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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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LUCAS SAMARAS: IN SEARCH OF SELF

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BY

CARLOS Mc CAMERIDGE

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## SECTION I

### Introduction

In 1964 Lucas Samaras exhibited his Bedroom (Fig 1) at the Green Gallery, as a work of art. In 1978, some 14 years later, he produced a series of 10 x 8 prints (Fig's 2,3,4,5) with the Polaroid Camera, using his one-room studio/apartment as the set. Over the 14 year period Samaras' art remained relatively constant. Both the exhibits exemplify aspects characteristic of the artist's work, such as autobiography, iconography and object orientation. His Bedroom for example, complete with furnishings trash and unfinished art works is collectively a record of Samaras' personal history. It is small and claustrophobic, filled to capacity with artifacts from both a Greek and American culture, each object with its own iconographic connotation that tells the autobiography of the artist. Like his other work it also represents his defence against the impersonal, hard-edged approach of 60s art.

Samaras exhibited Bedroom shortly after Oldenburg exhibited his parody of motel modern, the bedroom furnished with oversized furniture, parodying the American obsession with bigness. By comparison with Samaras' Bedroom Oldenburg's bedroom seems culturally impoverished and it reeks of an affluence that was foreign to the introverted subjective nature of Samaras.

This paper deals specifically with the work of one artist, working in general opposition to conventional styles. It is a critical examination, assessment and interpretation of his work. The various aspects of the artist's life, history and personal attitudes are discussed and their manifestation in his work is examined.

It deals with Samaras' approach to style as trans-historical and his refusal to fit conveniently into any one artistic category. It sets in perspective the autobiographical work of an individual against the impersonal approach of the Pop Artists and Photorealists. And it examines the interrelated themes and recurrent visual elements, manifest in his diverse use of media, including: Box-sculpture, Tapestry-painting, mirrored sculptures and Polaroid Photography.

### Historical Background to the Artist.

Lucas Samaras was born on September 14th. 1936 in Kastoria, Macedonia, Greece, Raised in the Greek Orthodox Church, Samaras spent his childhood surrounded by the furnishings of the Byzantine Ritual: the icons, reliquaries, mosaics, and various liturgical objects associated with the eastern rite. These were objects that would have an influence on the work of the artist in future years.

After a harrowing child hood in his native land amidst the Greek civil war, he came to America where in 1948 he settled with his mother in New Jersey. In 1955 he entered Rutgers University on a scholarship where he was to meet Allan Kaprow, George Segal and Robert Whitman. Their experiments led him to become associated with performances of happenings at New York's Reuben Gallery.

Although he did not create any happenings of his own, Samaras allowed himself to become a living element in the creative acts of others. Between 1959 and 1962 he appeared in such happenings as Oldenburg's Fotodeath and Storedays. Concurrently he studied acting with Stella Adler, wrote several bizarre and erotic stories, studied art history with Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University and painted in oils and pastels.

The subject of these first paintings centred on himself, a recurrent theme to which he became obsessed and which is the prominent feature of much of his work. This preoccupation with self, ranges from his first small boxes containing images of his own face. Then in 1966 Mirror Room, (Fig 6) an 8x10 foot sculpture which when entered endlessly multiplied the viewer. Then later to his involvement with photography which led to Autopolaroids 1970-71 and Phototransformations 1973-74, in which he used the instant image making Polaroid photographic print, both to represent and distort his body and surroundings.

It is the interplay between Samaras autobiographical portraiture and the distinctive visual style inherent in his work that aroused my curiosity, initially by the four 10x8 polaroid prints from the book "One of a Kind". Using this source as a starting point I traced back to his work in the 60s with boxes, mirrors and the instant image camera, then available only in the 2x3 in. format. It was not difficult to recognize a work by Samaras. Usually his face or some part of his body is present, together with a rainbow of incandescent spectrum colours, as intense as the synthetic hues of neon. His choice of materials is equally as grotesque: synthetic fabrics with garish patterns, costume jewellery, glitter, sequins, spangles, hardware, pencils, utensils and inherently destructive objects like knives, pins, tacks, razors blades and broken glass.

#### Style as Trans-Historical.

It is this repetition of a set of images rather than of forms or techniques that defines his work as that of an individual. The succession of his works do not follow a pattern of stylistic evolution as such. Samaras himself



challenged the conventional idea that 'style' was a set of formal characteristics evolving in one direction.<sup>1</sup> He was acquainted with the theories of Schapiro, Henri Focillon and George Kubler which "predicated the possibility that certain stylistic traits were trans-historical, belonging not exclusively to specific periods in history, but more freely available."<sup>2</sup> Also important to other artists of Samaras' generation trained in art history, such as Claes Oldenburg and Robert Morris, was the realization that once reproduction of world art reached a certain level of popular diffusion in slides, art books etc, the entire history of art could be experienced simultaneously in what Andre Malraux described as the "Museum without Walls."<sup>3</sup> Reproduction is the main feature which links the diversity of expression experienced then and now. They are united by a new concept of style, no longer fixed in historical time. But because of the availability of reproductions, all equally present to us. Samaras was perhaps the first artist to conceive of style in this new way, as fluid and trans-historical, and to make of this consciousness the content of his art.

The possibility that the artist was now in a position to create mutations of historical styles, to shed artistic identities, like a series of masks or costumes, perhaps appealed to Samaras, an alien who was superstitious and associated identification to a particular style with identification by authorities who might have tried to seize or deport him if he remained to visible. Moreover it was something within his Byzantine psyche, that rejected the Americanness of 60s art and gave preference to a semi-traditional art product.

"I function as though there were no other living artists around, although I do look at the artists of the past. I will go to a museum or buy a book and say to myself, "yes, this is the art of Greece or the art of Africa." Well the combined arts of the past are fantastic. They are fantastically varied and touch all aspects of human existence. They touch the body and the environment - everything. Well, then I say, "Samaras you're an artist what are you going to do?". My answer is that I'm going to do everything. It is not necessary that I express myself within one convention. You see many artists around you ..... This one a Clyfford Still, that one a Jackson Pollock. Each one has his speciality. I am not a specialist. I'm a general practitioner:" It is clear from this statement that Samaras does not want to be limited to any one style or convention. He is expressing his trans-historical attitude to his work, which enables him to borrow from the past or the present, subject matter and technique.

