Sypher's Cipher: *'Paradoxes of Conduct' in the Reception of Mannerism, 1954-1973*

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Long since relegated to the margins of American letters, Wylie Sypher was an influential post-war intellectual capable of reaching audiences in and out of the academy. After publishing his dissertation on eighteenth century British anti-slavery literature, he served as a professor in the English department at Simmons College, eventually spending summers among the writers at Bread Loaf. Today, he is arguably most well known for introducing Henri Bergson's theory of comedy to English-speaking audiences. Yet he also had pretensions toward art history, which were tied less to his own expertise than a commitment to the humanities and their vital role in liberal arts pedagogy. In 1969, the president of Middlebury College described him as a 'humanist, humanitarian, and historian' who 'unites the breadth of scholarship with clarity and perspective and transcends parochial time and arbitrary critical boundaries to find unity in literature and the arts, criticism, film and technology itself':[1] the type of post-war intellectual with fingers in every pie, scarcely recognisable among the specialists of today.

One of Sypher's most famous works, *Four Stages of Renaissance Style: Transformations in Art and Literature 1400–1700* (1955) (fig.1), was widely read, but ill-reputed for what we might call its 'middlebrow Mannerism', a genre that used the literature and artifacts of sixteenth century courtier society to allegorize post-war middle class aspirations: the cultivation of moral sophistication and self-doubt, the ironisation of popular and commercial media, and the democratisation of elite culture. Like other forms of middlebrow art and literature, middlebrow Mannerism played an important role in reframing Modernism and the established institutions that supported it. Although scorned by scholars including Erwin Panofsky and Meyer Schapiro, Sypher and his mid-century peers' over-reaching belletristic syntheses had lasting, if unanticipated, consequences for the future of post-war art. Sypher's writing shows up in key manifestoes of the period including Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's 'The Dematerialization of Art' as well as Peter Hutchinson and Robert Smithson's treatises on entropy, abstraction, and Mannerism itself. Ultimately, middlebrow Mannerism provided artists and critics with the tools to wage a proxy struggle against High Modernism while prompting them to scrutinize their own roles and behaviours within the 'court' of the mid-sixties art world.

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[1] James I. Armstrong, 'Wylie Sypher', Middlebury, Vermont, August 12th, 1969. *Wylie Sypher Papers*, Simmons College, Boston.

Whereas the middlebrow is often relegated to material culture or appropriation in the field of art history, literary and cultural historians have recently published a raft of scholarship on the topic.[2] Studies range from analyses of the marketing institutions that promoted and distributed middlebrow literature, to the cultures of self-improvement and aspirations toward cultural capital bound up with its middle-class reception. While Beth Driscoll discovers that 'middlebrow writers defined themselves…against the empty rebellion and vacuous radicalism they saw in Modernism', Tom Perrin argues that 'middlebrow literature semi-consciously organized itself into an aesthetic movement by repeatedly defining itself against a hegemonic modernist culture it productively misread as both homogenous and incoherent'.[3] If '[s]cenes of opposition between modernism and the middlebrow [...] are characteristic, even defining, features of middlebrow novels' of the post-war period, we might ask whether they, too, found their way into the contemporaneous polemics of art and art history. Indeed, it seems that they did, but at a certain remove, and certainly not within the realist tradition employed by the novelists.[4]

Smithson and Hutchinson, for instance, were not exactly middlebrow; they were not popular artist-illustrators, themselves, in the vein of Norman Rockwell or Smithson's teacher, John Groth. Rather, as they formed part of a small secessionist cadre within the sixties-era New York art world, they sought to trope on middlebrow tastes and mores, aligning their pedantic reverence for generalist histories of Mannerism like Sypher's with their intimate knowledge of commercial television, advertising, and other forms of popular culture. By adapting middlebrow genres to fit their aesthetic program, they managed to eschew the 'canonisation of Modernism,' while shifting the norms of artist conduct at the time.[5]

Sypher and his enthusiastic readers in the art world muddied the boundaries that had separated artists, historians, critics, and their audiences, forcing them to renegotiate these divisions through competing understandings of the art and culture of the sixteenth century. The intellectual history of middlebrow Mannerism, therefore, pushes us to reconsider processes of lamination in which artists, critics, and historians key one historical frame to another, not merely as a form of subversive self-fashioning, polysemous postmodern allegory, or a performed identification with the past, but also to collectively sort out the direction and values

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[2] Cecilia Konchar Farr and Tom Perrin, 'Introduction: Inventing the Middlebrow', *Post 45*, published 07.01.16. http://post45.research.yale.edu/2016/07/introduction-inventing-the-middlebrow/ Last accessed, 4.13.2018; Alongside publications, scholars have formed a working group called 'Middlebrow: An Interdisciplinary Transatlantic Research Network', https://www.middlebrow-network.com/. Last accessed, 4.13.2018.

[3] Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Palgrave, 2014. Tom Perrin, *The Aesthetics of Middlebrow Fiction: Popular US Novels, Modernism, and Form, 1945-1975*, New York: Palgrave, 2015.

[4] Tom Perrin, 'Rebuilding Bildung: The Middlebrow Novel of Aesthetic Education in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States', *Novel*, 44, no.3, 2011, 384.

[5] Raymond Williams, 'When was Modernism'? *New Left Review*, 1/175, May/June 1989, 51.

of their field and their roles within it. The case suggests how mid-century middlebrow culture extended beyond moralising literary devices tied to the realist novel to encompass an iconography of symbols and gestures in the visual arts. In turn, the discovery of middlebrow Mannerism moves the field of art history away from reductivist glosses of *la culture moyenne,* where accessible art is treated exclusively in terms of the social stratification of taste.[6]
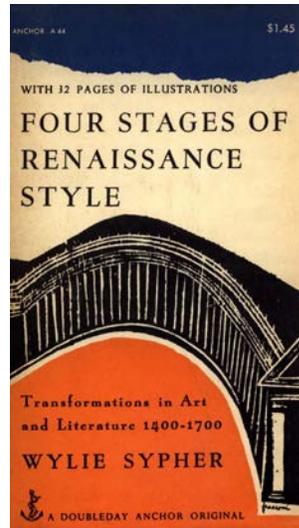
Figure 1 Wylie Sypher, *Four Stages of Renaissance Style: Transformations in Art and Literature 1400–1700*, 1955

1. Four stages

March 11th, 1954. Writing from his office at Doubleday Publishing on Madison Avenue, Andrew Chiappe — literary editor and Shakespeare professor at Columbia University — assessed the first draft of a chapter from a new book under contract: *Four Stages*. The book was Sypher's; the chapter on Mannerism. 'You are right', his review letter began, 'this is the heart of the book and the originality of your study most centers here'. But Chiappe was forced to hedge: 'Readers will more often disagree with your conclusions in this chapter than those in the preceding ones'; '"Mannerism" is far more difficult to explain than "Classicism," and the age you are dealing with refuses to reduce itself to too simple a formula, even the formula of complexity'.[7]

Sypher was in thorny territory. Doubleday was the largest publisher in the United States; his book meant to reach a general audience. But there was little

[6] Pierre Bourdieu, *Un art moyen, Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*, Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 1965.
[7] Andrew Chiappe, 'Letter to Wylie Sypher, March 11th, 1954'. *Sypher Papers*.

consensus about Mannerism as a coherent movement. To draw the irreconcilable views of cultural critics and literary, music, and art historians into a banal statement about regnant discord over the sixteenth century would be vague and reductive. Sypher wanted to show how Mannerism marked the subjection of individuals to abstract psychological, political, economic, and moral structures, but the terms in his toolkit: Nikolaus Pevsner's 'bad conscience' and T.S. Eliot's 'dissociation of sensibility' had been meant for the Counter-Reformation and Modernism.[8] 'Anything you can do to make your central definitions of Mannerism stand out more vigorously and clearly would be to the good', Chiappe chided. Even worse, Sypher's writing seemed to suffer its own convolution: 'Your style and presentation appear themselves to grow slightly "mannerist" here, affected perhaps by their subject'.[9] Sypher began his revisions. By the autumn, everything seemed to have resolved itself; Chiappe complemented Sypher on writing an 'important and daring book', and in January, it was off the press.[10] Nevertheless, when we look back at *Four Stages*, Chiappe's assessment was on the mark.

Sypher's synthesis of Mannerism was roundabout, defining the movement through privation at every turn: 'malaise', 'distrust', 'dissociation', 'irresolution', 'disequilibrium', 'disintegration', 'contradiction', the 'atechtonic', entropy, even invented neologisms like 'unreconciled' and 'disrelationship' scattered willy-nilly throughout the text. His most compelling passages had less to do with the arts than casuistry.[11] The Jesuits had institutionalised irreconcilability in their ecclesiastical practices and could '"loosen" or "adapt" the law to suit the particular person involved in a particular instance.' They could 'submit to the uncertainties and flexibilities of the mannerist world, which would require a pliable and provisional law of pro and contra', an 'elastic logic' afforded by the 'mannerist god'. The Jesuits allowed for wiggle-room, 'play…where things fitted together with great tolerance.' Mannerism meant 'experimental response; tentative commitment'. Barely veiled rhythms of psychoanalysis, existentialism, and jazz syncopated beneath Sypher's interpretation of artists who had access to a 'revolving view', and could therefore conceive of problems from multiple angles. Mannerism, for Sypher, was modern, permissive, sophisticated, a world without clear rules and authority, 'other-directed', in short, an allegory of middle-class America.

At least this was how some of his readers felt. Fan mail the following May from the Austrian émigré Hilary Holt, an editor based in Los Angeles reads: 'Dear Mr. Sypher…last midnight, I picked up your book at a combination newsstand-bookstall because the word "mannerism" attracted my attention. I took the book

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[8] Wylie Sypher, *Four Stages of Renaissance Style: Transformations in Art and Literature 1400–1700*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955. 102,140.

[9] Chiappe, *March 11th Letter*.

[10] Andre Chiappe, 'Letter to Wylie Sypher, October 2nd, 1954'. *Sypher Papers*.

[11] Sypher, *Four Stages*, 127, 146-147.

home and read it until six in the morning in a state of complete absorption'.[12] Sypher's treatise had a 'perspicuous style,' and a 'clear, orderly development,' and avoided the pitfalls of 'hyper-intellectualization'. But what Holt 'really wish[ed]' was that 'someone would go to the trouble and write about the *mannerist phase of today*, how, for instance, modern Jazz is the outcome of universal insecurity'. The parallels were all too clear: 'The 'modern trends in literature, painting, and stage-craft (from [Konstantin] Stanislavski to Elia Kazan)' marked a 'new scepticism and inner fear'. 'What else could the era of the H-Bomb be if not "mannerist"'? Holt wondered.

Although casual readers like Holt who happened upon *Four Stages* at their local newsstands may have been good business for Doubleday, they were not Sypher's own intended audience. A list of recipients earmarked for gratis copies included Lionel Trilling, Roger Shattuck, Anthony Blunt, Mario Praz, Rudolf Wittkower, Sydney Freedberg, Francis Fergusson, Erich Auerbach, Pevsner, Meyer Schapiro, Alfred Barr, and Erwin Panofsky: a who's who of mid-century historical expertise and cultural savoir-faire; and by all indications, they were hardly impressed. Panofsky, 'more and more sceptical of "*les grandes syntheses*"' complemented the layout and illustrations as 'the best that can be expected under the circumstances',[13] thanking Sypher for 'taking an interest in what we art historians have been trying to do':[14] 'We' as opposed to 'you' being the implication. Schapiro's response was no less lukewarm, 'any number of people in the nineteenth century had done the same thing';[15] Wittkower was the least kind of all, pointing to the ahistorical impulse that drove Sypher to 'link painters to a certain style who lived as much as a hundred years apart' and confuse Mannerism with the Baroque, details that 'raised questions in the minds of professional art historians'.[16] A memo detailing the book's errors would be forthcoming. He and his partner, Margot Wittkower, were particularly attuned to these gaffes; they had just begun *Born Under Saturn*, their own overview of the period, which specifically opposed the

[12] Hilary Holt, 'Letter to Wylie Sypher, May 26th, 1955'. *Sypher Papers*.

