

WHEN POP TURNED THE ART WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

By: TONY SCHERMAN

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ANDY WARHOL AND FRIENDS OVERSAW THE DEATH OF A CENTURIES-OLD TRADITION AND THE BIRTH OF THE POSTMODERN.

"IT WAS LIKE A SCIENCE FICTION MOVIE--," WROTE THE late curator and art critic Henry Geldzahler, "you Pop artists in different parts of the city, unknown to each other, rising up out of the muck and staggering forward with your paintings in front of you." Geldzahler's lines, with their playful lugubriousness, were apt. When the innovators of pop embarked on their mature work, much of which was uncannily similar and all of which explored the same terrain--American consumer culture--almost none knew what any of the others were doing, or even that they existed. Pop arose spontaneously, an authentic movement, an organic response to new realities.

Geldzahler's zombies-from-hell imagery, moreover, perfectly captured the art establishment's horrified reaction to pop's inexorable rise. Pop shocked the shockers: the avant-garde, the entrenched, self-appointed keepers of the gate between high and low culture. It was the first postmodernist art, its principles a departure from the tried-and-true humanism of even such a radical genre as its predecessor abstract expressionism. In its leveling instinct, it helped lay the groundwork for the upheavals that would define the sixties. Critically savaged as lightweight ("mindless" was the usual characterization), it was, in fact, knottily complex, its essence and nuances discernible only in retrospect.

Unlike abstract expressionism, which had spent decades underground before winning widespread recognition, pop zoomed to pre-eminence within two or three years, climaxing its rise in the last two months of 1962. "The new vulgarians," as one hostile writer dubbed its practitioners, took the art world by storm.

In 1960, Andy Warhol, at 31 one of New York's most successful fashion illustrators, rebelled against the fey good taste of his advertising work and began filling his Upper East Side studio with big, stark, intentionally banal paintings. He took his subjects from the lower reaches of popular culture: comic books, and later tabloids like the New York Daily News and movie-star publicity photos. As clever as he was ambitious, Warhol knew that nothing would enrage the art world--and gain its full attention--more than imagery originally created for the base amusement of lowbrows.

Meanwhile, out in the Jersey suburbs, the 37-year-old Roy Lichtenstein, a Rutgers University art professor, was smuggling comic-strip characters into his otherwise unremarkable abstractions when it hit him: Why not make paintings that look just like comic books? And in a loft in lower Manhattan, a 27-year-old former North Dakotan named James Rosenquist came home every night from his job as a Times Square billboard painter, his mind reeling from staring at 50-foot Pepsodent smiles and whitewall tires from a foot away. He transferred his fragmentary images onto canvas, jarringly juxtaposed.

All around the city, artists were suddenly obsessed with popular culture. Claes Oldenburg, born in Sweden in 1929 and raised in Chicago, lived on the Lower East Side, a sculptor and onetime journalist. "I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum," he declared in a 1961 manifesto, one of the great pieces of writing by a contemporary artist. In December of that year, he filled his East Second Street studio with brightly paint-splattered, eccentrically shaped plaster replicas of dime-store merchandise, christened it the Store, and declared it open for business.

Everything in the Store--shoes, pants, shirts, dresses, hats, ladies' lingerie, ties, pies, cakes, fried eggs, sandwiches, candy bars and more--was for sale at prices ranging from \$21.79 for an oval

mirror to \$899.95 for a statue of a bride. Behind its grubby facade, "the Store" was a complex entity, an indication of the metaphysical sleights of hand about art, life, and their interaction that would characterize pop. It was an art gallery filled with wonderful pieces; it was a neighborhood store--of sorts--where you could walk in, browse, buy, or shoot the breeze with the genial if opinionated proprietor; and it was a philosophical critique of the division between art and life, an effort to wrest art from its pedestal: "I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap ... [that is as] heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself."

Reviewing the Store for Arts magazine, Sidney Tillim wrote the first American article on the emerging tendency, coining a lofty name for its creators: "In mass man and his artifacts, ... the New American Dreamer ... finds the content that at once refreshes his visual experience and opens paths beyond the seemingly exhausted alternatives of abstraction...." Almost at once, the names proliferated: Commonism, Popular Realism, Anti-Sensibility Painting, the New Sign Painting, Factualism, Common Object Art. "Pop," which didn't come into use until later in 1962, had been coined in 1958 by an English critic. An English pop movement actually preceded America's but lacked the latter's fiery energy, just as a group of California pop-related artists never produced anything to rival the New Yorkers' powerful icons.

