

Designed Aesthetic: exhibition design and the Independent Group

One of the most direct and successful means by which the members of the Independent Group sought to address issues of popular culture and to engage a public was through the design of exhibitions. Over the course of its existence from 1952 to 1959, members of the IG were involved on various levels with the design and construction of several major exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts; and many members of the IG contributed to *This Is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1956. These exhibitions were characterized by a non-hieratic approach to art and photography, generally eschewing fine art objects and presenting images in the form of reproduction exclusively. In addition, the seemingly random installations utilized a montage approach which encouraged radical juxtapositions and privileged a heightened visual perception.

What is interesting from our contemporary vantage point is the way in which their analysis of advertising, styling, and technology through discussion groups and 'chaotic' exhibitions provided an index to the ways in which design - both as a product and as a producer of desire - could be approached through popular culture. For the IG, design became an unrepresed term whose circulation made possible the animation of a new series of relations within the fine-arts field. It seems clear that design - particularly product design but also interior and exhibition design - offered a visual lexicon familiar to many of the participants. Reyner Banham was a design historian and critic, Alison and Peter Smithson, James Stirling, Colin St. John Wilson and Alan Colquhoun were architects, Theo Crosby and Edward Wright were graphic designers, and Richard Hamilton taught design at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. Design, rather than fine art, was the language through which they

observed and apprehended the structure of their environment and the technology which was reshaping it. Design also became the medium through which all forms of popular culture could be critically evaluated.

In many respects the IG was like a visual think-tank; its discussions and exhibition plans were hashed out in a manner more similar to that of a design team in an architect's office than an artist in a studio. The lectures and discussions provided the raw materials and ideas for a collective thinking from which emerged a series of exhibitions. The collaborative nature of the meetings and projects distinguished the group efforts from the more private artistic practices of painting, sculpture, design, or collage. The members of the IG came together not so much as artists, but as collectors of images and information, which they sought to share. The exhibitions, rather than the art produced by individual group members, provides the clearest expression of their critical thinking.

Considered as a product, an exhibition is substantially and materially different from a work of art. Since an exhibition is temporary, difficult to represent in two-dimensional form, generally not portable, different from the sum of its parts, expensive to produce, not collectible and definitely not a commodity, it violates most of the tenets that structure a conventional object's entrance into the marketplace or into art history and criticism. Moreover, an exhibition, in that it is site-specific and confronts the viewer's passage through time and space while arranging a mass of material into a more or less coherent demonstration of a particular point of view, is in a rather complex and interactive way about the stimulation and sharing of ideas. Clearly, it is for this reason that the formulation of exhibitions appealed to the IG.

Given the shifting membership of the group and the widely divergent viewpoints, no coherent strategy was fully articulated, no manifesto written. One clear statement of a fundamental position of the group was expressed in the famous letter which Richard Hamilton sent to the Smithsons shortly after *This Is Tomorrow*. In that letter Hamilton described the IG's important 'manifestations' (including discussions and exhibitions) of the postwar years, drawing out the common thread of pop art/technology. The objective of this research, was to define pop art in terms of its main components: 'Popular (designed for mass audience), Transient (short-term solution), Expendable (easily forgotten), Low cost, Mass-produced Young (aimed at youth), Witty, Sexy, Gimmicky, Glamorous, Big Business.'¹ Within the field described by this list the IG was primarily interested in popular culture that dealt with technological change; they had no interest in soap opera, folk art, or

romance novels. Indeed, they seemed most interested in images that showed specifically how technology might change representation, as well as how technological change might be represented.

One of the critical concerns of the IG - both in selecting found images and in formulating exhibitions - was how individuals would respond to and interact with the new technological environment. Exhibitions, combining large-scale reproductions and movement through space, with suggestions of both the museum and the trade fair, served to suggest this change in visual perception as well as social and economic relations. By greatly enlarging photographs originally reproduced in books or magazines, they succeeded in transforming a visual text into something closer to mass propaganda or advertising. In this respect, the exhibitions functioned like an inversion of reading, as a type of fantasy experience sustained by a cinematic scale of imagery and by the potential for group reception.

Photography as a means of representation and as a device for exhibition design had been widely used in European trade, international festivals and design exhibitions since the 1920s. The pioneering work of El Lissitzky (particularly in the Cologne *Pressa* exhibition of 1928), and others, signalled the great possibilities that huge-scale photomontage sequences held for engaging the spectator through a direct and specifically controlled denotative relationship.² What the IG derived from the history of exhibition design seems to have been an interest in the production of a visual environment where flux and change, expendability, and the effects of new reproductive technologies might find expression.

