

Four questions and as many attempts to answer (Random, for Peter Phillips)

Walter Guadagnini

1. Why so many artists who determined the origin of the Pop Art phenomenon in the early Sixties arrived, with time, at a direct confrontation with art of the past, and even to make direct reference to it?

This question is spontaneous when faced with Peter Phillips' most recent work, but it involves a great part of his generation and of his first traveling companions: Allen Jones, who decided to refer almost without mediation to Matisse, after pillaging the popular magazines of his time; Roy Lichtenstein, who transferred his technique from comics to Picasso and Mondrian; Mel Ramos, who, after *Superman* and *The Nile Queen* traced back to David and Goya with the greatest contempt for kitsch; Gerhard Richter, who after daily papers re-photographed and re-painted Titian; George Segal, who, after holding the passers-by on the benches of the metropolis found inspiration in Rodin; Martial Raysse, who reinvented himself as a painter of battles, after playing with the myths of refined beauty, and we could continue¹.

They are all obviously different cases, both in premise and in result, but they hint at the presence of a common problem, which cannot be disregarded, because perhaps it also enlightens, *à rebours*, and the very reasons that led to the first works of these artists. So: as can be seen from uniform evidence, confirmed on various occasions, the origin of Pop Art is also attributable to the need to find a common image and a wider audience than that of the intelligentsia, to the need to go and look out of the studio window again, to seek a direct confrontation with the contemporary world, with the new scenery the latter was proposing (this happened, obviously, inside the mind of who was creating the works, not in the mind of those that the system charged with the task of rendering them simple merchandise, but that is another matter).

Therefore a breath of fresh air to face a new society, a "new realism", also capable, so to speak, of withstanding competition with the extraordinary image bombarding proposed by the new consumption and media society that was being definitively established (to remain within Great Britain, *The Hidden Persuaders* by Vance Packard, was published in 1962). But also, and no less important, a generation of artists who had grown up (especially in Europe) in Art Schools, Academies, with a strong conscience, a strong knowledge and an equally strong conscience, of the craft and (or, in the American case, a strong desire) of history.

Peter Phillips' situation was, in this respect, emblematic: first he attended a technical institute in Birmingham, with a craftsman's learning of the job, then the Royal College of Art in London, the cradle of pictorial tra-

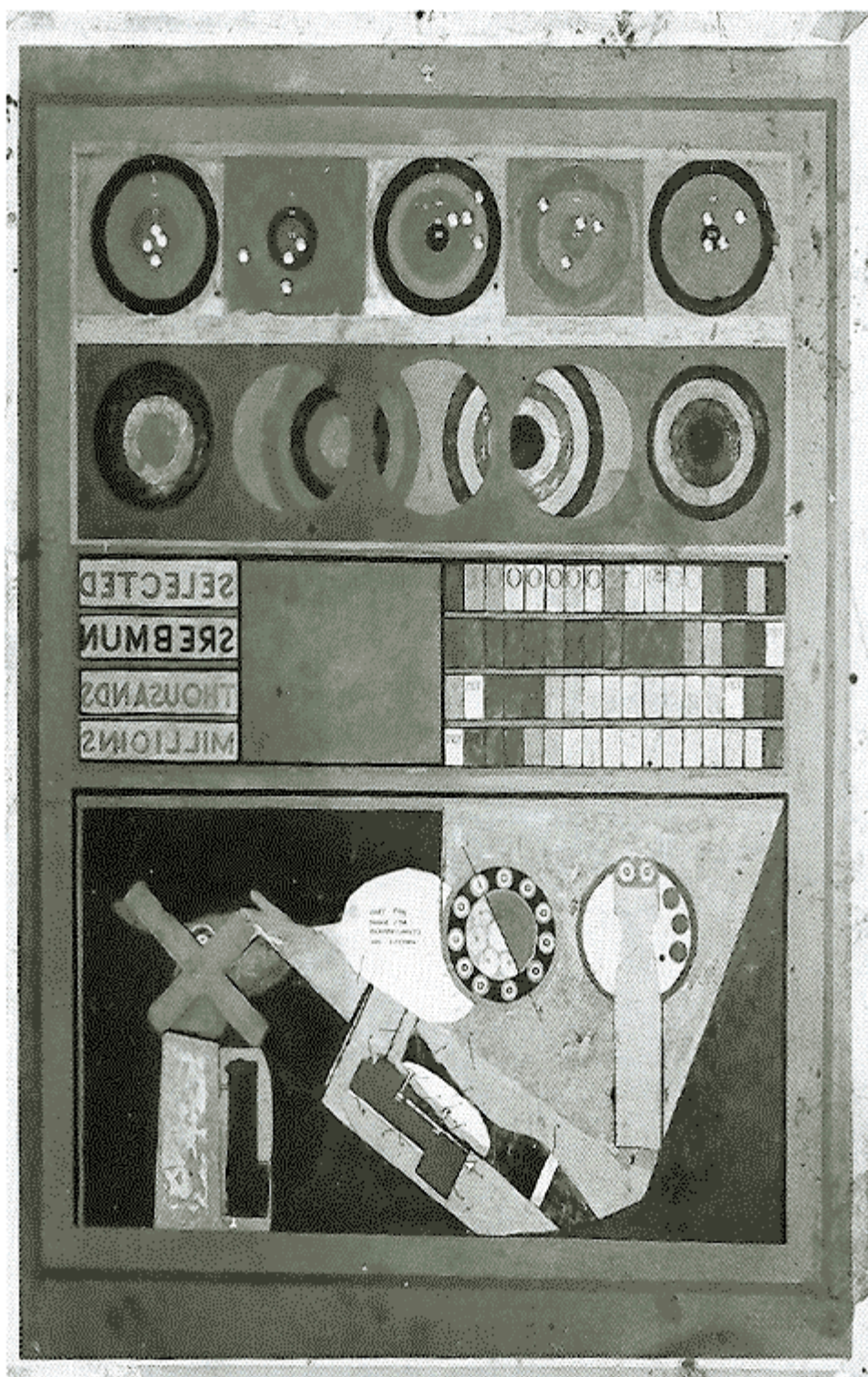
dition, where "the '59 generation" emerged (Hockney, Kitaj, Phillips, Boshier and Jones) and who exhibited at the RBA Galleries of London in 1961, in the annual "Young Contemporaries" exhibition. This is where Pop Art was born (with all due respect for the pioneer work of Richard Hamilton, the crux here is that in just two years what exploded was a planetary phenomenon and not the conceptual development of the