In February, a few weeks after Oldenburg closed the Store (owing his gallery \$285), Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist unveiled their new work in tiny uptown galleries, Rosenquist at the Green, on West Fifty-Seventh Street, Lichtenstein at the Castelli, on East Seventy-seventh. What Rosenquist was after in early canvases like **The Lines Were Etched Deeply on the Map of Her Face** (1962) and **Pushbutton** (1961), was the way fragmentary images flash by us--the side of a woman's face, a streaking yellow taxi, a pair of staring eyes--discontinuous and alluring, when we hurry across a busy street or flip through a television's channels. Whereas Warhol and Lichtenstein strove for impersonality, Rosenquist's personal touch was always visible. He sought to dazzle. Of pop's major figures, he was the most likely to appeal to conventional tastes.

A WRITER ONCE ASKED LICHTENSTEIN WHY HE had started painting comic-book characters. "Desperation," he answered. "There were no spaces left between Milton Resnick and Mike Goldberg [two second-generation abstract expressionists]." He added on another occasion, equally mordantly, "It was hard to get a painting that was despicable enough so that no one

would hang it. ... It was almost acceptable to hang a dripping paint rag.... The one thing everyone hated was commercial art; apparently they didn't hate that enough either."



Roy Lichtenstein. **Takka Takka**. 1962.

Newsweek came to Lichtenstein's opening: a remarkable coup for a relatively unknown artist, a sign of the buzz pop was already generating, and a portent of the role the media would play in its rise. The Newsweek writer, though clearly uneasy, refrained from judging Lichtenstein. Others would shortly be less reticent. "One of the worst artists in America," wrote Brian O'Doherty of The New York Times in 1963; The New Yorker's Harold Rosenberg called Lichtenstein "an academic draftsman retooled to blow up comic strips."

Lichtenstein's early pop subjects fell largely into three groups: war comics, romance comics, and everyday objects (golf balls, range ovens, etc.). At first, the comic-strip paintings seem to be mere copies--Lichtenstein was "making a sow's ear out of a sow's ear," wrote O'Doherty--but in fact the works depart significantly from the originals. A comparison with, say, the source that Lichtenstein

used for **Takka Takka** (1962), shows that the differences are substantial. And the longer one looks at **Takka Takka**, the more striking it is, at once elegant and vulgar, with a resonance the original never had.

Artists from Picasso to Romare Bearden had appropriated others' work, but they had almost always made it part of a collage or some other larger whole. For Lichtenstein (and Warhol), the appropriated image was the whole. Lichtenstein was not a collagist; he made second-generation pictures, which raised all sorts of troubling questions. Was he ripping off the original artist? (He and Warhol were both sued, Warhol successfully, for using others' work). What constitutes originality? In a culture glutted with images, is originality not only impossible but beside the point? When Warhol first saw Lichtenstein's work, in mid-1961, he was distraught; Lichtenstein's comic-strip paintings were obviously better than his own. "Right then I decided that since Roy was doing comics so well, that I would just stop comics altogether," Warhol wrote, "and go in other directions where I could come out first." Serial repetition, for instance, a concept very much in the air, largely thanks to the avant-garde composer John Cage. Soon Warhol was producing row on row of dollar bills, S&H Green Stamps, and bright red-and-white Campbell's soup cans.

By the late summer of 1962, the rubber stamps Warhol was using to imprint a repeated image began to feel "too homemade," as he put it. He wanted something "that gave more of an assembly-line effect," and he hit on the technique that became his trademark: photosilkscreening, or printing a silkscreened photograph onto a painted canvas. "... you get the same image, slightly different each time. It was all so simple--quick and chancy," he wrote in his memoir, *POPism*. Warhol's paintings aren't paintings at all; they're hybrids, half painting, half photograph.

