Paper - ICA Exhibitions 1948-1961

From A Picasso Picture to a Headscarf: Paintings into Textiles

\*good afternoon, my name is Anne Massey and I work at the school of art and design at Middlesex University where I work with practising artists and designers. This situates me in the contemporary as does my role at the ICA as their resident historian. I’m speaking today about ICA exhibitions 1948 to 61. I have also been researching, writing and curating about the history of British art, design and popular culture since 1980. I value empirically based, archival research and enjoy the physicality of stuff.

\*Thinking about the history and impact of exhibitions from 1946 to 61 I would like to begin by asking, within the context of the ICA’s history what are we looking at? Quite neatly we are looking at 100 exhibitions in total, which makes the percentages easier to work out, I should stress that this excludes the library exhibitions and the annual Christmas picture fair. As we can see, these are mainly distributed between single artist’s shows and group exhibitions in painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking. Around the edges of this we have exhibitions of photography and film, design, architecture, material culture and literature. It is also worth noting that this exhibition history is supported by a fascinating network of people and influence as well as at least 400 supporting events, including lectures, discussions and Saturday evening dances. In my paper I would like to explore some key exhibitions, a fuller account of these 100 shows is included in my recent book ICA 1946 to 1968, published by the ICA with generous support from the book Paul Mellon Centre. My work is always underpinned by Rayner Banham’s maxim it’s not either/or but both/and, that is I use an all embracing approach to subject matter which includes not only fine art, but also design and popular culture. The two themes which I have drawn out to explore with you are the temporal turn and vibrant matter. Thinking of the work of Christine Ross in the past is the present: it’s the future to: the temporal turn in contemporary art, Bloomsbury 2012. Art is no longer representative of the endless moment, it now deals with different experiences of time-entropy, ephemerality, repetition, real time, randomness the time of the other and women’s time. And the postwar period has become bracketed with the contemporary, many books on contemporary art history begin with the independent group and the ICA.

