

Just What Is It That Makes Hamilton So Popular, So Modern?

A semi-naked bodybuilder stands in the middle of a room, carrying a giant lollipop. On the couch, a pin-up sits in a provocative pose. A lamp with the Ford crest on the side table, a comic strip on the wall, canned ham on the table and a magnetic tape are some of the objects that decorate this odd-looking household interior, ceilinged by a slice of Moon. This is, of course, the description of Richard Hamilton's *Just What is it that Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing?*, collage created in 1956 and widely considered as the first Pop Art work (some sources state that the big POP written on the lollipop was the reason of the name of the movement). Hamilton, on the same line, is considered a founding figure of the movement, and the most famous of the British Pop Artists.

Richard Hamilton was not only an artist, but also a teacher -he had a short-term teaching job at the Royal Academy of Art (Lippard, 1966) and a post in the Fine Art Department at the Newcastle Upon Tyne University until 1966- exhibition organizer, typography designer and political activist (Richard Hamilton, 2014). In 1957, in a letter to Peter and Alison Smithson, he wrote down the qualities that an artwork should have in order to be defined as popular, mass-produced: popular (designed for a mass audience); transient (short-term solution); expendable (easily forgotten); low cost; mass-produced; young (aimed to reach the youth as audience); witty; sexy; gimmicky; last but not least, glamorous (Amaya, 1965), providing also one of the first definitions of pop art (Stonard, 2007; 610). The aim of the essay is seeing how many of the elements of the work correspond to the defining point of popular modernism, and see if Hamilton's collage belongs to its realm; at the same time, conduct a deeper analysis of Hamilton's production and artistic persona before the eighties, to finally draw some conclusions as of his position within popular culture.

The first aspect of *Just What Is It?* To be considered is the technique with which it was realized, which is collage. In everyday life, collage is experienced as an easy art practice by children, teenagers collecting scraps in their diaries; colourful and creative, it is even listed as an effective art therapy technique (Frank, 2014). Only later in life one discovers that collage is more, and more complex than that: a validated art practice. Within the context of European avant-garde, artists shared the desire to experiment with artistic languages and techniques; with the help of technological progresses, they could redefine the relationship between work of art and real world. Collage is one of these new techniques. Used since 1912 by cubists Braque and Picasso for example, it spread to other art movements to become common practice among Surrealists, such as Arp and Ernst, Dadaists Hoch and Schwitters, Futurist Prampolini, Pop artists and many other examples. One of the features of popular modernism is a relation to modernity, a modernity that is multiple and embraces the new, dynamic and unfinished. So, in terms of medium, I think that Hamilton chose a technique that can represent this characteristics in ways that others don't. Beside highlighting the thin line between destruction and

creation, creating a collage is the process of collecting, dissecting and reordering fragments of visual material that is varied and reflects a multiplicity of languages and intentions, and that can be reframed and reinvented in many ways. It can be unpredictable, and it is intrinsically unfinished, because new pieces can always be added, glued one on top of the other to create infinite layers of stories. Furthermore, beside its representative qualities, the work relates to modernity because it contains pop icons and the emerging new myths of modern mass-society: the comforts of bourgeois homes with household appliances, televisions and other electronic devices; the obsession with the image and care of the body. The material that Hamilton used all came from popular sources: he made the collage in a single morning, with pictures of American magazines that he found in the flat of Frank and Magda Cordell (Stonard, 2007). And what better sources could there be than American magazines? He considered them as storehouses of images (Wilson, 2011) and he looked at America as the source inspiration, a take-off point into tomorrow (Lippard, 1966).

American iconographic sources –mostly magazines – were not only influential but available in London, as demonstrates an exhibition of photographs from *Life* magazine held at the ICA in 1952 (Stonard, 2007; 613). In 1957, always exploiting American mass-consumption imagery, he produced *Hommage à Chrysler Corp.*(fig. 2). In occasion of the symposium Popular Culture and Personal Responsibility, in October 1960 in London, Hamilton presented an essay titled Art and Design. Beyond the criticism towards the scepticism of those who opposed mass culture, Hamilton exposed the new condition of the mass-object: “[...] the package is of greater importance than its contents in influencing the purchaser. Many products, in which efficiency of operation is the only real essential, are dependent on the design of the shell as the factor ultimately determining sales. In its efforts to gain and hold the affection of the mass audience a product must aim to project an image of desirability as strong as that of any Hollywood star. It must have gloss and glamour, and evoke a yearning for possession.” (Hamilton, 1982; 157). It is in light of these considerations that the figure of automobiles and women were so tightly associated in the post-war consumerist society, and this is why Hamilton chose to represent them together in his oil paint and metal frame on wood. The image represented is disconnected and somehow abstract, but still in its centre are recognizable the shapes of a voluptuous woman –wearing a bra and with painted red lips- caressing a sleek car, that is now not only a direct reference to contemporary consumption and production, but assumes a metamorphic value, becoming a vehicle of desire.

