

The Pop + The Gap

[Hamilton, Rauschenberg, + Warhol]

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Introduction

This thesis project has explored a process of negotiating the ruptures occurring within the discourse of a colonized — and effectively eviscerated — indigenous México, while searching for allegories which might effectively illustrate these discontinuities within the larger frame of social and historical dissonances. With this as my conceptual context, I have engaged three pioneering ‘Pop’ artists of the mid-twentieth century, Richard Hamilton, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol, in conversation to produce a thesis project which looks to the banal for symbols of this rupture and its attendant reverberations.

As first imagined, this project would create visual statements of and about elements of the quotidian, and the many themes and images embodying and reflecting this contemporary consumer/macho boy-man/neocolonial society, while appropriating a style evocative of the art of the three subject artists (i.e., Hamilton, Rauschenberg, and Warhol). During this process, however, my studio practice has evolved new forms of making, which have included photography, photographic silkscreen, digital image manipulation, and collage and mixed-media on paper and canvas.

Examples of the ‘everyday’, and the dissonances this rupture has created within a tradition of indigenous Mexican culture and language, are everywhere evident in the minutiae of daily living, from dress to daily household implements and utensils, from forms of shelter and transportation to livelihood pursuits. Daily scenes common to today’s Oaxaca often include women in native, traditional dress alongside women dressed in the latest European fashions, in the central plaza of Oaxaca; hand-woven straw sombreros alongside backwards-worn baseball caps, observed in an indigenous Zapotec pueblo; old VWs and shiny SUVs, bumper to bumper on the streets of Oaxaca; woven baskets, clay cooking pots, pirated Luis Vuitton handbags, and throw-away plastic buckets from China, all on offer in the same weekly village marketplace. Another striking contrast is the urbane, and conflicted soap opera beauty (the most celebrated of whom, Angelica Rivera, is the current First Lady of México, and married to the president, Enrique Peña-Nieto) and the indigenous pueblo woman, *watching* the daily soap opera program on the ubiquitous, always-on television set,

sometimes sitting on a dirt floor in her simple home. But also within the everyday here is an everyday reality, or perhaps confluence, of poverty, corruption, and racism; a lack of formal education, never mind any intellectual curiosity; and an inaccessibility to jobs, quality schools, and health care, except of course by the neocolonial class. This everyday, then, includes the most mundane objects, as well as celebrity figures, which Warhol seemed to focus on; and then the daily reality and materiality of life, which could be said was more the subject of Rauschenberg and Hamilton.

I wrote this in my thesis proposal early last summer:

What can be said about contemporary México's ruling elite, the middle class, and the still-colonized indigenous peoples in a Warholian / Rauschenbergian / Hamiltonian dialogic? México has a love affair with celebrity, with power and glamour, with the foreign, and with the banal. It seems something could be said about all this, and I intend to explore the mix employing photography, photo silkscreen, and painting on canvas and paper to illustrate the tensions, and perhaps the juxtapositions, that exist on many levels in contemporary México.

Further, I will research the processes, practices, and threads of thought and explorations of Hamilton, Rauschenberg and Warhol, which will inform my studio work. Through experimenting with this form of expression, I will look to my research to answer questions posed by my practice.

On the one hand, my thesis project as imagined was too narrowly defined. I could easily have included Jasper Johns, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Marcel Duchamp in my stated thesis questions, as each figured largely in the life of one or more of the three artists. But it would probably be more accurate to say that this thesis topic is entirely too broad and multifarious; too many actors, with too many diverse influences from too many sides. Nevertheless, my research has uncovered both unexpected and extraordinarily intriguing insights into these three artists and the influences which came to bear on their development. Moreover, this research has added a completely new dimension to my understanding of not just their respective persons and oeuvres, but also of the underlying theoretic and thematic developments of the whole genre of Pop, Op, Minimalist, and Conceptual Art in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the legacy of Marcel Duchamp on the world of visual, musical, and performing arts, and beyond, since 1950. And I will detail several of these influences and subsequent developments below.

It seems to me there is so much to say about the rupture that is unfolding here in México by using the language of the everyday, and I am still wrestling with the question of how best to express it all. My current track of explorations are going in the right direction, but I also sense there is so much more that can be said and done, experimenting with different forms of making and illustrating different metaphors.

2. *Development of the Thesis Project*

This thesis project has taken shape within a context of investigations into the lives and oeuvres of Richard Hamilton, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol, as well as the significant influences of Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, and Zen Buddhism on their respective oeuvres, and the larger worlds of fine art, music and dance/performance. In framing the project, the writings of Michel Foucault addressing the concept of ruptures within a social and cultural dialogic continuum were informative. Entering into conversations with, and working to reflect something of each of these three artists in my studio work, I have been experimenting with illustrating the everyday object as well as the everyday circumstances of life that I see around me, within the context of tracing the rupture in the discourse of indigenous and ‘modern’ México.

