

LEARNING TO PAINT: A BRITISH ART STUDENT AND ART SCHOOL 1956-61

JOHN A. WALKER



1 'Margaret Clark & John A. Walker', Grimsby, circa 1959. Photo: John A. Walker.

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Currently I work as an art historian and critic but when I was a child and teenager, my ambition was to become an artist. The following essay is an account of the education I received at a leading British, provincial School of Art during the late 1950s/early 1960s. I have tried to describe the experience as objectively as possible but a subjective dimension is inescapable. The particular concatenation of experiences and influences I describe was unique to me; nevertheless, other students belonging to the same generation shared many of those experiences. I hope this individual testimony will be of value in the future to scholars researching the history of twentieth century British art and art education, and will be regarded as more than a nostalgic memoir.

As the child of working class parents living in a provincial fishing port, the institutions known as 'universities' were unknown to me until my art teacher at grammar school – Ernest Worrall (1898-1972) – suggested I apply to one. This is how I came to attend the Department of Fine Art (also called the King Edward VII School of Art), located within King's College, a campus situated in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which was then part of the University of Durham. The Department had a long history – its origins can be traced back to 1837. The fact that it awarded a B.A. honours degree in Fine Art was unusual at the time because most art schools awarded an N.D.D. (National Diploma in Design). I studied there for five years from 1956-61. The course was four years long – so it was equivalent to the standard three-year art school course plus the so-called foundation year – but I did an extra year because I was awarded a Hatton Scholarship (a prize that enabled a few students to postpone taking their degree for a year).

Admission to the Department was via 'A' levels (one was expected to have at least 'A' level art and a foreign language) and via a practical examination. In my own case, I was excused the practical examination because the Department's Director – Professor Lawrence Gowing – gave me an interview and approved my portfolio of watercolours and oil paintings. Practical examinations were part of



2 'Professor Lawrence Gowing in his Newcastle studio', 1957. Photo source: *Lawrence Gowing*, (London: Serpentine Gallery/Arts Council of Great Britain, 1983), exhibition catalogue, p. 60.



3 John A. Walker, 'Still life painting influenced by cubism, exam piece', 1957. Oil on cardboard.
Lost or destroyed.

the assessment process during the early part of the Department's curriculum too: for example, I recall having to paint a still-life picture in just four hours. In the final year, the degree was awarded on the basis of an exhibition of work plus an art-historical dissertation of 10,000 words.

The Department had three schools: painting, sculpture and design. Design included printed textiles and stained

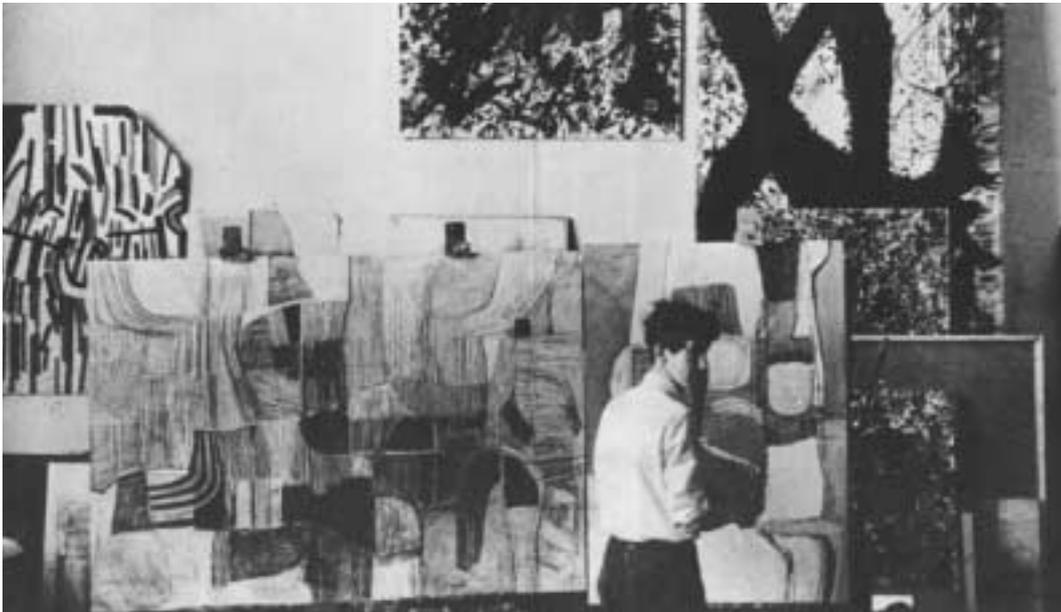
glass. In addition to these subjects, basic design, printmaking, life - drawing, and the history of art were taught. During the first year, students were regularly taught in groups; they were set projects and given a range of exercises to perform in formal, classroom-type situations. Like current foundation years, they were exposed to a variety of materials, media and techniques. Again, like present-day foundation courses, the first year served a 'diagnostic' function - students could discover what media and practices interested them and suited their abilities. As time passed, students were allowed more and more freedom until their work became entirely self-directed. Students were also encouraged to specialise in particular art forms - in my own case, it was to be painting. Discipline was stricter then than now: attendance was required every day and there was a signing in book that was removed at 9.30 am.

THE STUDENTS



4 'Margaret Clark (top) and Pauline Armstrong (bottom)', circa 1958-60.
Photos: John A. Walker.

Student populations in British universities at that time were predominantly male. However, the Department was exceptional in being roughly 50/50 in terms of gender. (This equality of representation did not apply to members of staff who were mostly male.) Female students pursued all the various forms of art but the majority tended to gravitate towards design areas – such as printed-textiles – for the reasons feminist art historians have since identified, but also because there were job prospects in the realms of fashion, fabric and interior design. Fashion design was not a taught subject but students such as Pauline Armstrong, Margaret Clark and Rosemary Preece often dressed in the latest fashions, which they made themselves by copying designs illustrated in the latest issues of fashion magazines. As I recall, all the students were white and most were aged eighteen. A few male students were older because they had spent two years doing National Service in the armed forces. (One of these had the amusing name Matt Rugg. A talented abstract painter, he was awarded a first class degree,



5 'Matt Rugg in front of two of his abstract paintings in Room 2', circa 1960. Photo source: *The Prospectus of the Department of Fine Art 1960-61*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: King's College, University of Durham, 1961).

moved to London and taught for many years at Chelsea School of Art.) Like myself, many students had been educated in grammar schools. They came from all regions of Britain and I estimate that most of them were drawn from the lower-middle and working classes.

THE STAFF



6 'Victor Pasmore in front of one of his abstract paintings', 1960. Photo: Richard Hamilton, source: Ronald A. Davey, *Victor Pasmore 1958-60*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Hatton Gallery, 1960), exhibition catalogue, title page.

Although I was ignorant of the fact when I arrived in autumn 1956, the staff included some of the most prestigious names in British art: Gowing, the Director, was a painter, scholar and curator (he was Director from 1948 to 1958; in 1959 Kenneth Rowntree, another painter, replaced him); Victor Pasmore, the master of painting was one of Britain's leading abstract, constructionist artists; Richard Hamilton, his chief assistant and

lecturer in design, was a versatile artist, designer, curator and intellectual who was soon to become known as a 'father of pop art'. Other staff I remember were: Eric Dobson (drawing and painting lecturer); John McCheyne (master of sculpture); Geoffrey Dudley (sculpture lecturer); Leonard Evetts (master of design); Helen Dalby (textile design lecturer); Louisa Hodgson (teacher of technical methods); John Dunn, who taught ceramics; and three art historians: Quentin Bell – a direct link to the Bloomsbury Group – Ralph B. Holland and Ronald A. Davey; Ian Stephenson and Roy Ascott (students who, after graduating, were employed for a time as studio demonstrators).

Scott Campbell, who produced wooden relief constructions made from broken furniture, was an administrative assistant. He, along with two secretaries – Elizabeth Whitfield and Anne Mitcheson, coped with approximately 15 staff and 150 students.

THE CAMPUS AND BUILDING

King's College was/is conveniently located in the northern part of the City of Newcastle, at the top of College Road (now called King's Walk), off Barras Bridge. In one direction, it was short walk to the main streets and shops of Newcastle; in another, it was a brief stroll to the Hancock Museum (a natural history collection) and the vast expanse of the town moor (where funfairs were held). The Campus was also close to Jesmond, a middle-class suburb where many students found accommodation in bed sits and flats and took exercise in the beauty spot Jesmond Dene. Newcastle was then a northern industrial city with working class slums but it had a dramatic setting along the slopes of the River Tyne spanned by a famous steel road bridge (1928) and its central



7 'The George V Tyne Road Bridge', n.d. Photo: Philipson Studio, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.



8 'View of Grey Street', circa 1890. Print. Richard Grainger and John Dobson created the curved, classical-style Street in the 1830s. The Monument to Earl Grey is visible as is the portico of the Theatre Royal opened in 1837.

core had some elegant architecture, such as Grey Street, and many cultural institutions.

I soon gained the impression there was a wide gulf between 'town' and 'gown': little contact or interaction took place between the intellectual life of the university and the local Geordie culture with its strong dialect, shipyard toil, thirst for Newcastle Brown Ale and fanatical support for Newcastle United football club. (I gained some knowledge of this culture by marrying the daughter of a Geordie shipyard worker.) However, the University did have an extra mural department and classes in art were given to local people in the Department during the evenings. What students and local people did

share was the mass culture medium of the cinema. American movies like Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) attracted full houses. The 1950s was an era of Cold War between East and West and so any unusual behaviour on the part of art students, such as painting in Northumberland Street during charity rag weeks, elicited such remarks from local people as 'they must be communists'.



9 'View of the Department of Fine Art from College Road with Student Union building on the left'. 1960s?
Photo source: David Dougan, *Newcastle Past and Present*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Frank Graham, 1971).

