

## 1960c

Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol start to use cartoons and advertisements as sources for paintings, followed by James Rosenquist, Ed Ruscha, and others: American Pop art is born.

In 1960, independently of each other, Roy Lichtenstein (1923–97) and Andy Warhol (1928–87) began to make paintings based on tabloid cartoons and advertisements. They were drawn to familiar characters like Popeye [1] and Mickey and generic products like tennis shoes and golf balls; a year later, Lichtenstein added comic strips of romance and war to this image repertoire [2]. Quickly dubbed “Pop”—a term first associated with the Independent Group in England—this kind of art was roundly condemned: with its cold surfaces it seemed to mock the emotive depths of Abstract Expressionist painting, and mainstream critics, who had only just come around to Jackson Pollock and company, were not happy about this new turn of events. In 1949 *Life* had showcased Pollock under the banner “Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?” In 1964 the same magazine profiled Lichtenstein under the heading “Is he the worst artist in America?”

### **The charge of banality**

Critics charged the work with banality, which in the first instance had to do with content: Pop threatened to open the floodgates of commercial design and to drown out fine art. Of course, modern artists had long poached the brash forms of mass culture (popular prints, posters, newspapers, and so on), but they did so mostly to reinvigorate staid high forms with feisty low contents; with Pop, on the other hand, the low appeared to overrun the high. The accusation of banality also involved procedure: since Lichtenstein seemed to reproduce the cartoons, advertisements, and comics directly (in fact he modified them more than Warhol), he was branded with a lack of originality and, in one case at least, menaced with a charge of outright copying. In 1962 Lichtenstein had adapted a couple of didactic diagrams of portraits by Cézanne made by an art historian named Erle Loran in 1943; Loran surfaced to protest loudly. Not coincidentally, when Duchamp presented his readymade urinal as art forty-five years before, he was charged with similar crimes, only then the terms were a little more severe, “obscenity” and “plagiarism.”

Lichtenstein did copy, but he did so in complicated fashion; even his use of the comic strips was not as automatic as it might appear. He would select one or more panels from a strip, sketch one or more motifs from these panels, then project his drawing (never the comic) with an opaque projector, trace the image on the canvas, adjust it to the picture plane, and finally fill it in with stenciled dots, primary colors, and thick contours—the light ground of the dots first, the heavy black of the outlines last. Thus, while a Lichtenstein might look industrially readymade, it is actually a layering of mechanical reproduction (the comic), handwork (the drawing), mechanical reproduction again (the projector), and handwork again (the tracing and the painting), to the point where distinctions between hand and machine are difficult to recover. In different ways, Warhol, Richard Hamilton, James Rosenquist (born 1933), Ed Ruscha (born 1937), Gerhard Richter, and Sigmar

Polke produced a related conundrum of the painterly and the photographic; it is a prime characteristic of Pop art at its best.

Lichtenstein abounds in manually made signs of mechanically reproduced images, but his signature dots crystallize this paradox of “the handmade readymade,” for they are a painted depiction of a printed code, the so-called Ben Day dots devised by Benjamin Day in 1879 as a technique to produce a printed image by means of gradations of shading translated into a system of dots. More importantly, the Lichtenstein dots convey the sense, still fairly novel at the time, that appearance had undergone a sea change of mechanical reproduction, that life was somehow “mediated” and all images somehow “screened”—that is, printed, broadcast, or otherwise viewed beforehand. This is another strong theme of Pop, again with significant variations wrung by Warhol, Hamilton, Rosenquist, Ruscha, Richter, and Polke.

