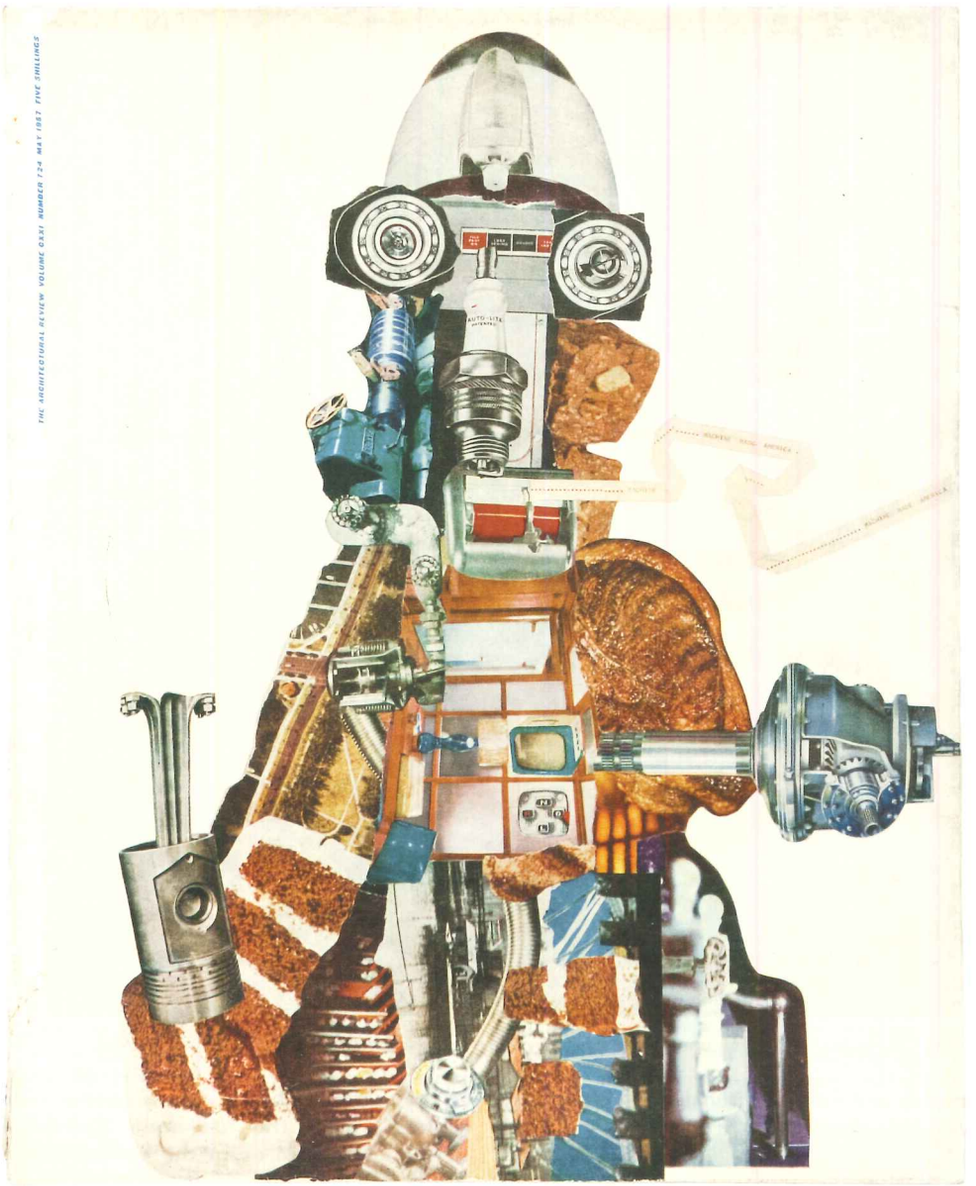
4-2018

[Review of the book *Pollock's modernism*, by M. Schreyach]

Eileen Costello



7. *Machine Made America II*, by John McHale. 1956. Collage reproduced on the cover of *The Architectural Review*, May 1957.

mostly of familiar works of art. Beautifully produced and well designed in a larger than normal format (25.4 by 19 cm.), it is reasonably priced for a volume of such high production standards, especially in comparison with most academic texts. John McHale's collage *Machine Made America II*, which served as the cover for *The Architectural Review* in May 1957 (Fig.7), has been adeptly recycled as the jacket.

Highmore offers little help to the reader seeking to know where the book might be situated in relation to the history of post-war British art: there is scant discussion of historiography or primary sources. Somewhat disappointingly, the archives consulted are not listed; instead, the reader is directed to the footnotes. But then, the publication of empirical research is not the purpose of the book. Highmore explains its heuristic intent: it 'is devoted to exploring the 1950s 'current production of "brutalist" images' and to puzzling out what that term might have meant for a group of artists, architects and critics working in and around London at the time' (p.8). He succeeds in meeting his aim of investigating a key moment in the visual culture of post-war Britain through an alternative account of the Independent Group, a loose and fractious collective of architects, artists, designers and writers who met at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London in the early 1950s.

It has often been argued that there is far more to the Independent Group than the assertion made by its members that it was the first stage of Pop Art.[1] Highmore makes a convincing case for the replacement of the Pop label with that of Brutalism, with quotations from the main critics involved with the group, Reyner Banham and Lawrence Alloway, and an insightful reading of paintings, photographs, collages and architecture. With well-informed detail, his first chapter interrogates the 1953 ICA exhibition *Parallel of Life and Art* in relation to Nigel Henderson's wartime flying experiences, with a brief postscript devoted to William Turnbull. Subsequent chapters take the case study of Alison and Peter Smithson and their 'as found' aesthetic and investigate Hammer Prints Ltd, established by Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi in 1954. The last chapter includes the design by the Smithsons for the 'House of the Future' for the Ideal Home exhibition in 1956. As Brutalism is a messy subject, it is entirely appropriate that the structure of the book has grown organically from various papers and presentations. There are, therefore, some overlaps between chapters – for example, the emergence of the field of cultural studies is referred to more than once.