Which doesn't lessen the creativity involved but merely shifts it to other areas: finding the right photograph to silkscreen, for instance. "There was in Warhol an intuitive ability to appropriate for his paintings just the right mass-media photographs and emblems from literally millions of options," said the artist Allan Kaprow. "Furthermore, he had an old-master sense of the placement of images on a field ..." And his color sense was exceptional; the critic John Russell once called him the greatest colorist since Matisse.

That May, when the first mass-media overview of pop appeared (a neutral to dismissive feature in *Time*), "pop artists" were still an undifferentiated bunch, bit players like Mel Ramos lumped in with future superstars. As the year progressed, the latter emerged: Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, and Oldenburg. Tom Wesselmann was often included in that list; today, he is usually omitted. In fact, two painters, Warhol and Lichtenstein, made almost all the essential pop artworks, and to take things even further, Warhol's work and pithy remarks come close to defining pop by themselves.



Andy Warhol. **32 Campbell's Soup Cans**. 1961 – 62.

IN JULY, WARHOL FINALLY HAD HIS FIRST SOLO exhibition, but in Los Angeles, far from the pacesetter world of Fifty-Seventh Street. At Irving Blum's Ferus Gallery, he showed **32 paintings of Campbell's soup cans**, one for every flavor. A nearby gallery filled its front window with Campbell's cans and a sign that said: "Buy them cheaper here." Warhol sold the set to Blum for \$1,000; in 1996, when the Museum of Modern Art acquired it, the group was valued at \$15 million.

Oldenburg introduced his enormous "soft sculptures" (a six-foot hamburger, an eight-foot ice cream cone, and other majestically inflated items) in September at the Green Gallery. A half-

dozen other pop shows were scheduled for the fall, all at prestigious venues. "The art galleries are being invaded by the pinheaded and contemptible style of gumchewers, bobby-soxers and worse, delinquents," wrote Max Kozloff in *Arts International*.

Until pop arrived, vanguard American art had fought its battles in private. "Up through the fifties and even in the early sixties," Hilton Kramer says, "the New York galleries showing serious art you could count on the fingers of two hands. By the end of the sixties, the number of galleries had increased by four or five hundred percent. Pop art not only changed the tone of the art world, it changed its size."

Mass-circulation magazines may have peered under abstract expressionism's lid from time to time, as *Life* did with its famous 1949 Jackson Pollock article, but the passions of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, or Pollock, for that matter, were too arcane for steady coverage. Pop, on the other hand, lent itself easily to glib phrasemaking. The national magazines and big newspapers picked up on it as soon as, or even sooner than, the art journals. But their response was overwhelmingly disparaging; if the mass media helped pop to prominence, it was through their energetic contempt. After a few tentative forays, *Time* and *Newsweek* roared out in high, superficial dudgeon, scandalized and loving it, and long after pop had entered the mainstream, the newsmagazines lost few opportunities to pillory these ... these ... these ... Who the hell are these guys? They're artists all right--con artists!

The new art was a response to two forces, abstract expressionism and the postwar explosion of popular culture. Rebelling against the first, it embraced the second. In the mid-fifties, after years of rejection, the abstract expressionists, or New York school--Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, and their colleagues--had finally prevailed. For the first time in history, American painters were recognized as the dominant force in international art. As the art historian and critic Leo Steinberg puts it, the New York school "was the first American cultural product after jazz to really conquer the world." All too quickly, abstract expressionism became art-world dogma, its tenets vigilantly enforced by the critic who had played as big a role in formulating the style as the artists themselves. Clement Greenberg disparaged any deviation from the abstractionist straight-and-narrow. Reference to the outside world was a serious lapse; the painter didn't represent physical objects, he objectified inner states. A painting was produced spontaneously, unfolding in response to itself, and the successful painting expressed the artist's individuality in every brushstroke, every drip.

Against this backdrop, Warhol's famous remark that he wanted to be a machine takes on its proper meaning. It's not a statement of alienation, or a death wish; it was Warhol, the young Turk, baiting the New York school. Nor was it just talk. Warhol's found imagery infuriated the abstract expressionists, with their stress on originality. He made multiple copies of a painting--another outrage, this time against the emphasis on uniqueness. Taking on spontaneity, he planned everything ahead of time. What mattered was choosing the right image; as Warhol often said, anyone could do the actual work on his paintings. Almost all his ideas--ready-made imagery, mechanical procedures, mass production, de-emphasis of spontaneity, and an emphasis on impersonality--were darts hurled at abstract expressionism.

