
The Critical I online anthology

Edited by Lucy Scholes

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The Critical I was a five-week course for the public inviting a unique exploration of the art of criticism, offering participants an opportunity to hone their critical eyes and develop their critical faculties. The aim of the course was to encourage critical thinking, introducing participants to different ways and approaches to assess the art works in front of them regardless of the contextual information available.

This online anthology is the creative outcome of *The Critical I* course that ran over five Monday evenings at Tate Modern in February and March 2013. Thirty participants had the opportunity to explore and critically respond to works in Tate's collection as well as the *A Bigger Splash: Painting After Performance* and *Lichtenstein: A Retrospective* exhibitions.

We are delighted to share this selection of written pieces with you.

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Response to *Lichtenstein: A Retrospective*

Room Four: War and Romance

Paul Meakins

The works in this room critique the notion of clichéd gender roles as Lichtenstein concentrates on reproducing early American comic strip motifs from publications such as *All-American Men Of War* and *Girls' Romances* that promote gender stereotypes in American society during the late 50s and early 60s.

Lichtenstein argued that throughout the history of art, artists had relied upon the use of intentional clichés to create the ideal image of what it means to be male or female in the world. His work, by contrast, challenged the link between High or Classical art and these clichés by showing that the ideal image of male and female inhabits not only all forms of art, whether high or low, but also everyday forms of media such as TV, magazines and comics.

Within the context of the works within this room, *Whaam!* (1963) reinforces the idea that the war comics of the period constructed and promoted a specific form of masculinity. One in which values of sacrifice, duty and devotion meant that the American comic book hero acted rather than thought, and was willing to sacrifice himself for his country. *Whaam!* holds a distorted mirror up to 60s American society so that the viewer can understand the political or social commentary of the period as reflected in the pages of the comic.

Comics would have been produced using printing machines, a process Lichtenstein wants to make the viewer aware of with his large-scale paintings that show in detail the mechanical process of their production. Lichtenstein's mass produced dots reflect American society becoming more mechanical and computerized; not only are comics mass produced at the push of a button, but death is also mass produced in war, as can be seen in *Whaam!*. There is also a sense of detachment in the scene depicted: when the pilot presses the button to fire the rockets, he is removed from the reality of the deaths he is responsible for as there is no physical contact between him and his enemy.

Furthermore, the use of an exclamation mark after the word *Whaam!* denotes the importance of the word to the work, as it also heightens the effect created by the painting and its subject matter. Its onomatopoeic qualities give both the painting and the original comic strip an appropriate sound effect to go with the visual image. As the rockets destroy the enemy plane, death is reduced to a single clinical act and word.

Although Lichtenstein made the intentions of these images clear when he said 'a minor purpose of my war paintings is to put military aggressiveness in an absurd light. My personal opinion is that much

of our foreign policy has been unbelievably terrifying,' he also stated in the same article that he '[didn't] want to capitalise on this popular position. My work is more about our American definition of images and visual communication.' Lichtenstein's enlargement of the comic strip image in *Whaam!* suggests that heroism in war is larger than life, parodying the notion of the American hero who exists in the pages of the comic book. Therefore, although Lichtenstein himself is slightly vague about his true intentions, I would argue that he has created a work in which the absurdity of death, war, and the role of aggression as summed up in the 'All-American Man', is reduced to a single word that itself is meaningless outside of the comic strip: Whaam!.

Oh, Roy... I love you, too...

Navann Ty

I could probably stand out by saying I didn't like the Roy Lichtenstein Retrospective at Tate Modern, which shows Lichtenstein's lasting legacy in 125 paintings and sculptures; but I did. The retrospective is a complete survey of Lichtenstein's transformation of popular culture into fine art. It also allows the viewer to see the playful side of the artist.

Lichtenstein is a key figure in Pop Art, an art movement that developed in the late 50s in the US, which drew on popular culture. Pop Art is often viewed as a response to abstract expressionism, such as Jackson Pollock's paint dripping. Lichtenstein's brushstrokes series, particularly *Brushstroke with Spatter* (1966), could be interpreted as a parody of Pollock's method of pouring paint onto the canvas. Lichtenstein's influences were diverse; comprising advertising, comic books and modern artists he admired. What I was most struck by in the exhibition was Lichtenstein's ability to turn popular culture into fine art and this diverse range of influences, both of which point to the concept of appropriation. He appropriates comic books as easily as he does the work of artists who preceded him.

