derived their Pop inflections largely from the American style. You see this in the Germans Gerhard Richter's and Sigmar Polke's period of Capitalist Realism, for example. And there is a decisive account in Bruce Altshuler's "Pop Triumphant: A New Realism" – the second part of which is excerpted in this anthology – about the punctured reaction of the French *Nouveau Realistes*, who realized that the Americans' art out-scandalized their own in sheer intensity when they first exhibited together in New York at the Sidney Janis Gallery.

The focus of this volume remains on the American exposition of the style as it flowered in this soil and gained its central historical prominence. And that is why the first section of the book is not only about the British background but about the American as well. While the American Pop artists did indeed borrow scale and an interest in all-over patterns from the Abstract Expressionists, Pop subject matter didn't rise *ex nihilo* with the new dawn of the '60s. Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Larry Rivers each had broken the abstract mold and were drawn to the play and ambiguity of common objects: of news photos and clothes hangers, of brightly painted cigar box labels rendered with knowing Ab-Ex drips. Their art was both linchpin and lever, offering a link to that earlier generation, but doing so with a droll energy, a lightness that gave the Pop artists license, lifting them away from the heavy influence of Pollock and Rothko.

The anthology's plan follows logically from predecessors to the general phenomenon of the movement itself. A chronological arrangement of voices speaks to and over one another; voices calling back and forth and repeating the names of pictures, artists, dealers, collectors, exhibitions, and the arguments of other writers. As Pop was an art that targeted contemporary society head on and garnered its authority as much from public attention as from critical praise, the writings gathered here are meant to capture the gamut of printed notice; to encounter the movement's social as well as critical reception. In this light, it's as revealing to read pieces like *Life's* introduction to Roy Lichtenstein, "Is He the Worst Artist in the U.S.?" and the *Sunday Herald Tribune's* glitterati-spotting in "Superpop or a Night at the Factory," as it is to follow the art-historical insights of where the speech balloons in Lichtenstein's pictures come from or whether Rosenquist's murals add anything meaningful to the history of history painting.

Through all of these writings, whether reviews or journalistic takes on the scene or art historical musings, a granular sense of a particular time makes its texture felt: Hilton Kramer biting off the words of Leo Steinberg in exasperation at the Museum of Modern Art's Pop symposium in 1962; Oldenburg's funky, astonishing "Store" on East Second Street; Rosenquist at lunch in his paper suit; Norman Mailer among the new bohemians at a Warhol sideshow of flesh and fauna; the observations of critics who saw so much in their first glimpses of this art, which they captured with such names as "Neo-Dada," "New Sign Painting," and, loveliest of all, Sidney Tillim's phrase, "New American Dream" painting.

After poring over hundreds of articles and catalogues for this book, one aspect of Pop art's life became particularly notable. For all the diversity of opinions, the vast historical body of writings on Pop makes one thing clear: the roster of artists generally considered members of the Pop camp barely included the mention of women. While history marks the '60s as the era of liberation, you would hardly know it from the case study of Pop. Marisol is the *single* woman whose works were exhibited frequently in Pop shows. And even then writers on her work more often questioned, ignored, or denied her label as a Pop artist, insisting instead on her significance as a sculptor of singular sensibility whose art is far more intimate, drawn with warmth to the pleasures and humor of social community, and whose artistic roots (evident in her predilections) are Latin American, not American. Women critics fared a little better in number – Barbara Rose, Dore Ashton, Ellen Johnson, Lucy Lippard, Grace Glueck, Vivien Raynor – but none of their writings, or their male counterparts', reveal a woman among the Pop artists who has been forgotten.

What the writers wrote was, to a great extent, about a four-headed goliath named Lichtenstein-Oldenburg-Rosenquist-Warhol. They are the central figures and the focus of the book's third section. Some readers are going to disagree with this. Some readers will argue that Jim Dine and Tom Wesselmann in particular have been downgraded, pushed off into the subsequent section about artists who participated in Pop but were not as essential to its definition. Both Dine and Wesselmann, along with the others in that section, compel consideration. Yet for all of their accomplishments, to my mind their art is less incisive. Their bodies of work do not have the uniquely attractive and rebarbative force of Pop's four masters, who variously shaped the movement's blunt insight that commerce had so deeply transformed the landscape of American culture that it had formed a new landscape ready for a new art. And it is their complicated tone of ambivalence – brightly innocent on the one hand and excessive (suggesting heartlessness, indifference, or moral corruption) on the other – that is so difficult and galvanizing. Dine and Wesselmann have some of this, but there is an undertow lacking. Dine's debt to Johns and Wes-

selmann's to Matisse soften the original edginess of Pop that described *Homo Americanus* as empty and happy, hungry for a mound of disposable pleasures.

In fact, there are other artists whose works were at one point in the fold of Pop, yet who are not included here at all – Billy Al Bengston, Stephen Durkee, Joe Goode, Red Grooms, Phillip Hefferton, and Robert Watts among them. Why are they absent? There is the essential objective reason of lack of space. And there is the altogether personal view, after going through so much material on the subject, that their Pop-period works did not alter the shape of the movement or claim the defining moment in their own careers.

Perhaps the most painful exclusions are Marisol and Richard Artschwager. She because of her significance as the woman most often included in Pop exhibitions – though, again, never entirely thought of in Pop terms. Artschwager because of his extraordinarily elusive yet fertile relation to Pop. Seen in many of the early Pop group shows, his sculptures done in Formica appear at first to be sendups of furniture, more chair effigies and table effigies than functional objects. They have the tongue-in-cheek smartness of vintage Pop, yet they are far more cooled out, more abstract and difficult to place within the sphere of the movement's magnified energy. Indeed, his work has as much to do with the esthetic of Minimalism as it does with Pop art, and it is just this tantalizing, shifting character that draws him into any rarified discussion of Pop but does not let him sit comfortably there. And this, I suppose, he shares with Marisol.

Two sections wrap up the volume, each offering a different kind of historical perspective. The penultimate section collects several representative essays that look back on Pop from the distance of a few years or many. Whether it is Robert Hughes's lacerating revision of the Warhol legend or Lynne Cooke's measured exposition of the relations of British and American Pop, these pieces provide social and historical contexts that the writers who were the movement's witnesses couldn't have apprehended. And they point to the fact that Pop continues to have its spectral hold on our culture's imagination.

