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Performing a brushstroke. Pop Paintings on Abstract Expressionism*

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to give a queer reading of some mid-1960s Pop Art paintings, whose more or less direct subject is the brushstroke. Queer hermeneutical instruments, like the concept of performativity, can recount the strategies set up by Pop artworks in order to deconstruct the essentialist meanings associated with the image of the thick, gestural brushstroke typical of Abstract Expressionism. All along the Fifties and Sixties, details of abstract painting spread and got a centrality due to Rosenberg's and Greenberg's pervasive critical systems as regards painting. The former interpreted the brushstroke as the direct expression of the life and the action of the painter; the latter, as the "nature" of painting itself as pure color on a surface. Countering this critical rhetoric, Lichtenstein artificially constructed flat images of the Expressionist brushstroke; Dine called into question its status of representation or reality; Rosenquist formulated food-like metaphors of abstraction, stressing its popularization in the mass media, and overturned the rhetoric of "natural" expressionist creation; Hockney camouflaged photographic figuration as a form of "drag abstraction".

KEYWORDS: Performativity; Pop Art, Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, James Rosenquist, David Hockney; Abstract Expressionism; brushstroke; art criticism

o. A QUEER READING OF POP PAINTING

"Do you think Pop Art is queer?" is one of the questions the young critic Gene Swenson asked Andy Warhol in 1963 and then (obviously) expunged from the published interview, which appeared in the November issue of *ARTnews* and has since become a defining text in Pop Art historiography.¹ The recent discovery of the original record of the conversation, as well as

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¹ See SWENSON 1997 [1963].

the reconstruction of the homophobic environment in which it took place,² have shed light upon the actual meaning of some of Warhol's famous statements, like – to name but one – “Everybody should like everybody”.

Even before the discovery of the question, over the last twenty years an (affirmative) answer has already been provided, together with a rich literature on the theme. Queer studies about Pop Art were inaugurated by the 1996 collection of essays *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*³ and their main contribution has been to fully acknowledge Warhol's queer subjectivity in the analysis of his work and his historical role as a leading figure of Pop Art.⁴

Up to its most recent examples,⁵ this literature has shown some trends: it tends to be limited to Warhol (or other queer artists like John Cage, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, who are not labelable as Pop) and it privileges his trans-medium *œuvre* (above all his films), his personality as it emerges from interviews and writings, or the cultural reception of his work, rather than his paintings (out of the twelve essays in *Pop Out*, only one is dedicated to Warhol as a painter). It therefore seems difficult to extend such a queer reading to the whole Pop phenomenon: other artists like Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, Robert Indiana or Jim Dine would be not suitable for this interpretation, since they did not show queer subjectivity⁶ and identified themselves explicitly as painters.

² “At the time of this 1963 interview, the wounds inflicted under ‘a savagely policed, McCarthyite America’ [...] were freshly reopened in advance of the 1964 World's Fair in New York, with brutal crackdowns on queer life in the city” (SICHEL 2018: 66).

³ See DOYLE, FLATLEY, MUÑOZ 1996.

⁴ Among the best results of this approach, a proper reading has been given back to a lot of coeval commentaries about Pop in which nobody before had pointed out gender and sexual orientation biases. See for example the discussion of extracts from a Rudolph Arnheim's unpublished interview in KATZ 1996; or Harold Rosenberg's early notes on the concept of “camp” in KATZ 2004.

⁵ See the 2014 issue of *Criticism* entirely dedicated to Warhol, and especially FLATLEY, GRUDIN 2014.

⁶ It is interesting to see what Gene Swenson, Warhol and his assistant Gerard Joseph Malanga say about the other Pop artists, in other extracts of the 1963 original interview:

SWENSON: You want it [the homosexuality] in your interview?

WARHOL: Yeah. But it should be on somebody else's too, just to, uh...

SWENSON: Oldenburg?

WARHOL: Yeah.

SWENSON: Who would be the best one?

WARHOL: Uh... Rosenquist.

SWENSON: Rosenquist?

WARHOL: Yeah.

MALANGA: He's too gentle!

WARHOL: Yeah, he's so gentle. No, no, he's just... no, I mean, he's sweet.

What I propose to do here is give a queer reading of a circumscribed feature in the historical phenomenon of Pop Art. It is an iconographic theme, namely the “Abstract Expressionist brushstroke”, which appears in some paintings realized in the USA around the mid-Sixties. I will examine renowned Pop masterpieces (Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes*, Dine’s palettes series or Rosenquist’s spaghetti paintings) but the attempt to consider these artworks as a coherent group is unprecedented. Although Warhol’s works often treat abstraction as an ironical subject, from Mondrian to Barnett Newman, the paintings explicitly dedicated to the material, swirling Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes are rare, late and often discussed (the most famous example being the 1978 made-of-urine *Oxydation* series, often read as an “insulting parody” of Pollock’s dripping); therefore, I won’t take them into consideration.⁷

Rather than mapping in its entirety this iconography among Pop paintings, my aim is to explain what such a “brushstroke” meant at that time, and which strategies were involved in its representation as an iconographic subject. In the early critical accounts of Pop Art, the opposition to Abstract Expressionism was intended to bring artists together into a unified movement and generation, along with other typical themes like the new influence of Dadaism or the use of commercial images as sources for figuration. In his 1963 interview Swenson asked the artists to take a position with respect to Pollock and De Kooning. Warhol expressed himself with provocative words, undoubtedly “queer”: “Pop is love in that it accepts all... all the meaner aspects of life, which, for various esthetic and moral considerations, other schools of painting have rejected or ignored” (Andy Warhol in SWENSON 1997 [1963]: 26). Other answers, however, are very nuanced,⁸

SWENSON: [pause] Do you think Pop Art’s queer? [laughing] I’ll ask Rosenquist that.

WARHOL: Yessss! That would be fantastic! [...] Oh that’s really marvelous. And Jim Dine too, just to get his reaction.

MALANGA: No, Bib Indiana! Awww, are kidding me!

WARHOL: No, well you can’t do it on everyone’s.

MALANGA: No, but Bob Indiana should have that question asked to him... because he’d go, ‘Ooooh, no that doesn’t make sense...’ [laughing]. (SICHEL 2018: 69)

⁷ Warhol’s obsession with abstract painting is discussed brilliantly, together with Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes* and many other artworks of the XX century, in the chapter *Satire, Irony, and Abstract Art* in VARNEDOE 2006: 199–206.

⁸ For example, Jim Dine stated: “I tie myself to Abstract-Expressionism like fathers and sons. [...] Certainly Abstract-Expressionism influenced me, particularly Motherwell” (SWENSON 1997 [1963]: 110). Even Warhol’s position recognized the historical value of the Abstract Expressionism: “If A-E dies, the abstractionists will bury themselves under the weight of their own success and acceptance; they are battlers and the battle is won; they are theoreticians and their theories are

and today it would be imprecise to equate the different relationship of each artist with the previous generations of abstractionists. As I will show, what can be identified as the common thread among Pop artworks thematizing Abstract Expressionism is a radical opposition not to the example of their older masters, but to the pervasive critical rhetoric about painting itself, which coagulated in the iconography of the brushstroke.

Clarification is now needed on my use of queer theory as a hermeneutic tool and with respect to queer studies on Pop Art (or Warhol). In these paintings I won't look for queer content or subjectivity regarding sexuality or gender identity. I choose a queer analysis as a methodological point of view that provides some theoretical instruments and reading keys to highlight the precise meaning of the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke as a Pop subject. In fact, queer theory is dedicated to the study of the ontologizing of categories ("female", "male", but also "sexuality"; "human", "animal" but also "species"), and can account for the various strategies of their deconstruction. Instruments and concepts of such an analysis have been identified and fully articulated by recent contributions, which encourages us to extend their applicability to larger fields of cultural production, from literature to cinema.⁹ This paper is an attempt to experiment with this critical approach by putting it in a dialogue with the methodological instruments of art history: as a cultural phenomenon, painting itself and art criticism were constructed by (ontologized) categories (to name but one, "expression") and painters could elaborate strategies to challenge the dominant paradigms of their time.

I will focus principally on two concepts of queer theory, namely *performativity* and its dialectical counterpart, *essentialism*. Performativity is the

respected in the staidest institutions; they seem by nature to be teachers and inseminators and their students and followers are legion around the world [...]" (105).

