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PRIOR, DAVID ALEAN (M.F.A. FINE ARTS: CREATIVE ARTS)  
HUMOR AND POP ART

This Thesis HUMOR AND POP ART degree by Edes

by David Alean Prior

has David Alean Prior  
B.F.A., University of Colorado, 1961

investigated by this Fine Arts whether this denial of Pop  
Art is valid. by

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The humor of Pop art is investigated in an effort to  
find similarities and differences between Pop Humor and  
Historical Humor in painting.

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of the University of Colorado in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Fine Arts

1966

In the final section of the paper, an effort is made  
to analyze the critics' reasons for negating the validity

PRIOR, DAVID ALEAN (M.F.A. FINE ARTS; CREATIVE ARTS)  
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PRIOR, DAVID ALEAN (M.F.A. FINE ARTS: CREATIVE ARTS)  
HUMOR AND POP ART

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Luis E. Eades

This abstract is approved as to form and content.

Signed Luis Eades  
Faculty member in charge of thesis

Certain contemporary critics have recently attacked the Pop Art movement for its uses of humor. The question investigated by this paper is whether this denial of Pop Art is valid.

Past uses of humor in painting are briefly discussed, using artists who are generally accepted as important to the development of Western painting. This brief list is categorized according to the role humor plays in the painting to determine whether humor has actually been an integral part of past painting or a mere additive element.

The humor of Pop Art is investigated in an effort to find similarities and differences between Pop Humor and Historical Humor in painting.

The findings of the paper indicate: that humor has played a significant part in Western painting since the sixteenth century; and that Pop Humor is different from past uses of humor in painting because Pop Art is the first movement to use humor as a primary basis for the painting.

In the final section of the paper, an effort is made to analyze the critics' reasons for negating the validity

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of humor in American painting today.

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every aspect of his daily life, has relevance for his art".<sup>2</sup>

This critic goes on to say that the humor of Pop is only a use of:

"...the endless of banal everyday realities to shock, or to display a witty contemporaneity."

A second critic agrees with the association of Pop humor with the abstract expressionists, but relates it to a rebellion against the intensely serious nature of abstraction. This would equate Pop humor with the nonsense humor described by signed Freud as a rebellion against the intellectual re-

1. Steve Gray, "Bamburgers and Bamburgits", *ART IN AMERICA*, December 1963, p. 127.

2. Dorothy G. Seckler, "Artist in America: Victim of the Culture Boom?", *ART IN AMERICA*, Number 6 1963, p. 30.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

## INTRODUCTION

A third critic proposes that the humor in Pop is one:

In a recent article criticizing Pop art, Clive Gray asks that his imagination for the moment is capable of no questions: a 'momentary' or 'sensational' substitute, and adds: "Is Hals' Laughing Cavalier funny, is it good because of or in spite of the smile, are Hogarth's series important because of or in spite of the slapstick action?"<sup>1</sup>

In his article Mr. Gray admits the integral part humor plays in Pop Art, but assumes a position common to many critics who contend that the entire Pop movement is of little consequence because of its humor.

One critic feels that the Pop artists have borrowed Jackson Pollock's "absolute identification of the work and the man", inferring that "whatever the artist does, that every moment of his daily life, has relevance for his art".<sup>2</sup> This critic goes on to say that the humor of Pop is only a use of:

"...the emblems of banal everyday realities to shock, or to display a witty contemporaneity."<sup>3</sup>

A second critic agrees with the association of Pop humor with the abstract expressionists, but relates it to a rebellion against the intensely serious nature of abstraction.

This would equate Pop humor with the nonsense humor described by Sigmund Freud as a rebellion against the intellectual re-

1. Clive Gray, "Rembrandts and Hambrandts", Art in America, December 1963, p. 127.

2. Dorothy G. Seckler, "Artist in America: Victim of the Culture Boom?", Art in America, Number 6 1963, p. 30.

3. Ibid., p. 31.

restrictions of the adult society.<sup>4</sup>

A third critic proposes that the humor in Pop is one:

"...that saves the artist the embarrassment of admitting that his imagination for the moment is capable of no more than a 'momentary' or 'sensational' substitute", and adds: "...Neo-Dadaism's humor is necessary rationalization of a refusal or inability to face one's personal dilemma directly."<sup>5</sup>

was significant, but because it is different, Pop humor is not significant; the critics have no legitimate basis for their evaluation of humor in art.

What is humor and how has it been used in past art?

"Humor: The quality of being funny; the faculty of expressing the amusing or comical.

3. Humor, wit, are contrasting terms which agree in referring to an ability to express a sense of the clever or amusing. Humor consists in the bringing together of certain incongruities which arise naturally from situation of character, frequently so as to illustrate some fundamental absurdity in human nature or conduct; it is a more kindly trait than wit; a genial and mellow type of humor. Wit is a purely intellectual, often spontaneous, manifestation of cleverness and quickness of apprehension in discovering analogies between things really unlike, and expressing them in brief, diverting and sometimes sharp observations or remarks; humor produces a smile, but wit produces sudden laughter."<sup>6</sup>

One need look only to the eighteenth century to realize the varied uses of humor in painting. To separate humor into the established categories such as Satire, Distortion, Incongruity, Slapstick, etc., allows many overlaps and much confusion. The matter may be simplified by dividing humorous art into three kinds, according to intent: (1) those works

4. Cleve Gray, *op. cit.*

5. Sidney Tillim, "Month in Review", Arts Magazine, November 1962, p. 37.

6. The American College Dictionary, Edited by Clarence L. Barnhart, p. 589.

## PART I

secondary element to complement the primary intent of the work; (3) those works which have an element of humor which appears with the intent of the work, but is separate from the main intent. This seeming denial by contemporary critics of humor as a creative statement allows one of three conclusions: all humor in Fine Arts is insignificant; humor in art of the past was significant, but because it is different, Pop humor is not significant; the critics have no legitimate basis for their evaluation of humor in art.