While American Pop is now considered historic enough to fetch awesome prices at auction – consider the figure of about \$15 million paid in 1996 by New York's Museum of Modern Art for a Warhol image of Campbell's soup cans – the sensibility of Pop permeates our society. An essay not included in this anthology, Michiko Kakutani's "The United States of Andy," published in the magazine of the Sunday *New York Times*, November 17, 1996, claims that Warhol's lasting lesson that art is all about commerce and packaging has been "picked up willy-nilly by successive generations of artists and artistes. . . . 'Access Hollywood,' the Jacqueline Onassis auction, Dennis Rodman's book, *Planet Hollywood*, Calvin Klein ads and the new 'Brady Bunch' movies are all post-Warholian phenomena, just as Cindy Sherman's photographs and Damien Hirst's dead cows are post-Warholian art."

Many of the names mentioned in Kakutani's essay, and the essay itself, will fade into history soon enough – adding to Warhol's most famous maxim, "In the future everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes," the bracing finale: and fifteen minutes only. But what is equally bracing is the testimony that these artists and artistes lend to the on-going phenomenon. Perhaps instead of speaking of Pop's permeating sensibility, it is better to say that the commercial sensibility that inspired Pop art has come to grip our culture ever more deeply. Pop has simply continued to be a compelling emblem of that fact and has inspired new expressions of it in turn. Certainly, commercial culture's strategy of planned obsolescence becomes an irony in the light of Pop art's longevity and bears on the need, or at least the usefulness, of this anthology.

In fact, another sense of irony related to the perspective of history touches this volume's closing section, its chronology of exhibitions. While the whole shape of Pop rolls out in the chronology's retrospective form of a historical ledger, reading through it is a matter of instants, month after month, lived through, however whimsically, one at a time. The sense of history is momentarily lost. At least in one interpretation of Pop, that is how these artworks were meant to live.

**From LARRY RIVERS: "WHY I PAINT AS I DO"***Frank O'Hara*

Larry Rivers lives in a house in Greenwich Village on a street crowded with bars and coffeehouses behind the New York University Law School building. Formerly inhabited by a scene designer, the studio is two stories high with walls of brick, whitewashed many years ago and now covered with the city's patina of warm gray. In the daytime the light pours in from three skylights, but at night it is a vast, dim place, lit by seven naked light bulbs hanging high up near the ceiling. At night the studio looks very much like the set for Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*; it's hard to believe you can find out anything about the outside world without using a ladder; the windows are way up.

Part of the house is divided into two floors, duplex style, the upper floor with a little balcony overlooking the studio. On these two semifloors the artist lives with his youngest son, Steven, thirteen years old. (His older son, a painter too, lives not far away in his own cold-water studio.) The other member of the Rivers household is a friendly, frantic shepherd dog named Amy who is perpetually hungry and lunges up and down the stairs in a delirium of affection for all comers.

On one of the studio's huge walls is stapled a 10 by 15 foot canvas, in preparation for the start of the artist's projected new work *ME*. On the opposite wall a female figure in welded steel has been attached several feet off the floor – the sculpture which appears in two of his paintings, *Second Avenue* and *Second Avenue with THE*. It was made in 1957 in Southampton, Long Island, where the Riverses lived for four years. Another wall has the huge *Journey* of 1956, a painting which looks small in the space of the studio; lurking under a nearby potted plant is a plaster commercial figure of Psyche or Aphrodite which Rivers rescued from a night club; she is holding an orange light bulb in her uplifted hand and Rivers uses her as a night light.

I have known Larry Rivers since 1950, when he had just returned from Europe. It was at a cocktail party we met, as one always meets people in New York, and waving at the crowd he said, "After all it's life we're interested in, not art." A couple of weeks later when I visited his studio for the first time, with its big splashy canvases and the beginnings of full-scale female nudes in plaster hanging from pipe-and-flange armatures, he said with no air of contradiction or remembrance, "After all it's *art* we're interested in, not life." His main interest was obviously in the immediate situation. And so it seems to have remained. . . .

O'HARA: The famous *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* was painted soon after your return from Europe, wasn't it? Was it influenced in any way by what was going on in New York art circles?

RIVERS: Luckily for me I didn't give a crap about what was going on at the time

in New York painting, which was obviously interested in chopping down other forests. In fact, I was energetic and egomaniacal and what is even more: cocky, and angry enough to want to do something no one in the New York art world could doubt was *disgusting, dead, and absurd*. So, what could be dopier than a painting dedicated to a national cliché – Washington Crossing the Delaware. The last painting that dealt with George and the rebels is hanging in the Met and was painted by a coarse German nineteenth-century academician who really loved Napoleon more than anyone and thought crossing a river on a late December afternoon was just another excuse for a general to assume a heroic, slightly tragic pose. He practically put you in the rowboat with George. What could have inspired him I'll never know. What *I* saw in the crossing was quite different. I saw the moment as nerve-racking and uncomfortable. I couldn't picture anyone getting into a chilly river around Christmas time with anything resembling hand-on-chest heroics.

O'HARA: What was the reaction when George was shown?

RIVERS: About the same reaction as when the Dadaists introduced a toilet seat as a piece of sculpture in a Dada show in Zurich. Except that the public wasn't upset – the *painters* were. One painter, Gandy Brodie, who was quite forceful, called me a phony. In the bar where I can usually be found, a lot of painters laughed. One female painter, because of the style of the painting, dubbed it “Pascin Crossing the Delaware.” Now, all this was reaction to the painting as *idea*. As to whether *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* is to be admired for its plastic charms – how it was painted, and so forth – I'm not sure it is anything marvelous. . . .

## BUT TODAY WE COLLECT ADS

*Alison and Peter Smithson*

Traditionally the fine arts depend on the popular arts for their vitality, and the popular arts depend on the fine arts for the respectability. It has been said that things hardly “exist” before the fine artist has made use of them, they are simply part of the unclassified background material against which we pass our lives. The transformation from everyday object to fine art manifestation happens in many ways; the object can be discovered – *objet trouvé* or *l’art brut* – the object itself remaining the same; a literary or folk myth can arise, and again the object itself remains unchanged; or, the object can be used as a jumping-off point and is itself transformed.

