Pop Art as Consumerist Realism

David Kunzle

By 1960 over half the employed white population in the United States was engaged in white-collar or service occupations; only 36 percent were defined as blue-collar workers.[1] Of the white-collar workers, the overwhelming majority were engaged in health, education, research, and government. The process of industrialization, which in the nineteenth century moved people into industrial production, in the present century is moving them away from it, progressively attenuating the physical relationship of the majority to the actual production of goods.

Abstract Expressionism

Avant-garde art has correspondingly been concerned less with the physical reproducton of visual and tangible realities than with psychic and cerebral processes. These have presented all the more challenge to the artist, in that the irrational components in them have surfaced, during world wars and other political crises, into social reality itself. In order to deal with this irrationalism, art has oscillated between extreme forms of abstraction and dematerialization, on the one hand, and highly distorted and exaggerated forms of realism and materiality on the other, not infrequently manifested in the same work. At the one pole, artists sought inner-directed mental and psychic energy; at the other, a sublimation of outer-directed physical energy. In the postwar era, abstract expressionism sought to reconcile the two poles with an art abstract in content and physically energized in form. This was believed to represent a kind of creative quintessence with the violence and gratuitousness of the physical gesture conveying pure and naked spiritual energy. The work of art stood as an emblem of the transformation of a once-material, once-functional object, a painting, into a state of pure creative gesture, which retained, however, highly sublimated symbolic connections to the physical effort traditionally or atavistically associated with nonartistic economic production—labor. The act of painting renders the idea of physical labor in a form as far removed as possible from the modern, labor-associated concepts of discipline and uniformity. Abstract expressionist art attempts to replicate what is conceived of as the primal energy displayed by primitives in pretechnological labor, combined with the spontaneous aggressiveness of the hunter or tribal warrior.

The appeal of abstract expressionism is as a form of cultural atavism. At the same time it imposes a unique body-autograph in an increasingly machine-dominated and labor-alienated era, restoring the otherwise missing stamp of human personality to the human-made artifact. It arose in the United States at a time of rapid economic growth, increased personal affluence for the majority, and the global extension of United States military power.[2] All this was accompanied by an attrition, among American people at large, of a sense of social responsibility, of commitment to collective effort, which had been generated by the struggles against the Depression and Fascism.[3] The majority acquiesced in what appeared to be the unimpeded functioning of a natural law of the free market. In these circumstances, the solipsism and asceticism of avant-garde art constituted a refuge for the suppressed conscience of a cultural elite disturbed by naked competition for personal wealth, while the aggressive and individualistic nature of that art was actually in fundamental conformity with the ideology upon which the competitive society was based.

By 1960, faith in salvation through increasing personal wealth and the acquisition of consumer goods was beginning to erode. There began to appear studies critical of the march of consumerism and of manipulation by advertising, television, and the mass media generally—studies which achieved a wide circulation.[4] The milk of that sacred cow, the American Way of Life, and its ideology were turning sour. As the cold war thawed, Communism was seen less as a direct physical and military threat than as a psychological and ideological rival feeding upon the vast pockets of poverty located around the world, which were as yet not cured by the United States. Ideological cracks began to show at home. The intensified economic penetration of the Third World, accompanied as it was by a thickening of its philanthropic veneer, reflected the suspicion that the absorptive capacity of the domestic market was, after all, limited. Advertisers as well as producers of consumer goods upped the ante. The impoverished foreigner had to be persuaded that progress and happiness lay in the acquisition of United States–produced soft drinks and television sets; virgin, once-sterile lands in remote countries were seeded with the fruits of American democracy. At home, the awful possibility of psychological and physical saturation by consumer goods was countered by even harder, more cunning, and more insidious selling techniques. In the United States people continued

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to buy, but more anxiously. Their consumption of the new and ever more sophisticated luxuries was tempered by the uncertainty of whether they were really needed, how much they really contributed to the individual's total happiness, and whether they did not create a prison of escalating personal indebtedness. In other words, the straightforward process of acquiring things, the once simple relationship of owner and thing owned, was undermined. Ownership of objects no longer conferred feelings of power. Consumers as well as producers began to examine motivations, becoming conscious of media pressures even while continuing to yield to them. As acquisition and possession became ends in themselves, they lost their organic relationship to personal lives, and their historic role of conferring feelings of power. Major luxury goods, like automobiles and refrigerators, lost even their social meaning as status symbols as they came within the financial reach of the majority. In these circumstances, the apprehension, latent ever since the very beginnings of the monetary economy, that purchase of luxuries as opposed to barter of necessities vitiates social relations became acute and neurotic. When production is the act of unidentifiable persons or agencies, when selling is known to be motivated exclusively by greed, and when acquisition is totally detached from necessity, there arises a psychological crisis of a magnitude in direct proportion to the efficiency and ruthlessness of the producing and selling process.

By the late fifties works of art were figuring increasingly on the roster of luxury consumer goods. Those who could afford a second car could afford to pay several thousand dollars for a single painting. The postwar era saw a burgeoning market in the United States both for Old Masters and works by living American artists. Works of art had one inestimable advantage over cars and other such conveniences: they did not wear out or become obsolete. They did not lose their value economically or socially. They were an investment, and became, through a change in law, a tax write-off, and thus effectively paid for out of the public purse. This law was to have far-reaching consequences and become a means of consolidating the crucial decisions about support for the arts in the hands of the rich.[5]

The desire to acquire art for purposes of investment and status derived from that same core of uncertainty about the relationship of real needs to the consumer goods which were swallowing up an increasing share of total personal income. Works of art were seen as objects of permanent aesthetic significance and monetary value, which compensated for the spuriousness, obsolescence, and dispensability of all the other stuff. Art constituted a growing, if relatively tiny corner in an investment market dominated by the stock of corporations of unfathomable immensity. Income derived from such stocks seemed as impersonal as the corporations themselves, which were increasing both their power and their remoteness by means of transnational, global movements. The new art patrons, many of them newly rich, were the managers and professional servants of these industrial behemoths, part cog and part control lever in essentially dehumanized and anonymous economic systems.[6] The art object, by contrast, connoting that intensely individual and rebellious presence—a presence both psychological and physical—communicated values richly compensatory for the meaninglessness of work and the leisure derived from work.

Abstract and abstract expressionist styles offered a vehicle of compensation and a refuge, but only temporarily. Inevitably, the style which proclaimed enduring values, but whose success depended on the freshness of its break with preceding styles, would itself be superseded; art was subject to the same fundamental economic laws as any other luxury object on the market, with the difference that the rhythm of turnover was slower. The coalition of artists, critics, gallery owners, media people, educators, and museum personnel, the first beneficiaries of the new all-American boom in art, were able to summon up traditional formalist concepts and "universal values" in order to prolong the life of a style, even as they planned, like good corporate executives, and recruited for the next swing in the market of artistic taste. Consensus was reached to maintain the reputation and value of certain styles and image-types, whose longevity was ensured through constant variations, multiples, and prints. Among others, Robert Indiana, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and most remarkably of all, perhaps, Ernest Trova have produced a kind of staple product, which only needs renewal through fresh label design, packaging, or marketing techniques.

Pop Art and the New Realism

Around 1960, then, consumerism entered a new, defensive-aggressive phase, demanding more than the outright escape offered by abstract and abstract expressionist styles. Psychologically, it needed a form of confrontation, out of which another, more sophisticated kind of refuge might be formed. This pseudo-confrontation was provided by pop art and the New Realism which served to co-opt criticism and absorb anxiety, and the effect of which would eventually be to roll back the growing disaffection from the consumerist ethic. Pop art, under a cloak of humor and irony, may be said to have constituted a kind of victory celebration of consumerism, which was also the victory of Americanism—what Robert Indiana proudly called

Americasm. The visual and literary rhetoric of this celebration, moreover, was couched in a so-called universal language, and was thus suited to the Third World, where consumerism and the American Way of Life, rather than parliamentary democracy and the American way of government, seemed the quicker answer to Communist insurgency.