⁹ "According to this vision, the most basic, and at the same the most abstract, idea in queer studies is the deontologization of categories, first of all of the categories towards which a given culture makes it compulsory to position oneself, those which define social identity. [...] by making the applicability of queer more general and abstract, it would make it possible to extend queer analysis to fields of experience which have not only been neglected by queer studies⁸ so far but which are socially (and thus politically) invisible" (DELL'AVERSANO 2018: 38). "I firmly believe that the most productive [...] way in which queer can transcend itself, is by daring to accomplish a leap from a lower logical level to a superordinate one, moving from the plane of the critique of the contents of particular categories, or of the modes of particular performances, to that of the analysis of the establishment, of the use, and of the function of the very procedures of categorization and performativity, and of their existential, gnoseological, psychological, social and political effects, with the purpose of questioning them, both in theory and in practice" (44-5).

concept that allowed Judith Butler to describe gender as a social construct,¹⁰ “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (BUTLER 1988: 519). It can be proved applicable to other categories or objects given as “natural”, in order to point out the social, cultural or critical construction of their essentialism. The essentialist discourses about art too are characterized by what Butler defined a “process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects” (BUTLER 1999: 185).

In what follows, I point out how the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke had been assigned its “essentialism” by a contextual discourse, which involved rhetorical and visual devices, both in the highbrow criticism and in the popular culture (for limits of space, I will limit my analysis of the latter to the sufficiently abundant cases in *Life Magazine*). On the other side, I will interpret the different strategies implemented by Pop painters to deconstruct this paradigm of painting as overall “performative”. In their works, the subject/target of irony and parody is not a generic painterly way of painting or someone of the Abstract Expressionists, but precisely the “brushstroke” as a critical construction.

1. LICHTENSTEIN’S BRUSHSTROKES

Our analysis cannot but start from Roy Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes*, which were first exhibited in a solo show at Leo Castelli gallery in New York, entitled *Roy Lichtenstein: Brushstrokes and Ceramics*, from November 20th to December 11th 1965. Anticipating the opening, two other exemplars of the series were reproduced in the Italian art journal *mETRO*, on the cover and among the illustrations of the October 1965 issue (figures 1-2).

With these works, as Lucy Lippard noticed in her brilliant review of the show, “Lichtenstein has arrived at the non-objective fold” (1966). Unequivocally appearing as “deadpan renderings of abstract expressionist brush splashes” (SCHLANGER 1966: 42) in his typical comic-like style, they were easily identified as “parodies on Abstract Expressionist gesture and the good old dependence upon brushstroke and paint” (LIPPARD 1966). Since then and up to recent literature this series has been interpreted as a

¹⁰ “[...] performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (BUTLER 1999: xv)

self-reflective meditation about painting itself.¹¹ It is not a coincidence that Michael Lobel, in his fascinating monography about Lichtenstein, assigned to the *Brushstrokes* a function of recapitulation and completion of all the main themes of his production of the early Sixties.¹²

To investigate more deeply Lichtenstein's subject, that is to understand what a "brushstroke" was in 1965, one should pay attention to the unusually well-documented origin of the series. It dates back to almost two years earlier, at the beginning of 1964, as we know from a long interview which lasted several days between November 1963 and January 1964, organized by the collector Richard Brown Baker¹³ for the American Art Archive of the Smithsonian Institution.¹⁴ In their last meeting on January 15th, 1964, Lichtenstein said:

I'm thinking of doing now some things on Abstract Expressionism [...] and there the problem will be to paint a brush stroke, a picture of a brush stroke... [...]", and then he specified: "purposely dripped paint and things, you know, where the drips are actually drawn as drops of water drawn by a commercial artist. (BROWN BAKER, LICHTENSTEIN 1963-4)

The moment in Lichtenstein's career when the idea of the *Brushstrokes* germinated is quite significant. At the beginning of 1964, Lichtenstein was establishing himself in the art market and becoming notorious for the first time.¹⁵ Important proof of this visibility was the article the very popular magazine *Life* dedicated to him roughly at the same time as Baker's interview and published on January 31st, with a rich photographic documentation

¹¹ According to Diane Waldman, who wrote the first (1969) and the last monography (1993) about Lichtenstein as a curator of the Solomon Guggenheim Museum of New York, the whole series "is about the essential nature of painting and the meaning of a mark or a brushstroke" and it is intended ultimately "to address the issue of what characterized style in art" (WALDMAN 1993: 151).

¹² See LOBEL 2002: 158-167.

¹³ Baker at that time had already bought three paintings and a drawing by Lichtenstein, see CROW 2011.

¹⁴ Baker met Lichtenstein in his studio at West 26th Street in New York City five times: on 15 November, 20 November, 6 December, 11 December 1963 and 15 January 1964. An audio excerpt of the first interview and the complete transcript of the two are consultable online, see <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-roy-lichtenstein-11994>. I will refer to the online transcript, which is not inscribed with numbers of pages, as BROWN BAKER, LICHTENSTEIN 1963-4.

¹⁵ In late 1963 Baker acknowledged this new fame: "I just wanted to bring out the fact that you have become a "name" artist now. Do you find this burdensome?" (BROWN BAKER, LICHTENSTEIN 1963-64).



FIG. 1 – R. Lichtenstein, *Brushstrokes*, 1965, *mETRO*, Oct. 1965, cover.



FIG. 2 R. Lichtenstein, *Brush Stroke*, 1964. In *mETRO*, Oct. 1965: 6.

of his studio work by John Loengard.¹⁶ The titled *Is He the Worst Artist in the U.S.?* clearly inverted the famous article cementing Pollock's fame, published more than a decade before on the same journal, under the title *Jackson Pollock. Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?*¹⁷ It would be no coincidence that Lichtenstein undertook the depiction of the brushstroke and the "dripped paint" of Abstract Expressionism, just at the moment when he started to be publicly compared with the artists embodying those techniques (figures 3-4).

The reference to the unforgotten 1949 article on Pollock clearly played with a paradoxical overturning of the meaning and practices of painting. It

¹⁶ In the pictures, the large *Thinking of Him*, commented in the interview with Brown Baker, hangs on the wall easel.

¹⁷ The author of the text is not listed in the issue, albeit it is known that Dorothy Seiberling interviewed Pollock for the occasion; see SEIBERLING (?) 1949. Illustrations of the article were a bold portrait of the painter by the renowned photographer Arnold Newman, which presented Pollock standing "moodily" – as the caption says – in front of his large painting *Number Nine*, as well as other images which tried to investigate the new Abstract Painting in the making, that is two close details of his paintings and two images of him at work, taken by the photographer Martha Holmes.

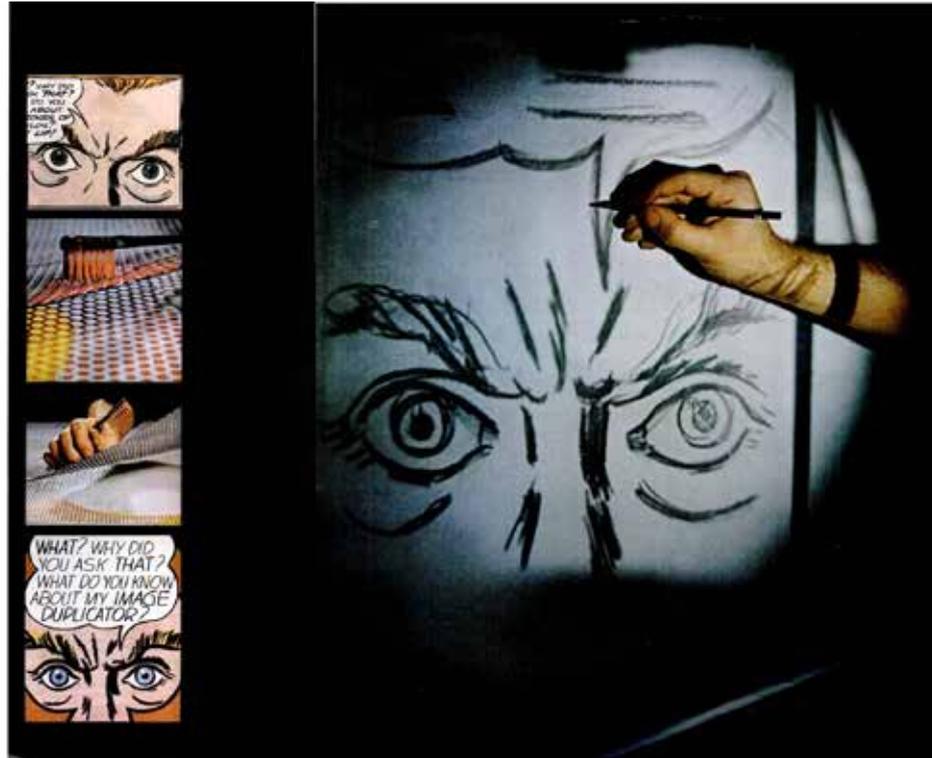


FIG. 3 – “Is He the Worst Artist in the U.S.?”, *Life*, 31st Jan. 1964: 79-81.



