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Citation for published version

Stanfield, Peter (2017) The Who and Pop Art: the simple things you see are all complicated. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 29 (1). e12203. ISSN 1524-2226.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12203>

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The Who and Pop Art: the simple things you see are all complicated

Abstract

The essay investigates the connections between The Who and Pop Art. It uses Lawrence Alloway's expansive concept of Pop Art, which he defines as a correspondence along a continuum between the commercial and the fine arts. The Who, I argue, exemplify this process of connectivity between the low and the high. The analysis focuses on the contradiction in the received wisdom that the band did little more than willfully exploit Pop Art imagery and the counter-idea that they were significant innovators within a form that had otherwise become limited in scope and ambition. Key questions are asked about authenticity and appropriation, race and pop, and art and sonic dissonance. The central object of the enquiry is the band's debut album, *My Generation*, and a handful of 45s released in 1965-66.

"We stand for pop-art clothes, pop-art music, and pop-art behavior," said Pete Townshend in 1965 of his band, The Who, "We don't change offstage. We live pop-art."¹ Explaining this alignment, their management told journalists that they "wanted a whole new scene going. We knew pop art could swing it."² The association, they admitted, was no more than an expedient act of exploitation intended to give The Who an edge in an overcrowded market. Whatever cultural capital Pop Art could provide for the band in 1965, their aspirations were not limited to a seizure of its iconography and doctrines. There was more at stake than a simple plundering of Pop Art concepts and images. I argue The Who made a significant, if unacknowledged,

contribution to Pop Art, by expanding a form that had become limited in scope and moribund in ambition.

Popular music histories and biographies of the band commonly note the correspondence between the band and Pop Art, but this connection is rarely considered in detail. Identified as a detour on the road to *Tommy* (1969) and greatness, the Pop Art connection is usually quickly glossed over. In these contexts, Pop Art is mentioned as an aspect of Pete Townshend's art school education, as a visual and sonic embellishment of The Who's act, or as a faddish extension of their mod lifestyle. Given that popular music is far outside art history's core repertoire, it is not hard to understand why the band have been roundly ignored by the discipline.³ The Who's Pop Art intervention takes place outside the gallery and is therefore aligned in art history with other low forms, such as the fashion industry's appropriation of Bridget Rileys' art and cinematic forays into the form in 1966 by Michelangelo Antonioni (*Blow-Up*) or Joseph Losey (*Modesty Blaise*).

If the primary focus is the art object rather than the process involved in making art, then The Who have little to offer histories of Pop. Viewing The Who from an elevated perspective of the fine art's appropriation of commercial art forms will also render the band invisible. If the perspective is reversed, shifting to how the commercial arts respond to fine art's comingling with lower forms, then The Who become significant protagonists within a Pop Art history.

Lawrence Alloway's theory of an "expansive Pop Art" informs my analysis of The Who, which considers their debut album, *My Generation*, a handful of 45s released in 1965, and culminates with "Substitute" recorded in the Spring of the following year. Alloway's unique intervention in art theory was through his

conception of the correspondence between the fine and the commercial arts as a continuum rather than a hierarchy. As an art form, movement, practice and category, Pop Art originated in England and received initial public exposure by Alloway when the term first appeared in print under his by-line in 1958. He had debated the topic throughout the 1950s with other members of the Independent Group (IG) – an informal collective of artists and critics who met in London at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. These creative and intellectual collaborations reached a creative mass in the autumn of 1956 with the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, which put many of their ideas into practice and on public view.

In January 1957, Richard Hamilton suggested to fellow IG members Peter and Allison Smithson that they mount another show, which would be “highly disciplined and unified in conception as this one was chaotic.” The basis of the planned exhibition would comply with the characteristics of Pop Art, which he defines as follows:

Popular (designed for a mass audience)

Transient (short-term solution)

Expendable (easily forgotten)

Low cost

Mass produced

Young (aimed at youth)

Witty

Sexy

Gimmicky

Glamorous

Big business ⁴

Capturing the key elements of Pop Art adroitly and economically, Hamilton's definition was prescient. 10 years later the term had become widespread, describing a diverse range of contemporary art and design practices and products. By the late 1960s, the term's very pervasiveness suggested to Alloway that there was a pressing need to account for its history.⁵

Alloway argued that Pop Art had gone through three overlapping but distinct phases by the mid-1960s. In the late 1950s, he and his "art-oriented" colleagues in the IG were using the term interchangeably with Pop Culture in an effort to extend "esthetic attention to the mass media" and explain the absorption of commercial material "within the context of fine art."⁶ At this juncture, Pop Art was an expansionist aesthetic that accounted for and worked with material culture on equivalent terms with the fine arts. While the two spheres were not indistinguishable from one another, they were held to be of equal interest. In its original form, "phase 1," as Alloway called it, Pop Art "was a polemic against elite views of art in which uniqueness is a metaphor of the aristocratic and contemplation the only proper response to art."⁷ He was arguing for a conception of a Fine Art/Pop Art continuum while presenting a fulsome debunking of art criticism that is predicated on a pyramid of taste.

Phase 2 took place in 1961-64 and referred to "art that included a reference to mass-media sources." This is the period in which Warhol and Lichtenstein play a defining role and are themselves defined. It is in this phase that Pop Art emerges as a movement alongside the figure of the "pop artist." The term itself becomes compressed and maximized, which facilitates "rapid diffusion." More restrictive in its

meaning than the previous iteration, the expansionist dimension is here reduced to a set of formal properties. Pop Art “shrank to an iconography of signs and objects . . . a consolidation of formal procedures that are largely traditional.”⁸

With its popularization, Pop Arts’ status as a movement was diminished and further dissipated through its prolific application to “fashion, films, interior decoration, toys, parties, and town planning.”⁹ Alloway uses the figure of Batman to illustrate the crossovers and connections made between the commercial arts and the fine arts in phase 3.