The inward thrust of art was spent; or, rather, its negative character was exposed, and with it the futility of its attempted escape from the inescapable implications of America's great outward economic and cultural thrust. Art sought a share in power, or to bathe in the reflection of power. The most significant new art movements of the sixties and seventies—op, kinetic, machine, happening, performance, world game, earth, concept—have all reflected this outward thrust and moved to appropriate, sometimes symbolically, sometimes in grandiloquent gestures of physical realization, the concepts and processes of technology, scientific research, ecology, social engineering, and psychological conditioning. These art movements represented more or less utopian fantasy bids to wrest control of social and physical environments from the "military-industrial complex," whose power everyone, following President Eisenhower who first used the term, agreed must be curbed. (Minimal art, on the other hand, has conducted an implicit critique of these pretensions, and a fundamental retrenchment of the concept of art as a visually consumable object.)

Pop art was perfectly adapted to a preliminary stage of this great fantasy of appropriation, of this symbolic bid for power, because of the low-level reality and democratic availability of the consumer objects it represented. Here at last, rather than in the gloomy, introspective, self-consciously American abstract styles, was launched a truly universal aesthetic based on a global reality, an aesthetic which could play amusingly upon the supposed universality and the admitted triviality of United States popular culture, which during the sixties was being exported literally all over the world: from T-shirts to monumental sculpture, Mickey Mouse and Coca-Cola circulated from Venezuela to Vietnam. The objects in which the home-country consumers no longer fully believed became the subject of artistic sublimation, being peddled not just into the home but right into the heart of the aesthetic consciousness. This artistic sublimation was the cultural equivalent of what I would like to term a form of economic sublimation: that is, the compensation for threatening saturation of the domestic market by expansion into an overseas market. In these terms, consumer goods were sent up to colonize art at the moment of threatening psychological saturation, just as they were sent out to colonize the world at the moment of threatening economic saturation at home. And, inevitably and automatically, the

Figure 1 Claes Oldenburg at his one-man show at the Green Gallery, New York, 1962.

image of the cultural artifact shared the status of international currency accruing to the real thing. Indeed, it did more, it acted as an advertisement for the real thing; wealthier people paid to see and buy, just as their children, wearing emblazoned corporate T-shirts, paid to act as walking advertisements. The distinction between the image and the real thing, or the real advertisement for the thing, was one of context rather than form. The United States–dominated international art market, discreetly aided and abetted by industrial corporations and government agencies, ensured that pop art received international exposure, just as it had done previously for abstract expressionism, but with increased energy and efficiency.

The pop art object, considered as a form of advertising for the real consumer object, played in the realm between the superhard and supersoft sell. It could be physically gigantic, like an Oldenburg hamburger (Figure 1), or physically deflated, like a Lichtenstein hotdog. Whatever the scale or treatment, it was able to suggest what the better artists on Madison Avenue were already applying: superficial glosses of self-criticism, irony, and detachment, elements deriving from the new soft sell theory.

Pop art from the outset posed as a form of criticism, and it did so on two levels: the aesthetic and the social. On the aesthetic level, it was hailed as flouting all previous artistic tradition, abstract expressionism in particular. Pop art was an iconophile blast at abstract expressonist iconoclasm. On the level of social criticism, pop art has been seen as an iconoclastic blast at consumerist iconophilia, parodying billboard vulgarity, commenting ironically, perhaps satirically, on the consumerist ethic itself. It was even said of Warhol that he was engaged in an "anaesthetic revolutionary practice."[7] Harold Rosenberg has suggested that if pop art is not social as well as aesthetic criticism, if it is without political content, it "is like a vessel purposely built to be kept empty." We may go further and say that pop art is like the Coca-Cola bottle it has emblematized—always empty be-

cause it is made *without a bottom*, so that we can pour into it our feelings of the moment, without the bottle's ever filling up or overflowing, and without those feelings meeting any resistance or gaining any shape. The ever-empty bottle of pop art absorbs criticism without resisting, without confirming, without even registering. Its social success lies in its evasiveness, which post pop, especially in the work and philosophy of Warhol, has raised to an absolute rejection of responsibility.

While it clearly resists interpretation as overt satire on consumerism, pop art is not so evasive and ambivalent that it excludes the opposite interpretation. Pop art is eulogized as a magnificent affirmation of consumerist values by John Rublowsky (1965), in a monograph with a pop style and academic format, which broadly characterizes the phenomenon as "of universal appeal and validity . . . because it goes beyond mere nationalism to reflect a universal aspiration which has its most highly realized (. . . vanguard) development in America. Coca Cola, the supermarket, hot dogs and hamburgers, mass-produced automobiles and appliances, rock and roll, canned foods, television . . . represent a goal [of] emerging nations as well as the more advanced European countries."[8] This is the same mentality which takes the number of United States–made television sets in refugee camps as the index of their comfort and the availability of Coke as proof of progress.[9] Rublowsky continues, "With the pop movement, American art becomes truly American for the first time, and *thus* becomes universal . . . [a] unique vision and inspiration from the mythogenic forces generated by a new social and economic reality" [stress added]. Grounds enough, these, to offer pop art, like the consumerism it reflects, as the global currency. Rublowsky closes with a vision of the American Herrenvolk, proud progenitors of an art "rude and boisterous, [which] expresses the American confidence and swagger of a new tradition that feels it is master of the world."

In the foreword to the same book, the director of the Philadelphia Institute for Contemporary Art sings the praises of American capitalism, which has produced an art "unashamedly inspired" by "the joys of the assembly line, and its evocation of commercial advertising reflects the joy and mirth of today's scene. . . . [The] satisfaction comes from the acceptance of oneself and of our mechanized and impersonal world." This kind of language clearly protests too much, and confirms our view that pop art, like much pop art criticism, is designed to paper over profound ideological cracks, and in order to do so, lends itself to the parroting of hopelessly discredited views of American society.

The pop art object was rendered in two contrasting ways, corresponding to two contrasting levels of perception of the originals as consumer articles. By the reductive method—of Warhol and Lichtenstein (Figure 2)—the representation was made as flat, uninviting, and unsensuous as possible, emphasizing the reproductive technique, and the art object as twice-processed—as reproduction of a reproduction. This style corresponded to the idea of some disaffection with the original article, its usefulness or the way in which it is sold. The opposite style, embodied in Oldenburg, enlarged and inflated the object in three dimensions, rendering it in luscious colors and in a sensuous artificial material like vinyl, which consecrated the look and feel and idea of the thing as an essentially synthetic food designed to give the illusion of substance. This style corresponded to a kind of emotional embrace of the consumer object in which any latent disaffection is smothered in associations that are part sensuous, part aesthetic, and include regressive childish and magical components.

To these consumer reactions, in which are mingled those of the artist as consumer of the original and the audience as consumer of both the original and the art, we must add the feelings pop art generates in the artists and, vicariously, in the audience, as *producers*, manufacturers, and marketers of consumer objects. We may use the same polar models of representation. The flattened, nonsensuous, twice-processed, and essentially impersonal look stands for a sense of the impersonality of assembly-line mass production; the serial effect used in so deadly a way by Warhol contributes ideas of monotony, uniformity, quantity, and the essential meaninglessness of the difference between the infinite number and the single item, which become one and the same thing—the essential meaninglessness, too, of the difference between soup flavors, soup colors, and soup label. The mass is the message of the single soup can and grid of soup cans in the art gallery or supermarket. Enjoy the distinction of eating the ten-million-and-first MacDonald's hamburger. The idea of vast quantity, inconceivable magnitude, predicated upon a single and individual choice also underlies the opposite pop art look, that of Oldenburg, who seems to be parodying and glorifying the marketing expert's fantasy projection of the ideal consumer: childish, credulous, easily seduced, filled with bottomless greed.

The artist now poses not merely as artist (an inadequate and in some ways discredited role) but as a real producer-retailer of consumer objects to the people. Oldenburg, in his *Store* (Figure 3) fantasizes himself as a manufacturer and storekeeper, with nostalgia for the days when things were casually laid out, when the man who sold was the man who made, and who sold not just for gain but to give pleasure.[10] But, out of the short-lived fantasy of the *Store*, Oldenburg is the mini-entrepreneur who delegates labor (his wife sews the vinyl), as is Lichtenstein, whose assistants paint the benday dots, and as are so many

other contemporary artists. Warhol goes one better in the matter of delegation, that cardinal principle of late capitalism: he delegates absolutely everything, even his thinking. He needs distance, he says, in order to oversee the whole (actually, in order not to see or experience it at all), conjuring up new pseudo-realities out of his (actually, other people's) head. The art object in the Warhol orbit arises from a kind of immaculate conception, for it is mysteriously and magically willed into being and marketed by myth.

