SIX PAINTERS AND THE OBJECT

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LAWRENCE ALLOWAY

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The relationship between the *good* and the *new* in contemporary art is intriguing and baffling. The realization that art and invention are akin is balanced by the suspicion of eccentricity.

Out of this conflict arises the question: *Is it art?* And the answer: Yes and no. Yes, *it could be*, since the expansion of artistic boundaries is inherent in the creative process. *No, it need not be*, for no mode in itself assures us of artistic validity.

Lawrence Alloway, Curator of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, has conceived and prepared this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue. Reflections about the new in art are implicit in the exhibition's subject matter; so is the intention to indicate an historical background to the profile of the new.

Thomas M. Messer, Director

Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank the following members of the Museum's curatorial department for their extensive involvement and their important contributions: Dr. Louise Averill Svendsen, Associate Curator: Research Fellows Carol Fuerstein and Maurice Tuchman: and David Hayes who proposed an earlier form of this exhibition.

L. A.

SIX PAINTERS AND THE OBJECT

LAWRENCE ALLOWAY, CURATOR

I

The artists in this exhibition (all born between 1923 and 1933) have been persistently aligned, in group exhibitions and survey articles, with object-makers, and two of the artists, Robert Rauschenberg and Jim Dine, are themselves object-makers. In the present exhibition, however, all six artists are presented as painters; some of their works include moderate collage elements, but no three-dimensional appendages. The association of paintings and objects has tended to blur both media differentiations and the individuality of the artists concerned. The unique qualities of the separate work of art and of the artist responsible for it have tended to sink into an environmental mélange, which in practice favors the object-makers, but not the painters. Object-makers, like the producers of happenings (often they are the same person), work towards the dissolution of formal boundaries[1] and sponsor paradoxical cross-overs between art and nature. However, the painter, committed to the surface of his canvas and to the process of translating objects into signs, does not have a wide-ranging freedom in which everything becomes art and art becomes anything. Because the painters have been identified with the object-makers, under various slogans[2], the definition of painting *qua* painting has been attached recently, more than it need have been, to abstract art. It is hoped, therefore, that by presenting six *painters* in this exhibition, they can be detached from an amorphous setting and, also, that the definition of painting can be extended to cope with the problem that their work presents.

What these six artists have in common is the use of objects drawn from the communications network and the physical environment of the city. Some of these objects are: flags, magazines and newspaper photographs, mass-produced objects, comic strips, advertisements. Each artist selects his subject matter from what is known not only to himself, but also to others, before he begins work. Subject matter provides a common ground, either for intimacy or for dissent, as it does not in abstract or realist painting. When the subject matter consists of pre-existing conventional signs and common images, however, we can properly speak of a known, shared

