Roy Lichtenstein's Tears: Art vs. Pop in American Culture[1]

Bart Beaty

He had one curious encounter at camp. He dropped by the chief of staff's quarters one night and found a young soldier sitting on a bunk, crying like a baby. "He said he was an artist," Novick remembered, "and he had to do menial work, like cleaning up the officers' quarters.

"It turned out to be Roy Lichtenstein. The work he showed me was rather poor and academic." Feeling sorry for the kid, Novick got on the horn and got him a better job. "Later on, one of the first things he started copying was my work. He didn't come into his own, doing things that were worthwhile, until he started doing things that were less academic than that. He was just making large copies of the cartoons I had drawn and painting them."

—Irv Novick reminisces (Duin and Richardson 332)

Irv Novick's recollections of a wartime meeting with Roy Lichtenstein intersect with common assumptions about the cultural value of pop art in a number of fascinating ways. Lichtenstein, of course, is an artist who is best known for his ironic reworkings of panels taken from American comic books. Two particular comic book genres were emphasized by Lichtenstein—the war comic, with the scenes of battle that he presumably missed while doing menial work, and the romance comic, with the crying heroines who are subtly recalled above. Novick evokes both of these genres in his anecdote. A journeyman artist for DC Comics, who himself specialized in war comics, Novick suggests that Lichtenstein's wartime experiences served as an important psychological test for the artist. Furthermore, the test is one that the artist seems to have failed according to the dominant criteria of masculinity. One further intersection bears mention, however, and helps to elucidate further the importance of Novick's

intentions with regard to this unusual anecdote. When he began painting in a pop art style, Lichtenstein did, indeed, appropriate some of the images that Novick had created for DC in his paintings, including "Whaam!" (1963) and "Okay, Hot-Shot" (1963). Novick's story seems to be an attempt to personally diminish an artist whose own career had eclipsed, just as it drew upon, his own. While Lichtenstein the painter trumps Novick the cartoonist, on the battlefield it was Novick who was the real man. Novick's attempt to feminize Lichtenstein as crying like a baby can be read further as a feminization of the realm of pop art in relation to the world of comics. In characterizing Lichtenstein as someone who just couldn't cut it in war—and by extension in art—Novick acknowledges the fraught relationship between comic books and pop art, while attempting to gender the distinction in order to reverse the traditional valuation of the two realms.

As early as 1966, critics suggested that comic books were a legitimate "pop phenomenon" deserving respect (Benchley 169), but this view remained a minority opinion. As a source material for high art painting practices, comic books were suspect to most critics, and as a form in their own right, they were frequently dismissed outright. Harold Rosenberg summed up the distinction succinctly when he suggested that the difference between a comic strip of Mickey Mouse and a Lichtenstein painting of the same was art history, or the fact that Lichtenstein paints with the idea of the museum in mind (13–4). In a similar vein, Michael Lobel suggested that Lichtenstein's work could be understood through the functioning of two codes: the semiotic and the aesthetic. The former is a conventionalized set of rules, while the latter is the product of a unique, creating subject (Lobel 156–7). This type of distinction denied outright the possibility that the codified work of Irv Novick might also be the work of a creating subject and seemingly banished comic books forever from the realm of art. Novick's attempts to ridicule Lichtenstein and his output, therefore, should be regarded as a form of displaced hostility or outrage against the art establishment of America that relegated comics to the level of lowbrow culture, never to darken the doors of the museum or art gallery. Novick lashes out at Lichtenstein as a representative of an art world that has consistently derided his own work. As the Novick story cited above so ably demonstrates, this distaste is fundamentally rooted in submerged gendered fears about the relationship between high and popular forms of culture. It is a debate that has raged in comic book circles since the 1960s, with Lichtenstein as a crucial point for criticism and com-

plaint. Even as comics developed their own avant-garde with the underground movement in the late-1960s and emerged thirty years later with bold new styles, their marginal position in the hierarchies of American visual culture still rankles.

