

Ballard interview, obrist
Art and psy test

HUO: The same year that you published your first texts, in London the Independent Group organised the exhibition This is Tomorrow (at the Whitechapel, London, in 1956) which startled everybody with its flood of popular imagery, undiluted in scale and treatment: films, advertising billboards, car-styling, consumer goods and comics.

You said about your experience of this exhibition: "To go to the Whitechapel in 1956 and to see my experience of the real world being commented upon, played back to me with all kinds of ironic gestures, that was tremendously exciting. I could really recreate the future, that was the future, not the past. And Abstract Expressionism struck me as being about yesterday, was profoundly retrospective, profoundly passive, and it wasn't serious. This is Tomorrow came on a year before the flight of the first Sputnik, but the technologies that launched the space age were already underpinning the consumergoods society in those days. How much of this did Abstract Expressionism represent? If an art doesn't embrace the whole terrain, all four horizons, it's worth nothing." Could you tell me more about your memories of this show?

JGB: At the time I didn't see This is Tomorrow as an aesthetic event. For me it wasn't primarily an art show, just as I didn't see exhibitions of Francis Bacon, Max Ernst, Magritte and Dali as displays of paintings. I saw them as among the most radical statements of the human imagination ever made, on a par with radical discoveries in neuroscience or nuclear physics. This is Tomorrow showed how the world could be re-perceived and re-made.

Very few people today are old enough to remember how traumatised Britain was by the Second World War (which in many ways we had lost). The British were locked into an exhausted present, and were trying to find their way back into the past, where they hoped they might be happier and discover their former certainties. A hopeless quest. A new future has to be built from scratch, and This is Tomorrow was a start. What impressed me was that it was a confident art.

HUO: Did you befriend Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi there, or did you know them before? You've always said that you had been influenced as a writer by certain artists, painters and even that novels like Crash for instance were composed as visual experiences, "marrying elements in the book that make sense primarily as visual constructs." Could you tell me more about that and about the influence of these artists? I'd like to know also about how you perceived their interests in science fiction writing, New Worlds and in your stories in particular? Did you play the role of a visionary writer? What was the nature of the relations between you? One of cross-fertilisation?

JGB: I didn't meet Paolozzi until 1966, and Hamilton somewhat later. I admired their work greatly, but I think the surrealist painters had the biggest influence on me - de Chirico, Ernst, Dali and Delvaux. These are all painters of mysterious and disconnected landscapes, through which the few human beings drift in a state of dream-like trance, which had a direct and powerful appeal for me.

I admired many of Hamilton's paintings, such as Homage to the Chrysler Corporation (1957) and his masterpiece, the collage Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing? (1956), and I also admired Paolozzi's great early sculptures, the totemic figures constructed from machine-parts, and his brilliantly original screenprints. I don't think I was any kind of influence on them. They were much more interested in American science fiction with its high-technology images.

HUO: The ICA was a powerhouse of experimental exhibition practice at the time, a laboratory for interdisciplinary dialogues. Could you tell me about how you saw it at the time and why it worked? What can we learn now from this experience for the present? In an interview I conducted with Richard Hamilton he told me "The main reason for the ICA's success as far as I was concerned, was that the institution was small enough to be like an intimate club." Would you agree?

JGB: The ICA has always been enormously important as an ideas laboratory, not only in the days of the Independent Group in the 1950's but also in the late 1960s after it moved to its present home in The Mall. There were many important exhibitions devoted to surrealist and installation art, and the ICA was a hot-house where people with original ideas met to exchange ideas. In the last few years it's regained its old flavour. Part of the problem it faces is that the avant-garde is now the new establishment. The new is in danger of becoming the new old. But today's ICA seems to be successfully repositioning itself as a post-2000 ideas lab.

HUO: Could you tell me about the exhibitions that you designed, such as the one in the '60s at the New Arts Lab with the crashed cars (a crashed Mini, an A40 and a Pontiac which had been in a massive front-end collision - a Pontiac from the last grand period of American automobile styling around the mid '50s, with huge, flared tail-fins and iconographic display). You called it New Sculpture.

I know that this show encountered massive hostility, that the cars were attacked. In a conversation with Eduardo Paolozzi published in Studio International in 1971 you said about this exhibition: "The whole thing was a speculative illustration of a scene in The Atrocity Exhibition. I had speculated in my book about how the people might behave. And in the real show the guests at the party and the visitors later behaved in pretty much the way I had anticipated. It was not so much an exhibition of sculpture as almost of experimental psychology, using the medium of the fine art show. People were unnerved, you see. There was enormous hostility." So, did you consider the exhibition medium to be a unique tool in this respect?

JGB: My show of crashed cars was held at the New Arts Lab in 1969. It was an art show designed to carry out a psychological test, so that I could decide whether to write my novel Crash - begun in 1970 and finished in 1972. I wanted to test my own hypothesis about our unconscious fascination with car crashes and their latent sexuality. One could argue that today's Turner prize, and the exhibitions of work by Hirst, Emin and the Chapman brothers perform exactly the same role, that they are elaborate attempts to test the psychology of today's public.

Going further, I'm tempted to say that the psychological test is the only function of today's art shows, and that the aesthetic elements have been reduced almost to zero. It no longer seems possible to shock people by aesthetic means, as did the impressionists, Picasso and Matisse, among many others. In fact, it no longer seems possible to touch people's imaginations by aesthetic means. People in London flocked to the Barnett Newman show out of a deep nostalgia for a time when the aesthetic response still mattered.