Pop in the Age of Boom: Richard Hamilton’s ‘Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?’

by JOHN-PAUL STONARD

MEASURING BARELY ONE FOOT square, Richard Hamilton’s Masses is one of the most celebrated images in twentieth-century British art (Figs.14 and 15). It was created for the catalogue and used for one of the posters for the exhibition This is Tomorrow held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, during August and September 1956. Collaged with images drawn chiefly from American illustrated magazines, it has become an emblem of the Age of Boom, the post-War consumer culture of the late 1950s.1 It has also become a manifesto for a movement. In one of the first accounts of British Pop art, published in 1961, it was presented as a catalytic work, and the next year was decreed ‘the first genuine work of Pop’.2 More recently it has been compared with the Décollage d’Arpigeon, has been hailed as ‘the starting point of planetary Pop Art’ and as the ‘perfect Pop work’.3 John Russell’s description over thirty years ago of the endless ‘pockets of meaning’ that can be found in ‘this little picture’ remains true today.4 Above all, it was a startling prognosis of the use of comic books, tinned food and burlesque nudes that formed the iconography of Pop art, and of the widespread use by artists of the semiotic language of advertising. Such a mythic status is all the more remarkable for an object not originally intended for display but as a design for lithographic reproduction.5 Despite this

fame, however, the immediate origins of Hamilton’s collage have remained obscure. The new archival and source material presented in this article sheds light on these origins, addressing problems surrounding the authorship of the work. Newly identified sources for various parts of the collage allow for a revised interpretation of its contents.

The background of and preparations for the historic exhibition This is Tomorrow are well known. In a context of enthusiasm for cross-disciplinary exhibitions of Constructivist-inspired art and architecture,6 a group of young artists, architects and critics met during early 1955 in the studio of the painter Adrian Heath and decided, after heated debate, on the basic format of their as yet untitled exhibition.7 Theo Crosby, who was at that moment the editor of Architectural Design, headed the organisation committee. Eleven teams of three or four individuals were formed, each with the task of constructing a display for the exhibition, which was to open on 9th August the following year. Crosby approached Bryan Robertson, the director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, who agreed to host the exhibition. The budget was minimal and, as preparations got underway, it was decided that each team would design and print a poster and contribute six pages to the catalogue (Fig.16). Each was also required to subsidise the materials for its display. From the outset the intentions were

For their help in the preparation of this article, I would like to thank Jo Baer, Mary Badham, Stuart Blacklock (EME Archive), Robert Cooper, Magda Cordwell, Michael Halsey, Rita Donagh, Colin Engelhardt (Kunsthalle Tübingen), Elisabeth Fairman (Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven), Tom Fegarty (Musée Maillol), Mark Franckowiak, Adrian Grew (Tate Archive), Graphic Imaging Technology, Brooklyn, New York, Richard Hamilton, Red Hamilton, Dan Hazen, Martin Harrison, Richard Holley, Randolphe Hoppe (Jack Roth Gallery), Harry Mundyik, John McHale Jr., Richard Morphet, Petra Come Oyen (University of Reading Department of Typographic), Randall Scott (Michigan State University Libraries), Pussy Simmonds, Cathy Stonard (Whitechapel Art Gallery), Ausilia Verde and Anna Vandenbroucke. Particular thanks go to Richard Hamilton for permission to cite from letters he used in lectures in the late 1950s, and it was through his agency that the work was acquired for the collection of the Hanover Gallery, London, in 1964, for £320; London, Tate Gallery Archive (hereafter cited as TGA) 1964. The collage was sold on 20th August 1974 to the American collector Ed Janss, recently it has been compared with the Demoiselles d’Avignon, which was a startling prognosis of the use of comic books, tinned food and burlesque nudes that formed the iconography of Pop art, and of the widespread use by artists of the semiotic language of advertising. Such a mythic status is all the more remarkable for an object not originally intended for display but as a design for lithographic reproduction. Despite this...
Just what is it that makes...


Richard Hamilton has described the enthusiasm with which Group Two began preparations for the exhibition and the importance of the interest he and McHale shared in ‘Pop Art, popular music, cinema and all the other things you see in a list when Pop Art is mentioned’. Group Two was unique in conceiving its contribution as a distillation of the ideas involved in Spring 1955. As it turned out, their show-stopping contribution dealt with American domestic appliances: ‘I was fascinated by “white goods” as they were called, washing machines and dishwashers and refrigerators – not simply as objects in themselves as designed objects, but also in the ways in which they were presented to the audience’.