[13] Erwin Panofsky quoted in Jason Epstein, 'Letter to Wylie Sypher, February 14th, 1955'. *Sypher Papers*. Panofsky wrote to Syper directly on March 2nd, 1955, but only to thank him for a copy and to tell him he had only glanced at the book.

[14] Erwin Panofsky, 'Letter to Wylie Sypher, March 2nd, 1955', *Sypher papers.*

[15] Jason Epstein reporting his conversation with Meyer Schapiro to Sypher, *February 14th Letter*.

[16] 'I had a long talk with [Rudolf] Wittkower this afternoon and asked him to tell me in detail what kind of objections he had. He said that not only he but a couple of other colleagues that he discussed it with noticed that in some cases you linked painters in style who lived as much as a hundred years apart, and you referred to some painters as Baroque who in his opinion were mannerist and vice-versa, and that while this kind of thing doesn't necessarily conflict with the sense of the book, it does raise questions in the mind of professional art historians'. Jason Epstein, 'Letter to Wylie Sypher, January 11th, 1955'. *Sypher Papers*.

trans-historical psychological treatment of alienated artists that pervaded Sypher's argument.[17]

2. Post-war Mannerism: an overview

The 'professional' art historians were defending their turf. The recuperation of Mannerism had been hard fought and long in the making — so long and so often rehearsed that it would be tedious to sketch more than a skeleton outline here.[18] Only seven years after Giorgio Vasari praised his Florentine contemporaries' efforts at recombining the most beautiful parts of other paintings in order to create '*la bella maniera'*,[19] the critic Ludovico Dolce read the same artists as over reliant on a '*cattiva prattica*', condemning their monotonous uniformity and rote formulae.[20] Dolce's judgment stuck. In 1601, Carlo Malvasia described Mannerist bodies as 'a lifeless uniform substance where flesh and blood had no part'.[21] After Gian Pietro Bellori's repackaging of Vasari's *Lives* in 1672, Mannerism became synonymous with affected slavish imitation and the idiosyncratic; 'whimsical' and 'artificial' in the words of the art historian Filippo Baldinucci the following decade;[22] for Roger de Piles and Diderot, a sterile vice turned away from nature.[23]

By the nineteenth century, scholars from Johann Domenico Fiorillo and Luigi Lanzi to Eugène Müntz and Alois Riegl began to carve out positive attributes of the *maniera* as intentionally perverse. Mannerists embraced artifice for its own sake

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[17] 'This recognition strengthens our conviction in the arbitrariness of the older typology worked out by psychologists who tended to confirm the traditional image of the alienated artist'. Margot Wittkower and Rudolf Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn,* orig pub. 1963, New York: New York Review of Books Press, 2007. 292-293.

[18] Elizabeth Cropper provides a concise historiography, in Cropper, 'Introduction' in Craig Hugh Smyth, *Mannerism and Maniera* (Second Edition) Vienna: Irsa, 1992, 12-21. Here, she gestures to Amadeo Quondam's meta-discursive judgment that the historiography of critical debates over Mannerism has stifled new scholarship in the field. Quondam makes the point that the obligatory rehearsal of polemics around the period, style, or idiom replaces, marginalizes, 'short-circuits', and 'violently distorts' the historian's own view. Quondam ed., *Problemi del Manierismo*, Naples: Guida, 1975, 5-44, 6,7.

[19] Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (1550; rev. ed., 1568) trans. Gaston de Vere, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 10 vols. London: Macmillan, 1911-1915, 357.

[20] Ludovico Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura, intitolato l'Aretino,* Venice, 1557, republished in Paola Barocchi, *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento fra manierismo e controriforma,* Bari: G. Laterza, 1960-61. 1, 19.

[21] Carlo Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice,* Bologna, 1678. 36.

[22] Filippo Baldinucci, *Vocabolario toscano dell'arte del disegno*, Florence, 1681. 88.

[23] Denis Diderot, '*Essai sur la peinture*' chap. 1, *Oeuvres,* Paris, 1821. VIXX. 412-417; 'Salon de 1767' no. 235, De Marteau, 102-110; Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes,* Paris, 1708, 40.

through the uninhibited use of High Renaissance sources, revelling in a new capriciousness afforded by their transformation from tradesmen to courtiers. The later Vienna School tied mannerist decadence to a wide historical spectrum that extended far beyond the catholic courts of Southern Europe. Where Max Dvořák imagined that Mannerism registered the chaos of the 1527 sack of Rome, Walter Friedlander pointed to the emergence of a latent Gothicism within the movement through its lack of focal point and smooth modelling of figures.[24] By 1924, Panofsky found formal coherence in Mannerism through unbearably crowded paintings populated by so many 'figura[e] serpentinata[e]' of 'ten or more head-lengths' who 'writhe and bend as if they had neither bones nor joints'.[25] These distortions 'twisted the balanced and universally valid forms' — visual correlates to Giordano Bruno's anti-doctrinal heresy.[26]

Above all, Panofsky went on to argue, mannerist distortions were historiographically significant because they distributed the fields of aesthetic interpretation into different domains of expertise. 'After them…writing about art passed from the hands of artists to those of antiquarians, *literati,* and philosophers, who developed it into normative "aesthetics" and finally into interpretative "art history" in the present sense'.[27] The mannerist '"idea" or *concetto* […] opened the doors to a new critical awareness — reflexive thinking about 'artistic production as such'. Despite its 'abstruse' perversions, it was a path from 'the practical to "pure" science and scholarship'.[28] Mannerism made a predicament out of artifice. It pointed to how works were made and composed, which — for Panofsky — gave birth to art history.

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of World War Two, Jeroen Stumpel has argued, Mannerism became primarily an enigma of the modern art historian's own invention, whose terms became debated to the point where they often bore little relation to actual works of art.[29] As an early corrective to this trend, in 1944, Marco Treves provided an initial etymology of the uses of *maniera* and by the early 1960s, historians defined the term within the historical context of court culture, often

[24] Max Dvořák, 'Über Greco und den Manierismus', *Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte des kunsthistorischen Instituts des Bundesdenkmalamtes*, 1, 1921–22, 22–42; Walter Friedlaender, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting*. Introduction, Donald Posner, New York: Columbia University Press, 1957.

[25] Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* (1924) Translation of 1960 edition, Joseph Peake, Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1968. 73.

[26] David Summers further developed this approach between posture and rhetoric in his early essay, '*Maniera* and Movement: The *Figura Serpentinata*' *Art Quarterly*, 35, 1972, 269-301.

[27] Panofsky, *Idea*, 84.

[28] Panofsky, *Idea*, 84.

[29] 'Only in the 1940s did *maniera* become a problem', — a problem 'created by modern art history'. Jeroen Stumpel, 'Speaking of manner: Maniera and its meanings', *Word and Image* 4, no.1, 1988, 253.

opting to forego the notion of a 'mannerist' period style altogether.[30] In a 1961
Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art (CIHA) meeting, Ernst Gombrich, who had
written his dissertation on Giulio Romano under Julius Von Schlosser in Vienna,
argued that the recent, fashionable approaches to Mannerism since Dvořák
neglected particular works of art and deep historical inquiry in favour of vague,
universalizing definitions that praised artists both for their anti-naturalism and lack
of conformity to classical ideals.[31]

In his own position paper at the conference, John Shearman built upon the
work of Georg Weise, who, in 1952, had pointed to the numerous parallels between
styles of art making and styles of deportment at court, drawing on early conduct
literature from Erasmus and Castiglione. Over the following decade, Shearman
worked philologically, outlining the uses of *maniera* and related terms in the visual

Figure 2 Craig Hugh Smyth, Chart of Poses from *Mannerism and Maniera*, 1962.

arts, musical theory and etiquette manuals of the sixteenth century in order to
define the movement — not as an angst-ridden aberration — but as a learned
technique of self-fashioning within the constraints of courtier society.[32] During this
period, his eventual colleague at Harvard, Sydney Freedberg, explored sixteenth
century painting both within and beyond the Roman and Florentine traditions,

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[30] Marco Treves, 'Maniera, the History of a Word'. *Marsyas* 1, 1941. 69-88.

[31] 'Dvořák's lecture of 1920 — one of the first rehabilitations of Mannerism — shows that
twentieth century critics who participated in the reaction both against Academic *art officiel*
and against Impressionism had no trouble understanding and applying this tripartite
scheme'. Ernst Gombrich, 'Introduction: The Historiographic Background', *Studies in Western
Art* (Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art), vol.II, *The
Renaissance and Mannerism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963, 168.

[32] John Shearman, *Mannerism: Style and Civilization*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.

discovering its continuities with high Renaissance 'classicism'.[33] Hence Freedberg's preference for the designation 'late-Renaissance'.[34] Meanwhile, Craig Hugh Smyth formalised painterly strategies through diagrams of typical mannerist poses (fig.2), which he traced to the artists' familiarity with antique relief sculpture and critical literature on the *maniera* from the sixteenth century itself.[35]

As they granted the *maniera* more historical precision, Shearman, Smyth, Freedberg, and others in the academy worked together, exchanging manuscripts, while they pushed back against their anti-classicist popularisers.[36] Shearman's notes on Gustav René Hocke's *Die Welt als Labyrinth. Manierismus in der europäischen Kunst und Literatur* read: 'Maniera as individual style leads him to stress individualism, oddities, fantasies: no historical conscience — see [Jacques] Bousquet, [Franzsepps] Würtenberger', later describing Hocke's interpretation as 'weird, psychological, [Salvador] Dali, etc.'.[37] By 1972, Henri Zerner described Shearman's resulting book as 'a manifesto against much of the modern art history' in the wake of Dvořák and the championing of El Greco by the historical avant-gardes.[38] The same year, the literary scholar James Mirollo lamented a free-form brand of 'literary mannerism', promoted by Sypher and his peers. As Mirollo put it derisively, these writers reduced the movement to 'religious, sociological, and political forces', which drove artists toward the psychological '*tension, anxiety, ambiguity, neurosis, strain, discord*' evidenced in their work.[39] Sypher, Hocke, Mario Praz and Daniel Rowland — the culprits — elided artists as diverse as Pontormo, El Greco, and Tintoretto with *Don Quixote*, *Hamlet*, and Gongorist poetry.[40]

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[33] Sydney Freedberg, 'Observations on the Painting of the Maniera', *Art Bulletin*, 47, 2, June 1965. 187-197; Freedberg, *Parmigianino: His Works in Painting,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950.

[34] Although Freedberg traced the transformation of *grazia* through schools of influence in his sections on 'Florentine Mannerism' in *Painting in Italy 1500-1600*, by the time he penned *Circa 1600*, his judgement of painters of the *maniera* was predominantly negative. Sydney Freedberg, *Painting in Italy 1500-1600* (The Pelican History of Art), Middlesex: Penguin, 1969; *Circa 1600*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

[35] Craig Hugh Smyth, *Mannerism and Maniera*, Locust Valley, New York: JJ Augustin, 1962.

[36] 'I would be glad to read your manuscript on Mannerism. It will be a great help to me as I wallow in my own pelican.' Sydney Freedberg, 'Letter to John Shearman, July 23rd, 1965'. *Papers of John K. Shearman*, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge MA. Box 30.

[37] *Shearman Papers*. Box 55.

[38] Henri Zerner, 'Mind Your *Maniera*', *New York Review of Books*, 19, no.3, August 31, 1972, 25-28; For an overview of this tendency: Beat Wismer, Michael Scholz-Hänsel, *El Greco and Modernism*, Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2012.

[39] James Mirollo, 'The Mannered and the Mannerist in Late Renaissance Literature', *The Meaning of Mannerism*, eds. Franklin Robinson and Stephen Nichols, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1972. 7-24.