This project grew out of my investigations last year into staged photography, and my work in paint on canvas in the years before that. In my staged photography project, I began situating myself amongst my neighbors, the staff of a local restaurant, or seated amongst twelve committee members of the local church, and in the nearby marketplace, where fresh pork is sold. While my image of the church committee -plus the ‘outsider’- was, I think, somewhat interesting (see below), and was singled out by my previous studio advisor as the best in the series, I was never satisfied with the results. I had inserted myself, the foreigner, the ‘other’, into the local picture, but beyond that, what was I expressing? It had all the hallmarks of a tourist snapshot against a foreign backdrop, but not much else. I kept asking myself, ‘So what?’, without ever coming up with a good answer. A genuine intercultural dialogic never surfaced. Furthermore, I wasn’t interested in a ‘Cindy Sherman approach’ to staging my own costuming. But I have found the Chinese artist Weng Fen’s photographic work particularly evocative, and often quite poignant, while speaking about the historic social and environmental ruptures occurring in China. In my work, I was going for the evocative, but was coming up short.



El Comité
c-print, 56cm x 61cm

I began digitally manipulating photographs to insert myself into prehispanic codices, and then film stills from 1950s Mexican movies. I found this avenue of investigation much more creative and evocative of a dialogic between myself and the foreign 'other', and believe that it began to more richly illustrate the divide I was navigating between my adopted home, México, and my inherent prejudices. There is more to excavate along this line of inquiry, and I expect to do so.



Untitled I, Untitled II (above + below)

Mixed media on giclée print on paper; 40cm x 60cm (above); 50cm x 70cm (below)

I proceeded to experiment with creating silkscreens of some of these and other photographic images, on paper and on canvas, over which I could then paint, using primarily acrylic paints. My first image (see below) depicted the recently deposed and jailed head of the powerful Teachers' Union of México, Elba Esther Gordillo. Gordillo is to México what Jimmy Hoffa was to the US: a tough, ruthless, long-serving leader of a politically powerful national union, long accustomed to power and privilege and an utter lack of accountability and transparency. Gordillo is instantly recognizable to the Mexican public, as the reach of the teachers' union touches everyone in México. And the all-too-frequent labor strikes by the 'maestros' places the union and its leader frequently on the front page of newspapers across the country.

Elba Esther

Silkscreen + acrylic on paper; 90cm x 60cm

My next silkscreen print featured Benito Juárez, México's lone indigenous president (from the mid-1850s until his death in the early 1870s). (Juárez came from a small, Zapotec pueblo in the mountains high above the city of Oaxaca, and became the Abraham Lincoln of sorts of México, instituting a program of reforms while



returning some Spanish-confiscated lands to their rightful and original, indigenous owners. While Juárez's tenure is not without controversy, he is generally held to represent the pinnacle of good, moral, and honest political leadership in México.) This silkscreen triptych features Juárez in the center, flanked by the current president of México, Enrique Peña-Nieto, on the left, and by Peña-Nieto's political godfather and alleged puppeteer, the nefarious Carlos Salinas (who was president of México from 1988-1994) on the right.

Three Faces of México
silkscreen and acrylics on paper; 70cm x 100cm



With this series of silkscreens, I was engaging in conversations with Warhol, but I wanted to do more, and broaden the sweep to encompass more of the Mexican milieu. This led me to delve more deeply into what Warhol and Rauschenberg and others had done in the medium of serigraphy, and to what effect. Which, of course, opened up new and very unexpected avenues of investigation.

I began the year with what I now feel were excessively and laboriously deliberated subject ideas for collage and mixed-media work, which ultimately weren't, I believe, successful. As John Cage would say, I kept putting too much *there* there. And my *there*, in this case, was my over-thinking everything, and choosing subject areas too large and complicated, such as my canvas "Walls / Borders", in which I collaged photographs onto painted canvas, using alternating images of the Berlin Wall and the Wall separating México and the US. As I have grown to understand

Rauschenberg's approach, which is so interwoven with Cage's Zen sensibilities, I have begun to appreciate the idea of allowing more spaciousness and spontaneity, or even chance, to enter my own working processes, coupled with an awareness of the fabric of life around me, which I can further weave into my work. The everyday stuff of life, then, which reflects back to the viewer, is what is engaging me as I move forward in my work.

How have these investigations and explorations impacted my own studio practice? What I have noticed is that my focus has been shifting throughout this year from one of looking at my specific environment - that is, Oaxaca, México, peopled by indigenous Zapotecas - to investigating, and beginning to experiment with several new ideas. Specifically, there is the Duchampian idea about 'non-retinal art' that is created in service to the mind; also Cage's notions of chance operations and opening up (or, perhaps more accurately, opening out) the whole of one's art practice to the bricolage of life; also Rauschenberg's and Johns' ideas about creating work not *about* something else, but *of* that something else; and Warhol's echoing of Cage's ideas about removing the biases, the desires, the personality, and even the hand of the artist from the work through an emphasis on 'factory-made'; Hamilton's rather 'in-your-face' political and societal dialogic.; and Foucault's ideas about ruptures in the historic and cultural/ social dialogic continuum.

3. Contextualization of the Thesis Project

context

noun

1 *the wider historical context:* circumstances, conditions, factors, state of affairs, situation, background, scene, setting.

I started with these questions, which I posed in my original project proposal:

Who were Richard Hamilton, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol? What was the art world like at the time, and who and what were the influences which led them to break free of the genre of abstract expressionism of the time? How was their work

received, both by the world of artists and by the greater public? And what is the legacy of Hamilton, Rauschenberg, and Warhol, if there is one?

I went into this project thinking simply that the banal was the focus of these three artists, and thus *my* focus. And of course it was *a* focus of theirs. But, as with all things in life, it was much more complicated than that.