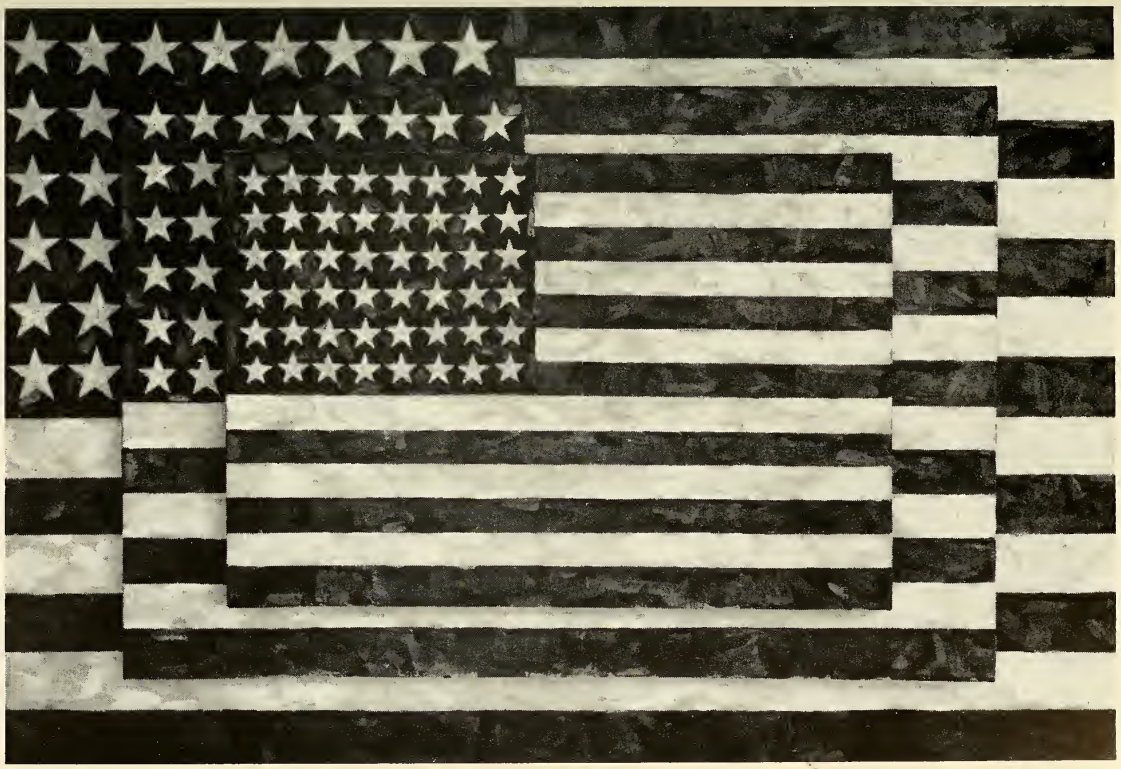
subject matter. This approach to the city is, of course, the common ground between the object-makers and the painters. However, the translation of the urban object into a painted sign involves the painters in very different procedures from the object-makers. Let us consider some of the different ways in which six painters make signs of their chosen objects.

Jasper Johns' images are complete and whole: his maps are co-extensive with a known geography; his flags unfurled. His art-historical importance rests particularly on his early work in which he found a way to reconcile the flatness required of painting by all esthetic theories of the 20th century, with figurative references which the demand for flatness had tended to subdue or expunge. What he did was to filter objects through the formal requirements of a flat painting style. It was, of course, the Dadaists who had released the potential of use and meaning for art in common objects and signs, but the assimilation of such objects to a rigorous and delicate painting standard was a new development. (Johns accomplished this, it should be remembered, in the mid-50s, when New York painters were open to far fewer alternatives than is now the case.)

The use of complete signs or objects involves the artists in a certain kind of spatial organization. Displays tend to be symmetrical, or, at least, orderly, with the area of the painting identified fully with the presented forms. Dine, like Johns in this respect, presents his signs and his objects, such as clothing or tools wholistically or sequentially (as in the series paintings in which color changes or other transformations take place). Warhol, as a rule, presents his monolithic bottles or cans intact; where his images are incomplete or hazy, they are repeated, and the repetition of the basic unit introduces a regular order which the single image may not possess. Rauschenberg, in his recent paintings with silk-screen images printed from photographs, uses incomplete but legible images. Order is established not by using forms but by the recurrence of evocative fragments.

The element of time in the use of popular art sources by artists is important, in view of the criticism that their work is exclusively and blindingly topical. In fact, however, Johns' flags are pre-Alaskan and pre-Hawaiian, though still legible as the stars-and-stripes, a stable sign. Dine's objects, painted or literally present, are not conspicuously new, but rather functional objects without a fast rate of style-change; they are timeless like a hardware store, or a Sears-Roebuck catalogue, rather than smart and up-to-date like a slick magazine or an LP record-sleeve. Lichtenstein's references to comic strips have been accused, by those who only know art, of being too close to real comic strips. However, a group of professional comics artists (at National Periodical Publications), judged them as definitely not mirror images of current comics style. The professionals regarded Lichtenstein's paintings derived from comic strips as strongly 'decorative' and backward-looking. Robert Rauschenberg's images, the traces of original newsprint material of

Jasper Johns *THREE FLAGS. 1958.*
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York.



radar bowls and baseball players, etc., are so elaborately processed, by overlapping and corroding of contours and planes, that their topicality is opposed, though not cancelled, in a timeless blur. The general point to be drawn from these observations is that the presence of topical elements in a painting should not be supposed to constitute the total content of the work. In fact, the more sensitive one is to the original topical material, the more aware one becomes of the extent of its transformation by the artist, the spreading of the ephemeral image in time.

