



PRINT October 2004

POPISMS

“Infotainment”

When *Artforum* called to propose looking back at “Infotainment,” a 1985 touring exhibition of young, media-smart East Village artists, I had just returned from London, where I saw Tate Britain’s “Art and the 60s: This Was Tomorrow.” As I thought back to New York in the mid-’80s, it struck me that there might be a parallel to draw between that strange time when artists seemed mesmerized by the power of mass media and the earlier moment in British Pop. Both “Infotainment” and “Art and the 60s” were about responses to American mass culture, and both groups of artists, though separated by twenty years, saw that culture as fascinatingly alien. The two groups seemed infected with a kind of nostalgia, a desire for an imagined moment more golden than the present. The fact that the British artists of the ’60s were looking forward while the Americans looked back only seemed to magnify the relationship, or at least clarify the shared frame of reference. Between them lies what we have come to understand as Pop, and more particularly name as Andy Warhol.

There is a way in which British Pop art always seems misunderstood, mixed up with the much flashier fashion and music scenes in ’60s London. It is usually described as if it had this veneer of tough knowingness. It is supposed to signal a sharp, quick ability to read the signs of consumer culture, understand the workings of representation, and come on as street-smart—a brightly colored, vinyl-coated exclamation. But while Richard Hamilton’s paintings, for example, are incredibly complex, intelligent meditations on all kinds of ideas about representation, from Duchamp to advertising, visually stunning they are not. Spare, cautious, controlled, deliberate, halting, self-conscious to an aching degree, careful, even beautiful on occasion. Hardly the stuff of Pop as we think of it.

In addition to many well-known paintings, the Tate show included some less familiar works and ephemeral material, such as a telling documentary film by Ken Russell (who went on to make such pop movie classics as *Women in Love* and *The Devils*). Broadcast by the BBC in March

1962, *Pop Goes the Easel* portrays a day in the life of four young artists in London, all associated with the Royal College of Art: Peter Blake, Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty, and Peter Phillips. We see each alone in his or her studio before they all gather at Boty's and then go back to the college for a party, where they dance the twist to some American rock 'n' roll records.

Far from being innate semioticians gliding easily from benday dots to the rhetoric of celebrity iconography, they prove to be a group of fantasists living in the sour, dark world of post-World War II Britain and wishing they were elsewhere. The scene in Boty's studio is telling. A once posh flat in the West End of London, it is a place of derelict elegance, a perfect sign of the ruin of the British economy. The four young people in their winter coats stand perilously close to a lone kerosene heater in the center of the room, drinking mugs of tea to keep warm. They banter and chat, trading tips and pieces of hard-won knowledge about America, each trying to top the next by knowing more about this bizarre and far-off land. Boshier wins hands down, reading from the back of a comic book how to win a ticket for a trip to Mars, at some date as yet to be announced. This is British Pop, dreaming a sun-drenched, optimistic culture far from the cold, wet reality of faded gentility and weak tea. It is a kind of cargo cult, the artists acting as collectors of remnants and artifacts that can bring them closer to the future. It is a nostalgia of fragments patching together an unreal vision of the America they wish to find. This is not Warhol's populist dream of an America in which everyone drinks Coke but an elite dream, accessible only to those in the know, or at the Royal College.

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Despite this ghostliness, there is a post-Pop exuberance to the "infotainment" tagline, a savvy appropriation of then-hip media-speak. Each of the essays takes a dim view of the effect of media saturation on human sensibility, and there is a certain poignancy to reading this after twenty years of further saturation. Robbins, himself one of artists discussed in the book, probably comes closest to articulating the shared aesthetic. And he strikes a precarious balance, defiantly declaring that what they do is the only thing possible, while arguing that the only thing possible is a passive watching: "To the children of Barthes and Coca-Cola, television affords the opportunity to monitor consumer civilization from our bedrooms." One gets the impression that for these artists everything has been seen or done, that the future is not some fantasyland of dreams and elsewhere but familiar territory staked out in sitcoms and game shows. There is an overwhelming sense of being left over, of being somehow at the end of the line. No longer quite producers, but more presenters, with gallery replacing studio.