Where did Lichtenstein stand in this brave new image-world? Did he “cling” to notions of originality and creativity, as art historian Michael Lobel has argued? True enough, when Lichtenstein appropriated images of products, he did efface the brand names (Warhol retained “Campbell’s,” “Brillo,” and all the rest); as Lobel remarks, he “Lichtensteinized” his objects, and worked “to make the comics look like his images.” This tension between traces of distinctive authorship and signs of its evident eclipse is pronounced in Lichtenstein, but apparently it did not trouble him much. “I am not against industrialization, but it must leave me something to do,” Lichtenstein commented, modestly enough, in 1967: “I don’t draw a picture in order to reproduce it—I do it in order to recompose it. Nor am I trying to change it as much as possible. I try to make the minimum amount of change.” This is the ambiguous line that Lichtenstein hewed: to copy print images, but to adapt them to painterly parameters; to “recompose” them in the interest of pictorial form and unity, in the name of distinctive style and subjectivity, but only enough to register these values (perhaps to register them as threatened) and no more.

Rosenquist also recomposed his images, which were most often drawn from magazines, but his paintings retain the disjunctive quality of his preparatory collages of source illustrations, which he cropped and otherwise manipulated. For the most part Rosenquist used bland images of everyday objects, “common enough to pass without notice [and] old enough to be forgotten,” which he then painted, with his skills as both an abstract artist and a billboard painter, in spectacular passages of lush illusionism that often traverse several panels and sometimes evoke the wide-screen cinema of the time. In some works, however, his subjects are charged, and his version of Pop approaches social commentary. For example, with the twelve-foot expanse of *President Elect* (1960–1/4) [3], we move, as along a highway of billboards or through the pages of a magazine, from a beaming John F. Kennedy to manicured female fingers breaking apart a slice of cake, to the rounded surfaces of the right side of a ’49 Chevrolet: the juxtaposition is almost Surrealist, but, as with Richard Hamilton, the mood is mostly upbeat, suggestive of a new age of products and promises. However, a short time later, in *F 111* (1965), an eighty-six-foot extravaganza that connects a jet fighter and an atomic blast with, among other disparate images, a little girl under a hairdryer and a mess of spaghetti, the mood is far less sanguine: the smiling president is dead, the Vietnam War is in full swing, and “the military-industrial complex” is exposed as the dark support of American consumer affluence.

The charge of banal content that greeted Pop is more difficult to refute than the accusation of dumb procedure, but here too appearances are not so simple. The lowly subjects often favored by Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, and others did offend aesthetic taste attuned to the lofty themes of Abstract Expressionism, but Lichtenstein in particular was not so contrarian. In fact, he showed that tacky advertisements and melodramatic comics could serve some of the same goals set not only for traditional art (such as pictorial unity and dramatic focus) but also for modernist art (such as the “significant form” prized by Roger Fry and Clive Bell and the vaunted “flatness” demanded by Clement Greenberg). Jasper Johns had played a similar trick with his paintings of flags, targets, and numbers of the fifties; as Leo Steinberg pointed out, these works met the Greenbergian criteria for modernist painting—that it be flat, self-contained, objective, immediate—by means that Greenberg found utterly alien to such painting—the kitschy images and found things of mass culture. Lichtenstein and company forced together the poles of fine art and commercial design with more sparks than did Johns, for their advertisements and comics were as flat as any flag or target, and more vulgar to boot.

Ed Ruscha also followed this Johnsian lead into Pop. He moved to Los Angeles from Oklahoma in 1956, and there, a year later, while still an art student at Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts), he saw a magazine reproduction of a Johns work, *Target with Four Faces* (1955), which combined a simple sign with four molds. The painting struck Ruscha as both matter-of-fact and mysterious, and he responded to the provocation with an even blunter move: a simple word painted in one color on a flat ground painted in another color. His first such works were monosyllabic exclamations—“guttural utterances like *Smash*, *Boss*, and *Eat*”—that were nonetheless ambiguous [5]. “These words have these abstract shapes,” Ruscha later remarked, “they live in a world of no size.” He went on to explore “the idea of visual noise” in a variety of word-image combinations, and the result was a kind of deadpan Duchampian aesthetic of his own, redolent of both Midwestern straight-talk and LA sophistication. If every major Pop artist complicates the high art of painting through cross-pollination with other mediums—Lichtenstein with comics, Warhol with newswire photographs, Rosenquist with billboards, and so on—Ruscha has introduced a cinematic quality into pictorial practice: often his colors have a celluloid gloss, and his paintings oscillate between deep, airy spaces and flat, word-inscribed screens—as though they were projected as much as painted [4]. In this respect, too, his version of Pop exploits its Los Angeles locale.

