

## Behind The Scenes

### \* *Love Triangles: The Hidden Mechanisms of the Independent Group*

The Independent Group was closely networked with much behind the scenes activity. The Independent Group's approach to design history and cultural analysis can be summarised as *both/and*, as opposed to *either/or*. As Reyner Banham argued in 1960 when discussing the role of the critic:

He [*sic*] must project the future dreams and desires of people as one who speaks from within their ranks. It is only thus that he can participate in the extraordinary adventure of mass-production, which counters the old aristocratic and defeatist 19<sup>th</sup>-century slogan, 'Few but roses', and its implied corollary, 'Multitudes are weeds', with a new slogan that cuts across all academic categories, 'Many, because orchids.'<sup>i</sup>

It has been widely acknowledged that this inclusive, anti-hierarchical methodology sprang from the Independent Group's shared enthusiasm for American popular culture, European modernism and thirst for success. What has received less attention to date, is the complex network of relationships which lay behind the Independent Group's *modus operandus*. Conventionally monogamous relationships were certainly important to the group and the functioning of its social networks – we can think of Alison and Peter Smithson; Richard and Terri Hamilton; Muriel and Colin St John Wilson; Nigel and Wyn Henderson; Freda and Eduardo Paolozzi; Sylvia Sleigh and Lawrence Alloway and Mary and Peter Reyner Banham. Indeed, these couple were vital to the functioning of the success of the Independent Group, and definitely operated behind the scenes. As Muriel Wilson recalled:

'Doing the cooking' and 'Going out to the greasy spoon for sandwiches during the installation of This is Tomorrow' was part of these partners' roles, as well as being important practitioners in their own right. Mary Banham was a Courtauld trained art historian, Wyn Henderson an anthropologist and Sylvia Sleigh a painter.

Beyond the traditional, monogamous and heterosexual model of Independent Group relations was a looser structure of relationships which were just as important for its smooth functioning and future success. Eduardo Paolozzi had close relationships with Jane Drewe and Kathleen Raine. Lawrence Alloway with Richard Smith and Toni del Renzio with Peter Watson. Indeed, there is a whole queer history of the ICA which needs to be written, as the institution staged the first show devoted to Francis Bacon in 1955 and was a magnet for the press when the spies Burgess and McLean disappeared. Anthony Blunt lectured there frequently. There was a Surrealist disregard for conventional mores which infiltrated the ICA led by figures such as Roland Penrose. It was a bohemian hang out, situated near Soho.

With the recent publication of Adrian Clark and Jeremy Dronfield's book *Queer Saint* and the discussion at the ICA recently, I do worry that this kind of history can get rather prurient and borders on the titillating. What I would argue for is an approach which respects difference and takes it into account, rather than celebrate the shock factor.

This is where the Independent Group, as ever, come to my rescue. The approach of *both/and* rather than *either/or* can also be applied to some of their most important relationships, as well as the way in which the group analysed the apparatus of culture. There is a tolerance and respect to their approach which remains overlooked and undervalued. Drawing inspiration from the recent work of Alana Kumbier in *Ephemeral Material: Queering The Archive*<sup>ii</sup> and other recent work in this area, this paper explores the hidden mechanisms of the Independent Group. I explore the relationships which are not usually foregrounded, beyond the Fathers of Pop, and the archives which are not usually consulted – record covers, hit records, reminiscences and parties. As Kumbier argues:

‘Queer records...include records that are less likely to be collected by archivists, including mass-produced recordings, pornography, magazines, and ephemera.’ (p22)

Turning to our prime example for the purposes of this paper is the relationship between the Hungarian painter, Magda Cordell, her musical producer husband, Frank Cordell and pop theorist and artist, John McHale. They lived harmoniously together at 52 Cleveland Square, each with their own studio, coming together for meals and throwing memorable parties. This *menage a trois* endured throughout the 1950s, and only came to an amicable end when Magda and John left to work with Buckminster Fuller in America.

Frank Cordell was a high profile music producer by the early 1950s. He had met Magda Lustigova when she was a Hungarian refugee, working for the British forces translating intercepted wireless signals in Palestine. Frank was conductor of the RAF Middle East Command Orchestra before being moved to Palestine where he fulfilled a dual role in intelligence and in musical entertainment. Magda had lost her family and home and fled to Palestine with her sister at the age of 18 to escape Nazi persecution. Frank then took her back to London in 1947 where they married and found a job at the BBC, conducting broadcasts for the Light Programme – he was a well know name in popular entertainment by the early 1950s. The couple moved into their Bayswater house in 1952, Frank had a room on the top floor with a grand piano where he composed and Magda had a print and painting studio at the rear of the ground floor. They were soon joined by the artist John McHale. He had been living nearby in Fellows Road and had a studio in Maida Vale at 8 Randolph Mews in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Alloway and McHale had already met, and would co-curate the ‘Collages and Objects’ 1954 ICA show as well as the second, full term of the Independent Group from 1954-5.