One Five Times / Sharp Shooter, 1960

olio su tela / oil on canvas

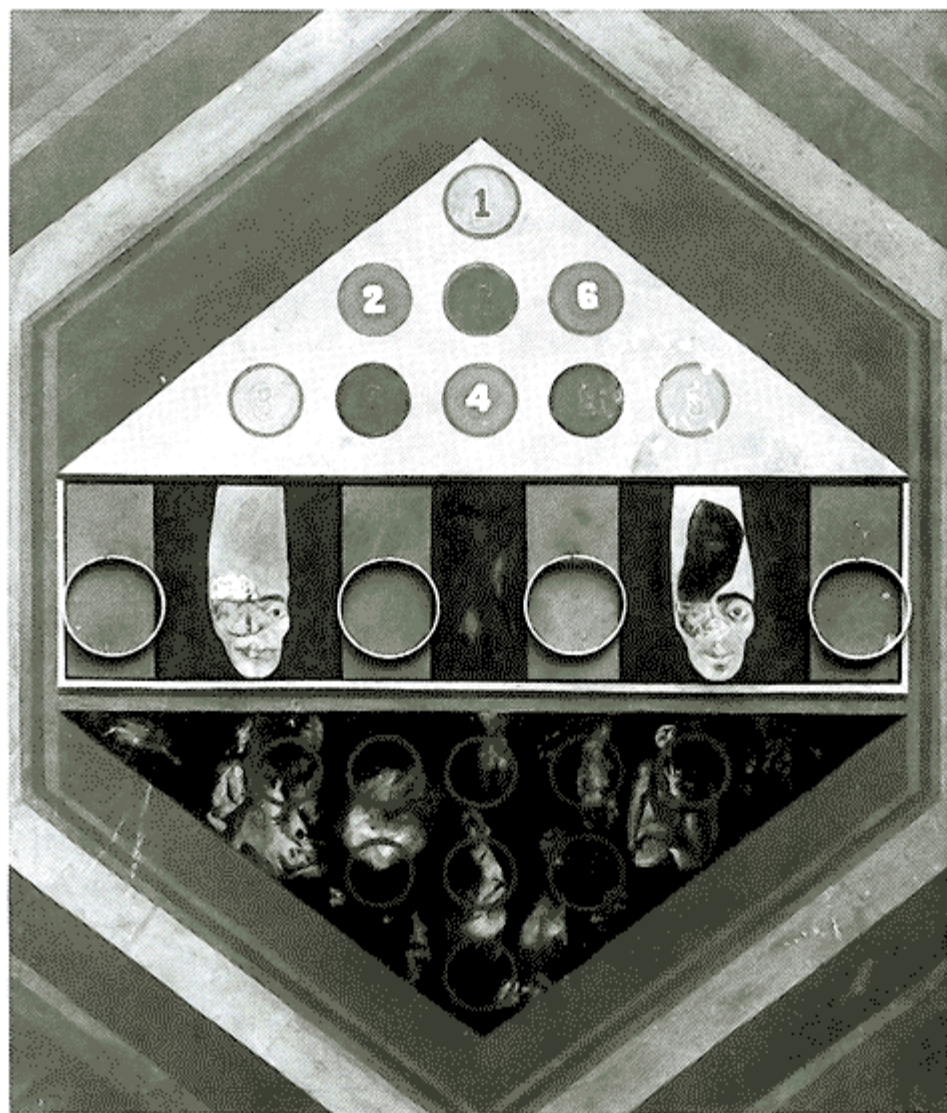
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collezione privata / private collection



Burlesque / Baby Throw, 1961

olio, ganci metallici, anelli di legno e collage su tela /
oil, hooks, wood rings and collage on canvas
180 x 150 cm
collezione privata / private collection



themes), certainly referring, at least in Phillips' case, to Peter Blake's solitary example and also to Jasper Johns or Larry Rivers, few but meaningful works that had already been seen, and in curious harmony with Robert Indiana's provocative heraldry; but, again, we should wonder why it takes these forms, why it assumes contemporaneity as datum, if not as a starting-point, at least a crucial point in the quest for the image².