Eduardo Paolozzi’s use of advertising images from American magazines was formative and fed into a general and collaborative interest in such material. ‘Tear sheets’ of advertising images were passed around, and ‘tackboards’ of assorted advertising imagery were common in artists’ studios and homes.

Hamilton has described the enthusiasm with which Group Two engaged directly with the contemporary world. Although this impetus arose in part from the dynamic think-tank atmosphere of the Independent Group at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, the exhibition was for the most part defined by contemporary British attitudes to Constructivism. Both constituents were founded on ideas that enabled cross-disciplinary discussion between architects, artists and philosophers.

Among the eleven teams, Group Two comprised the architect John Voelcker and the Independent Group members John McHale and Richard Hamilton. Also important for Group Two’s contribution were Terry Hamilton (Hamilton’s wife), the Hungarian painter Magda Cordell and her husband, Frank Cordell, a musical director at EMI. Anne Massey has recounted how the Cordells, McHale and Lawrence Alloway formed a caucus within the Independent Group. Although Voelcker played an important role, the combined interests of McHale and Hamilton largely determined Group Two’s contribution. McHale and Alloway had taken over convenorship of the Independent Group towards the end of 1954 and reoriented its discussions towards American popular culture, advertising, Hollywood cinema and science fiction.

13. Catalogue for the exhibition, This is Tomorrow, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956, showing two-page spread designed by Richard Hamilton, including the collage.

14. See also C. C. Rose, ‘Just what is it that makes today’s house so different, so appealing?,’ in Richard Hamilton, 1966. Collage of printed materials and prepared surfaces, 24.7 by 24.5 cm. (Kunsthalle, Tübingen, Städtische Kunsthalle).

15. Ibid.


12. Posters for This is Tomorrow, reproduced in Architectural Design (September 1956), p.39. Included are the posters designed by John McHale (top row, second from left and Richard Hamilton (top row, third from left) for Group Two.

magazines can be seen from his collection of ‘tear sheets’ from magazines reaching back as far as 1931. It is clear that he was a pivotal figure for that small number of British intellectuals who took American popular culture seriously, but his later emigration to the United States has meant that his contribution has been somewhat overlooked. Hamilton himself later recorded that ‘John McHale’s catholic intellect applied itself with presidential vigour to everything and generally disseminated the fruits of his enquiry to the book. When his bumper bundle from a first visit to the United States was ceremonially presented at the ICA, the first Elvas Presley records to land on those shores were protectively interwoven with copies of MAD magazine so that no one knew what was ballast and what cargo’.

The German art historian Jürgen Jacobs has suggested that McHale’s Independent Group lecture ‘Technology at Home’ influenced Hamilton’s decision to include an image of a woman vacuuming. In his famous letter to Peter and Alison Smithson, in which he provided one of the first definitions of Pop culture, Hamilton enumerates those events of the ‘post war years’ which he felt were important, listing McHale’s ‘Ad image research’ alongside the work of Paolozzi and the Smithsons.

Furthermore, McHale was one of the leading exponents of collage within the ICA milieu. His works were included in the exhibitions ‘Collage and Object’, organised by Alloway and designed by McHale himself, held at the ICA during November and November 1954. This important exhibition showed works by Lucio Fontana, Braque, Schwitters and others alongside collages by members of the Independent Group, principally Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson. Significantly, Hamilton was not involved. The press release for the exhibition describes it as part of the ‘coulage revival’ in post-War Britain. A further exhibition of eleven collages by McHale was held in the library of the ICA shortly after this. The exhibition catalogues the events of the ‘post war years’ which he felt were important, listing McHale’s ‘Ad image research’ alongside the work of Paolozzi and the Smithsons.

