

Richard Hamilton declared that art should be “popular, transient, expendable, low cost, mass produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous and big business.” With reference to specific examples, explore the difference between this Pop Art view and the ideas embodied in the work of the American Abstract Expressionists.

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Fig 3, Jackson Pollock at work. (1950) in Fineberg, J. (1995) Art since 1940 Strategies of being. Laurence King Publishing

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Imagine it's the mid 1950s and you have just seen this poster (Fig 1). It's a collage made from popular magazines and advertisements by the English painter and printmaker, Richard Hamilton. He has declared that the art of tomorrow should be 'popular, transient, expendable, low cost, mass produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous and big business.' (McCarthy, 2000: p.8)

But this is 1957. The American Abstract Expressionist, Mark Rothko has just produced 'Light Red Over Black', oil on canvas (Fig 2), two by one and half metres. It is meditative, spiritual and intense. What a contrast.

In this essay I am going to explore this contrast by outlining some of the ideas embodied in the work of the American Abstract Expressionists and discussing whether any of Richard Hamilton's views applies to them. (McCarthy, 2000)

The American Abstract Expressionists developed in the 1940s in New York and were an exciting, eclectic, male dominated group. By 1949 they had created their individual styles and were divided into two broad groups. The Action Painters, artists with a passion for the action of painting (Fig 3), were led by Jackson Pollock and Willem De Kooning. They worked spontaneously with large brushes and sticks, making sweeping gestural marks, pouring paint from the can. Their objective was to paint their inner impulses directly onto the canvas. The Colour Field Painters, artists with a passion for colour, were led by Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman. They were interested in religion and myth, creating simple compositions with large areas of single colour. (Fig 2) Their objective was to produce a contemplative or meditative response in the viewer. Both groups shared a passion for the paint and its application and delighted in paint for paint's sake. The American Abstract Expressionists strove to make abstract art that was expressive and emotional in its effect. (Bricker Balken, 2005) (Fineberg, 1995) (Wilson, Lack 2008)

They were influenced by the Surrealists' idea that art should come from the unconscious and the Automatism form of painting developed by Joan Miró, André Masson (Fig 4) and Max Ernst. By 1942, many key Surrealists and Cubists had escaped war torn Europe and were living and exhibiting in New York. What an exciting time this must have been for the American artists, to have Dali, Breton, Ernst, Seligman, Tanguy, Leger, Mondrian, Chagall and many more in their hometown. To experience first hand their influences, opinions and techniques. To hear their views of abstraction and to be at the centre of the art world as it shifted from Paris to New York. (Fineberg, 1995) (Graham-Dixon, 2008)

They were interested in the Mexican art of Rivera and Clemente Orozco and inspired by ancient beliefs, primitive cultures, rebirth, evolution and the art of the indigenous American Indians. Jackson Pollock placed large canvases on the floor and developed an individual dancing/painting style, creating images he described as 'energy and motion made visible'. (Fig 3) (Graham-Dixon, 2008: p.502) (Bricker Balken, 2005) (Fineberg, 1995)

Mythology and religion were used to explore and depict the human mind and belief systems and they were inspired by their natural and urban surroundings. Their art was mainly abstract and they placed paramount emphasis on emotional and meaningful subject matter. (Wilson, Lack, 2008)

They strongly believed in the absolute individuality of the artist and that each artist was unique. Their art arose from their own view and therefore unanimously denied that they were a movement. In 1965, Barnett Newman stated, 'There was never a movement in the conventional sense of a "style", but a collection of individual voices.' (Bricker Balken, 2005: p.60)

They rejected the label Abstract Expressionist as they felt it linked them to the German Expressionist groups Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter and the abstract art of Kandinsky and Mondrian. The art critic, Harold Rosenberg said in conversation that ‘the only thing they did agree on, was that they had nothing to agree on.’ (Fineberg, 1995: p.34) (Wilson, Lack, 2008) (Graham-Dixon, 2008)

Abstract Expressionist art was superseded by the rise of the Pop Art movement of the 1960s. Though the two movements produced such different art, they did share common ground. They were both inspired by the Surrealists and their work was fuelled by their surroundings and personal lives. The Abstract Expressionists looked to themselves (Fig 5) and human nature to find a way of making sense of their world. Pop artists expressed themselves using consumerism and popular icons. (Fig 6) (McCarthy, 2000)

For instance, Richard Hamilton’s advertisement, (Fig 1) ‘Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?’ (1956), offers a glamorous and hedonistic ‘fantasy world available for the right price’ and promises ‘escape from the drudgery of post-war life in Great Britain.’ (McCarthy, 2000: p.6)

Tinned ham, a vacuum cleaner, TV, modern furniture, reel-to-reel tape and theatre shows were now available to the consumer. The body builder, the well-endowed pouting woman and the sexual innuendo of the comic strip refer to changing sexual boundaries. The Ford car logo and the earth ceiling advertises custom made cars and space travel. (McCarthy, 2000)

Richard Hamilton’s view that art should be ‘popular, transient, expendable, low cost, mass produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous and big business,’ is an interesting way of reviewing their differences.