In substance and in short, these young Royal College of Art artists found themselves faced with two possible tracks: the first, represented by the various declensions of the informal and of geometrical abstraction, excluded in the name of modernity the possibility of resorting to image, or at least to its explicit, immediate depiction; the other, represented by the defenders of tradition, refused any compromise whatever with contemporaneity, not so much of images, as of the way of depicting them. Thus

the origin of Pop Art, in this case, seems to be the almost instinctive choice of a third way, capable of overtaking both leaders in one fell swoop, to checkmate them on their own ground: modernity on one hand, image on the other hand, taken to the limit. Once again, as in the best avant-garde tradition, the problem was to meet the necessity of *être de son temps*, but with the absolute novelty that this proposition now found itself in harmony - and not in opposition - with its time, with its taste; it did not aim to bypass it but to exploit it.

That Phillips was extraordinarily precocious in this genesis and one step ahead of his traveling companions, occasional and not, has been widely proved (see Marco Livingstone's essay published here, to which we refer for a thorough analysis of the work of those years and of the two subsequent decades)³ and it is not worthwhile returning to the subject, if not for a short, additional note. The photographs of Phillips, Boshier and Hockney's works, documenting the 1961 year end activities at the Royal College of Art are clear examples of this condition: while Phillips was already fully inside a Pop pictorial culture, therefore already prepared to blend with extra-pictorial methods and techniques, the his classmates works belong to what was defined in Italy in the same years as "nuova figurazione", that is to say the attempt to find "new images of man", developing models of realism that still belonged to a tradition, though modern and spurious⁴.

For Phillips, therefore, the question is not of breaking with the past, but of starting from a sort of grade zero of painting, taking as its essential element - non-problematic we could say a priori - contemporaneity of image, and as its aim the reaching of balance between the technique and the image or, rather, among the different techniques (as from the beginning Phillips conceived paintings as a total field of action, therefore collages, wood insertions and so on) and the different images that in the end constitute the work. Therefore the point for Phillips was - as it would be in a few years for all this group of artists - the old theme of painting, nothing more. And yet it was explored, in these first years, through an iconographic structure claiming, sometimes to excess, its modernity, its adhesion - no matter, at this point, if critical or condescending - *à son temps*. Now, to return to the original question, it should appear clearly enough that the more explicit reference to the past that may be felt in Phillips' most recent works (and in those of many exponents of his generation), at least from the end of the Eighties, derives from the progressive loss of meaning of that aspect of image contemporaneity which initially had the value of a declaration of poetics. A declaration that was made even at the cost of forfeiting interpretation of their respective works according to a view less bound to topicality (and in fact the loss of this perspective coincides with a fading of their public image). Once the field had been freed of this expressive necessity, it remained open to the immense gallery

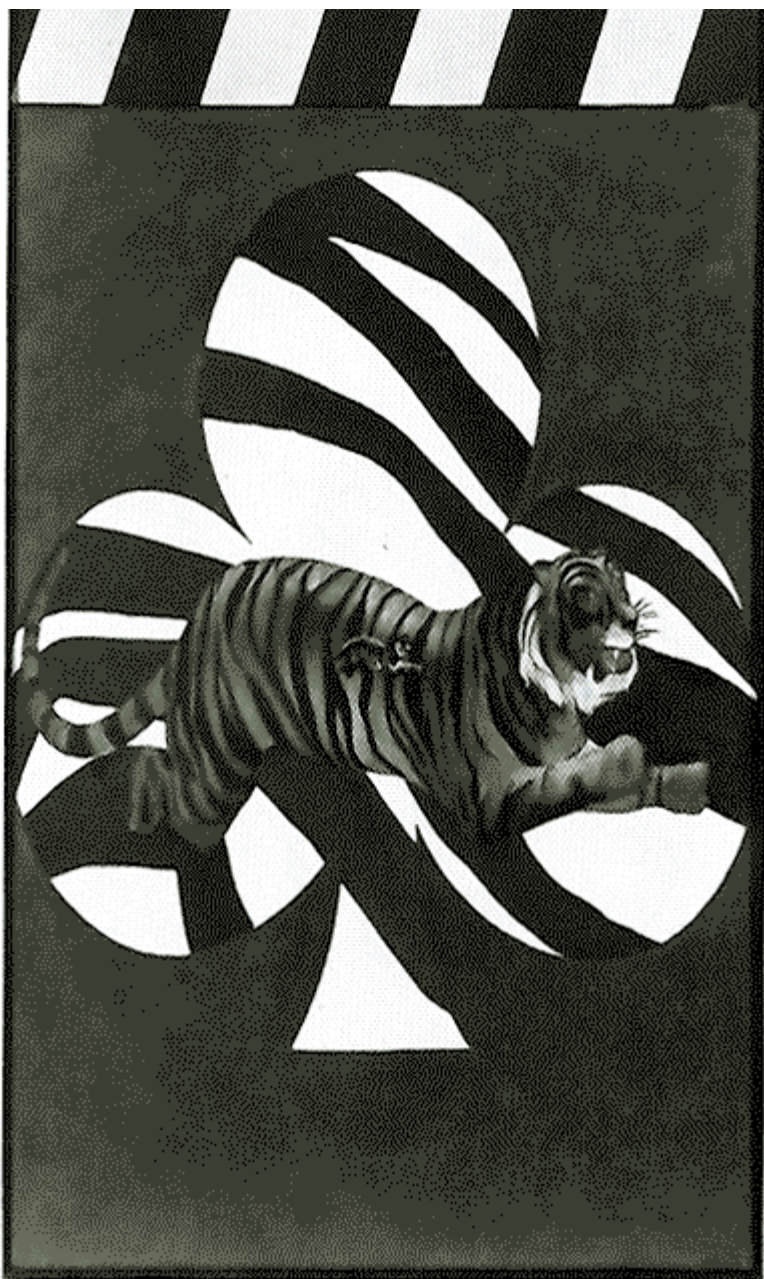
of images originating from the most different sources, even from the