Le Corbusier in Volume 1 of his *Oeuvre Complète* describes how the “architectural mechanism” of the Maison Citrohan (1920) evolved. Two popular art devices – the arrangement of a small zinc bar at the rear of the café, with a large window to the street, and the close vertical patent-glazing of the suburban factory – were combined and transformed into a fine art aesthetic. The same architectural mechanism produced ultimately the Unité d’Habitation.

The Unité d’Habitation demonstrates the complexity of an art manifestation, for its genesis involves popular art stimuli, historic art seen as a pattern of social organization, not as a stylistic source (observed at the Chartreuse D’Ema, 1907), and ideas of social reform and technical revolution patiently worked out over forty years, during which time the social and technological set-up, partly as a result of his own activities, met le Corbusier half-way.

Why certain folk art objects, historical styles, or industrial artifacts and methods become important at a particular moment cannot easily be explained.

*Gropius wrote a book on grain silos,  
Le Corbusier one on aeroplanes,  
And Charlotte Perriand brought a new  
object to the office every morning;  
But today we collect ads.*

Advertising has caused a revolution in the popular art field. Advertising has become respectable in its own right and is beating the fine arts at their old game. We cannot ignore the fact that one of the traditional functions of fine art, the definition of what is fine and desirable for the ruling class, and therefore ultimately that which is desired by all society, has now been taken over by the ad-man.

To understand the advertisements which appear in the *New Yorker* or *Gentry* one must have taken a course in Dublin literature, read a *Time* popularizing article on cybernetics, and have majored in Higher Chinese Philosophy and Cosmetics. Such ads are packed with information – data of a way of life and a standard of living which they are simultaneously inventing and documenting. Ads which do not try to sell you the product except as a natural accessory of a way of life. They are good “images” and their technical virtuosity is almost magical. Many have involved as much effort for one page as goes into the building of a coffee bar. And this transient thing is making a bigger contribution to our visual climate than any of the traditionally fine arts.

The fine artist is often unaware that his patron, or more often his patron's wife who leafs through the magazines, is living in a different visual world from his own. The pop art of today, the equivalent of the Dutch fruit and flower arrangement, the pictures of second rank of all Renaissance schools, and the plates that first presented to the public the Wonder of the Machine Age and the New Territories, is to be found in today's glossies – bound up with the throw-away object.

As far as architecture is concerned, the influence on mass standards and mass aspirations of advertising is now infinitely stronger than the pace setting of *avant-garde* architects, and it is taking over the functions of social reformers and politicians. Already the mass production industries have revolutionized half the house – kitchen, bathroom, utility room, and garage – without the intervention of the architect, and the curtain wall and the modular prefabricated building are causing us to revise our attitude to the relationship between architect and industrial production.

By fine-art standards the modular prefabricated building, which of its nature can only approximate the ideal shape for which it is intended, must be a bad building. Yet, generally speaking, the schools and garages which have been built with systems or prefabrication lick the pants off the fine-art architects operating in the same field. They are especially successful in their modesty. The ease with which they fit into the built hierarchy of a community.

By the same standards the curtain wall too cannot be successful. With this system the building is wrapped round with a screen whose dimensions are unrelated to its form and organization. But the best postwar office block in London is one which is virtually all curtain wall. As this building has no other quality apart from its curtain wall, how is it that it puts to shame other office buildings which have been elaborately worked over by respected architects and by the Royal Fine Arts Commission?

*To the architects of the twenties, "Japan" was the Japanese house of prints and paintings, the house with its roof off, the plane bound together by thin black lines. (To quote Gropius, "the whole country looks like one gigantic basic design course.") In the thirties Japan meant gardens, the garden entering the house, the tokonoma.*

*For us it would be the objects on the beaches, the piece of paper blowing about the street, the throw-away object and the pop-package.*

*For today we collect ads.*

Ordinary life is receiving powerful impulses from a new source. Where thirty years ago architects found in the field of the popular arts techniques and formal stimuli, today we are being edged out of our traditional role by the new phenomenon of the popular arts – advertising.

Mass-production advertising is establishing our whole pattern of life – principles, morals, aims, aspirations, and standard of living. We must somehow get the measure of this intervention if we are to match its powerful and exciting impulses with our own.

## LETTER TO PETER AND ALISON SMITHSON

*Richard Hamilton*

16th January 1957

Dear Peter and Alison,

I have been thinking about our conversation of the other evening and thought that it might be a good idea to get something on paper, as much to sort it out for myself as to put a point of view to you.

There have been a number of manifestations in the post-war years in London which I would select as important and which have a bearing on what I take to be an objective:

*Parallel of Life and Art*

(investigation into an imagery of general value)

*Man, Machine and Motion*

(investigation into a particular technological imagery)

Reyner Banham's research on automobile styling

Ad image research (Paolozzi, Smithson, McHale)

Independent Group discussion on Pop Art-Fine Art relationship

House of the Future

(conversion of Pop Art attitudes in industrial design to scale of domestic architecture)

*This is Tomorrow*

Group 2 presentation of Pop Art and perception material attempted impersonal treatment. Group 6 presentation of human needs in terms of a strong personal idiom.

Looking at this list it is clear that the Pop Art/Technology background emerges as the important feature.

The disadvantage (as well as the great virtue) of the TIT show was its incoherence and obscurity of language.

My view is that another show should be as highly disciplined and unified in conception as this one was chaotic. Is it possible that the participants could relinquish their existing personal solutions and try to bring about some new formal conception complying with a strict, mutually agreed programme?

Suppose we were to start with the objective of providing a unique solution to the specific requirement of a domestic environment e.g. some kind of shelter, some kind of equipment, some kind of art. This solution could then be formulated and rated on the basis of compliance with a table of characteristics of Pop Art.

Pop Art is:

Popular (designed for a mass audience)

Transient (short-term solution)

Expendable (easily-forgotten)

Low cost

Mass produced  
Young (aimed at youth)  
Witty  
Sexy  
Gimmicky  
Glamorous  
Big business

This is just a beginning. Perhaps the first part of our task is the analysis of Pop Art and the production of a table. I find I am not yet sure about the “sincerity” of Pop Art. It is not a characteristic of all but it is of some – at least, a pseudo-sincerity is. Maybe we have to subdivide Pop Art into its various categories and decide into which category each of the subdivisions of our project fits. What do you think?