This section has introduced style as trans-historical with specific reference to Samaras. Section two will examine the image as it emerged from abstract expressionism, how it developed into individually distinctive styles such as Pop and Photorealism, that were consistent, contemporary and whose characteristics evolved in one direction. This examination, serves as a backdrop to further discussion of Samaras' interpretation of style as trans-historical and concurrently any similarities it has with conventional 60s styles.

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## SECTION II

In his preceding statement, Samaras makes the point that art of the past illustrates every aspect of human existence, a trait which his own art focuses upon. For instance, when I look at a work by Samaras, I feel he is speaking directly to me. He presents himself, his living quarters, his personal belongings to me the viewer, offering his art for inspection and approval in a highly self-conscious manner.

When I compare his work with styles characteristic of the 60s, for example Pop Art, the latter seems cold and impersonal, reflecting images of a materialistic society and its mass-produced objects, without alluding to the artist that created them. This raises the question: How did an artist living in the epicentre of American Art and culture such as Samaras, evoke such a personal integration with his art in the context of 60s art that appeared 'impersonal, hard-edged, and which kept the artists sensibility relatively covert'? <sup>5</sup>

To answer this question, this section is devoted to examining the images of 60s Art manifest in the various traditions of Pop Art and Photorealism, thus setting Samaras' autobiographical work - which stood in direct opposition to the prevailing tendency - in perspective, contrasting it with that art which appeared so impersonal and hard edged. The work of artists, William T. Wiley Robert Arneson and Philip Guston, who were working in a similar vein to Samaras is also discussed. The trans-historical nature of his work is examined in this context and concurrently its similarities with 60s art.

To begin with, I will examine the development of the recognizable image within the context of Abstract Expressionism, trace its emergence out of the ideological and formal confines of this style and its manifestation in the various traditions of Pop, Photorealism and in the work of artists like Samaras. This will perhaps serve as a visual guide to those artists like Samaras who used recognizable subject matter as a vehicle for aesthetic exploration..

### The Emergence of Recognizable Subject Matter.

William De Kooning, integrated recognizable subject matter into his work, and for more than a decade (from 1940), he struggled to find a solution to the pictorial issue. In his "Images of Women" on which he worked between 1950 and 1952, he resolved this problem by abandoning the model and substituting the idea; by avoiding a description of the figure through light and shade and line, substituting an image which became recognizable out of a seemingly random mass of thick multi-coloured brushstrokes. He also accomplished his goal by 'dissolving the



'distinction between the figure and the ground in favor of a single, shallow, densely articulated spatial plane,'<sup>6</sup> and by using the canvas to personally express than to represent the mood inherent to the subject.

Just as De Kooning introduced a recognizable image into the context of Abstract Expressionism, New York painters Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Larry Rivers, and Californian Richard Diebenkorn sought in the mid and late 50s an image - oriented alternative to Abstract Expressionism. They turned to the world surrounding them and selected from it ordinary familiar objects or images subject matter. Rauschenberg, Johns and Rivers worked primarily with and from inanimate objects. In contrast, Diebenkorn's main interest was in rendering a directly observed three - dimensional situation. Allan Kaprow, writer, critic and organizer of happenings saw this representation of images taking origins in the real world not merely in the mind of the artist' as a logical extension of Abstract expressionism'.<sup>7</sup> In painting externally rather than internally derived subject matter they continued the notions of space and illusion characteristic of Abstract expressionism. They rejected the Renaissance notion of a deep three - dimensional space achieved through a variety of pictorial devices including perspective and chiaroscuro, and used the canvas as a kind of curtain, beyond which there were no allusions to space. Any suggestion of space was achieved, actually, by the overlapping of thick brushstrokes or through the illusion of some colours receding and advancing on the canvas.

One can see the similarity between Diebenkorn's Woman by a Window (Fig 7) and De Kooning's Woman VI (Fig 8). Both are representations of women and avoid a description of the model through light, shade and line. Diebenkorn translates the three dimensional shapes before him into flat areas of colour which suggest, but do not describe the subject in detail. De Kooning uses randomly placed multi-coloured brushstrokes to give a less descriptive more abstract description of the subject.

The Last Civil War Veteran (Fig 9) Rivers uses a Life Magazine photograph as reference. He blurs the contours of his figures and uses areas of brilliant colour independent of the image, to flatten his space. In Crocus (Fig 10) Rauschenberg's use of the photograph, though it is a two-dimensional object itself, alludes to real three dimensional objects and space. By using a photograph as a collage element Rauschenberg obtains a depth that is purely optical and is not the result of traditional modeling or perspective. In his earlier work he used randomly scattered street refuse - birds, old tires, clocks, radios and umbrellas - in a similar manner. With these objects he

created real space, not an illusionistic one, just as the Abstract Expressionists used overlapping paint strokes to create real depth on the surface of the canvas.

There is a painterly style which links Rauschenberg, Johns, Rivers and Diebenkorn, combined with their use of space and illusion, to Abstract Expressionism. However they modify the original Abstract Expressionists meaning of the gestural brushstroke as 'a sign of the presence of the artist and his state of emotional involvement in art making process.'<sup>8</sup> Diebenkorn, for example, used the painterly brushstroke to express the mood of the subject. Rauschenberg, Rivers and Johns saw brushstrokes as merely the means a painter uses to get across a surface. Johns stated that brushstrokes were for him "as the keys were to the typist"

#### The Pop Artists

The influence of Rauschenberg, Rivers, Johns and Diebenkorn on the next generation of image involved artists, the Pop Artists, was direct. In the early 1960s New York painters Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann, James Rosenquist and sculptor Claes Oldenburg offered additional challenges to accepted aesthetic conventions, in their use of externally derived recognizable imagery. They used popular, banal, mass-produced objects and images as subject matter in conjunction with commercial techniques, materials and processes. Like Rivers, Johns and Rauschenberg, they maintained a relatively neutral attitude towards their subject matter, and by using real objects or duplicating two - dimensional images they drew heavily on their predecessors for their notions of space and illusion.

In Orange Disaster (Fig 11) Warhol uses a newspaper photograph as his subject; in Still Life Painting (Fig 12) Wesselmann uses magazine cutouts of Food and Food Packing contrasting with the painted background of a flamboyant kitchen. Lichtenstein bases his composition on an enlarged detail from a comic strip in Blam (Fig 13). He paints his images, but the bold black outlines combined with the stenciled banday dots, a technique characteristic of the photo - mechanical process, make them look like they were commercially produced.

