

On 'sensibility': art, art criticism and Surrealism in New York in the 1960s

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In a long polemical essay published in April 1969 titled 'Le "cas" Rauschenberg,' the Surrealist José Pierre surveyed the career of Robert Rauschenberg up to that point, considering its 'successes' and 'failures' in terms of the moments that it intersected with the sensibility of Surrealism.¹ The term 'sensibility' had gained wide circulation by then in New York art criticism and a close reading of 'Le "cas" Rauschenberg' reveals Pierre's awareness of its general treatment and philosophical foundation. Indeed, a few years earlier, the Surrealists in Paris had stated that Surrealism itself was part of 'a *complete recasting of sensibility*,' rooted in the nineteenth century; Pierre's text was not only an attempt to align Rauschenberg's work with the essential primacy that this Surrealist sensibility gave to metaphor, but also a critique of the art and culture influenced by John Cage that diverged from the allusion and connotation entailed by metaphor towards a new kind of affectlessness, literalism or positivism.²

The centrality of the word 'sensibility' to the art writing of the 1960s has been noted by art historians specialising in Neo-Dada and especially Minimalist art, but no historiography charting its objects, events, emergence and the inconsistent usage of the term exists. This article provides that account, which is only achievable alongside a retrieval of the little known history of the resurgence of Surrealism in the decade as a sensibility, historical narrative and living movement, bound antagonistically to the vaunted art (critical) sensibility of the sixties, of which Pierre's article on Rauschenberg was both a record and an outcome.

Defining a sensibility in culture: Leonard B. Meyer

The word 'sensibility' dates from the fourteenth century, but the modern understanding of it began in seventeenth-century British empiricism, formulated most rigorously as the accumulation of knowledge through sensation in John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689).³ One definition extends through eighteenth-century British empiricism to Victorian science and psychology as simply the capacity of the five senses to receive impressions made externally; the second lineage ran parallel and was argued philosophically, beyond mere functionality, in the writings of David Hume and Adam Smith among others, for a

¹ José Pierre, 'Le "cas" Rauschenberg,' *L'Oeil*, no. 172, April 1969, 42-50.

² The Surrealist Group, 'The Example of Cuba and the Revolution' [1964], Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (eds. and trans.), *Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations*, London and Sterling VA: Pluto Press, 2001, 126-8, 127.

³ Daniel Wickberg, 'What is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories Old and New,' *American Historical Review*, vol. 112, no. 3, June 2007, 661-84, 664-5.

moral and aesthetic sensitivity.⁴ This 'cult of sensibility,' where the term was associated with 'refined feeling, discrimination, and taste,' underwent a decline in late-eighteenth century Britain but 'provided much of the moral orientation of nineteenth-century American middle-class culture,' according to Daniel Wickberg.⁵ Across that period, you either had sensibility or you did not. However, Wickberg argues that during the democratization and pluralization of culture driven by modernists in the first half of the twentieth century, the word came to mean something everyone had – dispositions, feelings, inclinations, preferences, attitudes, temperaments, collective forms of perception – even though the idea of value seems to have clung to the reformed concept, and it turns out that some of these sensibilities and cultures were better than others.⁶

A key event in the attempt to define a cultural sensibility of the sixties in the United States was Leonard B. Meyer's supposition of a purportedly post-metaphorical, post-Surrealist realignment of culture, in his much-discussed theory of avant-garde activity since the early 1950s, published in *The Hudson Review* and titled 'The End of the Renaissance?' (1963). Assuming an 'uncompromising positivism' or '*radical empiricism*' (his preferred term) across a range of US and French culture, Meyer took his cue from music and musicology, particularly the writings of Cage, which had been collected two years earlier as *Silence* (1961).⁷ However, the terms in which Meyer characterised the music of the avant-garde – it 'establishes no goals toward which to move. It arouses no expectations ... It is neither surprising nor ... is it particularly startling. It is simply *there*....' – confirm his equal interpretation of it through Nouveau Romancier Alain Robbe-Grillet's theoretical writings.⁸ Meyer perceived, then, an 'anti-teleological' impulse 'in the

⁴ Wickberg, 'What is the History of Sensibilities?' 665.

⁵ Wickberg, 'What is the History of Sensibilities?' 665.

⁶ Wickberg, 'What is the History of Sensibilities?' 666-7.

⁷ Leonard B. Meyer 'The End of the Renaissance? Notes on the Radical Empiricism of the Avant-Garde,' *The Hudson Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, summer 1963, 169-86, 178. One critic who would have read it on publication stated later that it was 'widely discussed by artists,' Irving Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s*, New York: Harper & Row, 1988, 63. His example is Andy Warhol who alluded to Meyer's article in the year it was published, while acknowledging: 'I think John Cage has been very influential,' quoted by G. R. Swenson, 'From "What is Pop Art? Part 1"' [1963], Steven Henry Madoff (ed.), *Pop Art: A Critical History*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997, 103-11, 105.

⁸ Meyer 'The End of the Renaissance?' 173. Although Robbe-Grillet's *For a New Novel* had appeared in French in the same year as Meyer's text, it was accessed by Meyer – including, presumably, Robbe-Grillet's widely broadcast designation of the 'one serious, obvious quality' of the paraphernalia in a Nouveau Roman, 'which is to *be there*' – only through secondary sources: Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'A Future for the Novel' [1956], *For a New Novel* [1963], trans. Richard Howard, Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989, 15-24, 23. This key theoretical statement of 1956 had appeared earlier in a different translation by Richard Howard (alongside writings by Samuel Beckett and Frank O'Hara, and immediately following a brief biography on the recently deceased Jackson Pollock by Clement Greenberg after a set of photographs of Pollock under a cover featuring a photograph of him by Hans Namuth) as Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'A Fresh Start for Fiction' [1956], *Evergreen Review*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1957, 97-104.

music of [Karlheinz] Stockhausen, the paintings of [Mark] Tobey or [Mark] Rothko, and the writings of [Samuel] Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet ... in the music of Cage, the paintings of [Georges] Mathieu, or the chance theatre of [Jackson] MacLow's *The Marrying Maiden* [1960].⁹

Writing in the years before the chronological, artistic, cultural and epistemological boundary was formulated between modernism and postmodernism, Meyer went on to admit Rauschenberg into his canon of radical empiricists. It was Meyer's fullest attempt to delineate the new avant-garde pose:

Nature has, in fact, no purpose or goal. It simply is. And like nature, art should simply present. Thus Rauschenberg contends that 'painting is always strongest when ... it appears as a fact or an inevitability, as opposed to a souvenir or arrangement.' Alain Robbe-Grillet makes a similar point when he says of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* [1953] that 'the theatrical character is on stage, this is his primary quality – he is there.' Or, put negatively, the scenes in Robbe-Grillet's novel *Jealousy* [1957], are, [Bruce] Morrissette tells us, presented 'without a word of analysis or commentary, in the pure domain of phenomenological semantics.' Similarly Cage ... emphasizes that sounds should simply 'be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments.'

Our relationship to art, like our relationship to nature, ought to be one of acceptance.¹⁰

Under the mentorship of Cage's writings, Meyer regarded the relationship between the anti-teleological aesthetic and Zen Buddhism as 'direct and obvious.'¹¹ But he also thought it 'characteristically American' due to its 'emphasis upon the value of naïve, direct experience and upon the natural goodness of man,'¹² comparing a quotation from Cage's *Silence* with Henry David Thoreau's writings to that end:

Art should, in Cage's words, be:

'an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's

⁹ Meyer 'The End of the Renaissance?' 173-4.

¹⁰ Meyer 'The End of the Renaissance?' 177. Rauschenberg is quoted by Meyer from Dorothy C. Miller (ed.), *Sixteen Americans*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959, 58. For the others, see Robbe-Grillet quoted in Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, London: John Calder, 1962, 134; 'The dramatic character *is on stage*, that is his primary quality: he is *there*,' Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Samuel Beckett, or Presence on the Stage' [1953 and 1957], *For a New Novel*, 111-25, 111; Bruce Morrissette, 'The New Novel in France,' *Chicago Review*, vol. 15, no. 3, winter/spring 1962, 1-19, 18; John Cage, 'Experimental Music' [1961], *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, London: Marion Boyars, 1968, 7-13, 10.

¹¹ Meyer 'The End of the Renaissance?' 174.