FIG. 4 – “Jackson Pollock. Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?”, *Life*, 8 Aug. 1949: 42-43, 45.

concerned many aspects: Abstract Expressionist's inspired gymnastic and action painting turns into a repetitive mechanical operation, in which the Pop artist simply fills the holes of an overlay sheets to paint the Ben Day dots on the canvas; the brush becomes a toothbrush; the close ups once reserved to details of the brushstrokes are substituted the comics frame cutting, enlarged and screened with a headlamp projector.¹⁸

The 1949 Pollock article spread into popular culture some of the early critical readings about Abstract Expressionism, typically statements by the artists themselves published in avant-gardist journals of short circulation. Some important quotes were taken directly from a statement by Pollock originally published the year before in *Possibilities*:

When I am *in* my painting" says Pollock, "I'm not aware of what I'm doing". To find out what he has been doing he stops and contemplates the picture during what he calls his "get acquainted" period. (SEIBERLING (?) 1949: 45)

In Pollock's rare own voice, the act of painting goes out of focus, becoming an involving and blind experience, hermetically defined as a "contact" not to be lost with the painting. This metaphor of being "in the canvas" implied that there would be no room, no spatial distinction between the painter and the painting. In the 1948 original statement Pollock further described the process of dripping as a "pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well" (POLLOCK 2005 [1948]: 140).

As Ann Eden Gibson stated in 1988, what seems here a lack of awareness is instead a voluntary "evasion of language" and it was originally typical of all the Abstract Expressionists.¹⁹ The artists' reluctance to explain both what their paintings meant and the process of their creation was strategically intrinsic in their poetics of the uninterpretable, mystic and mysterious.

Historically, in the following decades this evasion "creates a vacuum that was occupied by these two systems of criticism (Greenberg's and Rosenberg's) each of which narrowed the implications of the work to a significant degree" (GIBSON 1988: 212). In the next paragraphs, I will account for the cultural consequences of these two criticisms, which were being

¹⁸ For a short analysis of the ironical intention of the 1964 *Life* article, see LOBEL 2002: 13.

¹⁹ "The Abstract Expressionists' resistance to interpretation was remarked upon by their critics, both friendly and hostile. It was also expressed by the avoidance of recognizable images in their work and in their refusal to explain, except in the most general terms, what the work "meant" (GIBSON 1988: 208).

consolidated in the early Sixties, when Lichtenstein and other Pop artists approached the brushstroke as a theme.

1.1 IMAGES OF “A TUBE OF PAINT SQUEEZED BY THE ABSOLUTE”

Commenting the historical role of Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes*, Diane Waldman claimed that “before Lichtenstein painted this series, the brushstroke had been a construct with no concrete identity of its own, usually acting only as a signifier of form in painting. By enormously enlarging the brushstroke and making it self-referential, as the subject of the paintings, he has provided it with such an identity” (WALDMAN 1993: 156). If it is true that a brushstroke was a totally new subject (and title!), it is not totally correct to say that the construct of the brushstroke had no concrete identity yet. On the contrary, all along the Fifties and up to the Sixties, it had received a precise visual identity: together with photographs of the athletic gesture of the Action Painters, magnified details of the brushstrokes were the favored means to illustrate the new features of Abstract Expressionism. Waldman herself remembered, even if without any precise reference, that “*ARTnews* magazine was notorious for frequently emphasizing details of

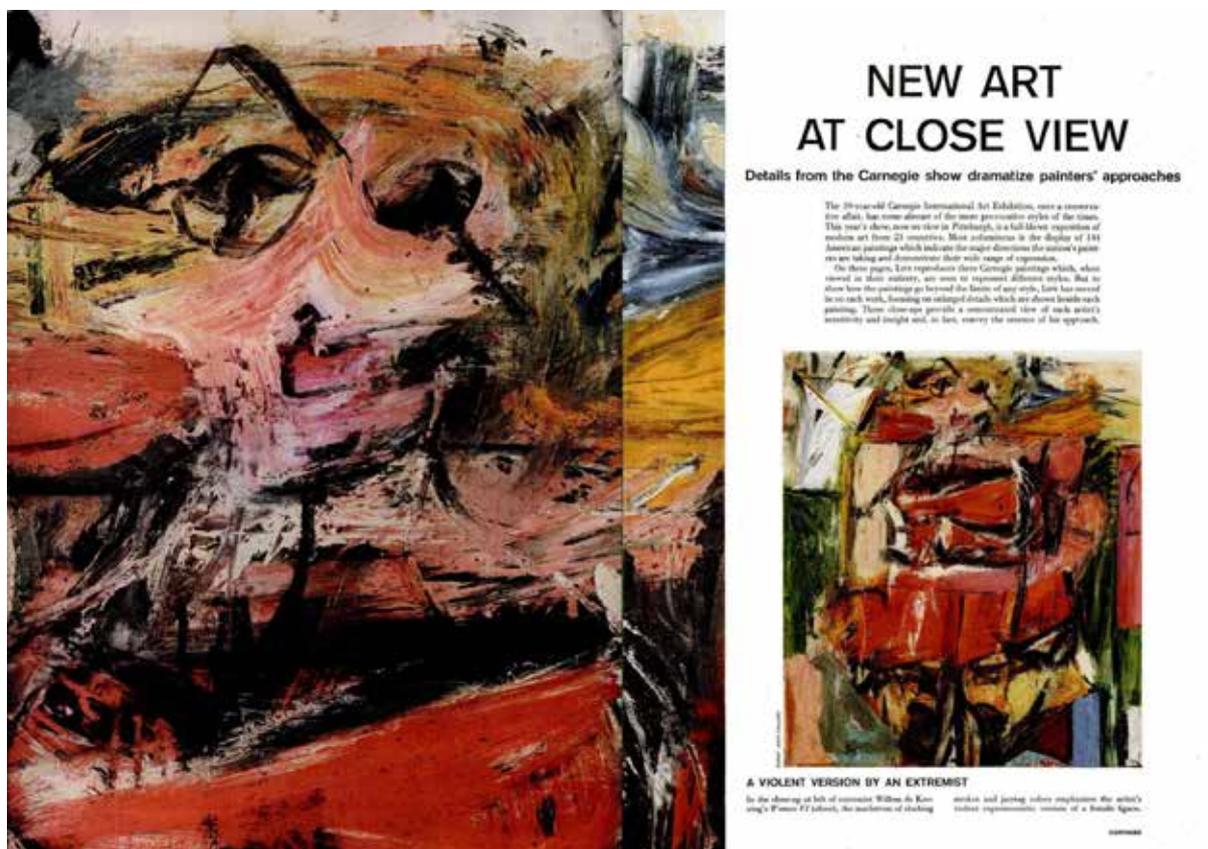


FIG. 5 – “New Art at close view”, *Life*, 21 Nov. 1955: 134-5.

paintings on its pages during the 1950s” (*Ibid.*) and this trend also characterized the more largely popular imagery about abstraction.

An eloquent example is Pollock’s 1949 article, where two details of the weft of dripping and brushstrokes were illustrated alongside two shots of him at work (figure 4), which anticipated the most famous photographs by Hans Namuth for *ARTnews* of two years later.²⁰ Following this iconography through *Life* magazine, we meet a review of the 1955 Carnegie show entitled *New Art at Close View*. *Woman VI* by De Kooning was illustrated with a full-page “dramatizing” detail of the female face (figure 5). The caption reported that “these close-ups provide a concentrated view of each artist’s sensitivity and insight and, in fact, convey the essence of his approach” (*NEW ART... 1955*: 135). In 1959, when Abstract Expressionism was already acknowledged as the most important American movement and painters like De Kooning were hailed as “the world’s dominant artists today” (SEIBERLING 1959A: 69),²¹ a two-part enquiry about the art movement still used the dual strategy of a close-ups of the painting’s surface and a dynamic gesture of the author to represent abstraction.

This iconography shows the influence of one of the two critical systems indicated by Gibson, that is Harold Rosenberg’s “action painting” definition, first elaborated in 1952. This very well-known text contains the effective birth of the essentialism of the brushstroke, the critical vulgate of its possibility to concentrate the artist’s sensitivity or “essence”, to use terms from the *Life* articles quoted above. The spatial absorption in Pollock’s description of being “in the painting” suggested to Rosenberg the famous metaphor of the canvas as an arena:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to re-produce, re-design, analyze, or “express” an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. (ROSENBERG 2005 [1952]: 190)

The substitution of the picture with an event corresponds to the choice of photographing the gesture of the artist rather than the resulting image. The theoretical consequence of such a substitution is to prevent a reading

²⁰ See GOODNOUGH 1951.