In particular, they reflect a conscious engagement with the political and social conditions in England in the 1950s, not just through representations, but through a concrete (and sometimes metaphorical) analysis of ideologically inflected imagery. *Growth and Form*, for example, which was organized by Richard Hamilton for the ICA in 1951, is clearly a political allegory of the rebirth and restructuring of England and the postwar economy after the devastation of World War II. The theme of the exhibition was derived from D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's book *On Growth and Form* (1917). The exhibition was originally proposed as part of the festival of Britain - a sort of postwar spirit-booster - but was vetoed by Herbert Read, president of the ICA, who failed to see the relationship of the exhibition to the festival's stated

1. Richard Hamilton, *Collected Words*, London: Hans-Jorg Mayer, 1983, p.28. This letter was written in January, 1957.

2. See Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'From Faktura to Factography', *October*, 30 Fall 1984.



This is Tomorrow, 1956
Whitechapel Art Gallery, London

theme: one hundred years of British achievement.³ The exhibition, as installed at the ICA in 1951, utilized an organic-looking screen and floor- and ceiling-mounted projectors to animate the space. These devices also served to link the photographic representations of the diverse forms and structures found in nature.⁴

In 1953, Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paólozzi, Alison and Peter Smithson, and Ronald Jenkins organized an exhibition at the ICA entitled *Parallel of Life and Art*.⁵ This exhibition - originally called *Sources* - was conceived as the externalization of the image collections and scrapbooks assembled by the organizers. It also referred to the great modernist image collections of Moholy-Nagy (*The New Vision*), Ozenfant (*Foundations of Modern Art*), and Giedion (*Mechanization Takes Command*). In all, about a hundred photographic enlargements of various sizes were included in the exhibition, hung at oblique angles to one another and at varying heights. Included were images of machines, diagrams, hieroglyphics, X-rays, microphotographs, children's drawings and reproductions of works of art. On the whole the photographs presented a rather grim and surreal panorama - especially in contrast to the rather more protean *Growth and Form* - prompting certain critics to accuse the organizers of 'flouting ... the traditional concepts of photographic beauty, [perpetuating] the cult of ugliness and denying the spiritual in Man.'⁶ The fact that the representations came from outside the art context, that they were not labelled or captioned, and that they were hung free-floating in a deliberately non-hieratic space, all reflected the organizers' belief that such imagery was altering the experience of daily life more than work being produced by 'fine artists'.

Richard Hamilton organized and designed another major exhibition at the ICA in 1955, this time focusing on technological development of all types of vehicles in an exhibition ultimately titled *Man Machine and Motion*.⁷ For the design, Hamilton used modular steel frames to which were attached photo blowups and

3. Anne Massey, 'The Independent Group: towards a definition,' *Burlington Magazine* Vol. CXXIX, no. 1009 April 1987.

4. *Growth and Form* was held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, July 4 - August 31, 1951.

5. *Parallel of Life and Art* was held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Sept. 11 - Oct. 19, 1953.

6. Reyner Banham, referring to the response of students at the Architectural Association discussion, in 'New Brutalism', *Architectural Review* 118, no. 708, December 1955.

7. *Man, Machine and Motion* was held at the Hatton Gallery, King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne in May 1955, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, July 6-30, 1955. The catalogue included a text by Reyner Banham and was designed by Andrew Froshaug.

plexiglas panels. This flexible system of cubicle modules completely surrounded the viewer with an open, mazelike structure which had the effect of echoing the exhibition's content (an idea the artist apparently derived from Duchamp): the spectator's motion in relation to a moving object. In one sense, Hamilton's interest in exhibition design was a way of exploring this phenomenon in a three-dimensional environment. In this exhibition in particular, he was able to investigate the history and variety of what he called 'adaptive appliances' - or machines which facilitated this changing perception of movement through space. Reyner Banham's essay in the catalogue situates this interest in the context of the legacy of futurism. The ideology surrounding futurism seemed to mimic that of the IG's with its interest in technology and the machine, sharing with it the essence of the popular cultural experience - its expendability, impermanence and adaptation to change.