The subject of Lichtenstein's relationship to comic books came to a head in the comic industry press in 1990, when Christie's auctioned the painting "Torpedos … Los" for $5.5 million. Why, comic book fans wondered, was that painting, based on a single panel from a comic book, valued so highly, when the entire fifty-two-page comic from which it was taken originally cost only a dime? Writing in the *Comics Journal*, Bob Levin defended Lichtenstein as a greater artist than those from whom he borrowed, but his opinion was not widely shared in comics fandom (3–6). In the introduction to the 1991 Misfit Lit show at Seattle's Center for Contemporary Art, Kim Thompson, the vice-president of the largest alternative comic book publisher in the United States, Fantagraphics Books, raised the spectre of Lichtenstein once again. He challenged the notion that comic books are simply "semi-anonymous art fodder" when he wrote,

> As bracing and exciting as pop art's celebration of the flatness, boldness and ubiquity of contemporary images was, one of its unfortunate side effects has been to relegate comics art to the same cultural compost heap as urinals, bricks, and Campbell's soup cans. This show is meant at least partly as an antidote to three decades of Roy Lichtenstein panel blow-ups and semi-abstract Mickey Mouses—a celebration of comics' *own* diversity, subtlety, richness, and graphic and literary ambitions. (3)

Here Thompson enunciates one of the two primary charges that comic book fans lay against Lichtenstein: that his success has diminished the possibility that comic art will be taken seriously as a legitimate art form in its own right. By reducing comic books to source material, Lichtenstein is accused of having made the legitimatization of comic books—already a difficult task—that much more challenging. Lichtenstein, therefore, is seen not as honouring the comic book form with his paintings but as further devaluing the entire medium, based on the long-standing prejudice against cartoonists that has existed in the world of high art. For comic book fans, this prejudice, as Thompson pointed out in his essay, was exemplified by the Museum of Modern Art's High and Low show in that same year, which focused on the ways that comics have influenced developments in the fine arts but not vice versa. Nowhere in the exhibit was there an acknowledgement of comics as an art in and of themselves.

Like a kind of mutely passive muse, they can only inspire art, not create it. It was because of this apparent snub that Fantagraphics sponsored the Misfit Lit show, with the company's founder, Gary Groth, acting as curator. Responding directly to this perceived lack of respect, comics fans have long charged that Lichtenstein is simply a thief who has made millions exploiting the work of comic book artists who were paid extremely low page rates for their semi-anonymous work (the discussion of the sale of "Torpedoes … Los" is a clear example). In his recent comic book parody of the *New Yorker*, Kyle Baker's "Goings on about Town" lists a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in this way: "'Roy Lichtenstein: The Rich Man's Vince Colletta.' Lichtenstein made a bold statement about how the comic book industry ripped off its talent. He did this by not paying the artists who created his source material either. Features images ripped off from Jack Abel, Vince Colletta, Frank Giacoia, Alex Toth and Don Heck" (8).

Baker's satiric emphasis on the issues of credit and recompense derive their humour from the shared assumption among comic book fans that what Lichtenstein accomplished with his art came at the expense of the reputation of comic book creators and the comics form. For many in comic book fandom, Lichtenstein served as a naggingly constant reminder of the failure of comic books to be taken as a serious contribution to contemporary art practices.

The distinction between comic books and painting—and between Lichtenstein and the creators of many of his source images—was driven home to comics fandom by the relative values placed on comic books and paintings at auction in the early 1990s. In July 1990, the *Comics Journal* reported on the sale of Lichtenstein's paintings as if this were news with a particular relevance for the comic book industry, although the magazine rarely reported on similar sales of comic book art ("Lichtenstein" 23). Indeed, an element of confusion enters the market when the monetary value of comic books is discussed. For comics, as a hybrid of both print and visual media, there are two distinct physical objects that can be sold. There is the book itself, which has two possible values—one when it is first published, and one later, when it is perceived as a valuable collector's item. But there are also the originals of the individual pages, which can be framed and displayed as art—or at least as templates for art. The widespread use of comic book price guides such as the *Overstreet Price Guide* and *Wizard Magazine* within comics fandom has placed in question the true commodity at the heart of comics. The *Overstreet*

Price Guide reports on sales values of hundreds of thousands of dollars for copies of highly sought after comics such as *Action Comics* #1 (the first appearance of the great American icon, Superman), but sales of original comics art pages rarely reach these dollar values. In the early 1990s, auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's began to place both comic books and original comics art for sale, bringing comics more fully into the traditional exchange system associated with painting. This was perceived as both a boon and bane for the comics community. On the one hand, it signalled a new level of acceptance—at least at the level of commerce. On the other, it meant that the market for original comics art would be fundamentally altered and prices would rise. An article in a 1994 issue of the *Jack Kirby Collector*, for example, explained the auction process to comic book fans, while noting the rapid rise in prices paid for Kirby's original art, which had now reached more than US$7000 ("Kirby Original" 26–7). Nonetheless, the prices paid for Kirby's drawings and Lichtenstein's paintings—some of which were based on Kirby's drawings—were a sore spot for comics fans, particularly insofar as the fight over Kirby's art had been one of the touchstones of comics fandom's efforts to legitimate the medium in the 1980s.