It was originally a comic strip, and nothing else. In the early 1960s, Mel Ramos painted Batman subjects, in oil on canvas, which were shown in galleries and in 1963 at the Los Angeles County Museum. Bob Kane, creator of the strip, announced in 1966 that he had done a series of paintings in oils, but seems not to have known about Ramos . . . Then Batman hit TV and Bob Kane described the style of the series to me as “Very Pop Art.” The comic continues, of course . . . The point is that experiences of art and entertainment are not necessarily antagonistic and unrelated, but can be linked into a ring of different tastes and purposes. And, to quote from a recent comic book: “At the Gotham City Museum, Bruce Wayne, Millionaire Sportsman and Playboy, and his young ward Dick Grayson, attend a sensational ‘Pop’ Art Show. . .”¹⁰

Alloway’s motivation for producing this short sketch of Pop Art’s mobility was to demonstrate the resistance the establishment showed in the face of his call for a non-hierarchical definition of art. He argues for a speculative rather than a

contemplative aesthetic, which was needed if the art critic was to engage with an inclusive culture as encountered in the first and third phases of Pop.

Pop artists are as mobile as their subject, and Warhol, in particular, did not remain fixated on Pop's formal properties. The comic strip iconography of some of his early paintings that featured Dick Tracy and Batman, among others, was left behind in his films and installations that culminated with the multimedia experience the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* in 1966-67. Warhol though remained adept at slumming with the vulgar arts. He knowingly appeared in a 1967 photo-spread for *Esquire* magazine dressed as Batman's sidekick Robin, with Nico playing the Caped Crusader. This camp send-up of his status as pop artist, and exploitation of the revived popularity of Batman (driven by the launch of the TV series in 1966), was a mirror image of a 1966 episode from the series, which presented a new villain, Progress Pigment. Described as "the king of pop art and apostle of its culture," the master criminal was clearly based on Warhol's public persona.¹¹

The figure of Batman has proved to be extraordinarily adaptable to a range of media formats, including television, radio, film, digital gaming and music. The vehicle for the latter was via the TV series' theme tune, composed by Neil Hefti and performed by Nelson Riddle. Numerous cover versions followed, from Jan & Dean, Link Wray, the Marketts, the Standells, the Ventures, moonlighting members of the Sun Ra Arkestra, and The Who, among many others. These discs were all released in 1966 and were accompanied by scores of similarly themed tunes, such as "The Ballad of Batman" by the perfectly named, the Camps, the Spotlights' "Batman and Robin," Dickie Goodman's "Batman and His Grandmother," and "Batarang" by the Memphis studio group the Avengers. While all are blatant exploitations of the TV

series' success, commercially motivated with maximum financial return in mind, The Who's involvement stands apart, not because their version is distinct, or because commercial imperatives were of little regard, but because they were part of a broader group of artists who punctured and fractured the boundary walls that separate the fine arts from the commercial arts.

Graphic designer Pearce Marchbank recalls how strongly The Who impacted on his consciousness in 1964/5, due in good part to the continuities and correspondences he found between the group and the fine arts.

There were fantastic art exhibitions in London . . . In 1964 there was this great big show called the Gulbenkian and there was the 54-64 at the Tate, which had a whole room full of American pop art: Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, targets and flags and what have you.¹² Then you drift off to see The Who and you'd put two and two together. There seemed to be a direct line between what was on at the Tate and what was on at the Marquee. Listen to the first chords of "I Can't Explain" by The Who. One of the best openings of any pop song written and it's absolutely clean and concise, just like what they wore on stage . . . tight and clean, like the look of the catalogues at the Robert Fraser Gallery.¹³

Marchbank's connections perfectly illustrate Alloway's Pop Art/Fine Art continuum.

The Who's second 45, "Anyway Anyhow Anywhere," released in May 1965, was promoted with the tag "A Pop-Art group with a Pop-Art sound . . . Pow! Don't walk run to your nearest record player." This was the first public move by the band and its hip management to drop their identification with Mod subculture and realign themselves as avant-gardists in the field of pop music. With every release by the

Beatles, Stones, Yardbirds and Kinks, the pop scene in 1965 was being actively remade and remodelled. The Who were late arrivals to the new pop culture party, as they also came late to the table of Pop Art. Like their immersion in Mod subculture in 1964, Pop Art had a role to play in defining The Who as distinctive in an overcrowded and highly contested field.

During the Spring and Summer of 1965, the band's mouthpiece, Pete Townshend, re-enforced the identification with Pop Art to the point of redundancy. One magazine article after another repeated his mantra on the topic, such as this clip from *Boyfriend*:

The Who are everything that is 1965 to their wild, pushing audiences. You may think their music phony or gimmicky, but it is no more that way than the action painters who sling their materials violently on to the canvas instead of using neat perfect strokes and a pallet. One is wild, like The Who are wild, propelling into their drums, guitars and voices, the feel of the buildings, the jets flying over them, the cars roaring along the new motorway. And they call this pop art music because the sounds are not purely musical, but full of the noises of the streets and lives around them.¹⁴

"From valueless objects - a guitar, a microphone, a hackneyed pop tune, we extract a new value." said Townshend in a 1966, "We take objects with one function and give them another."¹⁵ The art historian, Thomas Crow has called such processes the "subcultural transformation of the commodity." The process is improvisational, activist and inventive.¹⁶ The Who fit Crow's schema, but they are also hopping a ride on an established trend. At this stage, their Pop Art is defined as an expression of Alloway's expansionist phase 3. Townshend has little new to say about Pop Art, but

his rhetorical stance is utterly novel within pop music cultures. Lennon and McCartney, Jagger and Richards, and Ray Davis would recognize the moves The Who were making, but none of them presented their music in such an overtly theorized manner. Never shy about offering explanations for The Who's actions and music, Townshend said, Pop Art "is re-presenting something the public is familiar with, in a different form . . . Like clothes. Union Jacks are supposed to be flown. We have a jacket made of one. Keith Moon, our drummer, has a jersey with the RAF insignia on it. I have a white jacket covered in medals."¹⁷ For Townshend, Pop Art in this instance is about the presentation of self through co-opting the symbols of authority (flags, insignia, medals) . This iconoclasm creates a pose that is nonconformist, insolent and disrespectful, just like the single, "My Generation." He defines that record as "really pop-art. I wrote it with that intention. Not only is the number pop-art, the lyrics are 'young and rebellious.' It's anti middle-age, anti boss-class and anti-young marrieds!"¹⁸