The Department itself was housed in two buildings making up one corner of the quadrangle around which several departments of King's College clustered. One building was a red brick, neo-Tudor structure; the other neo-classical. The neo-Tudor building stretched above a double archway that gave access to the quadrangle, so the windows above the arches were key vantage points in observing the movement of people along College Road and the quadrangle. Also within view was

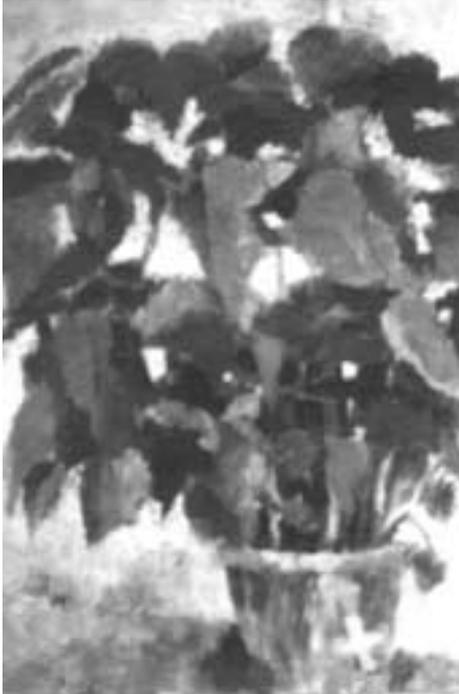
the Student Union building with its debating, eating and recreational facilities. A popular meeting place was called 'The Bun Room'. In 1958, CND marchers with traditional jazz bands assembled in front of the Union to set off for protest marches. I am ashamed to admit that I did not join them because at the time, I was politically illiterate and thought art had nothing to do with politics.

Entrance to the Department was via the neo-classical building just through the archways. It had an imposing entrance hall, with a marble floor, dominated by a large plaster cast of a classical sculpture. Similar casts appeared in other rooms. They gave the impression – false in my view – of continuity between the cultures of Ancient Greece and Rome and that of 1950s' Britain. Their main value was to serve as motifs in the background of still-life paintings. Rooms were generally high and airy, with tall, north-facing windows giving good light.

Off the entrance hall were administration offices, a lecture theatre, a library and a shop selling artists' tools and materials. The main support used by painting students was a cheap variety of cardboard, which soon warped; consequently, many students resorted to hardboard – a new and stronger material smooth on one side and textured on the other – that had become available in the recently established Do-It-Yourself shops of the period. Since my hometown was the fishing port Grimsby, during vacations I visited the docks to buy densely woven sailcloth to use as canvas. The student-grade oil pigments sold in the shop were of low quality and were subject to fading. Whenever I could afford them, I preferred to buy artists' oil colours.

Also off the entrance hall was the Hatton Gallery, a large room named in 1925 after the memory of Richard G. Hatton, the first Professor of Fine Art in the University. It housed temporary exhibitions and student

final shows. Pasmore and Hamilton also used it from time to time to mount experimental exhibits.



10 John A. Walker, 'Plant painting', 1956. Oil on cardboard. Lost or destroyed.

The two upper floors and attics of the building were devoted to painting studios, some for the use of students and some for the use of staff; there was a life-drawing room; stained glass and printed textile studios; a humid conservatory for the study of plant life; and a studio in which tables were laden with plants, bottles, pots and pans for the purpose of still-life painting; third and fourth year students who favoured abstraction gravitated to Room 2. In the basement were a number of cool,

sculpture workshops devoted to clay modeling, stone and wood carving, and plaster work.

An overspill of students, usually those in their final year, were accommodated in a one-storey, temporary building called 'the hut' at the rear of the main buildings (I recall a full-length pin up of Brigitte Bardot on the wall); and some individual studios were provided in rooms in houses in Eldon Street, a nearby Georgian terrace. On Barras Bridge, there was a bookshop that served King's College. Unlike today, art books were rare but occasionally I discovered and bought paperbacks about American artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and the younger generation who followed the abstract expressionists.

The students allocated individual studios worked very much in isolation. I remember only one tutorial from Pasmore in my final year and I had to arrange it myself. Hamilton began teaching at Newcastle in 1953 and stopped in 1966. As he recalls in his book *Collected Words 1953-1982* (1982), he discovered there were unused etching and lithography facilities and since he was a printmaker as well as a painter he began to offer evening classes to students who wanted to learn printing techniques. I did not avail myself of this opportunity but Rita Donagh, a gifted fellow student, did. She was eventually to become a tutor in several art schools, a British artist noted for her depictions of the tragic events in Northern Ireland and Hamilton's second wife.

MODERN ART

Despite the continuation of instruction in ancient, academic practices such as life-drawing, the main, underlying aesthetic ideology of the Department was modernism. (It could be argued there were several



11 John A. Walker, 'Self-portrait' [influenced by Cézanne], circa 1957. Oil on hardboard, 48 x 38 cm. Artist's collection.

varieties of modernism; the one at Newcastle was depoliticised even though Hamilton was a Labour Party supporter.) During the 1930s, Gowing and Pasmore had belonged to the Euston Road School and both had been strongly influenced by post-impressionism. Many students regarded the art of Cézanne, Degas, Seurat, Gauguin and Van Gogh as their natural starting

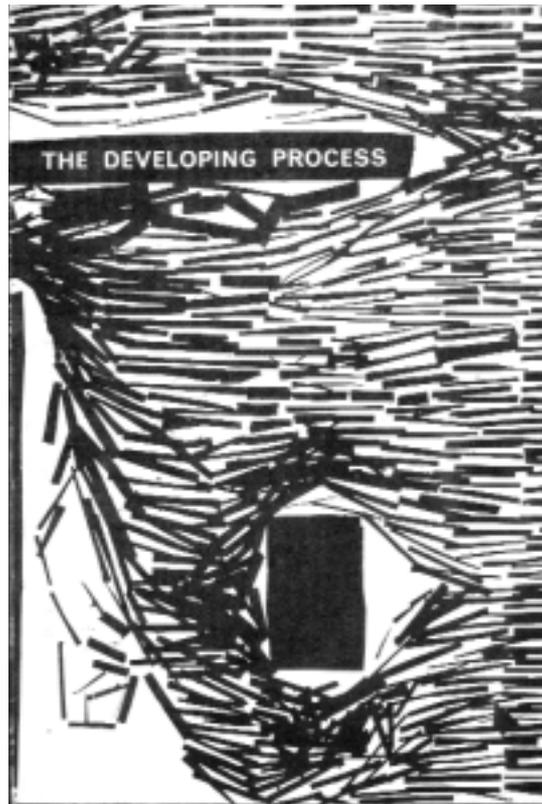
points. In my own case, I had been overwhelmed by the large-scale Van Gogh exhibition, which had toured Britain in 1955. Van Gogh's bold use of colour was to influence my painting immensely and I also wrote about his colour theories to fulfil the final year art-history requirement. (1) In 1958, Thames & Hudson published a three-volume edition of Vincent's complete letters. Buying them made a considerable dent in my local authority maintenance grant. I remember gaining considerable pleasure from art-historical research and from writing (this anticipated a future shift from making art to writing and teaching about it as an art critic and art historian). My dissertation stressed the rational dimension of Van Gogh's art and thought because I had quickly come to dislike the notion one had to be a mad genius to be an artist, that his work was the result of insanity. His work had emotional, expressionistic aspects but it was also reasoned, realistic and symbolic.

Cézanne was another important influence. In my first year, I wrote an essay on his paintings for Professor Gowing; much to my chagrin, at the end of a feedback tutorial he presented me with a copy of the catalogue for a Cézanne exhibition he had curated in Edinburgh in 1954. His introduction revealed what professional, art-historical writing was like – so much better than my own feeble effort. Gowing also spoke enthusiastically about the drawings of Seurat, which I had trouble appreciating. I also recall an impressive lecture by Ronald A. Davey on Degas and the theme of time. Therefore, it seemed logical for a young painter to begin with the post-impressionists and then to work one's way through the subsequent evolution of modern art – fauvism, cubism, Mondrian and De Stijl, etc. – until one reached the present day. In retrospect, it appears that the implicit assumption was that the evolution of modern art was a linear and logical progression towards

abstraction (this was certainly Pasmore's view and the story of his own artistic development). At the end of the course, one emerged into the world with a style of art that matched the most up-to-date style then current (in my own case, hard-edge abstraction). It should be noted that not all students followed this progression; many remained figurative artists and were inspired by such masters of the past as Nicolas Poussin.

THE BASIC DESIGN COURSE

What also made the Department one of the most advanced and progressive in the country was the basic design course – referred to then as 'basic form' or the 'foundation course' – that was taught to first year students in groups and in blocks of time. Students were set exercises addressing the fundamentals of all art and design, that is, point, line, shape, colour, tone, texture, form, structure and space. We were also instructed in techniques favoured by surrealists such as Max Ernst, frottage for example. The basic design exercises taught at Newcastle and a few other art schools in the 1950s were influenced by natural science,



12 'Front cover of *The Developing Process* booklet'. 1959. The exercise featured on the cover, set by Hamilton, involved imagining what would happen when a flow of particles encountered a number of pre-established forms.

modern science and technology. They were an attempt to introduce objective, analytical and rational methods into art education to counter the emphasis on intuition and self-expression, the development of personal touch or 'handwriting' and pictorial styles. They have been described in detail in several publications, so I will not repeat their contents here. (2) However, one of these publications – *The Developing Process* (1959) – appeared during my time as a student; it illustrated anonymous examples of the kind of work produced as a result of the exercises we were set. In fact, this booklet was a joint venture between the art departments of King's College and Leeds University and was published to accompany an exhibition held at the ICA in London. The show and the booklet naturally communicated to us a sense that we were participating in an art-educational experiment of national importance. One purpose of the basic design course was to provide all students with a common starting point; another was to destroy any preconceptions about the nature of art that students might have acquired at primary and secondary schools. (When, in 1962, I worked as a supply teacher in Hackney, I discovered the basic design course was already being taught in London secondary schools.) In 1956, I was unaware that the exercises set were derived from the preliminary course at the Bauhaus established by Johannes Itten in 1919, from the *Thinking Eye* notebooks of Paul Klee, and from books on organic form and natural processes such as D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form* (1917). Hamilton's exercises derived from Thompson drew attention to the creation of natural forms via the action of outer and inner forces; thus, they emphasized dynamism, processes, and transformations over time.

Although I still believe the basic design course represented the most

advanced art-educational ideas available in Britain during the 1950s, in terms of the continent of Europe most of those ideas were decades old. In other words, there was an absurdly long delay in the assimilation of modern art and design in Britain. Furthermore, as I later argued in an article published in *Art Monthly*, in Britain – unlike Germany – the basic design course exercises were disconnected for the most part from industrial design and architecture (although Pasmore himself was involved in architecture and Hamilton was involved with graphic and industrial design), and took place in a socio-political vacuum. (3) At Newcastle, the only logical outcome of basic design course exercises for the fine art students appeared to be abstract paintings and constructions. (This is what happened in my own case and in the case of painters like Matt Rugg, Ian Stephenson, Noel Forster and Mary Webb.) In Hamilton's opinion, such an outcome was a 'distortion' of basic design studies. In his view, their general purpose was to stimulate in students 'a plastic sensibility'. However, their formal and analytical character did encourage abstraction. Students were taught to analyse and explore the elements of art and design but little or no advice was given concerning their re-combination or synthesis; the issue of content was also neglected even though Hamilton's first pop paintings were rich in subject matter.