[40] Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967; Daniel Rowland, *Mannerism: Style and Mood*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.

Panofsky's notion that mannerist irony pried open an artistic self-awareness, which became the seeds of the discipline of art history would be lost on Sypher and the others therefore; so too his warning that the movement was 'by no means purely subjective or "psychological"'. In a passage on mannerist facades indebted to Panofsky, Sypher argued, 'The major plastic accents do not coincide with the major structural accents. Consequently in mannerist art the psychological effect diverges from the structural logic'.[41] In other moments, Sypher's invocations of Panofsky, let alone Vasari, vanished into an obtuse, empathic ether: Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck*, the famous paradigm of the *figura-serpentinata*, conveyed an 'insecure, unstable situation'; The languid Michelangelo of the Sistine Chapel: 'an aimless versatility'; Cellini's *Perseus*: 'sadist calm'.[42] If the results of middlebrow Mannerism were speculative, they were at least entertaining, too entertaining; that was the problem. In *The Stones of Florence* (1959), the American author Mary McCarthy likened the 'cut of the dead Christ's beard' in Pontormo's *Deposition* to Cosimo de Medici's; Mannerism was 'above all, nervous, painting, twitching, hag-ridden, agoraphobic, looking over its shoulder sidewise, emerging whitely from black shadows'.[43]

Some figures occupied a tenuous middle ground between the scholars and their middlebrow popularisers. McCarthy's spooky travel writing embellished the insights of Arnold Hauser, who, in the second volume of his extensive *Social History of Art*, described mannerist subterfuge in which 'motifs which seem to be of only secondary significance for the real subject of the picture are often overbearingly prominent, whereas what is apparently the leading theme is devalued and suppressed'.[44] For Hauser, the historical parallels of these distortions were all too clear: 'Our own age,' he continued, 'stands in just as problematical a relationship to its ancestors as mannerism did to classical art.'

In 1953, Gombrich derided *The Social History of Art* as reductive and highly derivative of Dvořák's *Geistesgeschichte* approach. By presenting 'all factors, material and intellectual, economic and ideological' as 'bound up together in a state of indissoluble interdependence', Hauser had 'caught himself in the intellectual mousetrap of "dialectical materialism"'. He had hastily attributed 'expressionist' and 'surrealist' attitudes to Mannerism, which often overlooked the ways painters, critics, and patrons viewed artworks in their moment. Hauser was quick to point out the '"conditioning" of historians by their own period,' but could not recognize, Gombrich suggested, how he had been led astray by his own revolutionary commitments.

By 1958, undeterred by Gombrich's anti-Marxist critique, Hauser embarked on a trans-historical account of Mannerism, which stretched to the Surrealisms and

[41] Sypher, *Four Stages*, 127.

[42] Sypher, *Four Stages*, 157-158.

[43] Mary McCarthy, *The Stones of Florence*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959, 109.

[44] Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art, Volume 2*, London: Routledge, 1951, 103.

Expressionisms of the twentieth century. He tried to bridge the middlebrow and historical approaches to the period by appealing to a common 'alienation' — the dialectical materialist 'key to Mannerism' — felt at particular historical moments of class conflict and expressed through the enduring formal trope of asymmetry. Alienation, as Hauser explained, came from an emerging world economy built entirely upon speculative 'finance capital'.[45] Speculation, once the province of the merchant class entered into the everyday life of the courts. Due to the rise of the mercantilist 'middle ranks', the sixteenth century, 'marked the beginning of modern capitalism'; the aristocracy indebted themselves to world markets and in turn, exchange value and free competition replaced the notion of 'just price' and guild protections. The incursion of the marketplace into the courts entailed a new 'indifference to moral considerations' among the nobility, which trickled down to cultural expressions of *Discordia concors* from the artist and poet courtiers. It was the first 'sophisticated, deliberate, adopted artistic style in the Western World. The first of conscious choice rather than necessity, driving rather than driven'.[46] Writing from his position as a visiting professor at Brandeis from 1957 until 1959, Hauser could not help see its mirror image in 'the affluent society', where a sophisticated, alienated style of the culture industry heralded the incursion of a global military industrial complex and unchecked free markets into every aspect of civil society and private life.

Whether it was Hauser tracing the origins of speculation and finance capital during pre-Bretton woods debates over how currency valuation should be pegged to precious metals; Gombrich drawing on behaviourist notions of conditioning and feedback to undermine Hauser's Marxism; Sypher describing mannerist 'parapsychology' while trying to account for a 'Loss of Self' in contemporary life; McCarthy's European travelogue with its games of intrigue for her *New Yorker* audiences curious about abandoning their Protestant moral code; Donald Posner prefacing Friedlander's *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism* in 1965 with the post-industrial phrasing, 'the hand works almost mechanically, the sculpture needs no form in nature, but follows a specific prototype. It is a "cliché"; a 'carbon copy', Mannerism was a prism; refracting the historical moment of the sixteenth century onto the post-war period.[47]

Above all, debates over Mannerism centred around behaviour and the way it figured in artworks. Gombrich was one of the earliest art historians attuned to the historically-oriented sociology of Norbert Elias and remarked in a 1954 symposium how Elias's account of 'civilizing processes'…'demonstrated in some detail how the gratification of our appetites becomes subject to increasing restraints, which can be

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[45] Arnold Hauser, *Mannerism: The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art*. Trans. Eric Mosbacher. London: Routledge, 1965. 57-59.

[46] Hauser, *Mannerism*, 51.

[47] Donald Posner, 'Introduction' in Friedlander, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism*, 48.

traced in the varying social codes'.[48] Although he rarely touched on art in his early treatment of courtier society, Elias's work suggested to Gombrich connections between the sorts of 'codes' by which painters and sculptors composed themselves at court and the way they composed their works of art.[49]

Figure 3 Postcard of Giovanni Francesco Caroto's *Boy with a Drawing*, 1520. Collection of John Shearman.

For Shearman, these correspondences were clear from the artworks themselves: 'How easy and just was the transference of the word *maniera*, a term for an ideal of behaviour, to a work of art we can see if we look beyond the clearly appropriate idealization and polish of form to the deportment of such a youth'.[50] He was talking about Michelangelo's *Ignudi*, continuing, 'We recognize already an air of refined detachments, and — to descend to a detail — a formula for twisting the wrist and holding the fingers in an apparently easy and elegant tension, that will be endlessly repeated in Mannerist works to the end of the period'. These painted

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[48] Ernst Gombrich, 'Visual Metaphors of Value in Art' (1954), in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, Greenwich CT: Phaidon, 1965, 18. The passage cited is from Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, Basel: Haus zum Falken, 1939.

[49] Gombrich writes later in the essay, 'Our attitude to certain elements of artistic expression follows indeed a curve similar to that of our attitude to other forms of gratification. The finidings of Elias would seem to apply here no less than in other fields of 'good behaviour'. Gombrich, *Visual Metaphors*, 21.

[50] Shearman, *Mannerism*, 53.

forms were formulae, acquired social behaviours that met the criteria of courtly refinement. 'Was this how Castiglione's young courtier's relaxed', Shearman mused, 'or did it take the imagination of a supreme master of the human body to invent a stylish deportment that is only too easy imitated in life?'

Through their studies, Shearman and others began to explore how styles of art-making and situational comportment mutually inflected one another. In Giovanni Francesco Caroto's *Portrait of a Child with a Drawing*, (1520) a postcard of which he kept in his collection (fig.3), we are invited to make out the boy's stance towards his drawing through his facial expression (a smirk or foolish pride?) and recursively, Caroto's own arch-virtuosic position toward his painterly abilities. The *maniera* was a 'stylish style', and the virtuosity involved in carrying it out was rooted in the manners of dress, dance, and dining learned through normative techniques of self-representation. The 'elegant tension' and 'stylish deportment' of 'twisting the wrist and holding the fingers', served as markers of psychic complexity, sites for irony and artifice where bluffs could be proffered and unmasked.

As the literary historian Harry Berger has put it in his book on *sprezzatura* — thinking of Marcel Mauss's description of '"inklings and tokens" of interiority' — courtier painters 'performed in a culture in which truth is imagined to be inward and invisible'.[51] Their formulaic treatment of the figure constituted 'theatrical attempts to represent inwardness', which led ultimately to 'crises of authenticity.' Inwardness theatrically displayed was 'an inwardness [...] that ha[d] already ceased to exist', a move from *grazia* — passed down through noble blood-lines from one princely despot to the next — to *sprezzatura* and the artifice of performed spontaneity and deception.[52] When the performance of inwardness became a normative demand, Berger and other Castiglione scholars have argued, its performers and their audiences began to find it inauthentic, and retrained their eyes on the theater of the gest, bluff, and malapropism.[53]

By the end of the 1960s, art historians extended their investigations into composure beyond the representation of torqued and elongated bodies in space. They wanted to understand, like Berger, how artists indicated their social status at court to one another, oftentimes, through their cool or ironic attitudes towards their subject matter. Zerner argued how Cellini's *Saltcellar* was an elaborate inside joke

[51] Harry Berger, *The Absence of Grace: Sprezzatura and Suspicion in Two Renaissance Courtesy Books*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. 1-4.

[52] Berger, *Absence of Grace*, 32.

[53] Wayne Rebhorn, *Courtly Performances*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978; Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, New Jersey: Harvester, 1983; Eduardo Saccone, 'Portrait of the Courtier in Castiglione', *Italica*, 64, No. 1 (Spring, 1987), 1-18; Peter Burke, *The Fortunes of the Courtier*, State College: Penn State University Press, 1995; Robert Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture in Sixteenth Century Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

where 'amusement becomes a pretext and a mask for seriousness': The 'violent contrasts of scale' gave a sense of the 'mock-heroic' and the 'sea horses that have the liveliness of real sea horses but are in fact the decoration of Neptune's throne' produced 'tensions that exceed courtly entertainment'. The overly ornate object seemed to be 'at odds with both the scale and the purpose of the work'.[54] To place features of the artwork at cross-purposes left more room for the viewer to interpret the relationships between form and content, and the artist's motives for pitting them against each other. For Zerner and other writers, the mannerist reliance on artifice did not mark exactly a triumph of reflexive agency, as artists separated themselves from nature — as it had for Panofsky — but a loss of control or strict alignment between the artist's position and the artwork's message. Mannerism was an art that turned away from the very messages it ostensibly expressed. And deciphering the stance of artists toward their works became a courtly game of recognition, not so different, as Berger has noted, from scrutinizing the thoughts or feelings of one's peers and rivals dissembled behind a cracked smile or cryptic comment.

3. Mannerism against Modernism

If artful conduct preoccupied Gombrich, Shearman, Freedberg, and Zerner over the post-war period as they sought to clarify a 'mannerist' or 'late-Renaissance' style, it too became a pressing problem for the growing constellations of contemporary artists, dealers, critics, curators, gallerists, publishers, teachers, and their publics. After all, these later constituents were living it, habituating themselves to artful behaviour in their everyday social dealings, in published think pieces, photo-essays, classroom critiques, at gallery openings, and after-opening dinners. Their composure was not merely a speculative historical endeavour, but also a social path or opportunity to display or betray one's acclimation to the registers of contemporary art.