I believe the piece that best illustrates Lichtenstein's appropriation is *Portrait Triptych (Study)* (1974) in Room 7, 'Art about Art', a room which shows his reinterpretation of artworks made by artists including Picasso, Monet and Mondrian. On the left portrait of the triptych, we see a woman depicted as per Lichtenstein's own style: pretty, blond, red lips, extremely similar to the women in his romance paintings. In the middle portrait, he draws the same woman using Picasso's codes, borrowing from cubism, as we see the female character from different angles and simplifying the woman's features as Picasso would have done, so she looks like an African mask. The third portrait on the right reduces the sitter to strict lines, using Mondrian's abstraction to make a parallel with what was initially a figurative portrait. I felt the triptych was Lichtenstein's playful demonstration to the viewer of his ability to appropriate and reinterpret other artists' styles. He uses the same method in *Bull Head I, II and III*, which I saw in a private collection, showing a bull head Lichtenstein-style, à la Picasso in the middle artwork, and a Mondrian-abstract in the last painting.

Of course we can't discuss Pop Art without evoking Andy Warhol, the other leading figure of the movement. Like Lichtenstein, Warhol began his work against a backdrop of abstract art dominated by Rothko and the like. Warhol said he hated abstract expressionism and his art was certainly a reaction to it. Like Lichtenstein, Warhol celebrated popular imagery and his subject matter was often really quite banal. Warhol paints a soup can; Lichtenstein paints

a garbage can. But unlike Warhol, Lichtenstein was also a painter and a craftsman, while Warhol was attracted by larger themes, including death and celebrity. As a matter of fact, the 'Regarding Warhol: Sixty Artists, Fifty Years' exhibition at the Met in 2012, did not include Roy Lichtenstein.

Most well known for appropriating from comic books and other sources – he takes a small frame, isolates it and put it on large format, transforming it into fine art – Lichtenstein also achieved much more. He analysed the impact of colours on the psyche in his early paintings; played with optical effects in his seascapes and in the juxtaposition of dots in his Ben-Day paintings; explored light reflections in his mirrors; and perspective in his Chinese landscapes. The Tate Modern show is a remarkable retrospective. Lichtenstein painted in series so the exhibition has a more or less chronological hang, but it also shows his playful side, most notably in his reinterpretation of other artists' styles. His facetious side is also present in his perfect/imperfect series, which you need to see to grasp.

Author! Author! Where the Hell is the Author?

Gary Burns

This could be a speech bubble in a Roy Lichtenstein triptych. The words of a forlorn teary eyed comic-born blonde heroine searching for an Alpha male to liberate her from the tedium of her life imprisoned within the frame of a painting where she is destined to spend eternity – locked in by the whim of the author.

But who *is* the author of her destiny? Where is the REAL author of these works that surround us? Their largeness gives us a sense that we are but another insignificant transient character in this, his comic strip of life.

Lifted from established 1960s comic books of war stories and romances, standing in the 'War and Romance' Room of the Lichtenstein Retrospective we are dwarfed by the over-sized paintings ('re-composed, not re-produced', as Lichtenstein claimed).

We stand here offering critiques of the artist's works, but are we actually offering critiques of critiques? Lichtenstein has presented us with his own take on another's work. How are we to judge his unoriginal, over-sized, (albeit commercially astute) plagiarized paintings?

Thousands of words have been written about these paintings offering insight into the artist's mind, his motivations, his *raison d'être*, and his context. But beware, dear reader. Once in a while an artist comes along who should only be judged on painterly skill and aesthetic, not the subject matter or any third hand philosophical meaning. These are grand, pleasing to the eye works of art – but sadly not challenging; not difficult; not even original.

The only originality these works produce is the endless myriad of nonsense generated by self-aggrandizing critics. This piece included.

Layers of Lichtenstein: Lichtenstein and Female Portrayal

Tal-Anna Szlenski

The 'War and Romance' room in the Roy Lichtenstein Retrospective at Tate Modern presents paintings in a playful, colourful and frivolous comic book style. All very lighthearted, one could easily think.

The men on the wall are in war style 'action', while the women on the canvases are hopelessly in love. This room is where a man is portrayed as a man – in action, brave, commanding, steering, doing – and a woman as a woman – insofar as having a man is what defines a woman.

In this display the women shown are in the midst of describing their relationship as a fairy tale, professing their love, making up excuses, waiting by the phone, providing reassurance and refusing to ask for help. In all of the scenarios depicted, the man, although absent, defines the scene.

Put all these images in a room together, like in this exhibition, and the juxtaposition of the overly brave male against the feeble female quickly introduces a different tone and perspective to Lichtenstein's work. Beyond the vibrant visuals, one discovers a sense of social commentary and critique through humorous caricature and irony.