Oldenburg's soft sculptures like Vinyl Medicine Chest (Fig 14) are sewn. He converts common hard objects, tubes and containers, into soft vinyl shapes imbuing his inanimate objects with the human like attributes of softness. This plastic or mechanical technique was incorporated into the work of the Pop Artists because it was consistent with their subject matter. It also depersonalized the painterly style which was characteristic of the work of Rivers, Johns and Rauschenberg.



The sculptures of George Segal were seen to have a close connection with Pop Art, without his remaining totally committed to the characteristic imagery and hard-edge surface. In Man Leaving a Bus (Fig 15) a section of a real bus is used as the setting for his cast plaster figure. The figure however does not have the machine - made process of replication about it, but has a distinct artist - made appearance. While Segal portrays a common ordinary situation, he does not try to stress its banality as the Pop Artists did, but rather 'to suggest its universality'.<sup>9</sup>

The Photorealists: Pop art was in many ways to condition the work of a group of artists, who in the mid 60s and early 70s, used photographs to replicate 'with a high degree of Verisimilitude',<sup>10</sup> the picture before them. New York's Audrey Flack, Chuck Close, Malcolm Morely and Richard Estes and Californian Richard McLean are among the painters associated with this tradition. Like pop artists, they use a two - dimensional medium, the photograph, as a device for integrating recognizable subject matter. They do not paint from directly observed objects or situations and accordingly they keep a very distant attitude toward their subject matter, often, as with McLean's Still Life with Black Jockey (Fig 16) and Morley's Cristoforo Colombo (Fig 17) using deliberately banal images. They are not interested in photo-mechanically reproducing them like Warhol, or using collage elements like Wesselmann or having to alter or recompose the visual facts like Lichtenstein, but simply to represent the painting as realistically as possible.

Abstract Expressionism has also played a role in shaping the work of Photo - Realists. For example, Close, who studied Abstract Expressionism in school began to paint from photographs as a way of introducing discipline into his work. Audrey Flack, like so many others, began her painting career as an Abstract Expressionist. In Strawberry Tart Supreme (Fig 18) the airbrushed shapes of cakes are positioned to emphasize a vertical composition, that creates a shallow space preferred by the Abstract Expressionists. She also surrounds the outer edge of the painting with a grey border, just as Morley uses a white one in Christoforo Colombo, to 'assert the physical presence of the picture plane'.<sup>11</sup> Strawberry Tart Supreme was part of Flacks 'grey border' series, completed over a period of two years, in which she was involved with the 'more abstract, less realistic and formal elements of picture making'.<sup>12</sup> Her subsequent work however, including the 'vanitas' series, contrast with this typical photo - realist style, and reflects her preoccupation with

human and personal problems and values. It is these and similar works, that will be examined in connection with Samaras' Polaroids.

Although Stephen Posen does not paint directly from a photograph, but from a directly observed studio situation he shares with the other Photo-realists. a detached approach to subject matter, and a smooth surface on which to represent factual exactitude. In his abstract still life, Untitled "F" his goal is the "desire to make two distinct planes of space, one projecting from the surface, the other receding from it, in order to call into question the integrity of the canvas surface."<sup>13</sup> Similarly; Sculptor Duane Hanson's work is often associated with this style. His life - like, life sized three dimensional figures are stereotypes in society, and appear frozen in time as if caught in mid-action by the aperture of a camera. In Repairman (Fig 19) like all his sculptures, is a portrait of a type rather than an individual, where he tries not to show the visible hand of the artist in the art making process, but merely to heighten the sense of reality.

#### The use of Recognizable Subject Matter outside the Confines of Conventional Art Movements.

Just as the Pop Artists and Photorealists integrated recognizable subject matter into their work, many individual artists working outside the confines of conventional trends did likewise, but not for the same intent. These artists of which Lucas Samaras, William T. Wiley, Robert Arneson and Philip Guston are a few - started their careers as Abstract Expressionists. Although they integrated recognizable subject matter into their work they kept alive the original Abstract Expressionist meaning of the gestural brushstroke as a sign of the presence of the artist and his state of emotional involvement in the art making process.

They did not use externally derived subject matter in superficial and bland way as the Pop Artists and Photorealists had done. By contrast they all endowed their work with a personal touch, enabling them to use subject matter that reflected aspects of their own personal life, emotions and feelings. They are as a result tied to Abstract Expressionism primarily by the manner in which they extend its intuitive and emotive aspects.

Californian William T. Wiley, uses art to explore the 'limitless possibilities of the human mind.'<sup>14</sup> In Mr. Unnatural and Friends (Fig 20) he combines painting and sculpture, made and found objects together with a personal iconography. Mr. Unnatural stands for "Wiley" himself, tall and thin, wearing a Japanese Kimono painted with an abstract - like landscape, a tall comical hat symbolizing its dual implications to a dunce or a wizard. The former representing the stupidity



and whimsical nature of the artist, the latter reflecting the clever, magical side of the artist, in his ability to transform the common and ordinary into a magical combination. A characteristic that manifest itself in the work of Wiley, aswell as Samaras, is their referential nature to objects and happenings in childhood. Wiley uses a range pole - the same instrument used by his father, as a surveyor, for measuring long distances, and a familiar object from his childhood - to symbolize the magic wand of the wizard. There is also the association between it and long distances. The sculpture holding the pole, faces in one direction while the framed painting on the wall has the pole facing in the opposite direction, suggesting that Wiley is non-directional in his art. He confuses the viewer's expectations not only in the way he uses and combines images but also in the way he mixes materials and their properties. In Mr. Unatural & Friends, he stresses the two - dimensionality of his sculpture, while in the confines of his painting he alludes to the Three - dimensionality of the objects and space, through his use of light and shade.

Robert Arneson uses a combination of humor and paradox in his clay sculptures to feed his imagination. In one of his sculptures he depicts his friend and fellow teacher at university, William T. Wiley, in the form of a protrait. Mr. Unatural (Fig 21) however does not represent a portrait in the historical sense, where it functioned as a substitute for the subject, but implements this accepted art-historical convention, mockingly, by using Wiley's alter ego, Mr. Unatural, as a sculptural stand-in. Arneson also uses the bust in a similar manner - in the context that it is an acknowledged classical form for depicting great scholars, philosophers and statesmen. - to represent a 'most unclassical unconventional thinker and artist.'<sup>15</sup>

Samaras' symbolic use of recognizable subject matter.