²¹ Such an “imperialist” acknowledgment was mainly due to the 1958-59 traveling exhibition *The New American Painting*, which had literally exported Abstract Expressionism in Europe.

of the artwork as a system of signs, culturally constructed and therefore readable. The “event” prevents the distinction between the artist and his creation, between the doer and the deed. Rosenberg goes on:

A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a “moment” in the adulterated mixture of his life [...]. The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken with every distinction between art and life. (191)

Scholars have already highlighted the philosophical background of European Existentialism that sustained this conception of painting.²² Rosenberg acknowledges that this rhetoric about Abstract Expressionism could bring to an inner, dramatic heroism or even to forms of “Mysticism”: “[...] the new movement is, with the majority of the painters, essentially a religious movement”. The work on the canvas transcends completely the limits of materiality, becoming “a new moment in which the painter will realize his total personality”:

When a tube of paint is squeezed by the Absolute, the result can only be a Success. The painter need keep himself on hand solely to collect the benefits of an endless series of strokes of luck [...]. In a single stroke the painter exists as a Somebody – at least on a wall. (195)

Here we are at the foundations of the essentialist definition of the brush-stroke, charged with such a responsibility to convey the essence of the artist and of the value of painting itself. It happened to do so without any “technique”, behavior or cultural determination, but only by virtue of “luck”.

Curiously, Rosenberg’s text and the images of Pollock at work would have a parallel and opposite historical effect on the creation of the “performative subject of postmodernism” (JONES 1998: 15). In fact, Pollock’s action painting has been always recognized as a cornerstone of happening and performance art, at least since its first programmatic text by Allan Kaprow *The legacy of Jackson Pollock*; furthermore, it has been showed how much the birth of performance art was intertwined with the coeval first formulations of a theory of performativity by Austin and Goffman.²³ The paradox shows at its best the importance of criticism to pilot the popular

²² See LYON 1991 for a comprehensive introduction to this major issue.

²³ See JONES 2020: 54-71.

interpretation of artworks and images and the function of Rosenberg's intentional focus on the brushstroke (which is absent in Kaprow's text) to the detriment of a theatrical and performative hermeneutics.

The best description of Rosenberg's overt essentialism was provided some years later by his main competitor in the interpretation of artists like Pollock, Franz Kline or Clifford Still, namely Clement Greenberg. In the early Sixties, he took as an "explicit target" the definition of "action painters" and the esoteric vocabulary used by Rosenberg in a pamphlet entitled *How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name*.

Mr. Rosenberg explained that these painters were not really seeking to arrive at art, but rather to discover their own identities through the unpremeditated and more or less uncontrolled acts by which they put paint to canvas. For them the picture surface was the "arena" of a struggle waged outside the limits of art in which "existence" strove as it were to become "essence". "Essence", or the identity of the painter, could be recognized by the painter himself only in the very act of painting [...]. The painted "picture", having been painted, became an indifferent matter. [...] The covered canvas was left over as the un-meaning aftermath of an "event", the solipsistic record of purely personal "gestures", and belonging therefore to the same reality that breathing and thumbprints, love affairs and wars belonged to, but not works of art. (GREENBERG 1993 [1962]: 136)

Even if he opposed to the concept of the "artist's essence" in such existentialist terms, we will see how Greenberg's own criticism ended up in another, if not more pervasive, form of essentialism.

1.2 "AT WAR WITH WHAT WE CONSIDER PAINTING"

Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* set up a very precise strategy in order to represent the twists and crests of the brush. In a passage of the interview with Baker, we find an important hint at the first attempts to illustrate a brushstroke. Skeptical about going to Pollock's or De Kooning's exhibitions and copying brushstrokes "from life", as Baker suggested, Lichtenstein reports his method of working without direct visual models:

I've made some little sketches but most of the shapes look like wooden signs rather than brush strokes, they look like a lot of cartoon drawings of wooden signs, you know how the edges are zigzagged and they've got marks through them which look more like weathered wood than they do – I have to think of a way of representing. (BROWN BAKER, LICHTENSTEIN 1963-4)

As Michael Lobel has fully documented, Lichtenstein found an answer to this impasse in two ways. On the one side, in late 1964 he found a comic source for the representation of the brushstroke, which is the origin of the first exemplar of the series (figure 2) and explains the residual presence of the painter's hand in the corner of the picture.²⁴ On the other side, as Lichtenstein himself told Bernice Rose in 1987, he used a sophisticated technique to obtain a graphic image of the brushstroke, in order to mitigate the rigidity still present in this first work (which apparently needed the depiction of the hand to dispel the ambiguity of "weathered wood"-like signs). He laid little strokes of Magna painting on some repelling acetate sheets, which created easily controllable studies then projected onto the large canvases.

Lichtenstein isolated and repeated the action of the brush, artificially manipulating the outcome until it gained the desired appearance of "juicy swirls of pigment" (LIPPARD 1966).²⁵ The effect of immediacy, spontaneity and "expression" is then simulated, contradicting the substantial connection with the essence of the painter. Not only, as Waldman noticed, "in satirizing Abstract Expressionism by focusing on its characteristic brushstroke, Lichtenstein unlinked process (the action or event) and end-product (the record of that action or event) and thus diminished the ineffable mystery of artistic creation" (WALDMAN 1993: 151). His strategy can also be interpreted as "performative" as it shows a brushstroke coming out from a reiterated process of construction *a priori*, by default.

Obviously, the concept of performativity belongs to our hermeneutical instruments and not to Lichtenstein's own terminology or conceptual apparatus. Nevertheless, it accounts for an attitude difficult to describe with generic terms like "satire", "caricature" or "irony" (none of them used by the artist) of the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke, or the opposition to the "pale imitation" and "slavish emulation" (*Ibid.*) by the late generations of abstractionists. Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* are not such forthright statements about actuality: Lippard acutely observed in 1966 that "it is too late to be mordant about action painting anyway" (LIPPARD 1966). Not

²⁴ The comic strip was *The Painting*, in the series "Strange Suspense Stories", published in October 1964. For a full analysis of the source, and its specific thematic meaning for Lichtenstein's relationship to the artificiality of images, see LOBEL 2002: 164-7.

²⁵ Such a performative, repetitive execution of the brushstroke could have a famous precedent in Robert Rauschenberg's *Factum I* and *Factum II*, a duo of combine paintings made simultaneously in 1957 in which the artist repeated accurately (but not exactly) the same features of dripping, brushstrokes and collage.

to mention the fact that Lichtenstein remained loyal to the teaching of modernist composition, like all other Pop artists, and shaped the design of many of his figurative paintings playing explicitly with reminders of abstraction.²⁶ What is at stake in Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* is rather the rhetoric of essentialist painting, as a lasting paradigm loading the meaning attributed to the acts of a brush on a canvas.

An indirect proof of this awareness may be found in the photographs, referred to by Lobel, that Ugo Mulas in league with Lichtenstein arranged in his atelier: he programmatically stressed the paradoxical process of execution, setting the acetate sheet in front of the finished large *Big Painting no. 6*, shortly before sending it to the Castelli gallery.²⁷ A more explicit formulation of the intention behind this performative strategy can be found in the 1964 interview with Baker. Asked about his recent trip to Paris, Lichtenstein commented Honoré Daumier's production of cartoons, expressing his own purpose to "remove apparent aesthetic qualities" from his paintings. Baker, interpreting this purpose as a contraposition to the aesthetical richness of Abstract Expressionism, asked him:

[Brown Baker:] But you are at war, as it were, with certain manifestations of modern painting?

[Lichtenstein:] With what we consider painting, which I think almost every painter is at war with really. I would think that almost all painters are at war – most of the major changes in painting can be looked at, at least as a war with painting that went – preceding and - ...

[Brown Baker:] and you are, I take it, in rebellion against the brush stroke.

[Lichtenstein:] Yes. (1963-4)

Lichtenstein's clarification indicates the specific meaning of his *Brushstrokes*.

²⁶ See, for example, Lichtenstein's interview recorded in the 1965 film *L'École de New York* from the series *Métamorphoses* by Jean Antoine, then transcribed in the French journal *Quadrum*: "I think I've always been interested in the relationship between certain abstract painting and certain commercial art or material which we took as realistic. For instance, I've done a tire which – let's say - with the repetition of the threads might look very much in principles like the work of Vasarely or I've done a notebook cover, a composition book cover, which looked like something like Jackson Pollock or maybe Jack Youngerman's work. [...] I think in these 'cartoons' which I am doing of landscapes in this show, they range all the way from more or less conventional cartoons of landscapes to work that is so abstract that if you didn't know they were landscapes to begin with it would be very difficult to tell what it was that was going down on the painting. But there is allusion here made possibly work of Rothko and other abstract painters which I think might be evident in these landscapes" (LICHTENSTEIN 1965: 162).