What is humor and how has it been used in past art?

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6. The American College Dictionary, Edited by Clarence L. Barnhart, p. 589.

secondary element to complement the primary intent of the work; (3) those works which have an element of humor which coexists with the intent of the work, but is separate from the main intent. This third category likens humor to the use of a certain color. While the color may have a tremendous backlog of symbolic and referential meanings, one may not assume that the use of that color has more than a coexistence of meaning with the intent of the work.

Using these three categories, perhaps some conclusions may be drawn concerning the relationship of Pop humor to historical uses of humor in painting. No attempt will be made to present a complete list of artists, but rather to mention those artists generally accepted as important to their age. Bosch, Jan Steen, and Frans Hals are representa-

Beginning in the sixteenth century, humor may be found in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, who depicted human infirmities in satirical, yet frightening form. In the triptyches Garden of Delights, many of the small events occurring have a humorous content. (One obvious example is the smiling figure whose rectum is being filled with flowers). Ultimately, however, the work has little to do with humor, being instead a work in which:

"Neither joy nor torment have an end in such a scene of anguish."<sup>7</sup>

Bosch's work seems to be well in keeping with the cri-

7. Carl Linfert, The Paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, p. 22.

son, Giovanni Domenico, and Pieter Bruegel also fit best in

terion of the third category above. England, William Hogarth is "In the same century, Pieter Brueghel the Elder presented numerous vignettes in his paintings of peasants at work and play. There are elements of caricature and social commentary in Peasant Wedding, but the total impression derived from the work is a comment on human dignity.

"Was it because he saw in the life of the peasant, free from the ambitions and vanities of city dwellers, the natural, hence the ideal, condition of man?"

At any rate, the humor in this work coexists with the primary statement of the work, as though Brueghel wanted to portray life, and so included all of life's aspects. In many cases in the seventeenth century there is evidence of humor in the gentle satire of the genre artists. Adriaen Brouwer, Pieter de Hooch, Jan Steen, and Frans Hals are representative of the humor of the century, but even Rembrandt and Rubens painted some humorous genre scenes. The genre paintings must fit best into the category in which humor reinforces the primary intent of the work.

The vast class of pictures termed genre is as varied as that of landscapes and still lifes; it ranges from tavern brawls to refined domestic interiors.

The existence of such a range, even within the individual artists, indicates that the portrayal of man in his environment was the major concern of the genre artist.

8. H. W. Janson, History of Art, p. 400.

9. Ibid., p. 431. Masters and scenes of the Commedia dell Arte use humor in the same way as his French counterparts. Tiepolo's son, Giovanni Domenico, and Pietro Longhi also fit best in

In the eighteenth century in England, William Hogarth is most notable for his social satire as revealed in A Harlot's Progress, A Rake's Progress, Marriage a'la Mode, and the Election series. Hogarth is first a social commentator. His humor is a tool, and thus his works must be placed in the second category where humor is a supplementary attitude.

In France, Antoine Watteau, Claude Gillot, and Nicolas Lancret typify a school of eighteenth century painting that used the Italian Comic Theater as subject matter. Gillot's Scene from the Two Coaches is representative of this type. The humor is dependent upon theatrical gestures and, in many cases, a knowledge of the play portrayed. The basis for the work is the popularity of the Italian Theater; the humor is present because of its existence in the play, rather than the play being used as a vehicle for portrayal of humor. Here again, the second category seems appropriate. Honore Fragonard must also be mentioned. While some of his works like The Reconciliation contain a degree of social comment and satire, Fragonard most generally presents genre scenes of the French aristocracy at play. There is humor present in Storming the Citadel, but the humor is secondary to the romantically sensual basis for the work.

Giambattista Tiepolo worked from the theater in Venice in the same way that Lancret did in France. Tiepolo's paintings of the characters and scenes of the Commedia dell Arte use humor in the same way as his French counterparts. Tiepolo's son, Giovanni Domenico, and Pietro Longhi also fit best in

the second category in their works depicting Venice at Carnival Time. The humor is a part of the Carnival scene, but the scene is the major statement, political evils of his day while Francisco Goya belongs chronologically to both the 18th and 19th centuries. Some humor is evident in The Family of Charles IV, but Goya's most important contribution to humorous art is the series of etchings, the Caprichos. Though the Caprichos first appeared in the period 1793-1798, they relate most closely to the 19th century and Daumier. The humor is rich and varied but the wish to reform by ridicule places these etchings in the second category. In his series of paintings The nineteenth century Neoclassicism and Romanticism were obviously at odds with humor. Jean-Baptiste Greuze's transformation of genre type into "pictorial sermons"<sup>10</sup> typifies the reaction against the frivolity of Rococo. Honore Daumier also worked during this period. In the early twenties humorous art is strongly allied with the artists' reaction to the First World War. George Grosz typifies the disillusionment of the artist faced with the horror of war. His satire is even more bitter than Daumier's and his works are less related to humor than to Pablo Picasso's Guernica, or Francisco de Goya's The Disasters of War. In those instances where laughter shows through Grosz' bitterness, it is in the form of wit,