Similarly, Samaras uses symbolic object references in his boxes and fabric reconstructions(Fig's 22,23) His small boxes, with dimensions not larger than 20 inches are filled to capacity with costume jewelery sequins, spangles, photographs, razor blades and mirrors etc, each object carrying its own symbolic value. In the drawer of Box 38 (Fig 24), for instance, a full lenght photograph of the artist with female genitalia is surrounded by costume jewellery, while a portrait of the artist appears from a dense mixture of nails and screws, on the lid of the same box. He assumes the role of both male and female, where the female is surrounded by the decorative beauty of coloured jewellery, and the male is engulfed by the threatening cold, hurtful associations of sharp objects. He uses

objects not only for their visual properties but also for their metaphorical potential.

"When I look at a razor blade, it has associations with being cut, but it's also wonderful - looking object in itself. Or a glass if its broken, it would cut you. But it also has strange qualities that have to do with transparency, translucency - a beautiful way of catching colour. If you took your head and knocked it against a nail you would be hurt. But a nail is also a wonderful object." (Artists Statement April 1976)

By comparison with Philip Guston's The Door (Fig 25), Samaras' iconography is less direct more complicated and abstract. The Door: is symbolic of Guston's emotional state at a certain point in time. He refers to his home, which appears more like a prison cell, his profession, represented by scattered paintbrushes, and his anxieties: the pile of shoes, the world coming in on him. The clock on the wall without numerals, indicating the passing of time and the whip, a metaphor of the torture endured by the artist. All indicative of emotional state. Samaras' iconography however, although autobiographical, is not as emotional. Instead it centres on the historical and the artists heritage. At this point I wish to discuss Samaras' idea of style as trans-historical; its associations with Greek art and concurrently its associations with styles characteristic of the 60s.

#### Samaras' trans- historical style and its Associations with Greek Art.

Samaras' Boxes and Reconstructions in the context of mainstream art movements, illustrate his stylistic inconsistency and trans-historical tendencies. For instance, when one speaks of the Photorealists the Traditional-realists or Pop artists, the third person plural is used, to denote more than one. The Photorealists for example, are a group of artists who in the mid 60s and late 70s, shared a common view to using photographs to replicate with a high degree of accuracy, the picture before them. They were not concerned with altering or recomposing the visual facts like the Pop artists, or expressing their personal feelings. They were however, united in conforming to a single style which collectively gave them an artistic identity, at a certain point in time.

In direct opposition to this, Lucas Samaras is an individual who is interested in his individuality. Although he may share the same commitment to expressing personal feelings as other artists, he is not bound to conform to any stylistic limitations in his expression of this individuality. He is free to move from



representation to abstraction or between the past and the present to achieve artistic aims.

The influence of Greek art, for example can be distinguished in much of his work. His boxes contain sparkling glitter, coloured stones metallic fabric and sequins which resemble the glass tesserae of mosaics. Their size and intensity allude to the minatures of Byzantine art. The manner in which he manipulates the objects inside the box and later arrangements of objects in the 10 x 8 Polaroids, resembles a shrine, in which the objects from Samaras' life become icons. The portative icon, and exclusively Byzantine product - which imbued the person or theme depicted with divine grace - takes the form of a photograph of the artist in Box 38 and again in the 10 x 8 Polaroids, in which he places self-portraits in glass containers into the composition, suggesting worship of the artist.

The occurrence of images related to sewing, also recalls his past childhood days in Greece and is perhaps explained by the fact that his mother was a dress maker and his father a Furrier. His wooden boxes bear a striking resemblance to a traditional sewing box or perhaps jewellery box, filled with needles, colourful costume jewellery and covered with strands of yarn. His fabric reconstructions are made out of cloth sewn together to create a single continuous surface. He uses materials with varied textures and brilliant colours, similar to the incandescence of stained glass, in a network of diagonal bands that results in a visual clash of flamboyant patterns stripes and dots.

By comparison with Box 38 these fabric reconstructions seem more abstract but they still carry autobiographical symbols. The traditional eastern feeling they evoke is contradicted by the suggestion of a contemporary image: that of the immigrant artist working a big city amidst a maze of highways and freeways crisscrossing the urban landscape.

#### Style as trans-historical and its Associations with 60s Art.

Style as fluid and trans-historical is emphasised by the way in which Samaras uses subject matter and technique, from both an archaic culture and a contemporary one. Although his work is influenced by the historical, it is represented in a fashion that alludes to both the past and the present.

His boxes are a combination of old and new. The wooden structure is similar in appearance to a Victorian Jewellery Box or a Greek Sewing Box, but he has adulterated its conventional appearance, by applying brightly coloured yarns to the outer surface and by filling it with objects from a modern culture.

Moreover the techniques of Byzantine art reappear in a contemporary form. The sparkling glitter, coloured stones metallic fabric and brilliant sequins are cheap imitations of the glass tesserae of mosaics.

His boxes are not confined to any one medium but to many. He has used materials which are both organic and synthetic by nature. Organic referring to the old and synthetic to the new. He has made the boxes from wood, which are filled with shells and cotton and by contrast, metal nails and screws, plastic sequins and photographic emulsion. The fabric reconstructions, although reminiscent of the intricacy of mosaics, are by contrast a collage of fabrics that have been mass-produced using the technology of a modern era.

The use of recognizable subject matter also associates Samaras with the styles characteristic of the 60s. His boxes and reconstructions are composed of materials that are recognizable and can be identified with. The use of dimestore fabrics including synthetic material, costume jewellery and hardware, are those of a mass produced technology. His preference for the mundane and every day is what differentiates his work from other artists working in a similar vein such as Robert Arneson. Such a preference however associates him with artists such as Rauschenberg, Johns and Rivers, who introduced ordinary familiar objects as subject matter for their paintings.

His use of ready made pre-printed fabrics as collage elements, emulates Wesselman's use of printed photographic images in Still Life Painting, but also by using the fabrics in such an overlapping fashion, he obtains a depth that is purely optical and is not the result of traditional modeling and perspective. Just as the Abstract Expressionists used paint laden brushstrokes on the canvas to suggest depth.

Samaras' use of photography associates him with the work of the Pop Artists and Photorealists, and his fabric sewing, with Oldenburg's overgrown stuffed toys and soft sculptures, which are also sewn. His assumption of the Pop Art use of the rainbow spectrum and its perhaps universal sense of good cheer, is apparent in his boxes and reconstructions and later 10 x 8 Polaroids. However he does not share, with the Pop Artists their relatively neutral attitude towards their subject matter.