As I began to investigate further, a whole pandora's box began to open, revealing not just the usual suspects commonly referred to as the 'pop' and 'op' artists, but, more interestingly, the profound influences that Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, and Zen Buddhism, primarily through D.T. Suzuki, had on the lives and oeuvres of Hamilton, Rauschenberg, and Warhol, as well as on the whole art, music, and performance world of the 1950s and 1960s, right through to the present.

The first investigative clue I encountered was that all three artists enjoyed a personal and highly influential relationship with Marcel Duchamp during the 1960s, which would shape them, and their art, profoundly. Hamilton's relationship with Duchamp would begin in 1957, when Duchamp invited him [by letter] to collaborate with George Heard Hamilton, then Professor of Art History at Yale University, on a complete English-language version of his *Green Box* notes, originally published in 1937 in a limited edition, and intended to serve as an illuminated manuscript of sorts alongside, or in concert with, Duchamp's magnum opus, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, also known as the *Large Glass* (see below). Working together nearly three years, George Heard Hamilton translated the original notes from French into English, while Richard Hamilton created the order and variable typography of the textual and diagrammatic notes, finally producing a volume they entitled *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even / A Typographic Version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp's Green Box*.¹

*The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even - copie conforme
Hamilton / Duchamp (1965-66)*

But perhaps John Cage, and his distillation of Duchamp's ideas about art, commingled with D.T. Suzuki's teachings on Zen Buddhism, would hold sway to an even greater extent over both Rauschenberg and Warhol. What was it about Marcel

¹ Manchester, Elizabeth, Tate Gallery, London, June 2007, revised October 2009, via <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/works/hamilton-typotopography-of-marcel-duchamps-large-glass-p78916/text-catalogue-entry> (accessed 7 Jan 2014).



Duchamp and John Cage (and Zen Buddhism) that would create such strong and lasting reverberations throughout the visual (and performing) art worlds? And how did their influence contribute to, and influence, the works of Hamilton, Rauschenberg, and Warhol? Al Held, the second-generation Abstract Expressionist painter, remarked: “Duchamp was just a French Symbolist until Cage showed us how to understand him.”²

Clearly, the work of Hamilton, Rauschenberg, and Warhol were dramatic ruptures in the art discourse of their day. Each of these three artists rose to prominence during the late 1950s and 1960s, during a time of wrenching change, unprecedented gains in material prosperity, and tremendous social upheaval in the US

² Larson, Kay, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists*. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012). pg. 407.

and the UK, and they each sought to create art that reflected life as they saw it and experienced it. My process has been an ongoing conversation with them, as each continues to have a profound influence on the art world today.

I am inspired by these three artists, and this has led me to investigate the relevance and the meaning of the everyday, and its place in contemporary art; and, more specifically, my art. The placement, or the replication of the everyday in art can draw us into a conversation with contemporary culture, politics, with others, and with ourselves.

Within The Context of Marcel Duchamp

First came Marcel Duchamp.

His *Nude Descending a Staircase*, of 1912, didn't just capture a moment in time, but a string of moments, and *movements*, while an abstracted naked woman strode down a staircase. This was heady stuff for Paris at the time, and the work was subsequently rejected by jurors of the exhibition of the so-called *Independentes* that same year. With Duchamp's subsequent and monumentally unorthodox *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, (1915-1923), (*see below*) the seeds were sewn for a revolution in art which would seriously begin percolating some three decades later.

In his forward to the catalog for the 2012-13 exhibition, *Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*, Timothy Rub notes that Duchamp's influence on artists in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as his revolutionary views on what constituted a work of art itself, was nothing short of profound. And the resulting effect of Duchamp was suddenly seen everywhere in the new work of the Pop artists, the Minimalists, and the Conceptualists. The dialogue about the relationship between art and life itself took on a whole new consequence³.

³ Basualdo, Carlos & Erica F. Batle, ***Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp***, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2013; pg. 7.

Nan Rosenthal picks up this thread, noting that by “[e]mbodying the intellect of his literary contemporaries Marcel Proust and James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp [...] has been aptly described by the painter Willem de Kooning as a one-man movement... By World War I, [Duchamp] had rejected the work of many of his fellow artists as "retinal" art, intended only to please the eye. Instead, Duchamp wanted, he said, ‘to put art back in the service of the mind.’”⁴

Perhaps this desire to put painting back in the service of the mind really meant “at the service of [Duchamp’s] own iconoclastic and profoundly original mind, a mind that coolly questioned every assumption ever made about the function of art and about art’s relation to human life.”⁵ Furthermore, Duchamp maintained that a work of art was only ever finally completed through an active reciprocity with the viewer. This idea was embraced wholeheartedly by John Cage, and by Rauschenberg as well.

What, then, does the Duchampian dialogic mean for us today, and what does it have to do with my current art practice? Duchamp opened the windows and doors of the house of ‘fine art’ to allow a fresh new breeze to circulate throughout, while neither taking himself too seriously, nor succumbing to the temptation to attempt to solidify his seditious view on art and the world into something resembling an academic or institutional formula. For me, this has meant re-examining my art practice, and considering anew what it is I want to say with my art; what conversations do I want to enter into with my work? And further, it brings up the questions: What is beauty?; What is the object, and who is the subject?; What, and what for?

Pierre Cabanne summed up the Duchampian paradigm by saying that: “With Duchamp, nothing is ever finished. He is always the future.”⁶

Within The Context of John Cage

In January, 1964, Samuel Wagstaff Jr. wrote a short article for *ARTNews* about an exhibition he curated at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut,

⁴ Rosenthal, Nan. "**Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968)**". In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000; http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/duch/hd_duch.htm (accessed 2 March, 2014.)