Rauschenberg's main work has been in what he calls the 'combine-painting', a mixed media art including objects, but he has recently painted a series of black and white paintings containing silk-screen images. He explained to Gene Swenson: 'Could I deal with images in an oil painting as I had dealt with them in the transfer drawings and the lithographs? I had been working so extensively on sculpture; I was ready to try substituting the image, by means of the photographic silk-screen, for objects'[3]. Here is a clear statement of the process of transformation that any object must undergo in order to function as a sign in a painting. Rauschenberg's paintings are partly the reproduction of legible and learnable images and partly the *traces* of a physical process of work (the pressure and density of the paint, often modifying very strongly the constituent silk-screen image).

The custom of quotation is not a new one, though Lichtenstein's use of popular sources, and his preservation of the original's stylistic character, has disconcerted critics. Sir Joshua Reynolds observed: 'It is generally allowed, that no man need be ashamed of copying the ancients: their works are considered as a magazine of common property, always open to the public, whence every man has a right to take what material he pleases'[4]. Popular art has replaced classical art as 'common property', but the point of such borrowings has not changed much. There is still (1) a legible reference to somebody else's work and (2) the transformation of the quotation, before one's eyes, by a new, personal use. Lichtenstein fulfils both functions, frankly declaring his sources and, at the same moment, setting them in a new context. Not only does he make numerous formal adjustments in his borrowings, there is, also, the spectacular increase in scale, whereby very small sources become monumental. *Head—Yellow and Black*, for example, was a thumbnail sketch from the yellow pages of the Manhattan phone book; *Flatten, Sand Fleas* is isolated and blown up from one episode in a war comic (about the education of a rookie by a tough sergeant). Lichenstein's images spring into largeness; part of their impact is the dilation of minute originals, their sequential flow dramatically arrested. Giantism, the enlargement of objects and images, characterises his work, as it does others'. Rosenquist blows up fragmentary but solid forms to billboard scale; Dine's clothing is often on the scale of a Times Square advertisement, or a Neanderthal wardrobe.

Robert Rauschenberg

OVERCAST I. 1962.
Lent by Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

Jim Dine

A 1935 PALETTE. 1960-61
Collection Franklin Konigsberg, New York

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Lenders

Mr. and Mrs. Charles H. Carpenter, Jr., New Canaan, Connecticut, Franklin Konigsberg, New York, Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. List, New York, Mr. and Mrs. Leon Mnuchin, New York, Mr. and Mrs. Morton G. Neumann, Chicago, Myron Orlofsky, White Plains, New York, Stanley Posthorn, New York, Mr. and Mrs. Robert A. Rowan, Pasadena, California, Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull, New York, Mrs. Ileana Sonnabend, Paris, Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Ithaca, New York; Leo Castelli Gallery, Green Gallery, Stable Gallery, all in New York; Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles.

JIM DINE

FOUR PICTURES OF PICABIA. 1960.
Oil on canvas, 4 sections, 45⅜ x 13⅛″ each.
Collection Stanley Posthorn, New York.

A 1935 PALETTE. 1960-1961. Oil on plywood, 72 x 48″.
Collection Franklin Konigsberg, New York.

COAT. 1961. Oil and collage on canvas, 80 x 60⅜″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Charles H. Carpenter, Jr., New Canaan, Connecticut.

TATTOO. 1961. Oil on canvas, 60⅛ x 48″.
Private Collection, New York.

THE PLANT BECOMES A FAN. 1961-1963.
Charcoal on canvas, 60 x 144⅛″ (4 sections).
Lent by the artist.

JASPER JOHNS

TANGO. 1955. Encaustic with newspaper on canvas and music box, 43 x 56¾″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York.

GREEN TARGET. 1955. Encaustic on newspaper on canvas, 60⅛ x 60⅛″.
Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Richard S. Zeisler Fund.