Warhol's myth is of a special kind. It is a myth which mythifies demythification. Warhol is like one of those self-destroying objects, whose self-destruction is applauded as an act of revelation. Warhol—Factory Owner-Manager, Captain of Art-Industry—through his words and deeds reminds us of a banal fact: the captains of our economic industries do not really create, they merely manipulate the forces of production; nor do they act as individuals, but rather as more or less loosely knit groups which try to guide those forces in the direction most profitable to themselves. Their very anonymity, their invisibility to the public eye, protects them from the pressures and hostility which are deflected onto our spongelike politicians. Art critics and the media have acclaimed in Warhol a porous kind of personality which facilitates the process: a cult of anonymity, a gigantic ordinariness, a pretended powerlessness, a kind of creative sterility or passivity which we, the great American consumer, are believed to share. His ordinariness is allegedly ours, his boredom is our boredom; his evasion of moral responsibility is ours. But *our* illusion, that out of this boring, sterile, irresponsible existence can come fame, wealth, and myth—that is *his* reality.

That the cult of banality could be elevated to the highest social success justified the fundamental contradiction of capitalism and absolved the guilt of it: "He [Warhol] offered . . . absolution, the gaze of the blank mirror that refuses all judgment."[11] We—or critics and the media on our behalf—have brought into being a new species of antihero, who seemed the more necessary in that the real heroes failed us: the guerrilla fighters allowed themselves to be killed, some committed apostasy, others simply faded back into the bushes of conformity. That Warhol, this antihero, should have been shot at the very moment when a real political hero (Robert Kennedy) was shot to death, is a supreme historical irony. Valerie Solanas said she shot Warhol because he, who claimed to abdicate control over everybody and everything, had too much control over *her*. She also shot his work, which has been shot publicly and symbolically in a popular poster, showing the lifeblood oozing out of the soup can of high art/consumerism (Figure 4). The potshot of a $2 poster at the $60,000 "masterpiece."

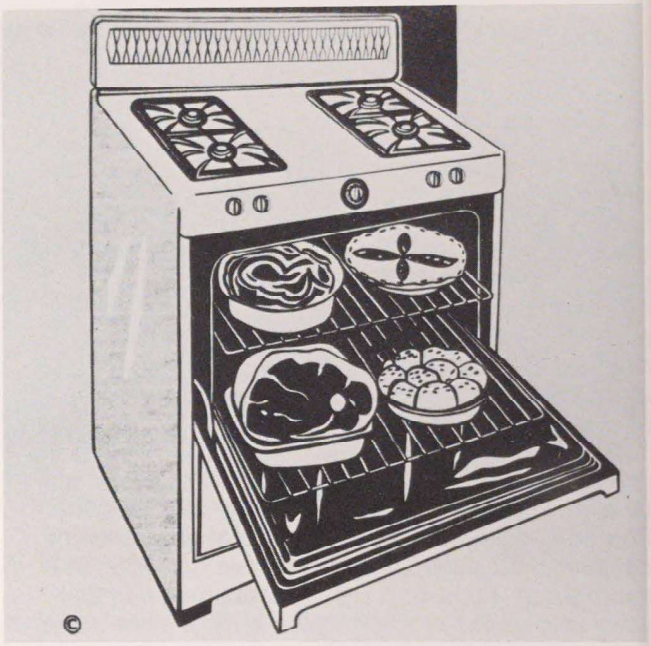


Figure 2 Roy Lichtenstein. *Stove with Food,* 1961. (From Waldman 1971.)

In its self-conscious embrace of the everyday, pop art was set up as an audacious repudiation of traditional artistic values. But, with that intellectual legerdemain peculiar to a certain breed of critic adept at having their cake and eating it, pop art was viewed as opposed to tradition and at the same time embodying the finest and most universal formal values derived from that tradition. It would seem that while generally having rejected the Old Masters, the vanguard artists at the same time compare very favorably with those they have rejected. According to Christopher Finch (1968:46), Jasper Johns beer cans "share the qualities of a Vermeer with those of beer cans." But Johns is more than Vermeer ever was, for he also resembles "the Renaissance humanist struggling to unlock the exact meaning of a Latin phrase." For this same author, the *car crashes* of Warhol are comparable in their classicism, sense of tragedy, and detached attitude to violence to Poussin's *Landscape with a Snake*. For Rublowsky, the abstract expressionists are in the "final stage of development that began when Leonardo da Vinci urged students to seek beauty in urine stains on the walls" (ibid.:65). The significance of the fact that Rublowsky should remember this very famous passage from Leonardo's *Notebooks* as mentioning *urine* stains, when Leonardo actually says damp stains, may be left to the students of Freudian slips. The significance is perhaps more serious in another distortion of that same passage; Rublowsky makes Leonardo urge students to seek *beauty* in the stains, where in fact Leonardo merely offers their random shapes as a stimulus to the imagination, not as beautiful form in itself.

The indiscriminate use of the Old Masters and the

Figure 3 Claes Oldenburg. *Store,* 1961.

values they transmit in order to promote contemporary art has a precise parallel in, and may indeed indirectly derive from, that kind of consumer advertising which uses reproductions and names of famous artists in order to sell totally unrelated products. It would be very fitting if all art critics found guilty of misappropriation of art-historical funds were condemned to be buried with their books in Los Angeles' Forest Lawn Cemetery, which has misappropriated so many artistic monuments from the past.

This frivolous pillage of history is intended to elevate contemporary art, presumably because it is so sorely in need of it. But it would be naive to ignore the fact that the outrageous quality of many of these comparisons is consciously designed—like the fulsome descriptions and metaphors of dishes on the menus of popular restaurants—to titillate and amuse by its sheer presumption. Yet there is a serious question of intellectual fraud here, and when it becomes really monstrous, we stifle our anger in laughter. In a very large and handsomely produced book written by an influential museum administrator, Diane Waldman's on Roy Lichtenstein, we find that this artist's selection of a schoolbook, called *Composition One,* "has evoked reminiscences of Courbet, whose choice of a *related* subject, the common man, was also considered outrageous in its time [my stress]" (Waldman 1971:15). Actually, if there is a comparison to be made along these lines, it is not between Lichtenstein's schoolbook and Courbet's common man, but between today's blind critical eulogy of the most trivial art and the equally blind critical rejection

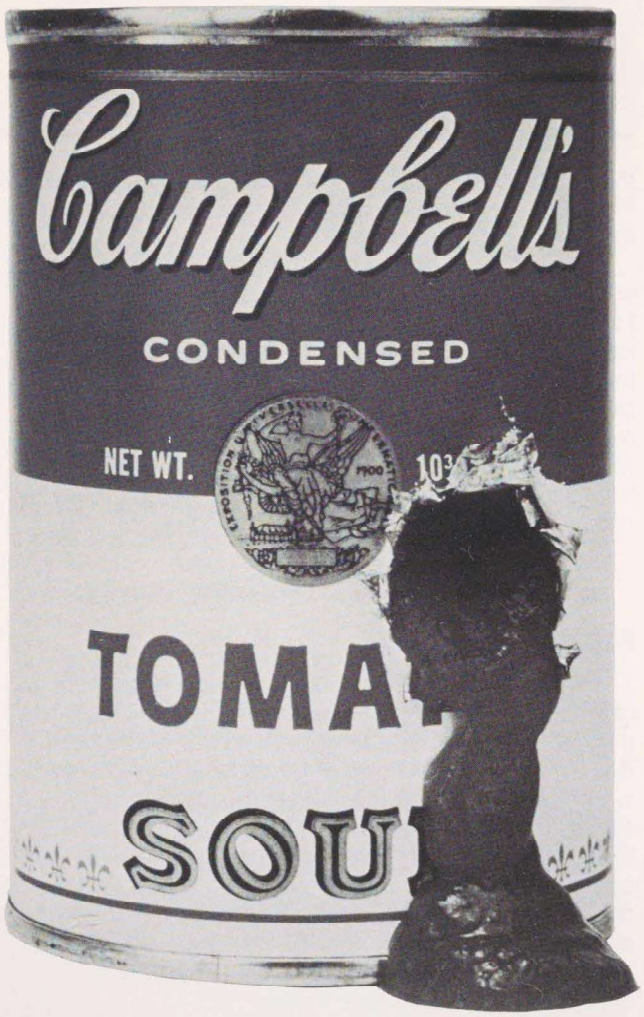


Figure 4 Dick Hess and Stettner Endress. *Shot Soup Can,* poster, ca. 1968.

in its time of some of the most serious art of the nineteenth century.