Yours,

*(The letter was unanswered but I used the suggestion made in it as the theoretical basis for a painting called Hommage à Chrysler Corp., the first product of a slowly contrived programme. R.H.)*

## THE ARTS AND THE MASS MEDIA

*Lawrence Alloway*

In *Architectural Design* last December there was a discussion of “the problem that faces the architect to-day – democracy face to face with hugeness – mass society, mass housing, universal mobility.” The architect is not the only kind of person in this position; everybody who works for the public in a creative capacity is face to face with the many-headed monster. There are heads and to spare.

Before 1800 the population of Europe was an estimated 180 million; by 1900 this figure had risen to 460 million. The increase of population and the industrial revolution that paced it have, as everybody knows, changed the world. In the arts, however, traditional ideas have persisted, to limit the definition of later developments. As Ortega pointed out in *The Revolt of the Masses*: “the masses are to-day exercising functions in social life which coincide with those which hitherto seemed reserved to minorities.” As a result the élite, accustomed to set aesthetic standards, has found that it no longer possesses the power to dominate all aspects of art. It is in this situation that we need to consider the arts of the mass media. It is impossible to see them clearly within a code of aesthetics associated with minorities with pastoral and upperclass ideas because mass art is urban and democratic.

It is no good giving a literary critic modern science fiction to review, no good sending the theatre critic to the movies, and no good asking the music critic for an opinion on Elvis Presley. Here is an example of what happens to critics who approach mass art with minority assumptions. John Wain, after listing some of the spectacular characters in P. C. Wren’s *Beau Geste* observes: “It sounds rich. But in fact – as the practised reader could easily foresee . . . it is not rich. Books with this kind of subject matter seldom are. They are lifeless, petrified by the inert conventions of the adventure yarn.” In fact, the practised reader is the one who understands the conventions of the work he is reading. From outside all Wain can see are inert conventions; from inside the view is better and from inside the conventions appear as the containers of constantly shifting values and interests.

The Western movie, for example, often quoted as timeless and ritualistic, has since the end of World War II been highly flexible. There have been cycles of psychological Westerns (complicated characters, both the heroes and the villains), anthropological Westerns (attentive to Indian rights and rites), weapon Westerns (Colt revolvers and repeating Winchesters as analogues of the present armament race). The protagonist has changed greatly, too: the typical hero of the American depression who married the boss’s daughter and so entered the bright archaic world of the gentleman has vanished. The ideal of the gentleman has expired, too, and with it evening dress which is no longer part of the typical hero-garb.

If justice is to be done to the mass arts which are, after all, one of the most remarkable and characteristic achievements of industrial society, some of the common objections to them need to be faced. A summary of the opposition to mass popular art is in *Avant Garde and Kitsch* (*Partisan Review*, 1939, *Horizon*, 1940), by Clement Greenberg, an art critic and a good one, but fatally prejudiced when he leaves modern fine art. By kitsch he means “popular, commercial art and literature, with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, il-

illustrations, advertisements, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap-dancing, Hollywood movies, etc.” All these activities to Greenberg and the minority he speaks for are “ersatz culture . . . destined for those who are insensible to the value of *genuine* culture . . . Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academic simulacra of *genuine* culture welcomes and cultivates this insensibility” (my italics). Greenberg insists that “all kitsch is academic,” but only some of it is, such as Cecil B. De Mille-type historical epics which use nineteenth-century history-picture material. In fact, stylistically, technically, and iconographically the mass arts are anti-academic. Topicality and a rapid rate of change are not academic in any usual sense of the word, which means a system that is static, rigid, self-perpetuating. Sensitiveness to the variables of our life and economy enable the mass arts to accompany the changes in our life far more closely than the fine arts which are a repository of time-binding values.

The popular arts of our industrial civilization are geared to technical changes which occur, not gradually, but violently and experimentally. The rise of the electronics era in communications challenged the cinema. In reaction to the small TV screen, movie makers spread sideways (CinemaScope) and back into space (Vista Vision). All the regular film critics opposed the new array of shapes, but all have been accepted by the audiences. Technical change as dramatized novelty (usually spurred by economic necessity) is characteristic not only of the cinema but of all the mass arts. Colour TV, the improvements in colour printing (particularly in American magazines), the new range of paper back books; all are part of the constant technical improvements in the channels of mass communication.

An important factor in communication in the mass arts is high redundancy. TV plays, radio serials, entertainers, tend to resemble each other (though there are important and clearly visible differences for the expert consumer). You can go into the movies at any point, leave your seat, eat an ice-cream, and still follow the action on the screen pretty well. The repetitive and overlapping structure of modern entertainment works in two ways: (1) it permits marginal attention to suffice for those spectators who like to talk, neck, parade; (2) it satisfies, for the absorbed spectator, the desire for intense participation which leads to a careful discrimination of nuances in the action. There is in popular art a continuum from data to fantasy. Fantasy resides in, to sample a few examples, film stars, perfume ads, beauty and the beast situations, terrible deaths, sexy women. This is the aspect of popular art which is most easily accepted by art minorities who see it as a vital substratum of the folk, as something primitive. This notion has a history since Herder in the eighteenth century, who emphasized national folk arts in opposition to international classicism. Now, however, mass-produced folk art is international: Kim Novak, *Galaxy Science Fiction*, Mickey Spillane, are available wherever you go in the West. However, fantasy is always given a keen topical edge; the sexy model is shaped by datable fashion as well as by timeless lust. Thus, the mass arts orient the consumer in current styles, even when they seem purely, timelessly erotic and fantastic. The mass media give perpetual lessons in assimilation, instruction in role-taking, the use of new objects, the definition of changing relationships, as David Riesman has pointed out. A clear example of this may be taken from science fiction. Cybernetics, a new word to many people until 1956, was made the basis of stories in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1950. SF aids the assimilation of the mounting technical facts of this century in which, as John W. Campbell, the editor of *Astounding*, put it, “A man learns a pattern of behavior – and in five years it doesn’t work.” Popular art, as a whole, offers imagery and plots to control the changes in the world; everything in our culture that changes is the material of the popular arts.