Unfortunately, there was little demand for abstract painting in Britain during the late 1950s and early 1960s; consequently, my prospects of making a living as a painter after art school were virtually nil. (And so it was to prove. However, I also changed direction because I became dissatisfied with abstraction.) Adjacent to the Department was a School of Architecture. As I recall, there was no dialogue between the two apart from one week in which joint student projects were arranged.

The period of time allotted to this interdisciplinary venture was too short for anything of substance to be achieved. The individualist character of art students also made collaboration extremely difficult. (The total inability of the art students to work together on a common project was illustrated by the fact that the engineering students always designed and built the best floats for the annual, rag week processions.) The fact that art and architecture were taught separately (except in art-history lectures) illustrated the deep division that had developed between them over the centuries. During the 1950s, however, there were sporadic attempts to bring art and architecture together. (Basil Spence's commissions to artists for sculptures, glass windows, etc., during the building of Coventry Cathedral were notable examples). From the Festival of Britain onwards, Pasmore had created a number of murals, mobiles and reliefs for public buildings including two identical reliefs – 'Mural Construction, White, Black and Indian Red', (1956) – for the Stephenson Engineering Building in Newcastle. Furthermore, since



13 Victor Pasmore, Frank Dixon & Peter Daniel, 'Basic House type at Peterlee, South West Area (phase 1)', late 1950s. Photo source: Ronald Alley, *Victor Pasmore: Retrospective Exhibition 1925-65*, (London: Tate Gallery, 1965)

1955 he had been employed as Consultant Architectural Designer to the new town of Peterlee then being erected in County Durham. With some friends, I visited Peterlee one rainy day to see what influence Pasmore was having on the architecture. To some extent, the facades of the houses looked like his abstract wooden reliefs and their white and mauve colour schemes echoed his palette. However, Pasmore later explained that for him what was important was the distribution of the houses in space – ‘a sense of multi-dimensional space, mobile, modern space’. He subsequently designed a concrete structure or pavilion to span a small lake and to act as a focal point. It was an example of ‘pure architecture’. Adult local residents came to regard it as a monstrous eyesore even though their children enjoyed playing and spraying graffiti on it. (4)

LIFE-DRAWING AND STILL-LIFE PAINTING

In addition to the basic design course exercises, students had to spend blocks of time drawing and painting in the conservatory and the life-drawing and still-life rooms. Traditional, empirical methods of study were thus encouraged. One of the first painting exercises, set by Dobson, was to depict empty wine bottles arranged on long tables. (Dobson was a connoisseur of wine and Japanese prints.) This deceptively simple task was designed to give students the opportunity to master oil painting techniques and to encourage close observation of shapes, colours, transparency and reflections. A key point to emerge was that the spaces between objects were as crucial to the composition as the objects themselves. In a modern painting, that is, one that did not aim for illusionism, figure and ground were of equal importance. Hence, the imperative towards flatness and an all-over quality due to the

consistency of brush marks found, for example, in Cézanne's and Seurat's canvases. Cézanne's intense scrutiny of still-life objects and the kind of perceptual distortions that resulted, were described in individual and group criticisms.

A daily routine soon emerged: a tutor would set a group of students an exercise in the morning, then he would leave to work in his studio. At about four in the afternoon he would return to see what had transpired. There were times when we were baffled by the exercises set and misunderstood what the tutor was after, so when he returned he discovered the day had been wasted.



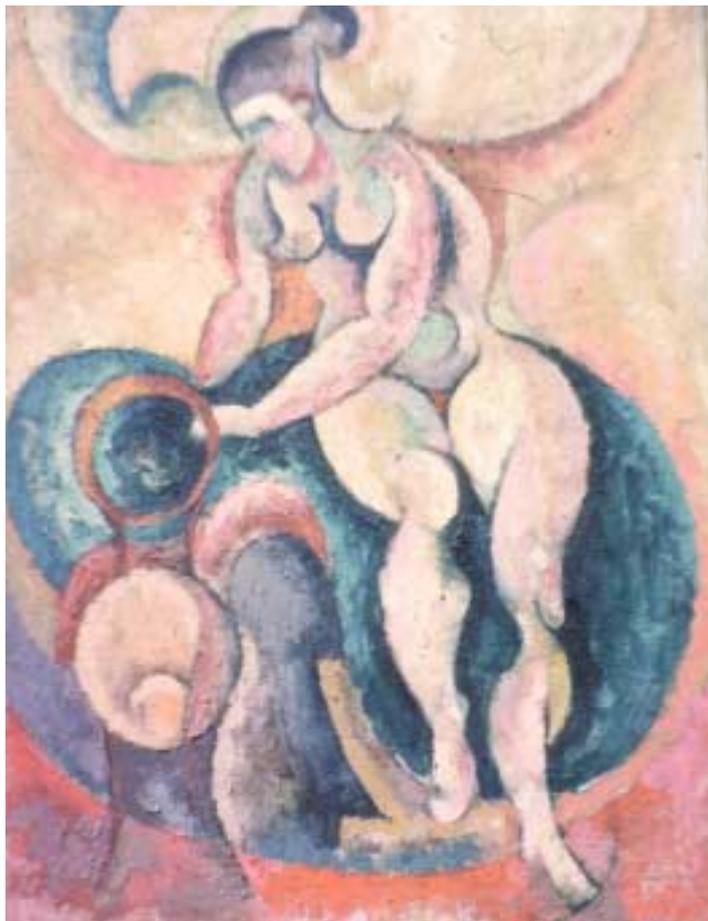
14 John A. Walker, 'Portrait of Edwin Beecroft' [influenced by Van Gogh's portraits], 1956. Oil on cardboard. Lost or destroyed. Beecroft came from Durham and looked like a teddy boy when he first arrived at Newcastle.

Close observation of nature was part of the curriculum and, of course, many students produced self-portraits and portraits of one another, and sketched landscapes in local parks and in the attractive countryside and coast of Northumberland. Excursions were made to see Hadrian's Roman Wall, Durham Cathedral, the Goya, Courbet and El Greco in the Bowes Museum Barnard Castle, and the architecture of Seaton Delaval Hall (1718-28), a

gloomy, baroque country house designed by Sir John Vanbrugh, which has a portrait by Joshua Reynolds and was once depicted by John Piper. Visits were also made to the seaside holiday resort of Whitley Bay, picture postcards of which were to be the subject of Hamilton's

paintings in 1965-66.

In the life room where the models Mrs Miller and Mrs Ryle plus a man whose name I have forgotten posed naked, the influence of the Euston Road School was evident in the objective, measuring-points-and-distances-with-a-pencil type of drawing that Dobson encouraged (this kind of drawing and painting was also fostered at the Slade under William Coldstream and Patrick George). After a while, I reacted against this kind of drawing – there seemed no point in accurate, illusionistic depictions because photography could supply them so much more efficiently. Dispassionate drawings of naked bodies also ignored their sensual/erotic character. I began to use nature merely as a



15 John A. Walker, 'Nude with apocalyptic curves', 1957. Oil on canvas, 81 x 61 cm. Collection Robert and Sophie Orman, Greenwich.

starting point for distortion and experimentation. My drawings and paintings of the female nude developed sweeping curves that Gowing once characterised as 'apocalyptic' (I had to look up the word's meaning in a dictionary). Permission to exaggerate or even alter observed colours I derived from the art of Van Gogh and Les Fauves. In two drawings of the nude, the curves became shorter and more pronounced until the result resembled the sinuous rhythms associated with baroque and rococo styles.

SCULPTURE

In the sculpture school the first exercise set was again very simple: 'make a cube out of clay'. While some students built a cube from small balls of clay, others used a spatula to slice a cube from a large lump of clay. Dudley, the tutor, was then able to point out that we had intuitively demonstrated the two, main, traditional methods of making sculpture – modelling and carving. A third method – the construction of armatures and structures from hand-twisted wire or welded-metal rods – had been exemplified in the early 1950s by the 'Geometry of Fear' sculptures of Reg Butler and others. Pasmore's works with relief elements and his three-dimensional constructions made from Perspex and wood supplied a fourth method.

I bought carving and chiselling tools plus an overall from the Department's shop and tried my hand at wood and stone carving for some months, but it proved physically exhausting, dirty and slow – it took a long time to discover one's original conception had been poor, or that the material had a flaw inside. Finding, affording and moving heavy blocks of stone or lumps of wood were also constant problems. I found it quicker and easier to construct sculptures from wire covered with white plaster (the result was somewhat similar to a bundle of barbed



EXHIBITIONISM MARS THIS SHOW
 By a "News" Correspondent

ON the whole the standard of this year's Young Contemporaries exhibition of art at the R.B.A. Galleries in London is much lower than in previous years. There is considerably more exhibitionism and most of the work of the so-called "Action Group" might be said to represent the "worst grade" of art 1940.

BACKGROUND ...
 ... By Robin Plummer

THE art student is separated from other students by two barriers—their success is measured either by finance or diploma and that they will believe that jobs, interviews, representation etc., are something for other people.

During school, students apply to the local authority for a grant. They then spend their years at the local art school working up with something or other of "National Diploma."

At the end of this time they often are placed and made to try to sell a thing. The one who has managed best is known. This means they have to take the teaching course of the A.T.C.—the Art Teacher's Unit—now.

This is a great change from both in character and ending and for the purpose of the work they do now.

Some students find that after six years they are still interested in their work, or they enter in one of the large London Colleges for a sort of post-graduate course.

It is exactly four out of three students that they find begin to produce a professional reputation.

The first art exhibition was organized by a group of students in post-graduate work combined in most schools.

The all-creative up-to-date work is usually in making something out of what they have. If the art student has a background and then it is the "thing" he should remember that for it is all exhibitionism, at least in every school in the country. The work of most of these works is extremely in the great at exhibitionism.

The art student of the home like poster and some posters which have been hung in the entrance hallway has provided the whole exhibition down to the public's work "better" picture in the 1958 year.