²⁷ See LOBEL 2002: 162.

With the expression “certain manifestations of modern painting”, Baker probably wanted to speak in terms of schools (Abstract Expressionism) or protagonists like Pollock and De Kooning. Instead, Lichtenstein moves the object of his rebellion onto “what we consider painting”, that is the critical discourse about painting, the parameters and canons established to judge art, inevitably addressing also Rosenberg’s strong influence on the coeval critical debate. If in art history every slight shift from one paradigm of painting to another can be represented as “a war”, the overcoming of the Abstract Expressionist hermeneutics appeared more radical: it involves re-considering the meaning of very basilar element of painting, that is color material laid onto the canvas.

2 ART IN THE MIRROR

In late 1966, Gene Swenson was assigned the curatorship of an interesting exhibition at the MoMA entitled *Art in the Mirror*²⁸. In a “small per-



FIG. 6 – A room view of the exhibition ‘Art in the Mirror’, MoMA, New York, November 22, 1966. Photo: February 6, 1967. Gelatin silver print, 17.8 x 24.8 cm. By Rolf Petersen (© The Museum of Modern Art, New York). Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Catalogue n.: IN812.2. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

²⁸ *Art in the Mirror* opened on November 22nd and closed on February 6th 1967.

sonal selection” he gathered paintings, sculptures and graphic artworks that “reflect art itself, and its place in the world both as a subject and a point of departure” (SWENSON 1966). At that time, and with the favor of the same critic who launched Pop Art in 1963, nothing prevented artworks by Warhol, Indiana, Tom Wesselmann and Lichtenstein from being included in a show that went from Pablo Picasso to Max Ernst or Francis Bacon.

In his short text for the leaflet of the exhibition, Swenson commented about the possibility for modern art to depict “art itself”:

All art is to some extent about itself, about form and color and materials. Paul Signac, in 1902, wrote, “The subject is nothing. Or at least just one of its parts, no more important than the other elements – color, design, composition.” Recently some critics and painters have taken that dictum to extremes where the only permissible “subject” is color or paint. [This show] does not include any work without an image of art, that is, none whose subject is “pure” paint or color or line. (*Ibid.*)

With these indications and with a selection that privileged the Dadaist and surrealist tradition, Swenson took a position against the still pervasive critical discourse of modernism formulated by Greenberg, who had been a prominent promoter of Abstract Expressionism in the critical milieu of the Fifties. In 1965 his essay *Modernist Painting* appeared in the journal *Art and Literature*, famously recapitulating his “prescriptive” (COLLINS 1987: 36) positions about modern art:

Each art [...] had to perform this demonstration [of value] on its own account. [...] Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself. [...] It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. [...] Thus would each art be rendered “pure”, and in its “purity” find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as its independence. (GREENBERG 1994 [1965]: 86)

Greenberg’s parameters of modernism and peremptory principles of quality represented in the early Sixties a normative, hegemonic discourse. We have seen how he was opposed to Rosenberg’s essentialism. Nevertheless, his authoritative appreciation of Pollock and other Abstractionists charged

the “brushstroke” with a parallel essence. As the color material on the surface is the specific and exclusive element of the medium of painting, the value of the brushstroke is that of confirming the essence or the nature of painting itself as a closed system.

Swenson, as well as the Pop artists, responded to Greenberg’s criticism first of all by an overt resort to figuration, which was no longer admitted in modernist painting as an external feature. At *Art in the Mirror*, a Lichtenstein’s *Brushstroke* was exhibited²⁹ and there was no doubt that it was meant as figurative, a therefore paradoxical depiction of modernist painting. An analogous play with abstraction through figuration is a main theme of Jim Dine’s paintings and graphics exhibited on the same occasion (figure 6). Swenson in particular chose from a private collection in New York a large painting dated 1961. Inscribed with a Magrittian title, *A 1935 Palette*³⁰ is an intensely autobiographic work, since 1935 is Dine’s year of birth and the wrong spelling of “palette” is a mark of the dyslexia he was diagnosed with from his school years. This metonymic self-portrait of the artist through his professional tools was interpreted by Swenson as a mirrored image of art itself. In fact, between 1963 and 1964 Dine returned to the use of such devices as palettes, color charts (but also bathrobes) in numerous graphic and painting series, partly exhibited in an important solo show at the Sidney Janis gallery in late 1964. In the 1961 forerunner exemplar, the monumental enlargement of the palette, reaching a human size, makes the distinction between figuration and abstraction (between the image of a palette covered with random pigment and appearance of pure colors on a surface) all the more ambiguous.³¹ This play, which resorted to a gimmick typical of *trompe l’oeil* painting of the XIX century, questions the essence of the thick brushstrokes represented: are they arranged by the artist as an inspired, expressive abstraction; or do they reproduce faithfully the involuntary and barely practical disposition of

²⁹ It was an exemplar of a 1966 multiple made of enamel and steel, and it was borrowed by Richard Brown Baker. It seems that Swenson selected it just before the opening of the show, since it is not present in the list of artworks in the leaflet.

³⁰ Oil on board, 184 x 110 cm. Franklin Königsberg had already lent the work from his collection for the 1963 crucial show *Six Painters and the Object* at the Guggenheim Museum.

³¹ A vivid evidence of this ambiguity can be read in a review of a 1964 show at the Sidney Janis gallery, where Jim Dine exhibited *Dream no. 2*, consisting in a huge palette with brushstrokes and a tube of aluminum departing from it. The Italian writer and artist Dino Buzzati spoke of “un quadro di tipo astratto” (“an abstract kind of painting”, BUZZATI 1964) without even noticing the palette.

undiluted color on a painter's palette? Above all, Dine denies a real difference between the two options.

More subtly than Lichtenstein's effort to artificially reproduce the gestural brushstroke, Dine's strategy to face the essentialist criticism about the abstraction can be interpreted in terms of performativity too. In executing those brushstrokes, he showed his ability in "performing" the technique, the gesture and the expressive intensity of an abstract painter, without meaning it. The fact itself that the image is meant as a self-portrait indicates that he "constructed" his own image showing his skill in abstraction; this self-reflection can be interpreted as an ambiguous answer to Rosenberg's claim that paintings are inseparable from the artist's life.

3 FOOD-LIKE BRUSHSTROKES: ROSENQUIST'S METAPHORS OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

With the examples of Dine and Lichtenstein in mind, in his 1966 exhibition Swenson explained the possibility of Pop figuration to lead a self-reflective discourse on painting itself:

Pop art, which first seemed a realistic relief, is slowly revealing itself as a return to metaphor. If the sledge hammer sound of its images penetrates our consciousness, it then continues to reverberate with increasing subtlety. (SWENSON 1966)

Beside Dine's palettes and Lichtenstein's first attempts to represent the brushstroke, a 1964 painting by James Rosenquist may suggest the "return to metaphor" of Pop Art. *White Bread* was exhibited in June in the artist's first European solo exhibition at the Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in Paris. The image of a knife spreading margarine on some toasts was no exception among other canvases for the use of commercial advertising images, the flat and anti-pictorial technique of execution and the large format (figure 7). Commenting it Edward Fry noted in the catalog:

White Bread for example is first of all a strict composition of closely related colours in planes which indicate space without making use of spatial illusions. The white bread, made with artificial preservatives, is spread with margarine – artificial butter: an objective reflection of industrialized cuisine. The image is painted with a flat anonymous technique, and we suddenly realized that at another level of meaning it is an ironic symbol directed against the heavy impastos of abstract expressionism. (FRY 1964)

Rather than a symbol, this painting is a metaphor for typical Abstract Expressionist twists of brush. Its strength is due, on the one hand, to the ordinariness of the metaphorical imagery, drawn from domestic and kitchen imagery; on the other, to the tension between the levigated surface of the canvas and the thick brushstroke of margarine illustrated.

Although Fry's comment is important testimony of the effective functioning of metaphorical meaning in Rosenquist's painting, some of the terms used in it like "ironic symbol", or its position "against" abstraction, sound generic. In order to understand what specific concepts are involved in the painter's strategy, it might be of some interest to comment on how metaphors contributed in the previous decades to the critical construction of the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke.



FIG. 7 – J. Rosenquist, *White Bread*, 1964, oil on canvas, 138,48 x 154,3 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington ([also available at NGA website](#)).

3.1 THE ESSENTIALIST FUNCTION OF NATURE

A theme of Abstract Expressionism, superficial at first sight, nevertheless haunts – so to say – in the critical history of the movement. It is the involuntary appearance of figuration, that is, of recognizable images, from a totally abstract painting, executed “blindly”.

