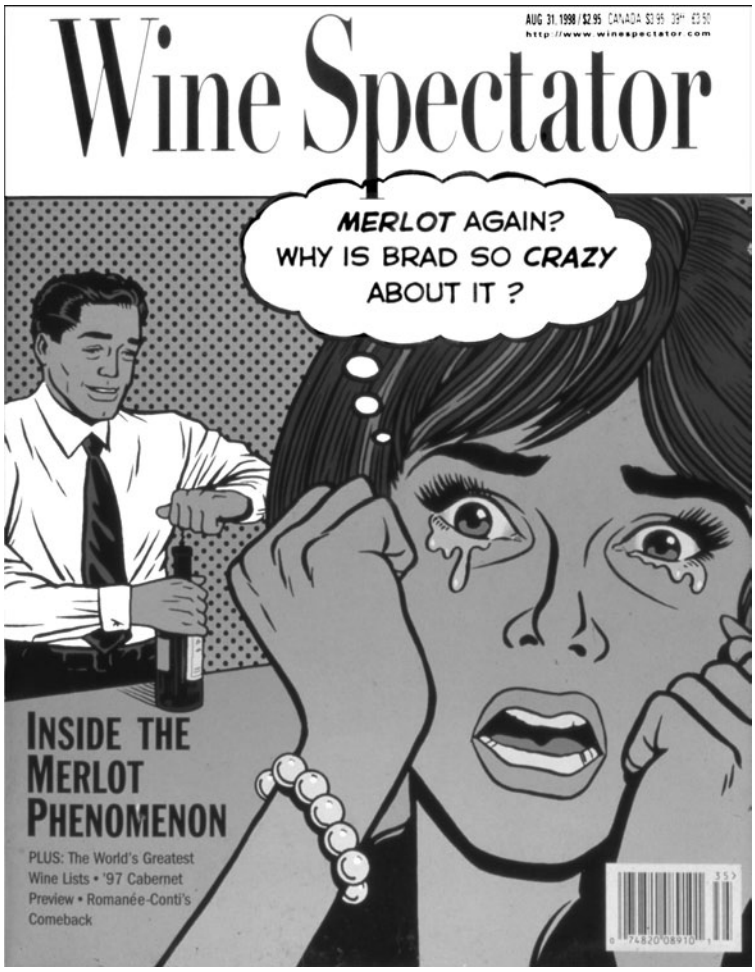
# INTRODUCTION

Pop art has by now become so thoroughly absorbed into the iconography of American visual culture – both high and low – that it is difficult to imagine how, at the time of its first appearance in the early sixties, it could have seemed profoundly threatening to its critics. Since that time, the place of mass culture has radically changed in the public consciousness: media studies courses are staples of university curricula; rock 'n' roll has been credited with influencing everything from the reemergence of feminism to the breakdown of racial barriers;[1] and a baby-boomer presidential candidate played the saxophone on a late-night talk show, waxed eloquent about his love for Elvis, and won. Pop art itself has been thoroughly assimilated into the postwar avant-garde canon, celebrated in art history texts and major museum retrospectives. At the same time, it continues to have currency in mass culture: the *Wine Spectator* sported a Lichtenstein-inspired cover illustration (*Merlot Again! Why Is Brad So Crazy About It!*), a photograph of the youthful Warhol was used to sell chinos by The Gap, and Warhol's self-portrait was featured on a U.S. postage stamp (Fig. 1).

Today, pop art's facility at traversing the boundary between high and low culture, commercial and fine art, seems essentially unproblematic. In the early sixties, however, any fusion of high and low culture was unthinkable to many, who saw it as the harbinger of a larger threat to established social and cultural distinctions. Consequently, at the time of its emergence on the American art scene, pop art immediately became the center of a critical controversy. Pop's imagery – Andy Warhol's silk screens of movie stars and Campbell's Soup, Roy Lichtenstein's paintings of war and romance comics, James Rosenquist's mural-sized montages of advertising images, and Tom Wesselmann's Playboy-derived nudes – were utterly inassimilable to prevailing definitions of art (Figs. 2–5). Advocates of abstract expressionism such as Harold Rosenberg, Gilbert Sorrentino, and Thomas Hess derided the style's obvious links with the images of consumer culture, dismissing it as unoriginal, derivative, and complicit with that culture.[2] Clement Greenberg, the critic most closely associated with the formalist defense of abstract expressionism, didn't condescend to acknowledge the movement critically. In 1961, the year pop began