The debate over Kirby's art erupted on the pages of the *Comics Journal* in 1984, when Marvel Comics—at that time the second largest publisher of superhero comic books in the United States—announced that it planned to return all of the original art in its warehouse to the artists who created it. Marvel had begun returning artwork to artists in 1975, but pages drawn before that date had never been retroactively returned. Their plan to return the original art—which legally belonged to the artists in the first place—came with a number of strings attached. The most significant of these was that artists were required to sign a one-page waiver that acknowledged that the pages had been drawn as part of a work-for-hire agreement. Changes to the work-for-hire legislation in 1978 had called the provenance of some of Marvel's best-known characters into question. If artists who had worked on Marvel's comics in the 1960s could demonstrate that they were freelancers who were not working under a work-for-hire agreement, they could theoretically challenge Marvel's copyright claims when they came up for the initial twenty-eight-year renewals. The first of these renewals was for the Fantastic Four, a canonical superhero team created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, which would come due in 1989. By pressuring artists to sign a retroactive work-for-hire agreement in exchange for the return of their property, Marvel hoped to thwart potential challenges to their

copyright (Heintjes 8–9). The importance of such an agreement was particularly pressing in the case of Jack Kirby, who, along with writer Stan Lee, had also created such popular characters as the Hulk and the X-Men. While it is not clear that Kirby could have won the rights to these characters in court, it was also not clear to Marvel that he could not. Accordingly, Marvel offered Kirby a return of a small portion of his art—88 pages out of more than 13,000 that he had drawn for the company in the 1960s—if he agreed to sign a specially written four-page waiver renouncing any claim that he might have to the characters that he had helped to create. Referring to the agreement as a "humiliating experience" and to the corporation as a "bully," Kirby refused to sign (Heintjes 13). Marvel's attempts to strong-arm Kirby into signing the special agreement led to an unprecedented public backlash against the company in the fan press. The *Comics Journal* printed dozens of outraged letters from fans and professionals in the ensuing months, and hundreds of prominent comic book creators signed a petition calling for the immediate return of Kirby's art ("We, the Undersigned" 27). Ultimately, the two sides came to terms on a new, one-page waiver that Kirby agreed to sign, and the company returned almost 1,900 pages of his original art. Most of the remaining 11,000 pages were presumed to have been stolen from the warehouse by Marvel employees over the years, as they circulated openly at comic books conventions. At the same time as he agreed to sign the retroactive work-for-hire agreement, Kirby vowed to continue fighting for credit in the books whose characters he had originated (Fryer 15).

The fight for the return of Kirby's art played a key role in the shaping of comic book fan resentment of figures such as Roy Lichtenstein. Among fans of American superhero comic books, Jack Kirby is considered the single most important artist in the history of the genre. Known affectionately as The King, Kirby had a unique visual style that is associated with the glory years of the superhero revival. Writing on the importance of returning Kirby's art, the *Comics Journal*'s editor-in-chief, Gary Groth, acknowledged that people see him as "the greatest artist who worked in comics" ("House" 6). Groth himself affirmed the importance of the artist's role in the history of comics: "It was Kirby's visual dynamism and structural monumentality that laid the foundation for the Marvel image that was to become so popular over the years" ("Marvel" 8). Similar sentiments were echoed by the cartoonist Frank Miller:

In the history of American comic books, there has been no single tal-

ent of more importance or influence than that of Jack Kirby. It would be impossible to exaggerate his contribution to the evolution of the superhero or to calculate exactly how much he personally advanced the art form. He created, with Stan Lee, the creative bedrock upon which Marvel Comics was built. Single-handedly, he developed the visual dialect, tone, and spirit of the modern superhero comic. He brought a sense of operatic drama and mythological scope to a genre that was fat, bloated, old, and dying. It could easily be argued that his vigorous creative lifeblood kept the comics industry alive through decades of editorial infertility, apathetic management, and dwindling distribution (Miller 63).

For Miller, Groth, and a large segment of comic book fandom, Marvel's shabby treatment of the man they considered to be a monumental figure in the history of the medium was appalling. The situation recalled, as Groth noted, the history of comics publishing as a "snakepit, populated by racketeers, cheap grafters, and opportunists, who regarded artists as cheap laborers and treated them accordingly" ("House" 6). Marvel's actions highlighted, for many, the lack of respect that artists working in the comics medium faced, even from their own kind, and the low status of the comic book artist. Interestingly, the same issue of the *Comics Journal* that most directly addressed the Kirby–Marvel dispute also contained a manifesto by Canadian comic book artist Dave Sim. He called for an end to the publisher–artist arrangement altogether, in favour of self-publishing, a business strategy that had made him one of the wealthiest cartoonists working in comic books (87–90). The debate over creator's rights in the comics field, which was foreshadowed by Marvel's treatment of Jack Kirby and focused by the success of Dave Sim as an independent publisher, structured much of the discourse about comics as a legitimate art form within fandom over the course of the next decade.

