

**Art and the Everyday: The London Scene**

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## Introduction

This paper looks at the work of the Independent Group. What was this?

- An intellectual project which centred around a nucleus of young, ambitious architects, artists, designers and writers at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London from 1952 until 1955. The Group is highly significant for the history of Team 10, as it involved Alison and Peter Smithson and John Voelcker. Conceptually the Independent Group's work is important for our discussions at this conference in three ways.
- Firstly, the Group re-evaluated modernism in architecture, design and art taking their cues from a diverse range of sources, including Sigfried Giedion, Le Corbusier and French Art Brut.
- Secondly, the Independent Group took an all-inclusive look at visual culture – nothing was debarred from its consideration.
- Thirdly, the Group also managed to dissolve the barriers between high and low culture in a highly sophisticated manner.

I have had a personal involvement with the Group since the late 1970s – it formed the basis of my PhD and my book, published in 1995. I think what has kept the obsession going over the years is the fact that, to quote Lawrence Alloway, the ideas are 'developable'. The Group's open approach to the everyday – to mass culture was, and remains, refreshing. As part of this introductory consideration of the Group, the involvement of creative couples in the project is worthy of attention. Like Charles and Ray Eames, at the Group's core was a close network of partners, so women enjoyed an unusually high level of influence for that time.

For example, the Group all met informally in each other's homes, in pubs, bistros and also at the ICA in Dover street, London. The main protagonists were: Eduardo and Freda Paolozzi; Nigel and Judith Henderson; Richard and Terry Hamilton; Lawrence Alloway and Sylvia Sleigh; Peter Reyner Banham and Mary Banham; John McHale and Frank/Magda Cordell. They created paintings, drawings, buildings, photographs and critical writing which reflected their obsessions with reworking modernism and mass culture. The Group's deep and critical understanding of modernism is admirable. Ways of deconstructing and understanding visual culture were explored by the Group in groundbreaking ways. The Group's relationship with American and European culture defies the usual analysis offered by traditional art history. This is why this conference on Team 10 is so important, as it adds to the new thinking about the importance of the group beyond the conventional 'Fathers of Pop' categorisation – recently reinforced, suprisingly by Hal Foster in *New Left Review*.

What I have chosen to focus on in this paper partly reflects my own current research and moves within the fields of art history, design history and cultural studies to respond to the challenges laid down by post-modernism, to consider culture in a broader sense, as a set of paradigms which reflect identities constructed by race, class, gender and sexuality. My

argument is that by using the same conceptual approaches as the Independent Group, complemented by an understanding of the everyday proposed by the anthropological discipline of material culture, the Group's relationship with the everyday will be revealed.

#### **Re-evaluating Modernism**

The first important concept that the Independent Group worked with was the re-evaluation of modernism. Think of Reyner Banham's in-depth analysis of early modernism in *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* of 1960, based on his PhD thesis at the Courtauld, plus the numerous articles he wrote for the architectural and art press, particularly *Architectural Review*. The Group's second set of meetings, held from October 1953 to February 1954, looked at Aesthetic Problems of Contemporary Art in which the problems identified were the challenge of new technology. This challenge was regarded by the Group as rocking the philosophical foundations of modernism, as understood at that time and largely as it is understood today. The Group argued that no everlasting notion of 'good design' could exist, no form of painting was aesthetically purer than any theory. The concept of timelessness was anathema to the Group. The Group looked at painting, and 'high modern' painting at that, as being inextricably linked with its context. Such art, design and architecture could not be timeless, it was always of a time, it could not transcend reality, it was part of the construction of that reality.

The ideas of the pre-war modern avant-garde were perpetuated at the newly founded Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA). The intellectual driving force was Herbert Read. This was at a time when the popular perception of modernism was of something dangerous and foreign.

Apart from Herbert Read an alternative take on modernism did inform the activities at the ICA – for example Roland Penrose's 1953 exhibition, *The Wonder and Horror of the Human Head*. However, there is still a sense in which Penrose is looking at objects beyond his own everyday reality as an eccentric country squire with a substantial house in London off Kensington Church street. The objects he chose to exhibit at home or in his gallery or form into collages are not part of his real world.

#### **Parallel of Life and Art**

But how did the Independent Group's approach differ? There is the contestation of timelessness, but also the Group's involvement with reality. I would argue that the Group members had a more intimate, a more dirty, a more involved relationship with things and with the everyday. When Nigel Henderson photographed scenes of his Bethnal Green neighbourhood during 1948 to 1952 he was actually living there. His wife, Judith Henderson was an anthropologist and was based there as part of a project led by the sociologist, J.L. Peterson. The shop fronts are grubby and the advertising displays set in this working-class areas of London are chaotic. This is the mess of ordinary, everyday life. Henderson is photographing these scenes 'as found', as the everyday, as the material culture of the population without

judgement. Similarly, his collage work of this period is messy – it messes with the photographic medium and mixes this with oil, scrawling into the surface. This affirmation of the messiness of everyday life challenges the modernist search for perfection.