Lichtenstein, too, rebelled into impersonality. Copying a comic-strip frame by hand, he put the copy into a projector and traced the magnified image onto a canvas for the outline of his painting. His trademark Ben Day dots (the tiny dots used by printers and cartoonists for shading) made his canvases look printed, not painted. "I wanted to look programmed," he told an interviewer. The hand, bearer of individuality, was fetishized by abstract expressionism. Pop slapped it away. By the time pop arrived, the New York school had already taken some hits. To oversimplify, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns had reintroduced real-world content into avant-garde painting. Weakened or not, abstract expressionism kept its hold on artists' imaginations. So when Warhol and Lichtenstein started experimenting with comic-book imagery in 1960, each dutifully daubed his canvases with abstract smudges, swirls, and drips. "You can't do a painting without a drip," Warhol told his early supporter Ivan Karp in 1961. One evening in mid-1960, Warhol

showed his friend Emile de Antonio two paintings of Coca-Cola bottles, one half-covered with drips, the other drip-free. De Antonio told him: "Come on, Andy, the abstract one is a piece of shit, the other one is remarkable. It's our society, it's who we are, it's absolutely beautiful and naked, and you ought to destroy the first one and show the other." Yet even after de Antonio's verdict, Warhol couldn't find it in himself to abandon the drip for another year.

CLEMENT GREENBERG AND MOST OF THE ABSTRACT expressionists had always maintained a rigidly elitist stance toward vernacular culture. In his most famous essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Greenberg called pop culture "ersatz culture ... destined for those who are insensible to the value of genuine culture." By 1960 Greenberg's kitsch--television, advertising, magazines, movies, and other mass media--had lodged itself deeply in America's consciousness. Media-generated imagery was too urgent, too omnipresent, for artists to ignore. Like the Beats a few years earlier, the pop artists were discovering America. Driving through the commercial bustle of the Lower East Side's Orchard Street in 1960, Claes Oldenburg felt "that I had discovered a new world. I began wandering through stores--all kinds and all over--as though they were museums. I saw the objects displayed in windows and on counters as precious works of art." But the best pop passage about encountering America comes from that unlikely wanderer in the heartlands, Warhol.

"The farther West we drove," he wrote, describing an early-sixties cross-country trip, "the more Pop everything looked on the highways. Suddenly we all felt like insiders because even though Pop was everywhere--that was the thing about it, most people still took it for granted, whereas we were dazzled by it--to us, it was the new Art. Once you `got' Pop, you could never see a sign the same way again. And once you thought Pop, you could never see America the same way again.... I was lying on the mattress in the back of our station wagon looking up at the lights and wires and telephone poles zipping by, and the stars and the blue-black sky.... I didn't ever want to live anyplace where you couldn't drive down the road and see drive-ins and giant ice cream cones and walk-in hot dogs and motel signs flashing!" Pop reveled in America, but not, like Whitman, in the nobility of the multitudes. Pop reveled in America's supermarkets. In its magazines and TV shows, in its rising tide of commodities.

Pop arrived on October 31, 1962. This is only a slight exaggeration, for not only was the big "New Realists" show, which opened on that day, spectacular in itself, but the show's location had special significance. The Sidney Janis Gallery on East Fifty-Seventh Street was, as Harold Rosenberg put it, "the leading emporium of American abstract art." Less than a decade earlier, it had been Sidney Janis's backing that had legitimized the New York school in the eyes of the world. In 1962 the gallery still represented most of the major abstract expressionists, including Rothko, de Kooning, Motherwell, Adolf Gottlieb, and Philip Guston. Depending on one's perspective, the "New Realists" show was either a betrayal or a housecleaning; in either case, "the show was an implicit proclamation," as Thomas Hess, editor of *Art News*, wrote, "that the new had arrived and it was time for the fogies to pack."