10. Ibid., p. 471.  
and is always subordinate as an element.

11. Maurice Raynal, The Great Centuries of Painting - The 19th Century, p. 60.

Daumier is best known as a satirist, but his satire is different from Hogarth's in type and intensity. Daumier's lithographs attacked specific political evils of his day while Hogarth crusaded against contemporary breaches of morality. Daumier uses wit, rather than humor, to satirize, for his lithographs are seldom a kindly form of abuse. The work he produced while on the staff of the political paper "Charivari" won him a prison sentence because of its denunciation of the king.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to imagine Hogarth placing himself in the same position. It is Daumier's paintings which employ humor rather than wit. In his series of paintings based on "Don Quixote", Daumier reveals an affection for mankind which softens his wit into humor. When humor is evident in Daumier's works, it is used as a supporting element to strengthen the philosophical content.

In the period from 1914 through the early twenties humorous art is strongly allied with the artists' reaction to the First World War. George Grosz typifies the disillusionment of the artist faced with the horror of war. His satire is even more bitter than Daumier's and his works are less related to humor than to Pablo Picasso's Guernica, or Francisco de Goya's The Disasters of War. In those instances where laughter shows through Grosz' bitterness, it is in the form of wit, and is always subordinate as an element.

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Dada humor is related to the war in that its declared purpose was indeed to make clear to the public at large that all established values, moral or aesthetic, had been rendered meaningless by the catastrophe of the great war.<sup>12</sup>

Dadaist humor is nonsense humor, verbal and visual puns; a general rejection of accepted standards, and thus holds a position of being secondary to the philosophical ideas of the artists. Picasso has done many variations on master-works. Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Poussin's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and Velazquez's *The Maids of Honor* among others, have provided stimulus for works by Picasso.

Paul Klee also uses humor as an element to strengthen the philosophical message of his paintings. In the Twittering Machine, Klee uses humor to mock:

"...our faith in the miracles of the machine age and our sentimental appreciation of bird song."<sup>13</sup>

Klee's humor, while it is very rich, must be thought of as subordinate to his philosophy.

Joan Miro will be discussed later in depth. It should be mentioned in passing that his humor places him with Klee, in the second category.

Pablo Picasso's uses of humor seem as varied as his styles. He uses satire in The Lies of General Franco, but it is based on wit rather than humor. In his bronze Gorilla (cast with a toy car as part of the head), and Bull's Head (an assemblage of bicycle seat and handlebars), the humor springs from the elevation of the found object to an aesthetic level. The important difference between Picasso's found

12. Janson, op. cit., p. 529. - Les Femmes d'Alger.

13. Ibid., p. 527.

objects and those of the Dadaists is that Picasso used objects which had playful connotations. These casts by Picasso do seem to be the first works of art, though not paintings, which fit the category of art based on humor.

One other group of Picasso's works has importance in this discussion. This group consists of Picasso's variations on master works. Picasso has done many variations on master-works. Manet's Dejeuner sur l'Herbe, Poussin's Bacchanal, Delacroix' Femmes d'Alger, and Velazques' The Maids of Honor among others, have provided stimulus for works by Picasso. The question arises as to whether or not these variations are satirical in nature. In separate analyses by Jaime Sabartes, a personal friend of Picasso,<sup>14</sup> and Douglas Cooper<sup>15</sup> the works are described as visual springboards from which Picasso practices his personal form of abstraction. There is never a mention of satire, and indeed, upon reviewing Picasso's variations in relation to his original work of the same period, it is difficult to ascribe satirical content to these works.

The last artist who should be mentioned because of the humor inherent in his work is Jean Dubuffet. Dubuffet's paintings reflect an interest in children's art and art of the insane. His Beard Series or Cow paintings reflect Dubuffet's

14. Jaime Sabartes, Picasso, Variations on Velazquez' Painting "The Maids of Honor".

15. Douglas Cooper, Pablo Picasso - Les Dejeuners.

humor at its best. It is when Dubuffet's art presents images of people or animals that the humor exists, and it is dependent upon the discrepancy between the visual appearance of these images and the spectator's knowledge of these images in reality. All of Dubuffet's works contain a common theme: the love of materials and texture; but since humor is not present in all of his works, he would seem to be using humor as a secondary element of this development to the current popularity of abstract painting, and particularly abstract painting. In reviewing this brief list, most of the artists fit (elements may be) in demanding art of complex visual incident, into the second category. Brueghel and Bosch exist almost given rise to practically every new development of the last as transitional figures characterizing the shift from the master making, kinetic art--all have in common, whatever their differences, concerns of religious painting to the genre scenes and satire experience its former hegemony over pure aestheticism, that follow in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And humor is a complex and recognizable experience. Only Picasso in the two sculptures mentioned, begins to admit of the many artists rightly or wrongly labeled "Pop", an art based on humor.

only a few exhibit humor which transcends the momentary laugh evoked at encountering the unexpected in a work of art. As aspects of past art: humor does exist as a legitimate part representative of a more than momentary wit, three artists of the works mentioned. Two conclusions are left open to generally delineate the types of humor possible in the popular investigation: either Pop humor is completely different from past uses of artistic humor, or the critics would seem all work with a popular contemporary view of the visual world to have no basis for their denial of it. and yet their work remains quite individual both in appearance and attitude.