Forces Sweetheart, 1962
olio e collage su tela / oil and collage on canvas
197 x 182 cm
collezione privata / private collection



Motorpsycho / Club Tiger, 1962
olio su tela e legno laccato / oil on canvas and lacquered wood
127 x 76,6 cm
collezione privata / private collection





Motorpsycho / Go, 1962
 olio su tela e legno laccato / oil on canvas and lacquered wood
 157 x 101,6 cm
 Teheran Museum of Contemporary Art





past, and therefore even from the history of painting. Which is a history of images and technique, such as that of Peter Phillips, for example.

2. What is a Vargas figurine doing near a battery ignition? Or, in other words, what was Peter Phillips doing in "Primary Structures"?

27th April 1966: "Primary Structures", a collective including the major names of the minimal area in an exhibition destined to mark an epoch anyway, opened at the Jewish Museum of New York⁵. In the "stop and go" logic of the avant-garde, which reiterates its myths and rites, the exhibition was, in fact, the sign of the umpteenth change of course: Pop Art had by now penetrated even too far, the market, institutions and even, with excessive rapidity, common awareness; something quite different had to be offered to the intelligentsia, constantly on the lookout for what was trendy and hence had to be elusive, at least in the beginning.

In this respect Judd, Andre & co., are as far as one could possibly be from the Pop aesthetic: their refusal of any pleasure of the image (to paraphrase Barthes) and their ferocious theoretical rigor seem to be an exemplary retaliation against the figurative abuse and ideological frivolity that characterised Warhol & co. And indeed, on a scenario whose aims and achievements were as coherent as that emerging from "Primary Structures", the only discordant voices - for previous and future history - appeared to be those of Richard Artschwager (who had always been absorbed in his own re-interpretation of the vision mechanisms, not referable to any specific trend), of Douglas Huebler (destined to continue emphasizing the purely conceptual and heteronymous aspect of his work) and, of course, Peter Phillips.

How is it possible, we wonder, that a painter who had embodied one of the most lucid and extreme forms of reflection on the popular image in the previous five years, and who was to begin two series, namely *Random Illusion* and *Art-O-Matic*, in which the image is still the all-important thing, could exhibit three sculptures of a clearly non-figurative structure (even though, it should be said immediately, definitely not “minimal”, and not even “primary”)?

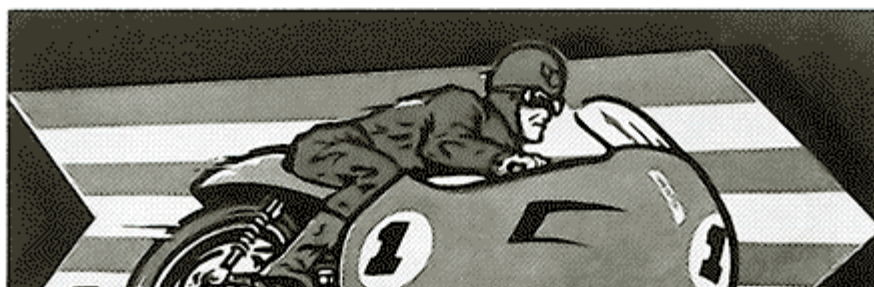
Having established the fundamental and founding coherence of Phillips's work notwithstanding its extremely varied expressions, it is now necessary to find the answer to such question inside the works of the artist himself, behind the lines of the images, in all that, to put it in a nutshell, may not immediately strike the seer's eye, but is there anyway, and that, to anticipate our conclusions, is from the beginning a non-marginal part of this poetics. At a deeper look, in fact, Phillips' work was constructed, until 1964, with a geometrical rigor that innervates the whole composition, constituting its authentic axis, as is demonstrated, just as an example, by works such as *Purple Flag*, *Spotlight*, *Lions Versus Eagles*, *Four Stars*. Be it the reduction of the British flag, the geometricalization of light beams, the surface division or the frame shape itself, the constructive principle is as determining as that of the figure's identification; and, in fact, both elements are inseparably bound, it is their union that characterizes Phillips' work as unique in the international Pop scenery. Something changed, actually, in the *Custom Painting* series, and was progressively enhanced in the subsequent series: the casualness principle, characterizing to the point that it became the title of work in the *Random Illusions*, unhinged the previous composition order; but geometry did not disappear from Phillips' creation horizon, becoming rather a figure among figures, an iconographic element just as pin-ups or cars. Indeed, the details joining figures of reality and figures of fiction come just from inside these latter. And again, in the *Art-O-Matic* series, the geometries drawn from the symbolic world of science became mere ornamental patterns, having at the same time a balancing function from the composi-