Janis, a hot-jazz enthusiast, one-time vaudeville dancer, and self-taught art scholar with several books to his credit, invited a whopping 54 artists: 12 were American (including Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Rosenquist, Warhol, Wesselmann, Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, Wayne Thiebaud, and George Segal), 7 French, 5 Italian, 3 English, and 2 Swedish. His gallery couldn't hold all this art, so he rented an empty store across Fifty-Seventh Street and filled the window with Oldenburg's garishly painted ladies' underwear from the Store, a touch of dumpy Orchard Street on soigné Fifty-seventh.

Of Janis's abstract expressionist artists, only de Kooning came to the opening, pacing up and down in front of the paintings for two hours and leaving without a word. Later that evening, at an opening-night soiree thrown by the wealthy collector Burton Tremaine, Warhol, Lichtenstein, Wesselmann, Rosenquist, and Indiana were all being served drinks by uniformed maids when de Kooning appeared in the doorway. "Oh, so nice to see you," said Tremaine, who owned a number of de Koonings. "But please, at any other time." "It was a shock to see de Kooning turned away,"

Rosenquist recalled. "At that moment I thought, something in the art world has definitely changed." Within days of the opening, Janis's abstract expressionists held a meeting, at which all but de Kooning voted to leave.

It was a classic Oedipal situation, the pop upstarts eager to supplant their elders. When a Newsweek reporter asked Warhol how he felt about abstract expressionism, the painter responded with an exquisite put-down: "I love the New York school, but I never did any abstract expressionism--I don't know why, it's so easy." Oh so innocently, Warhol was waving a red flag at the abstract expressionists, whose fury lasted. Years after pop's heyday, Warhol spotted de Kooning at a party in the Hamptons. Approaching the older man, Warhol held out his hand. "You're a killer of art," de Kooning screamed. "You're a killer of beauty, and you're even a killer of laughter! I can't bear your work!"

A less harrowing abstract expressionist--pop encounter occurred between Adolf Gottlieb and an Oldenburg soft telephone. Hilton Kramer tells the story. "Gottlieb was at a party at some wealthy Upper East Side home. [How much of the cultural history of the sixties didn't happen at parties?] At the end of the party, everyone was putting their coats on. Someone pointed to an Oldenburg vinyl telephone on the table and asked if it worked, and Gottlieb said, `Yeah. Pick it up and a voice says, "Hello, schmuck."



James Rosenquist. **I Love You with My Ford.** 1961.

DESPITE SIDNEY JANIS'S EFFORTS TO CAST "NEW Realism" in a global light, the Americans dominated the show. The Europeans, Thomas Hess wrote, "look feeble in this line-up. Some Englishmen do comic strips that try to say 'WOW' but can only manage the equivalent of 'Coo, matey.'" Warhol's contributions to the show were **Big Campbell's Soup Can**, 19 [cts.], the huge six-by-eight-foot **200 Soup Cans**, and **Do It Yourself (Flowers)**, one of his appropriated paint-by-numbers exercises. Lichtenstein showed the fighter-pilot canvas **Blam!** and **The Refrigerator**, a woman's smiling face looming alongside her new icebox. Rosenquist chose **I Love You With My Ford** and **Silver Skies**, and Oldenburg, aside from his lingerie, showed some of the Store's ersatz pastry.

The critical response was heated, voluminous, and overwhelmingly negative. In *The New Yorker*, Harold Rosenberg wrote of "appetite-wrecking collations" (that would be Oldenburg's pastries), "contrivances," and "misplaced home furnishings, advertisements, and comic strips." The outspokenly conservative Hilton Kramer, zinging thunderbolts from *The Nation*, called the art "puny," "slack," "feeble," and inadequate to the "brute visual power" of popular culture, which was "too robust" for it. But as every open-eyed observer realized, "New Realists" was a turning point. Not only did it represent the dethroning of the abstract expressionists, but it generated an immense amount of publicity, sending out shock waves to every major museum and gallery in the country and many overseas.

The timing of Warhol's first New York show, at the Stable Gallery, was perfect: It came a week after the Janis opening and quickly sold out (even if the well-known art historian Dore Ashton called Warhol "witless" and the Stable show "the sine qua non of vulgarity"). Each of pop's major protagonists--Oldenburg, Rosenquist, Lichtenstein, and Warhol--had now made his New York debut, to progressively more noise.