Critics of the mass media often complain of the hostility towards intellectuals and the lack of respect for art expressed there, but, as I have tried to show, the feeling is mutual. Why should the mass media turn the other cheek? What worries intellectuals is the fact that the mass arts spread; they encroach on the high ground. For example, into architecture itself as Edmund Burke Feldman wrote in *Arts and Architecture* last October: "Shelter, which began as a necessity, has become an industry and now, with its refinements, is a popular art." This, as Feldman points out, has been brought about by "a democratization of taste, a spread of knowledge about non-material developments, and a shift of authority about manners and morals from the few to the many." West Coast domestic architecture has become a symbol of a style of living as well as an example of architecture pure and simple; this has occurred not through the agency of architects but through the association of stylish interiors with leisure and the good life, mainly in mass circulation magazines for women and young marrieds.

The definition of culture is changing as a result of the pressure of the great audience, which is no longer new but experienced in the consumption of its arts. Therefore, it is no longer sufficient to define culture solely as something that a minority guards for the few and the future (though such art is uniquely valuable and as precious as ever). Our definition of culture is being stretched beyond the fine art limits imposed on it by Renaissance theory, and refers now, increasingly, to the whole complex of human activities. Within this definition, rejection of the mass produced arts is not, as critics think, a defence of culture but an attack on it. The new role for the academic is keeper of the flame; the new role for the fine arts is to be one of the possible forms of communication in an expanding framework that also includes the mass arts.

## MIXED MEDIUMS FOR A SOFT REVOLUTION

Thomas B. Hess

A lively, in places a brilliant exhibition, titled "New Mediums – New Forms," at the Jackson Gallery [June 6-24], informally poses one of the most interesting questions that concerns modern art 1960. It assembles free-standing works and reliefs made of sponge, wood pegs, tacks, a smashed fender, folded paper, ping-pong balls, playing cards, spikes, a stuffed chicken, a cut-out bird, tar, garter-belts, coffee-grounds, a railroad tie, styrofoam, polyesters, corrugate, pillows, an electro-magnet – rubbish and valuables, "garlic and sapphires in the mud . . ." Chronologically the start is ancestral objects by Arp, Schwitters, Calder (but where is St. Marcel?); there are established artists whose works here seem brimming with dignity – Cornell, Dubuffet, Mallery, Zogbaum; there are the latest "sensations" from just below Tenth Street and the far-out colonies of the Coast and Continent. Quality is as varied as materials. Bare-foot crypto-Bohemian farce and art-student efforts elbow their ways through works of severe insight and hard-won originality.

Previewing the exhibition in a spare room (that looked like *Citizen Kane* directed by a Collyer Brother) hardly afforded the opportunity for leisurely observation. But the jumble made the issue of the show even clearer: a great many artists today seem dissatisfied with the basic limits of Art, not for esthetic reasons, but for social ones. There is a kind of protest in many of these works, but it is not against the values of middle-class society as were the Dada manifestations. Rather the new protest is in favor of society – or for People in general – and against the invisible, crystal-hard barriers that an oil-on-canvas or a sculptured-sculpture place between the witness and the finished object. It is as if many of these artists were trying to reach out from their works to give the spectator's hand a good shake or nudge him in the ribs. You are invited to touch and move things, open hinged boxes, switch playing cards around, to rearrange "compositions": be a participant – *homo ludens* – in a game with art. The only rule kept is that there must be at least two people in each game – artist and onlooker. One gets the feeling that many of these works could die of loneliness. Thus it follows, it seems to me, that the human (i.e. ethical) quality of the audience will directly affect and modify the esthetic quality of the work. Art becomes an event and its audience's response is a function of art's equation – indeed it is the X which the artist wants to keep unknown and, in so doing, gambles his work on each pair of eyes and hands with which it collides. To over-simplify: such a work might be handsome and amusing among a group of artists and disgusting and boring at a chi-chi private viewing – depending on who is in attendance.

Not all the works in the exhibition, of course, break with that ambiguous *stasis* which has been the strength and the purity of the fine arts since long before its definition by Aristotle and which will endure until generations from now. Cornell and Mallery, for example, by the perfection itself of their craft and vision (you must look closely at the parts to see the logic of their unities), re-establish a "distance," a remoteness of art. This separation, magic quality of scale, exists in the lush imagination that is behind Rauschenberg's "combine" and Zogbaum's throne for a boulder. It is present, elsewhere, too. But an attack on the aristocracy of art by and with art is the main point of the exhibition –

although “attack” is too aggressive a noun for the witty, ingratiating social activity to which so many of these works are dedicated. Is there, perhaps, a new collective dive into sociology, into the streets, to the crowded sidewalks where barricades have become only romantic souvenirs? A soft Revolution? It is a subject to which this writer hopes to return in a more extended observation.

## **JASPER JOHNS**

*Robert Rosenblum*

The situation of the younger American artist is a particularly difficult one. If he follows too closely the directions established by the “Old Masters” of that movement inaccurately but persistently described as Abstract Expressionism or Action Painting, he runs the risk of producing only minor embellishments of their major themes. As an alternate approach, he may reconsider the question of a painting’s reference to those prosaic realities banished from the Abstract Expressionist universe. Like many younger artists, Jasper Johns has chosen the latter course, yet unlike them, he has avoided the usually tepid compromise between a revolutionary vocabulary of vehement, molten brushwork and the traditional iconography of still lifes, landscapes, or figures. Instead, Johns has extended the fundamental premises rather than the superficial techniques of Abstract Expressionism to the domain of commonplace objects. Just as Pollock, Kline, or Rothko reduced their art to the most primary sensuous facts – an athletic tangle of paint, a jagged black scrawl, a tinted and glowing rectangle – so, too, does Johns reduce his art to rockbottom statements of fact. The facts he chooses to paint, however, are derived from a non-esthetic environment and are presented in a manner that is as startlingly original as it is disarmingly simple and logical.

Consider his paintings of the American flag. Suddenly, the familiar fact of red, white, and blue stars and stripes is wrenched from its everyday context and forced to function within the rarified confines of a picture frame. There it stands before us in all its virginity, an American flag accurately copied by hand, except that it now exists as a work of art rather than a symbol of nationalism. In so disrupting conventional practical and esthetic responses, Johns first astonishes the spectator and then obliges him to examine for the first time the visual qualities of a humdrum object he had never before paused to look at. With unerring logic, Johns can then use this rudimentary image as an esthetic phenomenon to be explored as Cézanne might study an apple or Michelangelo the human form. But if this artistic procedure of reinterpreting an external reality is essentially a traditional one, the variations on Johns’ chosen theme seem no less extraordinary than its first pristine statement.