This is Tomorrow, organized by Theo Crosby at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1956, gave twelve architect/artist teams the opportunity to design environments which by foregrounding the concept of design revealed new relations in fine art and architecture. Richard Hamilton and John McHale as artists and John Voelcker as architect, produced a visual synthesis of their shared interests in popular imagery, scale and spectator motion in the form of a built structure that could physically produce a heightened perception of two- and three-dimensional stimuli. A variety of different kinetic and synaesthetic materials were combined in a display system more reminiscent of a funhouse than an art gallery. Not only the sense of sight, but also sound and touch, were activated through the environmental use of a jukebox, movies and live microphones displayed throughout a tactile structure. *Patio and Pavilion*, produced by the team of Peter and Alison Smithson as architects and Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson as artists, isolated the built world as a set of basic needs - a parcel of land, a patio and an enclosed space, a pavilion. Less a collaborative effort than a summary of their common concerns, this habitat with its reflecting aluminum enclosure, forced the spectator to consider him- or herself as a reflection of the environment, while simultaneously alluding to the impossibility of returning to a more primitive existence, since the entrance to the pavilion was blocked with wire.

The last exhibition associated with the IG was *an Exhibit* organized by Hamilton, Lawrence Alloway, and Victor Pasmore.⁸ As Hamilton recalls, *an Exhibit*

8. *an Exhibit* was held at the Hatton Gallery, King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, June 3-19, 1957, and at the Institute of Contemporary Art, August 13-24, 1957.



was structured around the idea of abstraction: there would be 'no theme, no subject: not a display of things or ideas [but a] pure abstract exhibition.'⁹ What he meant was that the exhibition would have no overt content related directly to popular imagery, but would be about the process of producing visual meaning. The exhibition consisted of panels of various colors and degrees of translucency which were distributed along modular grids and systematically installed. Perhaps the culmination of Hamilton's own exploration of exhibition design, the panels were arranged in such a way that as the spectator passed through them, compositions were generated.

After the late 1950s the discussion group/exhibition format of the IG seemed to splinter as each member became more involved in the exigencies of private practice - Hamilton, McHale and Paolozzi moved more toward fine art; the Smithsons extended their practical exploration of New Brutalism; and Banham, Alloway and others concentrated increasingly on theory and criticism. Seemingly, the moment to reproduce something temporary had passed. It makes you wonder if the impetus that created the desire to analyze this 'designed aesthetic' was satiated, or if what Hamilton had predicted in 'Persuading Image' had already happened, 'that the consumer will be designed to fit the product,' thus rendering analysis improbable.

9. Hamilton, *Collected Words*, op. cit. p. 26.



above:

This is Tomorrow, Today, 1987

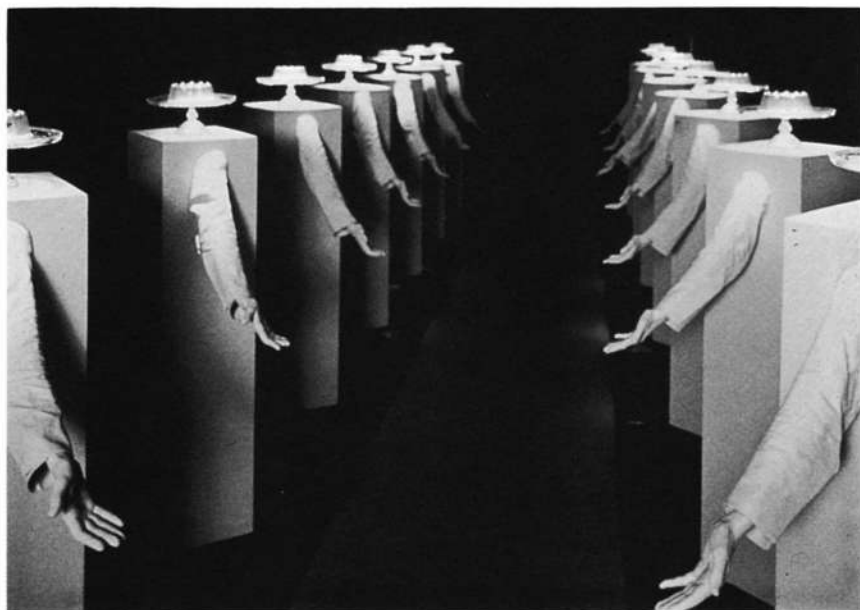
Reconstruction of *This is Tomorrow, Today*, exhibition at Clocktower, New York

below:

Impressario: Malcolm McLaren and the British New Wave, 1988

Exhibition at New Museum, New York

Exhibition designs made in collaboration with Ken Saylor



above:

Television Show, 1990

Exhibition at New Museum, New York

below:

Damaged Goods (Justin Ladda), 1986

Exhibition at New Museum, New York

Exhibition designs made in collaboration with Ken Saylor