Cartoon strips traditionally thought of as 'light' entertainment, have, in Lichtenstein's work, been used as a basis to launch serious criticism. Through his mimicking of the cartoon style he holds a mirror up to the art form in order to expose its flaws, as well as society's.

Does this style also lure the viewer into a flawed sense of understanding? The images on display depict single cartoon frames from which the viewer assumes he or she knows the full story. It is easy to make the same mistake when trying to find a meaning in Lichtenstein's work, framing it as social commentary in pursuit of social justice and equality.

Yet Lichtenstein is never forthright. He pokes fun, leads the viewer in a certain direction, but never introduces an actual proposition. In the context of the 'War and Romance' room this striking ambiguity is perhaps best highlighted through a quote by one of his own girlfriends, which introduces a new layer of understanding, and questioning, to his work.

This girlfriend, Letty Eisenhauer, stated in a recent interview: 'Take his series of crying girls. I think Roy was always very angry with Isabel [his ex-wife]. I think the crying girls are what he wanted women to be. He wanted to make you cry, and he did – he made me cry. So occasionally, in his paintings, I think that he revealed something of himself.'

From an initial social justice/feminist interpretation, the understanding of Lichtenstein's work moves into his own personal territory, marred by heartbreak. Are these crying, suffering women his way of echoing his own experiences, or the way he wishes these experiences would have been? Is Lichtenstein, through his images of distraught and daydreaming women, expressing a notion of 'Cry me a river, like I cried a river over you'?

Whichever reading one ascribes to Lichtenstein's work, and whether Lichtenstein is lending voice for equality or projecting his own bitter experiences, it is clear that his portrayal of women is wildly different from his opinion of them.

**Response to *Family Jules: NNN (No Naked Niggahs)*
1974 by Barkley L. Hendricks**
Lindsay and Camilla Hamilton

An athletic young black man sits displaying his family jewels, yet far from looking coy and demure, he brazenly stares out of the canvas in a manner reminiscent of the prostitute *Olympia* as famously depicted by Manet in 1863.

On looking up at the canvas, the viewer cannot help but feel a little intimidated by the magnificence of this black, male model whose tantalizingly tactile, elongated, statuesque body gleams out of the canvas like a beautiful Giacometti sculpture.

His luscious limbs have been extended, and a varnish applied to the canvas to give them a gloriously healthy, mahogany-like sheen. He is surrounded by references to his north African heritage, such as the ethnic wall tiles, his discarded tunic and the small smoking pipe, and he peers down at the viewer through small academic glasses with a gloriously superior air. In fact, this young man is so magnificent that all of him cannot possibly be contained within the canvas; one arm and one foot stretch languorously out of sight.

Painted so soon after Malcolm X and Martin Luther King's famous speech of 1963, at a time when Afro-Americans were still considered to be second-class citizens, this representation by Hendricks must have provoked similar emotional responses to those of the original Manet painting.

Yet it would appear that it is very much the artist's intention to use his art as a form of social comment through the heightened contrast between the black skin and the white sofa that takes up much of the left hand side of the image. The print of the discarded tunic is also that of a white lady from the 1920s whose face can be seen looking at this contemporary black man.

This is a young man swamped by white traditional culture, yet big enough to own it.

Against the Dying of the Light

Response to *Lightening with a Stag in its Glare*

date unknown by Joseph Beuys

Bree Sims

Man Ray, Matisse, Magritte... walking through the 'Poetry and Dream' Gallery at Tate Modern is a master class in surrealism. Just as your synapses cease to snap at the bright colours and juxtapositions captured in the flat canvases, a lightening bolt hits you.

Joseph Beuys' *Lightening with a Stag in its Glare* is vast. Exploding 18 feet into the air, the lightning is captured in bronze cast from clay but the surface looks more like just-set lava: visceral, in flux and exuding all the power of nature.

In contrast, the stag of the title was originally cast from an ironing board, balanced on top of two bulky structures. Together, it looks more like a primitive bicycle. Made of aluminum to convey the reflected light from the bolt, its mechanical, angular dimensions don't thrill in the way the lightening does. Despite the beast's mythical status as ruler of the forest, protector of lesser creatures and conveyor of souls to eternity, it is inert.

The 'lesser creatures' arranged around the stag recall childhood Play-Doh sausages, or something less pleasant. Maggoty and smooth they ooze in the lightening's glare as if in motion, straining towards the light. The spanners and other hand-tools embedded in the scoops of clay lend antenna, heads or legs to these strange primordial forms.

