

## Introduction

This study is based upon the retrospective and now widespread identification of American pop art of the sixties as an expression of post-modernism.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, this identification concerns New York pop, the form associated with the leading centre of art in both America and the world during this period. The immediate stimulus for this study lies in the question: Did the post-modernist art of American pop art in its initial form in the sixties give rise to a corresponding critical consciousness? In other words, can critical responses to pop during this same period also be retrospectively identified as post-modernist? This question determines the central task of this study: the recognition and establishment of the nature of post-modernist features in the critical consciousness generated by American pop art during the sixties.<sup>2</sup> The retrospectivity of this endeavour should be stressed. What is offered by this work is a comparison between the ideas of a select group of American critics writing in the 1960s in response to the challenge of pop art, ideas that bear a striking similarity to that body of thought and opinion that is now associated with post-modernism. Hans Bertens's history of post-modernism, published in 1995, provides a precedent for this study's retrospective argument. In reference to the writings of American literary figures, namely Leslie Fiedler, Susan Sontag, and Ihab Hassan, as well as the music theorist Leonard B. Meyer, Bertens claimed that "much of what is now broadly seen as the post-modernist agenda was already more or less in place by the end of the 1960s."<sup>3</sup>

The findings of this study centre on the relevant critical writings of Lawrence Alloway, Harold Rosenberg, Leo Steinberg, Max Kozloff, Barbara Rose, and Susan Sontag. These critics were all key figures in the New York art world or, in the case of Sontag, literary world during the period under review. Collectively, they span a number of generations and encompass two distinct approaches to the theorization of American pop art.

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Lawrence Alloway, Harold Rosenberg, and Leo Steinberg, for example, drew on critical philosophies that had been formulated or, at least, initiated in advance of the movement itself. Steinberg was born in 1920 and Alloway some six years later in 1926. The origin of their respective critical philosophies and, hence, interpretations of pop can be traced to the inaugural phase of their critical careers in the fifties. In Alloway's case, it concerned the "fine art-pop art continuum," the inclusive theory of both art and culture that Alloway had developed during the late fifties in Britain. It was dependent, in particular, on a factor that enabled Alloway to relate "high" and "low" cultural forms in the non-hierarchical manner of a continuum: the functionalist and non-essentialist conception of fine art as communication and, as reflected in pop art's subject-matter, as "one of the possible forms . . . in an expanding framework that also includes the mass arts."<sup>4</sup> "Other Criteria" (1972) represents Steinberg's savage, if belated, "deconstruction" of Greenberg's formalist argument as outlined in the 1965 version of "Modernist Painting." It also presents Steinberg's alternative, sociological case for pop and its anonymous counterpart in 1960's abstraction. Steinberg's decided opposition to formalism had been a feature of his criticism since 1953. It was at this time that Steinberg published his first article on contemporary art in which he argued for the centrality of representation in the "esthetic function" of all (including modern abstract) art.<sup>5</sup>

Rosenberg, the oldest critic featured in this study, was born in 1906. The critical philosophy that he brought to bear on his reception of pop, as with that of action painting in the previous decade, had evolved over a far longer period than either Steinberg's or Alloway's. It encompassed two ideological positions that, while distinct and while responsible for Rosenberg's alternate positive appraisal of action painting and negative one of pop, were joined by the common goal of human freedom. This concerned the "anti-Stalinism" or "Marxist anti-Communism" of the late thirties, the first decade of Rosenberg's critical career, and the "liberal anticommunism" of the fifties<sup>6</sup> as expressed in the tenets of existentialism.

Max Kozloff and Barbara Rose were born in 1933 and 1937 respectively. Unlike the critics discussed so far, the commencement of their critical careers coincided with the emergence of pop. The critical theories they would apply to this movement were moulded by their experience of sixties' art in both its pop-figurative and abstract forms and, integral to this experience, the failure of existing critical traditions, notably Greenbergian formalism, to meet its demands. Rose's break with Greenbergian formalism, the most authoritative critical position of the day, was far more circumstantial and gradual than Kozloff's and would not be complete until the

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close of the decade. The studied independence of both critics from fixed and absolute aesthetic standards, however, whether they were those of Greenbergian formalism or any other inflexible critical theory, took place under the powerful counter-influence of deconstructive philosophies – phenomenology in the case of Kozloff and pragmatism in that of Rose.