Nature Morte opened on East Tenth Street in 1982, the inspiration of two recent Parsons graduates, Alan Belcher and Peter Nagy. It appears to have begun as a businesslike answer to the problem faced by all young artists—how to get a show. Displaying a by now familiar impatience

with the idea of waiting around to be picked up by an established gallery, Belcher and Nagy simply picked themselves and their friends. But this loose pragmatism soon developed into a more clearly defined mission. As Peter Nagy wrote in the introduction to *Infotainment*, “Our preference was for a type of art which stood in opposition to the large expressionistic paintings which then dominated galleries . . . in opposition to the kitsch/funk of the East Village and in opposition to the mass-marketing of art in general.” The core group at the beginning included Kevin Larmon, Joel Otterson, Steven Parrino, and Robin Weglinski, and they were soon joined by Robbins, Jennifer Bolande, and Gretchen Bender. Bolande remembers that the gallery functioned as a kind of clubhouse: “We’d stop by there after going to galleries and sit in the back room and smoke pot and talk about art. . . . In retrospect it was the best gallery experience I ever had.”

Nagy called it a “dayclub” in a 1983 interview in *Real Life Magazine*: “In ’78 you open a nightclub, in ’82 you open a gallery, a dayclub. The whole change in atmosphere can be attributed to Mary Boone-ism and Julian Schnabelism. It’s the mass movement of popular youth culture from music into art. The whole music thing coalesced in the late Seventies, and now our stars aren’t Debbie Harry and Joey Ramone, they’re Keith Haring and Futura 2000.” This sounds a little optimistic now but catches the effervescence of a moment when artists saw themselves as avid consumers of a culture they desperately wanted to be part of but felt a little queasy about. Everyone I have spoken to remembers the gallery as a place of fun. But we are talking about a certain kind of geeky, let’s-discuss-issues-in-contemporary-art fun, not the dance-party fun of Patti Astor and her friends at Fun Gallery.

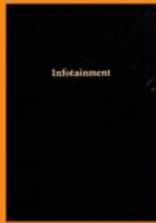
But who were the true followers of Warhol: the party people or the cultural analysts? More than anything the Warhol of the late ’70s and early ’80s was a totemic figure. In his platinum wig, he hovered like a weird ghostly presence in the limelight of celebrity. He was both trivial and commanding, dismissed by the serious minded and lionized by those who considered partying an art form. By the time he published *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* in 1975, he claimed he had failed at art and thus stopped making it. He was now interested in “business art,” and as he saw it, “business art” could succeed only if it had a sense of humor, which, to judge from his portraits both painted and written, meant a calculated insouciance infused with cruelty. This mix of glamour and common sense appealed to a younger generation backing away from the broad certainties of the various anti-aesthetic attitudes of the previous decade. They were no longer convinced that art could or should mount a sweeping critique of culture, preferring an ironic sideswipe. And the model of Warhol’s Factory—a self-selected society that gave validity and kudos to its participants, producing a homemade star system—was useful for negotiating the sudden treacheries of a sizzling-hot art market.

The young ’80s artists were fantasists in reverse image of their counterparts in London twenty years before. Both groups traded in specially guarded knowledge, but while the British artists dreamed of streets paved with gold, the younger Americans dreamed up schemes to gain access. As Otterson recalls, “We wanted to show at Leo Castelli but didn’t think it would be possible right away. But we wanted to do something. It was never an alternative thing—we always wanted to be part of the system.” To get there, they developed a mannered pop conceptualism, making odd, unassimilated work that can best be understood as complicated and possibly neurotic reworkings of mass-cultural images from a position of extreme connoisseurship. They

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Otterson remembers Nagy excitedly coming back one day to the apartment they shared in an area Robbins characterized as “a few hair-raising blocks from the Brooklyn Museum,” having met “this wild Dolly Parton woman from Texas who wanted to do a show of Nature Morte artists.” So the idea originated with Anne Livet, the specialist in art marketing, and it sparked real enthusiasm among the core group. Today Livet remembers the basic premise as follows: “It was a way to show America about the interesting art happening in the East Village. You could take a serious and underfinanced gallery and use their art as collateral to do a catalogue, and once you had a catalogue it was easy to get the show.” Livet found a backer named Jonathan Berg (hence the J. Berg Press) to put up money in exchange for art, and then she got on the phone and rounded up the (mostly commercial) venues, including Rhona Hoffman and Texas Gallery, as well as Vanguard Gallery in Philadelphia and the Aspen Art Museum. The show changed as the venues did, if any of the artists were lucky enough to make a sale. And if my memory of the exhibition is a bit vague, it’s because the show never hit New York; as Livet recalls, “I thought, well, the East Village is in New York, and you don’t need to do a show about the East Village there.” So, perhaps the show was a bigger event than I originally remembered. A group of young artists open their own gallery and use a marketing company to package their brand nationally. Now that would have brought a glimmer to the eye of the director of Andy Warhol Enterprises, promoter of “business art,” and a true believer in bringing home the bacon.