Earlier in Section 11, I posed the question of Samaras' ability to transmit autobiographical statements in the face of 60s styles such as Pop and Photo-realism. Having examined his work in that context the answer to the question becomes more clear.



By alienating himself from those styles that reflected images of a materialistic society and de-personalised the hand of the artist, he was obliged to retreat to the sanctity of the self and its history. By keeping his ties with a Byzantine culture through his art, he maintained artistic distance with his peers. Consequently this is important both to the individuality and originality of his work.

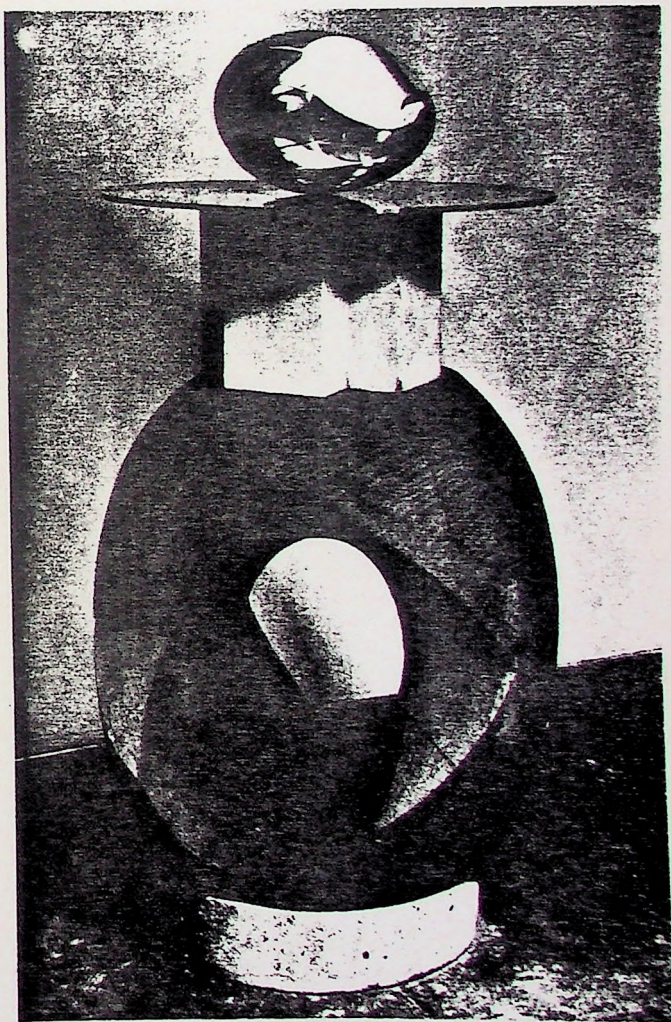
While the Photorealists and Pop artists are committed to expressing the bland and superficial, Samaras is committed to expressing the self-historical and the mystical. The mass-produced consumer products of Wesselman's Still Life Painting are images from a cosmopolitan city in the realms of materialism. The intricately ornate contents of Samaras' boxes are historical reminders of an artist living in the same cosmopolitan city, struggling to keep his ties with a non-western, preindustrial folk culture.

Section two has examined the emergence of the recognizable image and its development into image orientated styles, that kept a relatively neutral attitude towards their subject matter. Concurrently it has examined the work of individual artists working outside the confines of conventional art movements, who use subject matter to express aspects of their own personal life, emotions and feelings.

Lucas Samaras whose work is representative of his group, has been examined individually. His use of symbolic imagery has been discussed and the trans-historical style of his work has been evaluated and its associations with two distinct cultures. Section two has concluded that it is by the very nature of this trans-historical style, that Samaras has been able to evoke such a personal integration with art.

Section three explores the thematic relationship between Mirror Rooms and Boxes. It examines Mirror Rooms in context with other artists using reflective materials and shows how Samaras uses his mirrored sculptures to encourage spectator participation. His involvement with reflective surfaces is observed as a direct influence on his pioneering work with Polaroid Photography, which is also discussed in relation to Audrey Flack's Photorealistic paintings.

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Constantin Brancusi: *The Newborn*. 1915. Polished bronze.  $6\frac{11}{16}$ " x  $9\frac{7}{8}$ " x  $6\frac{1}{16}$ "; with base  $3\frac{4}{16}$ " x  $1\frac{7}{16}$ " x  $1\frac{7}{16}$ ". Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.



### SECTION III

In 1966, two years after Samaras had exhibited his bedroom complete with personal belongings rubbish and unfinished artworks, he exhibited Mirror Rooms (Fig 6) at the Albright Knox, Art Gallery, Buffalo. In these, all the surfaces both inside and out, including the furniture ~~were~~ made of mirrors. This had the effect when entered, of endlessly multiplying the viewer so the visitor was reflected right and left, shown as right handed and left handed, standing on his feet and on his head, complete and incomplete