Waldman goes on to call Lichenstein's picture of a brush stroke a "response as emotional as was Ingres for his women, expressed with a *not unrelated* detached and rational style [my stress]" (ibid.:20). Ingres comes in for a worse beating in Ellen Johnson's book on Oldenburg. According to Johnson, Oldenburg's giant *Fagends* composition "recalls the voluptuous piling up of curved shapes in Ingres' *Le Bain Turc,*" which, she adds, "is difficult to look at without thinking of an overflowing ashtray."[12] This sort of thing is no mere art-historical misappropriation; it is art-historical character assassination. But wait for the second punchline: in the same sentence, these same giant fagends *also* recall Delacroix' *Death of Sardanapalus*. In the Oldenburg, as in the Delacroix, "eroticism is combined with violence, but the implications of shattered limbs in *Fagends* is more shocking than Delacroix' explicit representation of slaughter."[13] More shocking, therefore even better art.

There are other robbers of literary graveyards: thus Rainer Crone introduces his oeuvre catalog of Andy

Warhol (Crone 1970) with tidbits from Goethe, Flaubert, Valery, T. S. Eliot, and Brecht, all of whom come out in praise of Warhol.

By a law both economic and cultural, there was a spin-off by which the concrete social data op art had first processed was diversified. Abstract expressionism did not permit of such diversification, only of further reduction. Pop art demanded it, and political developments, world and domestic, beginning in the mid-sixties, broadened the base of social consciousness for it, enabling pop, post-pop, and the New Realism to embrace an ironic or mock-ironic view not only of hamburgers but of Vietnam as well.

Pop Art and Vietnam

The mass media did not see any essential difference between the one type of commodity or spectacle and the next; the My Lai massacre and the Manson murders, the face of Marilyn and the face of Mao—all were equalized by their saleability. Imagery of consumer commodities meshed with imagery of war; there was a diverting sameness and a pleasant incongruity about them. The new "politicized" pop used reproductions of political events preprocessed for mass consumption. In some cases the supposed intention was to shock those sensibilities which preferred to segregate Coke from Vietnam; in others, to prove that all sensibilities around this desire to segregate (or willingness to equate) were already blunted. Having affirmed the most banal aspects of society in the early sixties, pop art banalized or discountenanced the political struggle of the late sixties.

The war was a spectacle. This idea was readily internalized by an avant-garde long corrupted by market principles, although certain dissident phenomena, notably the Poster of Protest, forcefully denounced this internalization.[14] With what seems an uncanny prescience, just before Vietnam became a public issue, Roy Lichtenstein aestheticized—or anesthetized—the idea of the brutal bombing war in a number of gaudy and brash enlargements derived from war comics (Figure 5). The particular choice of the war comic is curious, because neither it nor its lay cousin, the horror comic, was considered the controversial moral issue it had been ten years before, at the time of the great campaign against the horror comics. But to those who had their feet in both camps—high and low art—who had a lingering memory of the controversy, and a lingering suspicion of the imagery of war and violence which continued to afflict all the other media, Lichtenstein's use of war comics seemed designed to dull the conscience by dignifying art which was morally as well as aesthetically low.

Those so disposed, of course, could see Lichtenstein as hilariously antiwar, magnifying inherently suspect imagery in order to ram its real content down our throats—and give us a good gag in the bargain. But Lichtenstein's models, the original war comics he chose, related implicitly or explicitly to an old war, the Nazi war, which stood at a safe distance—one in which history had already punished the villains and settled all the moral issues. There was no risk of reference to any of the current or recent United States "police actions" around the globe. Less evasive than pop art, the low-art medium, such as the explicitly imperialistic and militaristic *Terry and the Pirates*, was shortly to take up the new war in Vietnam and urge it onward (Figure 6), while Lichtenstein passed the slaughter by the wayside, turning to idyllic landscapes and parodies of other avant-garde art styles.

Lichtenstein has discouraged any kind of political interpretations of his war cartoons and other parodistic compositions by means of a careful separation of the man, who may privately hold strong political, antiwar opinions, and the art, which is after all art: "My personal opinion is that much of our foreign policy has been unbelievably terrifying, but this is not what my art is about and I don't want to capitalize on this popular [sic] position. My work is more about our American definition of images and visual communication."[15] As the Tom Lehrer song puts it: "Vunce ze rockets go up, who cares vere zey come down, zat's not my department, says Wernher von Braun."

Pop Art and Fashion

The Vietnam era was preceded by a "revolution" in sexual mores that was reflected in both art and fashion. Fashion, that is, haute couture, became more sexual, naked, visually dazzling, fetishistic. It increased its sensuous appeal by borrowing from avant-garde art—abstract, op, and pop—which, in turn, found in the fashion magazines potent sources of publicity and support. The high fashion consumerist image of the beautiful was incorporated by pop art in various ways: in the cool, antierotic downbeat of Warhol's *Mouths of Marilyn Monroe,* and in the hotter upbeat of Wesselman's enlarged mouths (see Figure 7), which were prominently featured in the high-fashion magazines as part of the campaign to sell the new range of lipsticks, the new mouth, the new face.[16] Oldenburg's work in this area, his giant lipstick for Yale University, for instance (Figure 8), is the most dynamic, psychologically as well as physically, of the

whole group of oral artists. His use of the phallic symbolism of the lipstick holder, which fashion advertising copywriters had long known about and capitalized on, meshed with the concurrent efforts of the industry to resexualize the mouth and render more explicit its labial-vaginal symbolism by plugging the wet-look lipstick, shown glistening and dripping, on temptingly parted lips (see Figure 9).

As fashion became more overtly fetishistic, with high-heeled lace-up boots, vinyl dresses, face masks, and slave jewelry, and the sexually explicit and deviant became more commercially viable in all the media, high and low art responded accordingly. The relatively flat, commercial pinup stereotypes of earlier pop yielded to more intense imagery. Richard Lindner achieved belated recognition for the perverse and fetishistic charge of his female icons; the English pop artist Allen Jones struck roots in the marshland of the sado-masochistic and fetish magazines he discovered in Los Angeles. Jones was stimulated by the representational method, which combined a surrealistic, mechanistic view of the human form with intense, repressed sexual emotion (Figure 10). He was particularly affected by the so-called *Nutrix* publications, which flourished nationwide, but more or less covertly, in the late fifties and early sixties, whose artists, before and quite independently of pop, had stylized figures and situations completely out of any feasible reality deep into the realm of fantasy (Figure 11). The publisher of the *Nutrix* series was eventually prosecuted and driven out of business, while the pop artist became celebrated—and rich—with expensive painted, printed, and sculptural realizations of Nutrix-style emblems. These seemed, around the political climax of 1970–1971, to represent pop's confrontation with real social issues, in the form of parody or endorsement or both at once, of the male supremacy fantasies castigated by burgeoning feminism. In the photograph, of course, the Allen Jones woman-as table idea seems rather mild and deflated compared with the grotesquely exaggerated "original" fetish illustration type.[17] Viewed at first hand, however, Jones's "sculpture" gains in visual intensity from the very precise craftsmanship of the cleverly adapted shop window dummy and the real, all leather fetish-corset and boots, made by a London specialist in such things. I cannot help concluding this comparison of high and forbidden art with the reflection that the forbidden kind, which tries to approximate the crudest and most inadmissible sado-masochistic, misogynistic, and self-destructive impulses, is essentially more honest than the high art, which, while also preying upon a grossly sexist core, seems more corrupt, more commercial (much more expensive, of course), and, in its formal realization, so much more calculated and slick.

