HAL FOSTER ON THE ART OF RICHARD HAMILTON (1922–2011)

RICHARD HAMILTON, who died on September 13 at the age of eighty-nine, did more than anyone else to announce the idea of Pop art, with his famous collage "Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?", 1956, a tiny image of a modern interior cluttered with consumer products, media, and people. Originally made for the Whitechapel Gallery show "This Is Tomorrow" (where it served as an illustration in the catalogue), it became, over time, the first emblem of Pop. Equally important was the list of Pop attributes that Hamilton included in a 1957 letter to the architects Peter and Alison Smithson:

- Pop Art is
- Popular (designed for a mass audience)
- Transient (short-term solution)
- Expendable (easily forgotten)
- Low cost
- Mass produced
- Young (aimed at youth)
- Witty
- Sexy
- Gimmicky
- Glamorous
- Big business.

*All quotations in this text are from Richard Hamilton, Collected Words 1953–1982 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

To meet all these criteria was nearly impossible (in retrospect, Hamilton thought only Warhol came close); nevertheless, they informed Hamilton throughout his Pop years, during which time his paintings also responded, in an opposite register, to this rhetorical question of 1962: Can mass-cultural forms like advertising be "assimilated into the fine art consciousness"?

Too often, however, the Hamilton story gets stuck in the Pop moment; certainly, he produced different kinds of work before and after, and he was a key player in entirely other theaters of twentieth-century art. Obsessed with James Joyce (he illustrated Ulysses in the late 1940s), he was taken by studies in technology and science, too; he made etchings inspired by Sigfried Giedion's eccentric survey of the Industrial Revolution, Mechanization Takes Command, in 1948, and paintings related to D'Acr Yale Wentworth.
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Thompson’s magisterial treatise on biological morphology, On Growth and Form, in the early 1950s (Chromatic Spiral, 1950, is one example). The latter book also inspired the first of five thematic shows that Hamilton either created or assisted in during that decade. When we think of the innovative design of analytical exhibitions in the prewar era, we call up figures like El Lissitzky and László Moholy-Nagy; and if we consider postwar cases, the Independent Group comes to mind—from its “Parallel of Life and Art,” staged by IG colleagues Eduardo Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson, and the Smithsons at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1953, to “This Is Tomorrow,” which included non-IG teams as well. But despite the fact that Hamilton was a key member of the Independent Group, we tend to overlook his contribution in this regard; in fact the distinctive IG strategy of spatial grids in which disparate reproductions are presented—in an environmental montage somewhere between rational typology and free association—was largely his invention. Already in “Growth and Form,” a 1951 exhibition at the ICA that explored the relationships between biological function and form à la Thompson, Hamilton juxtaposed images of specimens with diagrams and photographs on lattices, some of which recalled exoskeletons. And in “Man, Machine & Motion,” a 1955 show that channelled the enthusiasms of his IG colleague Reynier Banham, Hamilton devised a quasi-machined grid to display more than two hundred photographs of the human form in prosthetic mode, dividing the mechanomorphs into four categories—“Aquatic (underwater devices), Terrestrial (surface locomotion), Aerial (aircraft), and Interplanetary (space travel)”—and suspending the images, accordingly, below, at, or above the line of sight of the spectator.

In this way, Hamilton worked to assimilate technological as well as popular culture into the “fine art consciousness.” Trained in engineering draftsmanship, he was a tool designer during World War II, and his paintings from 1957 to 1964 reflect obsessively on the styling of consumer goods by Chrysler, RCA, Whirlpool, and other companies of the postwar boom. Hamilton was a devotee of Dieter Rams, who created the classic designs of the German corporation Braun: “His consumer products have come to occupy a place in my heart and consciousness,” Hamilton once remarked, “that the Mount Saint-Victoire did in Cézanne’s.” This was said with a wink, of course, “an irony of affirmation” he adopted from Duchamp in support of his own oxymoronic strategy. And yet Still-Life, 1965, and Toaster, 1966–67, are loving rephotographs of promotional material for Braun products, the first sprayed with photographic tints, the second shiny with chrome and Perspex; the only other change Hamilton made was to Anglicize the brand in the first (Braun
becomes Brown and to subsume the brand in the second (Braun becomes Hamilton). At the same time, these images reverse the readymade in one important respect: Far from indifferent to aesthetic taste, their selection flaunts it. As Hamilton wrote, "They posed the question: does the subject matter of most American pop art significantly exclude from our examination those products of mass culture which might be the choice of a Museum of Modern Art 'good design' committee?"

Hamilton produced his own industrial designs, too. In 1973 a Japanese company, Lux Corporation, invited him to create a stereo that might qualify as an artwork; his response was to produce a painting of a hi-fi that functioned as a stereo amplifier and tuner. And in 1982, a Swedish company, Isotron, asked Hamilton to contribute to the design of a microcomputer; his proposal was to place the three essential units for processing, recording, and power supply into separate boxes and then stack them in a sleek tower. Hamilton also experimented with new-media products: As early as 1968, for example, he began a series of Polaroid "self-portraits" (which were in fact executed by other artists, including Warhol and Beuys). And rather than suppress the serial nature of mechanical reproduction, he underscored it: His iconic print of student protest, Kent State, 1970, was produced in a run of five thousand, and his "White Album" (1968) for the Beatles was issued in a "limited edition" of five million.