Within this socially dense milieu, artists became aware of and competent in taking up positions towards their art and audiences; and audiences in turn realised their crucial role in shaping artistic expression. As witnessed in the rise of participatory and aleatory art forms, artists sought to incorporate audience behaviours into their work, just as they looked to transpose everyday conduct into the sphere of artistic activity. The issue of manner attained a heightened importance in the post-war period as these participants re-established their roles and statuses within an emergent 'art world,' the term the aesthetician Arthur Danto popularised in 1964 to show how artworks required a community to consecrate them and endow

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[54] Henri Zerner, 'Observations on the Use of the Concept of Mannerism' 105-122, *Meaning of Mannerism*, 118-119.

them with meaning.[55] Insofar as the members of the 1960s art world inflected their polemical commentary with a kind of biting imprecision — just enough to allude to certain historical debates without seeming pedantic — they proved particularly receptive readers to the middlebrow Mannerism published by Sypher and his peers.
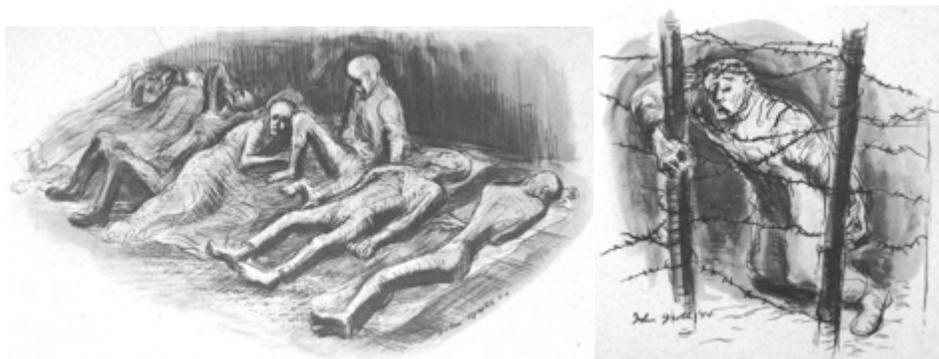

Figure 4 John Groth, *The Camp of the Disappearing Men*, 1944, Pen and Ink.

An avid reader, Robert Smithson was keenly aware of both the historical and class connotations of the mannerist poses and stances of his fellow denizens of the New York art world.[56] Smithson's commentary was often satirical, grotesque, post-apocalyptic, and tied to the immediate aftermath of the war effort. He had wanted to be a popular illustrator and studied under the cartoonist and correspondent John Groth at the Art Students' League in New York throughout the 1950s. Groth had toured the European front on the back of army jeeps. In 1944, under the auspices of the National CIO War Relief Committee and the Polish Underground Labor Movement, he illustrated *The Camp of Disappearing Men* (fig.4), a pamphlet detailing the atrocities of the Holocaust. Using pen and ink, he drew one 'mannerist' composition after the next: elongated and emaciated twisted skeleton-bodies lying on the ground or hung up on posts, swollen corpses slung across barbed wire concentration-camp fences. He continued six years later in *Studio Asia* (1952): American and Korean soldiers injured, splayed out on stretchers, lying in nets across army barrack scaffolding, or reclining in orientalised opium dens tattooed from head to toe (fig.5). By the 1950s, Groth transferred his 'mannerist' depictions from war-ravaged bodies to listless suburbanites at leisure as he worked as a freelance commercial illustrator for the Columbia Broadcasting System, eventually

[55] Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61, no.19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting, Oct. 15, 1964, 571-584.
[56] 'The pose of priest-aristocrat that Duchamp takes on strikes me as reactionary' he later told Moira Roth; the same verdict for his acolytes: Taking up an 'aristocratic stance' Jasper Johns had contracted 'Duchampitis'. Moira Roth, 'Robert Smithson, an Interview', *Artforum*, 12, no.2, October 1973, 47.

becoming the first art director of Esquire magazine, which served as a haven for him, Ben Shahn, and other left-leaning illustrators and graphic designers at the peak of the McCarthy era.

Smithson's early 1960s work picked up where Groth left off — at a peculiar juncture between post-Holocaust iconography and advertising imagery, set in opposition to the fine art, and in particular, abstraction of the moment. Smithson's carnivalesque *Drawings for Shrovetide* (1963) for a Minnesota Review issue dedicated to the Holocaust curiously introduced the artist by mentioning his lack of interest in experimentation and commitment to religious mysticism.[57] Already in the summer of 1961, he travelled to Italy, displaying Groth-like elongated crucifixes of an agonized Christ with spirals of inky blood emitting from his wounds at the Galleria George Lester in Rome. 'I would rather have people look at my paintings with a flash light with the room faintly lit by violet lights and the air filled with the odor of
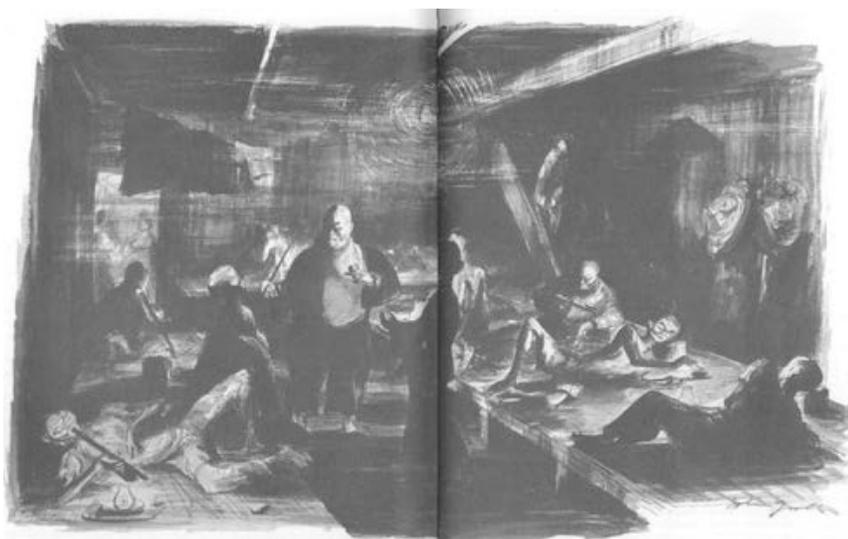

Figure 5 John Groth, *Studio Asia,* 1952, Pen and Ink.

heliotrope and jasmine';[58] for a background soundtrack: 'The tender throbbing of tambourines could add a tone for a select few'. Smithson lamented, however, that 'alas, people want to stare with aggressiveness or they feel they must stare in order to grant approval. There is something indecent about such staring'. He scoffed at one of Lester's acquaintances, a 'Japanese artist who does progressive abstractions'. The abstract painter figure and the indecency of staring were code for a timeless looking, high modernist contemplation, and its complacent, 'progressive' liberalism, a polemic Smithson would refine through his understanding of Mannerism well

[57] Robert Smithson, '*Drawings from Schrovetide'*, *The Minnesota Review*, 3, no.2, Winter 1963, 246.
[58] Robert Smithson, 'Letter to Nancy Holt, July 29th, 1961'. *Smithsonian Archives of American Art* (*AAA*). Washington DC. Box 1, Folder 15.

into the later 1960s.

As a way of eschewing the complacency of his fellow ex-pats that summer, Smithson sought refuge in catacombs under the Piazza Barberini and 'the dark Roman churches', which 'appeal to me because much of the art cannot be defiled by vulgar liberal eyes'. He wrote poems about hemlock-poisoned bowels and beetle-infested minds. Watching 'an Englishman studying 16th century art on a grant', he
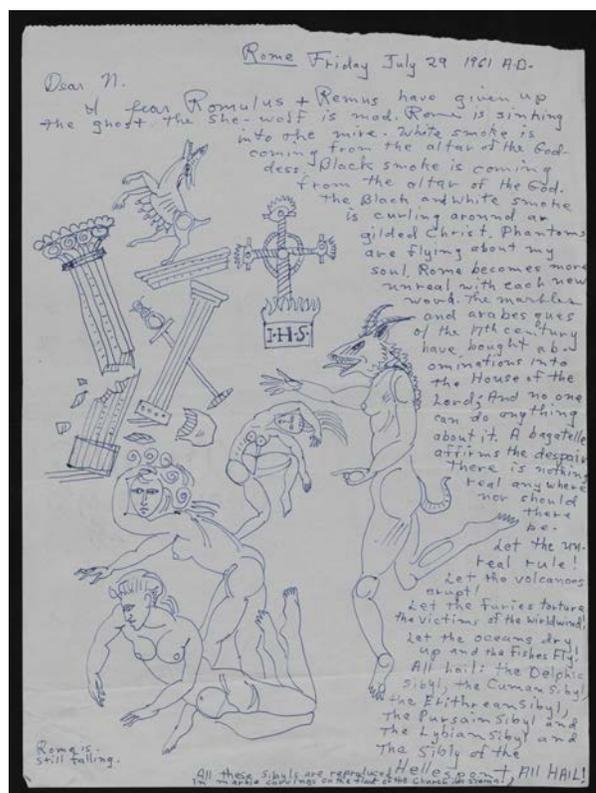

Figure 6 Robert Smithson, 'Letter to Nancy Holt, July 29th, 1961'. Pen on Paper, Washington D.C. Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

'came to the conclusion that many are taking an inventory of a world that is quickly fading or waiting for the bomb to go off', which he gladly welcomed: 'The world needs more tragic material'.[59] In his brooding letters (fig.6) to his friend and eventual partner Nancy Holt, he donned the epithets, 'The Keeper of Derangement' and 'The Nero from New Jersey' who 'watches the fire from the tip of a lucky strike', and in order to give her a better sense of the mannerist aesthetic he was after, he included a postcard: 'Enclosed is a painting by Sodoma from the painting museum in Siena'.[60] For Vasari, Sodoma 'always made a mockery of everything'

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[59] Robert Smithson, 'Letter to Nancy Holt, August 1st, 1961'. *AAA*. Box 1, Folder 15.
[60] Although the postcard is not extant within the Smithson-Holt papers at *AAA*, Alexander Nagel speculates that it depicted Sodoma's *Deposition from the Cross*, 1510-13, Oil on panel,

through his 'carelessness' and 'sloppy' fresco techniques, accomplished *di pratica*, while the Wittkowers used the artist as a case study in artists and their works leading separate lives.[61] If Smithson was looking for a religious iconography that seemed to undermine the impetus or feeling behind it, Sodoma proved an apt choice.

When Smithson returned home, he avidly and indiscriminately read Sypher, Hauser, Dvořák, Freedberg, Panofsky, Rowland, and Bousquet, making notes to look at Friedlander, Pevsner, Friedrich Antal, Hermann Voss, Werner Weisbach, among other writers on Mannerism. Meanwhile, he sketched notes about how Sodoma and Parmigianino could be marshalled to frame a pervasive turn to artifice in his own moment, evidenced by his collaged kitsch images of Venus surrounded by reptiles and Bellini's dead Christ dressed as a robot.

Smithson scholars have taken the artist's recourse to Mannerism in different directions since the artist's death in 1973, most commonly treating it as a Brechtian 'alienation effect' or an 'awareness of style', a phrase the artist used in his notebooks. As Alexander Nagel put it, noting Smithson's underlined passage from Hauser — where mannerism is opposed to 'the fiction of art as organic, indivisible, and unalterable whole' — a resistance to anthropocentrism served the artist's own anti-humanist agenda where 'mannerist art becomes the true birthplace of an art of irony and detachment'.[62] Similarly, Craig Owens contended that Smithson's writings ushered in an era of postmodern pastiche[63]; while for Caroline Jones, the disjunctions between his early mannerist phase and later earthworks have created posthumous predicaments for historians and art dealers who either seek to present a coherent picture of his life's work or maintain its internal contradictions.[64] Ann Reynolds argues that Smithson championed 'mannerism' as kitsch, serving as the 'avant-garde' Clement Greenberg's gadfly nemesis.[65] Jennifer Roberts, in her revision of these poststructuralist and anti-modernist readings, argues that Pontormo's *Deposition* (1526), which Smithson came across in the writings of Daniel Rowland (the painting in which Mary McCarthy had likened Cosimo De Medici's beard to Christ's), provided the groundwork for the artist's overarching notion of

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426 x 263 cm, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.

[61] 'We can learn about the low level of accomplishment that Sodoma frequently settled for, and Vasari's negative judgments again are expressly coupled with his method of working '*di pratica*'. Andrée Hayum, *Giovanni Antonio Bazzi — 'Il Sodoma'* New York: Garland, 1976. ii; Wittkower, *Born under Saturn*, 173-174; Vasari, *Lives VI*, 386f.