Within this picture, however, they are to be found other things and some things.

before the public. It was a surprise, work found in other of a high standard when the exhibition ended several people had taken the first step towards acceptance. The exhibition became an annual work-competition with the objectives of their production to improve the standard.

SCULPTURE Photograph: Douglas Wales



16 A 'News' Correspondent, 'Exhibitionism mars this show' [Young Contemporaries 1958] *N.U.S. News*, March 6, 1958, p. 6-7. Photo of wire and plaster sculpture by John A. Walker taken by Douglas Wales.

wire). An abstract sculpture of this kind was selected for the 'Young Contemporaries' exhibition held in London in 1958. Naturally, I was delighted when a photograph of it appeared in the *N.U.S. News* (the National Union of Students newspaper) but above the anonymous review was the negative headline 'Exhibitionism mars this show'. I should acknowledge that other students, such as Ron Dutton, Angela Godfrey, Derek Morris, Charles Sansbury, Gilbert Ward and Fred Watson, persisted with sculpture and were far more successful.

THE HATTON GALLERY

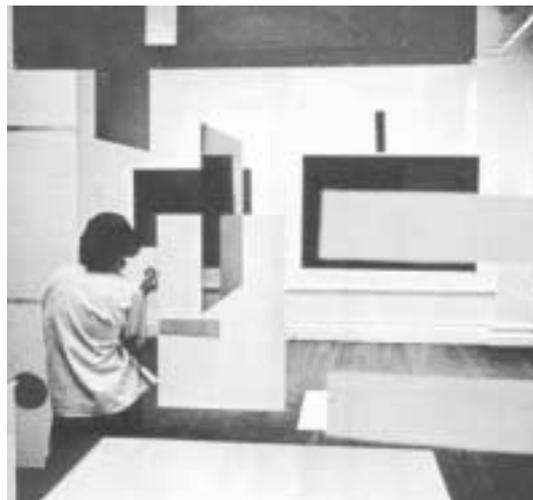
Since Newcastle was hundreds of miles north of London, students based there were disadvantaged compared to those attending London colleges because the latter had access to more public museums and private galleries. In Newcastle, there was one major public gallery – the Laing Art Gallery (its modern collection included works by Gowing,



Pasmore, William Gear, Graham Sutherland, Ruskin Spear, Matthew Smith and John Piper, and it showed travelling exhibitions) – and two private, contemporary galleries: the Univision Gallery and the Stone Gallery. Across the river in Gateshead was the Shipley Art Gallery. I recall visiting it to view a huge, religious canvas by Tintoretto and listening to an expert talk about conservation methods.

The Hatton Gallery situated within the portals of the Department, therefore, was a crucial addition to the curriculum because its temporary exhibitions enabled students to study at close quarters examples of international art. Among the exhibitions I remember were: sonorous Welsh landscapes by Martin Bloch; one featuring the ‘raw art’ of Jean Dubuffet; one devoted to the Australian painter Sidney Nolan (then a fashionable painter) and another entitled ‘Abstract Impressionism’.

Periodically, Pasmore and Hamilton used the Hatton for their own purposes. For instance, in 1957 they constructed an abstract, three-dimensional environment made from acrylic panels that varied in their



17 ‘an Exhibit’, [A spatial construction designed by Victor Pasmore and Richard Hamilton], 1957. Photo by Hamilton of installation in the Hatton Gallery. Photo source: Ronald A. Davey, *Victor Pasmore 1958-60*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Hatton Gallery, 1960), exhibition catalogue, illus 10.

hue and degree of translucency. The panels were suspended by nylon thread vertically and horizontally, and arranged in an intuitive manner in response to the space available. Pasmore added collage elements for the purpose of 'individuation'. Visitors could enter and move around within the maze-like environment. The show was entitled 'an Exhibit' and it was later shown at the ICA in London. (A second edition of 'an Exhibit' using a metal space-frame to hold the panels was mounted by Pasmore and Hamilton in 1959.) The Newcastle version of 'an Exhibit' (1957) provided, I thought, a rather tame visual and visceral experience: it was like standing in the middle of a geometric, abstract painting but was it art or interior design? Today, this kind of work would be described as 'installation art'.

THE HISTORY OF ART

Every week, in the lecture theatre, Holland and Davey gave lectures illustrated by slides. Their course provided a detailed and rather remorseless chronological survey of the whole history of Western art and architecture from Ancient Egypt to post-impressionism. For me, architecture was a new and difficult subject. I recall buying an edition of Banister Fletcher's heavy volume *A History of Architecture* employing the comparative method and trying to plough through it. The lecture course was undoubtedly educational in a general sense but was more suited to art history students than to art students. For budding artists, an unresolved problem was the history/practice relationship. If one's starting point was post-impressionism, what was the relevance of studying the Italian Renaissance? If one wanted to be an abstract painter how useful was it to learn about figurative art? Holland made trips to Italy and I recall dismissive remarks about some examples of

contemporary art he encountered there; that is, the torn posters of artists like Mimmo Rotella and Alberti Moretti. Davey dealt mainly with the modern period; consequently, I found his talks of more interest and relevance.

Art-historical knowledge was also conveyed in an informal manner by studio staff during the course of their teaching. Pasmore, for example, in setting an exercise, would often talk about cubism and constructionism, especially the work and ideas of the American artist Charles Biederman (the latter's book *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* [1948] was recommended) and he would reminisce about the time he met Picasso at London's Victoria Station when the Spaniard came to England to attend a peace conference.

Standing by one's easel, studio demonstrators like Ian Stephenson – a painter who fused cubism and the neo-impressionist dot technique – would often refer one to the art and ideas of Robert Delaunay, Piet Mondrian, Victor Vasarély or whomever was appropriate.

In addition to the art-history survey course, there were lectures by



18 Richard Hamilton, 'Photo of the audience for his lecture taken with a Land Polaroid camera', Newcastle, 1960. In the front row from left: Margaret Clark, John A. Walker and Eric Dobson. 5th from left is Roy Ascott and 2nd from right is Leonard Evetts.

members of the studio staff. I especially remember Hamilton's well-prepared talks about Duchamp's 'Green Box', which he was then designing a typographic version of for Lund Humphries (this was one of the art books I bought in Newcastle when it was published in 1960)

and aspects of mass culture: he delivered brilliant lectures on new technological developments in mass culture such as Cinemascope, Cinerama and the Edwin Land Polaroid camera. (5)

In addition, there were guest speakers from outside the University: I recall a lecture by the Jungian psychoanalyst Richard Huelsenbeck, who had once been a sound poet contributing to the Zurich and Berlin dada movements. This gave me a feeling of vertigo – to see and hear a living representative of such a notorious modern art movement. Someone – Roy Ascott I think – tried to disrupt the lecture with a dada-type gesture – by playing the national anthem on a gramophone – but Huelsenbeck was unimpressed by this prank. Being ignorant about dada, I immediately resorted to the library. The radical, anti-art ideas of the dadaists excited but disturbed me. They challenged my assumptions: I was learning to become an artist; I still thought art had a positive role in society, so I could not agree with their demands for its abolition. As a painter, I also found it hard to accept the dadaists' preference for collages made



19 John A. Walker, 'Death of Kay Kendall', 1959. Collage, biro and crayon drawing, paint, 59 x 23 cm. Double-page spread in a sketchbook entitled *The Eye Betrayed*.
Artist's Collection.

from fragments of language and photographs, although this kind of work did appear in my sketchbook. Mixed-media collage was a more private, personal kind of art – surreal images appeared next to bad but passionate poems; they were made in the evenings and at weekends in my rented room in Jesmond rather than in the Department. One of these collages, however, could be categorised as pop – an image of the recently deceased film star Kay Kendall (1927-1959) was placed above a drawing of a bleeding eye.

A second guest speaker I recall was the London art critic Lawrence Alloway who lectured on the action painting of Jackson Pollock. Alloway had a crew cut and dressed like an American. He soon departed for the United States.

Another external source of art-historical knowledge was the annual Charlton Lecture, which took place outside the Department and was open to a university-wide audience. The Charlton Lectures focused on single works of art. I recall listening to George Heard Hamilton's lecture on Monet's 'Rouen Cathedral series' (1959), a fascinating introduction to the notion of serial art, and to L. D. Ettlinger's scholarly interpretation of Kandinsky's painting 'At Rest'. I certainly learnt more about Kandinsky's iconography from Ettlinger's talk, but it still did not make me warm to his work.

RE-INTERPRETATION PROJECT

One project that was set infrequently (once a year I think) involved a practical response to the history of art. Students were asked to select a work from the past in order to 'translate' or 're-interpret' it. This exercise, which I think originated from Quentin Bell, seemed at odds with the philosophy of the basic design course. It clearly had its origins

in the ancient, academic method of learning by copying the works of the masters. In our case, we were expected to contribute something new as Picasso and Bacon had when reworking paintings by Velasquez and Van Gogh. (Bacon's series of paintings based on Van Gogh's self-portrait on the road to Tarascon was shown at the Hanover Gallery in 1957. This was an exhibition I had seen.) In my own case, I attempted to reconstruct a cubist musical instrument. Another time, I enlarged Munch's 'Scream' picture and gave it a fresh set of colours. (Later, in the



20 'Brian Sefton "playing" Walker's almost finished cubist musical instrument', 1958? Photo: John A. Walker. Cubistic construction: Collection Martin Roots, Dorset.

early 1960s, I attempted to remove the cubistic distortions from Picasso's 'Demoiselles d'Avignon' to turn back the clock by providing a salon-type version. This was clearly a historicist, post-modern ploy.) However, I recall doubting the value of such 'translation' projects. Their chief merit was to make students look much harder at certain art works of the past than they would otherwise have done.



21 'Department of Fine Art library with plaster cast of an antique figure'. Photo source: The Prospectus of the Department of Fine Art 1960-61, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: King's College, University of Durham, 1961).

THE LIBRARY

The Department's library, located in a large, sunny room on the ground floor, was well stocked with art books, exhibition catalogues, periodicals and slides. Access to such a specialist library is an important benefit of art school education – never in the future is the ex-student likely to have direct access to so many sources of information about the arts (unless, that is, he or she becomes a university lecturer). It was in the library that I learnt more about my tutors, about the history of modern art, about the optical art of Vasarély, etc. And, as my interest in American art grew, about Pollock and the other abstract expressionists, and hard-edge painting. Concerning recent art, journals like *Art International* and *Art News* were essential reading. Newcastle was a provincial city far from London, the nation's art capital, so the library's magazines and catalogues were a vital window on the national and international art scenes.