**1.**
Mark Zingarelli, *Wine Spectator* cover, 31 August 1998. © Mark Zingarelli. Masthead courtesy *Wine Spectator*.

trickling into the galleries, he published his formalist position paper "Modernist Painting"; it was republished, without emendation, in 1965 – the year pop reached the height of its fame.[3]

In contrast to that wholesale dismissal of pop art, there emerged alternative accounts that cast it in a positive light. Younger critics such as Lawrence Alloway, Gene Swenson, and Lucy Lippard recognized that the prevailing critical apparatus that had been used to support abstract expressionism had little explanatory value for the work of the new movement.[4] In their analyses, pop art's value lay precisely in what its antagonists despised about it: that is, pop's capacity to articulate the realities of a society thoroughly permeated by mass culture. Ultimately, the popular press


**2.**
Andy Warhol, *100 Cans*, 1962. Oil on canvas. 72″ × 52″ (182.88 × 132.08 cm). © 2005 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / ARS, New York/TM Licensed by Campbell's Soup Co. All rights reserved. Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1963.

would extend this logic even further. Whereas early on it had reflected the skepticism of pop art's antagonists, by the mid-sixties, it described pop art not merely as an art *about* mass culture, but rather *as* a form of popular culture.[5] As Lawrence Alloway later put it, pop art had been "re-anthropologized," "returned to the common culture."[6]

It is through its complex and often contradictory engagement with mass culture that pop art played a crucial role in the emergence of post-modernism in the 1960s. In so arguing, I depart from the more established periodization: the fault line between modern and the postmodern


**3.**
Roy Lichtenstein, *Bratatat,* 1963. Magna on canvas, 46″ × 34″. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Photo: Robert McKeever.

has been most usually located in the 1970s.[7] It was in that decade that the term came into currency in the criticism of art and architecture as well as popular culture, and was used to describe forms of contemporary cultural production that appeared to make a decisive break with modernist norms within each field. In her recent intellectual history of the critical reception of American pop art in the 1960s, however, Sylvia Harrison has argued that it constitutes an early instance of postmodernist theory. This study extends that logic to a consideration of the art itself and demonstrates that there are sound historical reasons for doing so.

**4.** James Rosenquist, *Silver Skies,* 1962. Art © James Rosenquist/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

By the mid-1960s, pop art had attained a singular, and paradoxical, place in American culture – or more properly, two quite distinct places. Its earliest art-critical detractors had dismissed it as kitsch, exiling it from the realm of art entirely. Now, however, it was embraced by critics as the heir apparent of the historical avant-garde, citing precedents as diverse – and frankly, unlikely – as cubism, surrealism, and even abstract expressionism.[8] In brief, it had entered the canon of modernist high culture. At the same time, the popular press firmly situated pop art within an entirely different – and previously incommensurate – realm: that of popular culture.[9]

In fact what the popular press set out to do was more radical than simply the incorporation of a modicum of high culture within the morass of kitsch. It aimed to do nothing less than argue that the old cultural divide – that between high and low – had ceased to be relevant. There had emerged a new, third cultural category, which writers called "pop." Rather than providing readers with an explicit definition of pop, however, they proffered checklists of pop objects. These included phenomena as diverse as miniskirts, rock 'n' roll, dance crazes like the Frug, comic-book collecting, nostalgic trivia games, and revival movie houses. Included as well were the cultural criticism of pop intellectuals Marshall McLuhan and Susan Sontag, and of course, pop art itself. The common denominator, as one account phrased it, was "the spirit of Now."[10]

The reason that a concrete definition eluded the popular press is suggested by Sontag's more nuanced analysis of the phenomenon in her 1966 essay, "One Culture and the New Sensibility." Pop was, in her account, not so much a property inherent *in* things, as it was a function

of the sensibility of the beholder. That new sensibility, according to Sontag, embodied "new . . . standards of beauty and style and taste. The new sensibility is defiantly pluralistic; it is dedicated both to an excruciating seriousness and to fun and wit and nostalgia."[11] Aside from wit, nostalgia, and fascination with ephemerality, it was also characterized by an "insistent cool" and a "refusal . . . of sentimentality." The new sensibility fostered an aesthetic equally attuned to high culture and low: within its purview, "the feeling . . . given off by a Rauschenberg painting might be like that of a song sung by the Supremes." Each could be "appreciated as a complex and pleasurable event"; both were "experienced without condescension."[12]

In the present, this all has a rather familiar ring: the transgression of the high–low divide has long been deemed one of the hallmarks of postmodern culture, whereas irony, cool, and nostalgia are regarded as symptoms of postmodern subjectivity. It is precisely such arguments on the part of Alloway and Sontag that have caused Harrison to characterize the criticism of American pop art as an early – perhaps the first – instance of postmodernist theory. If the criticism of pop art can be considered postmodernist, a further question is surely begged: what are we to make of the art itself?