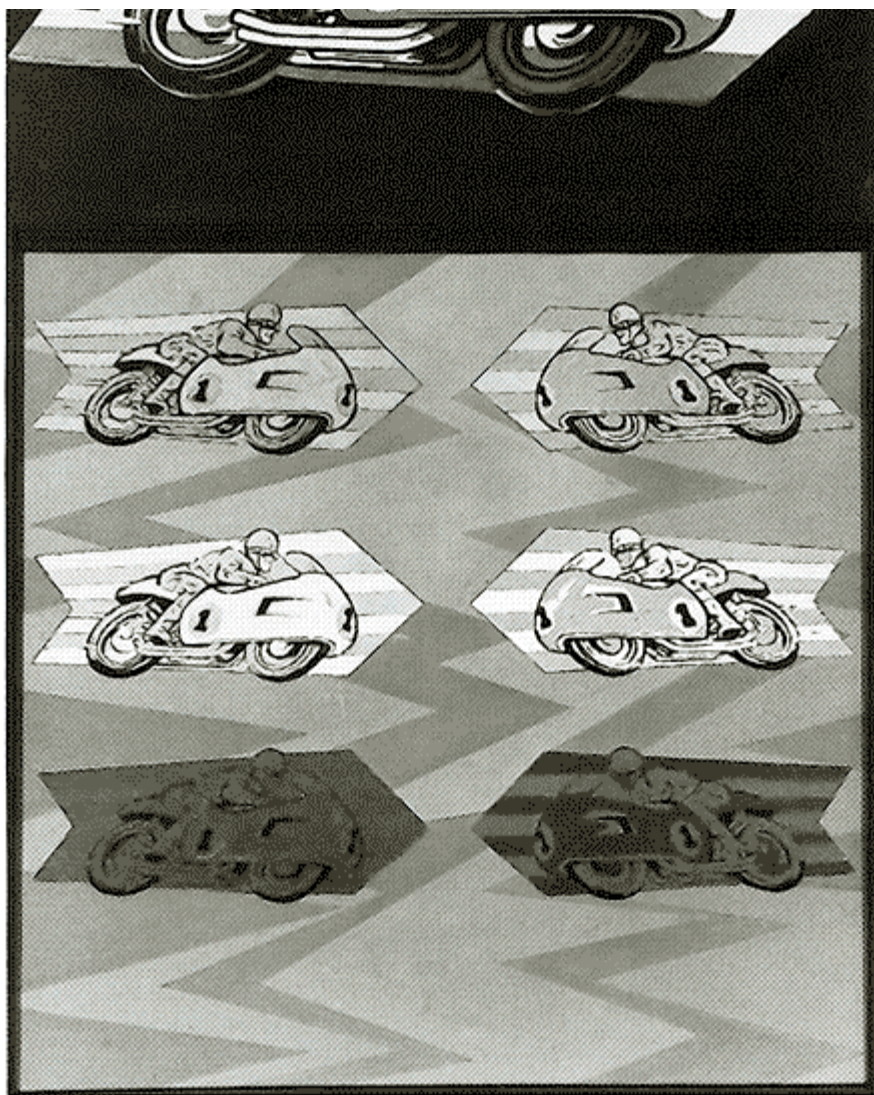
MULTImotorPLIKATION, 1963

olio su tela e rilievo in legno dipinto /
oil on canvas and painted wood relief

204 x 128 cm

Neue Pinakothek, Munchen





Untitled Drawing, 1964

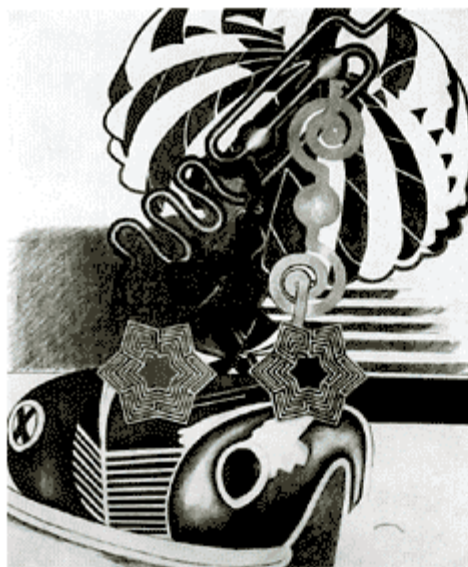
carboncino e matita su carta / charcoal and pencil on paper
63,5 x 51 cm

