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Cultural Studies also is not without examples of what Stuart Hall has called elsewhere a "hyperabstraction and overtheoreticism" and an abandonment of "the problems of concrete historical analysis" (Hall, 1988). Impenetrable discourse, overtheorization and an annoying penchant for scholarly "hipness" (see for example Angie Chabram-Dennis's chapter "I Throw Punches for My Race, but I Don't Want to Be a Man: Writing Us - Chicanas (Girl,Us)/ Chicanas - into the Movement Script" or Donna Haraway's "The Promises of Moters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/id Others") cloud the social relevance of some of the contributions. Hommi Bhabha's discussion of "Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt," for instance, a paper of "forbidding difficulty" as one participant put it (p. 67), was intellectually out of reach for most conference attendees. What I am sure was an important argument was lost amidst Bhabha's self-serving prose.

These chapter do serve the purpose, however, of illustrating the kind of scholarship other contributors - such as Bennett and Grover - challenge. Their presence allows the reader to follow the many lines of debate in the field first-hand, and contributes to the book's unique volatile feel. Cultural Studies is an important text which contains the attempts of some of today's most prominent critical intellectuals to blend scholarship and social purpose. For the new-comer to cultural studies, the book is a comprehensive introduction. For those familiar with cultural work, it is an indispensable elaboration. For the field, it is the most significant moment of development in several years.


Pop Art and Consumer Culture:
American Supermarket
C. Mamiya
University of Texas Press

Reviewed by Craig Drennen

Pop art, while often referred to and ubiquitously reproduced, has only sporadically been given the interpretive rigor reserved for other movements. Pop art, the mod interior designer's dream, hasn't always attracted the formal scrutiny given to, say, the Constructivists, nor the conceptual respect routinely given to site-specific environmental art. It is astounding to notice how little good iconographical work - something as simple as identifying the components in a Rosenquist painting - actually exists. Mamiya's book, an expansion of her doctoral thesis at UCLA, attempts to remedy this by investigating the social and economic underpinnings of Pop art, and how they finally affected not only the imagery produced, but all related aspects of the movement.

Mamiya begins by tracing Pop's meteoric rise and dissemination throughout the art world. The manner in which Abstract Expressionism was shunted to a backseat position in the face of Pop art has been somewhat of an art historical enigma. Perhaps the most useful part of this books is Mamiya's trace of the chain of events leading up to Pop's dominance, in commercial if not cultural circles.

She begins by describing the excited burst of corporate expansion in America from the late 1950's through the 1960's. The shift to a Keynesian economic approach, with its emphasis on consumer spending, coupled with the American government's efforts to curtail monopolies served as a two-pronged jolt that escalated corporate competition exponentially. This competitive environment created a need for product awareness, so it follows that unprecedented amounts of money and attention began being
Advertisers needed a forum within which to operate, one that was already widespread and already entrenched in American daily life. The solution, Mamiya claims, was mass media. Advertising and the mass media then entered into an initially reciprocal relationship that in some ways restricted the freedom of both parties. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television all required dollars to remain operative, just as advertisers (and thus, corporations) needed the high visibility and consumer contact. The negative side of the relationship is grimly illustrated by Mamiya as she lists instances where advertisers influenced what, and how, information occurred in mass media venues.

What has proven to be a positive aspect of the relationship - for artists at least - is that advertising helped generate enormous amounts of imagery for the pillaging. What Mamiya more importantly implies is that the advertising industry provided successful employment for many artists who would go on to define the Pop movement. It is no secret that proto-Pop artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg constructed window display for Tiffany's, but they are reproduced in this book for the first time. James Rosenquist was an acclaimed billboard painter, Tow Wessellman a cartoonist, Claus Oldenberg an apprentice to an ad agency. Andy Warhol was, of course, a highly popular commercial illustrator.

Here is where Mamiya separates herself from monographs and art history survey texts. She claims that while the techniques (photo-transfer silkscreen, for example) and subjects (hamburgers, soup) of advertising imagery were important to the early Pop artists, they were not the most important component. What the artists learned were the mechanics of advertising: Marketing, name/product recognition, publicity, and sales. The Pop artists had for more commercial acumen than their dour Abstract Expressionist predecessors and so could manage their own careers with more guile. Both the artists and the galleries of the Pop movement recognized early on the now-hip status of art as a commodity. However, Mamiya goes on to proclaim:

Pop itself absorbed into the established institutional matrix, thereby rendering it ineffective as a critique and neutralizing any potential for bringing about significant change.

This statement positions Mamiya against most interpretations of Pop, interpretations that claim that it either supports or ironically undercut consumer culture. Although the position is tidy and seamless, it is problematic. Mamiya would have us believe that by behaving as a commodity, Pop cannot provide a critique of its own refined commodity status? I would argue that the very act of entering the "institutional matrix" will both amplify the workings of the matrix as well as bracket the artistic product. Apparently the members of the corporate consumer matrix occasionally felt duly "criticized," for several lawsuits were filed against artists, including Robert Rauschenberg for copyright infringement. There is no need to argue in 1992 as to the effectiveness of appropriated imagery as a critical project.

The use of cultural referents in, and as, works of art enacts a collapse of the Cartesian binary of "high" and "low" culture, as Mamiya notes elsewhere. This collapse, again noted by Mamiya, proceeded geometrically across many registers and spurred what has come to be known as postmodern culture. Mamiya mentions this in the last chapter, but sees to need to revise her previous thesis. It might also be mentioned that the assumption that art need bring about "significant change" seems to be informed by the same Modernist insistance upon revolution and vanguard that Pop art subverts.

There are less crucial points throughout the book that also seem doubtful, such as Mamiya's explanation of the rampant proselytizing done by advertisers being the result of "... inappropriate numbers of advertising agents who came from strict religious backgrounds." This is not to say that the book is not useful; the bibliograpy alone is worth the price of the book. The connections she makes between juxtaposed images, particularly those of Rosenquist, Wesselman, and Rauschenberg, are continually convincing. The voluminous, and thoroughly cited, amount of data from disparate sources is refreshing as well. In her arguments, Mamiya noticeably avoids any overt reliance upon critical theory, perhaps reflecting her hesitancy in performing what only "reprivileges the role of the critic." In any event, the main points of the book are relevant, even if some of the final conclusions are labored and two-dimensional. When she is at her best, Mamiya illustrates with clarity and precision, the result of which is a better understanding of the works.