In his 1964 essay "The Artworld," philosopher Arthur Danto argued of pop art that the chief function of any new art form is to constitute a novel proposition of what art might be.[13] In other words, a work of art is an embodiment of aesthetic theory. The claim of any such object to *be* a work of art does not automatically *make* it so, however. That requires ratification by an entity Danto called the "Artworld" (for which one might read a nexus of galleries, museums, curators, critics, and so forth). Pop art's liminal cultural position at this moment, however, raises some interesting questions with respect to Danto's theory. What can we say of the status of an object that can be equally laid claim to by two distinct and incompatible worlds – in this instance, the Artworld, and the Popworld? How can an object simultaneously *be* two incommensurate things? It leads, seemingly, to what one critic described in the late sixties as "the confusion of realms" – in other words, something like the postmodern condition.[14]

At this point, it is useful to sketch out those features of the postmodernist theory that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s that are most salient for an understanding of pop art. Postmodernity was understood, at the broadest level, to be characterized by a change in subjectivity – or, as Sontag might put it, a "new sensibility." (This significantly distinguishes its origins from those attributed to modernity, which are usually seen as


**5.**
Tom Wesselmann, *Great American Nude No. 26*, 1962. Art © Estate of Tom Wesselmann/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Jim Strong.

grounded in the technological innovations of the industrial revolution.) That new subjectivity, or sensibility, resulted in the production of new cultural forms – high and low – that reflected it. With respect to an investigation of the postmodernism of pop art, there emerge three most relevant changes in subjectivity, along with their concomitant cultural symptoms.

The first change in subjectivity results from the increasingly mediated nature of our experience of reality, a historical consequence of the increasing pervasiveness of the mass media. Reality hence becomes de-realized, as our encounters with it are, in actuality, encounters with representations.[15] Hence much postmodernist art depicts not a direct encounter with social or physical "reality," but rather such experiences as previously filtered through the media. An early influential articulation

of this position was that of Douglas Crimp writing in 1977: "To an ever greater extent, our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these pictures, firsthand experience seems to retreat."[16] Crimp's remarks were uncannily anticipated by curator Henry Geldzahler in an apologia for pop art fifteen years earlier: "our primary visual data are secondhand. Is it not logical that art be made out of what we see?"[17] In thus engaging the media and adopting its forms, however, postmodernist art both abandoned the isolationism of the historical avant-garde and transgressed the modernist boundary between avant-garde and kitsch.

Second, as a result of the all-pervasive presence of the mediated image, the consciousness (and unconscious, in some accounts) of the postmodern subject is thoroughly colonized by the ideologies embedded in those images. Ideas of selfhood and subjectivity are thus seen as imposed from without. Consequently, the postmodern subject could no longer conceive of itself as a unique, autonomous entity. Thus, postmodern artists dispensed with originality as thoroughly as modernists had embraced it. The resulting artistic strategy was the act of appropriation, the pirating of images drawn from either the mass media or, alternatively, the history of art.[18] Such a gesture functioned as a wholesale rejection of the modernist fetishes of authenticity and originality, as neither form nor subject were unique to the artist. Thus art making became an act of self-negation rather that self-revelation or self-realization.

Third, the postmodern subject is understood, particularly by Fredric Jameson, to have become unmoored in history.[19] Traditionally, history was known as that branch of literature that claimed a privileged relationship to the reality of the past. Given the postmodernist tendency to regard all claims to the representation of reality as specious, history came to seem a species of fiction. This loss of historical consciousness resulted in a capricious relationship to the artifacts of the past, inflected by *irony* rather than reverence. Historical consciousness was replaced by an ironic nostalgia for styles and souvenirs culled at random from the past, or what Jameson dismissed as historicism. In cultural practice, this nostalgia was often directed at the objects of recently obsolescent mass culture, in a way that was ironically knowing rather than sentimental. Although Jameson has been particularly cynical about this feature of postmodernism, I agree rather with the argument of Linda Hutcheon, who has asserted that it is precisely through this ironic nostalgia that postmodernism – and, in this instance, pop art – gains its critical power.[20] Hutcheon's account has affinities, in turn, with analyses of the subversive potential of camp – with which sensibility pop art was frequently associated in the 1960s.[21]