A cart at the back of the installation is identified in the gallery interpretation as a goat, though we are left to speculate as to its purpose. Perhaps, since we are dealing in myths, we are supposed to conjure medieval depictions of the devil, with his goat-like face and cloven hooves, thus introducing the conflict in the piece: will the aluminum bicycle-stag or the wooden cart-goat win the race for the nascent sausage-souls?

Whatever we are supposed to think, pondering on meaning takes second place to marveling at Beuys' ability to capture the lightening bolt. It appears so fluid and transitory that the steel beam that holds it in place actually appears to be anchoring the lightening down, rather than holding it up.

Made towards the end of the artist's life, *Lightening* explores ideas of death (the prone stag) and regeneration through the power of nature.

It certainly invigorated me as I walked through the Tate rooms. Amid paintings and smaller sculptures this piece really hits you like a bolt from the blue, searing its image on your brain, and forbidding you ever more to go gentle into that good night.

Response to *Entablature* 1975 by Roy Lichtenstein

France Leon

My knowledge of Lichtenstein has been limited to his Romance paintings; those oversized cartoon strip images of women who always seem to be crying. On viewing the retrospective at Tate Modern I come to realise the scope of his work and I now see him with renewed interest.

The exhibition takes us through from his Early Abstractions and Pop Art stage to his late Chinese Landscapes, although not necessarily in chronological order. It is evident that Lichtenstein's work rethinks in such a way that provokes the viewer into seeing things from a different perspective.

I loved discovering his brass sculptures; the extracted design of art deco handrails and architectural features. They are simply stunning. His reworking of painters such as Picasso, Matisse and Mondrian were also as intriguing as they were amusing.

Among all the works I was fascinated by one in particular; possibly one that many would walk past, despite its size. It is simple, but it draws on something that we take for granted everyday.

Entablature is a painting with an imposing, statuesque aura. The conflicting styles of minimalist presentation and classical architecture are brought together in this large banded frieze of cool blues, whites and silver; complete with the artist's trademark Benday dots. It is majestic, it is regal, it demands my attention and I give it willingly.

For half an hour I contemplate; some time standing close, some time standing at a distance until I find myself cross-legged on the floor writing notes. It is while I'm sat on the floor that it dawns on me. Within this work is a musicality; a beat that emits from the painting, like a metronome or perhaps a clock ticking with the passing of time. This brings to mind my experience, some years ago, of standing before Jackson Pollock's *Summertime* (1948). Although Pollock's action painting has a rhythmic freedom, such as in a piece of jazz music, my reaction to each work was notably similar; I am held by more than just the paint on the surface.

Both paintings are long horizontal canvases. Both require contemplation, and for me the experience of each is much like that of standing before an alter-piece. Two artists, polar opposites, and two paintings that are seemingly worlds apart but that share not only a musicality, but also a reference to classicism. Pollock, whether wittingly or not, achieved a painting that many have commented appears to hide a frieze of figures behind the abstract paintwork.

Arguably though, Pollock painted freely from the unconscious with his pouring and dripping techniques, while Lichtenstein's craft was

more precise and designed. But both of these paintings would not look out of place perched upon a couple of Ionic columns.

I leave the gallery with my head held high. Not because I feel grandiose with some great revelation, but because if there is one thing that Lichtenstein's painting has left me with, it is a revived appreciation for our cities' architecture. I question how classicism has been used by and translated in our modern capitalist culture, how our institutions have used these designs to heighten their stature and importance.

In the days following I notice whilst on my way to work that where a bank once presided in a building with columns and entablature, I now see an instantly recognisable red and yellow McDonald's sign. It is almost allegorical and certainly seems to fit the themes of Lichtenstein's comment on high art versus low art. It is conflicts and contrasts such as these that make Lichtenstein's work as relevant today as it was forty years ago.

Response to *Laocoon* 1988 by Roy Lichtenstein

Leo Stortiero

If anyone is still uncertain whether Pop Art can deliver strength, power and vital force beyond its study on the reproducibility of common objects as works of art, that person might well be convinced otherwise when faced with Lichtenstein's *Laocoon*.

If Pop Art as an artistic movement now explained in History of Art manuals as that which aimed to use items and slogans from everyday life, and in doing so, give them artistic dignity, here with *Laocoon* almost the opposite happens. The classic myth and the almost liturgical shapes of the monumental sculpture are stripped from their context, deprived of their canonical legacy and, though maintaining the original dramatic strength and physical vigour, are brought into the modern era of our own.

The vivid, bright colours and the blurring lines make the faces of *Laocoon* and his children almost faces of pure decoration, there simply because a person is supposed to have a face, but carrying no evidences at all of their individual identities. *Laocoon's* struggle and vain sacrifice are those of the contemporary man, we all live a sorrowful life, where the most recognizable element is the snake biting us.