¹² Meyer 'The End of the Renaissance?' 176.

mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.'¹³

Similar 'culturalist interpretations' would dominate writing on Rauschenberg over the years, casting him as an affectless 'Emersonian,' 'Whitmanesque' American Adam.¹⁴ It is the very same 'transformation of an aesthetic practice of transcendental negation into one of tautological affirmation' that was later credited by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh to Andy Warhol in the sixties, in fact, at the expense of what Buchloh thought became the 'painterly' and 'expressive' efforts of Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg, respectively, in that decade, 'perhaps best articulated by John Cage's famous dictum of 1961 in *Silence*: "Our poetry now is the realization that we possess nothing. Anything therefore is a delight (since we do not possess it...)"¹⁵

Meyer's on-the-spot diagnosis, positing an initial period of post-war rebellion against allusive meaning in New York and Paris from about 1947 to 1953 as a form of positivism or empiricism, observed no difference between the supposedly direct and artless aims of abstract artists in the two cities and the equal concern to *be there* of Rauschenberg's White Paintings (1951), Cage's *Theater Piece #1* (1952) and 4' 33" (conceived 1947-8, composed 1952), Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (written 1948-9, first performed 1953) and Robbe-Grillet's *Nouveau Roman* (usually thought to be initiated by *The Erasers* of 1953). The Edenic language used by Rauschenberg at the time to promote the White Paintings – 'presented with the innocence of a virgin,' he wrote, '[d]ealing with the suspense, excitement, and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point a circle begins and ends' – advanced in the year he met Cage, meets at once Buchloh's dialectic of negation and affirmation as well as Meyer's blank slate rhetoric.¹⁶ Those paintings are now regarded as among the first stirrings

¹³ Meyer 'The End of the Renaissance?' 176; Cage, *Silence*, 12.

¹⁴ See Brian O'Doherty, *Object and Idea: An Art Critic's Journal 1961-1967*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967, 117. O'Doherty wrote later of a 'Whitmanesque plenitude in Rauschenberg's reaction to life' in the early 1960s, and of Rauschenberg's work up to 1969: '[a]s propaganda for nothing more than perception – to see the world fresh – it had an Emersonian innocence, a Whitmanesque exuberance,' Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth*, New York: Random House, 1973, 194, 197. Cage only discovered Thoreau around the time O'Doherty's journal writings appeared in 1967 and after that mentions him frequently as an inspiration, see for instance: John Cage, *For the Birds: In Conversation with Daniel Charles* [1976], Boston Mass. and London: Marion Boyars, 1981. For a definition of the 'culturalist interpretation' of Rauschenberg's work as 'embodying something peculiar about the American experience,' see Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis, 'Re-reading Rauschenberg,' *Artscribe*, no. 29, June 1981, 44-51, 44, 51 n. 1.

¹⁵ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art, 1956-1966' [1989], *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 2000, 461-529, 479. See John Cage, 'Lecture on Nothing' [1959] and '45' for a Speaker' [1954], *Silence*, 108-27, 110; 146-93, 151.

¹⁶ Letter to Betty Parsons of October 1951 on Black Mountain College writing paper quoted by Lawrence Alloway, 'Rauschenberg's Development,' Washington: National Collection of Fine Arts, *Robert Rauschenberg*, 1976, 3-23, 3; a facsimile of the famous, Cagean missive can be

of a sensibility that would only be recognised as such by Meyer and Susan Sontag in the early 1960s. A theory of contemporary art and an attitude among ambitious artists would follow in New York in that decade.

Defining sensibility in art: Barbara Rose and José Pierre

Meyer's paradigm is quite precisely situated – on the heels of Surrealism and admitting visual art from late 1940s abstraction up to Rauschenberg's work – but is seemingly oblivious to Pop art, which had a large international audience by the time he was writing in 1963. It bears some comparison with the New York art critic Barbara Rose's attempt to define a sensibility for the visual arts over the next half decade, though she would only give the actual term prominence in 1967. In the year following the publication of Meyer's article, Rose reviewed the pioneering minimal show *Black, White, and Gray*, held from 9 January to 9 February 1964 at the Wadsworth Atheneum, where curator Samuel Wagstaff, Jr. had compared the even tone and eventlessness of the Nouveau Roman to the cool artistic sensibility of featured artists Dan Flavin, Robert Indiana, Johns, Agnes Martin, Robert Morris, Barnett Newman, Rauschenberg, Tony Smith, Frank Stella, Anne Truitt and Warhol, as well as eleven others supposedly influenced by Cage.¹⁷ Rauschenberg obliged the 'new' aesthetic with one White Painting of four panels and one Black Painting of the early 1950s, along with the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953).¹⁸

Rose went on to write her landmark article 'ABC Art' (1965) at the request of *Art in America* editor Jean Lipman, meant to capture the apparent new tendency in American art.¹⁹ She was one of the first to state the relevance of Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings for the 'literalist' canon, asserting that artists associated with Neo-Dada, Minimalist and conceptual art were familiar with the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953, republished in 1958, 1966 and 1968) and perhaps *The Brown and*

found in Washington: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, 1991, 230.

¹⁷ James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, 144.

¹⁸ Meyer, *Minimalism*, 77. Donald Judd registered his distance from the new 'attitude,' as he called it, bemused in the face of these and Morris's exhibits: '[t]hey are next to nothing; you wonder why anyone would build something only barely present. There isn't anything to look at.... They're here, which is pretty puzzling. Nothing can be said of things that don't exist,' Donald Judd, 'Black White and Gray' [exhibition review, 1964], *Complete Writings 1959-1975*, Halifax and New York: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 1975, 117-19, 117. One critic soon placed Rauschenberg's work at the origins of the new sensibility: 'a comprehension of literalness and the literal nature of material worked with can gain much from a consideration of the work of Robert Rauschenberg in general and, more specifically, his *White Painting* of 1951,' Toby Mussman, 'Literalness and the Infinite' [1966], Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968, 236-50, 245 (he was referring to the one made up of seven sections).

¹⁹ Barbara Rose, 'ABC Art' [1965], Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art*, 274-97, 291. Meyer, *Minimalism*, 144.

Blue Books (1958, republished in 1960).²⁰ Rose quoted from the *Philosophical Investigations* in 'ABC Art' and stated as follows in the same text:

If Jasper Johns's notebooks seem a parody of Wittgenstein, then Judd's and Morris's sculptures often look like illustrations of that philosopher's propositions. Both sculptors use elementary, geometric forms that depend for their art quality on some sort of presence or concrete thereness, which in turn often seems no more than a literal and emphatic assertion of their existence. There is no wish to transcend the physical for either the metaphysical or the metaphoric. The thing, thus, is presumably not supposed to 'mean' other than what it is; that is, it is not supposed to be suggestive of anything other than itself.²¹

Rose made a critical comparison between the zero content of Minimalist art and the novels of Robbe-Grillet earlier in the essay, and her language further in evokes the vocabulary of the theory of the Nouveau Roman.²²

Rose expanded the comparison in 'ABC Art' initially by quoting from Robbe-Grillet's *For a New Novel*, translated into English that year, including the famous phrase, variously translated: 'the world is neither meaningful nor absurd. It simply is,'²³ no doubt as mindful as Meyer of Robbe-Grillet's designation in the same text of the 'one serious, obvious quality' of the paraphernalia in a Nouveau Roman, 'which is to *be there*.'²⁴ Then she avowed:

Curiously, it is perhaps in the theory of the French objective novel that one most closely approaches the attitude of many of the artists I've been talking about. I am convinced that this is sheer coincidence, since I have no reason to believe there has been any specific point of contact. This is quite the contrary to their knowledge of Wittgenstein, whom I know a number of them have read. But nonetheless the rejection of the personal, the subjective, the tragic, and the narrative in favour of the world of things seems remarkable, even if or even because it is coincidental.²⁵

²⁰ Irving Sandler recalled that Michael Fried gifted Rose and Stella a book by Wittgenstein when they were married in 1961 and cites Carl Andre's recollection that *The Blue and Brown Books* was casual reading in the New York art world in the early 1960s: Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s*, 87 n. 98.

²¹ Rose in Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art*, 291. Her view of minimalism as a rejection of metaphor is obviously what I am getting at in the contrast I am drawing between the sensibility I am outlining and the poetic project of Surrealism that I am contrasting it with, but Rose's discovery of metaphor in the work of Warhol and Morris shows already that the distinction was never going to be a clear cut one and would hardly have been endorsed by artists such as Flavin and Judd: see Meyer, *Minimalism*, 149.

²² Rose in Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art*, 281.

²³ Rose in Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art*, 291. '[t]he world is neither significant nor absurd. It is, quite simply,' Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, 19.

²⁴ Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, 23.