### **Screening and scanning**

In various ways, then, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Ruscha, and others seemed to challenge the oppositions on which pure painting of the twentieth century was founded: high versus low, fine versus commercial, even abstract versus representational. In *Golf Ball* [6] Lichtenstein presents an iconic representation of a dimpled sphere in black and white on a light gray ground. It is as banal as possible, but it is also not too distant from the pure plus-and-minus abstractions of Mondrian also painted in black and white. On the one hand, the near abstraction of *Golf Ball* tests our sense of realism, which here as elsewhere Lichtenstein shows to be a conventional code, a matter of signs that do not always resemble things in the world (around this time he read *Art and Illusion* [1960] by Ernst Gombrich, who defined realism in this “conventionalist” manner). On the other hand,

when a Mondrian begins to look like a golf ball, then the category of abstraction is in trouble too. Modernist painting often worked to resolve figure into ground, to collapse spatial depth into material flatness (Mondrian is again the great example). Like his Pop peers, Lichtenstein gives us both—the illusion of space and the fact of surface—and if there is a radical edge in Pop it lies here: less in its thematic opposition of low content and high form, and more in its structural identity of simple sign and exalted painting. One can see why, when cartoons and commodities appeared in the metaphysical space once reserved for the numinous rectangles of Mark Rothko and the epiphanic stripes of Barnett Newman, some people got upset.

Lichtenstein in particular performs a kind of visual short circuit: he delivers both the immediate effect of a modernist painting and the mediated look of a print image. Consider an early Pop work like Popeye [1], which shows the spinach-enriched sailor knocking out his rival Bluto with a roundhouse left. It might be an allegory of the new Pop hero taking the tough Abstract Expressionist to the canvas with a single blow. Yet the important thing is the blow: Popeye is arguably as instantaneous in its impact as a Pollock; it smacks the viewer in the head as well. (Lichtenstein likes to underscore the force of this blow with the onomatopoeic terms of the comics: his punches go “Pow,” his guns fire “Brattata.”) Thus at the level of effect too, Lichtenstein suggests that Pop is not so different from a modernist painting like a Pollock: they project a similar sort of viewer, one that is all eye, that takes in the image in a flash, in a “Pop” of immediacy.

But to what end is this demonstration made? With Warhol, the appearance, in the exalted space of painting, of a newswire photograph of a gruesome car crash or a poisoned housewife is difficult to take even today. For the most part Lichtenstein puts high and low together with less subversive effects; he was proud of his formal sense, his tasteful ability to make good paintings out of banal pictures or mawkish stuff. Yet his reconciliation of high and low is not only a matter of his formal skill; it also registers a historical convergence of these old binaries. Lichtenstein was well prepared for this convergence. In the late forties as a G. I. Bill student at Ohio State University and in the fifties as a teacher in Ohio and upstate New York, he worked through his own catechism in modernist art: he painted along Expressionist lines first, then in a faux folk style (to which he adapted Americana themes, such as Washington Crossing the Delaware [1951], that anticipate his Pop art), and briefly in an abstract mode. He became adept in a repertoire of modernist styles and avant-garde devices, such as the gestural stroke, the Cubist play with signs (a few strokes to signify a shadow, a white patch to signify a reflection, and so on), the abstract forms of grid and monochrome painting, as well as the readymade object and the found image, all of which he received secondhand. These devices appear in his work as mediated, as if in review, held together by the iconic shapes supplied by the advert or the comic strip—held together, that is, by the very representational mode that avant-garde art had worked to overthrow. This is one aspect of his Pop art that does have an edge.