Susan Sontag was born in 1933, the same year as Kozloff. The beginning of her critical career pre-dated that of Kozloff and Rose by only a few years. Her approach to the theorization of pop, however, as it formed part of the broader and inter-disciplinary category of contemporary art, arguably sits mid-way between those discussed so far. The evidence presented by Sontag's critical writings examined in this study, especially "Against Interpretation" and "The Aesthetics of Silence" and their various arguments for the lack of authorial perspective in contemporary art, indicate that she grafted a theoretical framework, one largely drawn from an extensive knowledge of both philosophy and literary theory, onto her first-hand experience of sixties' New York art. To the extent that this framework included Alain Robbe-Grillet's and Roland Barthes's theoretical writings on *nouveau roman* and, in this mediated form, Heidegger's existential phenomenology, it illustrates Sontag's deep engagement with French post-war culture to which she was exposed during attendance at the University of Paris 1957-58.<sup>7</sup>

Despite differences in both the age and critical philosophy of these critics, the post-modernist features of their respective theorizations of American pop art were in all cases the result of the failure of prevailing formalist and realist critical canons to meet the critical challenges issued by pop. Briefly defined, these concerned pop art's anonymity, its erosion of boundaries between categorical and cultural realms, as evident in both subject-matter and techniques, and its depiction of not "nature" but, rather, "culture," that is, the illusory, mediate world created by mass communications in their sophisticated post-war form. Critical responses to these features of pop, now considered post-modernist, fall into two broad groups: first, pop understood as a reflection of the post-war societal form, especially of its dominant and defining characteristics of mass communications and capitalist consumerism; second, pop understood as subversive of both "worldviews" and many of the factors necessary for their formation.<sup>8</sup> As will be explained in greater detail in the first chapter of this study, these perceptions of pop comply with two main deconstructive post-modernist models: first, the philosophical model such as that formulated by either David Ray Griffin or Patricia Waugh;<sup>9</sup> the second, which is a variation of the first, the sociological model defined by David Lyon and Zygmunt

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Bauman.<sup>10</sup> Lyon and Bauman's model posits a correspondence between the deconstructive workings of the key characteristics of post-war society (or post-modernity) – mass communications and capitalist-consumerism – and post-modernism in its deconstructive form, such as the philosophical post-modernism identified by David Ray Griffin.

In addition to the philosophical and sociological post-modernisms just defined, and in accounting for a definite regional inflection to the post-modernist critical consciousness in America during the sixties, attention also must be directed to the avantgardist model proposed by Andreas Huyssen. This is the only model to address in any depth the question of a specifically American phase of post-modernism during the sixties. As will become apparent in a more detailed examination of Huyssen's argument in the next chapter, this study, in part at least, affirms Huyssen's perception of the avantgardist character of 1960's American post-modernism. It also supports his identification of stimuli in the form of American historical factors, particularly as they concern the platforms of protest associated with the American counter-culture during this period. It does not, however, support either the coherence of Huyssen's model (i.e., its uniformly avantgardist character) or the limitation of its life to the sixties and shortly thereafter.<sup>11</sup> Instead, it argues that American post-modernism in the sixties as revealed in the critical consciousness generated by pop, while never completely coherent in its character, either presaged or represented a broad parallel to later formulations of the post-modern. The generally unwitting mapping of the "post-modern condition," or "post-modernity," on the part of Alloway, Rosenberg, and Steinberg is firm evidence of the first. This involved a delineation of its "deconstructive" character and, in the case of Rosenberg, a critique of its deleterious impact upon both art and "self." Rosenberg's negative account of pop art's social context prefigured the critical reactions to post-modernity, including that of Jean Baudrillard, that Charles Jencks has more recently seen as extending from approximately 1980 to the present.<sup>12</sup>

Susan Sontag's and, to a lesser extent, Max Kozloff's interpretations of pop art that have been cast in terms of the "silencing of language," especially as they concern the phenomenological view of human consciousness, are indicative of the second trend. In this, they represent a parallel to subsequent formulations of post-modernism, specifically those indebted to post-structuralism. The more or less contemporaneous development in France that from the time of post-modernism's mid-seventies incarnation (i.e., from the time that it assumed the status of a "world view"<sup>13</sup>) has provided the prime avenue of theoretical support for the dominant decon-

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structive form. Post-structuralism and the “silencing of language” can be seen as alternative responses to the critique of language that had been conducted throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the philosophers Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger and concerned their findings on the limitations of language, as revealed by its relationship to experience, knowledge, and “truth.”