²⁵ Rose in Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art*, 292. The questionable term 'objective' might have been derived by Rose from Roland Barthes, 'Objective Literature' [1954], *Critical Essays* [1964],

Two years later, Rose and Irving Sandler published artists' predictably mixed, frequently attitudinised responses to their questionnaire of 1967 enquiring explicitly as to the existence and nature of a 'sensibility of the sixties.' Although it held limitedly to New York as unquestionably the hub of relevant opinion on contemporary art – out of thirty-five respondents, all male, all were apparently attached to New York galleries – the questionnaire nevertheless reveals an intermittent pattern that is worthy of consideration. There was agreement on a sensibility of 'apparent impersonality' and 'factory surfaces' by Roy Lichtenstein; 'cool detachment, irony' by Allan Kaprow; of a "'Slick Sixties'" of 'repetitive forms

trans. Richard Howard, Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972, 13-24, 14. It is questionable in the sense that the so-called objectivity of the narrative of the Nouveau Roman is established through the eyes of a subject, as noted in the complaint about such 'objectivist' interpretations of the genre by the author himself: Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'New Novel, New Man' [1961], *For a New Novel*, 133-42, 138-9. It is notable that Barthes, who was writing when only *The Erasers* had been published, compared the position taken by Robbe-Grillet's novel towards the object to the 'torment [*tourment*] of a rational destruction of the classical object' by modern painting, and, without referring to specific artists (or writers), went on to state that Robbe-Grillet's 'endeavour is equal in importance to that of Surrealism against rationality,' Barthes, *Critical Essays*, 23.

The resemblance Rose conjectured here, and that Wagstaff had in 1964, between the minimal narrative of the Nouveau Roman and the emptiness of Minimalist art, must have been recognised by artists themselves; indeed, in interview early in the twenty-first century, Robbe-Grillet recalled being met enthusiastically in New York by Rauschenberg and Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, George Segal and Warhol (though it is not made clear when these encounters took place), while his interviewer states 'artists like Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham and Mel Bochner referred to your works on many occasions, but you had no dealings with the next generation of artists,' to which Robbe-Grillet responded, 'Yes. I am not really attracted by conceptual painting,' Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews*, vol. 2, eds. Charles Arsène-Henry, Shumon Basar and Karen Marta, Milan: Charta, 2010, 180-189, 183, 184. For a claim that is unsupported by citation but highly plausible, that the Nouveau Roman 'would acquire cult status among the generation of Minimalist/post-Minimalist and Conceptual artists,' and that David Lamelas, Graham and Lawrence Weiner 'have explicitly stated in interviews or in their work that the writings of Alain Robbe-Grillet and the films of Alain Resnais played an important role in the development of a post-Minimal, proto-Conceptual aesthetic,' see Buchloh, *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry*, 328, 340 n. 15. In addition, titles and themes in the work of Cy Twombly and Hans Haacke make reference to Robbe-Grillet and Resnais's film *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), while the art or writings of Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci demonstrate, at the least, an interest in Robbe-Grillet's writings. For his part, Robbe-Grillet had nothing to say about Minimalist art and metaphor when the subject was served up by Paul Schwartz, 'Anti-Humanism in Art: Alain Robbe-Grillet in an Interview with Paul Schwartz,' *Studio International*, vol. 175, no. 899, April 1968, 168-9, 169. One source has asserted that 'the conceptual artists initially related their work to the research of the British analytic linguists,' in a text that is, nevertheless, taken up largely by a speculative (rather than historically correlated) comparison mainly between the examination of the structure of semiotic systems that takes place in the writings of Robbe-Grillet and Jean Ricardou, on the one hand, and the art and writings of Joseph Kosuth on the other: Charles Russell, 'Toward Tautology: The Nouveau Roman and Conceptual Art,' *MLN*, vol. 91, no. 5 ('Responsibilities of the Critic'), October 1976, 1044-60, 1047.

[and] tough clarity' for Stephen Greene; on 'the irrational as a kind of order in itself ... irony' by James Wines; of "'Generation X" or "Supercool Meets Captain Cosmo"' in the words of Edwin Ruda; of 'coolness, passivity and emotional detachment' as understood by Gene Davis; of an aesthetic that was 'engineered/scientific/geometric/calculated//measured...' in the formulation of Will Insley; it was 'tough, deadpan, ironic, anti-confessional, anti-individual' for Paul Brach; 'often armoured, sleek and tough-skinned' for Leon Golub; and characterised by 'intellectual dandyism and boredom ... reduction and denial' for Friedel Dzubas.²⁶

The judgement on Surrealist art was given implicitly by Meyer and Rose in a combination of a theory that excluded it, by writers with apparently barely any knowledge of it in texts that do not mention it. By the time José Pierre critically analysed Rauschenberg's work of the preceding decade and a half in 'Le "cas" Rauschenberg,' the sensibility had taken on a specific identity as 'cool,' 'antisubjective or anti-Expressionist' and 'thing-oriented or object-like,' and it had a set of artistic styles, key texts (Cage, Robbe-Grillet and Wittgenstein were indispensable, but so was Marshall McLuhan) and had been quite meticulously periodised in the decade, though frequently seen as originating somewhere in the 1950s.²⁷ Artists 'did look at things for what they actually were and not as metaphors of human feelings,' recalled Sandler later, and their sensibility as seen in their work and statements showed a shift that sounds almost fastidiously divergent from Surrealism in his terms: 'from psychology to physicality, from subjectivity to objectivity, from interpretation to presentation, from symbol to sign ... from anthropocentrism to anti-anthropocentrism.'²⁸

In 'Le "cas" Rauschenberg,' then, Pierre was spot on when he introduced his article by lamenting from the Surrealist point of view that the steering philosophy of US art over the preceding fifteen years had been an English-language 'logical positivism' or 'scientific empiricism' in the tradition of Locke, George 'Bishop' Berkeley and Hume, naming Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein as its most recent representatives in philosophy.²⁹ He went on to implicate Rauschenberg's apologist Cage to that effect with a few choice quotations: 'The object is a "fact," not a

²⁶ Barbara Rose and Irving Sandler (eds.), 'Sensibility of the Sixties,' *Art in America*, vol. 55, no. 1, January-February 1967, 44-57, 45, 46, 47, 48, 50, 53, 54, 55, 57. James Meyer states that Rose was criticised and even lampooned by some artists connected to minimalism, but this is only really evident in the reasons given for their refusals to answer by Johns, Morris and Claes Oldenburg, and perhaps in the abrupt, sarcastic or derisory answers harvested from Andre, Dzubas, Flavin, George McNeil and especially Milton Resnick; Meyer, *Minimalism*, 148. If one or two Minimalist artists did go ironic on Rose, Clement Greenberg soon turned meta-ironic on them all, redeploing the contentious term to undermine the work: 'almost every work of Minimal Art I have seen reveals in experience a more or less conventional sensibility,' Clement Greenberg, 'Recentness of Sculpture' [1967], *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, 250-56, 254.

²⁷ Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s*, 60.

²⁸ Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s*, 61.

²⁹ "'positivisme logique,'" "'empirisme scientifique,'" Pierre, 'Le "cas" Rauschenberg,' 43.

symbol,' 'Ideas are one thing and what happens is another thing.'³⁰ For Pierre, such art and supporting comments marked the fashionable estimation in the 1960s that the end had come for 'metaphor, of messages and other dusty old nonsense,' the very poetic mechanism that Surrealism had traditionally used as an antidote for positivism.³¹ Pierre probably took the term 'positivism' from Meyer himself for the verdict he gave on the art of the period, using 'mock positivism' ('positivisme narquois') for Cage's statements and influence specifically.³² Rose had used the same fact-not-symbol quotation by Cage in her *American Art Since 1900* (1967), which was one of Pierre's sources in what was as much a defence of Surrealism as an evaluation of Rauschenberg through its theoretical resources.³³ Some of this material might have reached Pierre through correspondence with former Surrealist Nicolas Calas who read both Meyer and Rose as an art critic in New York at the time and was back in sympathetic contact with Surrealists in Paris.³⁴ But how was actual Surrealism considered critically alongside the new sensitivity at the time Meyer, Rose and Pierre were writing and what was its fate across the period they scrutinised?

The (Surrealist) sensitivity of the Sixties: Susan Sontag

Commentators on art and culture in New York in the 1960s found in 'sensitivity' a term that they could use at least to begin discussion as to what was distinct to the

³⁰ Pierre, 'Le "cas" Rauschenberg,' 45. Pierre slightly misquoted or misrendered Cage's quotations: '... object is *fact*, not symbol,' John Cage, 'On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work' [1961]; 'Ideas are one thing and what happens another,' John Cage, 'Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?' [1961], *Silence*, 98-108, 108 and 194-259, 222.