In the introduction to *Revolt into Style*, the musician and journalist, George Melly consciously follows the lines set down by Alloway and his IG colleagues and argues for an account of pop culture that is neither obsequious to tradition or meekly subservient in the face of aristocratic rituals of discrimination. By focusing on the commercial arts, Melly emphasizes the "non-literary" aspects of contemporary culture, which suggests a "rejection of an educational structure in which social origin is revealed through the manner of verbal communication." The effect of this stance is to emphasize the importance of class politics as a defining principle in the British version of Pop Art.¹⁹ It was the class-based and gendered aspect of popular culture that the *New Statesman* columnist, Paul Johnston, in 1964 calls, "Beatlism," which

he, like so many others, found distasteful. Johnson considers the vulgar arts to be “anti-culture” and he despairs at how leaders in government and society were now in thrall to the voices of the young. At age 16, Johnson recalls, he and his friends were reading Shakespeare, writing poems and listening to Beethoven.²⁰

As befits the Beatles’ standing, Melly gives them a central role in his narrative of revolt from convention, nonetheless, The Who play their part. He proposes that the band have an intellectual coherence that conflicts with their mannered exploitation of Pop Art. In the interview with Townshend, he poses a question about the band’s use of the Pop Art tag, asking whether it was anything more than pure exploitation? It was “a bit of a gimmick,” Townshend replies, “but we felt it was necessary to bring colour to [our] image, to stop us looking too sinister, too drab and over-intense. Actually though there was something in it, because pop art borrowed from real pop and we’re taking it back again.”²¹ Townshend positions himself as an imposter, co-opting Pop Art for self-serving ends, and as a provocateur – an artist who turns the world he is presented with back in on itself. The Who’s vogueish adherence to Pop Art principles are contained, in Townshend’s terms, within an authentic engagement with its doctrines, through a serious application of its tenets.

The Who’s first biographer, Gary Herman, configures London Mods as the advance guard of a postwar movement that gave youth a sense of self, which prioritized consumption over production. He argues that because Mods “no longer believed in the idea of work, but had to submit to the necessity of it, they were not passive consumers as their elders were.”²² This idea is most clearly articulated in youth’s desire to produce outrage in others for its own sake - to enact a rebellious stance.²³ In support of his argument, he quotes The Who’s manager, Kit Lambert, on

the band's rejection of a fixed and accepted heritage, and that their "rootlessness" should be considered as a "new form of crime aimed against the bourgeois."²⁴ This is Lambert's hyperbolic attempt to articulate the idea of the rock star as the personification of the rebel, the outlaw in our midst. For Townshend, however, the band's rebel stance is the start not the end of the story he wants to tell.

People come up to me and ask say, "How could you break a guitar?" And some fool in the Bee Gees said, "You wouldn't break a Stradivarius, would you?" The answer is "Of course I wouldn't break a Stradivarius," but a Gibson guitar that came off a production line - Fuck it! I can get a better one.²⁵

The Who's lack of respect for mass-produced objects and refusal to conform to preexisting concepts of what constitutes a good performance, or a correctly balanced recording, is shaped as a rejection of tradition. The band evoke a culture of consumption that refuses the past, which assists their confrontation with a shared, formative and restrictive heritage. When identity can be bought in the high street, inheritance is devalued. Such activity is readily rendered as a revolt into consumption (or "style" as Melly defines it), but it is an impotent action because, as with tradition, it is defined and contained by its own terms. The participant who thinks he or she can escape from one prison – tradition – via another – consumption – has gone nowhere at all. By violently turning on the object of desire, Townshend avoids this trap:

"We don't allow our instruments to stop us doing what we want," he sneered. "We smash our instruments, tear our clothes, and wreck everything. The expense don't worry us because that would get between us and our

music. If I stood on stage worrying about the price of a guitar, then I'm not really playing music. I'm getting involved in material values."²⁶

The film director, Antonioni undoubtedly read The Who's acts of destruction in these terms. Unable to secure the services of the band, he featured the Yardbirds and had them ape The Who in a club scene in *Blow-Up*. Jeff Beck destroys his guitar and throws part of it into the crowd. Fighting others in the audience, David Hemmings' character takes ownership of the guitar neck. In the moment of struggle the desire for possession is everything, but immediately thereafter the fragment of the instrument is emptied of meaning and value and he tosses it away. Even when he has custody over the object of his desire, Hemmings' character remains unfulfilled. In his art and in his rhetorical utterances, Townshend recognizes this state of affairs. He knows that desire cannot be satisfied, and so he seeks *jouissance* in the act itself, in the juvenile delight in smashing things up. The pure pleasure to be found in destroying objects was something he did not deflect attention away from. His actions, however, are never simply defined by him as unfocused moments of vandalism. In a theorized form these destructive inclinations are defined as an aggressive antipathetic creativity – an act of negation.

Townshend gave value and meaning to his violent performances by aligning himself with Gustav Metzger's ideas on autodestructive art. The association was not cheaply made, nor was it presented without serious qualification.