WHITE FLAG. 1955-1958.
Encaustic and newspaper on canvas, 52¼ x 78⅜″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York.

NUMBERS IN COLOR. 1958-1959. Encaustic and newspaper on canvas, 67x49⅝″.
Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N. Y., Gift of Seymour H. Knox.

THREE FLAGS. 1958. Encaustic on canvas, 30⅞ x 45⅝″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York.

FALSE START. 1959. Oil on canvas, 67¾ x 53″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull, New York.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I CAN SEE THE WHOLE ROOM AND THERE'S NO ONE IN IT. 1961.
Oil on canvas, 48⅛ x 48⅛″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York.

ICE CREAM SODA. 1962. Oil on canvas, 64 x 32¼″.
Collection Myron Orlofsky, White Plains, New York.

HEAD–YELLOW AND BLACK. 1962. Oil on canvas, 48 x 48″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York.

LIVE AMMO. 1962. Oil on canvas (group of 6 sections).
Section 1, 68 x 56″; *Section 2*, 68 x 36″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Morton G. Neumann, Chicago.
Section 5, 68 x 68″.
Lent by Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles.

FEMME AU CHAPEAU. 1962. Oil on canvas, 68 x 56″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York.

FLATTEN, SAND FLEAS. 1962. Oil on canvas, 34 x 44″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Leon A. Mnuchin, New York.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

UNTITLED. 1953-1954. Combine-painting on canvas, 79½ x 96¼″ (3 sections).
Collection Mrs. Ileana Sonnabend, Paris.

FACTUM II. 1957. Combine-painting on canvas, 61⅜ x 35⅝″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Morton G. Neumann, Chicago.

MIGRATION. 1959. Combine-painting on canvas, 50 x 40⅛″.
Collection Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Ithaca, New York.

OVERCAST I. 1962. Oil and silk screen ink on canvas, 96¾ x 72″.
Lent by Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

OVERCAST II. 1962. Oil and silk screen ink on canvas, 94⅞ x 72″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. List, New York.

JUNCTION. 1963. Oil, aluminum and silk screen ink on canvas, 45½ x 61½″.
Lent by Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

JAMES ROSENQUIST

ZONE. 1960. Oil on canvas, 95 x 96″ (2 sections).
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York.

THE LINES WERE ETCHED DEEPLY ON HER FACE.
1962. Oil on canvas, 66¼ x 78¼″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull, New York.

FOUR 1949 GUYS. 1962. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48⅛″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull, New York.

MAYFAIR. 1962. Oil on canvas, 42 x 70″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Leon A. Mnuchin, New York.

UNTITLED. 1962. Oil on canvas, 84 x 72″.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert A. Rowan, Pasadena.

ANDY WARHOL

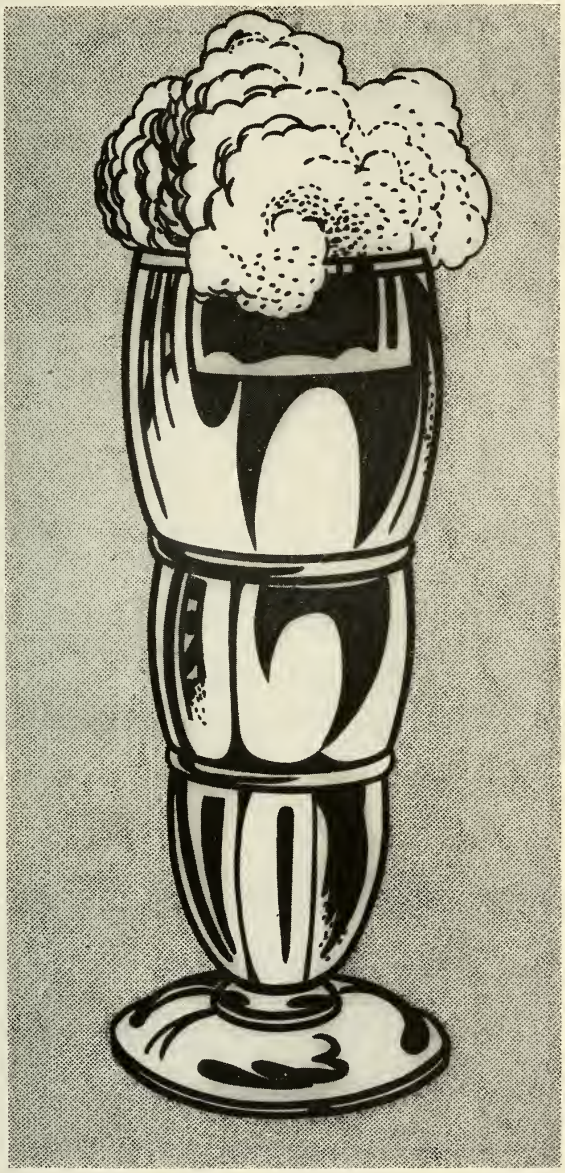
DICK TRACY. 1960. Casein on canvas, 70⅛ x 52½″.
Lent by the artist.