Patriotism

The flag imagery of Jasper Johns in the fifties is regarded as a landmark of our pre- or proto-pop. There were certain minor legal problems attached to the use of United States flags, simulated or real, in art contexts lacking in overtly patriotic intent, but it does not seem that avant-garde appropriation of the Stars and Stripes (Figure 12) has suffered serious run-ins with the law, compared with real-life desecrations for purposes of political dissent, and in protest of the Vietnam war. Arrests and prosecutions of protesters "misusing" the United States flag were fairly common. The pop artist's purpose in using the flag, if it is to be politically construed, was affirmative: flags were sacred and familiar Americana, even before Coke bot-

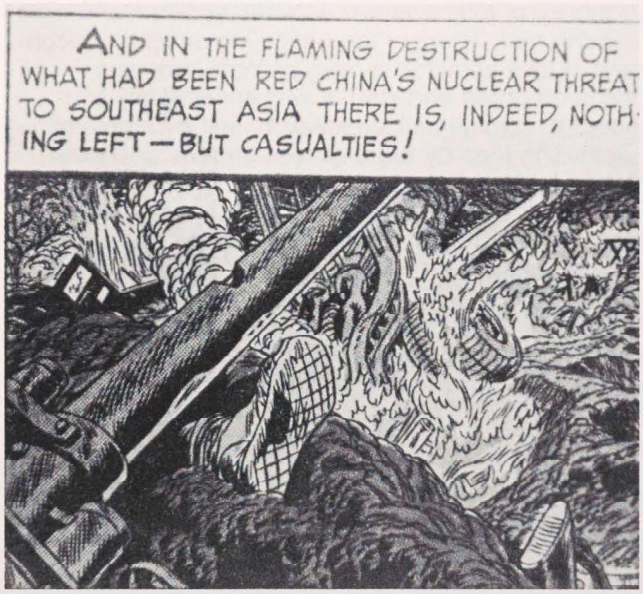


Figure 5 Milton Caniff. From *Terry and the Pirates* comic strip, ca. 1968.

Figure 6 Roy Lichtenstein. *Whaam!* 1963. Tate Gallery, London. Exhibition catalog, 1968.

tles and hamburgers and dollar bills. They were, like the latter, icons of the newly rediscovered American scene. The flag pictures of Johns and others (see Figure 13) give off an air of amused reverence and nostalgia; rearrangements were formalistic and anodyne, unlike those symbolic destructions practiced by designers of certain political posters in support of the peace movement who twisted the stars into a swastika and the stripes into prison bars, who concealed the flag behind bandit masks, who transformed it into statistics of genocide—this last process simple and striking enough to lend itself to realization in a real flag which, when carried in peace marches, actually provoked physical attacks from "patriotic" bystanders. One of the later flags in this line to be visualized by the counterculture hides, under cartoonlike wit, a prophecy of total civil war and destruction.[18]

In the early years of the peace movement, the concept of love acquired a new, political dimension (since co-opted and lost). It was immediately subjected to commercial exploitation, first by hippie minicapitalism, then by big business and the pop artist. Robert Indiana launched the new and universally acceptable four-letter word into the high-art world in a monumental and abstract form, and has since thrived from its use in various media (see Figure 14). As late as December 1972, this property, in immense enlargement, was serving not only as proof that the market for love was bigger and richer than ever, but also as a gallery advertisement, promoting the pleasant fiction that it was love, not interest, which formed the primary bond between the artist and the owner of the gallery he was contracted to. To which the counterculture makes a suitable reply (Figure 15).[20]

Another of Johns' proto-pop devices was the target, which he painted in various forms. It is, significantly, a *blank* target. What Johns deliberately leaves open (who or what is being targeted?) is filled in, once again, and turned around by the protest poster: it is the young American draftee who is the target, it is Uncle Sam who is doing the shooting. The famous Uncle Sam as recruiter, with his illusionistically pointing and accusing finger, which was conceived during World War I and helped send millions to their deaths, became, with the pop artist, an object of mere curiosity, an amusing gargoyle from the past, innocuous in itself and faintly absurd, especially when duplicated serially so as to resemble a wallpaper design.[20] The Poster of Protest, by contrast, turned the accusing finger back against the originator (Figure 16) in a gesture of defiance and rejection which was all the more necessary because the Pentagon, at that time, didn't need to make the rhetorical and moral appeals to voluntarism, contained in the old recruiting poster, but only to set in motion the deadly machinery of compulsion.

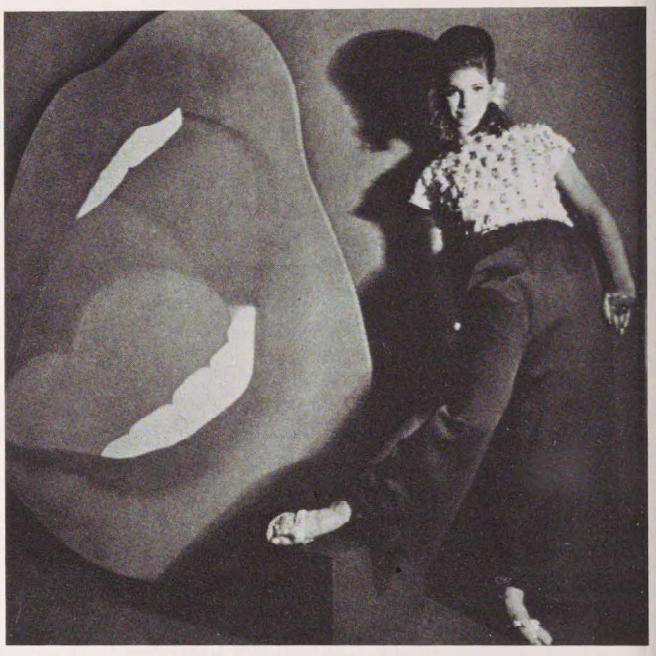


Figure 7 Tom Wesselman. *Mouth* (*Vogue,* November 15, 1966).

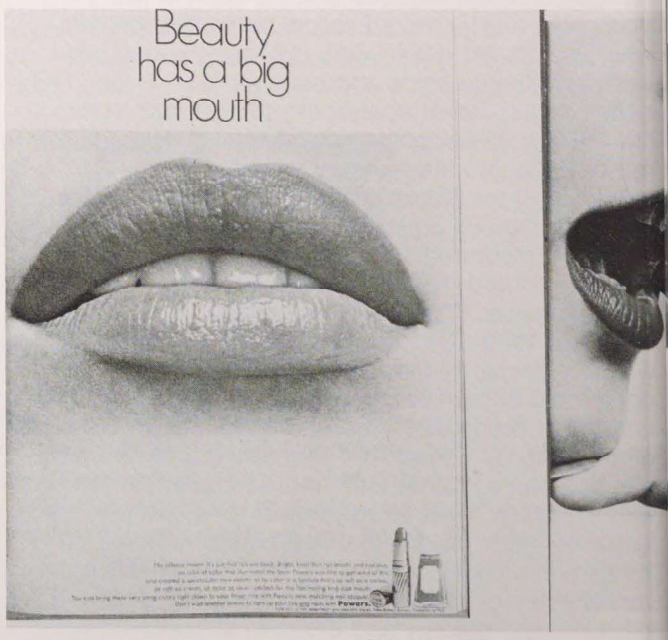
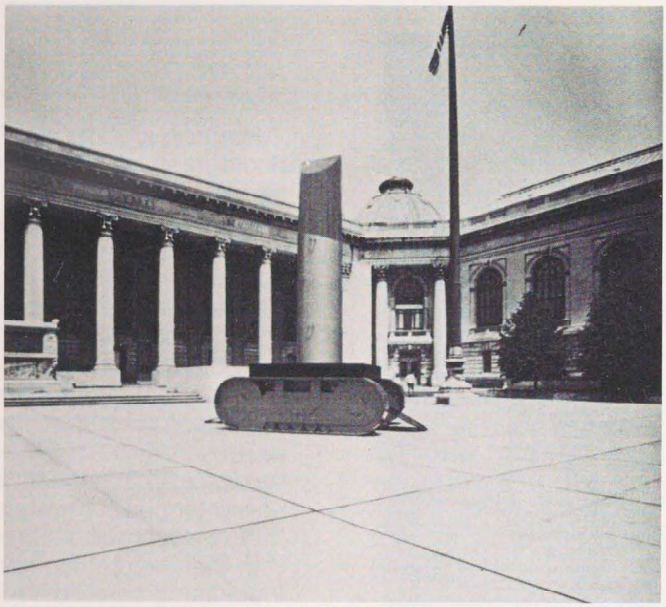


Figure 9 Lipstick advertisements, 1964–1965.



igure 8 Claes Oldenburg. *Lipstick on Caterpillar Tracks* for (refused by) Yale University, 1969.