In light of these theoretical formulations, it becomes clearer why pop art belongs to the history of postmodernism and why, in fact, it plausibly can be said to stand at its point of origin. Pop art more than sufficiently meets the stated criteria: it was the first art movement to articulate itself consistently in the language of the mass media, thus straddling the boundary between art and mass culture. In appropriating such imagery, pop refuted modernist notions of originality and autonomous subjectivity, thus constituting itself as a form of antimodernism. And through its deliberate choice of obsolescent cultural imagery, pop initiated a visual language of ironic nostalgia that provided a model for subsequent postmodernist art and popular culture.

It is that last aspect of pop – its preoccupation with obsolescence – that is central to both my analysis of its postmodernism as well as its critique of consumer culture. Pop art was, in the most fundamental way, an art about consumer culture. That fact begs the question: was its relationship to that culture complicit or critical? It is pop's utilization of passé imagery that provides the answer.

Pop was an art born during the height of the enormous economic boom that followed World War II. That boom was predicated on a continual expansion of the consumer industry fueled not only by acceleration of the rate at which new commodities were produced but also by the vast proliferation of the types of available commodities. Paradoxically, that culture of innovation was produced by its seeming opposite – an acceleration in the rate of obsolescence. That acceleration was no accident, of course. It was in fact *planned* obsolescence, a strategy developed by marketers and manufacturers to drive consumption in an upward spiral.[22] Planned obsolescence – or the obsolescence of desirability, as it was known in the industry – worked to truncate the life span of commodities well before their useful life was over. This superannuation was effected at a purely surface level through changes in style, or "styling." Such changes did not require expensive research and development, but did have the effect of making the consumer feel that his not-quite-new purchase was suddenly dated and thus in dire need of replacement.

Although planned obsolescence was – and remains – an efficacious marketing strategy, it does reveal commodity culture in a particularly ugly light. Consumer culture constantly provides us with new things that are undeniably glamorous and desirable – only to provide us, moments later, with an even more glamorous and desirable version of the same commodity. That very fact raises some basic questions about consumer culture: how real is that glamour, how durable that desire, if it can be supplanted so quickly?

It is the revelation of this logic that lies at the heart of pop art's subversion of consumer culture. It repeatedly made visible those obsolescent commodities that the consumer industry hoped to erase from our consciousness. Any culture of innovation is necessarily simultaneously a culture of obsolescence, and it is inevitable that the old and undesirable discards will come to vastly outnumber the new and still-glamorous commodities. By presenting us with the commodity that is no longer desirable – one that has become faintly ridiculous, even – pop art challenges the claims of consumer culture to satisfy our desires through the "new-and-improved" version. It does so by de-glamorizing the commodity, or commodified celebrity, by cloaking it in a style that is conspicuously dated and thereby rendering its desirability obsolescent. This de-glamorization allows us – no longer dazzled by the appeal of the media image – to see past the glamour and recognize the way in which we are manipulated by these images.

Since the renewal of scholarly interest in pop art in the 1980s, the implications of pop's relationship to its mass-cultural sources have continued to remain a contested issue. In her survey of the critical reception of pop art, Carol Anne Mahsun has noted the failure of pop's initial critics to develop a cogent analysis of that relationship. For her part, Mahsun argues pop's radicality lay in its utilization of mass culture to constitute "an objectification of an aesthetic argument," thus calling into question the orthodox modernist belief in the autonomy of the art object.[23] Christin Mamiya, in contrast, has taken up the position of pop's early antagonists. Asserting that pop's engagement with consumer culture "ultimately absorbed social and political criticism about this system,"[24] she maintains that complicity facilitated the commodification of art in the 1960s. Although Mamiya's discussion brings forth considerable historical information concerning the commodity culture of that period, its relevance to her argument is not always fully articulated. Thus, her contention that the ambiguity of pop's imagery facilitated its integration into the consumer network remains undeveloped; this is problematic insofar as other historians of the movement suggest that it was precisely *through* that ambiguity that pop articulated an implicit critique of mass culture.

Subsequently, Cécile Whiting has offered a more nuanced critique of the movement, arguing that the ambiguity of pop's engagement with a feminized consumer culture worked to destabilize the boundary between high and low culture.[25] Expanding upon the contextualization provided by Mamiya, Whiting crucially insists that the gendered