McHale was married to the artist Evelyn McHale, with whom he had three sons – John McHale Jnr, Evan and Julian. When he left his first wife Evelyn to live with the Cordells, the relationship was very cordial – Frank Cordell paying for the boys’ education, for example. As John McHale Junior recalled:

‘My father was a low key Scots and considered it unseemly to blow one’s own horn. Frank cordell was similarly always very low key, professional, supportive, and a gentleman. So both these artists got forgotten in the high profile shuffle over the years, even though they produced a hell of a lot of the innovative work at the ICA and beyond. Now even futures design is coming back into vogue along with POP art and Op art all started by my father with incredibly generous support from Frank Cordell over the years.’ (email to author, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2011)

John McHale designed this album cover for Frank Cordell in 1958. By this time, Frank was musical director of HMV (later EMI) where he worked with important musicians such as Alma Cogan and Humphrey Lyttleton. This was one of HMV's earliest stereo records, and John McHale chose a publicity image by celebrity photographer, Flair, to grace the cover. Here is Frank in Studio 1 of Abbey Road studios, tinged a vibrant yellow. Reyner Banham contributed a review of the cover in his regular *Architect's Journal* column at the time of release, noting:

'the role of the arrangers, composers and conductors, without whom the other lads would have nothing to play, feed through echo-chambers, or design art record-sleeves for (which last would deprive the technical editor of one of our contemporaries of some pocket money.'

This is a celebration of behind the scenes.

Frank Cordell also contributed to Independent Group sessions, contributing a session on 'Gold Pan Alley' in July 1955, where he discussed the two way process of the production and consumption of popular music:

'Millions of pounds are spent annually by music, radio and recording industries in producing and selling this product and its pervasive power is such that hardly any group of individuals in the western world can remain untouched by its manifestations.'

He transformed the talk into an article with the same title for issue 19 of the RCA students' magazine, ARK in 1957:

'This vast continuum of production-consumption, is controlled by those same factors of taste, fashion, behaviour, group approval, success goals, etc, expressed in ads, comic strips and movies, all of which possess autonomous values which are outside of, and indifferent to, the critical values of Western 'Fine arts' and 'Official Culture'. Like other mass-produced produces, the Pop song and its performers exhibit 'product Differentiation' characteristics typical of competitive product design.'

And this collage, interactive aesthetic approach to the entire continuum of culture is characteristically Independent Group, as we see here in the pin board in John McHale's bedroom at Cleveland Square.

It was also explored by John McHale in his art work, here is his cover for Architectural Review from 1957. He drew inspiration from mainstream modernism, but also engineering design, popular culture and technology. Magda had a completely different style – quasi abstract, bold and physical her work has a direct physicality to it, she inserts the female body into the space of art. Interestingly, she had her first solo show at the ICA, but in the Members' Room at exactly the same time as Man, Machine and Motion was showing in the main gallery space.

John McHale continued to work across collage and technology; here I am showing his Transistor 4 piece from 1954, now in the collection at Yale. He brought communication theory to the Independent Group in the same year, providing diagrams for Bingo Meyer's talk on Probability and Information Theory and their Application to the Visual Arts.'

\*As Mary Banham recalled she was: 'the most elegant woman I've ever met.' And here she is in a portrait by Lawrence Alloway's partner, Sylvia Sleigh in glamorous gold.

This is Tomorrow at the Whitechapel Art Gallery – Frank Cordell helped John McHale and Richard Hamilton with section 2. The juke box was borrowed from Phonography Equipment Co Ltd through Frank’s connections. He also helped with the images for the film collage poster and for the loan of the model of Robbie the Robot from Forbidden Planet. He installed the sound system and projection facilities – Magda facilitated the loans. John McHale was away on a research trip for most of 1956, and the influences he took from Yale were vital to his, and Magda’s, future careers.

The network continued to operate, and live together, after This is Tomorrow. Frank and John worked on a film featuring the Smithsons’ project for ‘Hauptstadt Berlin’ in 1959. Magda and John exhibited together during the autumn of 1962, and the exhibition catalogue included a quote from Buckminster Fuller.

The pair had already moved to the USA, leaving their London home in 1961 with Magda divorcing Frank due to the immigration and employment laws. John McHale took up a position with Buckminster Fuller at the World Resources Centre at Southern Illinois University. He also took his three sons with him. Magda and John worked for this cause for the rest of their lives – John McHale writing the brilliant book, *The Future of the Future*, published in 1969 and Magda Cordell was based at Buffalo University until her death in 2008. She founded the Center for Integrative Studies there, surely a legacy of the Independent Group. Frank Cordell remarried in the early 1960s, Anya who he met on location in Japan. The original menage a trois still remained friends.

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<sup>i</sup> Reyner Banham, ‘A Throw-Away Aesthetic’ in *Industrial Design*, March 1960, reprinted in Penny Sparke (ed) *Design By Choice*, Academy Editions, 1981, p93

<sup>ii</sup> Alana Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material: Queering The Archive*, Litwin Books, 2014