Edgy too is his demonstration of how much the codes of advertisements and comics have in common with the devices of the avant-garde (throughout the century the influence in this high–low relationship ran both ways). Of his own pictorial language Lichtenstein once remarked: “Mine is linked to Cubism to the extent that cartooning is. There is a relationship between cartooning and people like Miró and Picasso which may not be

understood by the cartoonist, but it definitely is related even in the early Disney.”

He might have added Matisse, Mondrian, and Léger, among others; they are all there, read through the comics, in his paintings: the ambiguous signs of light and shadow in Picasso, the bold but suave contours in Matisse, the strict primary colors in Mondrian, the semicartoonish figures in Léger, all put to different purposes, of course (for example, if the primaries signify pure painting in Mondrian, in Lichtenstein yellow is also likely to signal a beautiful blonde, red a dress, blue the sky). Lichtenstein recomposed his advertisements and comics to fit them to the picture plane, but also to expose these modernist connections and to exploit them rhetorically. (Soon these connections became patent when he began to “Lichtensteinize” some of these masters directly, with paintings done after Picasso, Matisse, Mondrian, and others.) One can draw a dire conclusion from this commingling of modernist art and comic strip: that by the early sixties most devices of the avant-garde had become little more than gadgets of commercial design. And certainly this is one dilemma of the postwar or neo-avant-garde: that some of the antiart measures of the prewar or “historical” avant-garde had become the stuff not only of art museums but of spectacle industries. Or one can take the benign view that both fine art and commercial design benefited from this exchange of forms and contributed to values that, again, are rather traditional—unity of image, immediacy of effect, and so on. This is how Lichtenstein saw the matter.

Lichtenstein was adept not only in modernist styles but also in different modes of seeing and picturing, some of which date to the Renaissance, if not to antiquity: specific genres of painting like portraiture, landscape, and still life, all of which he Lichtensteinized, \_as well as general paradigms of painting—of painting as stage, as window, as mirror, and as abstract surface. Leo Steinberg detected yet another paradigm in the collage-paintings of Rauschenberg and Johns, which he termed “the flatbed picture plane”: the picture no longer as a vertical frame to look at or through as if onto a natural scene (like a window, a mirror, or indeed an abstract surface), but as a horizontal site where very different images can be brought together textually, a “flat documentary surface that tabulates information.” For Steinberg this paradigm signaled a “postmodernist” break with modernist models of picturing, and certainly it influenced Lichtenstein. Yet Lichtenstein also suggests a variant of this model, which is crystallized in his *Ben Day dots*: a model of the picture as a screened image—and, as such, a sign of a postwar world in which everything seems subject to processing through mechanical reproduction and electronic simulation. This screening bears not merely on the actual making of his art (its commingling of handmade and readymade); it also addresses the mediated look of the contemporary world at large, and affects seeing and picturing as such. As Lobel notes, Lichtenstein often chose comic-strip figures placed in front of viewing screens—gun sights and televisual monitors as well as windshields and dashboards—as if to “compare or correlate the surface of the canvas” with such surfaces [2]. In effect, we too are thus positioned: our looking is also correlated with such viewing. Emergent here is a mode of seeing that has become dominant only in our own age of the computer screen: not only do all images appear screened, but our reading and looking alike have become a kind of “scanning.” That is how today we are trained to sweep through information, visual or other : we scan it (and often it scans us, tracking keystrokes, counting website hits, and so

forth). Early on Lichtenstein seems to have sensed this shift, both in appearance and in seeing, latent in the comic strip.

#### FURTHER READING

**Russell Ferguson (ed.)**, *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–92* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992)

**Walter Hopps and Sarah Bancroft (ed.)**, *James Rosenquist* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2003)

**Michael Lobel**, *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002)

**Steven Henry Madoff (ed.)**, *Pop Art: A Critical History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997)

**Ed Ruscha**, *Leave Any Information at the Signal* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002)