[Thomas Lawson](#) is dean of the School of Art at CalArts, Valencia, California.



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Clockwise from top left: *infotainment*, catalogue of a traveling exhibition organized by Livet Reichard Co., Inc., 1985. Peter Nagy, *EST Graduate*, 1984, acrylic and photography on canvas, 48 x 40". Haim Steinbach, *un-color becomes after ego*, 1984, plastic-terminated wood shelf with radio cassette player and latex masks, 31 1/2 x 65 x 16".

THOMAS LAWSON ON MEDIA MOGULS

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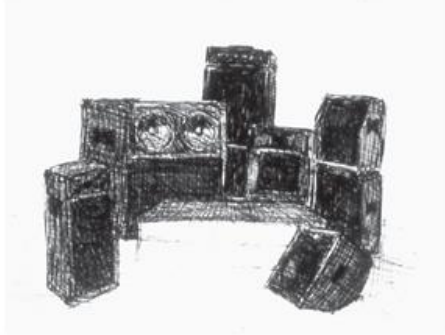


In addition to many well-known paintings, the Tate show included some less familiar works and ephemeral material, such as a telling documentary film by Ken Russell (who went on to make such pop movie classics as *Women in Love* and *The Devils*), broadcast by the BBC in March 1962, *Pop Goes the Easel* portrays a day in the life of four young artists in London, all associated with the Royal College of Art: Peter Blake, Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty, and Peter Phillips. We see each alone in his or her studio before they all gather at Boty’s and then go back to the college for a party, where they dance the twist to some American rock ‘n’ roll records.

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MY POP

Andrea Bowers >> Like Warhol, I shop at used bookstores and flea markets, and of course, I search the Internet. My projects are archaeological. I'm looking for forgotten subject matter buried in the virtual dump. I worry that crucial human activities will be discarded, and my work is fueled by a fear of historical amnesia. There's an early Warhol painting that uses a 1937 *Life* magazine photograph by H.S. Wong: a solitary Chinese baby in the just-bombed Shanghai South Station. Warhol's painting supposedly foreshadows his "Death and Disaster" series, but no one knows what became of it. And how many people today know Wong's powerful image? —AS TOLD TO KATY SIEGEL



Top left: Jennifer Bolande, *Speaker Family*, 1986, ballpoint pen on embossed paper, 17 x 18".
 Top right: Alan Belcher, *New Freedom*, 2004, color photographs on Plexiglas, 20 x 30".
 Inset: Andrea Bowers, *Nonviolent Protest Training*, Abalone Alliance Camp, Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant, 1981 (detail), 2004, graphite on paper, 38 x 49 1/2".

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McCollum remembered seeing her "portraits" a year later as part of "Interesting," an installation at Nature Morte, thus making him doubt his initial memory that they were in "POP," since he thought she would not likely have shown the same work in different contexts. Still, neither he nor she rejects the possibility that she first exhibited one in "POP."

McCollum has no doubt that he showed one of his "Perpetual Photos"—grainy black-and-white close-ups of framed pictures "found" on interior walls in movies and on TV. The "Perpetual Photos" evoke the lessons of Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), demonstrating the paradoxical loss of visual information that photographic enlargement ultimately produces.

Neither Sherman nor Prince recalls what they showed in "POP." Lawler thinks Prince showed a 1985 photograph of a detail of a photograph showing acorn jewelry nestled among the branches of a leafy plant—a notably innocuous work by the artist who had only just pulled off "one of the biggest stunts of his career." Though "POP" was itself hardly innocuous, it was a rather restrained exhibition to be sporting such a loud little name. It was, as McCollum says, tight and modest, its artists all strong. But to say, as he does, that it was memorable would be to fly in the face of the historical fact that it made virtually no impression.

The only other show at Spiritual America that anyone recalls in any detail is of Peter Nadin's "still life" paintings. Though no one can say precisely when this event took place (the sequence of the shows remains unknown), Lawler remembers bringing Nadin a gift of bananas on the occasion of the show's opening. Others, it is said, brought apples. "I think I showed fifteen or twenty paintings and read a couple of poems," writes Nadin. "I remember the occasion very fondly especially because many people arrived bearing gifts of fruit. Strangely, the fruit fell into two categories—bananas and apples. As the paintings derived from a castration complex, the sight of many people holding debagged metaphoric cock and balls was entirely appropriate."