⁵ Tomkins, Calvin, **Off The Wall**... pp. 114-115.

⁶ Cabanne, Pierre, **Duchamp & Co.** (Paris: Finest SA / Editions Pierre Terrail, 1997)

featuring twenty artists whom he viewed as exemplifying the new ‘minimalism’ of the day. Wagstaff had this to say about Cage:

“For a number of contemporary American artists, whose works tend away from Expressionism in a more austere direction, the composer John Cage has been an intellectual guide. Whether his influence has been direct, as in the case of Johns, Rauschenberg, Warhol, etc., or whether it was just a parallel affinity, Cage seems to be a spiritual leader with an aggressive following. Cage’s remarks about music, ‘There is too much *there* there’, and ‘There is not enough of nothing in it,’ might represent a binding philosophy of many painters and sculptors for the visual arts as well.”⁷

Calvin Tomkins noted that “By 1950...[Cage] had moved into composing music by means of chance operations, with results that almost nobody found acceptable. He had also gone deeply into the study of Zen Buddhism... he was moving away from the ideas of order, structure, and control towards ideas of no-order, no-structure, and no-control.” Cage “...proposed, in his music and in his life... nothing less than the overthrow of some of the most basic assumptions of Western art since the Renaissance.” This movement into chance operations and Zen-inspired indeterminacies in his compositions and subsequent performances would mark Cage’s significant legacy.

In September, 2008, Barbara Rose talked about not only the influence that Cage had on Rauschenberg, but, in fact, the reciprocity of ideas and influences which flowed between the two:

“It is usually assumed that Cage influenced Rauschenberg; in fact, however, the influence was reciprocal. Cage recognized the natural similarities of Rauschenberg’s work with the philosophy of Zen, which [Cage] had been studying since the late ’40s. And once he saw Rauschenberg’s ‘silent’ White Paintings, as is now legendary, Cage also began to consider silence to be essential to musical composition.”⁸

But perhaps most importantly, “...Rauschenberg recalls taking heart from the fact that Cage ‘gave him permission’ to continue experimenting at a point when everyone else was discouraging him.”⁹

⁷ Wagstaff Jr., Samuel, *ARTNews* 62 (9), January, 1964

⁸ Rose, Barbara, ***Seeing Rauschenberg Seeing***, New York: *ARTFORUM Magazine*, Vol. 4, September 2008, (pp. 432-436)

⁹ Rose, Barbara, *ibid.*

Within The Context of Robert Rauschenberg

Mary Lynn Kotz has written that “For Cage [as well as for] Rauschenberg, the purpose of art was not to create enduring masterpieces for an elite, but to further a perpetual process of discovery in which everyone could participate. They wanted to break down all barriers between art and life. Rauschenberg said, ‘Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)’¹⁰ Art, said Cage, should be ‘an affirmation of life - not an attempt to bring order out of chaos, nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we’re living.’ As Rauschenberg began to work on the combines, Cage, he said, gave him confidence that ‘the way I was thinking was not crazy.’¹¹

What could Rauschenberg have meant by the statement that he tried ‘to act in that gap between...’ art and life, and that neither can be made? By the time he made this statement, in 1959, he had known John Cage for nearly a decade, and had become well acquainted with the teachings of Zen Buddhism through both Cage and from lectures by D.T. Suzuki. This statement is a wonderful Zen statement. And in fact, this ‘gap’ is what is encountered when our endless stream of thoughts subside, if even momentarily, and is then further nurtured through meditation practice. This gap, sometimes called ‘ordinary mind’ in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, is no other than Buddha mind, or enlightened mind. Rauschenberg was surely familiar with this concept, and described his experience of ‘ordinary mind’ in relation to his art practice to John Gruen in an interview published in *ARTNews*, in February, 1977¹². Rauschenberg remarked that his process of creating in the studio was outside of his conscious control, though he would often resort to tricks to “reach that solitary point of creativity”, such as pretending to have an idea, and then seeing what might proceed from that. Rauschenberg continued, “...I put my trust in the materials that confront me, because they put me in touch with the unknown. It is then that I begin to work... when I don’t have the comfort of sureness and certainty. Sometimes Jack Daniels helps too. Another good trick is fatigue. I like to start working when it’s almost too late... when nothing else helps... when my sense of efficiency is exhausted.

¹⁰ Exhibition Catalogue, ***Sixteen Americans***, Museum of Modern Art, New York, December, 1959.

¹¹ Kotz, Mary Lynn, ***Rauschenberg / Art and Life***. (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2004), pg. 89.

¹² “Robert Rauschenberg: An Audience of One”, interview with John Gruen, *Art News*, 29 (February 1977), p.48.

“It’s then that I find myself in another state, quite outside myself, and when that happens there’s such a joy! It’s an incredible high and things just start flowing and you have no idea of the source.” This is a perfect description of the experience of ordinary mind, or as Rauschenberg called it, the gap one experiences between art and life, none of which can be made.