There are none of the stylistic similarities among the Pop artists that we find in the Cubist School, for example,

15. Milton Kramer, "Symposium of Pop Art", Arts Magazine, April 1963, p. 38.

PART II

or even among the abstract expressionists. The binding element in the pop movement is thematic.<sup>17</sup>

Humor in art, then, exists as an important element in a variety of art of the past. What are the reasons for Pop art's receptivity to humor, and what kind of humor is Pop humor?

In answering the first question it is important to grasp:

"...the relation of this development to the current popularity of abstract painting, and particularly abstract painting which has been so extreme (whatever its other achievements may be) in denuding art of complex visual incident. This poverty of visual incident in abstract painting has given rise to practically every new development of the last couple of years; happenings, pop art, figure painting, monster making, kinetic art--all have in common, whatever their differences, the desire to restore to complex and recognizable experience its former hegemony over pure aestheticism."<sup>16</sup>

And humor is a complex and recognizable experience.

Of the many artists rightly or wrongly labeled "Pop", only a few exhibit humor which transcends the momentary laugh evoked at encountering the unexpected in a work of art. As representative of a more than momentary wit, three artists generally delineate the types of humor possible in the popular image. Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, and Andy Warhol all work with a popular contemporary view of the visual world and yet their work remains quite individual both in appearance and attitude.

"There are none of the stylistic similarities among the Pop artists that we find in the Cubist School, for example,

16. Hilton Kramer, "Symposium of Pop Art", Arts Magazine, April 1963, p. 38.

or even among the abstract expressionists. The binding element in the pop movement is thematic.<sup>17</sup> It has grown and changed through the successive shifts in emphasis that his painting has taken.

Lichtenstein's interest in comic strip images began when his children asked him to paint Donald Duck. The painting that evolved caused Lichtenstein to abandon his abstract expressionist style and begin a series of paintings using Donald Duck and Krazy Kat.<sup>18</sup> This series borrowed the image directly from the comic books. The humor in these works is concerned with the elevation of a non-aesthetic image to the position of art. This aspect of Lichtenstein's work, which has parallels in most Pop painting, has often been compared with the found objects of the Dadaist movement. The relationship which exists has been amplified by the critics of Pop to prove that it is an anti-art movement.

"Dadaism was antiart in that it deliberately sought out images for their shock value and for their antithetical qualities in regard to accepted standards. In the Dada experience, the imagery of the art was arbitrarily arrived at in response to a philosophic outlook. Dada art was a direct result of the application of a nihilistic ethos to the creative functions of art. The Pop movement, on the other hand, developed in response to a profound shift in esthetic atmosphere by a new social and economic era. The imagery is neither meant to shock nor is it in any way antiart."<sup>19</sup>

Lichtenstein's work combines the elevation of a common object, with a slick, machine-produced finish to convey the banal monumentality that exists in a popular image that

17. Ibid., p. 30.

18. Ibid., p. 31.

19. Ibid., p. 32.

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Lichtenstein's work combines the elevation of a common object, with a simulated machine-produced finish to convey the banal monumentality that exists in a popular image that

18. Ibid., p. 30.

19. Ibid., p. 46, 47.

is reproduced in hundreds of copies. But Lichtenstein's humor does not stop with society, for even art becomes an object of humor in his paintings.

In The Image Duplicator, done in 1953, Lichtenstein pokes fun at his own technique of projecting his small drawings on a large canvas by means of a projector. A villainous character questions the spectator: "What? Why did you ask that? What do you know about my Image Duplicator?" The humor present in the image remains the same as other work of this period, but the words in the balloon descend to the level of a joke, dependent upon a knowledge of Lichtenstein's techniques. This painting is a rather isolated case, however, since it is considerably earlier than Lichtenstein's other satirical works based on art.

Lichtenstein's later works which allude to art of the past have a less specific reference and seem more successful where humor is concerned. John Rublowsky comments:

"Lichtenstein's work deliberately relates to that of other artists as well as to various schools and styles. A pure explosion painting rendered in his comic strip technique, for example, is a direct allusion to abstract expressionism. A carefully executed painting of an automobile tire, on the other hand, relates to the geometric abstractions of Vasarely, whereas the waves in such a painting as "Drowning Girl" are a direct reference to Hokusai. The all-over pattern of his "Composition Book" alludes to the all-over paintings of Pollock and Youngerman, and Lichtenstein's cubist paintings in the cartoon manner are directly related to Picasso."<sup>20</sup>

Another aspect of Lichtenstein's use of past art is

20. Ibid., p. 46, 47. 1964. The human figure and word bal-

leons are gone and the image normally consists of a low horizon reflected in his works based on E. Loran's compositional diagrams of Cezanne's paintings. In these diagrams Lichtenstein seems to be commenting more on the critics than the artist.

The twin portraits of Allan Kaprow and Ivan Karp, done in 1962, maintain the same essential concepts of the comic-book hero, but exhibit a more personal idea of subject matter.