Only in 1963 that Hamilton would travel for the first time to California, in occasion of the first retrospective exhibition on Marcel Duchamp in Los Angeles (Richard Hamilton, 2007; 93); it is in that occasion Hamilton will meet Duchamp for the first time “an artistic father figure for him since 1952” (ibid.; 94). For three years, from 1957 to 1960, he had worked “as a translator, in a sense” (Artrepublic.com, n.d.) on the Green Box, Duchamp’s preparatory studies, drawings and writings for his work *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors*, also known

as *The Large Glass* (1915-23) (fig. 3). Along with Duchamp, one of Hamilton's most remarkable influences is James Joyce; in an interview about his exhibition "Imagining Ulysses" at the British Museum, in 2002, the artist said: "their genius pervades my life" (Giampietro, 2007). After his travel in California, both these influences converged in the work *Epiphany*, made in 1964 (fig. 4). The work shares with Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* both strategic - a ready-made quality, being a "found object"- and structural feature, being based on a large circle. As for Joyce's influence, his concept of epiphany, the moment of illumination, both inspired the title for the work and deeply impressed Hamilton at a conceptual level. He wrote about this: "I sometimes wonder if a sudden epiphany hit Marcel Duchamp when he picked up a bicycle wheel and put it through a hole in the top of a kitchen stool in 1913. I experienced such a moment of understanding when I encountered a large button in a seedy gift shop in Pacific Ocean Park, Venice, California, with the words SLIP IT TO ME blatantly displayed across it. The greatly enlarged version which I characterized as a work of art was entitled Epiphany." (ibid.).

Another feature of popular modernism is difficulty (in this paragraph there is also a bit more relation to modernity, in terms of the engagement of the artist with it). One would think that there is no difficulty in sticking pieces of magazines on paper, but it matters that those pieces have been put together not at random, but to represent and engage with contents of modernity. But how? It is interesting to know that the work was born from a sort of shopping list whose points were not the usual eggs and milk but elements of the mass and advertising iconography (Wilson, 2011). What Hamilton was trying to represent was the shift of everyday objects from everyday objects to icons, the creation of an "archetype out of the stuff of daily life" (ibid.) He chose this material not because he was interested in its aesthetic value, but because that material could be used to understand how the artist could analyse and represent the shift of society's values. That is why Hamilton is considered a history painter –that is, an artist that, through his understanding of that shift, represents a narrative of society to be understood in the context of the struggle of the individual against the State's attempt to repress any personal liberation with the help of popular press (ibid.); as such, we can understand how he was deeply preoccupied about the shaping of contemporary mass society also on another, sometimes more political level.

In 1966, Lawrence Alloway wrote that Hamilton was the only artist associated with the Independent Group or the British Pop artists that could be defined as an "activist" (ibid.; 8). He took part in the first Aldermaston march in 1958, organized by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarming (CND) (ibid.). Despite his personal involvement in political activism, it is the individual Richard that participated to it; Hamilton, father of Pop Art, rarely let direct political attacks get into his works. The only one that could be mentioned before the eighties (he would engage political subjects later on in his career) is the famous *Portrait of Hugh Gaitskell as a Famous Monster of Filmland* (fig. 5). After Gaitskell betrayal of socialism and the numerous defeats of the Labour Party,

the politician succeeded in persuading the party to support a line favourable to the possession of nuclear weapons and membership to NATO (ibid.; 9). In an interview released in 2010, Hamilton said that sometimes anger would keep him going, and that the *Portrait* was the result of fury: "When he refused to get rid of Britain's nuclear deterrent, I thought: the bastard!" (Cooke, 2010). The work, realized in 1964, was defined by Alloway the "only painting with a political or satirical point, and he is the only British artist to use Pop for such a purpose" (Wilson, 2011; 9). It is an oil and collage on photograph on panel, representing Gaitskell's face, with saggy flesh and hunted eyes, wearing the mask of the Phantom of the Opera and showing a mad and bulging eye taken from a 1959 publicity representing Jack the Ripper (ibid.; 13). The politician thus meets the monster, becoming also some kind of masked actor, conferring to the work not an ironic reading, but the clear impact of a moral judgement.