BEFORE AND AFTER, 3. 1962. Liquitex on canvas, 72⅛ x 99⅞″.
Lent by Stable Gallery, New York.

MARILYN. 1962. Liquitex and silk screen ink, 80¾ x 113¾″ (2 sections).
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York.

THE MEN IN HER LIFE. 1962. Liquitex and silk screen ink, 81⅞ x 81⅞″.
Lent by Stable Gallery, New York.

SILVER DISASTER, NO. 6. 1963. Liquitex and silk screen ink, 42 x 60″.
Lent by Stable Gallery, New York.



Roy Lichtenstein *ICE CREAM SODA. 1962.*
Collection Myron Orlofsky, White Plains, New York.

II

'There is some point to Shaftesbury's remark that the invention of prints was to English culture during the 18th century what the invention of printing had been earlier to the entire Republic of letters'. observed Jean H. Hagstrum.[5] Prints familiarized artists with a body of art works that could be assimilated into general experience. in the absence of the originals. These repeatable images. which dispensed with the notion that uniqueness was essential to art. reached a large audience indiscriminately. Prints are the beginning of the mass media explosion. The use of prints accelerated until. by the late 19th century. mass-produced prints. sometimes by anonymous artists. provided an *alternate* tradition to the arts of painting and sculpture. Anton Ridder van Rappard is remembered as the friend who told Van Gogh that *The Potato Eaters* was a terrible mistake. but Van Gogh's letters to him. written in the early 1880s[6]. have a recurring theme of the greatest interest. There is constant discussion of popular graphic art as something equal to fine art. and possibly better. Of a drawing in *Punch* magazine of the Tzar on his death bed. Van Gogh wrote: 'If such a thing is possible. it has even more sentiment than Holbein's *Totentanz*'. And in another letter he listed admired subjects in illustrated magazines: *The Foundling. A Queue in Paris During the Seige. The Girl I Left Behind Me. Waning of the Honeymoon. Labourer's Meeting. Lifeboat. Sunday Evening at Sea. Mormon Tabernacle. Cabin of Emigrant's Ship.* This list of subjects shows that popular art had characteristics of its own with sufficient vitality to form a tradition of its own. different from the main line in the fine arts. The late paintings of Georges Seurat, as Robert Herbert has pointed out. with their flat linearism and show business subjects (cabaret. circus) are influenced by the posters of Jules Cheret[7]. The artists' sensitivity to popular art was widespread in the 19th century. and one other example might be cited. the art critic Champfleury. who recorded: 'I published in 1850. in the *National*. a preliminary fragment on folk art. It was concerned with barroom decoration *(imagerie de cabaret)*. faience. caricature'[8]. Here. as in the cases of Van Gogh and Seurat. popular art is assigned its own traditions. in the urban mass of the population. and linked to topical events.

The use of popular art sources by artists has been widespread since the 18th century. though not much charted. Courbet. who seems to have used popular engravings in some of his paintings[9], handled form with an abrupt. schematic quality which. to his contemporaries' eyes. was polemically naïve. In Courbet. popular art was equated with a pastoral society. with. that is to say. Folk Art traditions. This connection led logically to nostalgic and exotic primitivism. in Gauguin's work in both Brittany and Polynesia. for instance. and thence to numerous 20th century revival styles. However. another current identified popular art neither with the products of unchanging peasants nor with unspoiled natives. but with the vernacular art of the city.