In Lichtenstein's paintings from 1963 such as Eddie and Two Swimmers, the emphasis has changed slightly. The use of word balloons had appeared in earlier paintings but in these works the presentation of emotion plays a larger part. Where the earlier works concentrated on developing the theme of techniques of mass printings and the visual image that occurred in these processes, Lichtenstein now began to range further into the field of satirizing the emotional content of comic strips. The works explore significant human responses to war and love, but do so in terms of comic book language. The phrases and allusions of the language are lifted directly from the comic book and comment on human experience that has been made maudlin by repetition. Lichtenstein's use of this aspect of human emotion heightens the effect of social comment present in these works.

Some of the latest paintings by Lichtenstein reveal a new attitude. They can be represented by the painting titled Landscape, painted in 1964. The human figure and word bal-

leons are gone and the image normally consists of a low horizon line, clouds and sky. The technique of primary colors and Ben Day dots combined with the hard-edged forms remains, but the concept is different. Lichtenstein seems to be presenting studies in classicism done with the techniques learned from the comic book.

In this manner Lichtenstein's work has evolved through an entire cycle from the early portraits presented as they would appear in a comic book, to finally presenting a landscape as a comic book would.

Lichtenstein's humor began with a popular, widely reproduced image. The spectator laughed because Lichtenstein seemed to be saying, "This is a painting done by an artist and yet it looks like a comic book. It has power because of its mass acceptance and its involvement with the values of our culture, but you and I know that it would never have had to be painted if our society wasn't partially lacking in values." The humor was audience directed and held a legitimate question about both society and art. Later work delved further into the emotions as reflected in our society's mass media and, clearly, the humor arose from a rejection of this mass portrayal of emotion. Lichtenstein's most recent paintings tend to negate humor to explore the aesthetic possibilities of applying mass media techniques to classical form and space.

19. ... P. 70

20. ... P. 64.

21. ... P. 67.

Claes Oldenburg has said that he is searching for an art "as sweet and stupid as life itself",<sup>21</sup> and toward this end he has embraced the objects and visions of contemporary society. He has investigated three major symbols of contemporary culture: "street", "store", and "home".

Oldenburg's first New York show was composed of objects, found or constructed, which were wrapped in paper and string. He has described their significance as images of the street, which were inspired by packages he had seen transients carrying in New York. These "White Objects", as they are called, gave way to the "Ray Gun" series which John Rublowsky calls phallic symbols and which have "appeared in all of Oldenburg's subsequent periods".<sup>22</sup>

After the "Ray Gun" series Oldenburg began to find his imagery in stores. Hamburgers, pies, clothing, make up the environment of the store.

"Individually they are delightful works, full of humor and fantasy, and appear to be the spontaneous creations of an uninhibited child."<sup>23</sup>

The initial food objects were made of plaster, and painted. Their scale remained within the limits of the scale of the actual object portrayed. Later, Oldenburg began to enlarge the objects using canvas over frames, stuffing and sewing the canvas as an upholsterer might. From the method of dis-

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21. Ibid., p. 70

22. Ibid., p. 64.

23. Ibid., p. 67.

play of the early objects grew the environments of the large works. When Oldenburg moved from New York to Venice, California, the latest series of environments concerning the home began to develop. These rooms with furnishings may signal the end of humor in Oldenburg's work. The humor in Oldenburg's work is necessarily tied to his use of recognizable objects. The White Objects or the Ray Gun works are not humorous, and neither are the final environments of the home. Another significant point is that the humor of the small objects is quite different from the humor of the large objects. Mr. Tillim feels that the humor is gone from the large objects.

"...he has exchanged the crumbly plaster for sailcloth, which if nothing else has tempted him to large sizes that complete the destruction of his original sense of humor."<sup>24</sup>

There is a degree of humor in the large objects, contrary to Mr. Tillim, but the humor is different in character. If there is no humor in a bed-sized hamburger, why should a life size hamburger be funny? The humor in the large objects has become an uneasy humor and the store environments containing these objects are permeated with an atmosphere that tends to negate the humor in the solitary object.

There is another aspect, in addition to size, which may contribute to the change of emphasis of the humor. This

<sup>24</sup>. Tillim, op. cit., p. 38.

aspect is the softness, the overstuffed feeling, that the works impart. The sexual connotations of the softly rounded hamburger and ice cream cone, become more prominent as the construction material becomes soft and flesh-like.

Greek Comedy is said to have been born of a Dionysiac fertility ritual, and a portion of Western humor has been based on sexuality or simple pornography ever since. It seems that Oldenburg's shift in scale and material has removed the large food objects from the realm of satirical humor and placed them within the bounds of sexual humor. Many art critics have commented on the sexual aspects of the large soft objects, but the small plaster works do not seem to evoke this imagery.

In Oldenburg's latest "home" environments, humor has almost completely disappeared except in whatever humor exists in the revelation of the banal. The pattern has moved from the initial humor of "...caricature, directed partly toward self, partly toward society,"<sup>25</sup> through the sexual humor of the oversize store objects in environments; to the final home series.