The types of collage McHale was making at this moment show nevertheless the influence of abstraction rather than of the naturalistic space used in fact it is. As Baulham pointed out, McHale’s clear interest on his return from America was to ‘produce a mechanistic figure’, in particular of a robot. His Machine made America II (Fig.17) designed for the front cover of Architectural Review (12th May 1957), was typical of this kind of work, showing the influence of Art Brut mixed with an interest in robotics, science fiction and food advertisements. The collages he exhibited in the ICA library in 1955 depended, Alloway wrote, on “a capacious Dubuffetesque human contour”, and appeared ‘democratically Archimboldesque’. Alongside this abstract manner, other works are based on typographic monotonous collage. His most innovative works in the medium are his collage books, for instance Shoe-Life Stories, made after April 1955, which use varying page sizes and other devices to create constantly changing juxtapositions of images drawn from magazines and newspapers, in particular headlines and other cut-out text (Fig.18). Together with two other books made around the same time, Shoe-Life Stories has yet to receive the critical attention it deserves. Bannam’s and Alloway’s comments are borne out by the content of letters from McHale to Richard and Terry Hamilton sent from America during late 1955 and early 1956. These further illuminate the intellectual background to McHale’s work and his own wide interests. Writing at the beginning of November 1955, McHale describes the excitement of studying in the Yale School of Fine Art with such luminaries as Norman Ives, Herbert Matter and, above all, Josef Albers as faculty members. The interests he expresses in this and subsequent letters are largely concerned with perception, visual illusions and science fiction. ‘Main kick now is perception via [Adelbert] Ames et al, colour vision’. McHale’s distance from the ‘post war world’. He asks Richard and Terry Hamilton if the space allocated to the newly formed Group Twelve of Alloway, Toni del Renzio and Geoffrey Holroyd would reduce the space allocated to Group Two. He also refers to the ‘New Haven version of the I.G., which ‘flourishes or rather did flourish last term. ’

In London pressure was beginning to mount for Hamilton and Voelcker to finalise details for Group Two’s contribution, in particular for the poster and the catalogue which were due on 1st May. Voelcker sent details of requirements for the catalogue and poster to both Hamilton and McHale in mid-February, following a meeting of the organising committee that he had attended two days earlier. At this meeting the designer Edward Wright had presented a mock-up of the catalogue, and the amount of pages allocated to each group was decided. Wright was also to design the posters, and the requirements for each group were similarly confirmed. The deadline was emphasised by Hamilton in a letter to McHale towards the end of March, indicating that McHale had been out of touch: ‘Had hoped to hear from you now by now re clump’ (‘clump’ was the term used by Group Two to refer to the individual teams). The content of Group Two’s contribution had yet to be finalised, Hamilton requesting suggestions and material from McHale, and adding: ‘You can see that it is imperative that one or the other of us starts on this very soon so do let me know your views immediately’. Hamilton signed off: ‘I shall be seeing Magda next week I presume and she, no doubt, will have information as to the date of your return’. Magda Cordell, who was having an affair with McHale (for whom she eventually left Frank Cordell), visited him in New Haven from the beginning of February to around mid- to late March. On 16th March Voelcker had informed the Hamiltons by letter that McHale was to send material for the catalogue ‘with Magda when she returns’. At around the same time, McHale wrote to Hamilton agreeing to design the poster, but requesting that Hamilton execute his design in England. He also confirmed that his materials and commentary would reach Hamilton via Magda who was returning from her visit to New Haven. In the next two days following this you will have my notes on structure of John V. the central display of the Group Two space, catalogue, comments, suggestions for images etc. etc. These materials were accompanied by a letter and a mock-up for the catalogue, sent to the Cordells’ flat in Cleveland Square, Paddington, where McHale also kept a studio. Notes and a mock-up of the layout for the catalogue by McHale (Fig.19) accompanying this letter made clear his attitude towards the catalogue as largely visual–scientific, suggesting pictorial use of the equation P=MC, and also the standard diagram of ‘sense extension’, derived from a book by E.W. Meyers, a
for this exhibition I am off the direct photo-image, he writes in the same letter.

Although this letter arrived around the same time as Magda Cordell’s return from New Haven, it is unclear whether it had been posted or was brought back by her. What is certain is that she conveyed the trunk containing McHale’s collection of American ephemera, Elvis Presley records and copies of MAD magazine.19 This is an important point – as the deadline for the catalogue, including just what it is, was 1st May, it would have been impossible for Hamilton to have used material from the trunk if McHale had brought it back later. The collage was therefore made between Magda Cordell’s return at the end of March and 1st May. Aware of this impending deadline, Hamilton wrote to McHale on 28 April with the news that a photo-collage was to be included in the catalogue. This letter is unaddressed but can be inferred from McHale’s response. In an undated letter sent towards the end of April, shortly before the end of the spring term for the Yale School of Fine Arts, he comments that the Hamiltons had ‘held their noses at the thought of collage’ during the preparations, wanting to retain an aura of seriousness for the catalogue. Now when I fall over backward trying to be serious you tell me ‘crazy housed’ my suggestions, and are working a la Mad [that is, in the style of MAD magazine]. Big Deal. Put me down for some lessons when I get back. I’d like to be a crazy collageist too . . .’20 McHale’s exasperated response reflects Hamilton’s lack of interest in collage before this date, but also shows that the idea to include such a collage ‘a la Mad’ came from Hamilton himself, after seeing copies of the magazine that had arrived at Yale in mid-March.21 McHale, in a letter of 19 April 1955 addressed to McHale’s, Mr and Mrs Hamilton at 52 Cleveland Square, where Hamilton lived at the end of March. Unlike more popular titles, MAD was not then available in England.22