The Vietnam war, which happened at the end of the great, relatively continuous postwar economic boom, threw the savagery of United States military conduct and the suffering of the "enemy" at the other side of the globe into sharp relief against the quiet luxuriance of the "good life" at home, where the moral imperative was still to keep consuming. For Americans, to eat was the official ideology, as well as the great compulsion biologically, economically, militarily. Eating, no longer functional, had to become art. America (U.S.) is the first society in history to have totally divorced eating from hunger, to have raised it to an icon. Pop art enshrined that icon, not as a mere image but as a social duty, with absolute (religious) injunctive force in a way which elides the distinction between commerce and art. This occurred at that great international political-commercial-artistic festival, the New York World's Fair, the year of the great escalation in Vietnam (Figure 17).

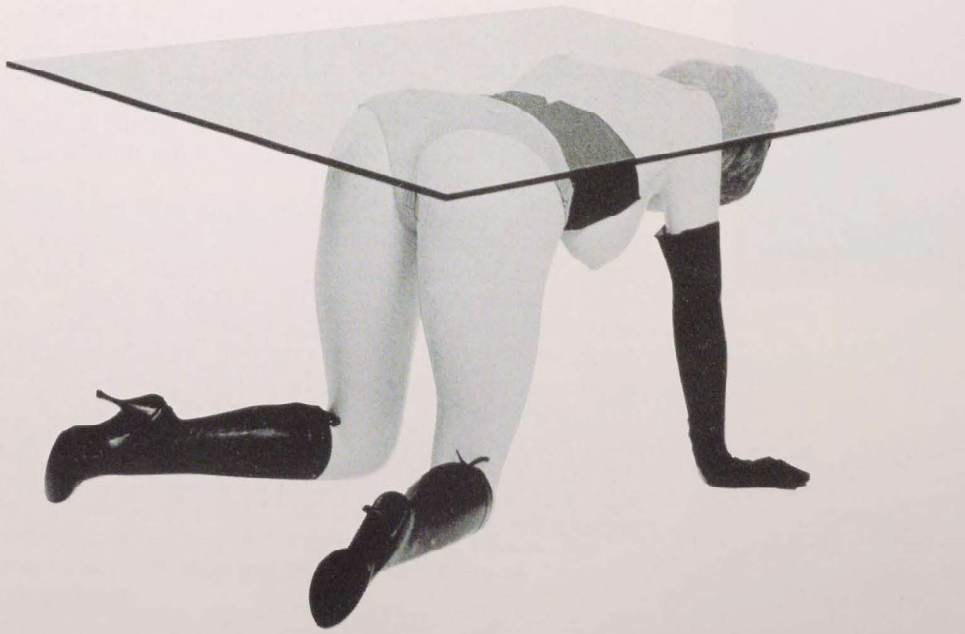
Our billboards and restaurant signs extol the great American freedom to eat mindlessly, selfishly, needlessly, and self-destructively. This "freedom," which is used as symbol and substitute for political liberty, when rammed down the throat of an impoverished Asian people, becomes an obscene, sadistic gesture of oppression (Figure 18). The popular poster which formulates this with more graphic wit than historical accuracy (the Vietnamese rejected this "freedom") is the work of a highly successful commercial artist and illustrator, sufficiently disturbed by the war to find its impositions distasteful.

Figure 10 *Nutrix* publications: "Unruly Slaves Bound in Steel," ca. 1960.

Postpop and the New Realism have appropriated photographic documentation of war abroad and violence at home. Typically, this was done in a fragmentary way, betraying the feeling that the war is just one of myriad fragments of reality obtruding upon our consciousness; at other times, the war photograph is reproduced entire and used for its dadaistic, anti-art shock effect. Either way it is depoliticized. The peace poster or poster of protest, however, used it as political indictment (see Figure 19). Savage photo collages contrast, for instance, the plight of a Vietnamese family half-drowned in the flood of a bombed dyke with a beautiful American fashion model caressing her own naked form in the waters of a river, to the caption, "This is the spell of Chanel for the bath."[21]

In the realm of high art, whatever the intentions of the artist, critical obfuscation takes charge of his or her work. The sculpture *Riot* by New Realist Duane Hanson (Figure 20) faithfully reproduces a photograph of police brutality, with its interpretation deliberately left open, so as to allow, it seems, for such critical subtleties as those of Udo Kultermann in his big New York Graphics book, *The New Realism.*[22] For Kultermann, this picture exemplifies the artist's role, which is to "present reality directly and emphatically while maintaining both coolness and objectivity." Such a view of reality has the proper "discipline" and "high seriousness" lacking in "propaganda" art (such as, presumably, the posters of protest, which denounced, satirically but openly, the war at home and abroad). Kultermann goes further: compared with the

Figure 11 Allen Jones. *Table,* 1969.



art of the twenties, much of which was conceived as a political weapon, "Today a work of art (of this "cool," detached kind) mirrors the greatest possible authentic knowledge of what happens and exists in reality." Duane Hanson's view of reality is more real than reality itself, because it is "an artistically constituted reality." Kultermann's argument rises in tighter and tighter spirals, but he finally comes to the nub of the matter: it is the artist and scientist, leaders in the "process of investigation into the true nature of reality," who reveal "knowledge of eternal forms which do not depreciate, but sustain our awareness of archetypes." The Duane Hanson view of police brutality is good because it reproduces nondepreciating, archetype-sustaining forms. I can only take this to mean that its function and virtue is to remind us that riots and police brutality going on in the present are all part of an eternal and archetypal process; therefore, the last thing we should do is to feel that something should be done to stop it. Politically reactionary and mystifying criticism, on the part of a much-published writer, could go no further.

The Third World

As we observed earlier, United States postwar modernist art, and particularly pop art and the art of that age, has been marketed in the Third World with resounding success. We may close by turning to Latin America, where the penetration of United States culture has seemed as irresistible as that of United States corporations. Harold Rosenberg, although a much more sophisticated and indeed skeptical critic than those we have cited hitherto, has furthered this process, and shares that desire for detachment, that yearning for purification of sociopolitical reality through aestheticism. The first chapter of his book *The Anxious Object* (1964), which deals with the Sixth Bienal in São Paulo, Brazil, speaks, in tones of astonishment mixed with admiration, of all the "Arab Pollocks," "Argentinian de Koonings," and "Ecuadorian hard-edge" painters exhibiting there. The phenomenon of surrender by Third World bourgeois artists to United States models is an occasion for wry admiration; the astonishment is that the foreigner should prove so adept at picking up American styles. Rosenberg establishes what he calls a "profound internationalism" and the "negation of cultural background" as the logical, necessary, and inevitable development in art at this point in history, but he does so without connecting it to the ruthless transnational economic thrust of this internationalism, with its concomitant systematic destruction of native cultures (in Brazil at that time, the genocide of Indian peoples was proceeding apace, as it still is).

That a major international art event, testifying to United States cultural hegemony, should be held in Brazil at that time is in itself significant, for Brazil was aspiring to the position which is now unquestionably hers: that of the major, expansionist subimperialist power on the Latin American continent, and the creole guardian of United States business and military interests. In reading Rosenberg's book, one has no idea, because Rosenberg carefully avoids the subject, what was convulsing Brazil in August-September 1961 (he does not even give this date). He does not tell the reader that the insurrection at that moment was of popular and progressive forces against the militaristic reactionaries, a struggle which managed to put into the Presidency the progressive João Goulart. (His regime was later ousted, in 1964, by the United States–backed Brazilian military and replaced by a fascistic dictatorship whose legacy remains.)

When the popular upheaval in favor of Goulart threatened the smooth running of the Bienal and all the social high jinks planned for it, Rosenberg adopted, self-consciously and with true *New Yorker* nonchalance, the pose of the aesthete miffed because his pleasures have been intruded upon. Rosenberg had come, so he says, determined to study the Bienal in terms of its audience as manifested in the social festivities planned for the opening gala—but the gala never came off. "Politics butted in. The President of the Republic resigned, students demonstrated, armored cars appeared on the streets of São Paulo." But Rosenberg, ever resourceful, decides to shift his approach. Despite the fact that the party was off, and even if the audience was no longer available in the proper form and circumstances for sociological and whatever else analysis, "the *art* was there. . . . Let the audience worry about revolutions and protocol . . . the paintings and sculptures had learned to speak over the heads of events."[23] Finding himself caught up in a revolution, the art critic summarily dismisses it and the students struggling in the streets: "With the human assemblage cancelled" (inside the museum—outside doesn't count) "it was left to listen in to what this multitude of objects and images had to say to one another."

