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Liam Considine, *American Pop Art in France: Politics of the Transatlantic Image*. London: Routledge, 2019. 176 pp. 8 Color/ 45 Black and White Illustrations. \$160.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780367140137. \$44.05 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780367140168.

Review by Kevin Hatch, Binghamton University, State University of New York.

Liam Considine's book *American Pop Art in France: Politics of the Transatlantic Image* lies at the intersection of two important recent art-historical trends. The first is an ongoing and widespread enthusiasm for all things Pop, evident in both academic writing and the museum world. Books and journal articles have proliferated in recent years, while the fortuitously coincident blockbuster shows *The World Goes Pop* and *International Pop* (organized in 2015 by the Tate Modern and the Walker Art Center, respectively) together have served as a summation and also an origin point for further research.[1] The second is a deep rethinking of the broader postwar period in avowedly transnational terms. Here, too, a museum exhibition has been fundamental, with the dazzling *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965* appearing at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2016 (which now stands as a powerful epilogue to the brilliant career of its curator, Okwui Enwezor).[2] This latter development can be understood at least in part as a necessary if overdue response to the urgent pressures of the current political moment, a precipitate of the ongoing reckoning with race and identity, the legacies of colonialism, and the persistence of injustice currently taking place both within and far afield of academia and cultural institutions. To call this reckoning incomplete would be a gross understatement; the relatively tentative adoption of a transnational frame apparent in, for example, the Museum of Modern Art's reinstallation of its permanent collection in 2019 has been criticized for not going far enough.[3] The ongoing fascination with Pop, on the other hand, while related to the transnational turn, is itself both curious and complex, and deserves further examination. Considine's book—sharply written, well researched, and compellingly argued—is a welcome addition to both these discourses, though it also begs some of the thornier questions that their nexus has brought to bear.

Considine notes in his introduction that his commitment to a transatlantic perspective necessitates a break with the prevalent view that Pop art found little purchase in France, that it constitutes a “history of missed encounters,” in his words (p. 5). The notion that French artists and critics rejected Pop wholesale was common even at the moment of its emergence (such that in 1963 Gene Swenson could state flatly “there is no Pop Art in Paris”); it still informs present scholarship, where the idea that its French dismissal was an aspect of larger anti-Americanist sentiment is now something of a given.[4] In contrast, Considine argues that the reception of Pop in France was in fact subtle and ambivalent, one that allowed cultural producers to “reflect

and resist” postwar American hegemony (p. 3). Analyzing this reflection and resistance here means dispensing with the idea of influence in favor of tracing “cultural transfer,” a concept borrowed from historian Michel Espagne. This turn to cultural transfer is one of the most provocative and productive aspects of the book, although it also raises methodological questions. Espagne’s work has been highly influential in literary studies, particularly for scholarship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for which its emphasis on dynamic, multidirectional reinterpretation rather than mere exchange has been helpful in hastening the disruption of traditional center-periphery thinking.[5] To date, Espagne’s work has had less of an impact on Anglophone art history; here, one of its benefits is the allowance of a broadening of the field of art-historical inquiry to encompass cinema, commercial design, comics, poster production, and exhibition curation alongside painting (the latter being fundamental to Pop in virtually all its manifestations).[6] Thus, chapters are devoted to Andy Warhol’s *Death in America* series alongside a key Citroën advertising campaign; the impact of Robert Rauschenberg’s turn to silkscreen in 1963 on an exhibition of paintings held in Paris the same year that borrowed half its title, *Mythologies quotidiennes*, from Roland Barthes’s well-known book; Jean-Luc Godard’s Warhol-tinged films of the early 1960s; the conflicted attitudes about comics held by the members of the Situationist International; and the adoption of Pop techniques in the production of posters during the protests of May 1968.