Hamilton’s interest in MAD is of some significance for the origins of Just what it is . . . Although it was a leading title in the late 1950s, on a par with household names such as Life and Playboy, MAD was unique in offering a critical position on the mass media message with reference to Marshal McLuhan. Pre-

19 Suggested design for the Group Two contribution to the catalogue of This is Tomorrow, by John McHale. (Richard Hamilton archives.)

20 Money, op. cit. (note 5), p.57. “In conversation with Michael Craig-Martin, Hamilton suggests that McHale ‘returned with a box of exotic things he had acquired there’. Evidently this could not have been the case if the materials used were for the production of the collage, see Steele, op. cit., pp.97-98, 99-100. This letter is preserved in many accounts of preparations for the exhibition, see, for example, C. Stephens and K. Storr ‘This War: Tomorrow’, edit. cdt. Art et la Vie: The War Tomorrow, London (Tate Gallery) 2004, p.11.

21 Terry McHale to John McHale, 1st May 1956, RHA, and used pages from the magazine in a design for an unrealised collage book made at about the same time.23 He describes it as ‘dadaist satirical’, and as ‘a kind of feedback control mechanism’ to the mass media message with reference to Marshall McLuhan. This is Tomorrow was defined by, London 1982, p.57. (note 7), p.57. This is Tomorrow was defined by, London 1982, p.57. This is Tomorrow was defined by, London 1982, p.57.

22 Although no material from the magazine was used in Just what it is . . ., the indirect influence of MAD suggests a more ironic take on advertising culture than has previously been described as such. McHale’s grudging acceptance of the ‘crazy collageist’ approach suggests that he too may have w affed for a more maternal approach both to the catalogue and the exhibition. According to Hamilton, the collage was produced in a single morning, after Hamilton had provided Terry and Magda Cordell at 52 Cleveland Square, where Hamilton lived at the end of March. Unlike more popular titles, MAD was not then available in England.22

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Hamilton has been served by detailed expositions, chiefly by the artist himself, the collaborative circumstances in which *Just what is it . . .?* was made have meant that its origins have remained vague and often erroneously explained. 4 This point is substantiated by Hamilton’s often-cited observation that the poster looks as if you had a hand in it, and the catalogue myself, is excellent and completely in the tradition of our section! 44 As it transpired, Group Two was to contribute two posters to the exhibition: Hamilton realised the potential of the ‘Mad collage’ he had produced, and used it to produce a second poster to use alongside McHale’s (Fig. 21).

Hamilton had in fact made two other collages relating to the exhibition. A perspective visualisation of the Group Two installation was made to illustrate a feature on the exhibition in the issue of Architectural Design for September 1956 (Fig. 21). This collage clearly shows the optical illusion on one wall, facing the popular culture mural, a Kix-Ora bottle (reproduced in the final display with an inflatable Guinness bottle) and a jukebox, while the ‘fun-house’ structure shows an enlarged photographic of spaghetti and meatballs, indicating a space Hamilton had reserved for McHale, and the large labelled head—here Pierre Mendès-France, replaced in the final installation with a photographically enlarged image of a similar labelled head—collage, this time in the style of ‘Space’ on Hamilton’s second collage. See, hear, smell, touch (Fig. 22), which was also used in the exhibition catalogue, relates to Just what it is . . . both in format and by the use of text labels. The three collages, all now in museum collections in Germany, form a coherent group that marks a pivotal moment in Hamilton’s career.