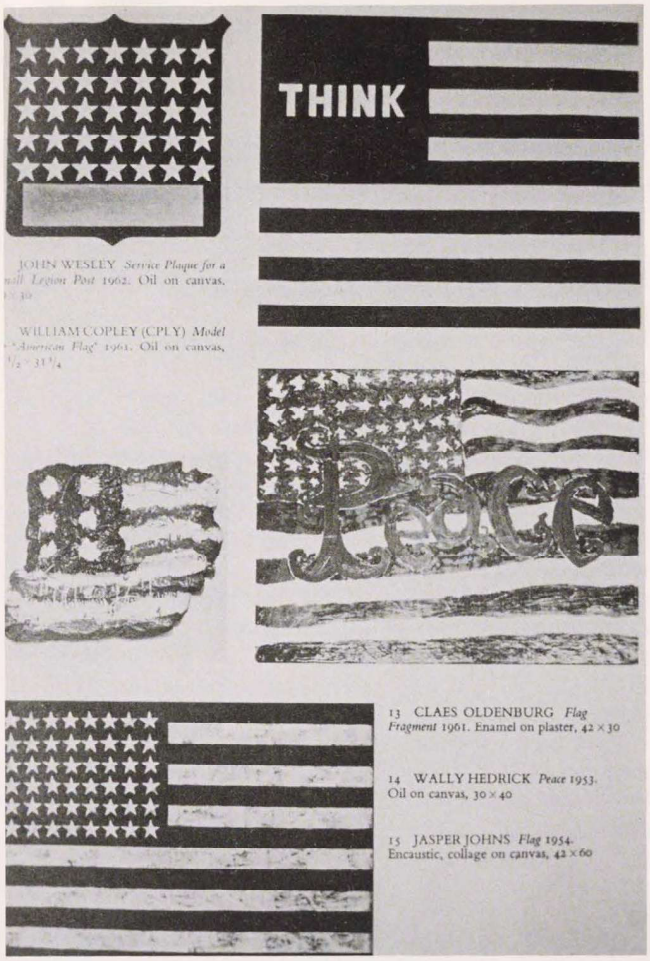


Figure 12 Pop art flags: page from Lucy Lippard, *Pop Art,* 1968.

Figure 14 Robert Indiana. Advertisement for gallery show, 1972.

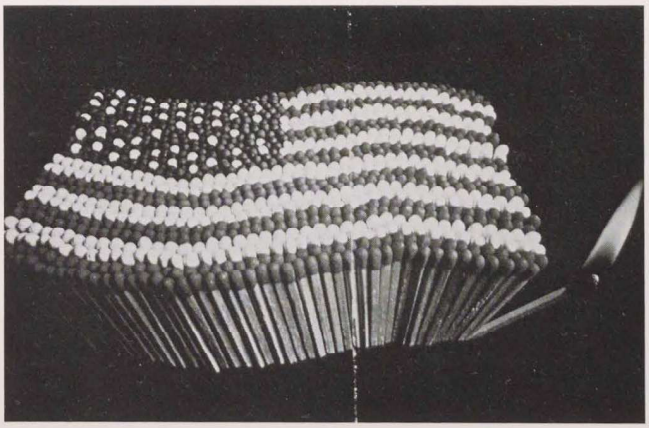


Figure 13 Bill Stettner. "Stars and Stripes forever?" poster, ca. 1970.

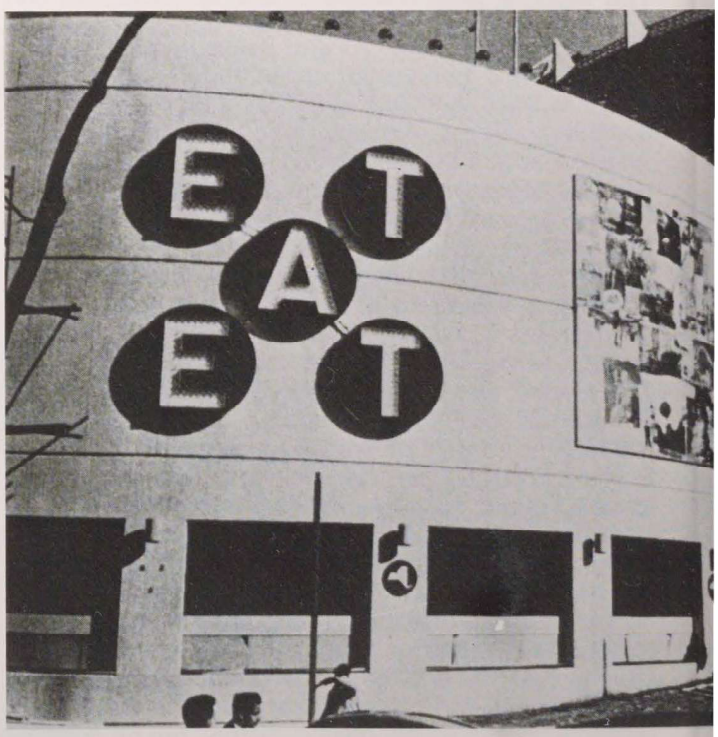
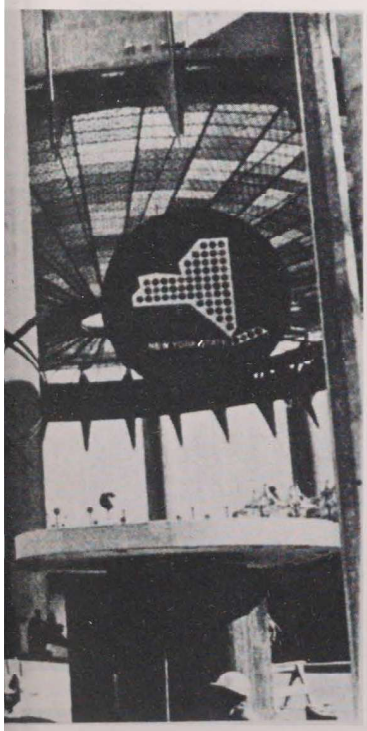


Figure 15 Anonymous poster, "SHIT," ca. 1969.

Figure 16 Anonymous poster, "Uncle Sam Wants You!" ca. 1969. ▶



▲ **Figure 17** Robert Indiana. "EAT," New York World's Fair, 1965.

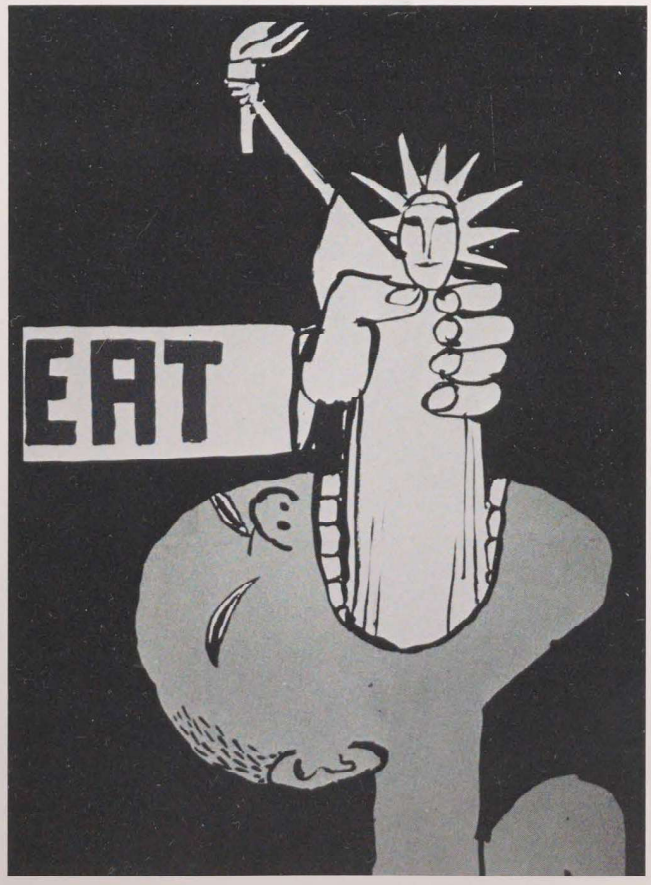


Figure 18 Tomi Ungerer. "EAT" poster, ca. 1968.