In addition to the departmental library, there was the main university library situated a short distance away along the quadrangle. During my first two years at art school, I found myself puzzled by the different kinds of art and tuition I was encountering. Feeling the need for rational explanations, I read much theory. After a day's work in the studios, I would often spend hours in the basement stacks of the main library reading back numbers of such journals as *Scientific American*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and *British Journal of Aesthetics*. My purpose was to learn more about Gestalt psychology, colour theory, optical illusions, visual perception and information theory, topics that Pasmore and Hamilton had talked about.

In terms of books, Anton Ehrenzweig's *Psycho-analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* (1953), Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception* (1956),

J.J. Gibson's *Perception of the Visual World* (1950), were important sources. Another was E.H. Gombrich's study of the psychology of pictorial representation: *Art and Illusion* (1960). The study of psychology led to the study of aesthetics and philosophy because the explanations given by one discipline always seemed to be limited. Although I did not realise it at the time, this was the beginning of a long march (which took several decades to complete) through the various intellectual disciplines that would eventually end with materialist accounts of art's relationship to economics and politics (superstructure and base).

The desire for an interdisciplinary account of a phenomenon such as colour led me, Martin Roots and some other, like-minded students to organise a series of lectures by staff in other faculties. It seemed absurd to us that we were part of a university but there was little or no contact between the various disciplines and departments. We invited a scientist to talk about the physical nature of light and colour, a psychologist to talk about the psychological dimensions of colour, an anthropologist to talk about the social aspect of colour, etc. Unfortunately, this series of lectures was not the success we had hoped.

One reason was that the external lecturers underestimated the intelligence and sophistication of art students and so they talked down to us.

Another, short-lived student initiative in which I was involved was a



22 'Portrait of Martin Roots', circa 1959.
Photo: Brian Sefton.

magazine with the double-meaning title PSST. It had a kitsch, floral wallpaper cover and ten pages of duplicated text. Only one issue was published around 1959. Inside there were some love poems, a satirical 'Mother and child' lino-cut print, a critique of art school teaching by Noel Forster, a polemical article on art by Roy Ascott, and a parodic



23 John A. Walker, 'Mother & Child', circa 1959. Lino-cut print published in PSST (1), 20 x 15 cm. Artist's Collection.

article about the Union Jack based on the assumption that the flag was the first example of British abstract art. The latter must have been prompted by Jasper Johns' American flag paintings of the 1950s.

PASMORE VERSUS HAMILTON

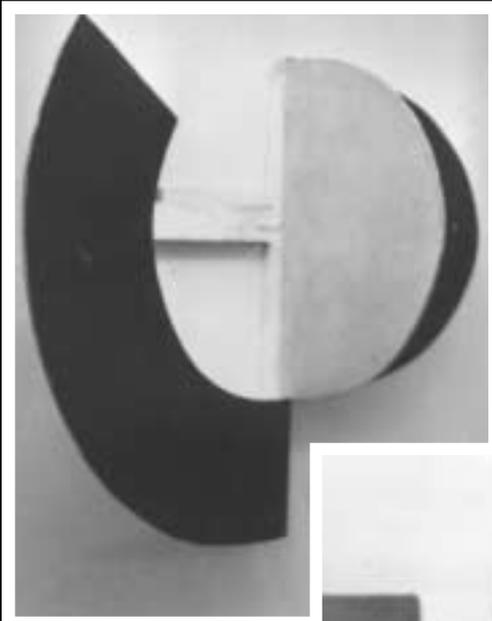
During the late 1950s, Pasmore appeared to be the dominant force within the Department even though it was clear that he and Hamilton shared many ideas and that they collaborated closely on teaching the basic design course. At that time, Pasmore occupied a superior post and outside the Department, he was reputed to be Britain's leading abstract artist. In 1960, a significant show of his recent work was mounted in the Hatton Gallery. This was very much an 'in house' production because Hamilton designed the catalogue, Davey wrote its introduction and Noel Forster and Hamilton took some of the photographs. In May of the same year, the *Burlington Magazine* published a major article on Pasmore written by the London critic Alan Bowness. (Bowness visited Newcastle in early 1960 and Pasmore kindly showed him some of my abstract paintings: the critic discerned the influence of American hard-edge painting despite the fact this was the first time I had heard the term; he also mentioned the name Ellsworth Kelly, again a painter I did not know. [A show of American West Coast hard-edge had been mounted by the ICA in London during March and April.] Apparently, no credit was to be given for arriving at the same solutions as the Americans independently.) On February 5th 1961, the magazine section of *The Sunday Times* newspaper published a whole page, illustrated article by Pasmore entitled 'What is abstract art?' Clearly, Pasmore's switch from figuration to abstraction was thought significant and the mass media was taking a new interest in the fine arts.



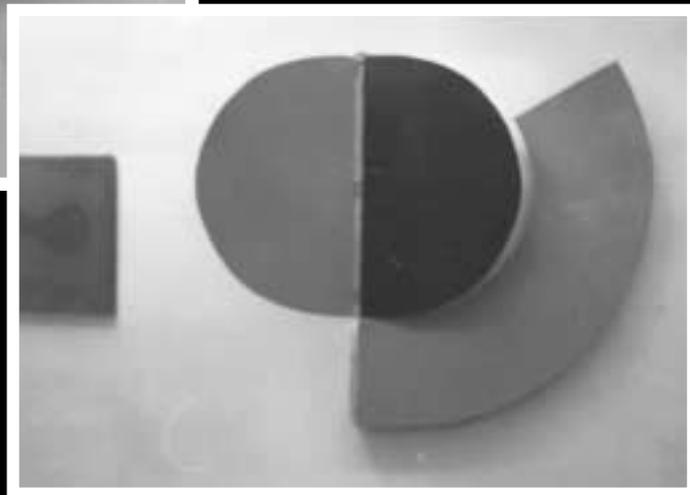
24 Victor Pasmore, 'What is Abstract Art?' (detail), *Sunday Times Magazine Section*, February 5, 1961, p. 21.

Hamilton did not appear to enjoy the same fame and publicity as Pasmore even though he was fresh from the Independent Group meetings of the early 1950s and the 1956 'This is Tomorrow' pop culture exhibit (which I had not seen and knew nothing about). Hamilton mounted exhibitions with photographic imagery and his paintings had figurative references based on mass culture sources such as advertising. His early pop paintings (such as 'She', [1958-61] and 'Pin-up', [1961]) I only glimpsed while passing through his private studio. I did not relate to them or understand them – my chosen direction was colour-field abstraction, hence the emergence of pop art – which I really became

aware of as a result of having work in the same 'Young Contemporaries' exhibitions as David Hockney, Derek Boshier, et al came as a surprise. Committed as I was to abstraction, Royal College of Art pop seemed to me reactionary because of its return to figuration and its frequent use of personal, anecdotal subjects. The contrast between Pasmore and Hamilton can be crudely summed up as a contest between abstraction and figuration. The battle between these two varieties of art was extremely fierce during the 1950s but Hamilton and Pasmore seemed to have adopted a policy of toleration because as tutors they worked in harmony.



25 John A. Walker, 'Lady Chatterley & Mellors', 1960. Wood, hinges and painted block board. Destroyed.



Once I had worked my way through the history of early modern art – in terms of a series of influences on my painting – I was receptive to the example of Pasmore's painted, wooden constructions and reliefs. One I devised had an oval shape that was hinged so that it folded like a book, attached to it was a curved shape that was also hinged so that it projected out from the wall and swung from side to side. The work was 'participatory' in that spectators could touch, move and re-arrange the parts. (Several students were interested in the idea of art that exemplified change and was interactive.) At first sight, the work appeared totally abstract, but the title 'Lady Chatterley and Mellors' (D. H. Lawrence's famous novel was then banned in Britain but I owned a paperback copy I had smuggled in from Paris) indicated a 'disguised' sexual content (that is, abstracted female genitals and erect phallus). I, and other artists, resolved the 1950s' conflict between abstraction and figuration in this way. Despite the figurative references, Pasmore liked the piece and hung it alongside his own work in a show of constructions held in the Hatton Gallery in 1960.

In 1961, Pasmore was taken up by the Marlborough New London Gallery and ceased to teach at Newcastle. After his departure, Hamilton became the dominant figure and it was then, during the early/mid 1960s, that he influenced the student who was to become, during the 1970s, the Department's most famous ex-pupil: Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music. (Ferry was a student from 1964-68.) Richard Yeomans' article cited in the notes describes some of the changes Hamilton introduced. During the time I was at the Department, Hamilton's discussions of Duchamp and mass culture I found fascinating but they did not relate to my pictorial concerns – except perhaps the acceptance of chance and accident. The dada and mass culture elements seemed

foreign bodies within the curriculum; they were certainly at odds with Pasmore's advocacy of constructionist abstraction. Had there been schools of photography and film within the Department, then surely the mass culture components would have made much more sense.

THE CURRICULUM AS A WHOLE

As a student, what puzzled me about the art education I received was the variety of activities taking place under one roof. One could understand the specificity of particular techniques and art forms such as painting and sculpture (even though constructivism implied a fusion or transcendence of these two forms), but what was the relation between life-drawing (an ancient practice strongly linked to the human figure and its role in history and portrait painting) and still-life painting (a traditional genre associated with seventeenth century Dutch art), and the basic design course (associated with modern art and design)? The various practices differed in age; they differed in aesthetic principles and in the kind of art they generated. Any one practice considered separately made sense but together they spelled confusion and contradiction. (Of course, one could argue this was a rich pluralism providing students with plenty of choice or that the basic design course was intended to provide a foundation for all other activities.) The key tutors at Newcastle did introduce and discuss ideas and theories that particularly interested them but I feel the course lacked self-reflexivity in the sense that the totality of practices was not explicitly addressed. I did try to ask older students about this issue but they had no explanations. In my opinion, today's art students face even worse difficulties for there are now even more, mutually contradictory, models of art practice available to them.