The concept of cultural transfer provides Considine a helpful means of decentering canonical figures such as Warhol and Rauschenberg, placing them on the margins of the stories he tells (though they often still play the role of initiator). But the strategy also prompts the reader to consider what precisely reception might mean, which is to ask who is doing the receiving, and how. Certain characters recur in the book: the gallerist Ileanna Sonnabend, the impresario Pierre Restany, and the Paris-based art critics Gérald Gassiot-Talabot and Michel Ragon all turn up in different chapters, providing the sense of a shared intellectual ambient within which reputations were made and arguments took place. In Chapter 1, for example, we read that it was at Sonnabend’s small gallery on the south bank of the Seine where Warhol’s *Death in America* series—suicide victims, car accidents, racialized police violence, and electric chairs, all silkscreened in vivid monochrome—had its world premiere in January 1964. In a later chapter, we learn that Sonnabend gifted an opaque projector to the French painter Daniel Pommereulle around the same time, leading to the popularization of that quintessential Pop device among French figurative painters in the mid-1960s. The encounters Considine stages between American Pop art and its French interpretants are original and often fascinating. In the book’s aforementioned first chapter, an examination of Warhol’s car crash paintings on view at Galerie Sonnabend leads to a rich discussion of nascent car culture in France, which in turn prompts a detailed analysis of the Warholian ad campaign Robert Delpire designed for the legendary Citroën DS four-door coupe. By the time we learn that Delpire’s ad work was put on view in an exhibition at the Musée des arts décoratifs in Paris in November 1965, and that the show received plaudits from several prominent French art critics of the time (even as others regarded American Pop art itself as a threat), the reader has gained a good sense of the twists and turns involved in the transatlantic transfer of Pop techniques and ideas.

Considine’s approach echoes in some ways that of Hannah Feldman in her landmark 2014 book *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation, 1945-1962*, and the comparison is instructive.[7] In Feldman’s understanding of French modernism after World War II, the common term “postwar” is a misnomer, given the country’s continuous involvement in wars in Southeast Asia and North Africa; she thus rereads the cultural production of the period in light

of the violent processes of decolonization then taking place. Like Considine, she similarly expands the scope of inquiry beyond painting and sculpture to encompass avant-garde film, urban planning, governmental cultural policy, and mass-market news magazines; but throughout, she aims to rethink French modernism as specifically “rooted in the experience of the colonies as well as the metropole.”[8] Feldman emphasizes conflict and incommensurability rather than transfer; meaning is most often found in absences and lacunae. Thus, for example, the Lettrist poet Isidore Isou’s effort in the 1950s to create a universal, materialist sound-language suitable to his transnational present ultimately misfires, precisely because the poet could not think beyond French borders (both intellectual and physical). As Feldman writes, “Lettrism was unable to exceed the limitations of a colonially circumscribed France as a container for the aurally-defined community it imagined, and ultimately failed to make good on Isou’s proposals.”[9] My point here in contrasting Considine’s approach with Feldman’s is not to find fault with the former for lacking attention to the colonial realities of postwar France. Rather, it is to point out that, for all its purchase on its present, Pop tended to be at heart an art-world phenomenon (at least in the Global North). Its native environment remained the international network of galleries, museums, and the art press, even as it flirted with everyday life; hence the prevalence of critics and artists in Considine’s book, in favor of other potential players or stakeholders.

The stakes of cultural transfer clarify with increased political investment, which is what occurs in the last two (highly effective and engaging) chapters of Considine’s book. The two chapters tell related stories. The penultimate considers the conflicted relationship the members of the avant-garde group the Situationist International developed with comics during a period (1958-1967) that witnessed both Pop art’s international rise and a vogue for comic books in France. Considine carefully teases out the differences between cheap, imported, widely syndicated American comic books and the higher quality *bande dessinée*, such as *The Adventures of Tintin* and *Asterix*, that were promoted by Gaullist officials as a homegrown alternative. The author’s meticulous attention to this contested terrain of comic book production leads to exciting new insight into how the Situationists implemented comic strip panels in their published work—an implementation that was further inflected by the concurrent rise of American Pop art, as he convincingly demonstrates. In the final chapter, Considine adds considerable depth to the now-familiar story of poster production during the student/worker protests of May 1968. The chapter weaves an intricate tale that tracks how Pop techniques and devices found their way to the Atelier Populaire and other sites of poster production during the protests, along the way touching on everything from the communist art collective Jeune Peinture to the Figuration Narrative school of painting promoted by the critic Gassiot-Talabot. This last chapter includes superb close readings of individual posters, noting the way their “media mimicry and conflation of manual and mechanical representation” were both borrowed from Pop (p. 128).