Solipsism

This is the new form of dialogue. We have progressed from the idea, which has long been a commonplace, that art speaks primarily to other artists, critics, and a few collectors, to that of art speaking to itself. This solipsism, this incest, represents not just an artistic and cultural but an economic philosophy. It lies at the very heart of the ethos of consumerism. The consumer object is to be judged and used, not on the basis of its being good in relation to a real need, but on that of its being better than or different from or bigger than its predecessors or rivals. The new car is roomier than the old one; brand X washes whiter than brand Y; the latest cigarette has less tar than all the others; Reagan is less corrupt than Nixon—no matter that the car is unsafe, the detergent pollutes, the cigarette causes cancer, or that politics breeds corruption—these considerations are irrelevant to objects marketed on the assumption that they relate only to themselves and their kindred.

So it is with art. This art exists by virtue of its dialogue with other art and other media, battening, at a safe aesthetic distance, upon human experience, or, rather, upon images already detached from and falsifying of human experience. Far from "acting in the gap between art and life" pop art, like much other avant-garde art, widens that gap and establishes consumerism as the bridge. Art which tries to elevate itself above the stream of history and the fabric of human struggle eventually raises itself out of human sight altogether.

Is pop art then already dead? No. Together with other devices of the avant-garde, it is like a weapon seized by guerrillas from an army of occupation and turned against the enemy. The pop art mouth, which celebrates the false ingratiation of our culture, becomes in the hands of the Third World, the Cuban artist for instance (Figure 21), the obverse to an authentic and historic pain. It is to this voice that we must listen.

Figure 19 Anonymous poster, 1968: "Our foreign policy . . ."

Figure 20 Duane Hanson. *Riot,* 1968.

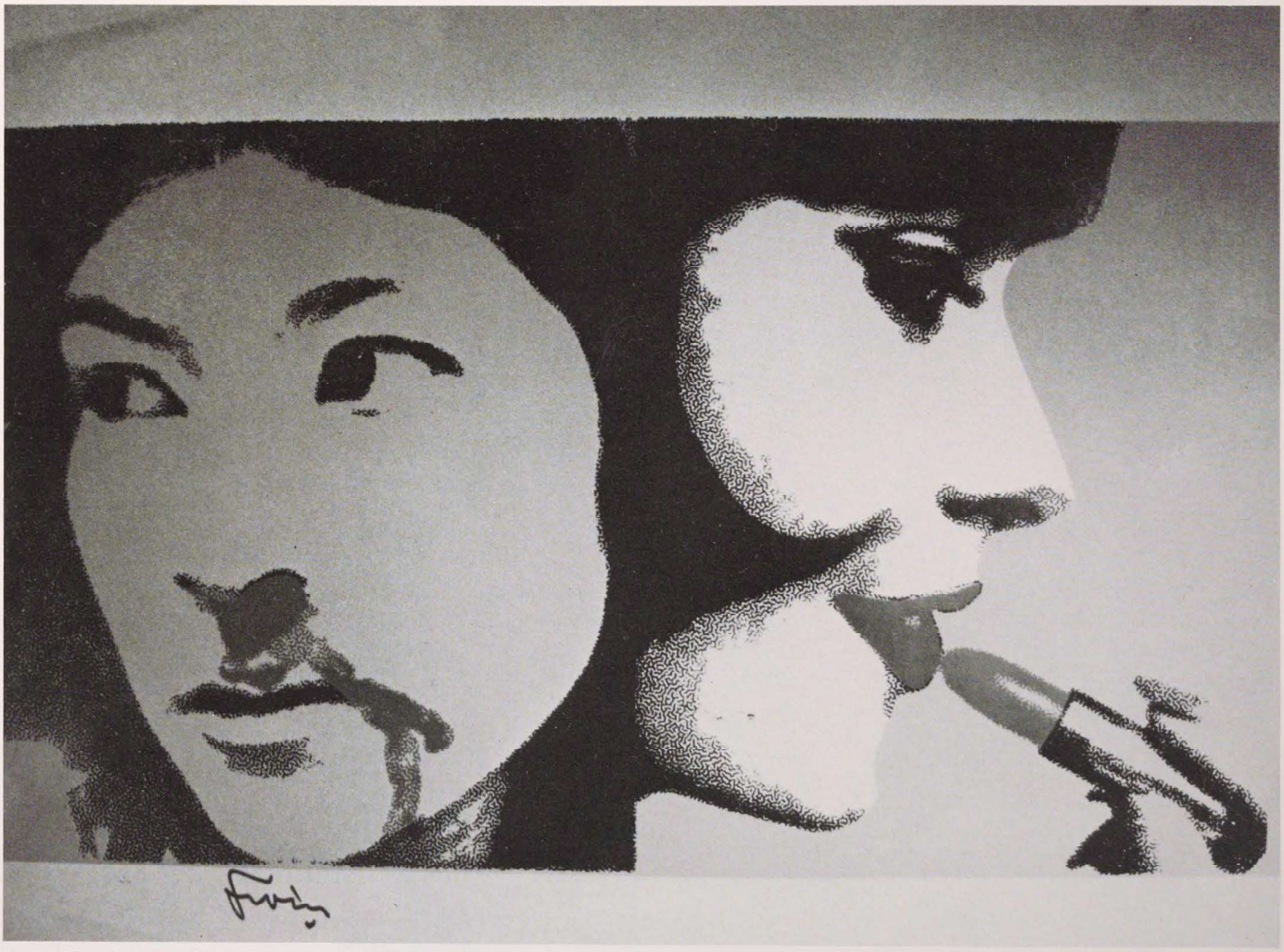


Figure 21 Frémez (Cuba). Poster, ca. 1970.

Notes

1 *Statistical Abstract of the U.S., 96th ed.* (U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 1975), Tables 586–588.
2 See Kozloff 1973, Cockroft 1974; see also, in a comparable critical vein, Kuspit 1976.
3 See Jezer 1982.
4 Notably, Packard 1959.
5 See Feld 1983. My thanks to Larry Gross for directing me to this work.
6 Rublowsky 1965, in *Pop Art*, pp. 155ff, lists, as the major early patrons of pop art, excluding the gallery owners, a taxi cab and insurance magnate, an Italian industrialist, a rentier, a corporation lawyer, and an insurance broker.
7 Cited by Robert Hughes, "The Rise of Andy Warhol," *New York Review of Books*, February 18, 1982, p. 8.
8 Rublowsky, op. cit., p. 7.
9 One example among a thousand: *Los Angeles Times* chief editorial for March 22, 1975.
10 But not to all art critics: "[The Store] where you can buy his disagreeable pastries at slightly inflationary prices" (Kozloff 1962, pp. 34–36).
11 Hughes, op. cit., p. 6.
12 See Johnson 1971, p. 44.
13 Ibid.
14 David Kunzle, *Posters of Protest* (exhibition catalog, Art Galleries, University of California at Santa Barbara, with copious reproductions; smaller edition, with fewer reproductions, published by The New School for Social Research, New York, both 1971). See particularly no. 66. A slide set of these posters has been published by Environmental Communications, 62 Windward Ave., Venice, CA 90291.
15 Waldman, op. cit., p. 27.
16 *Vogue*, November 15, 1966, p. 128.
17 *Allen Jones Figures* contains reproductions of Jones's sources in fetish and advertising art (see Galerie Mikro 1969, p. 71).
18 *Stars and Stripes Forever?* by Bill Stettner, 1970, showing the flag composed of serried ranks of matchheads, one of which, in a corner, is burning. In Kunzle, *Posters of Protest* (n.d.), slide set I., no. 7. The other posters referred to are listed in Kunzle, exhibition catalog cited, nos. 28 and 30 (with reproductions), and nos. 34, 35, and 38.
19 Kunzle, catalog cit., nos. 43, 44, and 46.
20 Six More: An Exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Los Angeles: n.p., 1963, cover.
21 Ibid., no. 78.
22 See Kultermann 1972, p. 22, pls. 39–40.
23 See Rosenberg 1964, p. 15.

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