\*Here is an installation shot of an exhibition I co-curated with Matt Williams at the ICA in 2013, parallel of art and life. Here we see an organisation which situates itself in the contemporary and even the future. But in this exhibition, one of the first to deal directly with the institutions past, we virtually step into the ICA of the 1950s with this installation shot of the Dover Street opening exhibition, 1950 aspects of British art reproduced on vinyl and pasted on the wall. This folded the past and the present into one another.\* I also placed paintings, collages and drawings by the independent group members around the walls and placed design work in the two vitrines, including exhibition catalogues, private view cards, and album cover design and a textile design. The impulse to explore the ICA’s rich history from a contemporary perspective has continued, more recently with the Dover Street market installation\*where objects from the ICA’s archive, held at Tate, were blown up and placed around the four-storey premises of commes des garcons, which used to be the ICA’s premises from 1950 until 1967.\*This allowed for a stepping back and a stepping forward in time, most literally on the staircase.\*The new book on the ICA gives an overview of this period, relying heavily on archive material and more focused coverage of key exhibitions in the style of Bruce Altschuler at Phaidon in Salon to be a Biennale. The Dover Street market exhibition was opened by Jashia Reichardt, who is curating a show at the ICA in its library which revisits cybernetic serendipity. \*Moving on to vibrant matter, I am inspired by the political economist Jane Bennetts 2010 book, whereby she gives credit for the agency of the assemblage and of the object. The objects of the archive which relate to temporary exhibitions are therefore accorded recognition alongside the exhibits.\*Another key source for ICA exhibitions are the installation shots, which vary in quality and quantity. The best are 40,000 years of modern art, held at the Academy Hall in Oxford Street in 1948. The exhibition was professionally designed by FHK Henrion, with modern art work drawn from British collections juxtaposed with non-Western material culture. From the very beginning the ICA had a strong educational purpose, the founders in particular Herbert Read, Peter Gregory and Roland Penrose were driven to bring the message of modern art architecture and design to the British public.\*There were always affordable pamphlets produced to accompany each exhibition as well as a lively programme of talks and discussions. This was partly inspired by a modern movement ethos to liberate the population and expand their minds to new possibilities both culturally and politically, and partly by wartime experiences with official culture.\*The ICA furthered its mission in 1950 when it moved to permanent premises at 17 to 18 Dover Street. The front room on the first floor of this domestic building presented unique challenges in the placement of the tall windows entrance doors and limited hanging space.\*The first exhibition to take place in Dover Street was James Joyce his life and work which consisted of various archive objects placed in vitrines and around the walls somewhat haphazardly. This was Hamilton’s first exhibition installation for the ICA, and we see here the poster/exhibition catalogue he designed for the show hanging on the left.\*This is the fold out catalogue which Hamilton designed with modern typography and possibly yellow screenprint. \*Hamilton was not the only artist to be used by the ICA to execute graphic design, here we see the Day-glo poster by Graham Sutherland advertising the official opening exhibition at Dover Street, 1950 aspects of British art.\*Here we see the entrance on the first floor with Sutherlands poster and the table designed by Eduardo paolozzi and his student Terence Conran the house Plant adding an important domestic touch.\*Here is an installation shot of 1950 aspects of British art, showing just how difficult space was to use with specially designed screens by Jane drew and a permanent cabinet on the left. Thinking about vibrant matter as a theme, there was a feminist perspective to this. Women have been highly significant in the history of the ICA and have played a prominent role, Jane drew was the architect and interior designer of the Dover Street premises as well as the broker and designer of the present headquarters at the mall. \*Another key woman in the history of the ICA was Dorothy Morland, its director from 1950 to 1968. In a role which today would be termed curator or perhaps arts manager or arts administrator, she oversaw a smooth running of the ICA and encouraged and supported many young artists and designers, in particular the independent group which I have written about in the Journal of Visual Culture.\*Lee Miller, also played a vital role in the history of the ICA and is often overshadowed by her partner, Roland Penrose. She assembled a fascinating scrapbook as part of the wonder and horror of the human head exhibition in 1953 at the ICA, installed by Terry and Richard Hamilton. Here we see examples from popular culture juxtaposed with representations taken from fine art. She also wrote about the exhibition in British Vogue where she discussed the latest in plastic surgery and hairstyling.\*1953 was a fruitful year at the ICA, with the wonder and horror of the human head in March followed by Le Corbusier, Paintings, Drawings, Sculptures and Tapestrys then 11 British Painters: Recent works then the parallel of life and art exhibition, as we can see here on the private view card, edited by Alison and Peter Smithson, Nigel Henderson and Ronald Jenkins which opened in September. This show followed the same approach as the wonder and horror of the human head by placing images haphazardly around the walls, and in this case suspended from the ceiling\*. This fits the vibrant matter context by including material not normally seen in the art Gallery, that were placed together to create a three-dimensional assemblage. Beyond the recognition we need to give to the role of women at the ICA, it is also interesting to explore the theme of vibrant matter from a feminist perspective. I propose to do this through the intersection of painting and textiles.\*The ICA had a history of converting painting into textiles, seen here with painting in the visitors book by Picasso of leaping Bulls, which was then printed on silk to form a headscarf in 1950 in an addition of 100.\*This theme is continued in October 1953 with the fascinating exhibition, paintings into textiles which followed directly from parallel of life and art. This was led by Hans Juda, the editor and publisher of the British export magazine the ambassador and part funded by himself, by Estorick and some subsidy from Peter Gregory of London Humphreys for the printing costs. Leading contemporary artists were commissioned to produce paintings which would inspire textile design. Here we see Henry Moore’s zigzag which is used on the cover of the exhibition catalogue/issue number 11 of the ambassador magazine. The design also went into production by David Whitehead Ltd as a textile in 1954. Also commissioned were Robert Adams, Eileen agar, Sandra blow, Prunella Clough, Terry Frost, William Gear, Victor Pasmore, John Piper, William Turnbull and Edward Wright among others.\*Also on show was the work of professional designers including the Lucienne Day and Jacqueline Groag. Students from the Royal College of art, central school of arts and crafts, Leicester school of art and Corsham Court were also included. The exhibition was controversial, as this speech by Hans Juda delivered as part of the ICA discussion of paintings into textiles on 5 November 1953 reveals. Juda was incensed by Brian Robertsons review of the exhibition in the Sunday Times, and he frames his critique of both Robertson and John Berger using gender. \*He talks about the businessman having the opportunity to consider cloth worthy of his interest. But he talks about consumer as feminine. “The ultimate consumer should be the luckiest of all. She will have a greater choice to furnish her house or herself. The variety in this exhibition alone is, I think, impressive. It certainly Council some of the confusion it has aroused.\*Juda went on to contrast the points of view of Robertson and Berger with writing by fashion editors. “It was interesting for those averse to studied the criticism, to notice that when newspapers or magazines sent their fashion editors-mostly women-the comments were more than encouraging; when, however, the art critic was sent-men!-they were not. One other curious division in the critics ranks is startling. When Mr Robertson considers our efforts vulgarisation, Mr Berger considers our exhibitors not even capable of only highbrow interior decoration. Mr John Berger’s criticism in the new statesman of last week culminates into words-‘no comment’ how much better indeed that paper would be if Mr Berger could guarantee its subscribers that he will in future confine his criticism to those two words; ‘no comment’.”

\*This theme of the female consumer was also explored by the independent group during its meetings, and more widely disseminated through subsequent publications including Ark. For example independent group member Toni Del Renzio discussed women consumers, shopping and Italian style in this 1957 article. \*Also in 1957 was the exhibition and exhibit, co-curated by Lawrence Alloway Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore at the Hatton Gallery and then the ICA. This exhibition has an ethereal quality, the transparency of the sheets and their reflective quality creating an ephemeral space at Dover Street. \*The catalogue was similarly transparent, based on the format of the foldout map.\*

\*I finish my rapid tour through 100 exhibitions with Theo Crosby, Peter Blake and John Latham held in 1960 at the ICA. One of the first examples of British pop art at the Institute, if not in London, included was Peter Blake’s girly door. Again we see the inclusion in ICA exhibitions of the ephemeral, the popular, the feminine. Throughout the first 14 years of its exhibition history, from 1948 to 1961, we see a broad inclusion of what can be placed in the temporary exhibition from design through to popular culture through to fine art in a rich and explosive mix. For the emancipated spectator, to quote Jacques Rancier, we see vibrant matter presented both within and beyond the exhibition space. The exhibitions push back the boundaries of what is acceptable in the temporary exhibition and the gallery space. By using the concept of vibrant matter I hope I ha e demonstrated the importance of the exhibited object, and the surrounding network of connections between people and stuff, between critical reviews and writing, programming and events.