25. Ibid., "Dada: A Critique of Pop Art", Art Journal, Spring 1964, p. 195.

27. Walter Dill Scott, "Pop Art", Artforum Magazine of the Year - 1964, p. 152.

Andy Warhol's work can be divided into two major categories. First, and probably best known, are his works concerned with the everyday commercial items found in an American supermarket: the paintings and labels which use the commercial art of the Campbell's Soup Company; labels and cartons of household products. While many of the work are based on the commercial art of foodstuffs, they bear little resemblance to Oldenburg's food; for Warhol's food is always neatly packaged, sterilized, and remains precisely faithful to the model.

"The striking abundance of food offered us by this art is suggestive. Pies, ice cream sodas, coke, hamburgers, roast beef, canned soups--often triple size--would seem to cater to infantile personalities capable only of ingesting, not of digesting nor of interpreting."<sup>26</sup>

Warhol's work hardly fits into this type of criticism, however, for many other of his objects from this same period are non-edibles such as "Brillo" cartons, or cigarette packages. It is not in the specific area of food that Warhol's statement lies. Where food enters Warhol's subject matter, it seems to do so because of the relationship which the food's mechanized sterilization bears to the printed image of the package. Both have the common aspect of being machine produced in their perfection. In this mechanization, Warhol relates to a general definition of Pop Art as defined by the public eye, immediately recognizable, and yet somehow

26. Edward T. Kelly, "Neo-Dada? A Critique of Pop Art", The Art Journal, Spring 1964, p. 195.

27. Jasja Reichardt, "Pop Art", Britannica Book of the Year - 1965, p. 152.

Richard Hamilton.

"It is' he wrote, '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.'"<sup>27</sup>

Warhol fits more of Hamilton's specifications for Pop than perhaps any other artist, but the categories begin to indicate the reason for grouping together so many seemingly different artists. The humorous attitude of raising the common object to the level of art object is at work in Warhol's work as it was in Lichtenstein, and Oldenburg.

Two of Warhol's works stand apart from those concerned with household objects, and yet fit into the same area of interest. These works are the portraits of Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe. When compared with Warhol's painting of a Campbell's Soup can, these portraits seem at first to be very different; aesthetically speaking, they are the same. The paintings have been done by silk screen process over a photographically produced image. The separate colors were then silk screened over the top of the image. There is no sign of the artist's hand in these works. The choice of popular personalities for these portraits parallels the choice of a Campbell's Soup can; both are constantly in the public eye, immediately recognizable, and yet somehow surprising when viewed as art. The star, like the soup,

27. Jasia Reichardt, "Pop Art", Britannica Book of the Year - 1965, p. 152.

has lost personality by mass production.

The second major category of Warhol's work is concerned with the "Death Image". These works satirize by incongruity but the satire is not humorous. One painting consists of a repeated image of a silk-screened photograph of the electric chair at Sing Sing Prison, with a sign behind the chair which says "Silence". Another work is a large photographic image of a wrecked ambulance with the body of the passenger of the ambulance protruding through the broken glass of the window. These works present satire but the existence of humor is doubtful.

The humor in Warhol's work must be restricted to his household objects. In these works the humor arises both from the elevation of a common object and also from the satirical implications of the artist as a machine.

The second area of Pop humor is social satire. Warhol and Lichtenstein share the common interest in mechanically reproduced popular art. Almost every artist who is classified as belonging to the Pop movement shares this involvement. Oldenburg has used this popular image in such works as the painted papier mache Z-up, but his concerns are more strongly allied with the first area above. Neither of these two areas of humor is completely new. The concept of elevating a common object to an aesthetic art is rich and varied but can be traced to two very basic forms:

## PART III

level was present in the work of the cubists, the dadaists' found objects, and Picasso's casts. Nor is social satire. Similar humorous aspects exist in the work of these three Pop artists. Two general areas of humor occur which are common to the artists discussed.

The first area of Pop humor is that which is concerned with raising a common object to an artistic level. The humor in this act is two-fold. Initially, a humorous response is evoked by the incongruity of the situation and the surprise at seeing such a work. Beyond this momentary response, humor arises from a rejection of past art forms, and thus, from a type of satire on art itself. Oldenburg's food, Warhol's labels and boxes, and Lichtenstein's comic book images all contain this type of humor. Directly related to this aspect of Pop humor are Lichtenstein's parodies of art.

The second area of Pop humor is social satire. Warhol and Lichtenstein share the common interest in mechanically reproduced popular art. Almost every artist who is classified as belonging to the Pop movement shares this involvement. Oldenburg has used this popular image in such works as the painted papier mache 7-up, but his concerns are more strongly allied with the first area above.

Neither of these two areas of humor is completely new. The concept of elevating a common object to an aesthetic art is rich and varied but can be traced to two very basic forms:

level was present in the collages of the cubists, the dada-ists' found objects, and Picasso's casts. Nor is social satire a new concept. What is different about Pop humor is the satire of machine made objects and images, but if satire attempts to reform, perhaps the present technological society is the first with a reason for protesting machine made materialism. The most significant difference between Pop humor and humor of the past in art seems to be that the humor of Pop art is often the primary basis for the work. The object of satire in Pop art is quite general in nature, being aimed at the total society rather than a class or individual. It is as though the Pop artists have learned from past art that a painting will never cure the ills of society or prevent a war. Perhaps it is the use of un-artistic images to satirize which contributes most to this quality of Pop humor. The use of a comic-book or a soup can to comment on American society tends to place the humor before the satire in importance. This, it may be said that Pop art is the first movement in the history of art which is based on humor.