collezione privata / private collection

Drawing for "Custom Painting n. 6", 1964

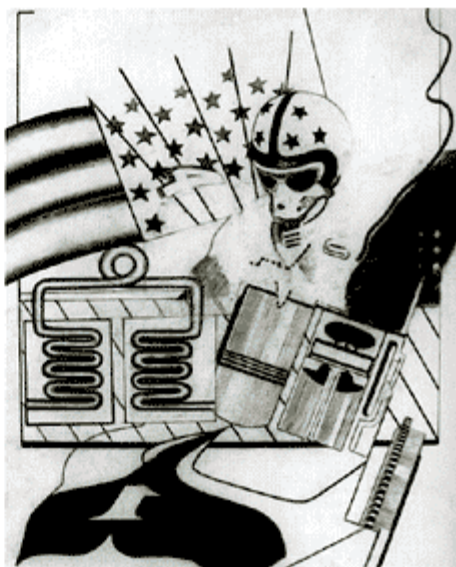
carboncino su carta / charcoal on paper
63,5 x 51 cm

collezione privata / private collection



Custom Painting n. 6, 1965

olio su tela / oil on canvas
122 x 91,5 cm
collezione privata / private collection



Custom Painting n. 4, 1965

olio su tela / oil on canvas
cm 214 x 175 cm
collezione privata / private collection



tion point of view and an unbalancing one from the point of view of the possible interpretations of the work in its whole.

Phillips' presence in *Primary Structures* is, therefore, though paradoxical, absolutely legitimate, as it enhances an element always present in his poetics, according to modes and accentuations radically different depending on the periods. In fact, while in the production of the second half of the Seventies and of the first Eighties Phillips arrives at a complete adhesion to an abstract image in a Kandinskij sense, in the works of the Nineties the theme is re-proposed according to another fascinating, and to a certain extent new version. Once again: the first glance cannot but linger over the images, the series of details constituting – each of them autonomously and yet bound to the others – works such as *Compressed Overlay Culture Jammer*, *Zone II*, *Showtime*, *Gateway*. But a deeper analysis reveals a principle of construction of the space which can be everything but casual (originating, if anything, from the *Mosaikbilder* grids of the mid-Seventies), a precise intent on the part of Phillips to include the images inside a structure acting, in this case, as a paging of the surface, taking into account balances first of all formal, attained through composition and chromatic, in a continuous overturning of the perspective and in a consequent, continuous wrong-footing of the seer's expectations. Where it also becomes, apparently, a question of perception (Bridget Riley was just a class beyond...), of those mechanisms which, though they had never been the center of Phillips' poetics, have always accompanied his research, in a logic of "freedom of choice" (as the exhibition at Thomas Gibson was entitled, when these works were shown together for the first time) valid as much for the artist as for the seer.

3. *Would Kurt Schwitters have used the computer?*

"Beautiful as the chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissection table", as the poet wrote more than a century ago, creating – perhaps *malgré soi* – an image that would originate innumerable other images, inseminating a great part of 20th century culture. Taken literally by the Dadaists, transformed by the Surrealists into a slogan, that meeting has not concluded yet its journey into the artists' mind, and it sounds as an indispensable guide even in the interpretation of the whole of Peter Phillips' work.

The world is an infinite image container: the artist's task is to place them on the painting surface making them become yet another image, this time an absolutely new one. An image originated from the chance meeting of various moments of the experience, from everything that belongs to the world, but even more to the artist, to his eye, which selects inside a scenery, or a warehouse, or a memory. Conscience and the unconscious, both private and collective (in which category, for example, are we to include Pollock's *Forever Corporation* or the *Art-O-Matic Cudacutie* car? While it is clear to what extremes the female body of *Mosaikbild 5 x 5* or *Mosaikbild 6 x 12* Elvis belong), without an interruption, at least on the level of the project. But while the matter of the relationship between memory and technology, between the pictorial technique and the contemporary technologies overbearingly entered the artistic reflection scenery already in the first half of the century, in the second half – the years in which Phillips has operated and continues to operate – the theme, for those who intend to deal with it, becomes pressing, even, in Phillips' case, ineludible.

It has always been said, and rightly so, that that Pop Art compromises strongly with reality, particularly with regard to iconography. But such a compromise can also be felt – and even to a greater extent – solely with regard to the choice of the expression instruments, and even in this case Phillips' creative course is exemplary. The use of car body paint, or of

**Veduta della mostra alla Kornblee Gallery /
View of the Exhibition at Kornblee Gallery**
New York, 1965



spray-guns, and the practice of projecting the image to be painted, the always-looked-for shore in photograph, the short but meaningful interlude of work with Gerald Laing⁶, the final arrival at the electronic image: all this speaks of a conscious and coherent choice right from the start, supported over time by adjustment of his own imagination to new technologies, or rather by the ability of exploiting new technologies for what they can offer to his own expressive capacities.