It was within this framework of debate about the recognition of the importance of the comics artist that Lichtenstein's work came into prominence—or more appropriately, notoriety—within comics fandom. While comic book artists were struggling within their own industry to achieve greater levels of recognition, it galled many in comics that Lichtenstein should appear so successful, while according the artists upon whose work his paintings were based no credit. It didn't help that many artists, including Kirby, were financially strapped and had to hock their original art across the country at comic book conventions in order to make a living. Further, the fact

that the American art establishment celebrated Lichtenstein so openly while denigrating his source material grated on the politicized comic book industry. The underground and alternative comics movement had galvanized audiences into demanding greater respect for the artists who were breaking new ground, as well as for the history of the medium itself, which had provided so many icons of American culture. In short, a newly awakened comic book audience was no longer willing to be casually dismissed by the art world nor used and abused by artists like Roy Lichtenstein.

A further irritant for many comic book fans was the fact that those who challenged the legitimacy of pop art did so in part by criticizing its roots in mass culture, further disdaining comics as not-art. When Roy Lichtenstein held his first one-man show at Leo Castelli's gallery in 1962, the country was not yet quite ready for what he had to say with his paintings. Arriving at a moment in time in which abstract expressionism remained a dominant American aesthetic, Lichtenstein's canvases were widely criticized by established art critics. The basis for a great deal of the criticism was the fact that in drawing on images derived from comic books, Lichtenstein's paintings failed to rise to the level of aesthetic seriousness. The core problem was the way that pop art foregrounded consumerism—a feminine trait—through its choice of subject matter. Alan Solomon noted, in 1963, that "the new art stirs such polar responses because it seems to make an active frontal assault on all of our established esthetic conventions at every level of form and subject matter" (50). Throughout the 1960s, the challenge to established conventions levelled by Lichtenstein drew criticism not only of the individual artists associated with the pop art movement but also of their subject matter. In objecting to the use of comic book panels as inappropriate subject matter for high art, it became necessary, by extension, to outline the problem with comic books more generally. Art critics were not shy on this front. Gene Baro, for example, praised Lichtenstein for rising through technique beyond the limitations of his subject matter, which he found "both uncomplicated and commonplace" (167). Otto Hahn suggested that Lichtenstein chose clichés for the basis of his paintings, "a simple image in which, in a standard space, standard elements illustrate standard sentiments" (136). Lawrence Alloway argued that "it makes no difference whether Lichtenstein invented or copied particular comic-book images (he worked both ways), because a reference to the general style of the comics is legible" (144–5). For the critics of pop art, comic books were uncomplicated, simple, standardized, and of no particular relevance to the

general conception of the work. These observations clearly derived from a bias against popular cultural forms that would recognize no merit in the commercialized culture produced beyond the parameters of the gallery system. Indeed, the taint of commercialism that comic books and pop art brought to the gallery was a problem for many critics. Writing on Andy Warhol, for example, Hilton Kramer suggested that pop art was a form of aesthetic consumerism that threatened to expose high culture as a gag (49). The tension between pop art and its sources was perfectly obvious, if not outright insulting, to those involved in the world of comic books. It was clear that it was the comic book's contribution to the work that was regarded as the greatest threat to the sanctity of the high art world, and this flatly ruled out the possibility that comics themselves might someday be regarded as a significant aesthetic contribution to American culture.

The ability of pop art to find champions in the art establishment of the 1960s was dependent on its capacity to incorporate elements of popular culture in a manner that was regarded as transformative and enlightening. Carol Anne Mahsun has pointed to the significant ways that pop art disturbs notions of originality through the use of found images. This disturbance further calls into question the tendency to link originality with a private and personal encounter, the root of individualism and self-discovery (78). Lichtenstein's paintings were validated, therefore, insofar as critics could demonstrate the significance of his transformations of the source material. For critics of Lichtenstein's approach this was nearly impossible. Peter Selz, for example, wrote that "these works leave us thoroughly dissatisfied … most of them have nothing at all to say … They are hardly worth the kind of contemplation a real work of art demands" (314). Writing in *Artforum* in 1963, Douglas McClellan took this line of attack further, arguing that Lichtenstein's canvases fail to transform already weak material:

> Lichtenstein has seemingly rearranged nothing, he has stayed reverently close to the originals except for greatly enlarging the scale. He has avoided the risks of transformation and he has picked a cripple for a target.… In the funnies, the world of human happenings is comfortably simplified by flaccid drawing, the only dimension is conveyed by mechanical dots, and life is represented by triumphant balloons of platitudinous speech rising from the mouths of the characters. It is like shooting fish in a barrel to parody a thing that has so long parodied itself. (47)

McLellan's criticism of Lichtenstein rests on the understanding that his source material is awful and that he has failed to do anything interesting with that material. For critics who examined pop art more closely, it was possible to conclude that McLellan and Selz had failed to grasp the tone of the paintings, overlooking the ironic commentary on Americana that could be found in the transformations of the sources. As early as 1962, Max Kozloff, for example, drew attention to a number of significant elements that could be found in the works of the pop artists, including their concern with formal problems, their use of irony, and their investigation of creativity (34–6). Kozloff's article, while critical of pop art generally, suggested that the pathway to validation for pop art would be found in its tendency to rework found images from American culture in an ironic or detached manner. This required the disavowal of comic books in art that was ostensibly about comic books, a development that helped to further solidify the marginal status of the medium within the world of American arts and letters.

Writing in support of pop art, Allan Kaprow argued that it was the gallery system itself that caused the distinction between commercial and high art. "The difference between commercial art and pop art is that pop wrenches its commercial model from its normal context, isolating for contemplation an object that originally was not contemplative" (66). Nonetheless, this perspective on the transformative power of the gallery system was not universally shared. Art historians have been at pains, therefore, to demonstrate the degree to which Lichtenstein thoroughly reworked the material that he painted. In other words, that it would remain as art and not be reduced to comics were it to leave the safe enclosure of the gallery. Albert Boime focuses his examination of Lichtenstein's reworking of the comic book panel on the artist's particular deployment of the word balloon as the central communicative device. Boime argued that in paintings such as "Torpedo … Los!" Lichtenstein exploited the dialogue enclosed in the word balloon in the interests of compositional structure (205). Michael Lobel offers a much fuller elaboration of the artist's techniques, in his recent book about Lichtenstein. He provides a number of intriguing readings of Lichtenstein's work, particularly focusing on the significance of the ways that the artist heightened or diminished key elements of his source material in order to achieve various effects. Lobel's reading of Lichtenstein's 1963 painting "Image Duplicator" is particularly relevant in the context of this discussion, drawing, as it does, on the work of Jack Kirby at Marvel. In "Image Duplicator," Lichtenstein combines elements

of two distinct comic book panels in the creation of his painting of an extreme close-up of a masked supervillain. The painting's text, "What? Why did you ask that? What do you know about my image duplicator?" is taken from an unidentified comic book panel. The image, particularly the mask, is derived from a Jack Kirby drawing that can be found in *X-Men* #1 (September 1963), although Lichtenstein has altered this somewhat by exposing more of the character's forehead and eyebrows, which are seemingly borrowed from the same image as the text (Lobel 1–15). Lichtenstein's painting, therefore, is not simply an enlargement of the scale of the image, as McClellan and many comic book fans would charge, but a full-scale reworking of two distinct images that results in an entirely new image. Writing in the catalogue of the High and Low show at the Museum of Modern Art, Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik go so far as to argue that, in combining elements from three distinct comic book images in the creation of "Okay, Hot-Shot" (1963), Lichtenstein "assembles them into a kind of super-cliché which looks more like a comic than the comics" (203). In this way, art historians are able to suggest that the reality of Lichtenstein's paintings is that they are only marginally related to their comic book sources. Much more crucially, they are the product of the artist's own creative way of approaching the material, the result of new methods of looking that privilege the aesthetic individuality of the artist while continuing to marginalize the cultural value of comic book producers such as Jack Kirby and Irv Novick.