Of course, this is pure Pop Art: the deconstruction of a capital element and the birth of a new one out of its ashes, but with new informal characteristics. The intent is a desecrating one by bringing back to earth institutionalized elements or powers, destroying the amount of untouchable seriousness and self-glorification, and returning those elements to the people and to the realm of ordinary debate.

Maybe everything I brought to attention here was neither in the author's mind nor intention. If so, that would mean that Roy Lichtenstein is alive and kicking. To me, at least.

LEGEND /// CRITIQUE

Legend, and the role of the critic in the creation of it Ali Coco Epps

Critics are a shifting assembly. It is a recurrent gospel that the interesting critic is an interested one, one who has given or taken interest enough to pique a similar response from the audience in that which they critique. It is not irreverent therefore, to suggest that with vested interest an artful critic might happen be the artist himself – weaving new contention into his work, and duly new legacy. In an increasingly fertile terrain, contemporarily we can see rising evidences of PR spin, but historically it has been much the same, where those within secular movements created their own nepotistic endorsements, helping others to help themselves.

A neat example of this is Man Ray and his 1921 piece *Cadeau*. The piece itself was originally a simple flatiron, but with the perturbing addition of Ray's fourteen sharp-end nails along the flat-press base; a nullifying edition, rendering in parallel both distrust in the iron (if used, it's going to rip up your shirts), and at the same time a chum camaraderie and dark wit in the simple inversion of its functionality. It is no accident that *Cadeau* has a legend attached to it, and that the fable of it far outweighs the actual piece. You will find that you are far more intimate with Man Ray's own horror-lit photograph of it – largely due to the unexplained disappearance of the original flatiron, and partly due to the delay of its later, almost-commemorative 1963-made replica – but there are no conspiracy theories here, just the scoop that the subsequent photograph – Man Ray's own visual critique, lit with pronounced subjectivity and bias – overshadowed the original to such an extent that the original itself was no longer required. The weight of that critical value meant the audience would now see the photograph, not as documentation, objective observation, or record, but as another work, with its own value and functionality, and entirely in its own right. More interestingly, the strength and legend of the piece itself was further reinforced, and the likeliness it would not be forgotten further amplified.

For the work of the critic to become, as the above example, no longer distanced record or objective documentation but a separate and valued work in its own right – work consequently to be criticised in its own right also – a number of unwritten rules reoccur, the most consistent of which remains the use of bias. When a reviewer uses subjectivity and opinion, or when we recognise good research and resonant grammatical construction, or when review is horror-lit or vehement or humorous, the foundations of legend begin to actualise, and the power of suggestion shifts from artist to critic. Likewise, canny critics are not unfamiliar with 'impression management', and significantly the most detrimental commentary to the endurance and permanence of any work remains indifference, not slander. As

an audience we become entangled in these layers – the voyeur, the participant, the critic’s critic – and each assessment then has opportunity to become more valued than the piece it assesses. As it does so, we get instances where the proposed audience will trust a review or ‘suggested impression’ better than their own experience of the work. Furthermore, in some instances they will assimilate it to such an extent that they will supplant the view of the critic for their own experience of it altogether, never experiencing the work firsthand. Here we can draw similarities back the earlier Cadeau example, noting that the piece itself need not be present for its audience not only to believe it existed, but acknowledge exactly what it felt or should feel like to encounter it.

In the majority of cases it can be said that the audience’s initial experience of a piece is immediately altered by that which the artist, curator or critic has suggested they ought to experience, especially so with masterful or lively comment. The candidness and popularity of subjective appraisal means the audience is thrown under a torrent of arguably non-retractable opinion, in addition to both their own initial encounter with the work and often a statement of intent from the curator or gallery underscoring the artist’s own design as to how the piece should be appreciated or read. Indeed, by the very nature of curation the works are immediately contextualised and the audience is given suggested comparisons to chew or eschew. The critic then should not take lightly his influence on the audience when it comes to how a piece is remembered, and in the shaping of its legend, but neither too should the audience underestimate themselves; each member is instrumental and as able to participate in the debate as they believe themselves to be.

It goes without saying that legend and critique would not exist without one another – one is reliant on the stirring of narrative, and the other on that narrative to stir. Even more so in a climate of increasingly publicly-engaged art and the vogue of blurring spectator and collaborator, the success of the artist’s work lies not only in the strength of its own conviction, but equally, and perhaps ultimately, in the willingness of the audience to participate in the formation of that critical narrative.