³¹ 'la métaphore, du message et autre balivernes poussiéreuses,' Pierre, 'Le "cas" Rauschenberg,' 44. The main statement on the priority given metaphor in Surrealism can be found in André Breton, 'Surrealist Situation of the Object: Situation of the Surrealist Object' [1935], *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1972, 255-78, 268. The foundational one rejecting 'the realistic attitude, inspired by positivism' is in André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism' [1924], *Manifestoes*, 1-47, 20.

³² Pierre, 'Le "cas" Rauschenberg,' 43, 45.

³³ Cage's quotation was one of the two epigraphs that introduced Rose's chapter 'After Abstract Expressionism,' in which it is stated that the 'atmosphere' in which Pop was nurtured was 'generated mainly by the composer John Cage,' and where Pop is said to have been launched by Rauschenberg and Johns: '[t]wo artists close to Cage who applied his attitude toward painting and, in doing so, attacked abstract expressionism at its foundations,' Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900: A Critical History*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1967, 211, 216.

³⁴ For Calas's quotation of Meyer's comments on Robbe-Grillet, see the article that first appeared in the journal *Art and Literature* in 1965: Nicolas Calas, 'Why Not Pop Art?' [1965], *Art in the Age of Risk and Other Essays*, New York: E. F. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968, 41-9, 48-9. In the following year, Calas was critical of Rose's justification of Minimalist art, finding equivalence between it and the dehumanizing efficiency of office design under corporate management: Nicolas Calas, 'ABC or LSD?' *Arts Magazine*, vol. 40, no. 9, September-October 1966, 15.

decade. But there was plenty of contradiction. Among the artists' responses to Rose and Sandler's questionnaire were those by Al Held, who thought contemporary artists were operating in rejection of the 'Surrealist sensibility' – no surprise there – and Philip Pearlstein, who characterised the new mood as 'objective rather than subjective, constructed (planned, predetermined) rather than improvised, but also less based on external logic, a bit more surreal ... hardened.'³⁵ A closer look at documents of the period demonstrates that the theoretical attempts to forge a sensibility that would achieve a clean break from Surrealism were placed under strain by the joint factors of a renewed interest in historical Surrealism and the resurgence of the Surrealist movement.

It was Susan Sontag's writing that would prove the most tenacious and influential in its serious undertaking to define both the notion of 'sensibility' and the new sensibility in the 1960s. This was carried out in real time from around the beginning of the decade at almost exactly the moment Sontag began publishing on Surrealism, and it was torn by apparently conflicting intellectual loyalties to André Breton and Surrealism, on the one hand, and more recent art and culture that repudiated Surrealism on the other. Sontag must have learned about the movement as a student of philosophy and literature at the University of Chicago and Harvard University in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Her understanding of it was furthered by her close acquaintance with Herbert Marcuse at the time Marcuse was working on *Eros and Civilisation* (1955), where the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) was quoted as evidence that the 'Surrealists recognized the revolutionary implications of Freud's discoveries,' together with the transformative year she spent in Paris in 1958 and friendship with Annette Michelson, future co-founder of the journal *October* with Rosalind Krauss.³⁶ By the early 1960s, Sontag's was a rare sympathetic voice heard about Surrealism, either in France or the US.

At the time, Surrealists in Paris such as Robert Benayoun, Breton, Elisabeth Lenk and Pierre were busily deriding the recent phenomenon of Happenings as shopworn Dada (even though Pierre would absolve Rauschenberg of his participation in them), mainly in the pages of their journal *La Brèche: Action surréaliste* (eight issues, 1961-5).³⁷ By contrast, Sontag defined in 1962 the 'allegory of dreams' in Happenings by way of what she termed a 'Surrealist sensibility,' generalising beyond actual Surrealism to encompass a 'Surrealist tradition' that

³⁵ Rose and Sandler (eds.), 'Sensibility of the Sixties,' 53.

³⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation* [1955], London: Sphere, 1969, 124; Daniel Schreiber, *Susan Sontag: A Biography* [2007], trans. David Dollenmayer, Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014, 48; Alice Kaplan, *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012, 96. See the notes on Marcuse and Michelson in Susan Sontag, *Reborn: Early Diaries, 1947-1963*, ed. David Rieff, London: Penguin, 2008, 91, 106, 180-81.

³⁷ Robert Benayoun, 'Où rien n'arrive,' *La Brèche: Action surréaliste*, no. 6, June 1964, 12-21; André Breton, 'Entretien avec Guy Dumur' [1964], *Perspective Cavalière*, Paris: Gallimard, 1970, 227-37, 232; José Pierre, 'Peinture et autre,' *La Brèche: Action surréaliste*, no. 6, June 1964, 1 (and see Lenk quoted in the same text).

created 'new meanings or counter-meanings through radical juxtaposition.'³⁸ Although she alluded in her text to the latest evidence of the quickening of contemporary Surrealist activity, the group exhibition *Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanters' Domain*, which she must have visited because she was in New York when it was held there at the end of 1960 through the beginning of 1961, Sontag preferred to believe that the post-Surrealist 'prescriptions which [Antonin] Artaud offers in *The Theatre and its Double* [1938, written 1931-6] describe better than anything else what Happenings are.'³⁹ Sontag's assertion of the pre-eminence of Artaud in the interpretation of contemporary culture shows her caught midway between approval of Surrealism and attraction to the critical legacy that succeeded it and, to a certain extent, was spawned by it. This was a trajectory set by the zero degree writing of Beckett and the French Nouveau Roman, joined by Maurice Blanchot who had written in *La Nouvelle revue française* in 1956 of the 'infinite proliferation of emptiness' of Artaud's texts, soon to be followed by the status afforded Artaud by Michel Foucault in his *History of Madness* (1961) and by the platform given to the one-time Surrealist's writings and their commentary in the important cultural review *Tel Quel* (1960-82), which Sontag read closely and where she would later publish.⁴⁰

In August 1964, Sontag wrote in her diary: '*Sensibility* is humus for the intellect.'⁴¹ That was to say that sensibility was 'distinct from an idea,' as she put it in perhaps her best-known essay, 'Notes on "Camp,"' where she wrote of 'something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste,' and it was taste that, in turn, 'informed' the intellectual and social history (ideas and behaviour) of an era.⁴² As far as the immense task went of fathoming so fugitive a quality as the broad cultural sensibility of the sixties, she was still engaged in trying to refine it. Late that year, one jotting in her notebooks has Breton down as 'a connoisseur of freedom,' then in two notes to self three days later Sontag reminds herself to read Cage's *Silence*.⁴³ In May of the following year, she devoted several entries to Johns and (mainly) Rauschenberg, partly due to a visit to Johns's home in South Carolina at the beginning of an enduring friendship, where she intuited a 'literalist' link between Rauschenberg and Robbe-Grillet (she

³⁸ Susan Sontag, 'Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition' [1962], *Against Interpretation* [1966], London: Vintage, 2001, 263-74, 266, 269.

³⁹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 270, 272.

⁴⁰ Maurice Blanchot, 'Artaud' [1956], *The Book to Come* [1959], trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2003, 34-40, 38; Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* [1961], ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa, London and New York: Routledge, 2006; and see Artaud's attack on all schools, systems and tendencies including Surrealism, published in the third number of *Tel Quel* in autumn 1960: Antonin Artaud, 'Shit to the Spirit' [1947], trans. Jack Hirschman, *Artaud Anthology*, 106-12, 111. Also see the special issue of the poetry review *La Tour de feu*, no. 63-4, December 1959, dedicated to Artaud with contributions from Breton and André Masson.

⁴¹ Entry of 20 August 1964: Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries, 1964-1980*, ed. David Rieff, London: Penguin, 2012, 19.

⁴² Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"' [1964], *Against Interpretation*, 275-92, 275, 276.