One result of this type of transformation is to consecrate the paintings for a serious and legitimated audience exclusively. Initial hostile reactions to pop art tended to focus on the possibility that the works might tend to attract the wrong element—that is, comic book fans—to contemporary art galleries or museums. In 1962, for example, Max Kozloff wrote that "the truth is, the art galleries are being invaded by the pinheaded and contemptible style of gum chewers, bobby soxers, and worse, delinquents" (35). For those involved in the comic book industry of the time, this charge would necessarily recall the critique levelled eight years prior by Dr. Fredric Wertham. In his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham had charged that comic books were a contributing factor in juvenile delinquency. In the ensuing debate about the effects of comic books on American youth, the Kefauver Senate subcommittee investigated the moral contamination that comic books threatened. The association of comic book–derived paintings with pinheaded delinquents, therefore, sent a strong signal to those interested in the production of

American comic books that were still reeling from the attacks of the previous decade. Criticism of pop art in the 1960s clearly echoed the charges levelled against comic books in the 1950s and served as a reminder that comic books were seen as a shorthand for an entire stratum of the American population that was unwelcome in polite society. What made these people so conspicuously undesirable was that they were the most obvious culprits in what Sidney Tillim termed "the decadence and destitution … of modern art" (61). Pop art, which paid close attention to the commercialized aspects of American mass society, constituted a threat to the established hierarchies of the arts, as well as to established social hierarchies. Indeed, the success of pop art raised the possibility that the traditional status reserved for the fine arts might be done away with altogether and replaced with a degraded sensibility more commonly related to mass culture. In short, the work of Roy Lichtenstein and others in the pop art movement held the potential to dissolve the distinction between high and low to the detriment of the high. Put another way, Lichtenstein's paintings threatened to feminize the realm of artistic production.

In his essay "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," Andreas Huyssen notes that broad terms such as "commercial" or "popular" can acquire connotations of the feminine. Huyssen suggests that "political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities" (47). Huyssen goes on to suggest that theories of mass culture have largely abandoned this tendency, although the example of pop art's relationship to comic books would seem to indicate otherwise. The distinction between pop art and its comic book sources derives from the sense of transformation that critics see the pop artist as bringing to the canvas. This detachment from disparaged consumer objects is explicitly masculinized by critics such as Lucy Lippard, who argues that the first wave of pop artists employed "hard-edge, commercial techniques and colours," while working "at one remove from actuality" (2). Lippard's choice of the term "hard-edge," with its unmistakably masculine overtones, reinforces the association of pop art with traditionally legitimated high art production, while reserving the sense of distance imperative to the specific gendering process in which Lichtenstein's work was engaged. Lobel observes, for instance, that Lichtenstein "can be seen as the masculine counterpart to Warhol's feminized dandy; in the face of Warho-

lian excess Lichtenstein provides the figure of the hard-working artist who dutifully returns to the quiet, painstaking work of the studio" (30). Cécile Whiting offers a similar reading, suggesting that, in particular, the formalist reading of Lichtenstein's paintings re-masculinized the artist:

> Lichtenstein's persona as the white-collar professional and affable father recalled the description of the typical middle-class man, of the potentially emasculated American male. Yet Lichtenstein's performance in the role of the cool and disciplined artist could also allay fears that his domestic responsibilities or profession effeminized him. The cerebral and detached artist could be seen to reinfuse the normative male with a cool, masculine veneer. Likewise, his paintings, defended in formalist terms that abandoned some of the precepts of Abstract Expressionism, could demonstrate the masculine control that the professional artist exerted over his medium. (132)

It was clear, therefore, that Lichtenstein's success stemmed, at least in part, from the particular ways in which his work was associated with masculine—that is to say, legitimated—values, while his source material was held up as an example of the feminized traits in American culture that the artist had successfully recovered and repatriated.

While Lichtenstein was masculinized as an artist during the 1960s, his paintings further called into question a number of assumptions about the role of gender in the arts. Whiting calls attention to the specific ways that Lichtenstein's images emphasize gender distinctions and thus polarize the opposition between masculinity and femininity. Most of the artist's output that is based on comic book images can be placed into two categories: images of war and images of the home. These images, which predominantly feature men in the former and women in the latter, correspond in obvious ways to traditional American gender norms. Whiting's analysis of Lichtenstein's paintings suggests that the artist locates gender at the heart of the relationship between high art and consumer culture because "they exaggerate the difference between the proper space, voice and affect of masculinity and femininity as they are expressed in the war and romance comic books" (101–2). This is accomplished largely through the selection of images. Lichtenstein's image of masculinity is derived from war comic books, although the artist focuses exclusively on moments of triumph in which the soldier confronts and defeats his enemy. However, in the stories from which Lichtenstein