While direct political attacks are rarely found in this period of Hamilton's production, social analysis and involvement is never far away: it is the case of his series of works *Swingeing London 67*, that goes from (a) to (f)(fig. 6). Each of the work is realized with a different technique from the other – a poster, seven paintings (mixed with other mediums) and five prints- to symbolize shifts of texture and position that are held by different elements of the image; moreover, Hamilton said, each area of technique has its particular vocabulary (Wilson, 2011). Two men are sitting in the back of a van. Both hold their hand to cover their faces, and the attention focuses immediately on one detail: their hands are held together at the wrists by handcuffs. They are Mick Jagger, vocalist of the Rolling Stones, and Robert Fraser, art dealer and gallerist and personal friend of Hamilton's. Arrested for drug possession, in the photograph taken by John Twine (ibid.) –which will be the iconographic source for the series- the two men are on their way to court. Beside the outrage for the arrest of his friend Fraser, Hamilton was clearly inserting himself within a counter-culture fight against the establishment's attack against expressions of personal freedom. Later he would say about this events: "I had felt a strong personal indignation at the insanity of legal institutions which could jail anyone for the offence of self-abuse with drugs. [...] There were several moves towards the subject at the time of Robert's arrest in 1967. Gradually this sense of outrage subsided into quiet deliberations on the technical requirements of the expression of that anger." (ibid.; 44). While in the etching and preparatory sketches Hamilton focused the attention on the faces of the two men, in the painting (f) (screen-print on canvas, acrylic and collage), he chose to represent also the view from the windows of the van: on one side a restrictive and suffocating brick wall; on the other an image of trees and open nature. Together they not only suggest a progression from freedom to confinement, but also the fact that the men are both handcuffed and trapped inside the van, their captivity accentuated by the shadow of the man on the left corner –maybe the driver, a sentinel or a guard. The study for the series, just like the one for *Just What Is It?*, is a collection of newspaper and magazine's headlines,

articles and photograph (fig. 7); by choosing that specific photo, Hamilton is invoking a particular iconography of emotion and drama that comes from Renaissance and religious painting. According to Hal Foster, Jagger and Fraser's gesture of covering their faces may even recall the canonical expression of grief and shame worn by Adam in the *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* by Masaccio (c. 1452): "it would be like Hamilton to spike a pop-contemporary scene with an art-historical allusion in this way" (ibid.; 121). Indeed in 1961 he had noted: "it is the Playboy "Playmate of the month" pull-out pin-up which provides us with the closest contemporary equivalent of the odalisque in painting" (Stonard, 2007; 619), as example of the readjustment in a pop key of classical imagery often present in Hamilton's work (for example, the body-builder and the pin-up of *Just What Is It?* as Adam and Eve). As a "knowing consumer", Hamilton elaborates his materials –whether classical or pop– within a critical analysis that "exists alongside his personal engagement with the changing values of society" (Wilson, 2007; 77).

It is this engagement with society and with the individual, it is the little trace of himself that Hamilton left beside in his works that separates him from his pop peers and especially Andy Warhol, with which he contends the title of King of Pop. In Warhol's minimalist factory, raw materials were recorded rather than transformed; techniques such as standardization and repetition were used just to assemble replicas of what was already there, without any editing. He identified with the apparatus and perceived it as an extension of himself; after the failure of his first exhibition he abandoned a sentimental approach in order to find a cold and machinic one, that will then lead to his complete rapture with artisanal manufacture. Unsatisfied with his own image, he was obsessed by celebrity and the idea of success. Hamilton, on the other hand, was very different. His materials are elaborated, assembled and manipulated to create something new, an image that contained in itself an understanding of how it has come to be, about its meaning, about how it is projected through media reproduction. He used to go through different stages of creating and editing: preparatory sketches, research, changes on the final work adding or removing layers. In the case of *Just What Is It?* it is possible to remark that the image of the woman talking on the phone on the television screen had been cut out, probably by Terry Hamilton or Magda Cordell, who helped Hamilton with the gathering and putting together the materials for the collage, and then later put back in place, most likely by the artist himself (Stonard, 2007; 616); in the case of *Swinging London 67 (f)*, the final painting underwent a series of changes, such as the insertion of one of the transparent positives used for etchings (Wilson, 2011). His social engagement has already been addressed, his commentary and analysis of mass society transpired through his works, as well as his occasional direct engagement with contemporary events. He was not obsessed by success, but on the contrary always surprised by it: about his collaboration one of his former students at Newcastle, Nick De Ville, he said: "I was astonished when he came to me and asked me if I could help him with the photographic material [...]. I thought: "well