⁴³ Entries 17 November, 3 December and 6 December 1964: Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 48, 53, 57.

was one of the first to do so) and concluded, as many others would: '[n]ew way – Rauschenberg, Johns – is through literalness – extending vision to include intense look at things we look at but never see.'⁴⁴

Her position came through clearer in 'One Culture and the New Sensibility' (1965). Krauss would later call this essay Sontag's 'report from the front lines of the 1960s,' and she would take a cue from it for her own writing on Rauschenberg.⁴⁵ Seeking to determine a 'new (potentially unitary) kind of sensibility,'⁴⁶ Sontag asserted the breakdown of boundaries between art and science, art and non-art, form and content, high and low, but it was the first that provided her with her double-headed title and her theme:

a reaction against what is understood as the romantic spirit dominates most of the interesting art of today. Today's art, with its insistence on coolness, its refusal of what it considers to be sentimentality, its spirit of exactness, its sense of 'research' and 'problems,' is closer to the spirit of science than of art in the old-fashioned sense.⁴⁷

Josef Albers, Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Rauschenberg, Rothko, Stella and Warhol were Sontag's representative artists at 'the locus of the new sensibility,' along with musicians Cage, Luigi Nono and Stockhausen, writers Beckett, William Burroughs and Rainer Maria Rilke, and dancers Merce Cunningham and James Waring.⁴⁸ There is some consistency there, and also with the efforts of Meyer and Rose to grasp the new idiom – Sontag read Meyer, and Rose read Meyer and Sontag. But the task Sontag had set herself, which exceeds the canonical range of Meyer and the terminological specificity of Rose, led to an odd list of 'basic texts for this new cultural alignment,' where Cage, Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, McLuhan and Wittgenstein were placed alongside Artaud, Breton, Norman O. Brown and Friedrich Nietzsche (while the convergence of the essay on science entailed the rejection of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau from the canon).⁴⁹ As the very embodiment of the 'romantic spirit,' Breton makes particularly peculiar company in the list. A note made by Sontag in her diary in December that same year suggests that in the wake of writing 'One Culture and the New Sensibility,' she retained somewhat divided loyalties: '[i]f I ever write any more essays, I want to do one apiece on Breton + Cage.'⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Entries of 20 May and 22 May 1965: Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 82-5, 85.

⁴⁵ Rosalind Krauss, 'Perpetual Inventory' [1997], Branden W. Joseph (ed.), *Robert Rauschenberg*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 2002, 93-131, 96.

⁴⁶ Susan Sontag, 'One Culture and the New Sensibility' [1965], *Against Interpretation*, 293-304, 296.

⁴⁷ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 297.

⁴⁸ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 295, 297, 298, 299, 300, 303, 304.

⁴⁹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 294, 298. Sontag referred to Wittgenstein in her diaries as early as October 1956 as one of her three favourite philosophers, and she mentioned Artaud in 1958: Sontag, *Reborn*, 86, 193.

⁵⁰ Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 157. The subsequent recognition that Breton was part of an entirely other tradition might explain why ten years on in May 1975 she was

Given the way the dominant cultural wind was blowing by the mid-sixties, Breton seems even more inappropriately situated in Sontag's follow up, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' (1967). It was first published in the joint fifth and sixth number of *Aspen*, the multimedia 'magazine in a box,' an issue edited by Rauschenberg's friend and commentator Brian O'Doherty and dedicated to Stéphane Mallarmé (who was then enjoying what Buchloh called a 'renewed reading and rediscovery' by conceptual artists attendant to linguistics and semiotics), snugly positioned alongside art or writing by Barthes (the first showing for 'The Death of the Author'), Beckett ('Text for Nothing #8' of 1958), Cage, Cunningham, Marcel Duchamp, Morris, Rauschenberg (an excerpt from his film *Linoleum* of 1966), Robbe-Grillet, Sol LeWitt and others linked mainly to Dada and conceptual art but nowhere near Surrealism.⁵¹

Sontag's text uses 'silence' as a single term to identify cognate ones that plot the new epistemology of 'absence,' 'termination,' 'nihilism,' 'emptiness,' 'reduction,' 'the "zero degree,"' 'blandness,' 'deindividuation,' 'alogicality,' 'literalness,' 'reticence' and the 'power to *negate*.'⁵² She called the last one of these the 'sensory or conceptual gap between the artist and his audience, the space of the missing or ruptured dialogue,' which, she adds, in a foretaste of Buchloh's transcendental negation turned tautological affirmation, 'can also constitute the grounds for an ascetic affirmation.'⁵³ Given Rauschenberg's already well-known and now endlessly quoted: '[p]ainting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two),' the omission of the White Paintings, the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* and their author seem like a lapse in the midst of Sontag's otherwise familiar talismans and emissaries of the new sensibility: Duchamp's Readymades, Cage's *4' 33"*, Pop and Minimalist art, Artaud, Beckett, Cage, Johns, Franz Kafka, Rilke, Robbe-Grillet, Warhol and Wittgenstein.⁵⁴ Its primary

considering that text as one of her two 'problematic essays from the 1960s' (with 'On Style' of 1965), Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 379.

⁵¹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth Century Art*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 2015, 186. One disappointed advocate of the artist has written that *Linoleum* 'resembles nothing so much as a Surrealist-inspired dream. In part, this impression arises because here Rauschenberg more explicitly trafficked in images with symbolic content,' Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 2003, 273.

⁵² Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' [1967], *Styles of Radical Will* [1969], New York: Picador, 2002, 3-34, 5, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 16, 29, 32.

⁵³ Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, 8.

⁵⁴ Rauschenberg quoted in Miller (ed.), *Sixteen Americans*, 58; Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, 5-6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 16, 18, 20, 25, 29, 32. Sontag had been reading Georges Bataille since 1965, who is discussed in 'The Pornographic Imagination,' published in the same year as 'The Aesthetics of Silence,' but he remained absent from the litanies that sketched the new sensibility: see the entries for 1 and 25 August 1965 and 17 September 1965 in Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 91, 99, 128; also see Kaplan, *Dreaming in French*, 126. In interview with Roger Copeland in 1981, Sontag spoke of 'a whole period of my life' in the 1960s, 'when I was spending a lot of time with Jasper Johns, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Marcel Duchamp,' quoted in Leland Poague (ed.), *Conversations with Susan Sontag*, Jackson MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995, 186.

realisations in text are said to be by Kafka and Beckett, whose uses of language, according to Sontag:

seem puzzling because they appear to invite the reader to ascribe high-powered symbolic and allegorical meanings to them and, at the same time, repel such ascriptions. Yet when the narrative is examined, it discloses no more than what it literally means. The power of their language derives precisely from the fact that the meaning is so bare.⁵⁵

Robbe-Grillet's 'dysnarrative' was obviously the most prominent contemporary novelistic and theoretical illustration of such practice,⁵⁶ but Sontag stayed with Beckett in 'The Aesthetics of Silence' for the motto of the new sensibility: 'the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.'⁵⁷ Sontag's survey includes Breton again, alongside Surrealist precursors the Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse), Friedrich Hölderlin, Heinrich von Kleist and Novalis, but her attempt to adjust the 'unexpected literalness' of the Surrealist object and 'unexpected scale' of Surrealist paintings to her already overextended aesthetic of silence was frankly mistaken, and out of line with how both the Surrealists and their commentators pro and con understood their analogical, connotative attitude toward knowledge.⁵⁸

Sontag's lingering respect had disappeared by the time of the texts of 1973-7 that constitute *On Photography* (1977), where Surrealism is derided as 'a bourgeois affectation,' Walter Benjamin's 'Surrealist sensibility is the most profound of anyone's on record,' and even the movement's accidental 'artistic' achievements in photography are enfeebled through generalisation, to the extent that nowadays 'we look at all photographs surrealistically.'⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, 29.

⁵⁶ 'What do you mean by dysnarrative?'/ 'Precisely that there is narration but that it does not function according to the laws of the genre,' Anthony N. Fragola and Roch C. Smith, *The Erotic Dream Machine: Interviews with Alain Robbe-Grillet on His Films*, Carbondale and Edwardsville IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992, 153.

⁵⁷ Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, 12. Sontag misquotes, missing out 'nothing with which to express,' Samuel Beckett, 'Three Dialogues' [1949], *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, London: John Calder, 1983, 138-45, 139.

⁵⁸ Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, 9, 12, 26, 29.

⁵⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* [1977], Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, 54, 74, 75. Diary entries of 25 May 1978 show her still reading Benjamin after her book had been published and in one stand-alone note, she is apparently transfixed, since it simply reads: 'Surrealist sensibility,' Sontag, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, 458. Sontag told Copeland in 1981 of her wish 'to delineate the modern sensibility from as many angles as possible. One of the names I've found for this sensibility is Surrealism; but I'm aware of the fact that I conceive of Surrealism in a very personal way,' adding 'I suppose I stretched the term Surrealism in much the same way I stretched the notion of camp,' quoted in Poague (ed.), *Conversations with Susan Sontag*, 185.