To our amazement, the American flag can become a monumental ghost of itself, recognizable in its tidy geometric patterns, but now enlarged to heroic size and totally covered with a chalky white that recalls the painted clapboards of New England houses. No less remarkable, this canvas-flag can be restored to its original colours, but unexpectedly con-

sidered as a palpable object in space from which two smaller canvas-flags project as in a stepped pyramid. Or in another variation, the flag, instead of being tripled outward into space, can be doubled vertically, coloured an arid slate-gray, and painted with erratic and nervous brushstrokes that threaten the dissolution of those once immutable geometries of five-pointed stars and parallel stripes.

If we expect to salute flags, we expect to shoot at targets. Johns, however, would have us realize that targets, like flags, can be the objects of esthetic contemplation and variation. The elementary patterns of concentric circles, as recreated by Johns in a monochromatic green or white target are to be stared at, not aimed at, and offer the awesome simplicity of irreducible colour and shape that presumes the experience of masters like Rothko, Still, and Newman. Again, as with the flags, this symbolic and visual monad can be transformed and elaborated. Such is the case in another target, whose circles are painted in different colours and whose upper border is complicated by a morbid exhibition of plaster body fragments. Or then, there is a target drawing in which, as in the double gray flags, the impetuous movement of the pencil disintegrates the circular perfection of the theme. Johns' capacity to rediscover the magic of the most fundamental images is nowhere better seen than in his paintings of letters and numbers. In "Gray Alphabets" he makes us realize that the time-worn sequence of A to Z conveys a lucid intellectual and visual order that has the uncomplicated beauty and fascination of the first page of a children's primer. Similarly, the "Gray Numbers" presents another chart, whose inevitable numerical patterns are visually translated into that ascetic geometric clarity so pervasive in Johns' work. At times, Johns even paints single numbers, as in "Figure One," in which the most primary of arithmetical commonplaces is unveiled as a shape of monumental order and a symbol of archetypal mystery. Such works look as though they might have been uncovered in the office of a printer who so loved the appearance and strange meaning of his type that he could not commit it to practical use.

If the almost hypnotic power of most of Johns' work is in part the result of his disconcerting insistence that we look at things we never looked at before, it is equally dependent upon his pictorial gifts. In general, he establishes a spare and taut equilibrium of few visual elements whose immediate sensuous impact is as compelling as the intellectual jolt of monumental flags and targets in picture frames; and his colours have a comparable clarity and boldness. Nor should his fastidious technique be overlooked. Most often he works with a finely nuanced encaustic whose richly textured surface not only alleviates the Puritanical leanness of his pictures, but emphasizes the somewhat poignant fact that they are loved, handmade transcriptions of unloved, machine-made images. Although Johns has devoted most of his young career to the manipulation of target, flag, number, and letter themes, he has also made many other discoveries. There are, for example, the chilly expanse of mottled gray geometries that becomes a tombstone for the Victorian poet whose name seems to be carved at its base; and the small open book, transformed from reality to art by the process of painting, and therefore concealing, the print on its page, and by fixing its mundane form in a position of heraldic symmetry within a framed box. And no less inquisitive about the interplay between art and reality are the "Drawing with Hooks," an intellectual and visual speculation on the curious mutations of two- and three-dimensional illusions when a canvas with two projecting hooks is viewed from both the front and the side; and the more recent "Thermometer," in which painted calibrations, fixed by the artist's brush, permit us to read on a real thermometer those fluid variations of temperature determined by nature rather than by art.

It remains to be said that Johns' adventurous inquiries into the relationship between

art and reality have often been equated with Dada, but such facile categorizing needs considerable refining. To be sure, Johns is indebted to Duchamp (if hardly to other, more orthodox Dadaists), whose unbalancing assaults on preconceptions were often materialized in terms of a comparably scrupulous craftsmanship, yet he is far more closely related to the American Abstract Expressionists. For if he has added the new dimension of prosaic reality to their more idealized realm, he has nevertheless discovered, thanks to them, that in the mid-20th century, the simplest visual statements can also be the richest.

## **From AFTER ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM**

*Clement Greenberg*

The crux of the matter of the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism has, in any case, little to do with influence in itself. Where artists divide in the last resort is where safe taste leaves off. And this is as true in what begins to look like the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism as it ever was. The painters who follow Newman, Rothko, or Still, individually or collectively, are as safe by now in their taste as they would be following de Kooning or Gorky or Kline. And I have the impression, anyhow, that some of those who have chosen to do the first, and not the second, have done so because they feel frustrated, merely frustrated, by the going versions of Abstract Expressionism in New York.

This applies even more, I feel, to those other artists in this country who have now gone in for “Neo-Dada” (I except Johns), or construction-collage, or ironic comments on the banalities of the industrial environment. Least of all have *they* broken with safe taste. Whatever novel objects they represent or insert in their works, not one of them has taken a chance with colour or design that the Cubists or Abstract Expressionists did not take before them (what happens when a real chance is taken with colour can be seen from the shocked distaste that the “pure” painting of Jules Olitski elicits among New York artists). Nor has any one of them, whether he harpoons stuffed whales to plane surfaces, or fills water-closet bowls with diamonds, yet dared to arrange these things outside the directional lines of the “all-over” Cubist grid. The results have in every case a conventional and Cubist prettiness that hardly entitles them to be discussed under the heading “After Abstract Expressionism.” Nor can those artists, either, be discussed under this heading whose contribution consists in depicting plucked chickens instead of dead pheasants, or coffee cans or pieces of pastry instead of flowers in vases. Not that I do not find the clear and straightforward academic handling of their pictures refreshing after the turgidities of Abstract Expressionism; yet the effect is only momentary, since novelty, as distinct from originality, has no staying power.

## POP ART AND AFTER

*Jasia Reichardt*

In England the interest in “pop art,” as it has been called during the past year, has been quite unprecedented. In view of the fact that its exponents are very young, i.e. in their early twenties, the general enthusiasm for their work has been something of an event. Today when we speak of “pop art,” we don’t think of the original meaning implied when the term was first invented nearly ten years ago.