While Pop humor is different from historical uses of humor in painting because of its dominance, there is no reason for declaring Pop humor insignificant. The humor in Pop art is rich and varied but can be traced to two very basic forms:

incongruity and satire, both which were employed by Hieronymus Bosch.

Since Pop humor has definite relationships with humor in art of the past and since past artistic humor has been significant as a creative statement, the critics of Pop humor seem to lack justification for their position. The question remaining to be answered is: Why have the critics lost their sense of humor in recent years?

Freud agrees that the comic is found in things, situations, and so on... first and foremost in people, only by a subsequent transference in things, situations, and so on...<sup>29</sup>

...the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human", and adds: "You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression."<sup>28</sup>

Freud agrees that the comic is found in things, situations, and so on... first and foremost in people, only by a subsequent transference in things, situations, and so on...<sup>29</sup>

If this is so, the possibility of humor in non-representational painting would seem to be precluded.

Hiro certainly has representational elements in his paintings but Cleve Gray feels that his "humor is undefined, unspecified and linked to deeper dimensions of tragedy."<sup>30</sup>

What is humorous in Hiro's Composition of 1953, which is in the Wright Gallery in Paris? The painting is representative of Hiro's style of figures. This concept, however, like the use

28. Henri Bergson, Laughter, p. 4.

29. Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, p. 181.

30. Gray, op. cit.

of Miro's interests in PART IV are ground relationship of the image. Eight separate figures are distributed across the composition. As the United States became a leader in world art, humor disappeared in the painting of the young artists who gained recognition in the early fifties and before Pop. Perhaps a major cause for this disappearance was the decline of the representational image in favor of abstract expressionism. Humor seems to be totally involved with human beings. That is, the things laughed at are people; and while they may represent concepts, the concepts are not funny unless they refer directly to human beings. Henri Bergson feels:

"...the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human", and adds: "You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression."<sup>28</sup>

Freud agrees that the comic is found: "...first and foremost in people, only by a subsequent transference in things, situations, and so on..."<sup>29</sup>

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Miro certainly has representational elements in his paintings but Cleve Gray feels that his "humor is undefined, unspecific and linked to deeper dimensions of tragedy."<sup>30</sup>

What is humorous in Miro's Composition of 1953, which is in the Maeght Gallery in Paris? The painting is representative with child-like figures. This concept, however, like the use

28. Henri Bergson, Laughter, p. 4.

29. Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, p. 181.

30. Gray, op. cit.

of Miro's interests in the figure ground relationship of the image. Eight separate figures are distributed across the composition, two of which are suggestive of landscape elements. Although the other six figures are abstract forms, human beings are immediately called to mind by the suggestion of a head with eyes, or feet-like appendages on the bodies. The use of circles as eyes, heads, and wheels or balls, provides a compositional repetition; and at the same time introduces a common element which relates the organic to the non-organic. If this attitude provides humor, it does so only after an initial recognition of human characteristics and expressions. In contrast, Leger uses similar non-organic elements in his figures and environments and yet his paintings call forth no humorous response. The humor in Miro's work begins with the recognition of the central figure as a head, with a large surprised eye that seems to question the spectator. Once accepted as a human being, the central figure allows the less human figures to take on the attitudes of human beings. The large object to the left becomes a head and the downward curving line suggests a frown. These human qualities in non-human images provide a major portion of the humor at work here. It may be admitted that there is humor present in the incongruity of a sophisticated talent dealing with child-like figures. This concept, however, like the use of the circle, is not humorous in itself, but only in the of natural sounds is the exception rather than the rule, admits the possibility that humor could be present in non-

respect that it reinforces the humor of the playful figures. The humor in Miro, then, springs from the use of incongruity; the embodiment of human beings in normally non-human forms, and it is this relationship of abnormality with the human situation which evokes a humorous response rather than a humor "linked to the deeper dimensions of human tragedy".<sup>31</sup> The fact that Miro's humor arises from representational images, though abstracted, seems to support the argument that humor is not possible in non-representational painting. But if it is not possible, how can music, which is essentially an abstract art, contain humor?<sup>32</sup>

One may begin with the fact that certain rhythms and note sequences have psychological implications of emotion. These implications of emotion arise mainly from their relationship with the attitudes and movements of human beings experiencing the same emotion. These cues are heightened by repetition and learned through observation. A fast tempo is incongruous in funeral music and even New Orleans Jazz musicians played slow tempo on the way to the grave, using a fast tempo on the return trip to signify the return from mourning. Humor would be associated with music that alludes to situations of gaiety.

So it is that tempo, certain note sequences and rhythm can be human-associated, but the fact that these elements exist by transference in an art medium in which an imitation of natural sounds is the exception rather than the rule, admits the possibility that humor could be present in non-

representational painting in the same way.

C. W. Valentine describes an experiment in which college students were asked to raise their hands upon hearing humor in Richard Strauss' "Till Eulenspiegel" and Jean Philippe Rameau's "La Poule".<sup>31</sup> The results pointed to an agreement by the subjects that humor was present, and existed by virtue of "notes not in proper sequence", "rhythm changing back and forth", "repetition", and "imitation of human, animal and mechanical sounds". Of course, the last reason once again reinforces Bergson's argument of the human in humor, but the first three reasons bear more analysis.