The returns of Surrealism in the Sixties

In the US, in parallel with Sontag's early references to the movement, a more explicit awareness of Surrealism had surfaced among artists, frequently adjacent to critical commentary on Pop art. Among art critics, Pop played a key role in the stimulation of interest in historical Surrealism. To my knowledge, the first time that '[e]choes of Surrealism' were detected in Pop, it was by Max Kozloff in *Art International* in March 1962 through comparison of Lichtenstein's painting with René Magritte's work and '[Salvador] Dalí and his concept of the dream postcard,' also tracing the 'distinguished pedigree' of Pop's 'metaphors' to Magritte among others.⁶⁰ Kozloff was sceptical about Pop but soon to be converted, and as the writing on it burgeoned, such comparison with Surrealism became routine up to the end of the decade.⁶¹

One of the first signs of the apparently irreducible presence of Surrealism in the 'new' sensibility – as though, paradoxically, it could not be thought as 'new' and a 'sensibility' at all without 'old' Surrealism as either a component or opponent – can be found in the *Artforum* article of September 1963, titled 'Anti-Sensibility Painting.' Here, author Ivan C. Karp, associate director of the Leo Castelli Gallery, was aiming to promote Pop art under the name of 'Common Image Painting' in an early attempt to glimpse its predominant trait. Karp could discern a new style in the

⁶⁰ Max Kozloff, "'Pop" Culture, Metaphysical Disgust, and the New Vulgarities' [1962], Madoff (ed.), *Pop Art*, 29-32, 30, 31.

⁶¹ In May 1963, Rosenquist was called by Rose 'a billboard Surrealist who marries Magritte's paint handling to collage space,' Barbara Rose, 'Pop Art at the Guggenheim' [1963], Madoff (ed.), *Pop Art*, 82-4, 84. Also very early on, the same critic averred in a manifestly reluctant register: '[t]o my mind, Rosenquist is a better painter than any of the Surrealists; still there is no getting away from his debt to [Max] Ernst and Magritte,' Barbara Rose, 'Americans 1963,' *Art International*, vol. 7, no. 7, 25 September 1963, 77-9, 78. While noting Rosenquist's stated admiration for Magritte, Lucy Lippard maintained that similarity between the two was 'superficial,' and argued that disparities in scale in Surrealism were intended to provoke a comparative, collage-like effect, whereas the gigantism of Rosenquist was turned outwards toward the spectator; Lippard also disputed attribution of any significant socio-political aspect to Rosenquist's art: Lucy R. Lippard, 'James Rosenquist: Aspects of a Multiple Art,' *Artforum*, vol. 4, no. 4, December 1965, 41-4, 41. Around then, on a trip to Paris from Chicago, Penelope Rosemont gave a critical account to the Surrealists of Calas's relatively tolerant view of Pop, which is slightly misremembered in her memoir (Calas had written on Larry Rivers and Jim Dine in 1961 and 1962, but he had not authored a book titled *Pop Art* as she believed): Penelope Rosemont, *Dreams & Everyday Life: André Breton, Surrealism, Rebel Worker, SDS & the Seven Cities of Cibola in Chicago, Paris & London. A 1960s Notebook*, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2008 74; see Nicolas Calas, 'Why Not Pop Art?' *Art in the Age of Risk*, 41-9. Rosemont was probably thinking of Calas' contribution to Lippard's widely read *Pop Art* (1966) in which he understood Pop, typically inconclusively, as both close to and distant from Surrealism: Nicolas Calas, 'Pop Icons' [1966], *Art in the Age of Risk*, 50-59. Soon after, back in the US, David Irwin gave a survey of Surrealist techniques and themes – defamiliarisation, juxtaposition, audience participation (regarded, unexpectedly, as 'pure Surrealism'), sex and shock/scandal – applying them to a swathe of Pop artists: David Irwin, 'Pop Art and Surrealism,' *Studio International*, vol. 171, no. 877, May 1966, 187-91, 189.

'vicious,' 'hostile,' 'thrillingly insensitive' trend that depicted 'fantastically ugly' US urban subject matter where, unlike in Surrealist painting, '[t]he poetry is invisible' and it is 'the fact of the picture itself which is the poetry.'⁶² 'Sensibility' meant, for Karp, 'sensitivity' and was not so much something that changed but, rather, something you either had or did not have; it was 'good taste,' a moral category, as it had been for the Victorians.⁶³ However, for Karp, '[s]ensitivity is a bore.'⁶⁴ Pop art entailed not a new sensibility in this self-consciously brazen account, but a refutation of sensibility: the 'purging of poetic sensations in painting.'⁶⁵

Karp's deployment of the term might have been different to Sontag's, but it was equally caught up in the muddle of attempting to define a new sensibility that was, in fact, largely dependent on something that pre-existed it. So, for Karp, James Rosenquist 'manifests a certain artfulness that is akin to Surrealism' and 'must maintain the sense of the monumentally bizarre without Surrealism or else he will defeat his art,' while Pop was, perplexingly for us now, 'possibly a bridge to a splendid new Romanticism.'⁶⁶

The broader return of interest in Surrealism as a set of themes and styles in that decade in the US has been detected retrospectively by Scott Rothkopf, who writes: '[b]y the mid-1960s a surfeit of New York group exhibitions explored Surrealist themes – in particular its psychosexual preoccupations – in the work of younger artists.'⁶⁷ Rothkopf points to *Recent Work by Arman, Dine, Fahlström, Marisol, Oldenburg, Segal* held at the Sidney Janis gallery in May 1965; *Beyond Realism* showing Richard Artschwager, Claes Oldenburg again, Marjorie Strider, Lucas Samaras, Paul Thek, Mike Todd and Chryssa Vardea-Mavromichali at the Pace Gallery over the same month; Gene Swenson's alternative to modernist formalism *The Other Tradition* at the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art from 27 January to 7 March 1966; and Lucy Lippard's *Eccentric Abstraction* at the Fischbach Gallery, New York from 20 September through October 1966, along with a string of publications on the movement and monographic exhibitions great and small devoted to Surrealist artists (for example Dalí, Max Ernst, Magritte, Joan Miró, Kurt Seligmann and Yves Tanguy), 'whose sensibilities,' argues Rothkopf, 'would have been most relevant to the time.'⁶⁸

⁶² Ivan C. Karp, 'Anti-Sensibility Painting' [1963], Madoff (ed.), *Pop Art*, 88-9, 88.

⁶³ Wickberg, 'What is the History of Sensibilities?' 667.

⁶⁴ Karp in Madoff (ed.), *Pop Art*, 89.

⁶⁵ Karp in Madoff (ed.), *Pop Art*, 89.

⁶⁶ Karp in Madoff (ed.), *Pop Art*, 89.

⁶⁷ Scott Rothkopf, 'Paul Thek and the Sixties Surreal,' New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, *Paul Thek, Diver: A Retrospective*, 2010, 46-53, 47.

⁶⁸ Rothkopf in Whitney Museum of American Art, *Paul Thek*, 47-9 and 52-3 n. 15, 16, 17, 18, 19. Lippard felt compelled to make connections with Surrealism throughout her text on 'Eccentric Abstraction' because the work she showed by Alice Adams, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Gary Kuehn, Nauman, Don Potts, Keith Sonnier and Frank Lincoln Viner 'that unites image, shape, metaphor, and association' seemed so dissimilar to Minimalist art, however she denied the work any of the 'arbitrariness' of Surrealism and said it resisted through formal understatement '[t]oo much free association on the viewer's part,' and within five years she regretted foregrounding Surrealism at all as the discussion of theory and of the uses of materials (especially those of Morris) had developed: Lucy Lippard, 'Eccentric

Informed of the crowds flocking to *Salvador Dalí: His Art, 1910-1965* of 18 December 1965 to 28 February 1966 at the Gallery of Modern Art in New York and perusing the glowing reviews of the retrospective *René Magritte*, also in New York at The Museum of Modern Art across the same dates, Breton's friend and translator during his time in America during the Second World War, Édouard Roditi, marvelled in *Apollo* in 1966 at 'this miracle of raising Surrealism from the dead to triumph like an avenging archangel over the routed hordes of the abstract movement.'⁶⁹ A similar situation transpired in the French capital, he reported, where 'in half a dozen Paris galleries, Surrealists, former Surrealists, or new Post-surrealists were meanwhile selling briskly,' while abstraction had gone out fashion.⁷⁰ The reason was the 'big show, around which these and other such exhibitions clustered like bunches of parsley round a monumentally ornamental roast peacock,' namely the Surrealists' own *L'Écart absolu* held at the Galerie de l'Oeil from 7 December 1965 and through that month, which was itself a critical response to Patrick Waldberg's historical exhibition *Le Surrealisme: sources-histoire-affinités* at the Galerie Charpentier in 1964.⁷¹

In fact, contemporary Surrealism in France had been undergoing a resurgence since the beginning of the decade. One factor in this was the reception it had given the themes and styles of US Pop, which was far more complex and selectively favourable than is currently understood.⁷² Beyond that, there were the three main exhibitions in Paris and New York – the *Exposition InteRnatiOnale du Surréalisme* or *EROS* (1959-60), *Surrealist Intrusion* and *L'Écart absolu* – that heralded, punctuated and publicised the continuing relevance of Surrealist ideas to the 1960s. Perhaps most important was the enhanced purpose and solidarity of the group in Paris gained from its unwavering opposition to colonialism in the period of the Cold War, notably its support for insurgent Algerians since the beginning of the Algerian War of Independence in 1954 and role in the drafting and publication of the widely distributed *Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War* or *Declaration of the 121* (1960), condemning military fascism and asserting the legitimacy of resistance to colonialism in Algeria and aid given to Algerians from France while defending conscientious objectors and desertion from the French army.⁷³ The period up to May '68 was one of intense activity and high visibility for Surrealism in France, which was echoed in the US where a new group underwent

Abstraction' [1966], *Changing: Essays in Art and Criticism*, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1971, 98-111, 110-11. Surrealism also offered the main point of comparison in her unconvinced appraisal of the fashion for erotic art in New York galleries in the following year: Lucy Lippard, 'Eros Presumptive,' *The Hudson Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, spring 1967, 91-9.