A clear statement of what is it . . . and its sources can be conducted. The perspectival and luminous coherence of the interior presented suggests that a single image underlies the scintillation. Armstrong used in the collage (Fig. 24). The image probably refers to ‘Space’ on Hamilton’s list of subjects, although it is not from a satellite, as the image might suggest, but from out of space, surviving the horrors and deprivations of a six-year war. For us, the fruits of peace had to be tangible, preferably edible. 53 Among the first images that Hamilton attached to the Armstrong advertisement was the view of the Earth—not from a satellite, as the image might suggest, but from an aerial camera that exaggerated the Earth’s curvature: the picture comprises many photographs taken from a height of one hundred miles. This is one of the few images that can with some degree of certainty be traced to McHale’s archive, which contains two copies of the double-page advertisement (taken from *Life*, 9th September 1955), 56 one of which is missing its left page, the source of the section of the image that Hamilton used in the collage (Fig. 24). The image probably refers to ‘Space’ on Hamilton’s list of subjects, although knowledge of the image shows that it might more accurately represent ‘Humanity’. With the ceiling fixed, the rest of the stage machinery and dramatic personae could be installed. Fulfilling the criteria ‘Cinema’, the pastoral view through the window in the original was obliterated by a reproduction of a well-known photograph of the Warner Cinema, Broadway, on the opening night in 1927 of Alan Crosland’s The Jazz Singer, starring Al Jolson. 57 Hamilton very carefully recreated the effect of a window by the addition of a window bar down the centre and at the top, using an opaque pigment, probably gesso. The theme of entertainment was continued to the right of the advertisement. This was taken from an
advertisement for Stromberg-Carlson televisions reproduced in the issue of Life for 10th January 1955 (Fig.25).58 Curiously, the image shown on the screen of a woman telephoning has been cut out and then put back. The most likely explanation is that the excision was made by Terry Hamilton and Magda Cordell when the material was gathered, and later replaced by Hamilton. By affixing the television over part of the fireplace in the original image, and obliterating the rest of it, Hamilton evokes a change recurring in many households in the 1950s, with the simultaneous introduction of central heating and television, the fireplace was no longer the traditional centre of the home.

Covering the insipid painting in the Armstrong advertisement, a poster showing the comic book Young Romance answered the subject of ‘Comics (Picture Information)’ on Hamilton’s list. Although in the picture space it is further back than the television set, it in fact overtops it, and was thus stuck down afterwards. It is evidently too small to be the actual cover of Young Romance, no.26, 1950, but is rather a ‘house ad’ – an advertisement placed by the publisher, Crestwood Publications, in another of their titles – in this case another romance comic, following on from pulp-story publications such as Intimate Confessions, used by Paolozzi in his collage I was a rich man’s plaything (1947) which inspired numerous imitators. As has often been pointed out, Hamilton’s use of the comic cover, drawn by the leading comic book artist Jack Kirby, anticipates the use made of comic books by Roy Lichtenstein. In direct contrast, the framed formal portrait to the right of the Young Romance, as well as providing a moment of bathos, may be taken to represent ‘History’ on Hamilton’s list. The sitter is visibly not John Ruskin, as has been suggested,60 and the source is as yet unidentified. Hamilton repeated the irreverent gambit of including a token ‘old master’ in Group Two’s This is Tomorrow display, a framed reproduction of Van Gogh’s Sunflowers (Collection of Harry Mendryk; © Joe Simon and Jack Kirby).

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More up to date was the heraldic Ford logo, cut to create a lampshade slightly larger than the one it covers in the original. The crown was used as an insignia for the Ford Fairlane, a model released in early 1955, appearing on the Armstrong Royal Floors advertisement (Fig.28). On page 139 the Hoover Company advertised its new Constellation model, ‘with exclusive double-stretch hose’. The Space Age apparatus, the first vacuum cleaner to drift on an air bed, is juxtaposed with an ‘actual photo’ of the new model in use: ‘Look at the reach of the Constellation!’ Cut around the window, an anomaly given the nocturnal setting. Affixed over the lower left corner of the Al Jolson view, the image of the woman vacuuming the stairs, with the now legendary claim that ‘ordinary cleaners reach only this far’, was taken from the same issue of the Ladies’ Home Journal as the Armstrong Royal Floors advertisement (Fig.28). On page 139 the Hoover Company advertised its new Constellation model, ‘with exclusive double-stretch hose’. The Space Age apparatus, the first vacuum cleaner to drift on an air bed, is juxtaposed with an ‘actual photo’ of the new model in use: ‘Look at the reach of the Constellation!’ Cut around the image shown on the screen of a woman telephoning has been cut out and then put back. The most likely explanation is that the excision was made by Terry Hamilton and Magda Cordell when the material was gathered, and later replaced by Hamilton. By affixing the television over part of the fireplace in the original image, and obliterating the rest of it, Hamilton evokes a change recurring in many households in the 1950s, with the simultaneous introduction of central heating and television, the fireplace was no longer the traditional centre of the home.