It has been widely and authoritatively stated in precedence that Peter Phillips' image construction is the extreme consequence of the *collage* practice that innervated the avant-garde cultures of the beginning of the century and arrived up to the Sixties (from Blake to Hamilton, from Dine to Rosenquist, to remain in a neighboring cultural ambit; and the essential part of the events regarding the relationship between *high and low culture* at the beginning of the century is also to be referred to this practice)⁷. It is just as obvious, however, that the development of Phillips' research forces us to review such a statement in the light of the interest shown by the artist for computers and their language.

Indeed, while it is apparent that the Nineties' paintings are constructed according to the *collage* logic, it is just as explicit that such logic also takes into account the windows opening and closing at leisure on the screen, as well as a simultaneous appearance of different images that does not represent an absolute novelty in itself, but is undoubtedly taken to the extreme by this new instrument. Similarly, optical distortions and aberrations contained in some of these panels (even variations on the theme of anamorphosis, marking a non-occasional presence of art history), are hard to imagine without the help of the machine (not impossible to realize, mind you, but certainly they could only be obtained by a purely mechanic activity that is not part of Phillips' scope of interest). In short, in the Sixties the reference horizon was still, in spite of all, the printed paper, today such function is performed by another medium of communication: what remains unchanged is the intention of confronting himself with the images and with the instruments of contemporaneity, of being – even though the center of his activity is not in London or New York anymore, a non-passive witness of what happens in the world, or at least of what is communicated through images of such events.

However, it is the process of linguistic transformation to which the “images found” are submitted that most radically differentiates Phillips from the latest apostles of the new. Once the subject has been individuated and located inside the surface, in fact, it is painted by Phillips, thus originating a series of indefinable, but conceptual consequences. The mere act of painting, indeed, presents certain essential matters of a temporal nature (painting, and this painting in particular, takes rather a long time, and reflects a mirror image of the mechanical instrument’s rapidity), for example, the persistence of the image, its relation with memory, which cast new light on the creative process as a whole. A painted fragment is different from the mere fragment of an image; painting reports to a single common denominator – itself – themes, objects, figures deriving from extremely varied areas, even though they are painted, paradoxically, according to different stylistic models. So painting becomes the bonding agent of a world perspective not otherwise admissible just because of its excess of dispersion and communication; and the same details, which a “normal” view overlooks with indifference, catalyze a new attention, the one we reserve to the painted object, whatever the subject may be. In this re-definition of roles, in this paradoxical and convulsive reference to slowness of vision – consequent to slowness of action – is situated the true, extremely modern perspective that Phillips maintains towards the world, the only one, we could easily think, that may be allowed to a painter nowadays.

Veduta della mostra “Hybrid” con Gerald Laing alla Kornblee Gallery /
View of the Exhibition “Hybrid” with Gerald Laing at Kornblee Gallery
New York, 1966



4. Peter Phillips declared, did he not, that he loved the Italian primitives in

*particular, because they did not use an illusion of space?*²⁸

A stormy day. A clown, in the center in full foreground, invites with a sneer to enter in the composition. Far on the right, a general (South American, we would think) in high uniform stares at him with a totally blank look. Between them, a couple that seems taken from a duly colored photograph by Doisneau, dances turning their back to the public. On the left, a woman in a bikini stays on the shore before a stormy sea. The scene on the left consists of a rock spur over which a disquieting black flock of birds flies in a cloudy sky, illuminated by the flashes of lightning; on the right, of an idyllic landscape of ruins dominated by a clearing-up sky. In the background, behind the clown, a yacht ploughs placidly through the waters of a bay overlooked by a town.

A day at the seaside: In the background of a stormy sea, a beach and some rocks; from the left rightwards, a wayfarer, a leopard, a violoncello, two figures knelt towards the sea, two others walking in the water, and another two figures, one standing and one knelt, on the beach; a naked man, sitting with his knees drawn up in his arms. Three seagulls fly over the water.

A day of travel: Inside a terminal railway station. The same clown, turning his back this time, beside a policeman, flanked in his turn by two more than life-sized anthropomorphic sculptures, similar to pre-historical idols or to two inhabitants of another planet. The station architecture borders the composition above, letting an unreal light filter through the glasses, illuminating only in part the scene.

These are some of the (rare) works realized by Phillips in the last two years, exercises of an extraordinary pictorial ability inserted in the computer use, brought a step further than the already borderline experience of the *puzzles* of the Nineties. A pictorial *tour de force*, and not only that. Operationally, in fact, the change in respect of the previous paintings is not particularly significant, the principle is still that of the *collage* in one of its possible, almost innumerable, variations. Conceptually and pictorially, on the other hand, the change is more radical than meets the eye. The reason is very simple, but rich in consequences: for the first time in his history, perhaps, Phillips deals with a perspective composition, confronts directly, without any filter, with the compositional structure that has supported the history and the way of thinking of the West painting for at least five centuries. Besides and consequently, he also confronts a narrative dimension he had always elbowed but never faced with such determination. Furthermore, we should not underestimate the fact that these works tackle – again without evident filters – the very question of pictorial genres, as it proposes landscapes with figures as extremely modern, and yet not forgetful. These premises notwithstanding, the feeling of being lost, the *random illusion*, the sense of game and hazard that has always been present in Phillips' work, is perhaps stronger here than any-

where else, more violent and disquieting than it was in the works of the Sixties or the Nineties, where, on a more thorough inspection, the refined artificiality of space, its progressive exasperation in an anti-perspective sense – together with an as much explicit artificiality of tones – appeared to act as filters upon the reality of the image, denying it through a visual device well known to the pre-Giotto painters beloved by Phillips. In the recent paintings, this guarantee of falseness fails, forcing the seer to place himself in front of the painting in a condition of participation to the painted event, to observe the scene “as if” it was happening, or could happen, in reality. And it is not sufficient, in respect of these paintings, to cling to the comfortable surrealist side (which exists, though, in its less didactic version) or to the merely technical matter (not unimportant, however, if the *cut and paste* has become the legal currency in the