Contrary to general belief, pop art did not come from the U.S.A., it was born in England. Lawrence Alloway first coined the phrase “pop art” in 1954, and his exact definition of what it meant was very different from the meaning ascribed to it now. When Alloway spoke of “pop art” he meant: advertisements in glossy magazines, posters outside cinemas, leaflets, pamphlets, all give-away literature forcefully communicating a single message. He meant, in fact, the whole paraphernalia of public art – art made by the few for the many, not for its own sake but for the sake of what seems to be naively speaking, an ulterior motive. Thus, pop art accompanied one during breakfast, on the way to work, during one’s leisure hours and it infiltrated its way into one’s dreams, forcibly and inevitably. Had Alloway, instead of using the term “pop art” coined another phrase, say, “visual pop kicks,” or “mass pop samples,” the controversy which involves the use of the word “art” with veneration for traditional meaning, instead of assigning to it a completely new significance, the current revival of figurative painting in England would have been called something else. Perhaps it would have been called “big city folk art.”

In 1952 in London, a group of young artists, writers and architects used to meet at the Institute of Contemporary Arts for discussions and lectures. In order to stress their affiliation with the avant garde, and with history in the making rather than with that already set down in books, they called themselves the Independent Group. Among them were Peter Reyner Banham, Richard Hamilton, Lawrence Alloway, Eduardo Paolozzi, William Turnbull, Nigel Henderson, Sandy Wilson, Edward Wright, Toni del Renzio, John McHale, Theo Crosby, Alison and Peter Smithson, John Voelcke, Jim Stirling, and others. The subjects discussed by the group included philosophy, science, and later, cybernetics, information theory, communications, mass media, fashion, “pop” music and industrial design. The first convenor of the group, 1952/53, was Reyner Banham. In 1954 Alloway and McHale became joint convenors, and by 1955 the talks included such subjects as violence in the cinema, by Alloway, and American automobile styling, by Reyner Banham; ensuing discussions took place in 1952, when Eduardo Paolozzi showed what he then called “found images,” projected on a screen. The “found images” consisted mostly of advertising material which, when isolated and enlarged, seemed to acquire a new meaning and a new significance. Later the architect Peter Smithson also organised a similar evening using publicity material. The first exhibition to make use of this sort of subject matter took place in 1953 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts under the title “Parallel of Life and Art,” and was organised by Paolozzi and Smithson.

The preoccupation of the group with mass media was a socially significant sign. A new sort of respectability descended on such lightweight and intellectually undemanding material as science fiction and cowboy movies. The very notion of culture changed before

one's eyes, and time hitherto afforded for the discussion of a "Western." The unlimited communication assailing one in the form of radio, television, reading matter, had forced its way into one's consciousness and could not be ignored. In 1955, John McHale went to the U.S.A. and when he came back some months later he brought with him a trunk full of glossy magazines: *Esquire*, *Mad*, *Playboy*, etc. These provided much material for discussion. At the time the group looked to America as the source of a new and unexpected inspiration, as a romantic land with an up-to-date culture, a hotbed of new sensibility in art.

One person on whom the glossy American literature made a tremendous impact was Richard Hamilton, who later became the initiator of "pop art" in England. Hamilton's definition of pop art was rather different from Alloway's. Whereas Alloway did not envisage pop art as fine art at all, nor as anything that called upon one's really creative instincts. Hamilton used the term to describe the sort of source material the artist was drawing on in making his *own* imagery, which was creative in every sense of the word.

The first piece of work in pop art idiom (according to Hamilton's definition) was shown in 1956 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in an exhibition called "This is Tomorrow." The exhibition set out to show the possibilities of collaboration between an architect, a painter and a sculptor in making a visually meaningful environment. The exhibition included twelve sections designed and prepared by twelve different teams which included three or four people each. It was an attempt to draw the viewer into a work of art as an environment, rather than to show him an *objet de vertu* on the mantelpiece. The exhibition aimed at destroying the notion that art is precious and sacrosanct, and set out to present it as a space in which the viewer becomes involved and implicated. Accompanied by complicated and longwinded statements, pronouncements, and all the other items that traditionally go with the making of manifestos, the exhibition made its point that art was an integral part of life. As an art event, "This is Tomorrow" was a real shot in the arm, but the stand which was long remembered as the most extraordinary and strange was designed by Richard Hamilton, John McHale, and John Voelcke (architect). Hamilton wrote in the catalogue: "We resist the kind of activity which is primarily concerned with the creation of style. We reject the notion that 'tomorrow' can be expressed through the presentation of rigid formal concepts. Tomorrow can only extend the range of the present body of visual experience. What is needed is not a definition of meaningful imagery but the development of our perceptive potentialities to accept and utilise the continual enrichment of visual material."

Hamilton contributed a pop art collage of which a very large photostatted version dominated the entrance to the exhibition. The items in the collage included cut-outs of glamour girls, a strip cartoon, tape recorder, vacuum cleaner, tinned food, television, advertisements, furniture, and a muscle-man in the centre holding an object in the shape of a lolly-pop with "pop" written on it in large letters.

Courbet said a hundred years ago that "an artist must concern himself with his own time." When Hamilton on January 16th, 1957 wrote down a definition of what pop art is and what it can contain, he was following Courbet's dictum. Hamilton wrote: pop art is –

- popular (designed for a mass audience)
- transient (short term solution)
- expendable (easily forgotten)
- low cost
- mass produced
- young (aimed at youth)

witty  
sexy  
gimmicky  
glamorous  
big business

In his own work Hamilton combined the formal clichés of glamour anthology (be it feminine, masculine, appertaining to a city or a motorbike) with abstract considerations of pictorial structure. Typical of his early and recent work is that nothing happens in his painting-collages without a clearly defined reason or a discernible source. For instance, if one may wonder about the significance of a row of dotted lines appearing in the picture – it is certain that their presence is not incidental or of a purely pictorial function, but that they had appeared in some other form in an advertisement or a poster from which some other section of the painting had originated. In a strange sort of way one could assign to Hamilton the function of an editor who collects material and quotations and later transforms them into something else, without ever forgetting their original source or function. Basically all his elements, however disparate they may seem, are related at source. His paintings have always been characterised by exactitude and precision, and the only ambiguity from advertising and publicity material to Hamilton's paintings is never explicit.

