

Christopher Finch, *Peter Phillips*, Galerie Bischofberger, Zürich, 1967

In 1960 a heavy cloak of provincialism suffocated the English world of art.

Paolozzi, Caro, Richard Hamilton and a few others were just beginning to explore completely new concepts but, except for some isolated manifestations like the "This is Tomorrow" exhibition in 1966, their research was carried out in a fairly hermetic atmosphere and their innovations reached only a very limited public.

On arriving in London a young artist had no access to these privileged circles. The only models available were those of the Ecole de Paris or the Abstract Expressionism of New York, or personal research. It was in this period that three students of the Royal College of Art – David Hockney, Allen Jones and Peter Phillips – began to follow the latter path. Phillips had some brief experience with Abstract Expressionism, but this was certainly not congenial to him. There is no reason to suppose that any particular events or influences determined Phillips' move towards his typical figuration. The exchange of ideas between his contemporaries encouraged experimentation. Ron Kitaj, another student of the Royal College of Art, demonstrated that a vast range of images could conform to a completely new system. Moreover the reproductions of the works of Johns and of Rauschenberg were beginning to circulate.

These factors, whilst helping to understand the acquisition of a new sensibility, certainly do not reveal the reasons why Phillips' work was developing in this direction. Without doubt an important factor was the study of technical drawing and advertising graphics, during his time Birmingham School of Art, and that was based on the methods of the '30s and '40s. Free from stylistic inhibitions, Phillips felt he could again use this language, whose clarity and precision he appreciated. Perhaps he was encouraged in this by the strongly delineated abstractions of the "Situation Group", organised in those days by Lawrence Alloway. But, unlike the "Situation" artists, Phillips had no inclination to eliminate images from his work.

On the contrary, it was as if a return to Birmingham school techniques brought with it a return to the images that he had been engaged with in that period. Right from the start his pictures were always immediately recognisable. Sometimes, appearing through cut out circles and stars, the archetypal iconography of Pop Art – pin-ups, custom-built cars, motorcyclists – was organised in a complex structural composition and with a purposely popular image. The force of the geometric patterns and the lyric juxtaposition of the images together create a very personal language; it is not wrong to consider Phillips a Pop artist, since Pop Art is a very personal movement. It is no longer a question of limiting one's viewpoint according to the problems, the historical moment; we are rather faced with an abolition of snobbism that allows the artist access to a new way of feeling. This new sensibility was certainly not born just to find itself permanently enclosed in museums.

Apart from the images, Pop Art introduced a new technical sensibility. Phillips observed that technique, like everything else, can be the subject of a picture. Having discovered his personal language, Phillips then created an aesthetic technique. Right from the start, the compositions appeared to proceed directly from a logical use of the chosen technical mechanisms. In this way Phillips arrived at a fully autonomous language, in which the fusion of images and techniques gave him a vocabulary and syntax that could free him from the daily task of the research for effects and which gave coherence to his work. In short, we could say that Phillips takes possession of advertising world images and techniques then modulates them with the logic of art.

The autonomy of his pictures gives them the character of a game, which fits in well with the nature of Phillips' art.

In 1964, Phillips went to New York on a Harkness scholarship; the economic freedom allowed him to follow the logical implications of his work with greater rigour. He maintains today that a residue of amateurishness faulted the pictures created before his move to New York. He investigated the use of an airbrush and he began to use it more and more. The use of a machine was the logical and inevitable extension of his previous pictorial methods.

Perhaps a direct consequence of this technique was the fact that the image became even more daring and immediate.

Previously, in 1964, he had painted the first of his *Custom Paintings*: now all the original premises were fulfilled. The fronts of custom-built cars, coils, mechanisms, were arranged against geometric backgrounds in a complex governed by laws of symmetry that were the logical product of the technical preoccupations of the artist. The method was a kind of end in itself compared to which the single works were only potentially dependent on the choice of the images and of the technique.

During the two years he spent in New York, Phillips took part, together with Gerald Laing, in a rather unusual project: the organisation of market research. The "Hybrid Enterprise" was set up, for which they prepared equipment including colours, optical games and various materials, as well as a choice of shapes, like squares, circles, stars and zigzags. They compiled statistics on the free-hand interventions carried out by the people interviewed, a representative number of critics, dealers, collectors (not artists). The data thus obtained were processed by computer and then used to create a work of art. It is clear that, within certain limits, such results could have been hypothesised in advance. The preferred materials were brushed aluminium or Perspex, materials very much in fashion then. The favourite object was three-dimensional, but not necessarily a sculpture. Its dimension was just a little less than life-size. Miniature reproductions were made. But apart from the details, the particular qualities of the object sprang only from this impersonal and statistical approach. Yet again the finished product was implicit in the method chosen. The autonomy of "Hybrid" and the autonomy of Phillips' pictures present some important differences. With "Hybrid", the choice of the artist remained limited to the method and, as a cultural gesture, represented a choice; the means for carrying out the survey were determined by purely objective considerations. The choice of the substance (in this context I prefer to use this word rather than "content") was that of the interviewees and processed by computer. In Phillips' pictures, instead, there is the rigorous pursuit of a method that springs, however, from a choice of substance made by the artist before starting work. This difference was brought to light in the experiment "Hybrid". The artist had previously tended to minimise the importance of the subject. The image was not important or significant in itself: it was the way in which it is painted or used. Now Phillips was rather more inclined to think he had underestimated the importance of the emotional element that stimulated involvement.

"Hybrid" was a very American experience, but an experience conducted by the profane. Phillips observed that he and Laing had the strange sensation of being watchers and watched at one and the same time. On one hand Phillips maintained that "Hybrid" was full of implications, but on the other hand he maintained that the immediate effect was more important than that of clarifying his position. A greater awareness of his own motivations allowed him to follow this method with increasing confidence. His approach to sculpture confirmed his vocation as a painter. He believed that the importance of his sculpture must not be exaggerated: there were some problems he could not deal with in two dimensions. To approach them in a three-dimensional way permitted him to return to the classic motivations of his painting. The lyrical nature of classic art springs from the tension between the strongly irrational nature of the subject (the Orestes cycle, for example) and the logical development of the method implicit in the nature of the subject. With Lichtenstein and Warhol, Peter Phillips is one of the classics of the new figurative art.