No one remembers exactly when Prince and Fine closed down Spiritual America—or why, Robinson tells me that he thinks Fine got disillusioned (with Prince? with her self-employment as a fake gallerist losing real money?) and moved to Florida. The gallery was a brief, minor, yet telling episode in the history of pop after Pop, in which one artist revealed certain things about himself and his milieu at a time when the economic stakes were liberatingly low. And, wouldn't you know that that somewhere in the process of

writing this article, I discovered that I finally lost the announcement card for "POP." □ David Deitcher teaches art and critical theory at Cooper Union and at the ICP/Bard Program for Advanced Photographic Studies, New York.

LAWSON/INFOTAINMENT continued from page 94 and as he saw it, "business art" could succeed only if it had a sense of humor, which, to judge from his portraits both painted and written, meant a calculated insouciance infused with cruelty. This mix of glamour and common sense appealed to a younger generation backing away from the broad certainties of the various anti-aesthetic attitudes of the previous decade. They were no longer convinced that art could or should mount a sweeping critique of culture, preferring an ironic sideswipe. And the model of Warhol's Factory—a self-selected society that gave validity and kudos to its participants, producing a homemade star system—was useful for negotiating the sudden treacheries of a sizzling-hot art market.

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BUSH/YBA-ISM continued from page 106

his music videos, his restaurants, his record covers, his product design—appeared, for a moment, to signal a radical disruption of art's specialized terrain. But when stores like Habitat and Selfridges recognized the consumer advantage in affiliating themselves with the new British art, the symbiosis between commerce and culture deepened until, as Simon Ford concluded, "the art becomes inseparable from the products it is helping to sell—the floor coverings and furnishings, the restaurants and clubs." Rather than reflect on consumer society, as Pop art did, YBA became an aspect of it.

As journalism embraced YBA, criticism abandoned it: Britain has no Bergers or Burgins to call its own. The art historian Julian Stallabrass, whose courageous book *High Art Lite* of 1999 remains the only

detailed critical excavation of the period, argues that YBA itself is inimical to criticism because it refuses any cultural or intellectual responsibility. "Instead," he writes of Sarah Lucas's *Sunday Sport* pieces, "a pervasive and disabling irony becalms the work in a manner that is supposed, in conventional wisdom, to challenge the viewer but which in fact conveniently opens up demotic material to safe aesthetic delectation." Indeed, the writing most closely identified with YBA exercised a related form of intellectual disavowal en route to becoming one of the best-selling contemporary-art books ever. Matthew Collings's *Blimey! From Bohemia to Britpop* (1997) is a subjective, satirical commentary, written with the epigrammatic fluency of a good journalist and couched in a tone of slightly bored detachment. Juiced up with anecdotes, gossip, and opinion, *Blimey!* flaunts a breezy, irreverent style that can be, by turns, just like the art: absorbing, accessible, and outrageous—or utterly, embarrassingly banal. Collings invented the perfect voice to complement YBA: He makes an impact without (crucially) ever appearing to try too hard. The absence of any critical agenda in his writing is, according to Collings, a willful response to an age in which the avant-garde is "an official one and therefore a pseudo one." Ironically, given that he is more than anyone identified with the dumbing down of art discourse, Collings is at heart a Greenbergian formalist who believes that "populism and art are not meant to go together." Stallabrass, on the contrary, would like to believe that art can be popular—in the sense of accessible to all—and yet still contribute to a morally and intellectually ameliorative culture. In *High Art Lite* he concludes that in trying to sustain the difficult balancing act of appealing concurrently to the art world and to a mass audience, YBA ultimately fails at both. Culturally aimless, it is an art that ends up mimicking an idea of art. In 1997, when Stallabrass locked horns with another Marxist, John Roberts, over YBA in the pages of *Art Monthly* magazine, their debate stalled around vexed definitions of populism and popular culture. Roberts, uniquely among critical theorists, has defended YBA's populism as being somehow politically efficacious. He has praised YBA's nonelitist appeal and has tried to account for it by positively recuperating the term "philistine" (which he later qualifies as an abstract position, rather than an inherent quality): "The philistine is the

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