The approach of the Independent Group can be closely allied to the newly emerging discipline of material culture. This has its origins in nineteenth century anthropology and entered discussion about visual culture in the 1980s, particularly in the work of Daniel Miller. He argued in 1987 in *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*:

'The argument that there is a thing called capitalist society which renders its population entirely pathological and dehumanized, with the exception of certain theorists who, although inevitably living their private lives in accordance with the tenets of this delusion, are able in their abstracted social theory to rise above, criticise and provide the only alternative model for society, is somewhat suspicious. The clear lesson from the history of modernism is that the academic left is quite capable of fashioning a central instrument for the reproduction of the interests of the dominant class at precisely the moment when it is making the most strident claim to the contrary.'

Unlike the older generation of modernists linked with the ICA, from its foundation in 1946 who still dominated during the 1950s, the Independent Group did not come from the traditional, upper-class or middle-class south of England, white, northern European backgrounds. The Group was more diverse – think of Paolozzi's Italian parentage, Magda Cordell was central European, Hamilton, Banham and Alloway were from lower middle class backgrounds. Members of the Independent Group used things and images of things from their everyday culture in their art work – advertising images, Hollywood cinema and packaging were used to create an immediacy, rawness and messiness which was different to the cool art of the British Surrealists. This approach can be found in the *Art Brut* work of Eduardo Paolozzi from this period, including the sculptures *Forms on a Bow* (1951).

The architects Peter and Alison Smithson staged an important exhibition with Henderson and Paolozzi in 1953 entitled *Parallel of Life and Art* at the ICA. Here again, everyday images of everyday life were taken and represented as coarse, grainy black and white photographic photographs in a jumbled environment. Microscopic views of tumours, X-rays, images of non-western habitats were thrown together. A discussion of the exhibition took place at the Architectural Association in Bedford Square on 2 December 1953 led by Reyner Banham. He referred subsequently to the debate in his article on 'New Brutalism' which showcased the work of the Smithsons: '...students at the Architectural Association complained of the deliberate flouting of the traditional concepts of the cult of ugliness and denying the spiritual in man.' New Brutalism was also informed by contemporary work in Paris, particularly the writing of Malraux and sculpture of Giacommetti. It is important to remember that members of the Independent Group, Paolozzi, Turnbull and Henderson had all visited Paris during the early post-war years and gleaned important influences from their meetings and gallery visits there. This continued to be supported through the ICA links –

Penrose was cultural attaché to the British Embassy in Paris in 1954 – and through reading and exhibitions in London.

### **This is Tomorrow**

The anthropological approach was central to the Independent Group enquiry. It helped inform the Group's deconstruction of traditional, modernist cultural hierarchies. The Group proposed that all aspects of culture be arranged along a continuum and that every experience was worthy of further examination and understanding. For the Independent Group things were of interest whether they were traditionally categorised as high culture or low culture.

The exhibition *Man, Machine and Motion* was held at the Hatton Gallery at King's College, Newcastle in 1955. Lawrence Gowing, who was Head of Fine Art there, was dubious about the show, writing to Roland Penrose:

'We have not yet decided how far we can should the costs which he (Richard Hamilton) envisages, and I have myself not decided whether the rather limited theme in which he is interested can be said to fall within the province of our gallery without the addition of a certain amount of material of a more general artistic character. However, Richard is evidently determined to persevere with his plans.'

The culmination of the Independent Group's work was the exhibition, *This is Tomorrow*, held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1956. This consisted of twelve distinct areas which were then filled with a particular environment by a team of three – one architect, one sculptor and one painter. Part of the exhibition consisted a British Constructivist celebration while other areas celebrated an Art Brut approach – like that created by the Smithsons, Henderson and Paolozzi. The display by Lawrence Alloway, Toni del Renzio and Geoffrey Holroyd consisted of an early interpretation of the work of Charles and Ray Eames, with a pin board and early communication theory.

The poster Hamilton designed for section 2 of the show underlines my initial point about the independent Group being about more than Pop Art. The Group challenged modernism, overturned the thinking of the earlier avant-garde, looked seriously at mass culture and at design within the same parameters as art. Lawrence Alloway wrote in Introduction to the catalogue 'Design as a human activity':

'A result of this exhibition is to oppose the specialisation of the arts... In *This is Tomorrow* the visitor is exposed to space effects, plays with signs, a wide range of materials and structures, which, taken together, make art and architecture a many-channelled activity, as factual and far from ideal standards as the street outside.'