The methodology of this study is based on a close reading of critical responses to American pop art that were made during the sixties by critics working in the same cultural milieu. These are examined within contexts that illuminate their cultural and historical significance and identify their relevance to sociological and philosophical post-modernist theories. Given the clear time span dealt with in this study, the inclusion of some material requires qualification. Lawrence Alloway’s *American Pop Art*, his most comprehensive account of American pop, was not published until 1974<sup>14</sup>; it was, however, almost completely dependent on his publications from the previous decade. Moreover, the view of American pop art that Alloway outlined in *American Pop Art*, as in all of his prior published writings on the subject, was indebted to his cultural theory the “fine art-pop art continuum.” Much of the analysis of Alloway’s critical response to American pop, therefore, is directed at this crucial formative influence, its sources, and British post-war context. In addition, Leo Steinberg’s appearance in this study rests on the single essay “Other Criteria,” which in its definitive form was not published until 1972.<sup>15</sup> It was, nonetheless, based on a lecture he delivered at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1968, and on ideas he had formulated during the previous two decades. The more pertinent of these concern his perception of the centrality of representation in the “esthetic function” of all art, that is, including modern abstract art, and the anti-illusionist premises underlying the relationship between subject and object in Jasper Johns’s art.<sup>16</sup>

With the organization of material in this study, distinctions are made between the “cultural” critic Sontag and the “art” critics Alloway, Rosenberg, Steinberg, Rose, and Kozloff. These distinctions, however, are unwarranted on a number of grounds. In their largely unwitting articulation of a post-modernist consciousness, almost all of the art critics identified a cultural shift that went beyond the concerns of either a particular style or a particular discipline. Barbara Rose, for example, called upon Alain Robbe-Grillet’s phenomenological theorization of *nouveau roman* to account for “literal” qualities in American sixties’ art that were common to pop and minimal art.<sup>17</sup> In reference to the same phenomenon Harold Rosenberg identified the reduction of ego, that of “inner-directed” man as seen in the

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“inexpressive” stream of sixties’ art in both its pop-figurative and abstract forms with the “chosiste” novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet.<sup>18</sup> Charles Jencks has termed this cross-disciplinary approach, one that will be discussed in relation to both Alloway’s and Steinberg’s critique of the essentialist epistemology associated with Enlightenment and by one definition modernist thought,<sup>19</sup> as “a motive force of the wide [post-modernist] movement.”<sup>20</sup>

The “art” critics are divided into two further categories: the “social” and the “philosophical.” Incorporation within either of these categories is determined by each critic’s *dominant*, though not exclusive, method of theorizing pop. The boundaries of these groupings, as between those designated “art” and “cultural,” blur at a number of junctures. Arguments central to the “social” theorization of pop, those that concern the “deconstructive” character of the post-war societal form and hence of post-modernity, are advanced also by the “philosophical” critic Barbara Rose. Although insufficiently developed in Rose’s criticism, they nonetheless underpin her clear understanding of the role played by mass communications and capitalist-consumerism in both dissolving boundaries between cultural realms and discrediting traditional cultural theory. The qualitative superiority of certain cultural forms (e.g., high art) has been argued, erroneously in Rose’s view, on the basis of their independence from economic concerns.<sup>21</sup>

In a similar blurring of boundaries, arguments central to philosophical theorizations of pop and that concern the subversion of worldviews by the deconstructive tenets of either pragmatism or phenomenology were also taken up by “social” critics. Alloway, for example, turned to philosophical pragmatism, if in a mediatory form, to discredit fixed and absolute aesthetic standards. These were predicated on the foundational beliefs of traditional idealist philosophy and, as witnessed by Clement Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), were unable to account for art responsive to the demands of industrial capitalism in anything other than a negative manner. Guided by both an anthropological definition of culture and a non-essentialist and functionalist conception of fine art as a form of communication, Alloway proposed instead the “fine art-pop art continuum.” As indicated by its designation, this provided a non-evaluative and non-hierarchical conceptualization of relations between the full gamut of artistic forms in industrialized society. A further example is represented by Harold Rosenberg’s negative assessment of pop art on the basis of the evidence it presented of the dissolution of “self” by totalitarian forces at work in post-war capitalist society. As will be expanded upon in the first and third chapters of this study, Rosenberg’s harsh judgment of pop was driven by the tenets of existentialist philosophy, especially as they in-

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formed the major existentialist theme of distinctions between the authentic and inauthentic life, and consequential rejection of a life lived in terms of “second-hand values” in favour of one derived from “immediate personal experience.”<sup>22</sup>

Arguably, the most marked overlap between categories is represented by the “philosophical” critic Kozloff’s and the “cultural” critic Sontag’s related inquiries into the “silencing of language.” Broadly described, this inquiry involved a redefinition of the critic’s role in the face of “silent” art’s disenfranchisement of his traditional functions of interpretation and evaluation. In the case of Sontag, it also encompassed a justification of the artist’s wilful frustration of meaning. As will be explained in further detail in the first chapter, both Sontag’s and Kozloff’s arguments rest heavily on the phenomenological principle of the intentionality of consciousness, a principle that precludes the possibility of apprehending the world, and hence art, in any objective form and thus undermines the authority of singular interpretations of either.