⁶⁹ Édouard Roditi, 'Letter from Paris: Surrealism Resurrected,' *Apollo*, vol. 83, no. 51, May 1966, 380-82, 380. See Sandra Zalman, *Consuming Surrealism in American Culture: Dissident Modernism*, Farnham and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2015, 82-4.

⁷⁰ Roditi, 'Letter from Paris,' 380.

⁷¹ Roditi, 'Letter from Paris,' 381.

⁷² For an introduction to the subject, see Jérôme Duwa, 'Le pop art dans le miroir du surréalisme (1959-1965),' *Pleine marge*, no. 38, December 2003, 57-70.

⁷³ Various, 'Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War' [1960], Richardson and Fijalkowski (eds. and trans.), *Surrealism Against the Current*, 194-7.

formation in Chicago in the middle part of the decade. It all raised the question of whether Surrealism was a sensibility, a historical entity or a contemporary movement.

Sensibility, historical entity or movement?

Critics and curators in New York were in no doubt about this. Surrealism had been 'tremendously buried,' recalled the art critic Robert Pincus-Witten who felt that as an 'alternative tradition' and a wellspring for some post-Minimalist theory it had deserved recognition in the sixties as a sensibility and a moment in art history between the two world wars.⁷⁴ However, Surrealism simply could not be a living movement because the sequentialising, progressivist, self-critical logic of modernist art history insisted on its expiry to make way for the advent of abstract expressionism. Its death was confirmed at two removes by recognition of the quite different, non-metaphorical, 'literalist' sensibility of Minimalist art and Pop, which was well on the way to hardening into a dogma by the end of the decade. The inconvenient presence of contemporary Surrealism, then, in exhibitions, protests and political statements in Europe and the US had to be sublimated through discussion of a sensibility in contemporary art and insistence on a glorious, distant past for Surrealism as an 'art movement.'

This acknowledgement of its (artistic) past and disavowal of its (metaphorical) function and (political) contemporaneity are played out in the special issue of *Artforum* devoted to Surrealism, proposed by editor Philip Leider and published in September 1966, complete with cover by Ed Ruscha. Unfortunately, the increasing enthusiasm about historic Surrealist themes, styles and artists culminated in a truly dire publication, which remains, nevertheless, an art historical curiosity, at once canonical and disposable. The magazine was still a formalist stronghold, entirely concerned with art in the US and mainly New York, furthering the cause of abstract art and sculpture, notably Minimalist art, which was debated to a position of major consequence by critics and artists alike. Contributing editor Michael Fried took Clement Greenberg at his word and disdained Surrealism, mocking the special issue of *Artforum* devoted to it; Krauss, who would play a key role in the modification of its history two decades later, did not contribute either.⁷⁵ The assessments by those who actually did write for it are almost uniformly condescending. In a platitude originally invented to serve abstract expressionism, Kozloff had Surrealism being taken forward by Rauschenberg, Johns and Pop; in Lippard's otherwise insightful and accurate article on Ernst, it was 'housebroken Dada'; for Robert Rosenblum, its aims were best represented in Pablo Picasso's

⁷⁴ Quoted in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*, New York: Soho Press, Inc., 2000, 192.

⁷⁵ See Phillip Leider's reminiscence quoted in Newman, *Challenging Art*, 191. The famous admonition is Clement Greenberg, 'Surrealist Painting' [1944], *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgements, 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, 225-31.

work of the early 1930s (another familiar formulation).⁷⁶ In the first of the two least-conversant articles, Sidney Tillim got snagged even more than Kozloff on the favourite word of New York art critics, 'sensibility' (Surrealism's was 'distorted'), in a wholly uninformative, off-the-top-of-the-head piece of prose that viewed Surrealists as 'provincial' who 'couldn't paint too well,' unlike the US artists who followed them and were more indebted to Cubism than Surrealism anyway, as Greenberg had earlier contended.⁷⁷ Jerrold Lanes further paraded the nationalism that burdened *Artforum* while toeing the Greenberg line, concluding with the unique charge that 'the movement's contribution to the pictorial realm is, at bottom, nil.'⁷⁸

Annette Michelson's first long article for *Artforum* promised the most, going straight to the heart of the matter by asking the key question of the day: '[w]hat ... is the place of Surrealism as Metaphor – and of its metaphors – in a time when Metaphor is stripped of cognitive value and exiled to the expressive peripheries of language?'⁷⁹ But Michelson never got around to answering her own question. Instead, her unusually wide knowledge of the movement gained from about fifteen years spent in Paris got buried in a disastrous set of erudite, overconfident digressions, opaque yet superficial, straight out of the *Artforum* school of 'patrician obfuscation' in the phrase of Pincus-Witten, her fellow writer for the magazine.⁸⁰ Michelson was aware of the dearth of astute English-language scholarship on the movement, but the dog's dinner of an article she cooked up under the limitations of a still-fashionable formalism did nothing to remedy the situation, and years later she conceded the weakness of her contribution while trying to explain it by comparing it to a 'Freudian "working through,"' as though top heavy theory can always be excused by further theory.⁸¹ Within the cultural multitude with which she shrouded Surrealism, mainly without justification, was the Nouveau Roman, 'renewing, as Johns does for metaphor and Cage for automatism, the possibilities of the erotic vision.'⁸² It is baffling in its unfoundedness, as is the claim in the minor essay by Nicolas Slonimsky on music and Surrealism, which barely grazed actual Surrealism, that Cage (who had no interest whatsoever in Surrealism) 'adopts procedures that are definitely surrealist.'⁸³

⁷⁶ Max Kozloff, 'Surrealist Painting Re-examined,' Lucy Lippard, 'Dada into Surrealism: Notes on Max Ernst as Proto-Surrealist' and Robert Rosenblum, 'Picasso as Surrealist,' *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 1, September 1966, 5-9, 10-15, 10 and 21-4, 23.

⁷⁷ Sidney Tillim, 'Surrealism as Art,' *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 1, September 1966, 66-71, 67, 69.

⁷⁸ Jerrold Lanes, 'Surrealism in Theory and Practice in France and America,' *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 1, September 1966, 86-7, 87.

⁷⁹ Annette Michelson, 'Breton's Surrealism: The Peripeties of a Metaphor, or A Journey Through Impossibility,' *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 1, September 1966, 72-7, 73.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Newman, *Challenging Art*, 335, 492.

⁸¹ Quoted in Newman, *Challenging Art*, 154.

⁸² Michelson, 'Breton's Surrealism,' 77.

⁸³ Nicolas Slonimsky, 'Surrealism and Music,' *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 1, September 1966, 78-83, 81.

In a superior though typically serpentine article, Calas developed the relevance of the Nouveau Roman to Surrealism.⁸⁴ It is brief and lacks coherence but at least it is informed, as is Roger Shattuck's eloquent and suggestive text on Magritte, which in this company comes across as exemplarily focused.⁸⁵ William Rubin's three essays under a single title are the spine of the volume and demonstrate some research and reflection on actual Surrealist art, even though his correct insistence that Surrealist paintings are 'always metaphoric' soon gives way to the kind of standard formalist analysis that had only deepened in his writings through the 1960s, about their 'plastic structure' and primacy of materials.⁸⁶

Although he was hardly an objective voice, Rubin's declaration to Leider soon after publication that the special issue of *Artforum* on Surrealism was 'the richest in the history of modern art journalism' sounds incredible today.⁸⁷ Leider's own feeling at the time was of 'high hopes ... dashed by mediocre quality,' then in retrospect, more accurately, as 'terrible ... I didn't see anything new in it. I still don't,' and, even more to the point, as 'really shit.'⁸⁸ It has a peculiar status, then, given by the combination of the undeniable disposability of its contents in what was, nevertheless, unquestionably the most influential magazine of art criticism for ten years from the mid-1960s.