EXTERNAL CULTURAL INFLUENCES

An art student is not only influenced by factors peculiar to the art school they attend because many other cultural factors are involved although not all will have a direct impact on their art. In my own case, the poetry of Dylan Thomas (his verse play *Under Milk Wood* was staged at the People's Theatre in Newcastle) and T.S. Eliot, the plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene O'Neill and John Osborne (the angry young man syndrome), Colin Wilson's book *The Outsider* (1956), which led me to the writings of Camus and Sartre. The philosophy of existentialism was certainly an influence because it tied in with the emphasis on the creative act in American action painting and European tachisme. Improvisation was also a feature of those kinds of art and it too was to be found in the traditional jazz (both black American and British revival performed in Newcastle's City Hall) that I enjoyed and danced to at the time. (John Walters, a witty fellow student who played the trumpet in a local jazz band, later moved to London and became a producer for BBC radio. He died in 2001 aged 62.) The literature of the American Beats was read but Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1958) left me indifferent. I also came to dislike jazz-and-poetry readings, fashionable at the time, because the 'free-form poetry' delivered (but not written by) budding actor Ralph Watson was generally so poor.

Local cinemas provided access to British and American films – the social realist British films of the late 1950s, the American movies starring James Dean, Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe and Kim Novak. There was a cinema on Barras Bridge frequented by students taking a break from their studies. I recall watching a documentary about the sculpture of Barbara Hepworth and being shocked by the audience's philistine reaction: taunts and derisive laughter. (However, it was a

pretentious and pompous film.) In addition, via the Student Film Society, I was able to see Italian and French films, the banned Brando motorbike film *The Wild One* and the gloomy symbolic masterpieces of the Scandinavian director Ingmar Bergman. In other words, being a university student enabled me to see foreign and art house films that were much less available to the general population of Britain.

While I was a student, I did not own a television set but I used to watch editions of Hugh Wheldon's BBC arts strand *Monitor*, launched in 1958, with my landlady at 53 Lovaine Place (since demolished to make way for the Civic Centre). (My early interest in British arts television later prompted me to write a history of the subject.) The broadsheet Sunday newspapers were also a link to what was happening in London, the world of books and the arts generally.



26 'Richard Stubbs & Margaret Clark in Arles with the River Rhône and the Trinquetaille Bridge [a view painted by Van Gogh in 1888] in the background'. Photo: John A. Walker, summer 1962.

Vacation employment in breweries, factories and the Post Office provided money for travel to London, Liverpool (to see the John Moores biennial exhibitions which commenced in 1957), to Brussels to see the 1958 Exposition with its steel Atomium and a major survey exhibition of modern art, and to Paris (to see all the architecture and museums) and Provence (to view the motifs of Cézanne

and Van Gogh). Several trips were made to London to view exhibitions, films, plays and fashions (Italian-style clothes). Each year the Department entered works in the 'Young Contemporaries' exhibitions and twice mine were selected. British art schools had more of a group style then than they do now, and so one could see at a glance that Newcastle favoured abstraction while the Royal College favoured narrative figuration. Towards the end of the 1950s, modern American painting – abstract expressionism – seemed to become increasingly important (even though in the United States it had already been overtaken by the neo-dada art of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg). It was a looser, larger and more organic kind of abstraction, which resonated with hidden meanings. Pollock, who had died in a car crash in 1956, was already a mythic figure. I managed to see the large-scale show of his work held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in November-December 1958. My copy of the catalogue records my impression that he was 'a vital genius'. Pasmore's constructions suddenly began to seem too small, geometric and tasteful.

In order to see the major 1959 show of the abstract expressionists – 'The New American Painting' – held at the Tate Gallery in February-March, a fellow student and I undertook a cold and dangerous journey of 300 miles hitch-hiking down the A1 road during a snowstorm. This was because we could not afford the rail fare. (At the time, we were blissfully unaware of the kind of charges of cultural imperialism that were later to be directed by art historians against this travelling exhibition.) We were profoundly impressed and on our return to Newcastle the influences of Rothko, Pollock, Kline, Still and Sam Francis impinged on our painting for some months. (Local Tyneside painters such as Bill Smith were also convinced that action painting was the



27 'Inside "the Hut" with Walker's paintings influenced by abstract expressionism', circa 1959.
Photo: John A. Walker



28 John A. Walker, 'Abstract painting' [influenced by Mark Rothko and beach/sea at Cleethorpes], 1959. Oil on canvas, 79 x 48.5 cm. Artist's Collection.

mode to follow.) A few European abstractionists, such as Hans Hartung, also had an influence. At the same time, the paintings were also the result of observation of the exterior world: one Rothko-looking painting was also derived from making studies of the beach and sea at Cleethorpes. Another abstraction was based on the pattern of light and shadow on a window. A third was based on a Van Gogh drawing of flowers in a field. Others were influenced by the basic course teaching: one painting influenced by Clyfford Still tried



to dramatise and narrativise the complementary clash between two fields of red and green by imagining that red was invading green; this echoed the gestalt psychology diagram or ambiguous figure known as Edgar Rubin's 'Claw' in which areas of black and white interpenetrate. However, it soon became evident that imitating the work and painting procedures of the Americans was pointless. The challenge was to find the next step, which seemed to be towards a tighter kind of abstraction, which was to be called 'hard-edge'.

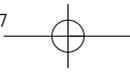


29 John A. Walker, 'Abstract painting' [based on a window with a shadow], 1959. Oil on hardboard.
Lost or destroyed.

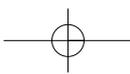


30 John A. Walker, 'Colour composition' [based on a Van Gogh drawing of flowers in a field], 1959. Oil on hardboard, 183 x 122 cm. Lost or destroyed.



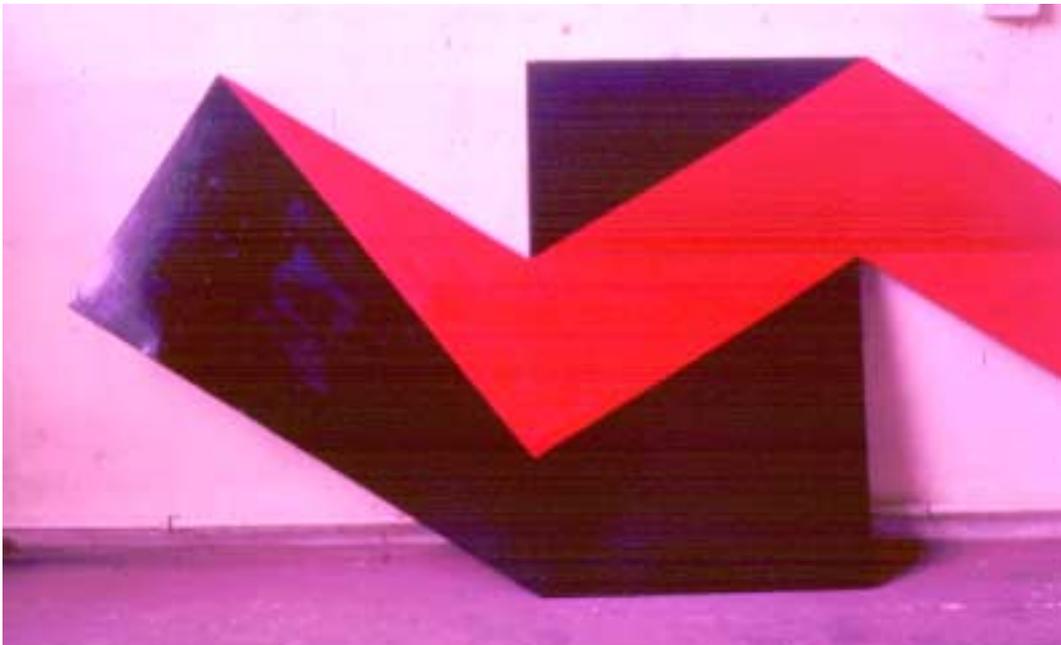


31 John A. Walker, 'Red invades green' [painting influenced by Clyfford Still and basic course exercises], 1959. Oil on canvas. Lost or destroyed.





32 John A. Walker, 'Abstract painting' [influenced by Sam Francis], 1959. Oil on hardboard. Lost or destroyed.



33 John A. Walker, 'Abstract painting on a shaped wooden support', circa 1960. Oil on hardboard. Lost or destroyed.



34 'Walker in action painting mode', 1960. Photo: Brian Sefton.



35 'Action painting' [influenced by De Kooning which was being painted in illus 34]. Oil on hardboard. Lost or destroyed.

PROSPECTS AND PORTENTS

Today, 'business studies' type courses are taught in art and design colleges and there is much discussion of art's relationship to the market and society, but in the 1950s, there was nothing comparable. Apart from the odd comment, my generation of students received no help or information from the staff about patrons and collectors, about how the gallery system worked. One obvious reason for this was that the British art market at that time was very underdeveloped. In a provincial city like Newcastle, it hardly existed. We thought, 'if artists of the fame and stature of Pasmore and Hamilton have to teach for a living, then what chance do we stand?' The question 'what will you do after art school with a qualification in fine art?' therefore, was pushed to the back of our minds. No doubt, some students guessed that, after a post-graduate year of teacher training, they would end up as art teachers in secondary schools. In fact, a number of Newcastle graduates continued to make art while earning a living by teaching in art colleges. Some graduates, like Chris Carrell found work in art-related fields (Carrell became an arts administrator). Others, like Jack Shepherd, Peter Slater and Richard Stubbs, turned to other professions (Shepherd became a stage and television actor – he is well known for his role as the TV detective Wycliffe, Slater became a slide librarian for London University, while Stubbs became a librarian and is now employed by the Open University).

At the same time, there were a few signs that support for artists might be forthcoming via public and corporate art commissions. For example, Edwin Beecroft and I were commissioned to paint stage flats for a Christmas show in a mental hospital located in a forest near Newcastle. I was also commissioned to paint a large canvas for the



36 Top: 'Walker in his garret studio in Jesmond with "Black Frost" in progress'. 1956. Bottom: 'Finished painting in the entrance hall of Wintringham Boys Grammar School, Grimsby', 1957. Oil on canvas, 274.3 x 81.2 cm. (It has since been removed, present whereabouts unknown.)



entrance hall of my former grammar school (the picture was a tribute to the fishermen who lost their lives in the North Sea due to 'black frost or ice' forming on the trawlers which capsized them). However, I was only paid for the cost of materials. Later on, I also won the first prize (£50) in an art competition organised by the local TV station – Tyne Tees. My painting was an oval, landscape view of the College quadrangle



37 John A. Walker, 'Oval landscape 1', circa 1958. Acquired by Tyne Tees Television, Newcastle upon Tyne. Photo: N. Davison, Wingrove Studio, Newcastle. (Present whereabouts of painting unknown.)

seen from a high window – the style was a blend of Cézanne and early Mondrian. Gowing judged the competition and I was aware of his artistic preferences so I thought I stood a good chance of winning. However, receiving the prize involved a stressful encounter with journalists and an appearance on an early evening, live TV news programme, which gave me an insight into the media pressures experienced by celebrities. Fortunately, none of my fellow students

saw the programme. But was this, I asked myself, a portent of better things to come?