Like Cage and Duchamp, Rauschenberg’s works were always a collaboration between the artist and the viewer, beginning with his very early *White Canvases* series (1951), begun at Black Mountain College. Duchamp felt that all art was open to an infinite variety of interpretations, and in this way, the viewer becomes essential and indispensable in any artwork’s manifestation or consequence. “The spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation; through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place”, Duchamp explained. “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work into contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”¹³

Rauschenberg, like his mentor, friend, and some-time collaborator John Cage, became steeped in Zen outlook, and yet never preached the Zen ‘gospel’. Instead, he lived it, and sometimes pointed towards it in public forums in a most articulate manner. At a Museum of Modern Art symposium in 1961, Rauschenberg had this to say about art and life and the gap:

“Every minute everything is different everywhere. It is all flowing...The duty or beauty of a painting is that there is no reason to do it nor any reason not to. It can be done as a direct act or contact with the moment, and that is the moment you are awake and moving. It all passes and is never true literally as the present again, leaving more work to be done.”¹⁴

Rauschenberg’s and Cage’s works displaying Zen mind is one of the most fascinating things I find about their oeuvre. As a Buddhist practitioner of many years myself, I have long wrestled with ways of integrating my experience of Buddhist teachings and practice into my work, but without much success; except that, in so far as the work I choose to make reflects, in its own way, my whole identity, which

¹³Sanouille, Michel and Elmer Peterson, eds., *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel)*, (New York, 1973, pp.139-140).

¹⁴ Hunter, Sam, *Robert Rauschenberg*, Rizzoli International Publications: New York, 1999). pg. 121. - from recording of a symposium held at the MoMA, New York, in 1961, in conjunction with exhibit, *The Art of Assemblage*.

includes being a Buddhist practitioner. John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg have shone a bright light on how they chose to reflect this 'gap' in their art and in their life.

Within The Context of Richard Hamilton

It has been said that Richard Hamilton was the father of Pop Art.¹⁵ Hamilton's 1956 collage *'Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?'* "...is widely acknowledged as one of the first pieces of Pop Art, and his written definition of pop art laid the foundation for the international movement..."¹⁶ that followed. In a letter to the architects Alison and Peter Smithson, dated 16 January 1957, Hamilton wrote that "*Pop Art is: popular (designed for a mass audience), transient (short term solution), expendable (easily forgotten), low cost, mass produced, young (aimed at youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big business.*"¹⁷

Most interesting to me is that Hamilton was such an aficionado of Marcel Duchamp, and not only curated a 1966 retrospective of Duchamp's work at the Tate Gallery in London, but also meticulously and painstakingly created a copy of Duchamp's *Large Glass* for the exhibition, which Duchamp acknowledged as a *copie conforme*, and signed it as such. As prelude, Richard Hamilton and George Heard Hamilton (no relation) collaborated to produce a new translation, ordered and rendered typographically, of Duchamp's *Green Box*, which comprised Duchamp's original notes, photographs, and drawings during the design and construction of his *Large Glass*¹⁸.

While Hamilton's work is indisputably retinal, it always requires the viewer to engage with what they are seeing, and thereby complete the exploration begun by the artist.

¹⁵ Laughland, Harry, *Richard Hamilton (Tate Modern)*, The Research Forum Blog - Courtauld Institute of Art, via <http://blog.courtauld.ac.uk/researchforum/richard-hamilton-tate-modern/> - (accessed 1 April 2014)

¹⁶ Maharaj, Sarat C., **Richard Hamilton**, New York: Museum of Modern Art, via Oxford University Press, 2009
https://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=2481 - accessed 15 January, 2014.

¹⁷ Maharaj, S.C., *ibid.*

¹⁸ Hamilton, Richard & George Heard Hamilton, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even / A Typographic Version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp's Green Box*, (New York and London, 1960).

By way of summarizing Hamilton's work from the late 1950s onwards, the art historian S.C. Maharaj noted that "media spectacle and advertising mythology are cited and rendered so faithfully that they do not ring true, and a more circumspect, reflective attitude is evoked. The source material is rephrased and filtered through the conventions of fine art, treated with a cool detachment that neither glorified nor derided it. Hamilton's admiration for the skill that went into the artefacts of popular culture and the pleasure they could afford was tempered by his awareness of their manipulative stereotyping."¹⁹

This same thing could, of course, be said about Rauschenberg's work, and Warhol's as well. The recasting of the source material, be it from advertising or mass media, was, most certainly, the primary characteristic of pop art.

Within The Context of Andy Warhol

Warhol's silkscreens are as instantly identifiable as the visage of the man himself. Warhol introduced *branding* to the world of fine art, and orchestrated the hugely successful *Warhol* brand. Much has been said about Warhol and his impact on the world of fine art and beyond, about how he brought the everyday into the gallery space, and about his celebration of 'fabulousness', celebrity, and everyone's 'fifteen minutes of fame'. Warhol blurred the boundaries, or perhaps it should be said that he *shattered* the boundaries between fine art and 'commercial' art and everything in-between.

There were multiple revolutionary torrents occurring throughout the art world in the US at the same time that Warhol began painting Coke bottles and Campbell Soup cans, but Warhol's raw, un-painterly, hard-edged silk screens were speaking an altogether new language. Clearly Warhol was rupturing the dialogue within the fine art world, saying that everything of everyday life is art. Rauschenberg was saying something very similar, as was Hamilton, and this new conversation echoed what Marcel Duchamp had proclaimed nearly fifty years earlier with his first readymade, 'Bicycle' (1915, *see below*).

¹⁹ Maharaj, S.C., *ibid*.