[62] Alexander Nagel, 'Robert Smithson removed from the source,' *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 63-64, Spring-Autumn 2013. 285-288.

[63] Craig Owens, 'Earthwords,' *October*, 10, Autumn, 1979. 120-130.

[64] Caroline Jones, 'Preconscious/posthumous Smithson: The ambiguous status of art and artist in the postmodern frame', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 41, 2002. 16-37.

[65] Ann Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004. 65-66.

'crystalline' geological, biological, and historical formation.[66]

The common thread through this scholarship lies in Smithson's use of Mannerism to drive a wedge between abstraction — rooted in complex systems of cultural and historical knowledge — and expressionism, grounded in affect and feeling. In turn, he could reposition abstract art within an eclectic nexus of science fiction, geology, Symbolism, and popular culture. The move is clear from his notebooks, where he penned 'abstract art developed a new quality when 'abstract expressionism' went into its alleged decline', and on the following page, 'strangely enough, this idea has its roots in historical mannerism'. But there was more at stake here than a break with abstract expressionism. The middlebrow Mannerism of Sypher and his peers prompted Smithson and fellow artists to project the social and behavioural dimensions of the mannerist moment onto their own.

From 1962 until 1966, Smithson developed a multimodal version of Mannerism across his drawings, sculptures, notes, and essays. These efforts merged the accounts of Sypher and others with the mannerist art they discussed. In doing so, Smithson could bring a more sophisticated ethical stance to bear on contemporary art as it experienced its 'social turn.' As Perrin argues, 'a widespread social concern with the value of normativity' fuelled the rise of middlebrow culture. Consequently these values provided a framework through which artists and critics engaged one another. Through middlebrow Mannerism, Smithson re-revived the normative aesthetics that had been suppressed since the demise of the genteel tradition, and through an inversion, recast modern art as artificial and morally suspect.

Smithson's focus on Mannerism coincided with his brief withdrawal from the New York art world, where, instead of attending openings, public talks, and other art-related events, he began to frequent underground films in art house cinemas and late night movies on 42nd Street with Hutchinson and Holt. He was quick to demarcate his own activities during this moment from contemporaneous tendencies in the art world while delineating the Mannerism he championed from art history proper. 'Mannerism is the product of anti-art history, it doesn't pretend to be authentic, it doesn't play at being "genuine culture"'.[67] He turned the faults and weaknesses Schapiro, Panofsky, and Wittkower had attributed to Sypher into hidden strengths in his own polemics.

Smithson found that mannerist scenes were 'cool', in the post-war sense, detached and affectless: 'what is called "cool" today is in a way the rebirth of the Mannerist sensibility'. Where Freedberg had argued that mannerist colour appeared in 'limbo between flesh and tinted stone or porcelain', Smithson began to apply 'cold and acid colors, bright pinks and intense blues, raw greens and metallic

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[66] Jennifer Roberts, *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 47.

[67] Robert Smithson, 'Notebooks,' *Smithson Papers, AAA*. Box 3, Folder 61.

yellows' to his sculptures.[68] He copied Bousquet's treatment of Wenzel Jamnitzer's *Perspectiva Corporum Regularium* (fig. 7), where the landscape was 'untouched by man' and 'the vegetable world is replaced by disquieting helixes', which served as an apt correlate for his geometric cryosphere, enantiomorphic chambers, and other mathematically informed structures. He took notes on how mannerist compositions often included 'several distinct spaces within a picture'.[69] He imagined this as a pluralist development where the ur-mannerist — now a kind of trans-historical Zarathustra emblematised by Smithson himself— recognized an 'infinity of styles and each style had a label', which meant that none were indicative, on their own, of any transcendental notion of god, or psychic interiority, or 'mystery'.[70] Reading
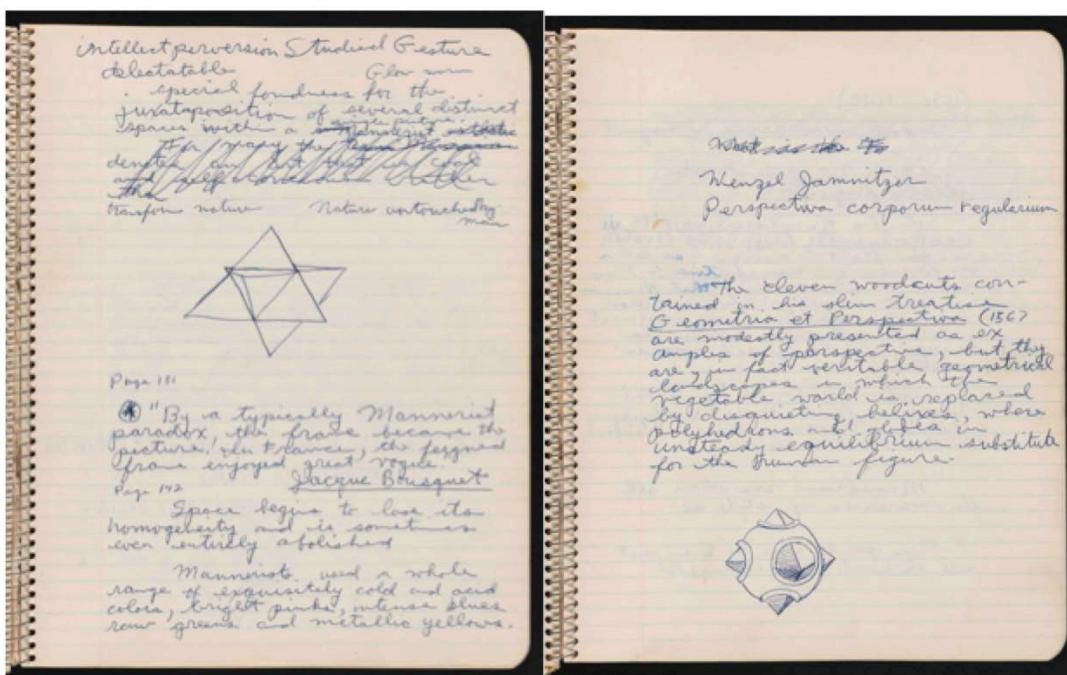

Figure 7 Robert Smithson, Notes on Wenzel Jamnitzer and Lorenz Stoer, *Smithson Notebooks*, Undated. Washington D.C. Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

Foucault at the same moment, he tried to separate the various 'author-functions' of artworks to show that they were not necessarily unified; and that artists might paint images in which they had no emotional or expressive investment. And through these diligent, if eclectic, attempts to transpose the mannerist moment onto his own, the movement continually offered him ways to turn against his contemporaries and,

[68] Smithson, *Notebooks*; Freedberg, *Parmigianino*, 189.
[69] Jacques Bousquet, *Mannerism: The Painting and Style of the Late Renaissance*, New York: Braziller, 1964. 104, 131.
[70] Smithson, *Notebooks*.

indeed, his own subject matter.

By the mid 1960s, Smithson penned a trilogy of mannerist treatises, *Abstract Mannerism* (1966-1967), *What Really Spoils Michelangelo's Sculpture* (1966-1967), and *From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in Cinema* (1967). In the first, he aimed to show how the 'errors' in post-painterly abstraction were actually highly conscious efforts to appear off-hand on the artist's part. The little drips that dribbled off of the colour field painter Kenneth Noland's targets; the crossed out sections on Warhol's silkscreens; Larry Poons' impasto dots; and the bleeding edge of Frank Stella's stripes had never received overt attention by critics and, therefore, had naturalized into an ideology about painterly spontaneity. The handmade errors preserved and repressed the expressionism within their painting, meant to read as a kernel of artistic subjectivity, which Smithson scorned: 'There is no such thing as abstract painting,' he told a group of art students at a symposium at Yale, 'abstraction originates in the mind, not the eye'; flatness is a 'delusion'.[71] These were less than subtle barbs against Greenberg, Michael Fried, Darby Bannard, and other high modernists who championed the expressive artist, the internal complexity or 'quality' of the work of art; and its capacity to offer 'compelling' optical experiences and a sense of its own autonomy to viewers.

Nevertheless, opposite Smithson, some high modernists held their own positive views of Mannerism. Fried has described how as a doctoral student alongside Rosalind Krauss and others, it was Freedberg who provided him his 'inspiration toward a life of looking', having taken a course in 'Northern Italian *maniera* painting' with the professor in his first semester.[72] Freedberg's '"formalist methodology" no doubt reinforced our interest in Greenberg,' he argued, pointing to their shared hostility to iconography. The connection seems less farfetched when we remember how historians of Mannerism had long argued that sixteenth-century painters exhibited a new awareness of the depth and planarity of their images, making them too deep or too shallow through their use of high finish, or the depicted space incommensurable.[73] Because mannerists made salient the very

[71] Smithson, 'Outline for Yale Symposium: Against Absolute Categories', 1968, Box 3 Folder 32, *AAA*.

[72] Fried, 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism,' *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. 54. We might take Fried's retrospective self-assessment as part of an attempt to distance himself from the accusations of 'formalism' so often marshaled against him. Fried's embrace of '*maniera* painting' would not only mean a departure from Freedberg, but the formalist tradition more generally, ranging from Clive Bell's disparagement of Fontainebleau Mannerism or Heinrich Wölfflin's praise of 'restrained' (i.e. non-mannerist) seicento painting.

[73] In Rosso Fiorentino's *Moses Defending The Daughters Of Jethro* (1523), for instance, Friedlander wrote 'parallel layers move with the surface of the painting…the figure storming in from the side moves parallel to the picture plane'. Friedlander, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism*, 33.

surface on which they painted, they may have served as attractive models for Greenberg and his acolytes. Fried found that what 'the two men [Freedberg and Greenberg] had in common was the distinction of their 'eyes,' which perpetually monitored the dynamics of painterly invention and dilution.

In an effort to disparage these formalist readings and open them up to dissimulation and artifice, Smithson invited his readers to 'look back at awful art history', where, drawing from Bousquet again, 'the feigned frame' of sixteenth century French painters reverberated through Greenberg's criticism: 'the picture edge is repeated inside.' The problem was — as he wrote in his second essay on Michelangelo — that Greenberg did not realise he was both a crypto-mannerist and a hypocritical naturalist. 'To Clement Greenberg, Michelangelo was a spoiled naturalist, in short, corrupt,' but only because he refused to recognise that Michelangelo delighted in corruption.[74] Smithson's writing grew decadent in these passages, countermanding the prosody of his Modernist rivals as he described the Medici Chapel: its 'dreadful discrepancies', a 'heavy, sagging, ponderous, epidemic, of corruptible bodies', 'muscles like enormous worms, and polypi fade under a sickly ashen light'. 'Great art has knowledge of corruption', Smithson charged, which made it 'sophisticated, rather than the mindless, formalist, "avant-garde"'. If the Greenberg school promoted pure art and uncontaminated human nature, Smithson would offer his readers a 'nature left with maggots and filth' whose tragic languorous pathos amounted only to black comedy. Michelangelo's odes to flaying and his own *Last Judgment* self-portrait as 'the flayed apostle' proved that he was ultimately 'a spoiled comedian who spent long tedious hours working out intricate gruesome jokes, that really aren't too amusing'. And if Greenberg could not recognize or decipher the ironic positions behind these paintings and sculptures, he had no business passing judgment on them or anyone else.