Was the Abstract Expressionist movement popular? Did the public like the art? I think the general public might have been confused as the artists denied they were a movement at all and insisted that they were all unique. The sculptor,

David Hare believed that 'we shouldn't be accepted by the public. As soon as we are accepted, we are no longer artists but decorators.' (Bricker Balken, 2005: p.40) Their art was described in staid gallerist and museum language which the artists felt alienated the public. The African-American painter, Norman Lewis, observed 'People no longer have this intimacy with the artists, so that the public does not know what is going on, what is being done by the painter.' (Bricker Balken, 2005: p.36) The critics, Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg held differing views and the press was sarcastic. Time magazine referred to Jackson Pollock as 'Jack the Dripper.' Rosenberg said of their work 'The dialogue is between the artist, materials and canvas'. (Fig 7) (Graham-Dixon, 2008: p.509) Pop art's dialogue was with the viewer because the popular iconography was so familiar to the public. (Fig 8)

Was their art transient and expendable? Was it throwaway art? Their subject matter was serious and thought-provoking based on existentialism, the unconscious mind, primitive culture, mythology, nature and emotion. They wanted to communicate deeply felt issues, for the viewer to be affected and to decide over time what this art meant to them. The objective was for their art to last. Mark Rothko once declared that he and his friends were 'producing an art that would last a thousand years.' (Fig 9) (Ratcliffe, 2008, Tate etc, Issue 14: p.40) In contrast, Pop art leapt out from the museums and art galleries into people's homes. The images were clear, immediate and fun. (Fig 10)

Did the American Abstract Expressionists produce low cost, mass produced art? Were their paintings cheap to make and did they produce lots of them? Both movements produced unique works of art to be viewed in galleries and museums. The originals were accessible to the rich and were financial investments. The difference perhaps lies in the process. Rothko would work in solitude listening to Mozart, taking months to produce his art, look at it for days, make minute changes and be insistent on how the gallery hung it. Pop artists began using screen-printing techniques and plastics to create

modern, bright, and lively images that were reproduced at affordable prices for the public to hang wherever they wanted. They shouted buy, enjoy and buy again. (Fig 11) 'For Rothko's generation, plastic was the emblem of everything they found antithetical not to say evil' (Ratcliffe, 2008, Tate etc, Issue 14: p.43)

Were they young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous? Was their art youthful, amusing, sexual, of little worth and alluring? Their art was about the serious issues of humanity and basic human emotions. (Fig 12) Pollock said in 1951, 'the modern painter expresses his age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio in the old forms of the renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique.' (Harrison, Wood, 2003: p.583) Theirs were grave, meditative thoughts concerned with the passing of time and in Rothko's case, an obsession with the basic human emotions of 'tragedy, ecstasy and doom.' (Gaham-Dixon, 2008: p.502) Pop art appeared light-hearted, up beat, openly acknowledged sex and let you pin it on your wall. (Fig 13)

Were the American Abstract Expressionists big businesses? Was their art a commercial activity? Did it make money? In 1950, the American Abstract Expressionists wrote to The Museum of Modern Art in New York, objecting to their business practices. In particular their 'corporate sponsorship by 'Pepsi-Cola' Eight years later Rothko continued to challenge New York 'Big Business' by returning the cheque for the Seagram commission because he was unhappy with where his paintings would be hung. Principles were paramount and art took precedence over money. Though financially poor, I think these artists were rich in principles and moral integrity. In contrast, by 1965 Pop Art was advertising Coca-Cola (Fig 14), cheese spread (Fig 15) and Brillo Soap Pads. (Fig 16) (Bricker Balken, 2005)

Both movements responded to their social, economic and cultural time. The American Abstract Expressionists had witnessed the chaos of world wars, the holocaust, the atom bomb, the cruelty of man's inhumanity to man, then a

manufacturing and consumer boom, TV and media explosion and air and space travel. I think they were brave and sensitive artists who responded to life with deeply spiritual, thoughtful and serious art always questioning and searching. Robert Motherwell described their response to modern life as 'rebellious, individualistic, unconventional, sensitive, irritable, a feeling arising from being ill at ease in the universe... the need for felt experience.' (Fineberg, 1995: p.38) In 1951, Life magazine referred to them as 'The Irascibles', (Fig 17) so perhaps they were the first 'grumpy old men' of the twentieth century. (Bricker Balken, 2005)

By the 1960s, society was changing and artists responded with new ideas, values and interests, 'eager to challenge received ideas about modern art.' (McCarthy, 2000: p.8) There was an optimistic, fun and hedonistic world that celebrated freedom, laughter and youth. They were for an art that did 'something more than sit on its ass in a museum.' ((McCarthy, 2000: p.75)

What a contrast.



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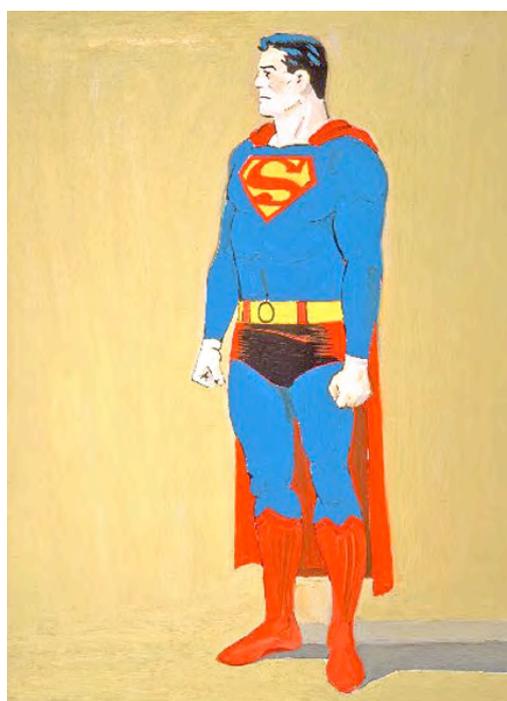


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