Has Highmore simply grafted the label of Brutalism onto the activities of the Independent Group, just as that of Pop art has been? There is far more to the group than either label suggests. It engaged with Modernism, jazz, popular music, computers, fashion and journalism. Perhaps there is not one label that fits all this. An approach that takes Brutalism as its main theme is a fascinating take on the history of post-war British art and the Independent Group, as it accounts for the ambiguities of artists and the interconnections between culture and society in a complex age – what Raymond Williams called 'structures of feeling'. But it is not the whole story: there is room for a constellation of readings and rereadings of the Independent Group and its history, from a range of disciplines. This Brutalist exploration of a unique moment in the history of British art and culture is one particularly erudite example.

[1] A. Massey and P. Sparke: 'The myth of the Independent Group', *Block* 10 (1985), pp.48–56.

Pollock's Modernism. By Michael Schreyach. 344 pp. incl. 45 col. ills. (Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2017), $45. ISBN 978–0–30022–326–2.

Reviewed by EILEEN COSTELLO

IN 1950, ON ONE OF the few occasions that Jackson Pollock publicly discussed his approach to painting, he remarked that 'technique is just a means of arriving at a statement'. Given Pollock's revolutionary method and unprecedented formal achievements, this declaration has generated an enormous amount of critical attention over the past sixty-five years. The book under review is the most recent contribution, yet it stands apart from earlier studies. Michael Schreyach scrutinises a select group of Pollock's paintings and drawings, primarily from the late 1940s and early 1950s, to render a fresh interpretation of Pollock's aims, which includes how the artist anticipated the viewer's experience. His analysis takes into account Pollock's historical context, the artist's own words and the canonical writings on Pollock and Abstract Expressionist art in general, which

8. *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender mist)*, by Jackson Pollock. 1950. Oil, enamel and aluminum on canvas, 221 by 299.7 cm. (National Gallery of Art, Washington).

he can both inventively oppose or convincingly reaffirm. Schreyach considers the work of a number of significant critics and art historians – primarily Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, Richard Shiff and T.J. Clark. However, the text is also informed by a number of other scholars who appear less often, if at all, in literature on Pollock, such as the art and music theorist Anton Ehrenzweig, the literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels and the art historian Charles Palermo, whose study on Joan Miró suggests to Schreyach that Pollock learned new modes of handling figural and dimensional planes from the Catalan painter, as well as ways to control the viewer's access into the fictive depths of pictorial space. Schreyach's reading of Pollock is enriched by his consideration of the thesis by the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty concerning the ways in which the body plays an active part in shaping perception. This innovative approach is likely to inspire a new level of scholarly debate.

The book is divided into five sections, each dedicated to a theme identified as key to understanding Pollock's unique practice of Modernism. 'Anamorphosis' particularly stands out; in it Schreyach establishes a connection between David Alfaro Siqueiros's use of anamorphic projection in his public murals and Pollock's *Mural* (1943; University of Iowa Museum of Art), which, as he explains, exhibits the effects of Pollock's experimentation with perspective and point of view, and with the viewer's access to visual resolution. 'Embodiment' focuses on a striking correspondence between Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body's role in the production of perceptual experience and Pollock's representation of embodiment in *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender mist)* (Fig.8); *Number 32, 1950* (Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf); and *One: Number 31, 1950* (Museum of Modern Art, New York). 'Projection' concentrates on the black paintings of 1951–52, which have only recently begun to receive wider critical attention.

Schreyach states in his introduction that Pollock's 'pictures and their effects seem to exceed capacity to talk about them', but 'seem' is the operative word because he writes about the paintings and their visual complexities with exceptional clarity and enthusiasm. He is never boringly descriptive. In cataloguing the surface features of *Number 1A, 1948* (1948; Museum of Modern Art, New York), he notes how 'the Lilliputian topography indexes' Pollock's 'hypothenar eminence' – a reference to the group of muscles that control the little finger. He identifies intention and meaning in typically overlooked details, such as blue selvage threads, tiny nail heads, individual drips and texture or in the optical effects Pollock achieved by using matte and glossy paints. He explains how a painting evidences more deliberation than chance as he examines the order, distribution and method of application of the various layers of paint.

Schreyach carefully considers not only the paintings, but also the words that have been used to describe them. For example, in discussing Pollock's black paintings, Lee Krasner stated that with 'the black-and-whites' Pollock 'chose mostly to expose the imagery'. Considering the figurative nature of these paintings, Krasner's statement might strike most as straightforward, but Schreyach writes that her 'idiosyncratic choice of the word "expose" stimulates reflection'. In fact, he builds upon the meanings of 'expose' in thinking about the black paintings as a whole. Schreyach's observations are layered and nuanced, and his arguments are carefully constructed and crafted. The text may be dense on occasion, but it is never opaque. The reader is aided by the introduction, which clearly articulates the author's aim and outlines his argument. Schreyach brings a new level of imagination, insight and erudition to an understanding of Pollock's work. Patient reading is worth the effort.

THE BVRLINGTON MAGAZINE

'CHARLES I: KING AND COLLECTOR' AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY

Giovanni Bellini in his father's workshop | A Jane Austen family portrait by Reynolds

Degas in Denver | Andreas Gursky at the Hayward Gallery | Marina Vaizey on Kettle's Yard

APRIL 2018