maybe some of my lectures in Newcastle had an effect on Pop instead of vice versa!" (YouTube, 1990); in an interview in 2010 he said that all the attention he was receiving was "getting a bit out of hand" and he was quite amused in recalling how he had won "a thing in the newspaper" about the worst exhibition of the year (Cooke, 2010).

At this point, I think it fair to say that *Just What is it that Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing?*, is a modern work of art, and it's popular as well, both according to the characteristic of popular modernism and the quality that Hamilton himself listed. The original aim of the work was indeed mass production (or reproduction): the collage, created to be part of the catalogue of the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, was not meant to be displayed, but to be reproduced (Stonard, 2007). Furthermore, it corresponds to other points of Hamilton's list: it is sexy, witty, low-cost, aimed to a young audience. These characteristics sum up most of Hamilton's production, and engage with modernity and pop culture in a variety of ways, both in contents and techniques. In my opinion, I would say that his works belong to Popular Modernism. The only point of his list that Hamilton's work failed to respect is being expendable, in other words easily forgotten. His production and his artistic persona, his teaching and writings had and still have a huge impact on the art world. Among one of those who was most influenced by the artist is Bryan Ferry, founder and vocalist of Roxy Music. Of Hamilton he has to say: "I was fortunate to be taught by Richard Hamilton in 1964, my first year at the Fine Art Department of Newcastle University, and from then on Richard was a great inspiration, both as an artist, and as a personality. Frighteningly intellectual, he seemed to validate my romantic leanings towards American culture, and he revealed how poetic and mysterious the modern world could be." (Bryanferry.com, 2011). Warhol's ability in creating his theatrical image and his skills in self-promotion may have had overshadowed Hamilton, but the situation is rapidly changing. Now, *Just What Is It?* is the central piece of most art history textbooks and retrospective exhibitions on the artist and on Pop Art; retrospectives are being organized all over the world, such as the one in Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, or last year exhibition Pop Art Design at the Barbican Centre or the most recent Richard Hamilton exhibition at Tate. Hamilton died in 2011, depriving the art world of one of its leading figures. Not only he had artistic talent and a great intellect, but also he was a pioneering artist of unparalleled skill, great personality and lasting authority is fascination with the authenticity of the image in contemporary society, and the social and political implications, has held him at the vanguard of modern art.



Fig. 1: Richard Hamilton, *Just What is it that Makes Today's Homes so Different, so Appealing?*, 1956, collage on paper, 26 x 25 cm, Tubinga, Kunsthalle.



Fig. 2: Richard Hamilton, *Hommage à Chrysler Corp.*, 1957, Oil paint, metal foil and digital print on wood, 1220 x 810 mm, Tate, London.

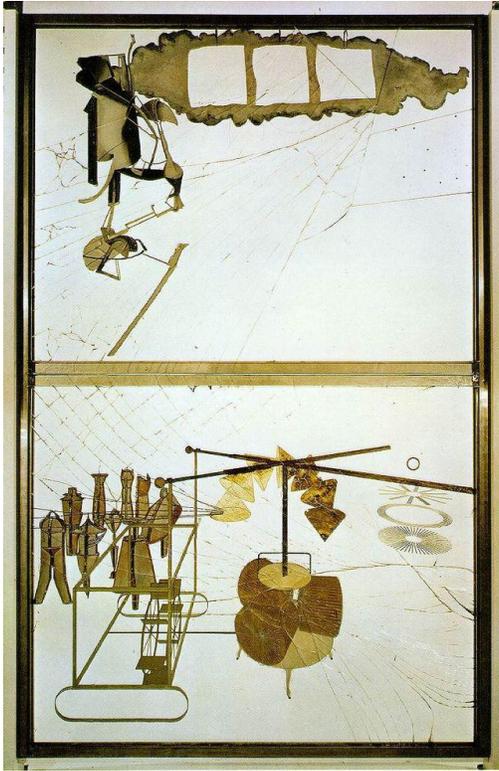


Fig. 3: Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-23, Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels, 277.5 cm × 175.9 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