Having established a historical basis for a mannerist revision of abstract art over the first two essays, Smithson used the third treatise — *From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman* — to trace his mannerist aesthetic into the present, into the theatre, cinema, and emergent 'lifestyles' of the art world, where the 'paradoxes of conduct' he described were on full view. In *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein seemed more concerned with setting than character development, a shift that reached its apotheosis in the horror and science fiction films of Roger Corman. Because of the stilted acting of Vincent Price and budget special effects, Corman's films were deliberately unconvincing: 'His actors always appear vacant and transparent, more like robots than people, they simply move through a series of settings and places and define where they are by the artifice that surrounds them'.[75] These were moments when the directors turned away from their plots and character

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[74] Robert Smithson, 'What Really Spoils Michelangelo's Sculpture', *Robert Smithson Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. 347-348.
[75] Robert Smithson, 'From Ivan the Terrible to Roger Corman or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema', *Collected Writings*, 349-353.

development, as if to undermine the pathos they would otherwise invoke, which
Smithson traced Hauser-like back to Sodoma and Parmigianino and then forward to
Flaubert, Pope, Poe, and the surrealists, and then outward to diagnose cold war
cultural malaise, where Johann Sadeler's *Mankind Awaiting the Last Judgment* (1568-
1600) — an engraving picturing foreground feasting and background apocalypse —
could 'bring the war home' for the New York art world and its burgeoning
resistance to interventionism in Vietnam.[76]

Smithson gravitated to Sypher because he seems to have understood that in
order to lower the register of art criticism, his 'style and presentation' would need to
'grow slightly "mannerist"', as Chiappe had earlier commented. 'In a sense I am
dealing with the exact opposite of what is generally consider good writing or good
criticism', he explained, 'because everyone knows artists 'write badly, and have
<u>nothing</u> to say'. The poor-quality prose of artists and poetic licence with historical
detail would let artists' writing 'develop into one of the most important esthetic
mutations ever to happen to art'. 'Artists,' unlike the critics he railed against, 'do not
have to maintain 'histories of taste in order to preserve the myths of tradition. They
know that "traditions" are fabricated like so much merchandise'. And in order to
carry out the 'slow-witted jests, pseudo-exactitudes, languid problems, and
contentless word facades', he held up Mannerism as a model for both evaluating
and producing contemporary art.

As Smithson penned his polemical trilogy, critics working alongside him
began to dissect recent artistic tendencies in order to determine which of them
might be sufficiently mannerist, or perhaps in excess of it, employing terms like
'eccentric', 'funky', or 'grotesque'. While Lucy Lippard assembled the exhibition,
'Eccentric Abstraction', making a claim for bodily energies located within soft and
sagging sculptures, Thomas Messer and the poet John Ashbery edited a volume on
'The Grand Eccentrics' where Messer qualified his new category with the caveat that
artists who have deliberately adapted eccentric subject matter to add new *frissons* to
their own consistent styles are, obviously, not true eccentrics (one thinks in this
connection of the sixteenth century mannerists of Florence, Utrecht,
Fontainebleau)'.[77] Meanwhile, Smithson's friend and fellow sculptor Peter
Hutchinson diagnosed the geometric forms he, Smithson, and others were making

[76] 'A similar a-effect exists in a Mannerist engraving by Johann Sadeler; a feast is going on in
a hall with singing and love making (the actual drawing is cold and stiff) while through
windows and a door we see a rather uninspiring apocalypse. God or somebody is riding a
rainbow, but nobody at the feast seems to care. A nearby war doesn't seem to interest them
either'. *Collected Writings*, 350.
[77] As examples of the 'eccentric', Messer pointed to 'little-known iconologies, like
illustrations of gnostic texts, highly sadistic episodes of martyrdom, visualizations of
scientific propositions in, for example, anatomy (dissections), or optics (extreme
perspectives), mystical exercises, *mementi mori*, bizarre interior decoration and so forth'.
Thomas Messer, 'Eccentric Propositions', *Art News Annual* 32, 1966, 12.

as mannerist, writing the essay 'Mannerism in the Abstract', in 1966.[78]

      Hutchinson began, 'Elegance, high technique, acid color, drama, use of the cliché: these are, according to Wylie Sypher, some of the elements of Mannerism'. He went on to cite Sypher extensively using his language of 'disquiet, turmoil, cynicism, and self-doubt' to describe his own tubes photo-collaged into barren landscapes (fig.8) and Smithson's numerically derived krylon-sprayed 'mirrorized' plastic structures (fig.9). These new sculptures were meant to counter the useless
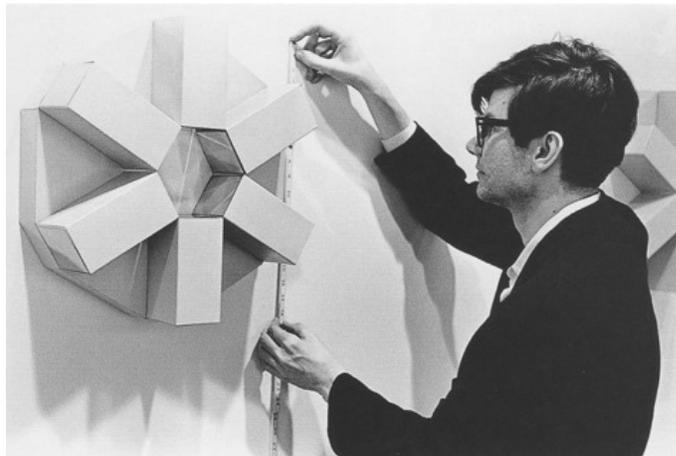

Figure 8 Peter Hutchinson, *Tube Projects*, 1968-1969.

Figure 9 *Robert Smithson with the Cryosphere* (1966) steel with chrome inserts; six units, 17 x 17 x 6 inches each at the Jewish Museum, New York, 1966. Photograph: Fred McDarrah.

[78] 'Smithson and I were very close friends at the time I wrote the article. He helped enormously with it but not enough to be a co-writer'. Email correspondence with Hutchinson, 7.22.2015.

hyper-rational world order with 'frozen inactivity…where humans do not live'. His comments echo Smithson's own interpretation of the geometrical landscapes and perspective studies of Jamnitzer and Lorenz Stoer, which were not meant to promote a more rational way of seeing, but substitute as automatons for the human figure: an early modern precursor to Corman's primitive mechanical special effects, where robotic forms moved across similarly artificial stage-set-like ruins.[79] They were parodies of hard edged abstraction initially, Hutchinson argued, but more recently, their 'parody [had] become extreme and stylistic' as Minimalism became assimilated into the market.[80]

By 1967, Greenberg fired back at Smithson, Hutchinson, and other artist-critics, writing in 'The Recentness of Sculpture' how 'by being employed as tokens, the "primary structures" are converted into mannerisms. The third dimension itself is converted into a mannerism', ultimately caricaturing Minimalism as good design. But by then it was too late. By the end of the 1960s, his challengers had moved on from their disputes with Modernism and medium specificity to look for stimulation beyond the confines of fine arts criticism.

Having encountered it throughout Sypher's writing, and in Freedberg's analysis of Parmigianino, Smithson turned to scientific and literary accounts of entropy, which soon became the governing principle of his earthworks.[81] And by 1968, in their widely read essay, 'The Dematerialization of Art', Lucy Lippard and John Chandler typified Smithson as an exemplar of 'cool' and 'aloof' artistic behaviour. His work was indicative of 'the current international obsession with entropy', which they explained via Sypher: 'During the course of time, entropy

[79] Christopher Wood's interpretation of the ironic humor behind Stoer's intarsia panels seems to corroborate Smithson's amateur reading of them. Wood writes that they 'look like jaded parodies of the pictorial narratives of Dürer's time. The antique and vegetally encrusted ruins were the sort that might have appeared in any Nativity painting of the early sixteenth century before the crisis of iconography brought about by the reformation. But the intarsia settings were occupied, not by holy personages, but instead by jokey, outlandish objects'. Christopher Wood, 'The Perspective Treatise in Ruins: Lorenz Stoer, *Geometria et perspectiva*, 1567', in *The Treatise on Perspective, Published and Unpublished*, ed. Lyle Massey, Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2003. 235–58, 239.

[80] 'Hutchinson, for instance, instead of going to the country to study nature, will go to see a movie on 42nd Street, like "Horror at Party Beach" two or three times and contemplate it for weeks on end. The movies give a ritual pattern to the lives of many artists, and this induces a kind of "low-budget" mysticism, which keeps them in a perpetual trance'. Robert Smithson, 'Entropy and the New Monuments', *Collected Writings*, 16.

[81] 'They are like the 16th-century artist Parmigianino, who 'gave up painting to become an alchemist'. This might help us to understand both Judd's and Morris's interest in geology. It is also well to remember that Parmigianino and Duchamp both painted 'Virgins', when they did paint. Sydney Freedberg observed in the work of Parmigianino, if not in fact, at least in idea.' Robert Smithson, *Entropy and the New Monuments*, 16. The passage Smithson cites comes from Sydney Freedberg, *Parmigianino*, 1950, 14.

increases. Time can be measured by the loss of structure in our system, its tendency to sink back into that original chaos from which it may have emerged [...] One meaning of time is a drift toward inertia'.[82] Artists from Smithson to Robert Morris took Sypher's 'drift toward inertia' as a literal artistic process and began to spread and scatter their materials on the ground, letting them move according to the entropic forces of pressure and gravity. Even as their writing grew more pedantic, didactic, and 'mannered,' they seemed to loosen their intentions over how their art would ultimately look and the material form it would take.

4. The artist's world

Nevertheless, as Smithson had already discussed in his final Mannerism essay, these efforts to loosen one's intention, to work against form, or let artistic materials behave 'naturally' were part of a larger trend towards the management and scrutiny of conduct in the 1960s art world. They were 'paradoxes of conduct' as Smithson had put it in the essay's subheading. He attributed the new, 'natural' behaviour of his peers (as Hilary Holt had done in his letter to Sypher) to Stanislavski's 'method acting' technique — where actors trained by trying to become their character in everyday life. He imagined that the technique had trickled down from the theater to the art world where 'artists and critics pose or fake being unaffected'; and if Greenberg had used 'natural expressiveness to replace the rules of the game', Smithson would resituate the games played among dealers, critics, and artists of the art world within the historical context of courtier society.[83] Smithson traced the proliferation of Stanislavski's 'natural' routines to publications like Fred McDarrah's *The Artist's World in Pictures* and Alan Solomon's *New York: The New Art Scene*, where insiders and neophytes alike learned to behave appropriately at dinners, art parties, studio visits, and other stages where the conduct around contemporary art was evaluated.

When Solomon and McDarrah documented and disseminated these roles and behaviours to an ever larger social domain, each token behaviour became supplanted by ironic variations. While Smithson noted how Andy Warhol's 'queens' and 'hustlers' acted naturally like 'plain Janes',[84] the critic and Warhol film-

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[82] The passage is from Wylie Sypher, *Loss of Self in Modern Literature and Art*, New York: Random House, 1962. 73-74. The authors tie Sypher's use of entropy as 'a drift towards inertia' to 'recent art by Robert Smithson and Piero Gilardi' and, in an important early alignment with postmodernism, mention that the term 'appears as the title of short stories as well, for instance, by Thomas Pynchon'. Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, 'The Dematerialization of Art', *Art International*, 12, no.2, February 1968, 31–6. 31, 33.

[83] Smithson, 'Ivan the Terrible', 349.