The 1950s and 1960s were an extraordinary score of years in the US, the UK, and Europe, with dramatic ruptures occurring throughout the worlds of fine art, music, dance/performance, politics, education, sexuality, youth, hemlines and haircuts.

And Warhol, his 'Factory', and his 'stars' epitomized one very American urban vanguard.

Warhol's shameless commercialization and branding of his art foreshadowed the appearance of Jeff Koons, who has exploited his own youthful experience as a commodities broker/salesman to scale new monetized heights in the art world, easily surpassing the crassest of Warhol's exploits, but in true twenty-first century style.

Nevertheless, I find Warhol's subjects and studio methods compelling, and this is informing my current explorations enormously.

4. Thesis Project Evaluation

My year-long project has been one of engaging in conversation with Rauschenberg, Warhol, and Hamilton, and unexpectedly with Duchamp and Cage, Merce Cunningham and Jasper Johns as well; specifically, their ideas, influences, explorations, mediums, and their methods.

It could easily be said, I believe, that an initial weakness (or perhaps the greatest weakness) in the project was my initial lack of familiarity with the persons and oeuvres of the three artists I chose to focus on. As a result, I had no idea about the extent of the influence Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, and the teachings of Zen Buddhism had on these three men, nor of the inter-relatedness and interconnectedness they experienced with each other. However, I chose to investigate these three because I saw some kind of common thread running through their work that I sensed bound them together in some way: the subjects and subject matter, while often presented quite differently, echoed each other, and entered into conversation with each other.

And following this, this lack of familiarity with Warhol, Hamilton, and Rauschenberg resulted in a reach far too broad for the scope of an MFA thesis project. In addition to Hamilton, Warhol, and Rauschenberg, I discovered Duchamp, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, chance operations, non-retinal art, Zen Buddhism and the 'gap', and Jasper Johns. Each one of these constituents would be worthy of extended study in much greater depth. It's been a difficult process to winnow the project down, edit out a lot of possibly extraneous material, and choose one area upon which to focus. But at the same time, this has been a rich process, and I'd be loathe to have given up any aspect of it.

Perhaps this is exactly what an MFA thesis project can, and should be about: the peeling of a metaphorical onion, revealing layer upon layer of fresh surprises and new discoveries. So I would say that an overriding strength of the project lay in the wholly unexpected and rich investigations into such diverse topics as Zen Buddhism, chance operations, non-retinal art, and discoveries of how the boundaries between music and the visual and performing arts were often completely blurred within the collaborative works of Cunningham, Cage, Rauschenberg and Johns, while in conversation with Duchamp and Zen Buddhism. This has been exciting new territory for me to discover and explore, and has broadened my conceptual horizons enormously.

I entered into this project without experience in the processes of photo silk screen, and with next to no experience with collage and mixed media work. Working

with collage and mixed media is quite straightforward, but silk screen is another matter. I first had to learn what photographic exposures produced the best results for creating a workable positive transparency from which a screen could be made. And then there's the matter of mesh size, i.e., how many threads per square inch of screening, which determines the quality of image left on the canvas or paper. And after a lot of trial and error, I found I preferred working with acrylic paints over a commercial silk screen paint, as the consistency and flow properties of the acrylics were better, and the color possibilities much, much larger.

I next wrestled with using photographs in various works, in much the same way as Richard Prince has. But so far I have found this less satisfying than using silk screen, as I find a silk screen image adds a texture and a certain indeterminacy, or mystery to the work which I have not been able to obtain with photographs.

I've also struggled with image and subject selections, at the same time as I was grappling with framing and contextualizing my project as it was evolving. I looked for images which would embody or epitomize millennia of discourse within indigenous México, and which could be juxtaposed with objects of the evolving everyday life here. The ubiquitous ceramic pot, or *olla*, seemed iconic of a rapidly disappearing lifestyle, while the equally ubiquitous imported plastic bucket seems iconic of the current throw-away, machine-made consumer culture which is permeating not just México, but the entire planet.



Progress(ion)
c-print on paper; 22" x 40"

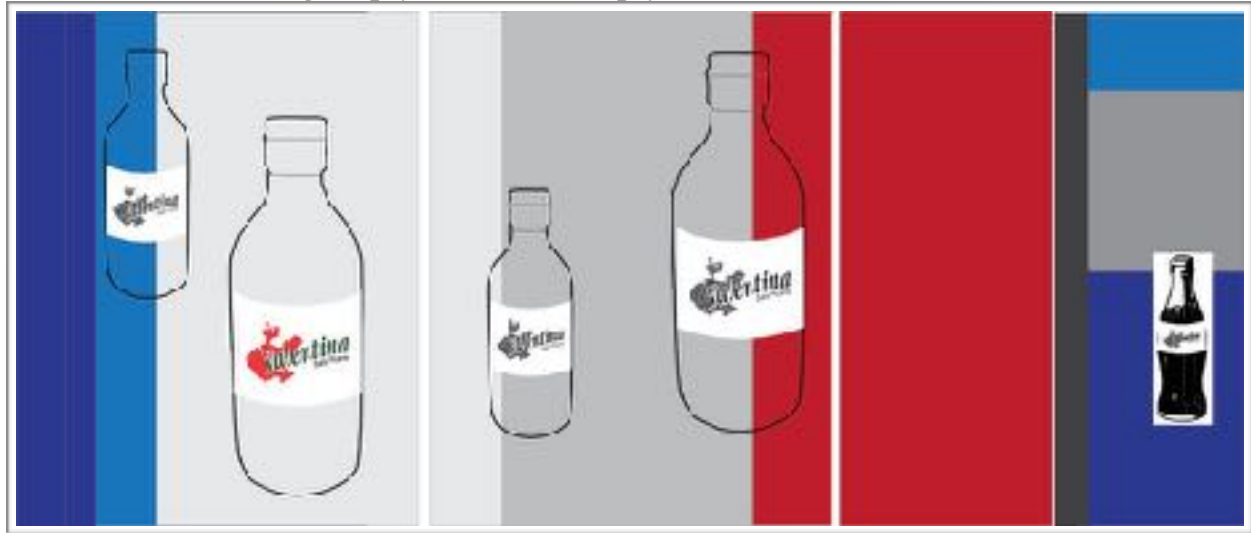
From there I created a diptych of silkscreen and paint on canvas, entitled '*April2-Collision*' see below (acrylic and silk screen on canvas; 240cm x 150cm - diptych), which features a double, mirror image silk screen of an indigenous woman letting drop a ceramic *olla* to the ground in front of her, which is flanked on the