On December 13, the term "pop art" was officially introduced. The occasion was a "Symposium on Pop Art" organized by the Museum of Modern Art. Present in the packed house were, as Henry Geldzahler said, "many idols and sacred monsters": John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Warhol, Lichtenstein, Leo Castelli (soon to become pop's leading dealer), Janis, the collectors Robert and Ethel Scull, and a figure many were blaming for pop: Marcel Duchamp, the founder of Dada. The audience was more hostile than sympathetic; Ivan Karp said he felt "surrounded by Apaches."

To have begun the year as a nameless rumor and end it as the focus of a packed event at the world's leading modern art institution was remarkable. Still, it's hard to avoid seeing the symposium as a setup. How could the temple of pure, difficult abstract art afford to ignore the hottest thing going? The solution: Rather than plan an exhibit (as the Guggenheim was already doing), hold a one-night discussion with a stacked panel. The event's organizer and moderator, Peter Selz, the museum's curator of painting and sculpture exhibitions, loathed pop and invited three more detractors: Dore Ashton, Hilton Kramer, and the poet Stanley Kunitz. This left Leo Steinberg, who was ambivalent about pop, and Geldzahler, an assistant curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the panel's only out-and-out pop advocate.

DESPITE THE UNEVEN SIDES, THE SYMPOSIUM produced sparks. Listening to a tape recording of the evening feels like eavesdropping on history; even the printed proceedings have a palpable electricity. "Like many people at that time," says Kramer today, "I had to wonder whether the art world was coming to an end. Certainly the whole abstract expressionist circle, Rothko, Motherwell, Gottlieb, looked upon this as the end of the world. Whether you were for it or against it, everybody felt that an enormous change had occurred."

Sounding callow and fearful (he was only 27), Geldzahler got things rolling. "The artist is looking around again and painting what he sees," he said. "... There is no way of escaping the modern electronic world. It seems now that an imagery so pervasive, so insistent, had to be noticed." Perhaps terrified of all those Apaches, Geldzahler sought to placate his fellow panelists. The abstract expressionists had slowly and with "heroism," he said, built an audience that could accept daring and unconventional work. Adventurous artists no longer had to suffer for years. It has often been said that pop ended the notion of the avant-garde; Geldzahler, impressively, was pointing this out as it happened.

Here came Hilton Kramer, promptly landing one of his arrows in an unlikely target. Excoriating pop's antecedents, Kramer lit into Marcel Duchamp, unaware that the old man was in the room. Duchamp, said Kramer, was "the most overrated figure in modern art." According to the Village Voice's Jill Johnston, during the intermission an unperturbed Duchamp suggested that Kramer was "insufficiently lighthearted." But Kramer's memory is very different. A friend of his, he says, was sitting with Duchamp and told Kramer afterward that when he made his remark, Duchamp's eyes filled with tears. Had Kramer felt remorseful? "Not at all," he says. "I felt he had many sins to live down."

Pop, Kramer argued, was significant only as a reaction to abstract expressionism. On its own, it amounted to almost nothing; it was art "by default, only because [it is] nothing else." What especially irritated him (and Ashton, Selz, and Kunitz) was its failure to transform its subject matter, its "shanghaiing of the recognizable," as Kramer put it.

Of all the panelists, Kunitz was the most undone by pop. He represented the old-guard avant-garde that had come of age in the thirties and forties, staunchly bohemian and abstractionist; seeing pop challenging both stances, he hit back as hard as he could. Bourgeois society and art had always been enemies, he said, yet pop's "signs and slogans and stratagems come straight out of the citadel of bourgeois society, the communications stronghold where the images and desires of mass man are produced, usually in plastic" (this got a big laugh). The New York school, he said, had been "notable for its courage and self-reliance; its self-awareness ... [and] its rich spontaneity of nervous energy...." It was "an art of beginnings, misdirections, rejections,

becomings, existences, solitudes, rages, transformations." How could Kunitz feel anything but loathing for pop, slayer of his beloved abstract expressionism? He consoled himself: The new form, he said, was "neither serious nor funny enough to serve as more than a nine days' wonder."