James Rosenquist — *FOUR 1949 GUYS. 1962.*
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull, New York.

Andy Warhol — *BEFORE AND AFTER, 3. 1962.*
Lent by Stable Gallery, New York.

As in the cases of Van Gogh and Seurat, the use of popular art sources was linked with acceptance of the city as a subject for art. In the 20th century there is a consistent connection between the painting of specifically modern subjects and themes and an interest in mass-produced and popular art. Purism, for example, selected as objects for still-life 'those which are like extensions of man's limbs, and thus of an extreme intimacy, and banality that makes them barely exist as objects of interest in themselves'[10]. Léger, who was associated closely with the Purists, argued for the equality of mass-produced objects and nature: 'Every object, created or manufactured, may carry in itself an intrinsic beauty just like all phenomena of the natural order'[11]. As a result of his conviction that 'beauty is everywhere', Léger not only praised mass-produced objects but extended his esthetic to take in popular art as well. In a passage of praise for window-dressing, in the 20s still a fresh and expanding form of display, he declared: 'The street has become a permanent exhibition of ever-growing importance'[12]. He criticised the Renaissance for leaving us with 'its ecstasy for the fine subject' and its 'hideous hypertrophy of the individual'. These themes survive today in the use of Coca Cola bottles and Campbell soup cans by Warhol, or in Lichtenstein's detached depiction of common objects. Against the conspicuous assertion of individualism, by paint handling, for example, Warhol and Lichtenstein collaborate with (usually unknown) popular artists. Lichtenstein's collaborators are comic strip artists or commercial artists and Warhol collaborates with Campbell's packaging department or, in his portraits of Coca Cola bottles, with Raymond Loewy Associates. The artist deliberately confirms his individualism to a pre-existing image (which he radically transforms behind a mask of subservience).

Another aspect of popular imagery has to do not with objects but with the folklore of heroes and heroines, that spectacular parade of slowly or quickly disappearing public figures. Surrealism, with its writers sensitive to the potential of fantasy in common events, explored this area. For instance, Robert Desnos wrote about French popular novels and singled out for comment Fantômas, 'an enormously important factor in Parisian mythology and oneirology. The hero's elegant appearance and the bloody dagger he holds in his hand upset the generally accepted idea, and puts an end to the notion of a lamentable, moth-eaten assassin, clothed in rags'[13]. Recently there have been various paintings of Marilyn Monroe[14], which have been interpreted as elegies for somebody trapped in the mass media. In fact, pretentious explanations of this kind are part of the unfamiliarity writers feel at the presence of popular art sources or references in the context of fine art. The conjunction of the once-separated areas of high and popular culture has embarrassed writers whose fortunes and status are identified with the care of high

art[15]. On the contrary, mass media figures are relished for their physical grandeur, for their pervasiveness (as in Warhol's diptych), and for the drama of common intimacy they offer their consumers. The attitude towards the stars is more like that expressed by Pierre de Massot, in an article on the French music hall, in which he listed, 'The legs of Mistinguett, the breasts of Spinelly, the buttocks of Parisys, the little stomach of Pépée constitute, with Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase*, the only "poetic" realm in which I can live'[16].