Already in the *Life* 1949 article about Pollock discussed above, a sort of “pentimento” (or a correction in the making) is described: “Once in a while a lifelike image appears in the painting by mistake. But Pollock cheerfully rubs it out because the picture must retain ‘a life of its own’” (SEIBERLING (?) 1949: 45). This evasion of a figurative interpretation of abstract painting followed Greenberg’s prescriptions about modernism; however, it did not prevent highbrow and popular comments from recourse to “figurative” devices, such as metaphor, in order to explain an art always considered difficult. We can follow this theme within Pollock’s criticism. Nature becomes a rhetorical device in order to described the cryptic sense of lines, dripping and brushstroke on his canvas, in the 1952 catalogue of a solo show at Betty Parson gallery:

His painting confronts us with a visual concept organically evolved from a belief in the unity that underlies the phenomena among which we live. [...] An ocean’s tides and a personal nightmare, the bursting of a bubble and the communal clamor for a victim are as inextricably meshed in the coruscation and darkness of his work as they are in actuality. His forms and texture germinate, climax, and decline, coalesce and dissolve across the canvas. [...] Forms and images, dissolve and re-form into new organisms. (OSSORIO 1952)

As Lawrence Alloway pointed out already in the mid 1960s, American art since the Forties was largely “biomorphic” combining “various forms in evocative organic wholes”. He noticed without difficulty the debts to the long-lasting fortune of Surrealism in the frequent reference to the organic, the animal, and the bodily. As Alloway put it,

Particular cases of resemblance are not interesting: the point is the identity of everything with its simultaneous phases of seeding, sprouting, growing, loving, fighting, decaying, rebirth. The impression is of a natural and personal abundance [...]. The desire for a nuanced and subjective imagery was manifested in paintings that did not subordinate the artist’s use of paint to a tidy and cleaned up end-state. On the contrary, rich meanings were located within the creative

act itself, so that the process-record itself is sensitized. [...] The artist’s gestures are image-making and keep their identity as physical improvisation beyond the point of completion. Gorky’s and Pollock’s linearism, Rothko’s liquidity, Baziotes’ scumbled haze of color, were all technical devices fused with permissive meanings. (ALLOWAY 2005 [1965]: 253)

The abstract brushstroke, in its various embodiments by each artist listed by Alloway, was charged with an “organic function” due to its own open, process-recording, “permissive meanings”. As a critical and rhetorical feature, the function of nature had a consequence which Alloway did not stress: natural and organic “explanation” of the paintings was both a symptom and a reinforcement of the essentialist status of the abstract brushstroke. In fact, the quoted references to nature are metaphors to describe artworks as spontaneous processes or acts, something that does not tolerate if not an organic, self-explanatory reason of its making: the recurrence of terms like “inextricably”, “germinate”, “coalesce”, “personal abundance” or “physical improvisation”, all stand for the unwillingness to explain the configuration of the brushstrokes on an abstract canvas.

In a queer perspective on social and hermeneutical categories, the appeal to “nature” or the “natural reasons” of an object is precisely the tool

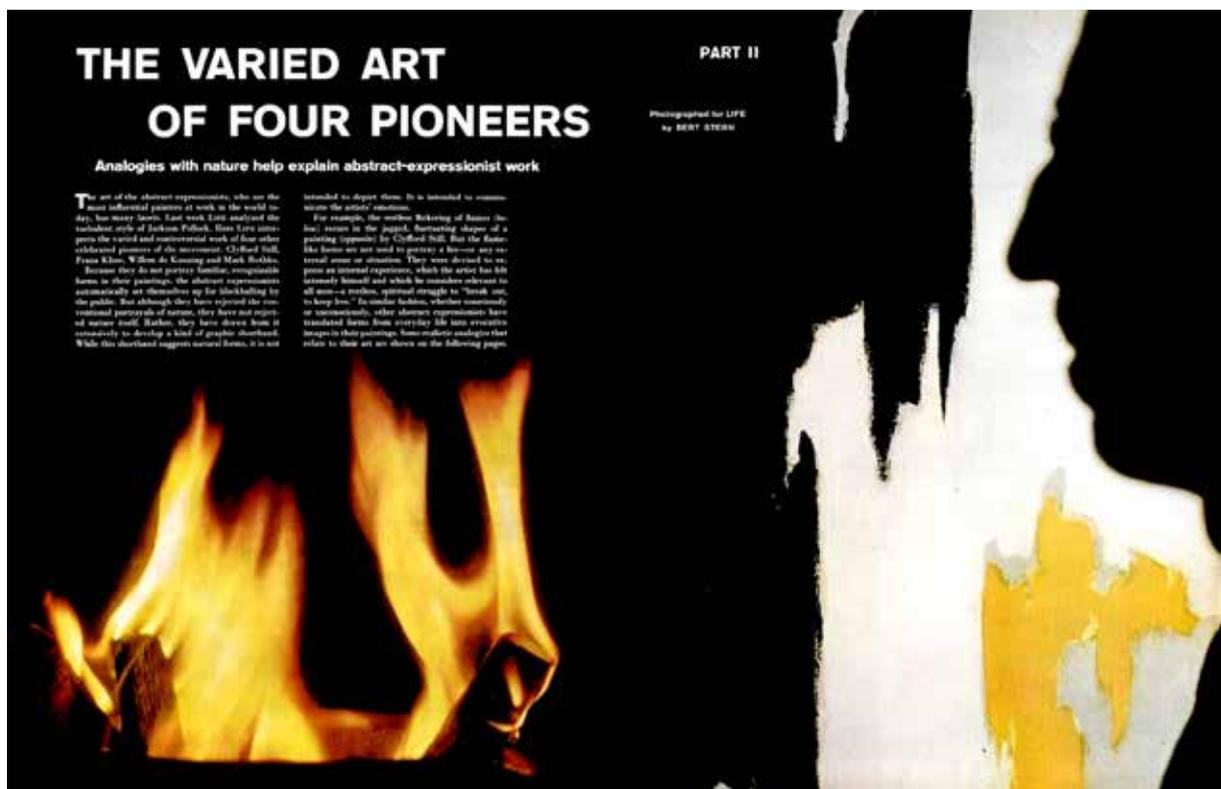


FIG. 8 – “The varied art of four pioneers”, *Life*, 16 Nov. 1959: 74-75.

Rosenquist loved to recall an anecdote of something that probably occurred in the late 1950s, which reaffirms the theme of the figurative “fear” in abstract painting. Although in it there should be “no meaning, except pure color and it’s supposed to be pure color and pure form. Well in the attempts at doing these non-objective paintings [...] things would appear, unconsciously”.

I saw an exhibition at the Howard Wise gallery on West 57th of this old artist whose teacher had been Hans Hoffman [the great exponent of Abstract Expressionism, ed]. And Hans Hoffman walked into the room. [...] He said to this man who had been his student, “What’s that there?” And he replied, “It’s winter solstice” or something like that. And Hans says, “looks like Popeye to me. Looks like Popeye sitting in a chair, see, see his head.” And there was Popeye. He had a pumpkin head, a stick body, big feet, hands, and it was supposed to be totally non-objective painting. Only colors. Feeling. And it embarrassed the man and from there onward that was Popeye. (STANISZEWSK, ROSENQUIST 1987)

The awareness of such a perceptive ambiguity of abstraction lays behind Rosenquist’s own use of images. This was intended as an overturning of the uncontrollable “permissive meaning” of Abstract Expressionism, in order to erase its abundance: in his own words, “my ambition at that time was



FIG. 10 – “The varied art...”, *Life*, 16 Nov., 82-83.

to get below zero”. With this aim, Rosenquist mixed fragments of colorful advertising pictures in his canvases and magnified them to uncanny proportions, so that “it would be like seeing an image, but you wouldn’t quite know what it is” (*Ibid.*).

When Rosenquist started to exhibit in the early Sixties, Greenberg’s ban on representational painting was still a dominant feature of the artistic debate. We must imagine how much suspicion there was of the work of the “new realists”, who returned to images after being mostly trained as abstract painters, as Rosenquist himself had been in the 1950s. Facing the current strict paradigms of what modern painting should be, Rosenquist expressed his theoretical position, answering Swenson in the 1963 interview:

[Paint and paint quality] are natural things before you touch them, before they’re arranged. As time goes by the brutality of what art is, the idea of what art can be, changes; different feelings about things become at home, become accepted, natural. (SWENSON 1987 [1963]: 115)

The almost banal relativity introduced by the artist in judging art shows its queer potential since it confronts the “natural” with the “cultural” of taste, criticism and novelty in “what art can be”.