Steinberg, whose lectures on modern art had packed the Modern's auditorium not long before, looked on pop's evident espousal of bourgeois values not with Kunitz's Old Testament fury but ironically. Pop, said Steinberg, treated popular culture "as Duccio would treat the Madonna, Turner the Sea, Picasso the Art of Painting--that is to say, like an absolute good." Focusing most of his remarks on Lichtenstein, Steinberg confessed to "not lik[ing]" the painter's work; it would take time for the work's formal virtues, if they existed, to appear. When Caravaggio and Courbet had emerged, he pointed out, their contemporaries, too, had recoiled in horror "against the incursion of too much reality."

In leapt Kramer. Steinberg was discussing pop as though it was art, Kramer said, even though he claimed not to have made up his mind. Sure it was art, said Kramer: failed art (big laugh).

No indeed, said an aggrieved Geldzahler; pop was "an art of decisions and choices of composition," his flustered zeal sending the audience into gales of mirth. "Roy Lichtenstein changes the comic strip he's working from," Geldzahler said. "I've seen the comic strip, I've seen the painting, the colors--"

He was cut off by Ashton, who said, "What do you need, a magnifying glass?" That brought down the house.

But Geldzahler kept on. "You don't need a magnifying glass, Dore. All you need is a pair of eyes, and an open, willing spirit, and a soul, and a--" It was no use; he was drowned out by laughter one last time, and, after a brief remark from Kramer, Selz moved in to signal the discussion over. A question-and-answer period ensued, during which an audience member said, "A lot of us came here tonight to find out from the experts if pop is art or non-art. So I was just wondering, when does the voting begin?"

"It's over," said Kramer. "You just weren't paying attention." And the crowd went home. Pop was routed that night, but its adversaries' victory was hollow. Pop had won the war. Still, its strongest opponents were unswayed. The urgent leitmotif of their criticism was that pop failed to imaginatively transform its subjects. Was this true?

The art's lack of transformation, its "poverty of visual invention," as one critic put it, was of course an aesthetic choice, part of pop's effort to close the gap between art and life. "There is something very beautiful in putting art back into the present world...." Oldenburg said. "This process of humbling [art] is a testing of the definition of art. You reduce everything to the same level and then see what you get." Pop was a stunt pilot flying as close to life as he could without crashing. Moreover, it did transform its subjects, although not in the way traditional critics had in mind. "Transpose" may be a better word, following the philosopher Umberto Eco's analysis of how pop put its subjects through any of several alterations--in context, size, number, physical composition--in order to render the familiar striking.

CONSIDER A SCULPTURE BY LICHTENSTEIN, eight feet high by five feet wide. Made of four concentrically stacked, irregularly shaped steel sheets brightly painted in red, yellow, black and white, it looks like a striking abstract design. Suddenly its identity declares itself: It's an immense, three-dimensional rendering of the explosions you've seen hundreds of times in old fighter-pilot comics--**Explosion No. 1** (1965). Lichtenstein's transformations of his "original," the generic comic-book explosion, are twofold. He has removed it from its familiar comic-book context (in which it was barely noticed), and he has given it a three-dimensional shape and a size that make it look strange and new, demanding contemplation. Canceling our automatic reactions to a staple of comic-book imagery, Lichtenstein prompts us to appreciate its formal beauty and the creativity of its originators.

When Warhol displayed hundreds of near-perfect replicas of Brillo soap-pad cartons in the spring of 1964, he made only one alteration to his banal subjects aside from painting on plywood instead of cardboard: a change of context from a supermarket to a classy New York art gallery. What the boxes provoked, aside from endless jokes and scowls, was the question, What makes these art, but their look-alikes plain old cardboard boxes? The answer: Nothing. No merely visual criterion can distinguish art from non-art, as Warhol demonstrated with his Brillo boxes. This revelation, simple but inspired enough for the critic Arthur Danto to call Warhol "the nearest thing to a philosophical genius the history of art has produced," was the last in an 80-year series of self-diminutions by Western art. First, art had declared it didn't have to be beautiful, then that it didn't have to be realistic, then that it didn't need a pictorial subject, and on down to the logical conclusion reached by Warhol: Art doesn't have to be anything.