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   "New Realism": term coined originally for a European group of artists, but lately applied to American art (see Bibliography no. 1);
   "Sign Painters": (see Bibliography no. 8);
   "American Dream Painting": (see Bibliography no. 18). However, the imagery is not dream-like, nor is it exclusively American. The imagery of these artists is a fact of global industrialism, a real part of life and, in no sense, a dream.
   "Neo Dada": The term over-emphasizes the connections with Dada that do exist, but the comparison is usually vitiated by inadequate definitions of what the original Europeans were in fact doing.
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13. Desnos, Robert. "Imagerie Moderne", *Documents*, vol. 7, Paris, 1929, p. 377.
14. "The Growing Cult of Marilyn", *Life*, vol. 54, no. 4, January 24, 1963, p. 89-91.
15. For the historical roots of the high art/popular art dialogue, debate, or quarrel, see Lowenthal, Leo, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1961, especially chapters 2 and 3.
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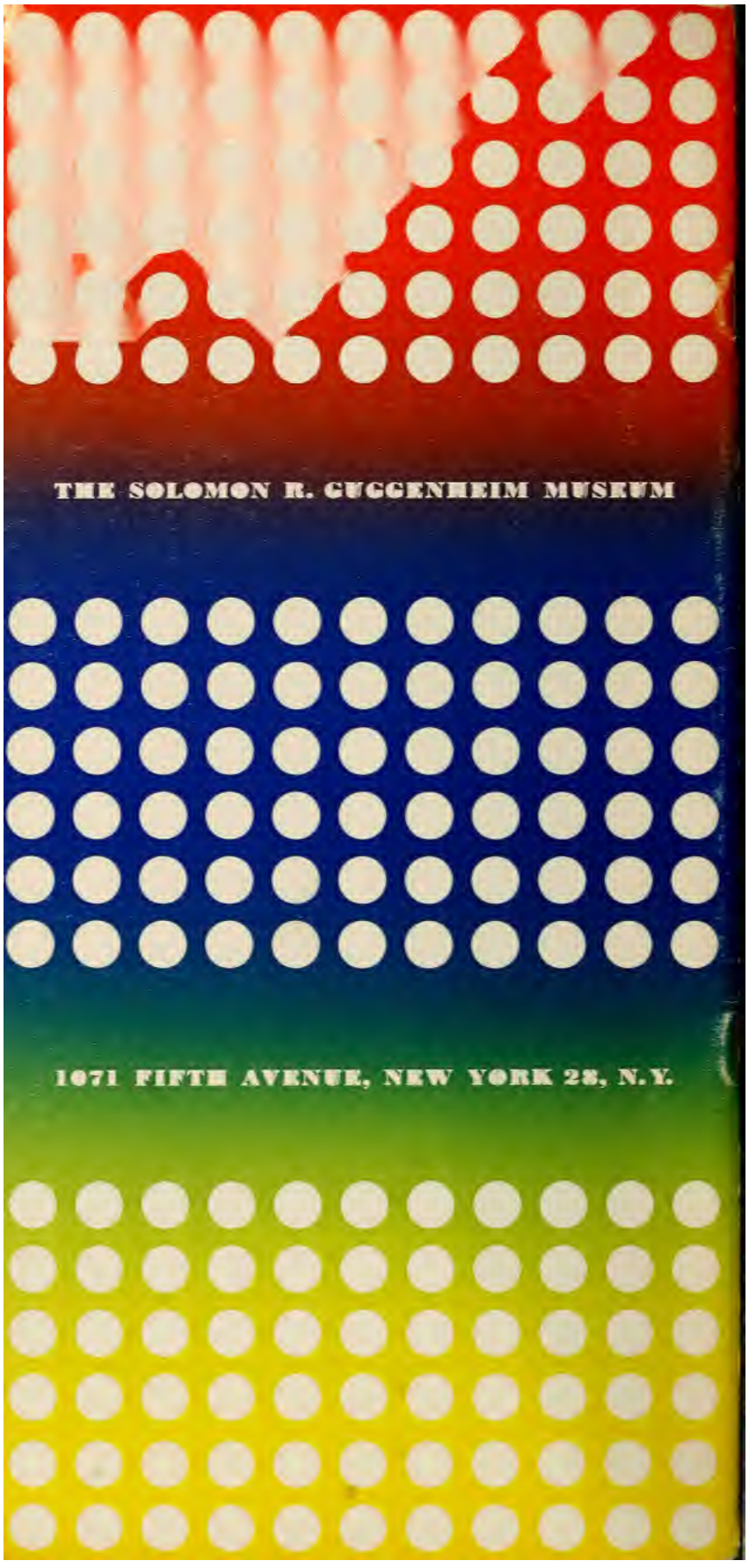
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