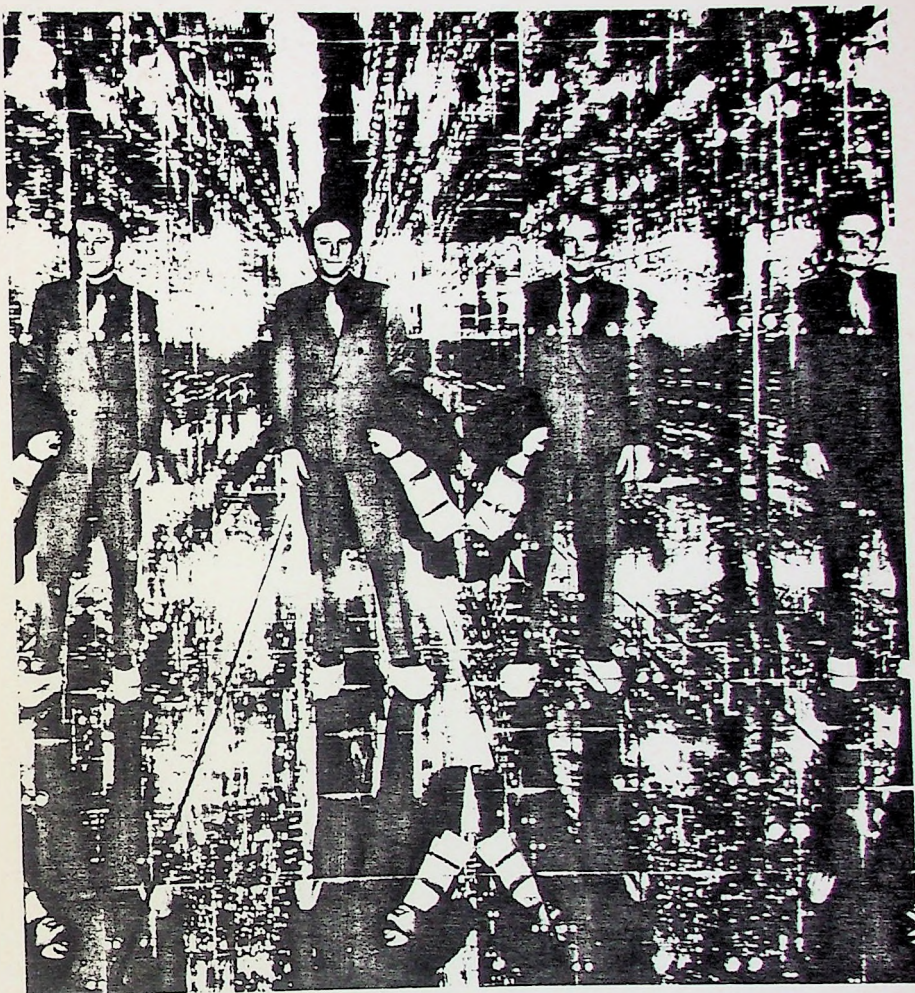
Mirrors, Boxes, and Polaroids. Although the Mirror Room is not a discovery made by Samaras - Mirror Rooms which were often found in Rococo Palaces, and Mansions of Europe - he has used the inherent properties of the mirror to "create a space, an environment, a fantasy, a world of Artificiality, a complicated panorama". (Artists Statement, 1969). Although he certainly created an environment, a fantasy, a world of artificiality in his boxes and in his 10 x 8 Polaroid Prints, his Mirror Rooms offer a different kind of visual experience, which is free from the claustrophobic intensity of his boxes with their iconographic connotations, and the polaroid prints with their strong object orientation and distinctive flamboyant colours. Rather, he has used the reflective properties of the mirror as an entity in itself, to mirror multiply and distort, without he himself having to become actively involved. What appears to be different about Mirror Rooms by comparison with Boxes, is the infinite space that is present. However by the actual size of the Room 8 x 8 x 10ft, and Corridor 7 x 50 x 3ft, which are relatively small areas for an average room, he has used the reflective surface to distort the actual size of his room and has caused a cubicle and a narrow corridor, to comprise infinite space.

The Mirrored Room was composed of 24" square mirrors attached to a plywood frame with screws which were covered by glass balls and which Samaras used "partly to produce a pattern, partly to transform mirror into something else." Their presence had the effect of producing thousands of glittering dots, adding to the visual experience and contrasting their dynamic unrest with the plain bodily shapes of the visitor.

These balls were also used in Corridor, which was a long, narrow, low passageway. The visitor entered Corridor at the left end of one side and exited at the right end of the other side, so that the route through the structure formed a letter Z, starting from its foot and terminating at its head.

Unlike the Mirrored Rooms, in which pieces of furniture were placed in the interiors - "as a three-dimensional drawing you might say, a skeleton a





Lucas Samaras: *Corridor*. 1966-1970. Inside. Installation *The Mind's Eye*. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 1970. Mirror on wood frame. 7' 9 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 50' 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 3'  $\frac{3}{4}$ " (outside). Photographs: Pace Gallery, New York.



sculptural outline, a table and chair for someone to sit down and imagine or think or discover,"<sup>16</sup> corridor was empty. The light explosions seen in the photograph are the reflections off the mirrored surface and reflective balls, of the flash used for taking the photograph.

On the outside of both Corridor and Mirrored Room series, the walls of the structure are also covered with mirror, reflecting the objects in the room around them incorporating them into the structure. The mirror walls are again dissolved, replaced by the illusion of space as in the interior. But in the outside mirrors this space is bounded by the walls of the room that are reflected in them.

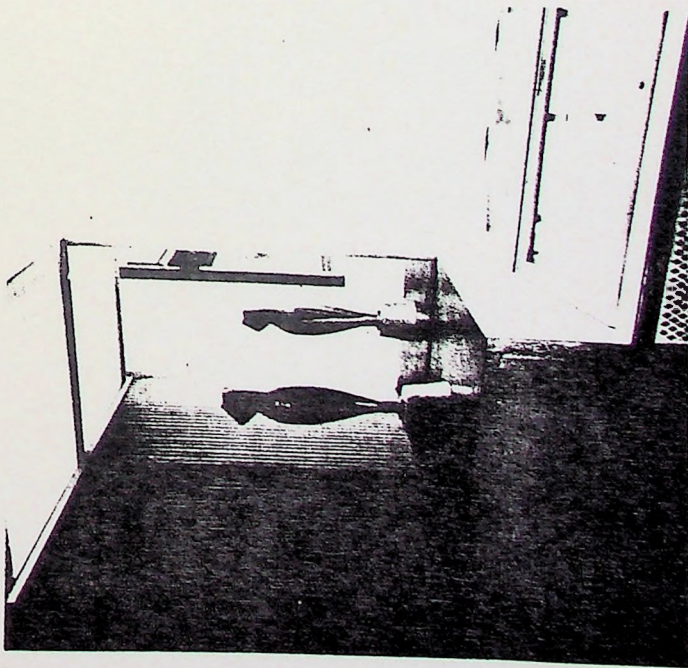
Brancusi, Rauschenberg & El. Lissitzky and their use of reflective Material

Brancusi's sculptures with polished metal achieve a similar visual experience as Samaras,' in which he 'disposed of the traditional concept of sculpture as self-contained unchangable and static.'<sup>17</sup> Brancusi made his sculptures reach beyond themselves by using the surfaces of metal which he polished so highly, to reflect the room and the viewer.