The qualities of improper sequence of notes and multiple rhythms are both directly concerned with incongruity as humor, while repetition stands alone as a separate humorous device. Both incongruity and repetition in music can have their counterparts in non-representational painting in terms of form, movement, or color; and both, according to Freud, have deeply rooted reasons for evoking humor.<sup>32</sup> These two humorous devices seem to admit the possibility of humor in non-representational painting. But, is the response to these abstract elements not, in fact, related to human actions? The Western painting tradition has been tied to the idea of presenting an illusion of the real world or recognizable objects from the time of the Renaissance until the twentieth

31. C. W. Valentine, The Experimental Psychology of Beauty, p. 273 ff.

32. See Freud's discussion of nonsense jokes in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious.

century. With this backlog of tradition, even non-representational paintings bear a relationship to visual stimuli encountered in everyday life. Some critics even try to substantiate the worth of non-representational works by comparing these works to microscopic photographs of matter, or telescopic photographs of solar systems in an effort to relate these works to the real visual world. In terms of Abstract Expressionism this effort is inconsistent with the aims of the movement.

"The abstract expressionist painters created unique worlds within the limits of a canvas plane--worlds complete unto themselves without reference to any external reality. A painting became a painting and nothing more. The contemplation of a painting became a purely sensual experience."<sup>33</sup>

In does remain valid, however, that in the same way that one sees recognizable shapes in clouds, or a flaking wall, one will find references in a non-representational painting which bind the painting to other facets of one's visual experience. In this way an incongruity of completely formal elements can call to mind incongruities of human behavior and thus cause the humor inherent in the incongruity to become humanly oriented. Such an occurrence would seem to be at odds with the concepts behind non-representational art.

"Even though pure art may be impossible there doubtless

34. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art*, p.

33. Rublowsky, op. cit., p. 3.

can prevail a tendency toward a purification of art. Such a tendency would effect a progressive elimination of the human, all too human, elements predominant in romantic and naturalistic production."<sup>34</sup>

The necessary conclusion, then, is that the possibility does exist for humor in non-representational art, but that humor is not compatible with the concepts or purposes which led to the creation of the painting and would actually weaken the desired response. Perhaps in accepting the philosophy toward the serious, T. S. Eliot's observation on contemporary abstract expressionism, the critics have become accustomed to negating the possibilities of complex social responses in art. "...we find serious poets who seem afraid of acquiring wit, lest they lose intensity."<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps another reason for the criticism of Pop humor may be the acceptance of the intensely serious nature of abstract expressionism. The writings of many current critics reveal an eagerness to establish the worth of a work of art which often precludes a consideration of humor as a significant element. An excellent example is the seriousness with which Dada objects are currently regarded. Marcel Duchamp has been elevated to the rank of a god, and gods, since Christianity, are not funny. Under this criterion for validating the worth of a new movement, the serious aspects of it are naturally emphasized since, often as not, the general public and the critics of the new are already laugh-

34. Jose Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art, p.

36. 12. George Williamson, A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot, p. 54.

ing.

So it is that humor in painting seems to be equated with non-involvement or frivolity, and finds difficulty in existing in the revolutionary aspects of the painting "Scene".<sup>35</sup> As each movement follows close on the heels of the established vogue, twentieth century painting seems to have embraced an emotional range that is decidedly inclined toward the serious. T. S. Eliot's observation on contemporary poets has validity for painting.

"...we find serious poets who seem afraid of acquiring wit, lest they lose intensity."<sup>36</sup>

In reply, a paragraph written by Aldous Huxley in 1931 seems pertinent.

"If young artists really desire to offer proof of their courage, they should attack the monster of obviousness and try to conquer it, try to reduce it to a state of artistic domestication, not timorously run away from it. For the great obvious truths are there--facts. Those who deny their existence, those who proclaim that human nature has changed since August 4, 1914, are merely rationalizing their terrors and disgusts. Popular art gives a deplorably beastly expression to the obvious; sensitive men and women hate this beastly expression; therefore, by a natural but highly unscientific process, they affirm that the things so hatefully expressed do not exist. But they do exist, as any dispassionate survey of the facts makes clear. And since they exist, they should be faced, fought with, and reduced to artistic

35. The "scene" is an implied institution of authority which dictates to contemporary taste in art. Basically, the "scene" is composed of four major factions. These factions are the most influential critics, collectors, gallery directors, and art periodicals. Unfortunately today, the "influential" portion of these titles is strongly related to financial success.

36. George Williamson, A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot, p. 54.

order. By pretending that certain things are not there, which in fact are there, much of the most accomplished modern art is condemning itself to incompleteness, to sterility, to premature decrepitude and death."

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree M.F.A. in Creative Arts.

David Alean Prior

NAME

has submitted this written thesis  
as a supplement to the creative thesis

one acrylic, one mixed media, one print, one ink drawing  
No. and Medium

12½" x 12½"  
Size

German Icon  
Title

23½" x 23½"  
Size

Bruckenau  
Title

16" x 19"  
Size

The Trip  
Title

16½ x 19"  
Size

Strasse I  
Title

Which is in the permanent possession of the University of  
Colorado and recorded with the Department of Fine Arts.

Approved by

Luis Eade  
Co-Chairman of Committee

Douglas J. Vogel  
Co-Chairman of Committee

Robert E. Day  
Chairman, Fine Arts Dept.

Date

May 20, 1966