When I was at art college Gustav Metzger did a couple of lectures and he was my big hero. He comes to see us occasionally and rubs his hands and says, "How are you T?" He wanted us to go to his symposium and give lectures and perhaps play and smash all our equipment for lira. I got very deeply involved

in auto-destruction but I wasn't too impressed by the practical side of it. When it actually came to being done it was always presented so badly: people would half-wittedly smash something and it would always turn round so the people who were against it would always be more powerful than the people that were doing it. Someone would come up and say, "Well, WHY did you do it ?" and the thing about auto-destruction is that it has no purpose, no reason at all. There is no reason why you allow these things to happen, why you set things off to happen or why you build a building that will fall down.²⁷

The direction of travel and the theoretical borrowings were not all one way: from art theory to Pete Townshend. In 1965, another of the tutors who taught Townshend at Ealing College of Art and Design, Roy Ascott brought a copy of "My Generation" into his art class and left a lasting impression on one of his students, Brian Eno. David Sheppard, Eno's biographer, writes: "This was pop music with its art school slip showing, as invigorating as it was emancipating. At a stroke, its three minutes of febrile, distinctly British musical energy convinced Eno that contemporary art and music could legitimately cohabit."²⁸

Other guitarists paid homage to what Townshend was doing, like Eddie Phillips of the Creation, who used a violin bow to turn his guitar into a diesel engine, or Jimi Hendrix with his pyrotechnics, but none found the violent seam that Townshend mined with such splendid juvenile glee and insouciance, and only Bob Dylan as successfully transformed a musical instrument, here a harmonica and not a guitar, into something that could assault an audience. When Beck attacks his amp and smashes his guitar in *Blow-Up* it is in response to the instrument's malfunctioning, when Townshend rams his guitar into his speaker stack it is done in

order to create noise. Townshend is not executing an expedient or rational action, but is doing something that is insolent and provocative – he is creating a violent sonic dissonance that is produced as an attack on the listener.

The chevrons, arrows, medals and targets, the graphic markers of the band's identification with Pop Art, which decorate their clothes, publicity materials and record sleeves, are ready-made, found objects, conversely their performances are *sui generis* and underwrite the claim that they make more than a reductive or playful contribution to the form. The Who are "very loud, we use massive amplifiers, beyond all reason." Townshend tells Melly, "You've got to be drastic and violent to reach the audience now. They've been getting too much *given* to them."²⁹ It is within the realm of sound that The Who are at their most radical; not copyists but innovators. In the *Melody Maker* Townshend expounds on his ideas about sonic dissonance: "We play pop-art with standard group equipment. I get jet plane sounds, morse code signals, howling wind effects."³⁰ The Who's smashing of guitars, amplifiers and drums contends with the contradictions they face and contains the idea of desire for and the ready rejection of the commodity.

In contemporary media, The Who are defined as restless, freewheeling and progressive, with Pop Art a ready-made alternative to their affiliation with Mod culture that was being dropped in their haste to exploit this latest fad. "We think the Mod thing is dying. We don't plan to go down with it."³¹ The band's dedication to immediacy, to the moment, to living in the present tense, produces an impatient pursuit of the new in the now. Townshend shows complete disdain for all that The Who have achieved, and in particular for the others on the scene who are less fleet of foot in taking the initiative and less agile in grasping what sits before them.

Dismissing the pursuit of quality as a worthwhile goal in and of itself, Townshend told a January 1966 television audience that he was “more interested in keeping moving. I think quality leads to being static.”³² His desire to live in the present is propelled by an amphetamine-fueled intensity. He demonstrates the appearance of someone who is witness to, and a participant in, an accelerating, exaggerated and unpredictable world:

My personal motivation on stage is simple. It consists of a hate of every kind of pop music and a hate of everything our group has done. You are getting higher and higher but chopping away at your own legs. I prefer to be in this position. It’s very exciting. I don’t see any career ahead. That’s why I like it – it makes you feel young, feeding on insecurity. If you are insecure you are secure in your insecurity. I still don’t know what I’m going to do.³³

Through using the language of negation, The Who amplified a non-conformist aesthetic and pushed it beyond that used by their rivals. We’re “a group with built in hate,” said Townshend, defining The Who against the pop mainstream *and* their immediate competitors.³⁴ Until the appearance of the Sex Pistols in 1976, The Who alone on the British scene spoke in these terms.

Velvet Underground founder, John Cale recalls the formative effect The Who’s recordings (alongside the Kinks and the Small Faces) had on him and Lou Reed. “They were sniffing around in the same musical grounds that we were . . . their guitarists were using feedback on records. It made us feel . . . we were not alone.”³⁵ Cale speaks of the Velvet Underground in remarkably similar terms to those held in 1965 by Townshend: “We were in it for the exaltation,” says Cale, “and could not be swayed from our course to do it exactly as we wanted . . . We hated

everybody and everything . . . We did not consider ourselves to be entertainers and would not relate to our audience the way pop groups like the Monkees were supposed to; we never smiled.”³⁶ In the image that adorns the front of the *My Generation* album no one in The Who is smiling either.

Framed top and bottom by the stencil-style block print of the band’s name and the album’s title, and hemmed in on the left side by oil drums, the band look up and into the camera that is being held high above their heads. Draped over his shoulders, John Entwistle wears the now iconic Union Jack jacket; Townshend sports a striped college scarf; Moon has on white Lee denim jeans and jacket with contrasting red t-shirt, which corresponds to “THE WHO” printed in the same shade of red. Daltrey is dressed in a pale blue Lee jacket that in turn is matched to the color of the “MY GENERATION” type, which runs across the bottom of the sleeve. The contrasting and corresponding use of color stands out against the otherwise monochromatic elements in the image. The viewer’s gaze loops from one band member to the next, each linked, yet separate, and equal in stature. Their faces are bleached white by the photographer’s lights, the processing of the image, or from reflecting the coldness of a winter’s day. The band is dressed and posed in a casual manner, but they are also Mod sharp, with clean lines, drainpipe tight trousers and black pointed boots. The four oil drums and the gray concrete pavement suggest an industrial, urban environment that The Who appear comfortable within, even as their posture and clothes suggest cool consumption rather than fevered productivity. The labor-leisure continuum is subliminally reinforced by the denim worn by Daltrey and Moon that still evoke American work wear, even as the light tone of the fabric contradicts any residue of pure functionality that might remain.