[84] Smithson, 'Ivan the Terrible', 349; For parallels to the contemporary middlebrow novel, see Perrin's account of Patricia Highsmith's 1950s lesbian fiction, which treats queer

actor Gregory Battcock wrote of how the group of experimental filmmakers in his circle were neither classical, nor Romantic, but had 'slipped into a third category variously defined as fragmentary, decadent, mannerist, or fractional'.[85] Their camp aesthetics provided, as Susan Sontag famously wrote at the time, 'a vision of the world in terms of style' or 'the epicene of style', a vision of style in the absolute sense, which paralleled contemporaneous approaches by Shearman, Smyth, and
      Freedberg to the *maniera* as 'being stylish', 'stylized', or a 'stylish style'.[86] In a chapter on artist social gatherings from McDarrah's book, the actor Bob Taeger is seen through thick smoke at a party hosted by Smithson behind the title caption, 'Where's the Party?' (fig.10). The image gives its readers a sample of the atmosphere of the artist's world: its 'haze of smoke' and ways of standing, talking, and dancing.
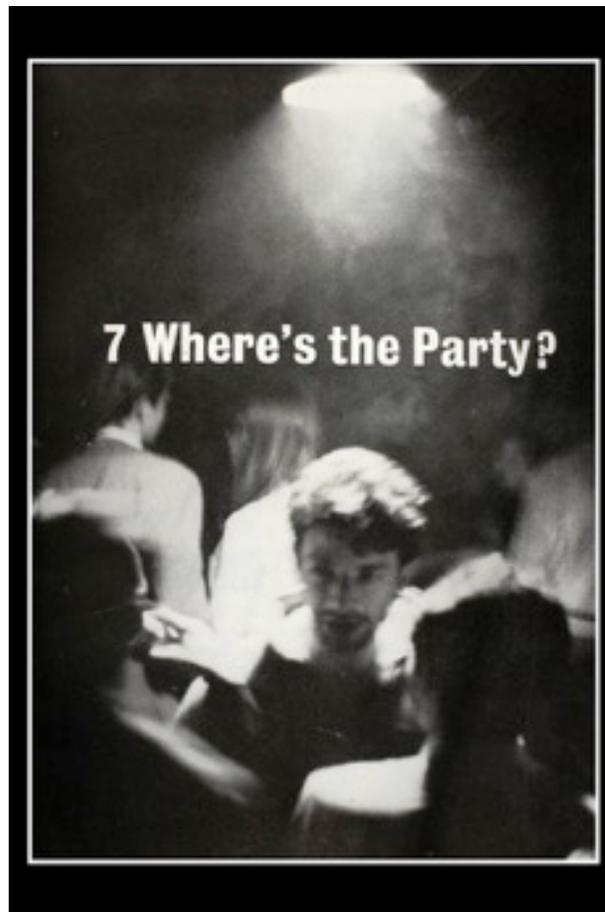

Figure 10 Fred McDarrah *The Artist's World in Pictures.*

protagonists and their subversive encounters as ordinary. Perrin, *Aesthetics of Middlebrow Fiction*, 79-89.
[85] Gregory Battcock, *The New American Cinema*, New York: Dutton, 1967. 111.
[86] Sydney Freedberg, 'Observations on the Painting of the Maniera', 189; Shearman, *Mannerism*, 19.

Smithson took a sociological view of these interchanges collecting clippings on art events from the popular press.[87] He mentioned to Holt that 'the spectacle of [their friend] Barbara invading the ART WORLD was more than astonishing. It always gives me a thrill to watch the serious novice "in action"'.[88] He made social network diagrams (fig.11) where he linked artists to one another, to the critics who championed them, and to dealers and collectors in their circle. He even went so far as to imagine the affinities and struggles between the Warhol and Greenberg circles within the genre constraints of Corman's B-movies, hurling the insult 'critoid menace' at the two: 'Both Fried and [Paul] Morrisey condition their audiences the same way, their words may be different, "quality" and "violence", but they are both representing production for production's sake'. Smithson continued, 'It is not hard to imagine a film called <u>quality violence</u> — opening scene: Holly Woodlawn impales Anthony Caro, played by Brigid Polk, on one of his sculptures after a violent argument over quality. The double-headed hydra of mass and privileged values would come full circle'.[89] From Warhol's films and Smithson's imagined scenarios to the critic-curator Gene Swenson's camp play, *The Way of Art*, which provided thinly veiled caricatures of museum curators, gallery directors, artists, and critics 'in action' — members of the art world were becoming adept at parodying their everyday interactions through low-prestige and middlebrow genres for one another.
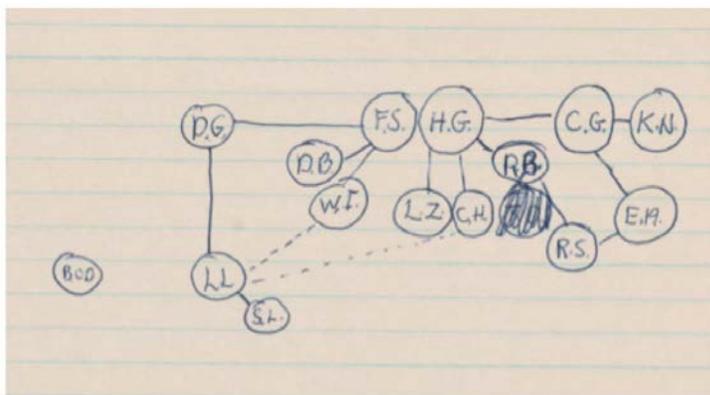

Figure 11 Robert Smithson, Social Network Diagram, *Smithson Notebooks*, Undated. Washington D.C. Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

[87] Some clippings include Brian O'Doherty, 'Vanity Fair: The New York Art Scene', *Newsweek*, 4 January 1965, 54-59; Charlotte Curtis, 'Art Gallery Hoppers Extend East Side Rush Into the Night', *The New York Times*, 27 April, 1966, 52. Smithson Papers, Box 8 Folders 2-6, *AAA*. It is worth noting that Duchamp's later scrapbooks are also full of documentation of social events within the art world, oftentimes where the artist, himself, did not participate. *The Alexina and Marcel Duchamp Papers*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Scrapbooks 5-6, 1966-1968, Box 10, Folder 1.
[88] Robert Smithson, 'Letter to Nancy Holt' circa 1960s. Box 1, Folder 15.
[89] Smithson, 'Production for Production's Sake', *Collected Writings*, 378.

By 1969, observations about art world conduct and the social pragmatics of its members entered the purview of contemporary artworks. For her project, *Groups* (fig.12), Lippard sent out a query to thirty artists internationally, asking them to photograph themselves in identical groups over a five-day period and describe the pictures, their dress, and expressions in detail. She exhibited her results at the School of Visual Arts and published them for a wider audience in *Studio*

Figure 12 Lucy Lippard, 'Groups', *Studio International*, 1969.

International the following year in 1970. Lippard forbade artists from 'posing or gimmicks' or any other 'diversion from the conventional group photo'. She was not interested in a particular group, but their array: 'I wanted their own work to span a broad range of current styles. Included here are sculptors, so-called "conceptual artists," art students, an abstract painter, and a figure painter'. When she came up with the idea, she 'imagined that the minute differences in style or emphasis [in the group portraits] […] would provide subtle interactions with the artist's own work'. Some mode of dress or expression might resonate with their paintings, sculptures, or conceptual art.[90] Lippard's project about group behaviour reinforced the sense of collective belonging among the groups themselves, suggesting that group identity would become increasingly important to its members as they became more aware and reflexive about their conduct within them.[91]

At the same moment, Smithson and Holt collaborated with Joan Jonas and Peter Campus to produce and act in the signal work of the artist-conduct genre: the

[90] Lucy Lippard, 'Groups', *Studio International*, 179, no.920, March 1970, 920. 93-100.
[91] In Swenson's unpublished play, a curator of Chinese Art, the director of the Metropolitan Museum, an artist, a gallery owner, collectors, and museum board members discuss the internal politics of the New York art world in parlor conversation and museum galas. Gene Swenson, *Way of Art: A Comedy in Six Scenes*, circa 1960s-1970s, *Smithson Papers*, Box 3 Folder 95.

video *East Coast/West Coast* (1969). The artists discussed and performed bicoastal differences, which served to bind subsets of artists into rigid norms of behaviour and expression. The video presents an encounter between a New York conceptual artist or critic played by Holt and a California sculptor played by Smithson.[92] When Smithson and Holt begin to act after a minute or so, they can barely keep straight faces while delivering their seemingly spontaneous dialogue. They present themselves in a parodic relation to their characters. Smithson repeats set phrases with such hyperbole (he utters 'it's a trip' nearly one hundred times over the course of the video) that it is unclear whether he is acting the part of a West Coast artist whose LSD use has given him a verbal tic or — in Smithson's typical peripatetic fashion — cannot be bothered to go through with the entire performance and is thinking about something else. He awakens out of his acting slumber only to skewer his sculptor character — 'I like to candy-apple things all the time, that's how I got into art. I was like putting finishes onto things' — before mumbling off.[93] The stilted delivery indicates that he hardly believes his script and his heavy chain-smoking through the entire work reinforces the dramatic irony, indicating a break between Smithson the smoker whose hand is jittery and alert, and 'the artist' speaker, whose mouth mumbles and slacks open. Holt exhibits the same laissez-faire attitude toward her character, whose epithets are peppered with invocations of systems, order, rules, documentation: the standbys of conceptual artists at the time. Her adamant attempts to berate Smithson's character play up the dogmatic aspects of the art practices she parodies.

The video goes on for an interminable twenty-two minutes, but by extending the length of the conversation, Holt and Smithson convey how their positions become entrenched and reified through conversational pragmatics, which they themselves tire of by the end of the work. Holt repeatedly criticises the way Smithson typifies himself: 'You can't throw words around. You have to be precise'. And Smithson defends himself by claiming, 'I use simple words, I make simple responses'. Beyond these explicit arguments over precise and plain talk, there is a clash of rhythms between Holt's punctuated diction and Smithson's slur. They manage to objectify the reigning discursive conditions of the art world thereby, showing how the underdeveloped theoretical paradigms of the moment have

[92] In the beginning of the tape Holt and Smithson appear out of character as Joan Jonas and Peter Campus fumble around with the video equipment, wondering aloud whether it is actually recording. They seem to want to show that they are relative novices with the video format or cannot be bothered to learn the basic protocols of shooting or editing, otherwise they would have deleted this beginning section. This gesture seems to allow them to separate themselves from nascent 'video-artists' who fetishise the medium-specific properties of video as a stream or relay in order to make work about themselves.
[93] The character is a thinly disguised portrait of the Los Angeles-based 'finish-fetish' artist Billy Al Bengston.

created an impasse whereby artists have difficulty moving beyond structural binaries when framing their own work.

Figure 13 Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, *East Coast, West Coast*, 1969. Video (black and white, sound). 22 min.

Indeed, Smithson and Holt can hardly muffle their excitement and maintain their deadpan demeanours in the video because they have stumbled on a set of manners that had previously gone unnoticed and fallen outside of the purview of contemporary art works — namely, the cadences and rhythms of speech, regional dialect, alongside the narrative modes by which artists create origins for themselves, project their beliefs, and take up moral positions towards their work. 1960s artists were acutely aware of these interactional dynamics and acknowledged them when addressing one another in their correspondence, but they had not yet figured out how to bring them into the frame of the artwork itself and Mannerism helped them do so. By articulating and modelling the manner by which speaking about and evaluating their art operated within the art world, Holt, Smithson, and many others soon enough could begin to use the formal dimensions of these manners as their artistic material.

East Coast West Coast, *Groups*, and a host of projects geared to social exchanges in the art world drew attention to the normative ideas about talking about art and the meta-pragmatic practices that put those ideas into circulation: the iconisation of regional features and consumption practices, the gestures that adhered to particular roles, and the required displays of graciousness and contempt at particular moments. Through these activities, artists began to use particular, regional varieties as a supra-local resource, which could develop its own standard delivery, accompanied by its own normative associations with social status and conditions of appropriateness. The art world turned courtly.