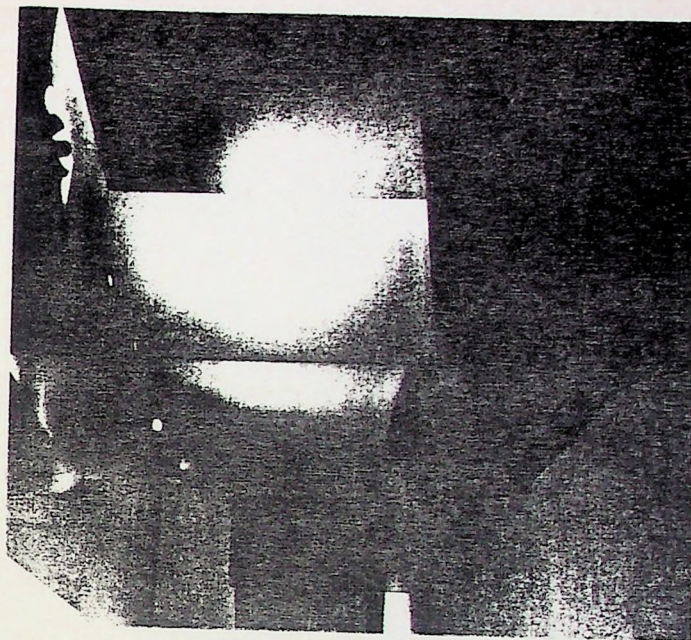
Rauschenberg adapted the Brancusi principle to painting in 1952, in which he did a series of white paintings whose shiny surfaces served like waxed floors in capturing vague reflections of the environment. Unlike the metal surfaces of Brancusi's sculptures, which distort the image because they are curved, the white paintings showed the silhouette correctly but in a vague manner. Rauschenberg wrote how "one could almost look at the painting and see how many people there were, in the room, by the number of shadows cast, or what time of day it was, like a very limited kind of clock."<sup>18</sup>

El. Lissitzky was equally as interested and concerned by his spectators involvement with a work. His Abstract Gallery 1927-1928 was a departure from the traditional exhibition room. "I did not think of the four walls in the room assigned to me as supports or a shelter," he wrote in his essay, "but as optical backgrounds for the pictures. That is why I decided to dissolve the wall surface as such". He used optical backgrounds, mirrors, to draw the spectator's attention to the pictures. The surfaces were dissolved by applying strips of material a few inches thick, painted white on one side and black on the other, to the grey walls. As a result, with every movement of the viewer in the room, the effect of the wall changed: what had been white became black, and vice versa. "Hence an optical dynamism is generated as a





El Lissitzky: *Abstract Gallery*. 1927-1928 (destroyed). Corner with Archipenko sculpture. Formerly Niedersächsische Landesgalerie, Hanover.



Larry Bell: *Untitled*. 1972. Vacuum-plated glass.  $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Installation the Pace Gallery, New York, 1973.



consequence of human striding. This play makes the spectator active."<sup>19</sup> Another problem Lissitzky faced was to eliminate the traditional overcrowding: "the big international picture shows resemble a zoo in which a thousand beasts roar simultaneously at the visitors."<sup>20</sup> He eliminated this problem by placing shallow traylike cases with movable glazed covers against the walls, that permitted him to house in the room one and a half as many works as in the other rooms, yet at the same time permitting one to see only half of them. This enabled the spectator to become more actively engaged in the show: the visitor pushed the cover plates aside or down, discovered new pictures and concealed what did not interest him. "He is physically compelled to come to terms with the exhibited objects".<sup>21</sup>

#### Mirrored Rooms and Spectator Participation

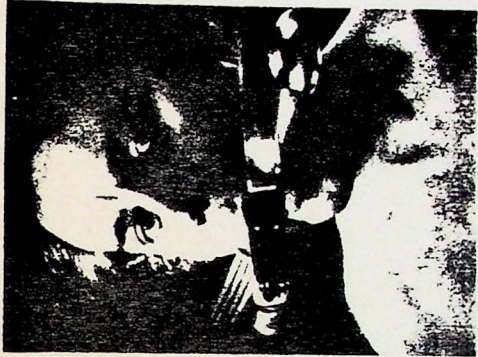
El. Lissitzky's pioneering work with Abstract Gallery recall how Samaras uses his mirrored sculptures, firstly to draw the spectators, attention to the structure by reflecting his or her image, secondly by using a door to either enter or leave the sculpture, thus actively involving the spectator to become involved in the art making process, and thirdly by physically compelling the spectator to come to terms with the object, by using the spectator's' own reflection as the dominating image, or theme in the vast composition.

By contrast with Samaras' mirrored sculptures Larry Bell's vacuum-plated glass panels of 1972 act functionally like the partitions in an office or museum. Offices use partitions to subdivide a room, where as museums use partitions to guide the steps of the visitors for the best view of the exhibition. Bell has used partitions that are both transparent and reflective and in doing so has created a sophisticated visual picture. The viewer is presented with, not only a reflection in the glass, but also an insight to what lies behind the glass, namely the walls of the room. Bell's structure however does not intimidate the viewer to the same extent as in Mirror Room. Samaras uses his sculpture like a game for both himself and the spectator to play. One cannot avoid sharing Samaras' self involvement, once inside the infinite box. Like his Boxes and Fabric Reconstructions, it is shockingly surprising and inventive. The visitors to Mirror Room (Fig 6) Facially express their outer fascination and amazement at this mirrored world, which Samaras has offered to share with them.

#### Mirrors and Photography

There is a direct link between Samaras' Mirrored Room series and his photographic







work, which cumulated in 1970-71 with a large exhibition of 'Autopolaroids'. Samaras' experiments with reflected images in mirror room series was direct response to his notion that: "most of us have evaded the body. There is a certain word which has negative connotations: narcissism. You know, don't look in the mirror ..... for me, looking in the mirror produces a sense of wonder. I say, "who is that?" I look at my hand and at my rear-end and say "What is that?" The idea of the mirror being an area of erotic conflict, is an idea for those who don't look into mirrors." (Artist's Statement April 1976)

For the same reason he began to experiment with the polaroid camera. He used the camera as he had done with mirrors, to "see portions of myself I had never seen before."<sup>22</sup> The advantage now however, was that he could capture these images on a two-dimensional surface, the photo-emulsion, and subsequently manipulate the image if he so required.