In 1957, a group of local artists – Ross Hickling, Bill Smith, Harry and Alan Lord – founded the Univision Gallery, located in the basement of the Royal Court Grill, Bigg Market, which was dedicated to promoting abstract art. Approaching the Univision, Rosemary Preece and I organised a two-person show of our abstract and semi-abstract paintings. Several of my square paintings were rotated by 45 degrees on the wall so that they became diamond-shaped. I had been intrigued



38 'Interior of the Univision Gallery with paintings by Walker', circa 1959 or 1960. Photos: John A. Walker.



by the idea that one could turn a painting around as one worked on it so that notions of top and bottom, left and right, were negated and that the result could then be hung in eight possible ways. Mondrian's so-called 'losangique' (lozenge-shaped) paintings begun in 1918 and Pollock's 'all over' compositions executed on the floor were the sources for this idea.

My first, large rotation painting dated from 1958 and was based on observation of a female nude. However, turning the picture soon

resulted in a virtually abstract composition. In this painting, the aim was to combine the emphatic brushstrokes of Van Gogh and Cézanne with the colour of Les Fauves, and to achieve rhythms by repeating colour accents. The use of cold and warm hues created a push-pull effect previously described by Hans Hofmann. The intuitive brushstrokes constituted a multidirectional network that was in tension with a rough grid of curves and squares. Spatial ambiguities resulted from the fact that the brushstrokes stressed the flat surface but also carved into the space behind, cubist fashion. Pictorial ambiguities and contradictions meant that this painting could be viewed for hours without exhausting its 'content' (see illus 41).

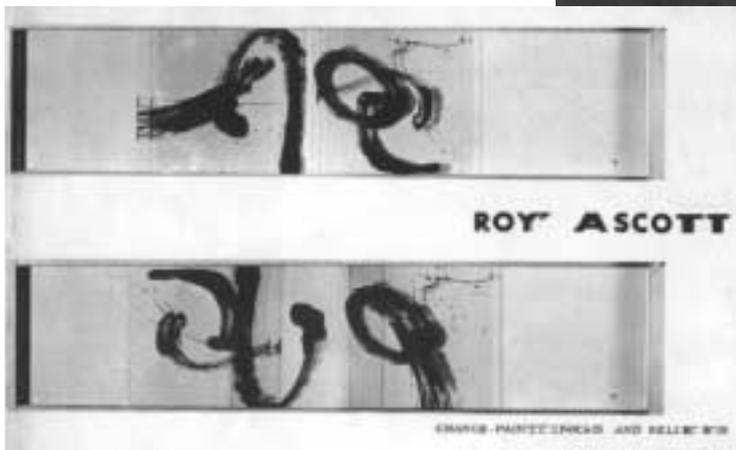
Preece was considered by many to be an exquisitely beautiful young woman. Her ideas and behaviour were strongly influenced by the nineteenth century aesthetic movement. She had pale skin, long black hair, favoured black clothes and smoked Sobranie Black Russian cigarettes with gold tips. Hamilton once photographed her for an issue of the annual



39 'Portrait of Rose Preece' published in *The Northerner*, Michaelmas Term, 1960, p. 19. Photo: Richard Hamilton.

college arts magazine *The Northerner*. Her paintings of abstracted figures and landscape tended to be light in tone and executed in one colour – yellow or pink. (In the early 1960s, she moved to Highgate, London taught art in a girl's school and then died of cancer.) The timing of our exhibition was unlucky. Nothing was sold and few visitors came because a strike at the local newspaper – *The Newcastle Evening Chronicle* – meant there were no advertisements or reviews. A man called Scott Dobson normally wrote about art for the local paper.

Another Univision show I recall seeing was Roy Ascott's 'Change-Paintings and Reliefs' (1961). Ascott was an energetic and ambitious young artist whose ideas were influenced by the new science of cybernetics. His abstract constructions, made from



40 'Roy Ascott and front cover of a folder issued at the time of his show at the Univision Gallery', 1961.

glass and wood, were enlivened by expressive, calligraphic brush marks; hence, they combined construction with action painting. They included interchangeable elements that encouraged spectator participation and literally exemplified change. Ascott went on to become an enthusiast for new digital technologies and attained high posts in art schools in North America and Wales.

Having works exhibited in London 'Young Contemporaries' was good for the ego but again nothing was sold. This was despite the fact that



41 John A. Walker, 'Nude painting' [seen by John Berger], 1958. Oil on hardboard, 122 x 122 cm.
Artist's Collection.



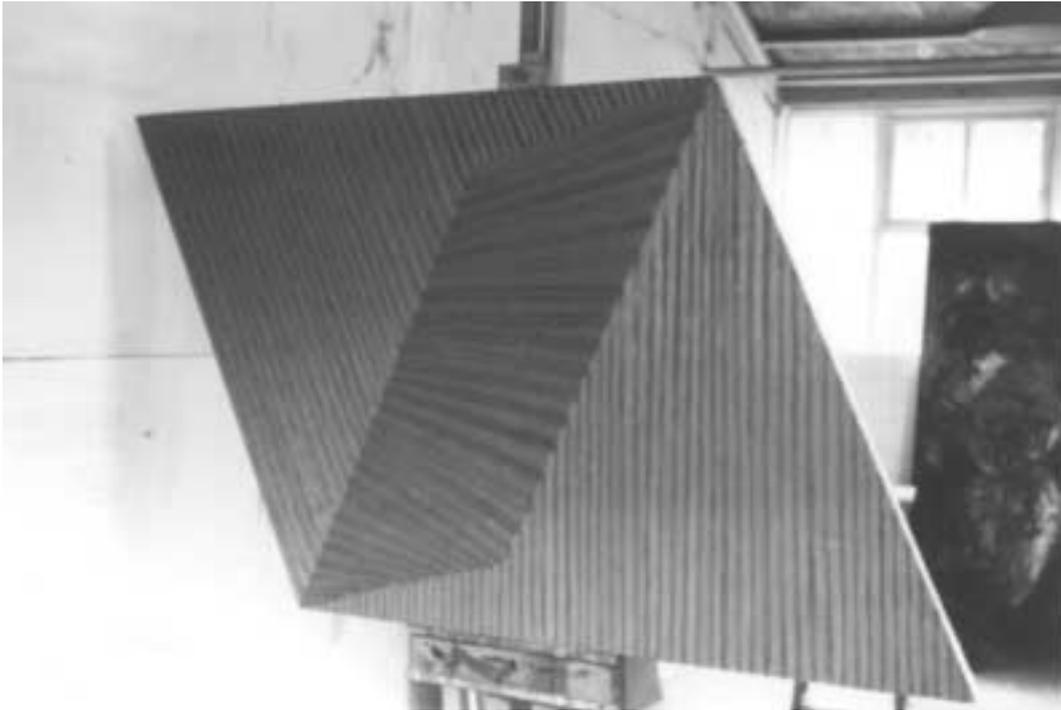
42 'Interior of the Hatton Gallery with first Final Year Show of Walker's paintings', June 1960.

the critic John Berger, writing in *The New Statesman* (28 February 1959), expressed the desire to see more of my work. Since the British art scene was concentrated in London, it became obvious to me and my closest friends that we had to move there after graduation if we were ever to fulfil our ambitions to become professional artists. At that time, a move to New York was not considered, even though we knew it had replaced Paris as the world's art capital. In contrast, some London art students were already crossing the Atlantic.

THE FINAL SHOW

My paintings had been influenced by Van Gogh's colour and his colour theory (certain remarks in his letters implied a completely abstract kind of art consisting of arrangements of pure colours), by Pasmore's

conviction that modern art's destiny was abstraction, by the basic design course idea that art consisted of fundamental elements. I later realised that I had followed a formalist, reductive path (all without the benefit of Clement Greenberg's criticism!): the aim had been to reduce painting to its basic constituents: flat fields of pigment; just two



43 John A. Walker, 'Shaped wooden support with red and green stripes', circa 1960, Oil paint on hardboard. Destroyed.

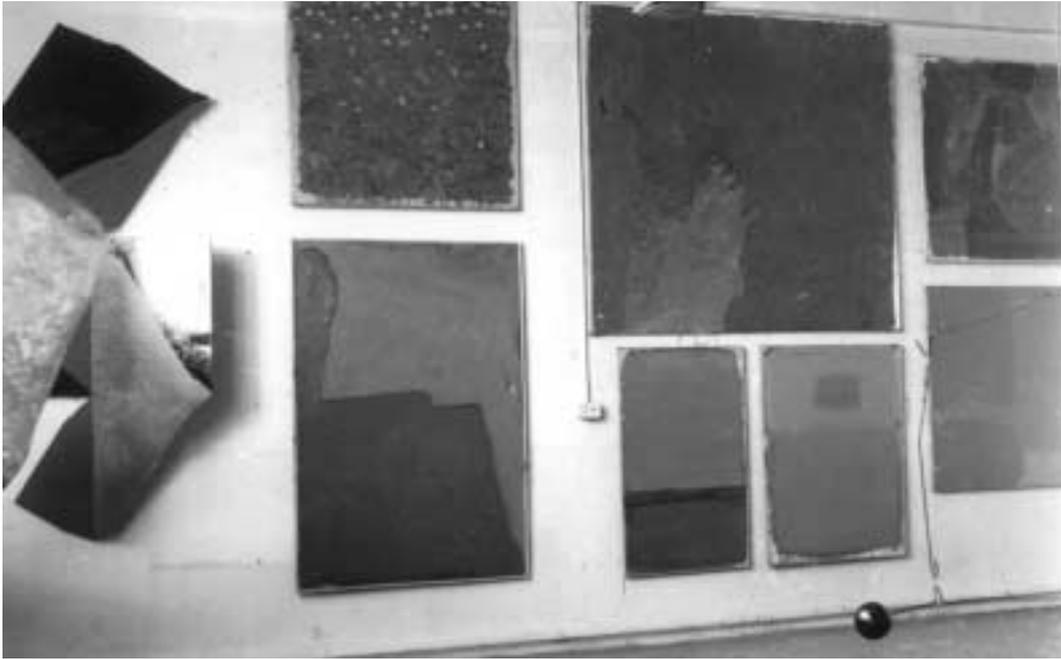
complementary colours of equal saturation were needed – cadmium red and viridian green – to achieve surface flatness and a simultaneous contrast giving rise to an optical flicker where the two colours met. To compensate for the lack of figuration or content, the canvases had to be big, and the hues intense. The intention was to overwhelm the viewer's optical system. Shape and form posed constant problems because colour, like water, can assume any shape. When I asked Pasmore about this in a tutorial, his advice was to 'deduce' forms from the shape of



44 Margaret Clark, 'Fabric designs in her Final Year Show', June 1961.
Photo: Department of Photography, King's College.

support one was using. Around 1960, I began to produce shaped supports with internal patterns of red/green stripes echoing the outer form of the support and with optical illusion effects. I knew Frank Stella's monochrome stripe paintings via reproductions in the catalogue *Sixteen Americans* (New York: MoMA, 1959).