5. Historical Lamination: Uses and Effects

The adoption of Mannerism therefore was not merely proto-postmodernist or a means of subversive self-fashioning, reckless pastiche, or strategic appropriation.[94] Rather, it aligned with a social turn in post-war art where members of the art world began to frame their social conduct within art works and their artworks within their social conduct. These behaviours were mutually reinforcing, helping to bind artists and artworks to groups and scenes, where formal criteria tied to medium-specific traditions was otherwise lacking. Members of the art world may have been such receptive readers of middlebrow Mannerism, not merely because they were historically ill-informed, but also because they needed to formulate 'other criteria', as Leo Steinberg put it, that would exceed the form-content binary and frame the social ties that maintained and reproduced their professional roles. As it had been in the courts, to play the mannerist moved the basis for aesthetic evaluation from brute fact —high modernist 'quality' for instance — to careful misprision and dissimulation learned, *di maniera*, through formulaic behavioural technique.
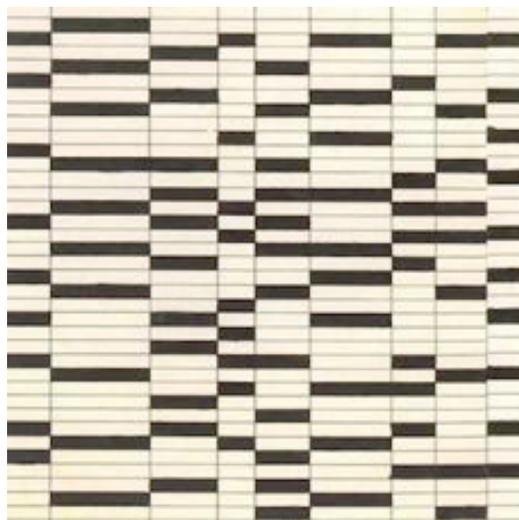

Figure 14 Left: Alessandro Allori, *The Pearl Fishers*, 1570-1572, Oil on slate, 116 x 86 cm, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.
Figure 15 Right: Ellsworth Kelly, *Light Reflection on Water*, 1951. Ink on paper. 22,2 x 21,9 cm. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

By 1972, Zerner made a similar point, drawing a parallel between Mannerism and contemporary art. He held up Alessandro Allori's *Pearl Fishers*

[94] In 1976, Achille Bonito Oliva published *Ideology of the Traitor*, one of the first works to explicitly theorise Mannerism as a form of Postmodernism, as a turn away from master narratives and direct critique towards a Baudrillardian 'conflict of the sign' where images are constructed according to an 'economy of waste, accumulation, and eclecticism'. Achille Bonito Oliva, *L'ideologia del traditore: Arte, maniera, manierismo*, Milan: Electa, 1976. 9-11.

(fig.14) next to Ellsworth Kelly's *Light Reflection on Water* (fig.15), hoping to find a common thread between them that could extend beyond the fast and loose social-psychological affinities posited by his more popular contemporaries. Drawing on Smyth's work on mannerist poses, he argued that the figures in *Pearl Fishers* formed a 'rhythmic pattern of angular accents on the surface of the picture', which were used 'arbitrarily', 'without regard to the subject of the work'.[95] The relationship between gesture and emotion had been severed and 'the agitated, contorted figures' seemed to 'contradict the generally pleasant character of the scene'. These 'contradictions' between the subject of the painting and the manner in which it was illustrated echoed 'today's art'. Contemporary painters, he pointed out, seemed to be 'in a comparable situation, a fact that would explain why we are more receptive to the *maniera* than previous generations'.[96] The parallel hinged on the abandonment of the iconic referent.

Allori's *Pearl Fishers* offered as much of an iconic image of its aqueous surface as *Light Reflection on Water*: very little. 'A work by Ellsworth Kelly has meaning largely because of our knowledge of its place in the historical development of art, because of our understanding of the reduction it operates within that context'. 'Otherwise,' Zerner argued, 'it would be senseless surfaces of flat colours'. The issue here is not so much the arbitrary placement of Allori's figures and Kelly's swatches, but the displacement of an explanatory and evaluative apparatus onto the paintings' reception: 'The justification of forms was exterior to the context in which they were used', Zerner contended. In the absence of iconic indexicals within the artwork, the audience needed help deciphering its puzzle or message. Why did Allori fill the picture plane with rhythmic figures or Kelly title his painting as a landscape? These moves seemed to allow 'a palpable portion of the work's meaning, what is inherently expressive in the forms' to 'escape the artist's control, to be independent of the work's function and even in frequent contradiction to the explicit subject matter'. In order to sort out these contradictions, the audience in both periods required information about the artists' relationships to the procedures available to them, the constraints of painting in the moment, the intended addressee, and access to an art historical corpus: 'nature is only encountered through a "cultural screen" of previous art', he argued. These forms of recognition would be available only to the knowing few. Even as they mark a conventionalisation and institutionalisation of formal devices and techniques, they depended on insiders or 'groups'. Under these circumstances, art would no longer be tied to expressive genius or harmonious composition, but to a common repertoire peculiar, as Zerner put it, to 'a given social community'.

Ultimately, the struggle over Mannerism by artists, historians, and cultural critics seems to have yielded a new set of alliances and antagonisms within the 'social community' of the post-war art world, prompting its members to sort out

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[95] Zerner, *Concept of Mannerism*, 116-117.
[96] Ibid. 115.

their professional roles among themselves. Artists including Smithson and
Hutchinson recognised that the use of geometric forms and the omission of
traditional references and materials from their art work would displace the burden
of interpretation and evaluation onto critics; and, loathe to relinquish a share of their
institutional control over their art, they searched for ways to issue their own
criticism. The middlebrow Mannerism of Sypher, Hocke, and Rowland proved a
ready resource because it was always already obliquely geared to contemporary
social concerns with normativity. And through their trans-historical model, artists
could establish affinities between periods that temporally and formally exceeded
Modernist aesthetics, thereby opening up the art world to a broader range of
situations and addressees. Beyond the sci-fi Minimalism of Smithson and
Hutchinson and the camp aesthetics of the Warhol circle, we might point to the
'mannerist' tableaux vivants of Pierre Klossowski and the labyrinths of the
Situationist International, each informed by middlebrow Mannerism in different
ways.[97] Mannerism provided the prestige of 'anachronic' distance to the artist-
critics, which they then paired with their extensive knowledge of popular and
subcultural aesthetics, thereby launching an attack on High Modernism from above
and below simultaneously, squeezing it out of its authoritative niche.[98] Smithson,
perhaps recognising that he had made this agenda too clear, struck out a passage
from his notebook: '~~All the critics that formulated the taste of 50's and early 60's will
be absorbed by the ever growing public avant-garde~~.' The 'public avant-garde',
through their aspirational embrace of high culture, would inevitably twist
Modernism into something abhorrent to the modernist critics who had established it
as a hermetic space apart over the previous decades. And through his cultivation of
expertise in B-Movies, science fiction, and other forms of popular culture, Smithson
intended to accelerate this process by any means necessary, even through stilted
readings of art history.[99] These developments put high modernist critics on the

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[97] See Klossowski's depiction of the Mannerist painter, Frédérique Tonnerre in Pierre
Klossowski, *La Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes*, Paris: Éd. de minuit, 1959; In a recent essay, Eric
De Bruyn notes how Hocke's *Die Welt als Labyrinth* proved to be one of the pivotal readings
for the Situationist International as they constructed their own iconology of the labyrinth. In
Hocke's text, De Bruyn writes, 'the mannerist maze is celebrated as a "map of the
mysterium" (*Landkarte des Mysteriums*), spiritual metaphor of the unfathomable, hidden
weave of the universe or the world-as-knot (*Welten-Verknotung*), the "decadence" (the
author's words) of modern art would be sealed by a mere decorative application of the
motif. Eric C.H. De Bruyn, 'Constructed Situations, Dynamic Labyrinths, and Learning
Mazes: Behavioral Topologies of the Cold War', *Grey Room* 74, Winter 2019, 44–85, 55.
[98] Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood. *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York: Zone, 2010.
[99] Smithson's extensive knowledge of B-Movies fed into an emerging tendency whereby the
art world reinvigorated itself by mining and re-exhibiting the expressions and products of
various subcultures. In 1970, when Werner Clemens, Hans Peter Kochenrath, and Kasper
König organized *B Special: A Week of Low Budget Movies in Köln*, they contacted Smithson for
selection advice. *Smithson Papers*, Series 2: Correspondence, Box 2, Folder 1.

defensive, forcing them to re-examine whether their judgments about art's 'integrity', 'autonomy', and 'classicism' extended beyond their individual, or perhaps, in-bred taste biases, while prompting them to repel the insult 'mannerist' back towards the new hybrid artist-critics in sheer desperation.

The tension between cultural critics and art historians turned out to be structurally homologous to the one between the artist-critics and high modernists in the sense that their diagnoses of Mannerism pushed them to distinguish their institutional roles through forms of boundary maintenance. Sypher and his peers appealed to a wide audience of lay readers who could read sixteenth century culture as an allegory of post-war alienation, which granted them a degree of social sophistication where they could construe their everyday deceptions and dinner-party games in world-historical terms. Their relationship to cultural history was aspirational, euphemistic, and therapeutically oriented. This is presumably why Hilary Holt took Sypher's 'book home and read it until six in the morning in a state of complete absorption.' Sypher was not the ultimate authority on the period, but his middlebrow style made Holt feel like he, too, was living through the period or 'stage.' Through their accessible histories of Mannerism, Sypher, alongside the publishers at Pelican, Doubleday, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Book of the Month Club, and so forth, catered to an increasing market for cultural products among the middle class.

Following *Four Stages*, Sypher compiled *Art History*, *An Anthology of Criticism* (1963), which, from his correspondence with authors and publishers, was clearly intended for the undergraduate curriculum and everyday museumgoer. Yet his popularisations pushed professional art historians over the course of the 1960s towards an increasing historical and formal precision in which the general term 'Mannerism' dissolved into more fine-grained distinctions. Through its own dubious scholarship, middlebrow Mannerism prompted art historians to professionalise and distinguish themselves through a new blend of philological and formal expertise. And indeed, Shearman's interdisciplinary work across music, painting, poetry, and conduct seems to substantiate many of Sypher's claims about grace and discord through historical research.

Middlebrow Mannerism, moreover, provoked art historians to reconsider their methods. Having taken *Four Stages* to task for its fast and loose history, the Wittkowers tried to sort out a rubric for the new presentist currents and define their potential application and publics. They concluded their treatment of artist conduct in *Born under Saturn* through a case study of the mannerist painter Archimboldo and his reception by the surrealists, Hauser, and others who had offered Freudian readings of the artist's satirical portraits. 'Misinterpretation is one of the great stimuli for keeping the past alive' they argued. 'To use works of art from past ages for their own purposes is the prerogative of artists' but these liberties did not extend to art historians they warned: 'historians should pause before they invest him

[Archimboldo] with the cloak of modernity'.[100] Nevertheless, even if the Wittkowers made a show out of their extensive use of primary source documents, they also hoped to emulate the lively anecdotal histories of their more popular contemporaries. *Born under Saturn* was, above all, an effort at accessibility.

Middlebrow Mannerism was therefore not merely a form of shoddy scholarship, oriented too extensively to the present. Rather the historical lamination it suggested remapped the social roles of the post-war art world with respect to one another. The genre pushed artists to assess their conduct in their interactions while offering them a new polemical register they could use to defend their work; in doing so, it retrenched Modernist critics into a 'life of looking', turning their judgments about quality and autonomy into self-caricatures relegated —Steinberg contended by the early 1970s — to 'rule over an increasingly eroding plane'; meanwhile the genre expanded the domain of art history to lay readers and prompted scholars — who suddenly needed to justify their profession vis-à-vis cultural critics — toward historical subtlety and accessible prose.

As Smithson wrote, the genre worked because of its flaws. Only through 'simple-minded platitudes, transparent philosophies, opaque remarks, unexpected sabotage, hackneyed metaphors, lusterless pedantry' could he and his fellow artists 'protect the[ir] art' and carve out a space that both undermined and exceeded systematic judgment and historical acumen.[101] If his readers squinted hard enough, they might even notice how lurking behind the reception of Mannerism — and its tentative alliances across art, criticism, fiction, and history — stood the menacing spectre of 'theory', ready to haunt the field for the foreseeable future.

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[100] Margot and Rudolf Wittkower, *Born under Saturn*, 283.

[101] Robert Smithson, 'Fiction and Language in Art,' circa 1967-1968. *Smithson Papers*. Box 3 Folder 9. Smithson later incorporated part of this draft into 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art.' *Art International* 12:3, March, 1968. 21-27.