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**POP IN THE AGE OF BOOM**

**NEW HOVER Constellation cleans twice the area of any other cleaner**


bottom stair, the slanting dado and the woman vacuuming at the top, the affixed cut-out transformed the top of the green cupboard at the far left of the Armstrong Floor advertisement into something more monumental in appearance.78 Intriguingly, as with the screen of the Strone-Carbon television mentioned above, the black arrow with the word ‘ordinary cleaners reach only this far’ has been cut out and then reinserted. It may be that the arrow was originally cut out for use elsewhere, then put back when it became clear how well it fitted the stairs. The arrow creates a link with the signs on the façade of the Warner Cinema, visible through the window, and adds to the verbal saturation of the room. Hamilton’s interest in the motif of the arrow had been made explicit in the Transitions series of four paintings made in 1954. As Anne Massy describes, he has taken the arrow motif directly from Paul Klee, whose Pedagogische Skizzenbuch (Pedagogical Sketchbook; 1925) had been the subject of Independent Group discussions in November and December 1953.79 Whereas in the Transitions paintings Hamilton uses the arrow to indicate the direction of movement across the flat surface of the canvas, in Just what is it . . . the arrow functions as it does in the original advertisement, to draw attention to a particular aspect of the image.

The bodybuilder at the centre of the composition, having entered from stage left, is not Charles Atlas, as has frequently been suggested, but the champion bodybuilder Irwin ‘Zabo’ Koszewski.80 He represents ‘Adani’, according to Hamilton, alongside the budgieque ‘Eve’ tittering on the sofa.81 The source of the photograph of Zabo is particularly fitting; the September 1954 issue of the pocket-sized magazine Tomorrow’s Man, published by the Irvin Johnson Health Studio in Chicago (Fig.30). This was one of a new genre of small-format magazines that appeared during the 1950s, including the Los Angeles-based publication Physique Pictorial (founded 1951) and the Chicago-based VIM (1954), as well as Male Clasix founded in 1956 in Greek Street, London, and the Hollywood-based Vixor (1959). These differed from existing ‘physical culture’ titles such as Muscle Power, Strength and Health and Iron Man in carrying little pretence at being aimed at a heterosexual bodybuilding readership. Koszewski was a well-known model who appeared in many of these titles. The photograph used in Just what is it . . . was taken after he had won third prize in the 1954 Mr America competition held in Los Angeles. The magazine, which was of the ‘posing strap’ genre, attributes the photograph to ‘Bruce of Los Angeles’,82 the well-known ‘photographic’ photographer Bruce Bellas (1909–74). As with many other male physique photographs of the time, a posing suit – a modern fig leaf, perhaps – has been added to the pouch in the original photograph. The ‘peertless’ Koszewski, who had also won the ‘best abdominals’ prize, suggestively holds a Tootsie Roll Pop in place of a dumbbell, inserted through a slit cut between his thumb and forefinger. This image is taken from an advertisement for Tootsie Roll Pops, a type of lollipop, which appeared in as of yet untraced advertisement in a comic book.

Although the published source for the photograph of ‘Eve’ has also yet to be traced, the sitter can be identified as the American painter Jo Baer, who posed for nude photographs while she was a struggling artist in New York in the early 1950s.83 Hamilton was not aware of the identity of the model when he affixed the image, taken most probably from a pin-up, or amateur photography, magazine. Complementing Zabo’s posing trunks, fig-leaf nipple tassels had been painted onto the original photograph by the publisher. Similarly, the ‘clocche’, or lamppshade, hat is a collaged addition to the original photograph, as the roughly cut-out left side of the sitter’s head shows. Close examination also shows that ‘Eve’ is collaged over the front edge of the sofa, perhaps to avoid her raised right arm obscuring the left eye of the telephoning woman on the television screen. The presence of ‘Eve’ looks forward to many such images in Hamilton’s œuvre. In 1956 he noted that ‘it is the Playboy Playmate of the month’ pull-out pin-up which provides us with the closest contemporary equivalent of the odalisque in painting. Playboy, launched by Hugh Hefner in December 1953, was the first magazine to combine high production values with risqué pin-up photography – a ‘quintessential emblem of the affluent society’, according to Dominic Sandbrook84 – and stands in contrast to other more saucy, under-the-counter American publications such as the Los Angeles-based publication Spice, published by Robert Harrison, in particular the November 1953 issue of the publication Beauty Parade which ran from 1952 to 1954. It is from these and other titles such as Carnavale di Bariarg and Shoungui, or perhaps Amateur Screen and Photography, that the photograph is most likely to have been taken.