Within the categories so described, a separate chapter is devoted to each critic’s account of pop art or, in Sontag’s case, pop as it forms part of the broader category of contemporary art. Importantly, this structure allows for a clear picture of individual contributions to the American post-modernist consciousness of the 1960s. This same structure facilitates the aims of this study that go beyond identifying post-modernist features of American pop art criticism, or, at least their identification *per se*. Prominent among these is that of deepening and, in some instances, revising our understanding of the contributions to American art criticism by the critics featured in this study. Susan Sontag, for example, has been widely viewed as a pioneering figure of American post-modernism, yet a neglected aspect of this recognition has, nonetheless, been an acknowledgment of the role played by her inquiry into the “silencing of language” in this contribution. As a case in point, Andreas Huyssen has confined Sontag’s post-modernist involvement to “camp and a new sensibility” and has associated only Ihab Hassan with the “literature of silence.”<sup>23</sup> In Harold Rosenberg’s case, this study aims to offset the dearth of scholarly analysis of his critical writings on sixties’ art. Implicated in this neglect, no doubt, is the negativity with which he viewed “anonymous” art of this period and hence all of pop. With the benefit of hindsight, however, Rosenberg’s negativity may be seen as tied principally to his perception and passionate upholding of the critic’s role as social reformer and, in this role, critic of post-war “mass” society. The negative reactions to post-modernity that have arisen since circa 1980<sup>24</sup> have thrown welcome light on Rosenberg’s writings on the “anonymous”

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character of sixties' art, especially on that of pop with its overt relationship to post-war society. They reveal these writings as providing an incisive and, arguably, protean commentary on the nature and consequences of the post-modern condition.

The broader aim of this study is twofold: one, to achieve an enhanced as well as a revised awareness of the critical consciousness generated by pop art in America during the sixties; two, to increase an understanding of both the nature and the breadth of the post-modernist phenomenon by drawing attention to the significance that its concepts held in American intellectual and cultural life during this period. America's inaugural role in the theorization of post-modernism prior to its escalation into a worldview has been obscured somewhat in the dominant and over-identification of deconstructive post-modernism with French post-structuralist theory, the development of which parallels the time span of this study. This perception has been challenged only in recent post-modernist writings that have acknowledged either American philosophical pragmatism<sup>25</sup> or phenomenology in its existential Heideggerian form<sup>26</sup> as deconstructive alternatives to post-structuralism. Even these, however, have failed to acknowledge the pre-eminent role played by pragmatist and phenomenological philosophies in the American post-modernist consciousness of the 1960s. A major catalyst for the formation of this consciousness was the critical challenges posed by pop. These challenges were not met – because they could not be met – by the prevailing formalist and realist (and associated mimetic) critical modes.



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PART ONE

**Theoretical Framework**

# 1

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## Post-Modernist Assumptions

The aim of this section is not to attempt to answer the difficult and fraught question “What is post-modernism?” It is rather to establish a range of post-modernist assumptions that will be used throughout this study to identify what can now be regarded as aspects of post-modernist thought in critical responses to American pop art during the sixties. Both these assumptions and their relevance to the critics under review will be discussed in a schematic manner so as not to pre-empt discussion in subsequent sections of this study.

“Post-modernist” responses to pop were prompted by those features that resisted accommodation within existing formalist or realist critical canons. The most prominent of these is anonymity, that is lack of “authorial presence” or a “centred sense of personal identity.”<sup>1</sup> This is evident in its depersonalized technique, minimal, if any, transformation of source material, and obscure or uninterpretable “message.” A further feature concerns the collapsing of distinctions between elite and mass cultural realms, evident in pop art’s indebtedness to the codes, subjects, and, in some instances, technical processes of mass communications. Finally, there is that of the representation of “culture” as opposed to “nature,” the province of realism, insofar as it concerns the simulation of pre-existing signs. Critics theorized these features along either sociological or philosophical lines. They viewed them as reflective of Western urban society in its post-war capitalist-consumerist phase or, alternatively, as eliminative of a world-view in the sense of an authoritative, totalizing system of thought.

The prime issue for this study is the relationship between these, in the main, sociological and philosophical theorizations of pop art and post-modernism. In constructing the post-modernist measure necessary to address this issue, three main categories of concepts of post-modernism require consideration: those formulated by critics featured in this study