

Enrico Crispolti, *Peter Phillips*,
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If the Italian cultural experience of "Pop Art" had not been – both on a critical level and with regard to operative deductions – in a prevalently formalistic key (and even wound up reviving passé image contemplations that the new approach actually desired radically to abolish), and if that experience had not been limited to the New York (not even wholly North American) measure, then perhaps there would have been a earlier awareness of the existence of a distinct and characteristic English Pop Art, whose manner, reasoning and roots were significantly distant from American Pop Art (as perhaps would be understood in a sufficiently unitary manner from those aspects that could be considered proof of Italian participation, I mean to say originally, and therefore of an independent European standing and not just as a provincial follower). Yet the English Pop tradition was not only problematically fully within its rights to play (as it certainly did in the '60s) an independent and characteristic role, but it was also historically justified to do so, since it was actually in London, at the I.C.A., that different theories of this new popular art, the "mass media" art, had begun to develop in the mid-50s. The first episode was the "This is Tomorrow" exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, now a milestone of contemporary history and where Hamilton showed his famous "collage" that threw open the Pop Art debate. From the theories introduced at that time a new critical conscience was born, alongside the first creative stimulation to dialogue with the new kind of mass "imagery" presences, as the most authentic face of our reality, in its sociological and technological truth.

Peter Phillips was seventeen years younger than Hamilton, but he was the pioneer of another generation. Whilst English pop artists were more or less the same age as Phillips, he actually played an important practical role in the affirmation of English Pop Art, despite being extremely young, and became its president. In 1961 he presented works by Allen Jones, Hockney, Boshier and Kitaj at the "Young Contemporaries Exhibition" in London.

And it is certainly Phillips' own paintings that present the particular style that characterises English Pop Art, differentiates it not only from North American, but also from the authentic and isolated remains of European Pop Art. This style, as I already tried to underline a few years ago, derived its *raison d'être* not only from a particular attitude to contemporary culture, but also to cultural heritage. In the relevant early London drafts of the mid-50s, which are of interest critically as well as creatively, scenes of North American metropolitan life were the most fascinating examples of the most typically emblematic character of the new horizon of popular imagination. English Pop artists then delved more deeply into this myth, sensitive (as North American Pop artists were not) however to a new historic depth in which to study such a new challenging question and every other possible imaginative application.

If North American culture acquired a mass society condition over recent decades and creatively speaking – at least with regard to figurative arts – over recent years, in English culture such a condition dates back to the beginning of the Industrial revolution itself, in the eighteenth century. Thus, the English Pop artists have been able to observe the mass mythologies of North American society as a doubtlessly new repertory but of a condition with historic foundations, in the sphere of figurative culture, dating back even to Hogarth, Bunbury, Cruickshank, from Rowlandson to Gillray, thus the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth century. That is to say just when the use of a caricatural key was being introduced in a perspective of social interaction directed towards the continuous presence of "humour", as found in the sociologisms of English Pop artists. North American Pop artists, on the other hand, saw no relative

value in this brand new repertory, but rather an absolute value, an exhaustive totality of the present and of its instantaneous and short-lived life rhythms, with no possibility or with few exceptions, of introducing an element of effective and patently ironic detachment.

It should be remembered that this was the general background, even if the figures who were the protagonists – including Phillips – have now broken away from the actual limits of the movement and go their own, very personal, way. It should be remembered because it must be clear that these were the shared aims within the cultural climate and the horizons of research, within which Phillips formulated his own personal approach to that dialogue of creative utilization of mass imagery. Phillips' first specific intentions date back to '61, when in numerous extremely confident paintings he mingled emblematic and abstract structures with typical items of popular myth. And in '62-'63 typical mechanical objects appear in his paintings, while the instrumental repertory becomes essentially an extreme, almost violent, precision and lucidity to propose an image that is always plural and multiple, when not deliberately composite. In the spring of 1964 he participated in "The New Generation: 1964" at the Whitechapel Gallery and he showed a fully developed personality. In fact, he was already one of the leaders of the new English generation, which in that very exhibition was further and incontestably affirmed as a conspicuous new presence to a significant extent. So, the polite, at times Chagall-like, metamorphic inventiveness of Allen Jones, was contrasted by the violent, imperious, concrete and aggressive imagination of Phillips, who, together with Joe Tilson, was the most efficacious and intense presenter of mass culture images, in an emblematic form and level of intensity. But, while Tilson was lyrical and subtly ambiguous in his acute, lively, imaginative irony, Phillips tried to be violent, immediate, vitally impetuous, as in the "blousons noirs" imagery, from which he took both iconographic and formal inspiration. During the 1964 exhibition David Thompson pointed out that it was a question of colour, intensity and of aggressive acuteness of focus, as much as of the choice and the significance of the images. And in his catalogue "statement", Phillips himself explained that his relationship with the machine had always existed, it was not something that had taken the place of something else, it had always been there, and he had therefore always been influenced right from the start, and it was something that he accepted naturally: he did not want to analyse these images, like an artist of a past generation. He had lived with them for as long as he could remember, always, and so it was natural for him to make use of them without even thinking about it. He was basically interested in painting and not in the presentation of 'imagery'. In fact, his intention was, and still is, to assimilate into his paintings the typical images of mass mythology, not only showing them in ulterior emblematic presentations, but intensifying their emotive shock strength, which overcomes their original pragmatic immediacy (their semantic quality and quantity), with an action that is more complex and loaded with resonance, and which he restores to us multiplied exponentially and at the same time, potentially symbolic of a mythology aimed at vital heroism, at "Americanized" life, not without its strongly ironic side, of course.

In the paintings of recent years, Phillips has intensified not so much the variety of elements brought into the paintings, as the extreme, almost hallucinating clarity of the way in which they are presented. And Christopher Finch has rightly defined a critical discourse on the relationship in the paintings between mass images and technology (as a specific quality of the images themselves). The extreme clarity used by Phillips (in ways that were originally part of a tradition of the myth of the machine and of "mechanic art") is therefore itself a resulting supposition of the "mass media" technology horizon. But this is where Phillips actually intervenes creatively: he sets the form problem, the constitution of precise formal values, of form as a possibility of further and privileged communication compared to mass imagination and to technological perfection as opposed to his data mere "imagery" of the masses and mere technology. In Finch's recent *Image as Language*, he states that the 'imagery' presented can

seem familiar but it is removed from every suggestion of its normal environment. It has an independent existence, like a complex organization of themes, colours, surfaces, forms. These, in equilibrium with one other, transport a completed plastic event.

This was Phillips' philosophy of painting and not simply a re-edition of mass "imagery". But his painting is not escapist, as his form is not merely formalistic. Phillips aims rather at the constitution of formal values as an actual possibility of communication. In turn, this is not merely a unilateral supposition, but emerges from an almost statistical test, like that conducted by Phillips and Gerald Laing in New York in "Hybrid Enterprises", offering the public various purely formal elements and different ways of communication, as well as carrying out a computer analysis of the resulting data.

Thus a densely communicative form (and the emotional impact is a relevant factor) was born, which at one and the same time exalted and criticised the problem of "mass technology imagination". Basically because what Phillips wanted to communicate and somehow hand down was not a repertory of intact or manipulated images. There was no technological manipulation, but rather a dimension of extreme tension, impossible to loosen, a kind of splendid, hallucinating, metallic hardness, a clear and cruelly fascinating splendour of every aspect of reality, a dimension of reality's complete manner of being, and therefore of ourselves as participants in this reality.