Conversely, anything can be art. For Danto, Warhol's Brillo boxes meant the end of art, not in the sense that art could no longer be made but in the sense that it had exploded all of its presumably necessary conditions. Warhol himself expressed this in 1963: "How can you say one style is better than another? You ought to be able to be an Abstract-Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling you've given up something." Indeed, the swarm of genres and styles that exists in today's art world, none with any apparent necessity, is the result of Warhol's remorseless logic.

With the insight that everyday things were works of art, pop changed American culture; undermining elitism and awakening serious art to the vernacular resources--from comic strips to movies to rock 'n' roll--that now enliven it. But that basic insight remains problematic. "Pop Art is liking things," said Warhol, and the remark points up the acquiescence, even collusion, as some critics have said, at the genre's core. Happily adrift in a sea of products, pop was unable to look beneath their gleaming surfaces to ask where they came from, how they were produced, and whose interests they served. Despite the vast stylistic difference between the illustrations of his advertising years and his work after 1960, there was no break in Andy Warhol's career. Even after he left advertising, he was still pushing products.

In the first half of 1963, pop swiftly consolidated its position at the forefront of American art. Museum after museum--in New York, Kansas City, Houston, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles--mounted shows. But the critical phase, winning pre-eminence among New York's dealers and collectors, was over. The hegemony of abstract expressionism was broken, the divide between fine art and mass culture crossed. In its embrace of the vernacular, pop was a breath of fresh air, an indication of the redefinitions and fresh starts the sixties would bring.

Abstract expressionism had drawn the artist's gaze inward, to a purely subjective realm. What was hard for its artists and ideologues to accept about pop was its reversal of this gaze, its redirection of the artist's awareness outward: to the teeming, exciting, vulgar new world of early-sixties America. Pop argued that the world was worth looking at--and it won the argument.

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Normally the art director at a magazine is involved in appearance more than words. But in this issue, the editors thought it would be fitting for me to add a little something. My father is an art dealer, and he began collecting pop art before I was born, so I basically grew up with it. It was always a part of our house. As long as I can remember, my father would ask me which painting I wanted in my room whenever he rearranged his collection. My two sisters and I typically each had one big painting hanging in our bedrooms.

I realize now that growing up surrounded by pop art influenced me greatly, although at the time I more often just thought my father's collection was "different," something that other families didn't have. Certainly none of my friends had these kinds of things around the house, yet I remember distinctly that they were fascinated with both the sculptures and the paintings. The works were like big toys, especially the Oldenburgs. My father wouldn't let us play with the pieces when we

had friends over, but every so often my sisters and I would stage a "raisin fight" with Oldenburg's Raisin Bread or pretend to eat one of his soft Popsicles.

Getting the chance to meet the artists made me realize that these objects weren't just toys. I remember sitting at the kitchen table with Claes Oldenburg and lending him my crayons. While I was drawing an Indian, he sketched the St. Louis Arch, with a giant piece of raisin bread as a monument underneath. One time my sister traded drawings with Richard Serra: He got a doggy; she got a sketch of one of his "prop piece" sculptures made of lead (she thought he got the better deal).

But the best things for me were the paintings. They provided perfect images to illustrate the stories that I made up (O.K., I was already a budding art director). While most kids used Lincoln Logs and Barbies in their stories, I would make up stories about the images I found in the pop pieces in my home. I'd point to a woman (who happened to be Marilyn Monroe or Elizabeth Taylor by Warhol) and have her go shopping for Campbell's soup or some Brillo, so that she could wash the plates designed by Lichtenstein. Then she'd drive home in her soft-vinyl Oldenburg car and visit her boyfriend, a baseball player, whom she would kiss passionately, just like in the Lichtenstein painting.

It wasn't till I was much older that I realized how special these objects were. During Art History 101, when we studied the 1960s, not only did I already recognize everything, from having visited museums and looked at books with my father, but I even realized that one particular slide, of a Donald Judd sculpture, had been photographed in our house.

While I was growing up, I certainly didn't consider the historical significance of pop art, but then again, neither did society. The fact that American Heritage is devoting an article to this important chapter in our country's cultural history is telling. I guess I'm not the only one to have grown up since those years.--Robin Helman

Tony Scherman is the author of Backbeat: Earl Palmer's Story (Smithsonian; Da Capo paperback), about one of the fathers of rock 'n' roll.