accompanying canvas by three silkscreen vertical images of the ceramic *olla*.

I then began working on a series of silk screen images, in conversation with Andy Warhol, of banal kitchen products, such as a can of jalapeño peppers, a package of Mexican chocolate, a carton of milk, a package of toilet paper, and a bottle of

Mexican hot sauce, and worked with the can of peppers and the bottle of hot sauce within a series of large diptychs and/or triptychs, on canvas.

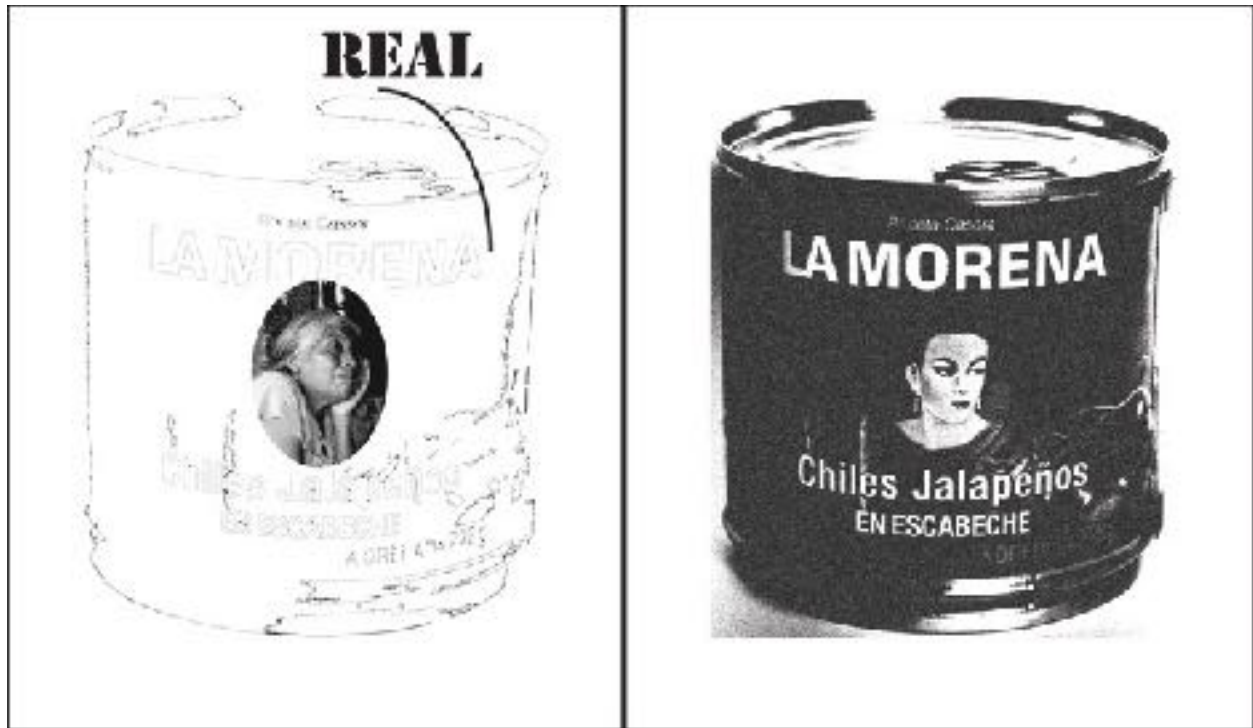


Picante (acrylic and silkscreen on canvas; 150cm x 270cm - triptych)

Jalapeños (acrylic and silkscreen on canvas; 120cm x 350cm - triptych)

I experimented with the can of peppers on its own, deconstructing the can to an outline drawing, and placing a photographic image of a pueblo woman in place of the stylized Spanish face normally depicted on the label. I printed this work on paper.

La Morena Real



silk screen and mixed media on paper; 70cm x 140cm

Finally, I began a series of 'Nearly-Erased' works, which are appropriations of sorts of Rauschenberg's 1953 "Erased de Kooning Drawing by Robert Rauschenberg". I took one work each from Rauschenberg's, Hamilton's, and Warhol's oeuvre, and digitally manipulated it so as to 'nearly erase' it. To these three, I added a recent painting by Jeff Koons, as I feel his kitsch, above all, is worthy of erasure.

My point with this series of c-prints on paper is to enter into conversation with Rauschenberg in particular, and signal not an annulment of his work or any others, but rather my breaking free from the shadow of these four artists.