borrows, masculinity is considerably more in flux. The comic books show moments of setback or psychological weakness that are excised from the canvases. Thus, Lichtenstein downgrades the complexity of comics considerably in order to make a point about American culture more broadly. The success that Lichtenstein's male figures enjoy finds its corollary in the failures of the women. The women in Lichtenstein's paintings are troubled by inner voices, represented by the thought and word balloons. Steiner observes that there is a close relationship between the women's words and their facial expressions in these works (165), and Whiting notes that this association tends to turn Lichtenstein's women inward towards their own private psychological problems, at the expense of the social world (114). Whiting concludes from the distinction between these types of paintings that the artist's works call attention to the artifice of gender conventions by downplaying the naturalist conventions that can be found in the comic books and highlighting stylized gender conventions. Thus, Lichtenstein is able to incorporate sources from popular culture, while asserting specialized knowledge about them and their genre conventions. He draws attention to the gender codes that comic books seek to naturalize through narrative structure and realistic rendering (115–6). Whiting concludes her discussion by noting that "the paintings thereby offer their viewers the opportunity to perceive and to parody the conventions of representation and gender that the readers of comic books ostensibly accept as natural" (117). Once again, the distinction between high art and popular culture is played out as the inadequacy of the comic book form and the comic book audience, a distinction that is clearly gendered in such a way as to diminish the interests of comic book producers and consumers.

For those interested in the comic book form, this casual dismissal comes as no surprise. Comic books have long suffered the slings and arrows of art critics who have dismissed them out of hand. In his seminal article, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Clement Greenberg argues that kitsch is the result of the commercialized mass culture that stemmed from the industrial revolution:

> Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time. (40)

That Greenberg listed comic books as self-evidently a form of kitsch, without even bothering to elucidate the observation or offer any sort of proof, should be obvious both from his definition and from mid-century biases towards commercialized cultural forms. Those involved with the comic book industry have rarely suffered from the illusion that the medium is well regarded among the high culture cognoscenti. What is, perhaps, more surprising, however, is the degree to which the taint of the comic books seemingly threatened to corrupt pop art—the legitimated face of commercial culture—as well. Greenberg, for instance, dismissed pop—or what he termed neo-Dada—on purely formal grounds, arguing that "whatever novel objects they represent or insert in their works, not one of them has taken a chance with colour or design that the Cubists or Abstract Expressionists did not take before them" ("After Abstract" 32). Two years later, he suggested that pop was a "new episode in the history of taste" but not "an authentically new episode in the evolution in contemporary art" ("Post Painterly" 64). For Peter Selz, the problem with pop art coincided neatly with Greenberg's definition of kitsch as pre-digested art. Pop art, Selz argued, was too easy to assimilate, requiring neither sensibility nor intellectual effort to create or admire (313–6). The problem with pop was that it depended on a form of kitsch—the comic book—as its source. While proponents of pop argued that the paintings served to elucidate the clichés found in the comic book form, opponents maintained that any contamination by kitsch elements in the paintings essentially rendered the new works kitsch as well. For those coming to the debate from the perspective of the comic book industry, there were few opportunities to defend the medium. Whether or not pop art was deemed kitsch, there was no doubting the fact that the comic books were irredeemable on their own merits.

What was worse for many parties approaching the pop–comics division was the possibility that comic books would be revealed not simply as kitsch—as beyond the boundary of good taste—but as feminized kitsch, or camp. The spectre of camp haunted comic book creators and readers in the 1960s, particularly owing to the success of the *Batman* television show, which drew heavily on a camp aesthetic, influenced by the quick success of pop art. Harvey Kurtzman and Will Elder, creators of the *Playboy*-published comic strip "Little Annie Fanny," drew attention to the camp perception of comic books in a story that found Annie and Benton Battbarton "camping" with his pop art cartoon blowups and his complete set of unex-

purgated Green Lantern comics (118). This strip drew its inspiration, of course, from the well-known Susan Sontag essay, "Notes on 'Camp.'" Sontag argued that camp was an unmistakably modern phenomenon that encompassed a love of the unnatural. Camp was defined as a certain mode of apolitical aestheticism that extended from kitsch but did not coincide with it exclusively. According to Sontag, camp was not simply a point-of-view but was an intrinsic element of some objects, including comic books. Indeed, two of the examples that Sontag gave as the canon of camp were comics: "Lynn Ward's novel in woodcuts, *God's Man*, and the old Flash Gordon comics" (278). Sontag maintained that camp was old-fashioned and out-of-date, something that the critics of comic books argued of that medium, and with the advent of television, that was something that the fans of comic books increasingly feared. Perhaps most importantly, however, Sontag suggested that camp was a "snob taste," shared by "mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste" (290). With this charge, it is perhaps easy to see why comic book artists like Kurtzman and Wood would ridicule camp in the pages of *Playboy*, shoring up the boundaries of normative masculinity in one of its most public venues. Sontag problematized pop art's authority by associating it with this emasculated taste culture but then sought to recuperate it at the expense of comics. Pop art "embodies an attitude that is related, but still very different. Pop art is more flat and more dry, more serious, more detached, ultimately nihilistic" (292). That is to say that pop art is more masculinized than camp, which is a celebration of feminized culture. With Sontag's intervention into the debate about pop art, comic books moved from a degraded kitsch position to a gay-associated camp position that the homo-social world of comic book producers and fans found entirely untenable and terrifying. As an extremely masculinist subculture, comic books fans and producers worked diligently to thwart suggestions of homosexuality wherever they arose, policing boundaries and chafing at what they deemed to be inappropriate suggestions. Pop art, therefore, was a threat because it absconded with the one element that comic book fans assumed would never be in question: the red-blooded American masculinity that informed war and romance comics alike, with their rigid adherence to patriarchal gender norms.