3.2 SPAGHETTI AND BRUSHSTROKES

The interview took place a few months before Rosenquist started working at *White Bread*, and it contained an interesting hint at images of food in his “painting below zero”: “The images are like no-images. There is a freedom there. If it were abstract, people might make it into something. If you paint Franco-American spaghetti, they won’t make a crucifixion out of it [...]” (*Ibid.*).

Food, and precisely pasta, had a previous famous occurrence in the public debate about Abstract Expressionism of the Forties and Fifties. In fact, the first reviews of Jackson Pollock in the Forties mocked at his works often comparing the chaotic pictorial surface to food like “half-baked macaroni”. The 1949 article on *Life* presented Pollock to a large public explaining that some critics “still condemn his pictures as degenerate and find them as unpalatable as yesterday’s macaroni” (SEIBERLING (?) 1949: 42), explicitly juxtaposing a detail of his vermicular painting texture (figure 4). Taking into account this famous association between canned food and Pollock’s

dripping and brushstrokes, it is possible to assign a further meaning to the frequency with which Rosenquist used spaghetti advertising. First introduced in early major works like *I love you with my Ford* (1962),³² images of spaghetti were often taken from advertisements of the Franco-American brand, which belonged to the Campbell Soup Company. Around 1964, they gained a new prominence in Rosenquist paintings. The former collage-like insertion limited to a decorative pattern, like in *Nomad* (1963), gives way to the centrality achieved for example in works like *Orange Field* (1964) and the diptych composed of *Spaghetti Grisaille* and *Spaghetti Red* (1965).

Even if Rosenquist explained this interest in terms of a purely consumerist attitude toward the food product (“I like the ways it looks and I like the way it tastes”, HOPPS 2003: 9), the “abstract” meaning of spaghetti is evident: their gentle curvilinear trend hints at the vermicular design of the abstract brushstrokes. A visual metaphor for abstract painting is the intention behind the choice of such patterned images as *Spaghetti and Grass*, which was used as the cover of Lucy Lippard’s 1966 forerunner book about *Pop Art* (figure 11).

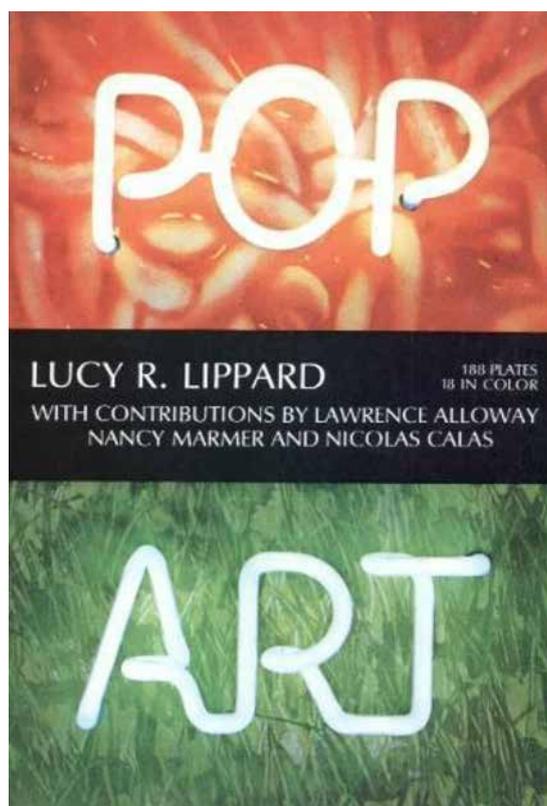


FIG. 11 – L. Lippard, *Pop Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 1966 (book cover).

³² Differently from what has been argued in the richest reconstruction of Rosenquist’s ad sources to date (see BANCROFT 2017: 126-127), this image of spaghetti does not come from a Franco-American advertisement, but from a Heinz 57 ad., for example in *Life Magazine*, 39, 16 (17 October 1955): 62.

Many of the spaghetti artworks revolve around Rosenquist's well-known masterpiece of the Sixties, *F-111*. In the 26 meter-long murals, spaghetti appear twice as a background motif: on the lower left, the image was taken from an advertisement of a Franco-American canned product (it is the same image already used in *Orange Field*); at the upper right corner, the large mass of spaghetti is drawn from a photograph by the artist and friend of Rosenquist's, Hollis Frampton.³³ Frampton's photographic work already played with the abstract fashion of canned spaghetti scattered in the sauce: Rosenquist used details from colored and black and white prints of the photograph in many works, like the already quoted *Spaghetti Grisaille*, *Spaghetti Red*,³⁴ *Spaghetti and Grass*, or *The Friction Disappears* (1965) and the lithograph *Spaghetti* (1970). This metaphorical and visual association between spaghetti and abstract painting got reversed and at the same time reaffirmed in the cover of the 1968 issue of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, reproducing *F-111*. The photographer Malcolm Varon seemed to respond to Rosenquist's own allusion to abstraction and magnified two details from the segments on the right with the red slimy pasta, to the point that it is difficult to recognize spaghetti and the nuances of color looked like non-figurative painting (figure 12).



FIG. 12 – *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Mar. 1968, cover and back cover.

³³ See BANCROFT 2017: 140-141.

³⁴ BANCROFT 2003: 292-293. It is interesting to notice that for the diptych of *Spaghetti Red* and *Grisaille*, Rosenquist cropped two details which were adjoining in Frampton's photograph, apparently without much intervention in composition.

The leveling of abstract painting and details of food could also have something to do with the main source of Rosenquist’s imagery. In popular magazines like *Life*, advertising images of food were continuously, involuntarily and shockingly put side-by-side with images of war, politics, public events of importance, and modern art. An eloquent example is the news of Pollock’s death in a car crash in 1957: the article illustrates a typical close up detail from his late paintings, and contains the usual reference to his critical distrust (“works like this [...] reminded other [critics] of half-baked macaroni”, see *A tragic end...* 1956). On the opposite page the reader finds a triumphal, acrid colored advertisement of Chef Boy-ar-Dee spaghetti (figure 13). Rosenquist’s attention would have gone to both the two images, as he was triggered by the effects of visual and thematic fragmentation and combination typical of the mass media.³⁵



FIG. 13 – “Rebel Artist’s Tragic Ending” and advertisements, *Life*, 29 Aug., 58-9.

³⁵ “The juxtaposition of ostensibly separate types of content was a basic characteristic of the magazine’s approach: the ‘intermingling of articles and ads typified *Life*’s look, and much of the rest of modern mass media, where supposedly separate categories of editorial and commercial distinction were, in fact, often indistinguishable” (LOBEL 2009: 31). The quote contained in this passage is from Erika Doss ed., *Looking at Life Magazine*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press 2001, p. 10.

The popularization of Abstract Expressionism, the introduction of its iconography in the mass media (that is the details of brushstrokes) and the inevitable contradictions it encountered in that specific visual context, provide Rosenquist with a figurative strategy to disrupt the essentialist rhetoric of abstraction. In his paintings abstraction was paradoxically obtained and constructed by figurative means; the expressionist brushstroke, which should be the outcome of an event of existential importance, is parodied with daily, repetitive and meaningless gestures. This strategy can be seen also as a reversal of the rhetoric of nature and organic development as the explanation for Abstract Expressionism, and a sarcastic comment about the formal comparisons like the ones in the 1959 *Life* issue.

The advertising sources of *White Bread* too reveal Rosenquist's formal and thematical strategy (figure 14). The original image was cropped so that the squared toast echoed with the shape of the real canvas and gave monumental autonomy to the yellow color field on its surface. Furthermore, a little caption in the original advertisement may have amused the Pop artist:



FIG. 14 – Advertisement of the National Association of Margarine Manufacturers, *Life*, 22 Nov. 1948: 148.

the over-all yellow page was intended to remind the customer that artificial coloring of the margarine was heavily taxed and this “discriminated” the manufacturers.³⁶ The stressed artificiality of the color can be therefore interpreted as a further metaphor for artificiality of painting, opposed against the “natural” essentialism claimed by Abstract Expressionism.

Titles are an important part of the visual and parodic metaphors that Rosenquist elaborated in his paintings around 1964 in order to deconstruct the Abstract Expressionism paradigm of painting. *Orange Field* refers clearly to Greenberg’s label of “Color Field Painting”,³⁷ and *White Bread* literally indicates the primed canvas awaiting for the all-over yellow painting. Another less known painting by Rosenquist, *White Frosting* could hint at Rauschenberg’s series of *White Paintings* as an inspiring precedent, as the 1951 artworks set a radical critique of the originality and uniqueness of Abstract Expressionism’s works. The overflowing mass of the white cream alludes metaphorically to the richness of the expressionist surface, but it is contradicted in the smooth finishing of Rosenquist’s execution of the monumental monochrome.