At first glance, it looks like Rubin's massive and controversial exhibition *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* held at The Museum of Modern Art from 27 March till 9 June 1968 (before moving on to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art then the Art Institute of Chicago) and his book *Dada and Surrealist Art* (1969) must have been sparked by his writings in the special issue of *Artforum*. However, Rubin had been building towards these projects for many years, studying Surrealism seriously and publishing on it since the late 1950s, watching as its reputation improved in the US. His writings from the special issue did indeed reappear in the book of the show and, as might have been expected, both consigned Surrealism well and truly in the past. The catalogue of the exhibition furthered the case for Surrealism's obsolescence and therefore the validity of his historicising exhibition. There, Rubin asserted that at *EROS*, the exhibition held at the galerie Daniel Cordier in Paris from 15 December 1959 to 29 February 1960 that had started the comeback, Breton had been 'reduced to including Johns's *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955), an excellent but not particularly Surrealist work, in order to create a sense of up-to-dateness.'⁸⁹ Rubin thereby disregarded the value of the twenty-five or so

⁸⁴ Nicolas Calas, 'A Perspective,' *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 1, September 1966, 84-5, 85.

⁸⁵ Roger Shattuck, 'This is Not René Magritte,' *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 1, September 1966, 32-5.

⁸⁶ William Rubin, 'Toward a Critical Framework,' *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 1, September 1966, 36-55, 37, 40. Rubin had posited a purely formalist 'poetry' in Dada and Surrealism when writing on Ellsworth Kelly in 1963, stating: 'the demand for novelty led many lesser painters into "literature," that is, beyond the legitimate poetry of imagery organically tied to plastic structures, and into an essentially extra-esthetic iconographic activity,' William Rubin, 'Ellsworth Kelly: The Big Form,' *Artnews*, vol. 62, no. 7, November 1963, 32-5 and 64-5, 33.

⁸⁷ Quoted by Leider in Newman, *Challenging Art*, 493-4 n. 31.

⁸⁸ Leider quoted in Newman, *Challenging Art*, 158, 191, 493-4 n. 31.

⁸⁹ William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968, 177.

contemporary Surrealist works from young artists across the world that had been on display at *EROS* on the basis of a paradox: that is to say that if they had all been up-to-date in the sense of the sequentialising tendency of art history, as Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955) (also shown at *EROS*) and *Target with Plaster Casts* were deemed to be by being perceived as Neo-Dada, they would, of course, not have been Surrealist, since Surrealism was reckoned by historians such as Rubin to have perished well before that event. As James Boaden has testified about some of the later interpretations of the work of Johns: '[t]oday it would be difficult to see *Target with Plaster Casts* as "not particularly Surrealist."' ⁹⁰ The decline of the formalist paradigm, in other words, has enabled art historians access to a new, renewed or belated vision of that object, once glimpsed by the Surrealists.

At first, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* did not have a smooth ride. It attracted a boisterous crowd of protesting critics, hippies, Surrealists and Surrealist sympathisers (including Calas) on its preview night of 25 March, angrily demonstrating against what they viewed as the depoliticisation, commercialisation, institutionalisation and premature historicisation of Dada and Surrealism. The review submitted by Leider to the still politics-free *Artforum* showed these objections to be entirely justified. Leider did not conceal his surprise at the quality of the paintings at *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage* – survivors of what he termed 'the claptrap about the Unconscious' – a revelation long determined by the low opinion of Surrealism held by artists and critics close to *Artforum*.⁹¹ In conveying it, Leider laid emphasis on the word of the hour:

the extent to which a painting is contaminated by the Surrealist *sensibility* is the extent of its failure ... the Surrealist *sensibility* is beyond rehabilitation, as silly, quaint and as hapless before the actual facts of the times as, say, a pre-Raphaelite sensibility. To rehabilitate Surrealism today means to make a case for it as art, and this Mr. Rubin has proven himself superbly equipped to attempt.⁹²

Kozloff begged to differ with his editor in his report on the rumpus at the opening, published in *The Nation*, identifying positively 'the untidy pervasiveness of Surrealism as a sensibility' in much art that was left out of an already massive show, demonstrating it with a motley selection that included Öyvind Fahlström and Pierre Alechinsky (seemingly unaware that their work had indeed accompanied the

⁹⁰ James Boaden, 'Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage? The North American Reception of Dada and Surrealism,' David Hopkins (ed.), *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, Malden MA, Oxford, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016, 400-415, 404.

⁹¹ Philip Leider, 'Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage: 1. A Beautiful Exhibition,' *Artforum*, vol. 6, no. 9, May 1968, 22-25, 22.

⁹² Leider, 'Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage,' 22. For the denunciation of the exhibition as a 'reprehensible fraud,' see The Chicago Surrealist Group, 'The Heritage We Reject' [1968], Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont and Paul Garon (eds.), *The Forecast is Hot! Tracts & Other Collective Declarations of the Surrealist Movement in the United States, 1966-1976*, Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1997, 44-5; reprinted in the Paris Surrealists' review *L'archibras*, no. 6, December 1968, 47.

Surrealists' at *Surrealist Intrusion* and *L'Écart absolu* respectively) and adding to these 'the later work of the abstract expressionists' (did he mean the early work?) and, even further off the mark, that of Morris, most critics' idea of the prototype of the 'literalist' sensibility of the sixties and an artist as anti-Surrealist in his outlook as they came.⁹³

Italicised in Leider's usage, the word and the judgement that accompanied it were inspired by Fried's recent censure of 'literalist' or Minimalist art in 'Art and Objecthood' (1967), where Surrealism was equally implicated, as were Rauschenberg and Cage, in 'the sensibility or mode of being that I have characterised as corrupted or perverted by theatre,' while Sontag was identified as the ringleader in the crime against modernism that is the confusion of the arts, and the word 'sensibility' is used endlessly and unreflexively by Fried to the point of numbness, whether 'literalist sensibility,' 'antiliteralist and antitheatrical sensibility,' 'modernist sensibility' or 'Surrealist sensibility.'⁹⁴ Meanwhile, Rubin and his supporters at *Artforum* and MoMA seemed to think that they were doing Surrealism a favour by demonstrating the extent to which it 'participated in the crucial inventions in modern form,' and although 'the important role that associational elements play in Surrealist art' was understood, any expression they achieved was due to 'an equivalent in the realm of form,' while the 'forms reflected [the Surrealists'] sensibility' and automatism 'was not merely a technical device, but a formal equivalent for a poetic sensibility.'⁹⁵

As silent on contemporary Surrealism as Sontag and Michelson, and concerned only with Surrealism as a historic 'art movement,' Leider and the other contributors to *Artforum* were presumably ignorant of or uninterested in the sacrifices made by Surrealists since the 1940s through their opposition to the colonial wars in Vietnam and Algeria; or, more likely, they were unaware of postwar Surrealist groups at all, never mind contemporary ones currently taking to the streets of Paris and Chicago in the very month of Leider's review of *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage*.⁹⁶ So it was that a still-living movement that had long been concerned with politics and a poetics of art that had its source in the unconscious was either rejected or fêted, but in either case turned into a historically

⁹³ Max Kozloff, 'The Sixties Look at Dada and Surrealism' [1968], *Cultivated Impasses: Essays on the Waning of the Avant-Garde 1964-1975*, Venice: Marsilio Publishers, 1999, 341-6, 341.

⁹⁴ See Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' [1967], Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art*, 116-47, 117, 125, 130 n. 8, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 141 n. 17, 142, 145 n. 19, 147.

⁹⁵ Ellen Mandelbaum, 'Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage: 3. Surrealist Composition: Surprise Syntax,' *Artforum*, vol. 6, no. 9, May 1968, 32-5, 33.

⁹⁶ See the broadside by The Surrealist Group, 'Freedom is a Vietnamese Word' [1947], Richardson and Fijalkowski (eds. and trans.), *Surrealism Against the Current*, 193-4, 193. The Surrealists' reward for their role alongside Blanchot in drafting then signing the later *Declaration of the 121* had included punishment by the state, persecution by the police and death threats from the fascist, paramilitary Organisation de l'Armée Secrète or OAS: Robert Benayoun, 'Letter to Chicago' [1963], Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley (eds.), *Black, Brown & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009, 169-71, 170.

distant aesthetic by formalism through the magical, loosely understood properties of the term 'sensibility.'

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