Given the high-velocity publicity and image making that helped solidify their alignment with Pop Art, the cover image of *My Generation* is rather mute and undemonstrative. Unlike the black and white poster designed for their Tuesday night residency at the Marquee club, which announced “Maximum R&B” and profiled Townshend with arm raised poised to descend on to his guitar, the band on the album sleeve are posed, fixed into place, inactive. Their iconoclastic *détournement* of the symbols of Empire and Nation – the flags into jackets and the medal festooned tops; or Moon’s appropriation of Pop Art on his t-shirts - RAF roundels, “POW,” “Elvis Lives,” “Great Balls of Fire,” “We’re U.N.C.L.E.” and even reproductions of a Bridget Riley-esque op-art motif and Lichtenstein’s 1964 “Pistol” – all, except the Union Jack jacket, are absent.

The session for the album sleeve was shot on Surrey Docks, south east London, in November 1965, by Decca Records’ in-house photographer David Wedgbury. He also provided the March 1965 images of the band in front of London landmarks, one of which was used for the album’s US release, and others in front of double decker buses and vast advertising hoardings, many used on European EP sleeves. These portraits all correspond more directly with Townshend’s Pop Art rhetoric than the *My Generation* sleeve. A month after the album’s release, in an interview in *Disc*, the band declares that “we’ll jump out of ‘65 like we jumped out of the Mod scene to the Pop Art scene . . . We intend dropping Pop Art right away . . . We’re sick of it.”³⁷

Townshend is astute enough to know that, like Mod, Pop Art is not built to endure. Obsolescence is a given in his concept of the band, his rhetorical stance presents this at face value, eagerly admitting to their novelty, suggestive not only of

evanescence but also movement. Redundancy and succession are pre-scripted and etched into his declarations: "I'm important now I'm young, but I won't be when I'm over 21," as he was paraphrased in an article in the *Melody Maker*, or "I hope I die before I get old . . ." as Daltrey sings in "My Generation."³⁸ By March 1966 Townshend has done with this phase of the band, or at least with Pop Art as the means to explain things: "It has no relevance to The Who except we used its ideas, although the way The Who used to talk about Pop Art was Pop Art: 'Are you Pop Art?' 'Yes we *are* Pop Art'."³⁹

The *My Generation* album was seven months in the making with sessions held in April and October. During their initial visits to the studio the band recorded the staples of their live set, including three James Brown covers ("Please, Please, Please," "I Don't Mind" and "Shout and Shimmy") two songs first recorded by Martha and the Vandella's - "(Love Is Like a) Heatwave" and "Motoring" - alongside Eddie Holland's "Leaving Here," Garnet Mimms' "Anytime You Want Me," Derek Martin's version of Otis Blackwell's "Daddy Rolling Stone," and Bo Diddley's "I'm A Man." Original Townshend songs were limited to "Out in the Street" and "Anyway Anyhow Anywhere." Acetates were made that held nine of these recordings, but a proper release was put on hold when negative critical reaction toward the paucity of original material was taken on board. At the October sessions, new compositions included "The Good's Gone," "La-La-La Lies," "My Generation," "Much Too Much," "The Kids Are Alright," "It's Not True," "A Legal Matter" and "The Ox." It was these eight tracks, accompanied by "I'm A Man," "Please, Please, Please" and "I Don't Mind," that made up the released album's track list.

The mix of covers and originals suggest, like the sleeve image, that things were in transition. This is consistent with Townshend's desire for The Who to assume an urgency in putting behind him that which would pin the group down and hold them to account. Even as the album was released, he was expressing his displeasure for all that they had just achieved. Giving a track-by-track run through of the album in *Disc*, Townshend expresses his hate for what it has to offer - his own songs and the cover versions in equal measure.⁴⁰ As with the guitars and amplifiers he trashed on stage, Townshend was practicing a form of autodestruction. He dismisses and belittles what The Who has achieved, if only to build up expectations of what was to follow.

The songs on the album documented Mod lifestyle – “The Kids Are Alright,” “My Generation,” “Out in the Street.” Targeted staid conformity – “It’s A Legal Matter,” “It’s Not True,” and mused on love turned sour – “The Good’s Gone,” “La-La-Lies” and “Much Too Much.” The history of the album’s germination might suggest that the original compositions represents the now against the yesterday of Bo Diddley and James Brown covers, documenting their movement from Mod purveyors of “Maximum R&B” to Pop Art expressions of love for (and disaffection with) the modern. But *My Generation* also expresses, albeit in an inchoate and nascent manner, the contradictory position that in good part would define The Who over the next 50 years. On this album the band begin their critique of commodity culture, while simultaneously struggling with the paradox of their own commodification as pop stars. It is a struggle that will eventually ensure they become active rather than passive agents in the mix of Pop Art’s third phase.

Like others in Britain who were invested in pop culture, The Who understood the modern to be American in orientation if not in actual fact. From their perspective, the United States, with its commercial arts and commodities, represented the future that promised a maximized intensity strong enough to overwhelm the senses – coke after coke after coke-a-cola. Repeated images of pinups dominate the iconography in Mario Amaya's *Pop as Art: A Survey of the New Super Realism*. Published in 1965, it was the first of many books on Pop Art aimed at a general readership. The reproduced art works are fixed, congealed and mired in Alloway's phase 2. Semi-clothed, recumbent and open mouthed, the female fantasy figures are aligned with consumer goods, most emphatically phallic objects - cars and soda bottles.⁴¹ While simultaneously distancing the aesthete from accusations of vulgar contamination, Pop Art gives consumerism a context and a platform in which pleasure without guilt can be taken in commodities.