In 1967, Allan Kaprow argued that the success of pop art would change the functioning of the art world to such a degree that it would be "inevitable … that museums and collectors will acquire examples of comic-strips and advertising; not in the patronizing

manner of a Museum of Modern Art's 'Good Design' show, but as works of the human spirit occupying a first-class place in the collections" (68). This has largely not happened. While original comic book art is increasingly collected, it is rarely collected by museums. When comic strips and comic books have entered into museums, they are generally viewed merely as a source for consecrated works, like those of Roy Lichtenstein. When this has happened, as in the Museum of Modern Art's High and Low show in 1990, there are occasional outbursts from the few comics artists who have gained some measure of respect from the high art world. In a comic strip review of the High and Low show commissioned by *Artforum*, Art Spiegelman, the creator of the Pulitzer Prize-winning comic book *Maus*, depicted a decomposing Lichtenstein woman thinking, "Oh, Roy, your dead high art is built on dead low art! … The real political, sexual and formal energy in living popular culture passes you by. Maybe that's—sob—why you're championed by museums!" (64). The indignity that characterized Spiegelman's review of the MOMA show was typical of the comic book industry's response generally to pop art and Roy Lichtenstein. Certainly, there is a level of outrage in the response, but also a strong sense of envy, tinged with a deep undercurrent of misogyny. The resentfulness of the comic book industry is a response to the processes of institutional legitimization that have championed the work of Roy Lichtenstein as a masculinized saviour of commercial culture, while dismissing the cultural and aesthetic import of popular forms as sentimental and feminized. In the catalogue to the High and Low show, Varnedoe and Gopnik go so far as to argue that "Pop Art saved the comics," citing the efforts of Stan Lee—Jack Kirby's collaborator on all of the early-1960s Marvel superhero comic books—to draw on the ironic detachment of pop art to sell his own work to new audiences as the decade wore on (208). The suggestion that comic books owe a debt of gratitude to pop art—rather than the other way around—infuriates many in the comic book industry to this day. Further, comic book fans and professionals—like Spiegelman—are alert to the fact that the ongoing critical success of pop art means that comic books cannot achieve artistic legitimacy. Roy Lichtenstein's success stems from the degree to which he worked to make comic book images strange and unfamiliar. If the status of comic books were to be elevated, the status of Lichtenstein would be thrown into question and possibly imperilled. From the point of view of someone like Spiegelman, the rise of the underground generation of cartoonists should have significantly altered the status of comic books, as even Varnedoe and Gopnik admit Robert Crumb to the MOMA show as an artist in his own

right. If comic books have seen some change in their fortunes as a result of the contributions of Crumb and his inheritors, the next logical step, according to Spiegelman, is to knock off Roy Lichtenstein and take his place in the masculinized world of high culture. The desire to efface Lichtenstein's contribution to high art—rather than simply existing alongside him—derives primarily from the feeling that Lichtenstein has, as Irv Novick's quote suggests, unfairly altered the status of the work of other artists. Bruce Glaser raised this issue in a 1966 interview with Lichtenstein, Warhol, and Claes Oldenburg in *Artforum:*

> **Glaser**: Well, even if there is a transformation, it is slight, and this has given rise to the objection that Pop art has encroached on and plundered the private pleasure of discovering interest in what are ordinarily mistaken as banal subjects. For example, if one privately enjoyed aspects of the comics, today one finds this pleasure made public in the galleries and museums. (145)

To this charge, Lichtenstein bluntly responded: "I am crying." It seems, therefore, that the vexed relationship between the masculine world of high art and the feminized arena of commercialized comic book production ultimately revolves around Roy Lichtenstein's tears.

Notes

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