Four elements of the collage remain to be addressed: the tin of ham, the newspaper, the tape recorder and the rug. The Armour Star tin of ham, placed incongruously on the coffee table, which may be considered as Hamilton’s abbreviated signature, to keeping with the quick-fire language of advertising, is taken from an advertisement that appeared in Tomorrow’s magazine for 20th April 1954 (Fig.20).85 The Journal of the Association of American Artists reports in the chair in the foreground was not part of the original Armstrong advertisement, and was thus included by Hamilton to represent the category...
the ceiling) and thematic (in the connection drawn with America). The reception of Dada and German modernism in general by members of the Independent Group is a rich subject for further research. Alloway’s observation, published just after This is Tomorrow closed, that Dada shows that a work of art ‘may be made of bus tickets or it may look like an advertisement’ points to the importance of this precedent in Hamilton’s and McHale’s work in the 1950s.

Just what is it . . . introduced the theme of the interior, often containing one or more figures, that has preoccupied Hamilton ever since.4 His own involvement with interior design, notably as a lecturer at the Hugh Casson’s School of Interior Design at the beginning of 1957, was first consolidated around the time of This is Tomorrow.5 But if the intention of Just what is it . . . was to create an image of the future, close analysis of the imagery reveals an equivocal result. None of the source material so far discovered dates from 1956, and elements go back to the beginning of the 1950s (the television design, the wind-up reel-to-reel tape recorded), to 1949 (the Young Romance cover) and to earlier dates (the Warner Cinema in 1927; the Victorian portrait).

Hamilton later confirmed this retrospective element, describing his conception of the interior in general as ‘a set of anachronisms, a museum, with the lingering residues of decorative styles that an inhabited space collects’.6 In contrast to the ‘House of the Future’, created by Peter and Alison Smithson for the 1956 Daily Mail Ideal Home exhibition – a space-age residence that ‘crystallized the domestic image of the brutalist sensibility’7 – Hamilton’s interior is more British than American, a ‘cozy little future-world’,8 heir to a genre of English interior scenes reaching back to the eighteenth-century conversation piece. An element not so far identified is the black-and-white speckled rug, whose appearance may have been inspired by the black-and-white rug in the original Armstrong advertisement. It is, however, an enlarged detail of a photographic postcard Hamilton founded of the ‘Sands and Promenade’ of Whitley Bay, on the Northumberland coast, probably taken around 1930.9 Falling in between ‘Adam’ and ‘Eve’, this is a very local, un-American view of ‘Humanity’.

George Orwell wrote that the best indication of the English character could be found on the magazine racks of small newsagent’s shops, where the extent of a nation’s hobbies and pastimes is documented.10 Just what is it . . . reveals how much these pastimes were influenced by American culture in the mid-1950s, but also that the setting for these new pursuits remained on a more modest and domesticated English scale. Whereas many accounts have described the collage as an up-to-date image of contemporary life, in fact a strong element of nostalgia is woven into the contemporary setting.

It may therefore be suggested that underlying the crowd-ed imagery of Just what is it . . . is an anxiety that this new cultural order could not, in fact, be sustained. When it first appeared, as a reproduction in an exhibition catalogue, Britain was in the midst of the Suez crisis, and the long tradition of British imperial dominion and supposed global supremacy appeared irrevocably broken. It could well have taken as a title Harold Macmillan’s famous appraisal that Britain had ‘never had it so good’, given in a speech in July 1957, particularly as Macmillan went on to describe the general anxiety that this ‘goodness’ was unsustainable; ‘is it too good to last?’11 Just what is it . . . is one harbinger not only of the iconography of much post-War art, but also reflects the disquiet of its time, marked by the end of Empire and the dawn of the Nuclear Age. True to their story, ‘Adam’ and ‘Eve’ must soon leave this consumer paradise. Viewed in such a context, Hamilton’s little picture seems to say that, in an Age of Boom, things sooner or later must go Pop.