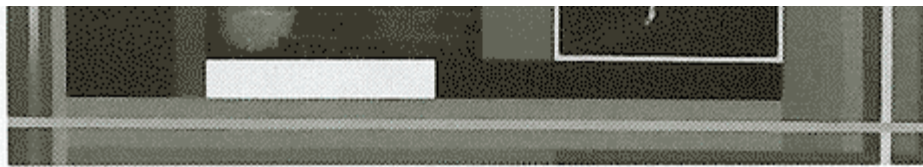
Blu Ram, 1996

olio su tela / oil on canvas

149 x 102

collezione privata / private collection





present painting scenery), as something more exists, something that makes these works as many authentic “cases” in the contemporary artistic scenery, irreducible to any label, either found in the past or updated. In the first place, Phillips shows that the time has come for him to strictly confront not only painting, but also its history, the complex mechanisms of a *machina* that could exhaust any possibility, both theoretical and factual, inside itself. The details drawn from the old that have appeared for many years on Phillips’ paintings, seem at present to be no more sufficient, as they cannot completely grasp the complex challenge of painting, as it has been intended as from the fifteenth century; details have always been images among other images, situated at the same level as the details of a car, a poster, an object. Inventing a situation – although starting from pre-existing figural data anyway – is a different thing, it is like acting inside history, knowing however that there is no guarantee of truth there. And this is the second, determining *punctum* of these paintings: the successful attempt at rendering an atmosphere, that particular and indefinite union of space, light and time inside which the figures of the painting are situated, inside which they act and communicate with the outside world (that is to say with the observer; and the clown figure is, in this regard, an emblematic rhetorical figure of connection). However, if all this happens with the awareness that history (even of painting) cannot be not only told, but not even believed anymore, the only atmosphere we can breath is that of a vision, a reverie that can only assume extreme tones, both in comedy and in tragedy (the clown, again). The highest degree of truthfulness, of apparent normality, coincides, in these paintings, with the highest expression of unreality, in the shape of a suspended time, consisting of the union to different times, each living in its unit but irreconcilable with the other times existing in the same space. By these astounded works, extraordinarily contemporary in their conception and admirably ancient in their making, Phillips sets himself among the non-numerous group of the great visionaries of painting (even his attitude towards the very act of painting is visionary by now, compared with the dominant and triumphant slovenliness of a painting that cannot even be defined as *bad*, as it does not know the *good*), of those who seem to be looking back and are, instead, looking farther or, more simply, are looking inside themselves.

¹ For Allen Jones, see M. Livingstone, *Allen Jones: Retrospective of Paintings 1957-1978*, Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery, 1979; W. Guadagnini, W. Kruger, *Allen Jones*, Kunsthalle, Darmstadt; Galleria Civica, Modena, 1996. For Roy Lichtenstein, D. Waldman, *Roy Lichtenstein*, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994. For Mel Ramos, R. Rosenblum, *Mel Ramos*, Taschen, 1994; W. Guadagnini, *Mel Ramos*, Galleria Civica, Modena, 1999. For Richter, B. Corà, *Gerhard Richter Museo Pecci*, Prato, 1999. For George Segal, S. Hunter, *George Segal*, New York, 1984. For Martial Raysse, D. Stella, *Martial Raysse*, Palazzo delle Stelline, Milan, 2000.

² For the chronology of these events refer to *Pop Art: U.S./U.K. Connections 1956-1966*, various authors The Menil Collection, Houston, 2001

³ *RetroVISION – Paintings 1960-1982*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, 1982; in this regard, the introductory essay by Enrico Crispolti is also essential, in *Peter Phillips – Works 1960-1974*, London, Milan, Paris, 1977

⁴ Photographs published in "Queen", London, 1967

⁵ K. McShine, *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors*, The Jewish Museum, New York 1966. In this occasion Phillips presents "Tricurvular" 1965-66.

⁶ The facts concerning the *Hybrid Enterprises* should be dealt with specifically. For further analysis, however, see articles published by the press, specialized and non, for the exhibition in tandem at the Kornblee Gallery of New York in 1966, quoted in the bibliography.

⁷ K. Varndoe-A. Copnik, *High & Low – Modern Art and Popular Culture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1991 is still fundamental, though disputable.

⁸ Quote used by M. Livingstone in *RetroVISION*.

On the Patch (Scream), 1997-98

olio su tela / oil on canvas

165 x 110 cm

collezione privata / private collection

