

The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty

Edited by David Robbins

Exhibition Organized by

Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley

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The 'As Found' and the 'Found'

Alison and Peter Smithson

Seen from the Late 1980s:

The "as found," where the art is in the picking up, turning over and putting-with. . . .

and the "found," where the art is in the process and the watchful eye. . . .

With Hindsight . . . The 'As Found' in Architecture:

In architecture, the "as found" aesthetic was something we thought we named in the early 1950s when we first knew Nigel Henderson and saw in his photographs a perceptive recognition of the actuality around his house in Bethnal Green: children's pavement play-graphics; repetition of "kind" in doors used as site hoardings; the items in the detritus on bombed sites, such as the old boot, heaps of nails, fragments of sack or mesh and so on.¹

Setting ourselves the task of rethinking architecture in the early 1950s, we meant by the "as found" not only adjacent buildings but all those marks that constitute remembrancers in a place and that are to be read through finding out how the existing built fabric of the place had come to be as it was. Hence our respect for the mature trees as the existing "structuring" of a site on which the building was to be the incomer. . . . As soon as architecture begins to be thought about its ideogram should be so touched by the "as found" as to make it specific-to-place.

Thus the "as found" was a new seeing of the ordinary, an openness as to how prosaic "things" could re-energise our inventive activity. A confronting recognition of what the postwar world actually was like. In a society that had nothing. You reached for what there was, previously unthought of things. . . . In turn this impressed forcibly – seen in the coat of white paint that "renewed" the ship, 1957 – how the new could re-energise the existing fabric.

We were concerned with the seeing of materials for what they were: the woodness of wood;² the sandiness of sand.³ With this came a distaste of the simulated, such as the new plastics of the period – printed, coloured to imitate a previous product in "natural" materials. Dislike for certain mixes, particularly with technology, such as the walnut dashboard in a car. We were interested in how things could be with technology touching everything and everyone. We foresaw a general reappraisal of values would occur, since as we "read" through the aspiration-images on offer in the magazines, the approach of the acquisitive society.

Our reaction to the 1940s – for us "design" was a dirty word – tried never to be negative. By "taking position" we rejected the then fashionable, but for us too simple, literal and literary attitudes, represented for socialist-minded intellectuals by the writings of Herbert Read. We were the generation stepping aside from politics as no longer appropriate to our needs. All this was an intellectual activity, extending to a care for "literacy" in the language of architecture. We worked with a belief in the gradual revealing by a building-in-formation of its own rules for its required form.

The "as found" aesthetic fed the invention of the "random aes-

thetic" of all our "Cluster" ideograms, diagrams and theories, which we took first to CIAM 9 at Aix-en-Provence, then to La Sarraz, and finally to CIAM 10 at Dubrovnik.

The 'As Found' in Exhibitions:

Nigel Henderson made up the quartet with ourselves and Eduardo Paolozzi that manifested our intellectually different aspect of the Independent Group. This difference – even to a certain apartness – can be seen in our exhibition *Parallel of Life and Art* of 1953; which although mounted in the front room at the ICA, had nothing to do with the Independent Group also meeting in that room. In willing the exhibition to happen, developing its idea, and during its making, our meetings with Nigel and Eduardo were often excruciatingly funny, especially in word play and cross reference.⁴ Our shared values – of not needing to say again what had been adequately said by their "inventor" – were bodied out by the sense of a continuity parallel to that of the heroic period of modern architecture, flowing through Nigel; from the Bloomsbury Group, from Paris of the 1930s and 1940s, from Marcel Duchamp, from early Dubuffet and so on. . . .

Again, our *Patio and Pavilion* of 1956 had nothing whatsoever to do with the Independent Group but was part of the *This Is Tomorrow* exhibition that grew out of a series of meetings in Bill Scott's studio in Charlotte Street – the tail end of the Euston Road Group? – to do with a vague English inherited belief that the arts should be able to again collaborate as in the Renaissance. The initial discussions, with people stacked up in a wonderful Edwardian way, were long, contentious. The studio venue changed once, as those attending gathered, to the adjacent top floor studio; the personnel changed dramatically, the originators virtually all dropping out. We stuck with the discussions – as did John Weeks and Erno Goldfinger, who had been their artist's choice from the start – and once Theo Crosby appeared and agreed to organise it, rounded up all the architects we knew of, including Michael Pine who worked in plaster, so that each group had an architect. Cateugh might have been Theo's contact.

The *This Is Tomorrow* exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery was only possible through Theo Crosby's willingness to undertake the organisation; his position at *Architectural Design* offering the necessary contacts for materials and so on, since nobody had any money. Our *Patio and Pavilion* answered a "programme" of our own making, offering a definitive statement of another attitude to "collaboration": the "dressing" of a building, its place, by the "art of inhabitation." We were taking position in the acquisitive society as it began its run, by offering in a gite a reminder of other values, other pleasures.⁵ With the transparent roof of the pavilion made to display Nigel's arrangement of the "as found," the sand surface of the patio (ultimately) chosen to receive Nigel and Eduardo's tile and object arrangement, the reflective compounding walls to include every visitor as an inhabitant, the "art of the as found" was made manifest. The complete trust in our collaboration was proved by our *Patio and Pavilion* being built to our drawings and "inhabited" by Nigel and Eduardo in our absence, as we were camping on our way to CIAM at Dubrovnik.