In publicity photographs shot throughout 1965, The Who positioned themselves alongside commercial imagery that echoed the iconography found in Amaya's book. They posed in front of giant advertising billboards depicting a woman in a white feathered hat, a bureaucrat in a bowler, a striptease dancer in a poster for the sexploitation film *Primitive London*, and a giant eye, which had a glass of gin for its iris. As with their version of "Batman," juxtaposing The Who with commercial imagery places them in the moment and aids in the generation of a check list audit of Hamilton's Pop Art characteristics. Elsewhere, however, in their act, with their singles and the *My Generation* LP, the Pop Art exercised by the Who is neither static or mere mimicry. The Pop Art practiced in these spaces is full of noisy, brash, angry,

anarchic, violent sentiments, and it is deeply disaffected with the inherited state of things.

In its surly and bolshie articulation of hostility, the album strikes a marked contrast with all the “cool” images of a processed, fabricated, man-made world that appear in Amaya’s book. There is one exception, however, the book’s reproduction of Peter Blake’s 1964/5 portrait of Bo Diddley. Rendered with conked hair, bow-tie, familiar tartan jacket and guitar erect, Blake sexualizes Diddley by painting electric blue lines around his inner thighs. It is the only image of a non-white character in all of the 51 Pop Art works Amay reproduces. In contrast, The Who acknowledge pop music’s racial dimension and their debt to black American stars.

By 1965 pop music, or at least records that innovated and spoke to the moment, were urban, black and female (at least in orientation and address if not in the performer’s gender and race) and is exemplified by Detroit’s Motown records. This side of the popular arts was not being represented by fine artists practicing Pop Art. In an essay, as much about the paucity of racial representations in American Pop Art as it is about a 1966 painting by James Rosenquest, *Big Bo*, art historian Melissa Mednicov argues there “are so few Pop paintings with black subjects in part because, beyond music, white artists did not understand how to represent the black experience of consumer culture in this period.”⁴² In 1965 commercial pop music was American and black, James Brown, Motown and Stax, and when pop wasn’t American and black it was aping that sound.⁴³ In a 2011 interview with Jon Savage, Townshend explains how this music was refracted through The Who:

the mods particularly liked Tamla Motown because it was urban. It was city-based, community based . . . you could almost sense that the records were

made in a street. . . It was such beautiful, well executed, well processed writing, recording, fabulous artists. It was an extraordinary phenomenon. But we also loved Howlin' Wolf, Buddy Guy, who did that rebel yell thing as well . . . But The Who were never a blues band, in a strict sense.⁴⁴

In their appropriation of black pop music, The Who act out the play of racial mimicry endemic to British bands of the era. This process of love and theft, however, is done with a self-consciousness that is absent in the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, or the Animals.

Even as their Pop Art sensibility found its summation in their first single released in 1966, "Substitute," The Who were by then rejecting the tag they had so recently embraced. With "Substitute," Townshend turns the platitudes, flatteries and shibboleths of commercial culture inside out and shows his unbounded disdain for the prefabricated. Class mobility, sexual attractiveness, commodity fetishes, authenticating emotions, eternal youth, all those things that help sell the promise of personal transformation through consumption, are revealed to be insincere, vacuous and phony: "substitute me for him," Daltrey sings, "substitute your lies for fact." It is also a space where racial identity is no less of an illusion: "I look all white but my dad was black . . ." The admission of miscegenation – sexual and cultural - was too much in North America and South Africa, and the band removed that line and replaced it for these markets with the asinine "I try going forward but my feet walk back." The 45 was released in the States on Atco, a subsidiary of Atlantic records, the preeminent rhythm and blues label of the era; a contradiction that should not be too quickly glossed over.

Band biographer, Herman contrasts the Rolling Stones' take on consumer society, "Satisfaction," with The Who's "My Generation." The former, he argues, is about an individual's unresolved frustration with incompleteness, unalleviated by acts of consumption despite the promises made, whereas the latter "encapsulates . . . the entire Mod experience – the individual anger and frustration . . . misplaced nonchalance . . . and collective violence." And, unlike "Satisfaction" it "expresses no awareness of the deeper implications of its stance."⁴⁵ What was inchoate on the *My Generation* album – a stutter – became with "Substitute" articulate and focused – "I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth. . ."

On the elements that influenced the Townshend composition, guitarist and Who fan, John Perry writes, "listening to Substitute when it came out, one never thought, 'Oh, Motown!,' but traces of its influence are all over the record – the tambourine, pushed right up front in the mix and the bass line in the verse."⁴⁶ It is there too in the song's title that Townshend gleaned from Smokey Robinson's "Tracks of My Tears," which he was listening to obsessively when he wrote the song. Perry also hears Jamie Jamerson's bass line from the Four Tops' "I Can't Help Myself" echoed in Entwistle's playing.⁴⁷ Without these correspondences with black American music, Townshend's critique of commerce in people and commodities would be little more than an act of bluster, his debt to Motown, complicates things.

And it was complicated not just by race, but by class, gender and sexuality too. Historian of British pop culture, Michael Bracewell writes that the question, "who am I?," which features so strongly in English pop was, through Mod, "both a reaction against adolescent (even teenage) conformity, and a belief that pop could be a spiritual quest through the boredom and hostility of modern English life in

search of self-knowledge. This was fundamental to the no-nonsense polemic of The Who, whose earliest period delivered pop punches to the kidneys as well as combining a bisexual mixture of extreme violence and extreme sensitivity – the bad boy so worn out with conformism of the tribe that he turns on his peers as well as his teachers and parents.”⁴⁸

The identification and celebration of ambiguity in The Who’s identity, which Bracewell shares with critic Jon Savage, helps explain for these writers the continued validity of The Who’s 1960’s recordings.⁴⁹ Sexual and gender dissembling is mirrored, magnified even, by The Who’s cooption of black pop culture on which their act was based – the feminine side echoed in their covers of tunes sung by Motown’s girl groups, which were coupled with the male strut and machismo of their James Brown imitations.