Nearly-

Erased Rauschenberg
oil on c-print on paper; 65cm x 110cm. series of 10

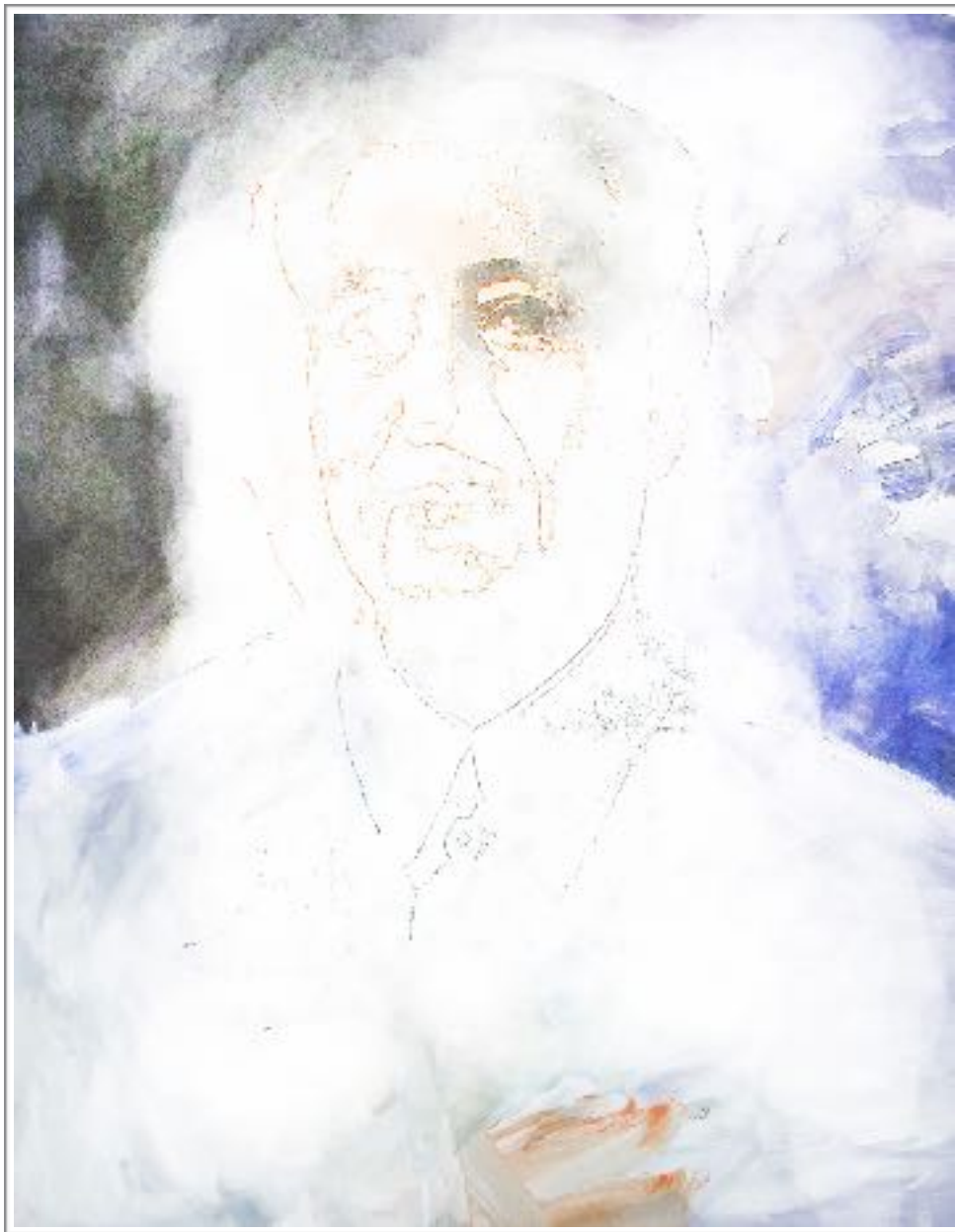


Nearly-Erased Richard Hamilton
oil on c-print on paper; 70cm x 100cm; series of 10



Nearly-Erased Jeff Koons

oil on c-print on paper; 70cm x 100cm; series of 10



Nearly-Erased Warhol

oil on c-print on paper; 75cm x 120cm; series of 10.

I explain these most recent series of works because I consider them my most relevant and successful of the entire project. These works engage in conversation with

the viewer, and with my focus artists as well. They are intriguing, and, I think, engaging. They pose questions. And in spite of Duchamp's clarion call to abandon 'retinal art', I find them pleasing to my retina, in both composition and in color, which, I'm afraid, I still consider important elements in art, whether of the visual or the performance sort.

These are criteria for what I deem 'successful' art. Without engaging the viewer, posing questions, and constructing a narrative, art is cosmetic, according to Duchamp. Rauschenberg, Hamilton, Warhol, Cage, Cunningham, Johns, and Duchamp each created a rupture in the then-current dialogue within the art world, as well as with and within the audience, by posing questions and engaging the viewer in a conversation beyond that of a pretty picture. Their art became inseparable from life. Their art asked questions, and served as a mirror to the contemporary world-scene. Their art took sides. Their art was political. These were some of the elements which marked the rupture which took place beginning in the early 1950s, and I feel this work still has remarkable relevance and presence today, some sixty years later.