This Is Tomorrow turned out to be the quartet's final joint "as found" manifestation.

In Sculpture:

Through other powerful influences, the idea of arranging metal things "found" was taken up in sculpture – to run – and run – and maybe it still has to run. Now, nearly forty years later, does it any longer have such an energising or revitalizing power? Around us again, no intellectual process seems involved in parallel; we see no reappraisal – of society, or meaning, or whatever – coming to formal presence; no new position being taken with respect to the immediately previous generation; no reaction occurring to parallel phenomena outside the discipline. The "as found" school appears to be as a stuck gramophone needle: maybe as outdated as that image.

In Polemic:

At one time in 1954-55 it was agreed that our quartet would all collect snippets out of newspapers or magazines of lines and phrases that struck us as demonstrating the sort of nonsensical "explosion" in use of images and words that was happening. What we kept ended up barely covering two sides of a page and, whatever Eduardo had in mind, he never called on its use. But this interest in groups of words was perhaps connected to watching us collage typescripts in Doughty Street while editing⁶ our *Urban Reidentification – UR – manuscript*, with its proposed covers in Neapolitan ice stripes. The text was finally published as *Ordinariness and Light*.

In the mid-1950s, the "found" manuscripts for *Young Girl* started, in frustration at the Bates House (Burrows Lea Farm) not building.⁷

The next two writings, which might – through their detailed accuracy and the integration of text and imagery/documents (to use the period word) – be considered as growing out of their "as found" period locations, were "Breath of India" and "1916aso"; started respectively in the late 1950s and the late 1960s. They cannot be thought of only as period pieces because the unpublished fiction writings continue to be edited for pleasure whenever there is a suitable gap. Nevertheless, in these fictions the characters remain portrayed as if found, in that place, in that period of their supposed existence, for the characters do not represent types or philosophical/psychological attitudes but are themselves, like people, largely unexplainable, reflecting the fact that in real life a person is something in the eye of each beholder. We see this in Jane Austen's supporting characters, whose "natures" seem to change when the beholder becomes sensible to other qualities in them.

Until these writings are published – the integration of imagery being resisted by potential publishers – it will be unclear whether there is a "school" of "as found" writing: even then, some critic may – as in the case of New Brutalism – include, for the sake of fashion or to body out a theory, things that muddy the issue and not explore fully, through ignorance, the then virtually unknown key figure . . . as in the case of New Brutalist architecture, where the work of Sigurd Lewerentz, virtually by itself, could have explained some deeper, enduring quality.

Some Doubts about the 'Found Image' in Painting

There are bound to be doubts about the "found image" in painting, at a time when the whole of past art is ransacked for imageable material to be enfolded into the ever-faster-consumed commercial graphics.

Looking back to the 1940s and 1950s – the period of Dubuffet and Pollock – the image was discovered within the process of making the work. It was not prefigured but looked-for as a phenomenon within the process.

As an art activity this was something new, since the "found objects" for Marcel Duchamp were of the previous period and were once "made" objects. That is, the objects "discovered" and transformed into art objects were originally made in the mind by an artisan or engineer, then drawn or sketched or modeled, then prototyped and so on, following the whole traditional process of invention and perfection. And as the stock of made-objects is continuously renewed by the activities arising from the different needs, intelligences and sensibilities of each period, the art activity of wit-and-eye founded on these objects can continue.

Current graphic art treats in this wit-and-eye way the painting of the past which was always prefigured – that is, first made in the mind. But in "found image" painting the first making-in-the-mind is missing, except in the sense that the process itself is pre-thought. In the 1980s, when that process is an inherited one, it can hardly be said to be pre-thought; it is a copy of a process already invented.

We could ask what are the new finding processes of our period, if the found-image in painting is now a genre?

1. See *Uppercase*, 3 (1961). Also A. and P. S. & Grille for CIAM 9 at Aix-en-Provence, cat. no. 71.

2. TTT pavilion; Upper Lawn pavilion.

3. Iraqi House, Piccadilly.

4. We inadvertently tested our sense of value by introducing a young person to Nigel just before his untimely death, and it was wonderful to hear and watch the old magician at work. This lack of a "studio" humour is strikingly absent in the late 1980s: does it reflect a lack of intellectual activity?

5. Something that we were discovering through other architects, Bill and Jill Howell, in their need to take us camping en route to CIAM at Aix-en-Provence and so on.

6. Two particularly fine strips were put in a frame and given as a wedding present to Trevor and Joan Dannatt, c. 1953.

7. See Alison Smithson, *Portrait of the Female Mind as a Young Girl* (London, 1966).