In the face of a staid conformity, The Who’s class, sexual, gender and racial aspects are animated and, in their mastery of sonic dissonance, they are also amplified. On September 9th 1966, The Who’s appearance at the Pier Pavilion, Felixstowe, was filmed by French television. The recorded songs are compressed into a montage of clips that conclude with “My Generation,” featuring a long feedback fueled instrumental coda. The end sequence focuses on Townshend, with brief cutaways to Daltrey and to Moon who add to the maelstrom. The noise is ferocious, but given shape by Entwistle’s throbbing bass line and Moon pounding on the one floor tom-tom left standing. Townshend places his back against his two amps and speakers, with arms outstretched he uses his whole body to modulate the feedback. He flays the guitar, slashing out Diddley-esque runs before turning his back to the audience and spearing one of the cabinets - jabbing the guitar’s head into the

speakers. Facing front, he machineguns the camera, he retreats once more into the backline and then rams the guitar's body into the stack. The relentless feedback takes direction and a dynamic as he frames the sound through manipulating the stiletto sharp lines of electronic noise, which lace around and through the rumble and clatter. The performance is thrilling; answering the questions he raised about the powerlessness of the autodestructive artist in the face of public indifference. The Who produce an immersive, inescapable spectacle and sensation - an attraction that excludes any alternative or substitute. Unlike the practitioners of autodestructive art, who Townshend criticized for being too easily repudiated, The Who in this public space cannot be denied.

Popular music scholars Simon Frith and Howard Horne suggest that Townshend saw his "musical activities in terms of performance art, which meant seeing The Who's stage act itself as the moment of artistic creation and exploring the constraints on this – the dynamic relationship between star and audience, the effects of chance and accident, the shifting borders between music and noise."⁵⁰ Reports of The Who's 1965 tour of Scandinavia underscore the serious intent of the band to do something other than simply entertain their audience.

It became a commonplace in Denmark to describe their music as "pigtraad," "like having barbed-wire pulled through your ears."⁵¹ One Scandinavian reviewer describes the sound made by the band as a "massacre," but out of this turbulence The Who "create sounds we've never heard before," using an "established music language" through which they channel "their complex ideas into practice with an astonishing artistic straightforwardness that touches people. . . The act, exciting and passionate, is performed without losing control over the performance as a whole."

The reviewer concludes with the thought that the show could only be bettered if the guitars and the building they were playing in would go up in smoke “backed by the shout of joy from the audience. Indeed – The Who is anarchy!”⁵²

In this view from Denmark, The Who appear to be dancing on the ruins of civilization, enacting an echo of F. T. Marinetti’s Futurist summons to “take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly.”⁵³ In *Lipstick Traces*, Greil Marcus provides enough examples of rock ‘n’ roll as a “negation of social facts” to support the Danish reviewer’s imaginative response to The Who. Rock ‘n’ roll at its most radical and subversive opens up for Marcus “questions of identity, justice, repression, will, and desire,” before it too becomes a social fact.⁵⁴ I would suggest this is also true for The Who.

The Pop Art identity The Who had fashioned throughout 1965 had gone by early 1966, at least in the publicity they stoked, but its influence was still at work in the run of 45s they released over the next two years – “I’m a Boy,” “Happy Jack,” “Pictures of Lily,” and “I Can See for Miles” – and it is readily present on the two albums they recorded prior to *Tommy* (1969) - *A Quick One While He’s Away* and *The Who Sell Out*, released in December 1966 and 1967 respectively. The latter in its cover imagery and with its fake radio commercials is assuredly Pop Art in effect and orientation. The band’s earlier exploitation of Pop Art’s tenets was a public play for attention and as such was a closed circuit, but the sonic dissonance and explosive stage show was innovative and, in Alloway’s terms, expansive. Ditching the rhetorical self-identification with Pop Art kept The Who in the now of the moment, leaving a bandwagon of “Pop Art” bands to follow in their trail.⁵⁵ With their self-identification with Pop Art dismissed as obsolete, the band was now free, as Frith

and Horne observe, to make “records about mass communication, about the media disruption of commonsense distinctions between the real and the false.” And, on their third album, *The Who Sell Out*, “to both heighten the ‘realism’ of [their] music and draw attention to its spuriousness.”⁵⁶

If Pop Art was just a mirror to commercial imagery, its refusal to acknowledge a world outside of Madison Avenue - a space where women exist in a non-objectified state, class difference has not been effaced, and people of color have a presence – the uniformity of the iconography in Alloway’s phase 2 can be easily explained away. In the expansionist phase 3, Pop Art does more than critique, reflect and appropriate commodity culture. Discussing Warhol’s series of Disaster silkscreens – electric chair, falling suicide victim, car crashes and race riots – Thomas Crow writes, they are “a stark, disabused, pessimistic vision of American life, produced from the knowing rearrangement of pulp materials by an artist who did not opt for the easier paths of irony or condescension. There was a threat in this art to create to true “pop” art in the most positive sense of that term – a pulp-derived, bleakly monochromatic vision that held to a tradition of truth-telling all but buried in American commercial culture.”⁵⁷ With a stance that was London-centric and created from “standard group equipment,” rather than from American pulp materials, The Who in 1965-67, like Warhol in 1963, pursued an authenticity that refused an easy turn to irony, a blasé rejection of the blandishments of tradition, or the empty fetishization of a depthless commodity culture.

Through the acts of mimesis and self-invention, expressed in their aural assault on an inherited status quo, The Who, I argue, unsettle and make more complex our understanding of Pop Art and the 1960s pop scene. Delinquent

mischief-makers *and* radical aesthetes, The Who returned to an ossified Pop Art an element of surprise, creating art that was impudent, insolent, aggressive, disconcerting and violent in its intent. Coming to terms with The Who's interventions into Pop Art means putting the focus not just on the end product, but also on the process of art making, where high and low cultural forms are in flux rather than fixed. Pop music exists in the present, and it is this fact that claims our attention. Fine art objects only infer this immediacy, The Who in 1965-67 lived it.

'The simple things you see are all complicated . . .'