Hamilton was also crucial to the repositioning of Duchamp in the early 1960s, which involved a partial shift away from the provocation of the readymade toward the investigation of vision and desire. Freed up by the commercial failure of his first Pop paintings, Hamilton devoted several years to his mentor; in 1960, he produced an English version of the "Green Box" of notes made for the Large Glass, 1915–23 (this was a collaboration with the art historian George Heard Hamilton that strove "to render as closely as possible the form of the original documents"), and in 1966 he completed a meticulous reconstruction of the Glass for the Duchamp retrospective he organized for the Tate Gallery that same year. Hamilton also made three-dimensional studies of individual elements from the Glass, such as the "Glider," which he kept in his own collection as if it were a talisman. His incisive essays on the artist figure importantly in the Duchamp literature as well. Indeed, Hamilton was a brilliant writer: One of the inventors of Pop prose, which plays on the charged lingo of admen of the time, he was the best exegete of his own work—a fact that, ironically, may have inhibited other critics and so retarded his reception, especially in the United States. (Our propensity to see Pop as an American invention is to blame here, too.)
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Although Hamilton collaborated with a range of artists—not only IG colleagues but also figures as diverse as Victor Pasmore and Dieter Roth (the meticulous Hamilton and the raucious Roth, whom he dubbed “Diter Rot,” surely make for one of the oddest couples in twentieth-century art)—he was closest to Duchamp artistically, elaborating on themes of his mentor with both subtle variations and outright inversions. Hamilton was also akin to Duchamp temperamentally: Witty and wry (with an occasional dash of acerbic), he was paradoxical, too, in his combination of refined tastes (a gourmand, he was the toast of El Bulli) and plebeian commitments (forever dressed in workaday denim and cap, he consistently refused royal honors). Yet Hamilton was never as iconoclastic as Duchamp: In his own ironic fillip, he reversed his predecessor on the matter of “retinal art,” and even as he redefined the traditional genres of painting in terms of both subject and technique (he was an early enthusiast of proto-Photoshop programs), Hamilton also stuck to the categories of figure, still life, interior, and landscape (his suite of canvases on the Troubles in Northern Ireland might count as history paintings), spiking his contemporary materials with mnemonic traces of iconic works of the past. “I’ve always been an old-style artist in the commonly accepted sense,”
Hamilton commented in 1967: “that was my student training and that’s what I’ve remained.” He stayed so to the end. Inspired by a reading of Bataille’s Unknown Masterpiece (1945), his final painting plays on Manet’s Olympia, substituting a mid-nineteenth-century image of an Orientalist prostitute for the white courtier, and replacing the black servant with master artists of the past, drawn from self-portraits by the elderly Titian, the youthful Courbet (here seen in colloquy), and the middle-aged Poussin (at a reflective remove).

His greatest achievements, however, remain precisely the Pop paintings that did not sell initially. Hamilton called them “tabular” pictures, in large part because they tabulated stylistic traits from both popular culture and high art, mixing, as in Hommage a Chrysler Corp., 1957, hits of car ads and nude. A pastiche of different techniques, marks, and signs (painterly, photographic, collaged, abstract, figurative, modernist, and commercial), the tabular picture presents a hybrid space at once specific and sketchy in content, broken and seamless in facture, subtractive and additive in composition, and collaged and painterly in medium. With these heterogeneous means, Hamilton aimed to mimic the desirous eye in its saccadic jumps across associated forms—in Hommage, from breasts to headlights, hips to bumpers, and so on—in movements that seem metonymic at times, as desire is said to be in its ceaseless shifting from object to object, and metaphorical at others, as the symptom is said to be in its weird logic of association. As Hamilton once remarked of his own manner of working, “the tabular picture is a sieved reflection of the ad man’s paraphrase of the consumer’s dream.”

“Tabular” invokes “tablet,” as well as “tabloid,” and the tabular paintings do contain traces of the verbal-visual mélange characteristic of popular magazines and newspapers, even as they also anticipate the mixed sign of information and image that dominates electronic space today, an often lush picture that carries an often insistent directive. Yet as tests of the assimilation of popular culture into the “fine art tradition,” the tabular pictures pressure the tableau above all; this is why they are necessarily paintings. In this regard, Hamilton differs importantly from his American peers; in particular, the tabular picture should not be confused with the “flatbed picture” associated with Rauschenberg. Like the flatbed picture, the tabular picture might appear horizontal both in the practical sense of how it is assembled in the studio (sometimes flat on a table or floor) and in the cultural sense that it scans images and texts across the continuum of high art and mass media. Nevertheless, Hamilton insists on the pictorial whereas Rauschenberg disrupts it: For all its horizontal tabulation of found images and texts, the tabular image remains a vertical picture of a semi-illusionistic space, even though this orientation is associated with the magazine layout or the media screen as much as with the painting rectangle. Indeed, in keeping with his IGY formation, Hamilton is communicative, almost pedagogical, in a way that Rauschenberg is not. Above all, Hamilton holds on to depth—depth that is at once pictorial, psychological, hermeneutic, and historical—whereas his American Pop colleagues tend to dissolve it. This is so because even as he was committed to popular culture, he was still invested in the tableau tradition.

He wanted the two to continue their complicated dialogue; in this respect, he remained “a painter of modern life.” Perhaps he was the last.

An international retrospective is planned for 2013 (beginning at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles); belated in more ways than one, it will come as a revelation to many. ☐


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