The close reading of protest posters is a prime example of the many instances in which Considine’s granular research methods pay off handsomely. (Other instances include analysis of the hang in Warhol’s 1964 Sonnabend show, in which the reader learns exactly which *Death in America* paintings occupied the walls, and a fruitful gloss on the painterly use of color in Godard’s 1963 film *Le Mepris* [*Contempt*].) The attention to detail leads to fresh conclusions on familiar subjects, which alone make the book well worth reading. Yet for all its precision, there remains something oddly indefinite when it comes to its titular subject, “American Pop Art.” The category seems capable of adapting and expanding to accommodate any cultural production of the 1960s with a passing connection to mass culture. This issue transcends the book at hand, coloring as it does the current fervor for all things Pop—such that Pop art seems in many instances to have

displaced Minimalism as the assumed chief inflection point for advanced art of the postwar period.[10] This displacement is salutary insofar as it has allowed for a far more diverse array of artists to emerge as vital to the global history of postwar art, while also reintroducing long-sidelined subject matter as fundamental to that history. Yet its implications remain to be assessed fully. Considine himself appears aware of this; in his introduction, he writes, “Pop art’s intimate connection with globalization, though widely remarked, has not [yet] been theorized” (p. 7). This observation to me appears apt, and further research may reveal that it is in fact the theorization of Pop art’s connection to globalization that holds the key to bringing together the two art-historical trends identified above. In the meantime, Considine’s book constitutes a first-rate set of concrete case studies that add substantially to our understanding of the reception of Pop Art in a particularly revealing place and point in time.

## NOTES

[1] *International Pop*, April 11-August 9, 2015, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and *The World Goes Pop*, September 17, 2015-January 24, 2016, Tate Modern, London. For an excellent comparative review of these two exhibitions, see David Joselit, “‘International Pop’ and ‘The World Goes Pop,’” *Artforum* 54, no. 5 (January 2016): 230-31.

[2] *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*, October 14, 2016-March 26, 2017, Haus der Kunst, Munich.

[3] For a notable example, see Claire Bishop and Nikki Columbus, “Free Your Mind: A Speculative Review of #NewMoMA,” *n+1*, January 7, 2020. The review, a searing satire, was commissioned by *Artforum* but rejected. Most non-specialist reviews ranged from highly positive to rapturous. For an example of the former, see Peter Schjeldahl, “The Exuberance of MoMA’s Expansion,” *New Yorker*, October 14, 2019; for an example of the latter, see Roberta Smith, “MoMA’s Art Treasure, No Longer Buried,” *New York Times*, October 17, 2019. The art press was largely positive, with reservations; for nuanced examples, see Helen Molesworth, “The Kids Are Always Right,” *Artforum* 58, no. 5 (January 2020): 142-149; and Laura Raicovich, “Gauging the Possibilities of Impermanence at the New MoMA,” *Hyperallergic* (January 9, 2020): <https://hyperallergic.com/536428/gauging-the-possibilities-of-impermanence-at-the-new-moma/>.

[4] Gene Swenson, “What Is Pop Art?” *Art News* 62 (November 1963); quoted in Considine, p. 5.

[5] See Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, “Deutsch-Französischer Kulturtransfer im 18. Und 19. Jh.: Zu einem neuen interdisziplinären Forschungsprogramm des C.N.R.S.,” *Francia* 13 (1985): 502-510, and Michel Espagne, “La notion de transfer culturel,” *Revue Sciences/Lettres* 1 (2013): 1-9. Manuela Rossini and Michael Toggweiler have called Espagne’s notion of “cultural transfer” a “travelling concept,” using art historian Mieke Bal’s term for a theoretical concept that crosses disciplinary boundaries; see their “Cultural Transfer: An Introduction,” *Word and Text* 4, no. 2 (December 2014): 5-9.

[6] Notable exceptions are collected in the volume *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, ed. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016). The volume includes an essay by Espagne titled “Cultural Transfers in

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Art History.” On the primacy of painting in Pop, see Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[7] Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation, 1945-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

[10] On the displacement of Minimalism from its central canonical position, see Monica Amor, “On the Contingency of Modernity and the Persistence of Canons,” in *Antinomies of Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 83-96. Much of the new writing on Pop has brought deserved attention to lesser-known figures (e.g., Corita Kent, Pauline Boty, Evelyne Axell, Antonio Dias, Wallace Berman, Vija Celmins, Marisol, Marta Minujin, Shinohara Ushio, etc.). Of course, big names still draw, as exemplified by the rave reception of the sumptuous Warhol retrospective staged at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2018.

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