'Substitute' the Who (1966)

¹ *Melody Maker* (July 3, 1965), 11

² John Heilpern, 'The Who' *The Observer Colour Magazine* (March 20, 1966)

republished in John Perry, *The Who – Meaty, Beaty, Big and Bouncy: Classic Rock Albums* (New York: Schirmer, 1998), 158-66.

³ A notable exception to this schema is Thomas Crow, *The Long March of Pop: Art, Music and Design 1930-1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

⁴ republished in Mark Francis (ed.), *POP* (London: Phaidon, 2005), 198.

⁵ Lawrence Alloway, 'Pop Art: The Words' *Auction* 1:4 (February 1962), 7-9. Revised in *Topics in American Art Since 1945* (New York: Norton, 1975), 119-22.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.* See also, Sasha Torres, 'The Caped Crusader of Camp: Pop, Camp, and the Batman Television Series' *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999), 330-343. Richard Kalina (ed.), *Lawrence Alloway - Imagining the Present: Context, Content, and the Role of the Critic* (London: Routledge, 2006), 26. For an expansive investigation of Alloway's film criticism, see Peter Stanfield, 'Maximum Movies: Lawrence Alloway's Pop Art Film Criticism', *Screen* 49:2 (Summer 2008), 179-93.

¹¹ 'The Clock King's Crazy Crimes' (aired October 12, 1966), see

<http://blogs.artinfo.com/lacmonfire/2011/03/09/meet-warhols-evil-twin-pop-goes-the-joker/>

¹² He has the name of the show wrong, he means the *New Generation: 1964* show at the Whitechapel Gallery. The Gulbenkian sponsored the Tate show, which was vast in its coverage of contemporary European and North American art.

¹³ Jonathan Green, *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground 1961-71* (London: Heinmann, 1988), 63.

¹⁴ *Boyfriend* (July 3, 1965), 26.

¹⁵ Heilpern, 'The Who'.

¹⁶ Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (London: Lawrence King), 25.

¹⁷ *Melody Maker* (July 3, 1965), 11.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ George Melly, *Revolt into Style: The Pop Arts in the 50s and 60s* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), 18.

²⁰ Paul Johnson, 'The Menace of Beatlism' *New Statesman* (28 February 1964), republished in *New Statesman* (22-28 August 2014), 23.

²¹ Melly, 116.

²² Herman, 21.

²³ *ibid.*, 39.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 44. A concept echoed by Melly in his 1966 discussion of Teds, who he considered "were a new kind of criminal for whom violence was an end in itself and 'crime' in the traditional sense neither obligatory nor even necessary." 32.

²⁵ From 1968 *Rolling Stone*?

²⁶ Andy Neill and Matt Kent, *Anyway Anyhow Anywhere: The Complete Chronicle of The Who 1958-1978* (New York: Friedman Fairfax, 2002), 46.

²⁷ Miles, 'Interview with Pete Townshend' *International Times* (13 February 1967)

²⁸ David Sheppard, *On Some Far Away Beach: The Life and Times of Brian Eno* (London: Orion 2009), 34. For a thorough investigation of the influence of an art school education on Eno and his colleagues in Roxy Music, see Michael Bracewell, *Re-make/Re-model: Art, Pop, Fashion and the Making of Roxy Music, 1953-1972* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007).

²⁹ Melly, 115.

³⁰ *Melody Maker* July 3, 1965), 11.

³¹ *Melody Maker* (June 5, 1965), 7.

³² *A Whole Scene Going* BBC 1 (January 5, 1966)

³³ *London Sunday Citizen* (August 8, 1965) cited in Gary Herman, *The Who* (London: Studio Vista, 1971), 94.

³⁴ Neill and Kent, 46.

³⁵ Victor Bockris and John Cale, *What's Welsh for Zen: The Autobiography of John Cale* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 80.

³⁶ *ibid*, 77.

³⁷ cited in Neill & Kent, 76.

³⁸ *Melody Maker* (July 3, 1965), 11.

³⁹ *Melody Maker* (March 26, 1966), 7.

⁴⁰ *Disc* (December 4, 1965), 8 &10. On-line at www.thewho.info/MyGeneration5.htm

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- ⁴¹ Mario Amaya, *Pop as Art: A Survey of the New Super-Realism* (London: Studio Vista, 1965)
- ⁴² Melissa L. Mednicov, 'Pink, White, and Black: The Strange Case of James Rosenquist's *Big Bo'* *Art Journal* 73:1 (Spring 2014), 60-75
- ⁴³ The best over view of the pop music scene at this specific point in time is provided by Richard Williams, '1965:Annus Mirabilis' in *Long Distance Call: Writings on Music* (London: Aurum Press, 2000), 79-90.
- ⁴⁴ Jon Savage supplied the transcript, for which I am very grateful.
- ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 65.
- ⁴⁶ Perry, 45.
- ⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 44.
- ⁴⁸ Michael Bracewell, *England is Mine: Pop Life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 80.
- ⁴⁹ Jon Savage, *1966: The Year the Decade Exploded* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), 60-67.
- ⁵⁰ Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop* (London: Routledge, 1987), 101.
- ⁵¹ Olle Lundin, Kjell Malmberg, *The Who in Denmark & Norway & Finland* (Sweden: Squeeze Books, 2006), 12.
- ⁵² *Ibid*, 16-17.
- ⁵³ Umberto Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2001), 19.
- ⁵⁴ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), 56.

⁵⁵ The bandwagon was epitomized by the Move and the Creation. The latter worked with the Who's *My Generation* producer Shel Talmy. Their debut 45 "Painter Man" coupled with "Biff, Bang, Pow" was released in October 1966, 16 months after "Anyway Anyhow Anywhere" and 10 months or so after The Who had dropped the Pop Art tag. The Creation labelled their music as "red with purple flashes." Other than with their "Batman" cover, the Who were never so prosaic. . .

⁵⁶ Frith and Horne, 107.

⁵⁷ Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties*, 87.