Optical illusions and eye-dazzling patterns found in psychology of perception textbooks and in the work of Vasarély interested and influenced a few students at Newcastle. Many printed textile students were obsessed with floral patterns. Finding their designs dull and conservative, I encouraged a close friend, Margaret Clark, to base her designs on the bold, black-and-white patterns of Vasarély. Her fabrics pre-dated the British fashion for op art by several years. She showed examples to Heals in London but at that time, they proved too strong for their stomachs. This example shows the importance of timing in



45 'Abstract paintings by Walker in second Final Year Show, Room 2', June 1961. Part of a mobile by Michael Hazzledine is visible in the bottom, right-hand corner.

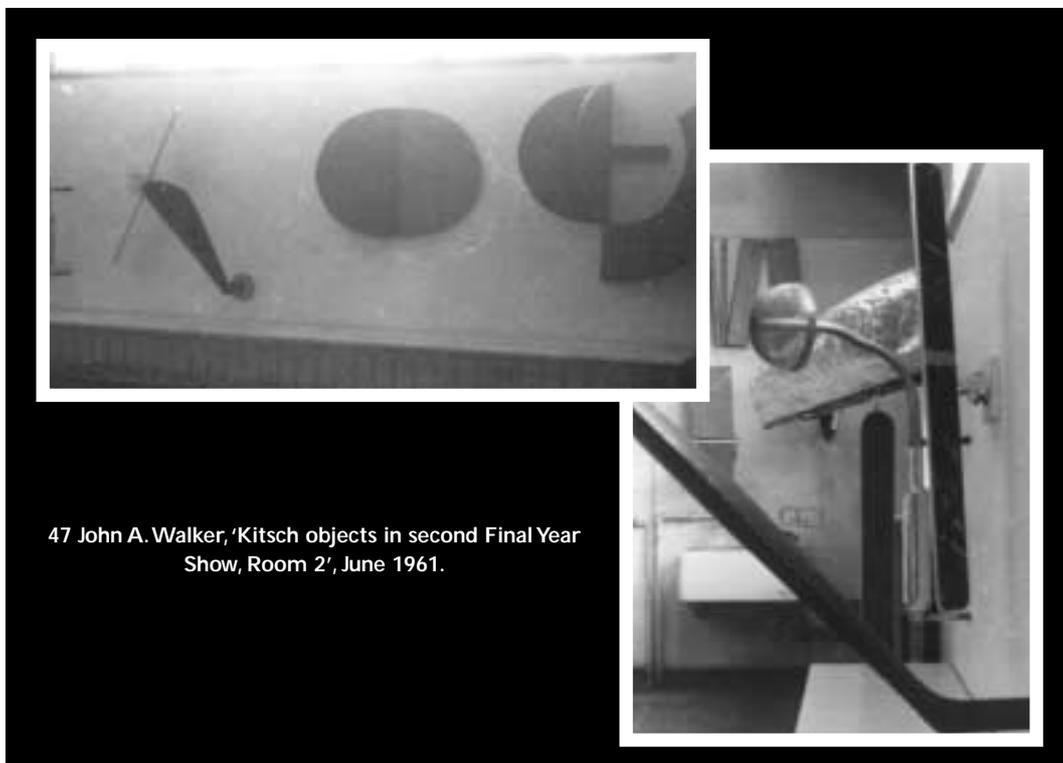


46 John A. Walker, 'Red/Violet Obstacle', 1960. Painted block board attached to wall by hinges. Photo taken in Eldon Street studio.



culture: it is a mistake to be too far ahead of public taste.

My final degree show mounted in the Hatton Gallery in 1960 revealed a consistent and logical development, a progression from small to large canvases, from figuration to abstraction. This, I believe, is what tutors and external assessors were looking for. However, having won the Hatton Scholarship to remain for a further year, I became dissatisfied with adjusting fields of red and green. It seemed to me that art had to be about more than this. Therefore, I began to introduce sexual imagery and to construct funky, crudely-made objects from such selected, non-art materials as motorcycle tubing (both rigid and flexible), green fablon, and red plastic bread covers bought in Woolworth's. The resulting 'sculptures' resembled codpieces and lavatory handles. In short, there was a dramatic shift away from pure colour towards sex and kitsch. (A Catholic priest who saw them found them offensive and said they resembled tribal fetish objects. The



comparison pleased me.) So, when the actual final show was displayed in summer 1961, the order and consistency of the previous year had been broken and I think my late experiments resulted in a lower class of degree than I would have received a year earlier. There seemed no prospect of making a living as an artist in Newcastle and so, in July 1961, I and two fellow students – Michael Hazzledine and Richard Stubbs – moved to London where I began again from scratch by painting from ‘nature’ ... but that’s another story. (6)



48 John A. Walker, Left: 'Codpiece', [revised version] 1963. Wood, fibreglass, fablon, aluminium strip. Right: 'Object with Red plastic Bread cover and motorcycle exhaust tubing', 1961. Lost or destroyed.



49 Cover of *Rag Pie* (62) 1962, showing Jack Shepherd, who later became a television and film actor. Ralph Selby edited this magazine, which was sold for charity.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

(1) A revised version of my art-history dissertation was eventually published as an essay in my book *Van Gogh Studies: Five Critical Essays* (London: JAW Publications, 1981), pp. 7-20.

(2) R. Coleman and others, *The Developing Process* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Durham University, 1959). M. de Sausmarez & others, 'A visual grammar of form' Part 1: *Motif* (8) winter 1961, pp. 3-29; Part 2: *Motif* (9) summer 1962, pp. 47-67. M. de Sausmarez, *Basic Design: The Dynamics of Visual Form* (London: Studio Vista, 1964). W. Huff, 'An argument for Basic Design', *Architectural Design* 36 (5) May 1966, pp. 252-56. R. Banham, 'The Bauhaus gospel', *The Listener* September 26 1968, pp. 390-92. P. Jones, 'The failure of Basic Design', *Leonardo* 2 (2) April 1969, pp. 155-60. E. Sonntag, 'Foundation studies in art', *Leonardo* 2 (4) October 1969, pp. 387-97. D. Thistlewood, *A Continuing Process: The New Creativity in British Art Education 1955-65* (London: ICA, 1981). E. Forrest, 'Harry Thrubron at Leeds ...' *Journal of Art & Design Education* 4 (2) 1985, pp. 147-67. There are MA and PhD dissertations about basic design by James Hammond, J. Satterthwaite and Dr Richard Yeomans. (See also the latter's article: 'Basic Design and the Pedagogy of Richard Hamilton', *Journal of Art & Design Education*, 7 (2) 1988, pp. 155-73.) A collection of examples of basic design from Newcastle and Leeds is maintained in Bretton Hall, University of Leeds. Images from it, which include works by Rita Donagh and Mark Lancaster, can be browsed via the Internet.

(3) John A. Walker, 'The basic faults of the Basic Design courses', *Art Monthly* (46) 1981, pp. 27-28. Marian Scott gave a more positive assessment of the impact of basic design in Newcastle in her article



'Post-war developments in art in Newcastle: was it a golden age?' *The Northern Review*, Vol 4 winter 1996, pp. 37-45.

(4) For more on Pasmore's impact on Peterlee, see: Peter Fuller (interview with Pasmore), 'Victor Pasmore: the case for Modern Art', *Modern Painters*, 1 (4) winter 1988-89, pp. 22-31; Jonathan Glancey, 'If they had an A-bomb...' *The Guardian*, G2, November 12, 2001, pp. 12-13.

(5) Hamilton's lecture was subsequently published as 'Glorious Technicolor, Breathtaking Cinemascope and Stereophonic Sound' in *Collected Words 1953-1982* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1982), pp. 112-32. A photograph of the audience in Newcastle taken at the time with the Land camera is reproduced on page 132.

(6) Something of that story is told in my essay 'A few "Semiotic" Paintings of the 1975, Unknown and Destroyed', (2002) posted on my website: www.artology.info and published as a booklet (London: Institute of Artology, 2002).



BIOGRAPHY/PUBLICATIONS

John A. Walker (b. 1938, Grimsby, Lincolnshire) is a London-based critic and art historian specialising in contemporary art and mass culture and their relationship to social context and politics. From 1956 to 1961, he took a fine art degree course in Newcastle upon Tyne and then moved to London where he worked as a teacher, civil servant, librarian and freelance art critic before becoming a lecturer in art history at Middlesex Polytechnic and other art schools. He has published many articles and books on the interactions between the visual arts and film, television and pop music. His published books are: *A Glossary of Art, Architecture and Design since 1945*, (London: Library Association, 3rd edn 1992). *Art since Pop* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975). *Van Gogh Studies: Five Critical Essays*, (London: JAW Publications, 1981). *Art in the Age of Mass Media* (London & Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 3rd edn 2001). *Crossovers: Art into Pop, Pop into Art*, (London: Comedia/Methuen, 1987). *Design History and the History of Design*, (London: Pluto Press, 1989). *Art and Artists on Screen*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993). *Arts TV: A History of Arts Television in Britain*, (London: Arts Council & John Libbey, 1993). *John Latham – the Incidental Person – his Art and Ideas*, (London: Middlesex University Press, 1995). [With Sarah Chaplin] *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1997). *Cultural Offensive: America's Impact on British Art since 1945*, (London & Sterling VA: Pluto Press, 1998). *Art and Outrage: Provocation, Controversy and the Visual Arts*, (London & Sterling VA: Pluto Press, 1999). [With Rita Hatton] *Supercollector: A Critique of Charles Saatchi*, (London: ... ellipsis, 2000). *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain*, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002). *Art & Celebrity*, (London & Sterling VA: Pluto Press, 2003).