4 “DRAG” PAINTING? A CONCLUSION

Lichtenstein, Dine and Rosenquist, as well as Robert Indiana or Tom Wesselmann, were all (more or less happily) married, and as far as we know none of them were closeted. This paper is not an attempt to answer the question which opens it, that is if Pop Art or Pop artists were “queer”. Beside questions of subjectivity and sexuality, categories that are present in their works, these artists were able to find, deconstruct and therefore “to queer” radically the dominant paradigms about the painting of their times, based largely on essentialism, as we have observed.

Other artists could be added to this American group, as they explored a performative conception of abstract painting in their own way and played with the paradox of non-essentialist brushstrokes. A prominent case would be that of Gerard Richter and his use of photography to stimulate an exchange between figurative and abstract painting.³⁸ Richter’s flatly painted

³⁶ Attention was explicit drawn to the color of the page: “This page is yellow so you will again ask yourself, ‘Why can’t I get margarine ready-colored yellow the way I want it?’”. See *Life Magazine*, 25, 21 (22 November 1948): 148.

³⁷ For the history of the term, which was originally employed by Greenberg since 1955, see HOBBS 2005.

³⁸ All along the Sixties Richter thematized a seamless exchange between photographic pic-

1972-3 *Ausschnitte* (“Details”) magnify details of swirling, material color, so that this series can conclude the trajectory of the iconography of the brushstroke described above. However, I would like to conclude my analysis with an artwork by the British painter David Hockney. Since his education in the early Sixties, he was particularly sensitive to the current models of painting coming from the US: his “eclecticism” (STEPHENS 2017: 15) of style and sources employed frequently clear but witty references to American Abstraction.³⁹ A painting executed in 1971, when he lived going back and forth between California and London, often travelling around Europe, has the descriptive title of *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool* (figure 15). As for the most of Hockney’s subjects, the source of the image is a photography: it was taken in Cadaqués and it shows how the artist himself was leaning on the water, as we can see his whimsical sandals and the swimming pool cot, then cropped off from the painting image. Even if Hockney faithfully reproduced the photography, the cropping is sufficient to prevent the viewer of the painting to recognize the reference. Without reading the title, the two fields of blue (water) and bright brown (marbled pool edge)

tures and abstraction. He isolated gestural “brushstrokes” (like the ones sweeping away the underlying photorealistic image of *Tisch* (“Table”), 1962; or those applied gesturally on a levigated background in the 1968 *Ohne Titel*). Or he forced his images by cropping and enlarging details to big formats, so that what appears at first is not the subject but its optical or abstract features. In this sense, the alternated chiaroscuro of the 1965 series of *Vorhänge* (“Curtains”) challenges mechanisms of Op Art; the 1967 *Wellbleche* (“Corrugated Irons”) mock Frank Stella’s hard edge painting. In some later series, like the 1969-70 *Wolken* (“Clouds”), Richter indulged in the “natural” abstraction provided by the chosen subjects, in a way that probably tried to evoke the formless disposition of the brushstrokes in Abstract Expressionist paintings by Still, De Kooning or Pollock. This can be argued because the series has been directly followed by another, the 1970-73 *Ausschnitten* (“Details”), which is a far more explicit reflection about abstraction as obtained by magnified photographed details of thick impastos. Discussing the *Clouds* and the *Details* series, Mark Godfrey wrote: “Both series are made from photographs of their subject, but whereas in recent work Richter had rendered photographic sources with impasto, in these works he painted as flatly as possible so that hardly a trace of brushwork remains on the surface. This makes the *Detail* paintings particularly strange, since crests and dips of paint produced by squeezes of tubes and twists of brushes are rendered as if without human touch, so that what seemed very physical appearance dematerialised” (GODFREY 2011: 84).

If it is true that Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes* are barely thematic source for the German painter, as suggested by Godfrey due to the formal difference between the two series, a more interesting comparison could be made with James Rosenquist’s enlargements of food and other ads images as abstract patterns.

³⁹ “This overtly stated playing with notions of style, and the use of images from a non-hierarchical range of sources, were part of a larger intention to signal a kind of self-reflexive knowingness, to announce the artificiality of the artwork and the scene it purports to depict” (STEPHENS 2017: 15).

and the red circle were arranged in a purely abstract composition. Among the flat geometric shapes, Hockney also highlighted the mottling of the marble and the bubbling of an underwater syphon, as two textures alluding to the painterly brushstrokes on the surface of an abstract painting.⁴⁰ The quite long title, with almost pedantic precision, stressed the paradoxical realism of this “abstract” image.

Through a subtle mimicry, the artist was interested in transforming a realistic image into abstraction and vice-versa: “At first glance it looks like an abstract painting, but when you read the title the abstraction disappears and it becomes something else” (David Hockney, 1976, quoted in ALTEVEER 2017: 225). More than simply a “wry comment on abstraction”



FIG. 15 – D. Hockney, *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 91,4 x 120 cm, © David Hockney. Photo credit: Fabrice Gilbert. Private collection.

⁴⁰ For these paintings, Hockney used acrylic he had thinned down with water and a bit of detergent, applying it in washes of colour to specific areas of raw, unprimed canvas – what Livingstone calls ‘a “waterly” technique to represent a watery subject’. This was a process pioneered by American abstract painters in the 1950s – particularly Helen Frankenthaler, whose techniques were then adopted by artists working with colour field strategies, particularly those in the Washington Color School such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. (ALTEVEER 2017: 225)

(LIVINGSTONE 1987: 140) or generic “appropriation and parody” (STEPHENS 2017: 15), this transformation and its effect could be compared to the practice of drag which artificially constructs gender through its appearance and performative features, “dramatiz[ing] the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established” (BUTLER 1999: XXVIII). Hockney’s “camouflage” of photographic images as abstraction highlights the perceptive conditions and the cultural features that were associated to pure color and forms, and above all pure brushstrokes; but he does so with an ironic and untrustworthy performance of it, discarding its underlying essentialism. In Butler’s words, “drag is an example that is meant to establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be” (xxiii-iv). Hockney’s “drag” painting “undermines the purism of high modernism” (STEPHENS 2017: 16), or its inevitable “idealism” (VARNEDOE 2006: 191), showing how abstraction would not need to be the expression of the painter’s own essence or of a strictly defined nature of painting itself.

Hockney’s sly and playful camouflage, as well as all the artworks gathered in my selection, may be considered as a subset of the larger group discussed by Kirk Varnedoe in the chapter *Satire, irony, and abstract art* of his Mellon Lectures. As Varnedoe points out, since the very birth of abstract art (roughly from Matisse onwards), the possibility of questioning its good faith has appeared:

We expect of abstraction, perhaps more so than other art forms, that its intentions be whole, that it be meant earnestly. Traditionally we think of abstraction as pure and unmitigated, a set of black-and-white principles that will not admit of grays. In other words, we associate abstraction with a kind of idealism. The question arises, If we are suspicious of idealism, are we then suspicious of abstraction? Is it necessary that abstraction be ideal and that it be in good faith? (VARNEDOE 2006: 191).

Narrowing my attention to some “bad faith” depictions of one certain kind of abstraction, which found in the brushstroke its poetic and critical core, my analysis has focused upon the shift from the essentialist paradigms formulated about Abstract Expressionism. Coherently with Varnedoe’s considerations, this essentialism carried values of “good faith”, as the direct expression of the artist’s interiority and existential self, urgency, immediate efficacy; or, in Greenbergian terms, it stated rigorous and autonomous self-definition of the “nature” of painting itself.

Each artist showed a different strategy in order to face the rhetoric of the brushstroke. Whether directly illustrating, alluding metaphorically to it or “camouflaging” it through other figurative images, these portraits of the brushstroke try to present it as the result of an artificial process, an indirect construction. Performativity as formulated in queer hermeneutics can be a fruitful instrument in order to point out this shared attitude. Evidence of performativity is found in Lichtenstein’s strenuous attempts to elaborate a plausible image of the brushstroke. The paradox of an artificial “expressionist” brushstroke determines the ambiguity of Dine’s *Palettes* paintings, where the observer must face the presence of “real” strokes on fictitious depicted palettes. Perhaps less obvious, a performative character is also implicit in the metaphorical functioning of Rosenquist’s works: overturning the rhetoric of the natural “correlatives” to the Abstract Expressionist creation, “abstract” food images highlight the appropriation by magazines’ popular visual culture of the Expressionist iconography, of his materiality and gestures. Finally, photographic camouflage, or “drag”, as abstraction in his painting *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool* stands for dismantled essentialism of Abstract Expressionism. Moreover, it is an example of how queer critical instances can be expressed, and historically traced, in the field of painting.

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