One might ask: what has Chrysler Corporation to do with an artist living and working in London who has, moreover, never been to the States? When Hamilton painted his *Hommage à Chrysler Corp.*, which was, in fact, his second pop art painting, he had simply made a statement about the presence of new demi-gods that the post-war generation of artists had elected. If Hamilton was living in Yugoslavia he might have painted an homage to Ford. However, living in England where Ford is a common commodity, he chose as the subject for his homage a car manufacturing corporation that epitomised the ethos of a country he had never visited. He was painting an imaginary representation of something that was essentially an unknown quantity and that carried the romantic associations of a materialistic heaven.

In 1960, at the annual Young Contemporaries exhibition held in London – which contains the work of art students submitted from the whole of Great Britain – a group of young painters who were at that time students at the Royal College of Art showed a number of works which included allusions to pop art imagery. Their preoccupation with figuration was a violent departure from the abstract tendencies of the generation immediately before them. The three most important influences evident in the work of these young artists were R. B. Kitaj (an older student at the Royal College who was preoccupied with historical and social events as sources for his imagery), Richard Hamilton, and Peter Blake (an ex-College student who had created a personal, romantic art form in which he incorporated Victorian valentines, dolls, mementos of the music hall and likenesses of popular vocalists). The group of young painters asserted their position firmly within one year, and at the end of 1961 their work created a considerable amount of interest in the John Moores Liverpool biennial. The “pop art” title was bandied about in connection with these young painters, although it soon became quite clear that they resented it. Among those working in this new figurative idiom who had so quickly distinguished themselves were: Derek Boshier, David Hockney, Brian Wright, Anna Teasdale, Allen Jones, Peter Phillips, Howard Hodgkin, Norman Toynton, Pauline Boty, John Bostead, and others.

There are several reasons why the title pop art is a misnomer when applied to them

collectively. First of all, their social consciousness is fairly dormant – that is, with the exception of Boshier – and if they incorporate such pop art elements into their work as advertisements, pin-ups, targets, toothpaste, bikinis, motorbikes and newspapers, their treatment of these elements is almost purely romantic. Yet, to present these artists collectively as the new English romantic movement would be equally erroneous, for the name does not take into account the spirit of whimsy with which so much of the work is imbued. In a recent exhibition in which six of the above mentioned painters took part at the Grabowski Gallery, their statements (which appeared in the catalogue) clearly indicated that the paintings were based on personal experiences translated in a very obvious and direct way. The intellectual process which transposes events into symbols, metaphors, or geometry is totally absent. Instead, the emotional response to environment takes over, magnifying those elements which have had the greatest impact on the artist, and ignoring others which, incidentally, may have a greater universal significance. A modern fable has emerged which has been endorsed by these young artists. A myth in which the real princess is not discovered as in Andersen's tale by her sensitivity to a dried pea that was placed under the tenth mattress, but by her ability to answer the question why one should use toothpaste brand A rather than brand B, without actually believing in her reply. Glamour, advertising, a certain amount of cynicism, are all public commodities which have been turned into private dreams and fantasies.

In one sense, one could refer to the work produced by these artists as urban folk art. And indeed the essential quality of folk art is often persistent, but whereas folk art is made by the many for the many, the elements of pop art (such as publicity material) are made for mass consumption by the few. The artist too is a consumer. The consumer of brand goods as well as of easily obtained and cheap entertainment, which allow him to enter into the spirit of the time without involving such issues as politics, economics, social problems, and religion. With the exception of Boshier, who has painted very few pictures that did not bear references to the space race, the others have solely made use of entertainment-industry topics, or of such pedestrian articles as playing cards, newspapers, disc sleeves, games, etc., which are then imbued with that particular spirit of irreverence characteristic of all these paintings.

Derek Boshier with his rainbows, pin ball machines, guns, and little pink figures inevitably turning into inanimate objects and shapes, has been concerned more with the social significance of events, and for this reason his work is concerned with rather more serious issues than that of the others. Anna Teasdale in her fragmented paintings with references to an industrial city life has quoted visual images from reality, which like pieces of jig-saw puzzle fit into a routine of somebody's life. In her subject matter she comes closest to the preoccupation with social realism of painters like John Bratby and Jack Smith some six years ago. Peter Philips has taken the whole gamut of the colours and symbols of the fair; from its pot-luck and brashness he has created fantasies that are now rather distant from the themes which first inspired them. Howard Hodgkin has presented modern man with Victorian pomposity. He has made a melodrama out of nothing, conveying the ridicule of a man who despite the number of layers of clothing he wears is always naked inside and always vulnerable. Specialising in the literary translation of imaginary events which are usually triggered off by some personal escapade is David Hockney, who has already had a considerable amount of success in London. His paintings have the irresistibility of allusions to passion in the form of small tokens and shared secrets. Nothing very dangerous, but just sufficiently naughty for the viewer to get the feeling of conspiracy. Hockney's special kind of whimsy presents the fears and hopes that most people

have but lack either the language or the coherence to voice. With a certain amount of self-indulgence, Hockney has touched our sensibilities with strange accuracy. Allen Jones's allusions to real events are very tenuous. In the painting entitled *The Battle of Hastings* he makes reference, through symbols, to a state of tension. The title refers simply to the preoccupation of his students at the time he was painting the picture with that particular historical event. In his *Bikini Baby* the process of fragmentation has left only a suggestion of what might or could have happened to the theme. This is a good example of literary theme being lost through the process of pictorial presentation. Norman Toynton has translated such symbolic events as *The Temptation of St. Anthony* into purely personal and subjective experiences. Often the events in the story are presented simultaneously within one canvas and occasionally supplemented by written comments. Brian Wright's paintings have contained rather more cryptic references to outside happenings. One of his best works was based on the theme of a recurrent nightmare in which two elements, a flower and a rock, became the symbols of menace.

What is interesting about these young artists, who lack neither courage nor eloquence, is that they say neither No nor Yes to the world. They don't accept things as they are, they make fun of them, they make use of them out of context, but they don't rebel against anything. They have made use of every scrap of information, news, emotion, publicity, bad luck, etc., that comes their way. Like hungry animals they have swallowed the world wholesale, and quickly forgetting its meaning they continue to lead their own lives and to play their own games.

This art must be taken at its face value, because a search for deeper meaning would be fruitless at the moment. So far, the contribution of these artists is a sly irony, well-aimed whimsy, and some individual talent. The new figuration movement which has captured the public eye to such an extent is still in the embryo stage. Only the next ten years will tell whether something exceptional can emerge from art under this much used and mis-used heading, pop art.