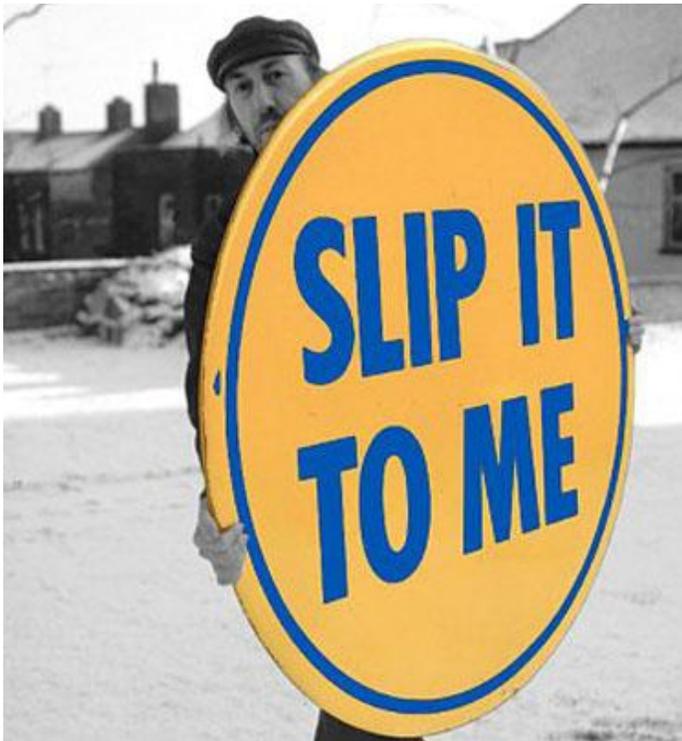


Fig. 4: Richard Hamilton, *Epiphany*, 1964, cellulose on panel, 121.9 cm diameter, Gagosian Gallery, London.

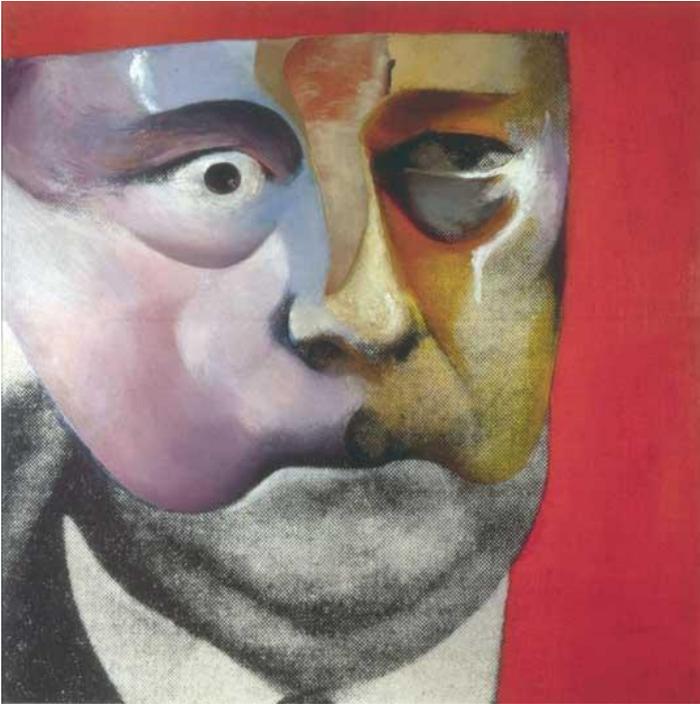


Fig. 5: Richard Hamilton, *Portrait of Hugh Gaitskell as a Famous Monster of Filmland*, 1964, oil and collage on photograph on panel, 61 x 61 cm, Arts Council Collection, South Bank Centre, London, ©The estate of Richard Hamilton.



Fig. 6: Richard Hamilton, *Swinging London 67 (f)*, 1968-9, Acrylic paint, screen-print, paper, aluminium and metalized acetate on canvas, 673 x 851 mm, Tate, London.

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