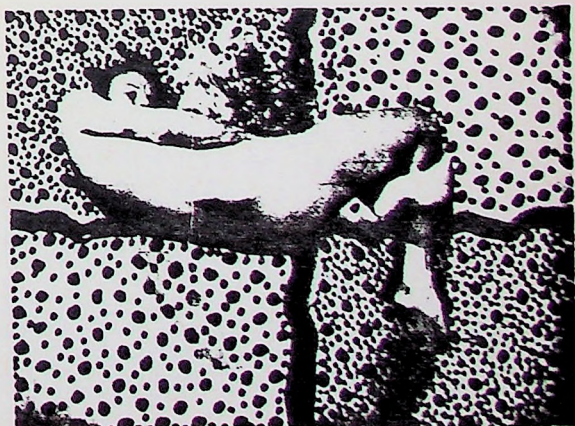
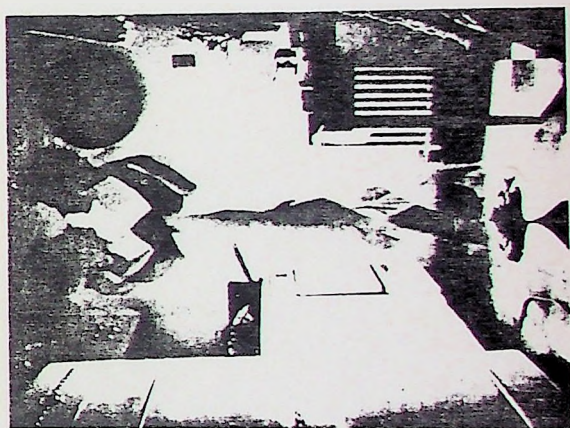
Samaras at first showed multiple exposures and colour changes within the camera itself, in Autopolaroid, together at times with further painting and drawing upon the finished photographic print surface. Then in Photo-Transformations using the then recently developed polaroid dry transfer print process (SX - 70) he reworked the actual colour chemistry of the print surface.

#### Samaras and the SX -70

John Holmes of Polaroid Corporation, provided Samaras, under suggestion from Harold Jones, director of Light Gallery, with a new SX - 70 camera for experimentation. the dye diffusion transfer technology perfected in the new film produced a tri-colour dye transfer print, with colours that were both vivid and permanent. The process is described as a 'mylar sandwich' containing a transparent sheet whose inner surface is the image receptor, an opaque, black sheet whose inside surface is a negative, and a pod containing the developing chemicals. As the emulsion packets pass through the camera they burst, to the picture surface and develop the image. It is the liquidity of the emulsion that enabled Samaras to manipulate the image as it was still in the process of forming.

In his Autopolaroid interview, he describes Polaroid as having "a feel, a look, a dialect of its own ..... moreover, the speed with which a result can be obtained without outside help - I was not going to go to photography school and learn photography - and the complete privacy available, afforded me the opportunity of doing something impossible with regular photography. I could tune up or tone down







emotion ..... by my own exciter, my own director, my own audience."

In the polaroids, Samaras presents himself as a multitude of human permutations, where each photograph represents the same person disguised by a variety of human emotional expressions and physical appearances. He assumes both a male and female role, where each one is characterised by a facial expression and the juxtaposition of objects on or around the body. Each photograph acts out the various human expressions: the coy, subtle, secretive, elusive, seductive, threatening and so on. Samaras describes them as "ways of studying my polaroided self as an abstraction or translation for aesthetic speculation, psychological perspicacity, sensual subtlety and warm embarrassment. Or they are a method for declassifying hush-hushed feelings. Or they are a stylized pretension of emotion - acting. Or they are a reworking of the form of the self portrait. Or it was a matter of one thing leading to another and piling up into an elaborate accomplishment."<sup>23</sup>

This statement demonstrates Samaras' reluctance to classify his own work in terms of its artistic value. Instead he offers a number of confusing variables as to their aesthetic function, which in turn prevents them from formal categorisation.

Like his other work they are a variety of ambiguous hybrids. They share some of the characteristics of the boxes and reconstruction's. The knives are present, together with the portraits of the artist depicted as bisexual. The set for the photographs is confined to his bedroom and kitchen. His added dots are reminiscent of the myriad of printed dots in his fabric reconstructions.

The inconsistency of style is again represented as trans-historical in his Polaroids. He defies the laws of gravity, by manipulating the print, so that his body appears to be floating in suspension, with no physical means of support. This is similar to Picasso's Swimming Woman 1929, in which the image of a woman is depicted in suspension on the canvas; the canvas which in turn could be hung by any side and viewed from any angle. Also the representation in art of suspended gravity or levitation was used by the traditional artists to identify the figure as a supernatural apparition. Some of the poses he adopts in the polaroids appear to mime art-historical images, particularly those of saints, both male and female.

The use of photography to produce these images further compromise's purity or the consistency of style. Because of the generic similarity of mechanically

recorded images, style in photography is not the same as style in the traditional arts. Yet even this inherent consistency of photographic imagery is attacked by Samaras. By manipulating and distorting the image, he has created photographs as personal and as intimate as his boxes and earlier pastels and paintings. What had taken Polaroid corporation years of research and development to make stable and predictable, surrendered to the artists fallibility. Technical perfection is brought to a new interpretation of artistic perfection by Samaras.

#### The Polaroid Camera in the Service of the Artist

The Polaroid Camera takes its place with the vast array of technological innovations and inventions of the twentieth century, which brought on to the market a range of plastics and synthetic rubber etc, as substitutes for 'paint and stone' and tools such as the oxy-acetylene blow torch and airbrush, thus enabling artists to discover new working methods.

The airbrush for example, used extensively by the photo-realist painters, such as Audrey Flack, was tailor-made for their desire to render a painting as close as they could to the original photograph. The airbrush was originally devised as a photo-retouching tool, a spray that mixes diluted paint with air to give a paint density that can match the grain of the photograph. In addition to this, a graphic style developed based on the medium's ability to produce smooth gradients of tone and colour. In the 1930s there were posters by A.E.Cassandre and Fortune Magazine covers; pin-up's in Esquire and Walt Disney's Pinochio 1939, was the first animated cartoon to draw on the airbrush's characteristic rendering of tone.

Photography, in twentieth century art has played a role in shaping image orientated movements such as Pop Art and Photorealism. Instant-image photography, however, as distinct from conventional photography, due to its in-camera negative-less developing system and speed (colour sixty seconds: Black & white thirteen seconds) has not had such profound effects on mainstream art movements. Rather, due favourably to its compact size, light weight and on-the-spot developing characteristics, it has been used in the service of the artist at work. Although originally designed for amateurs and hobbyists, instant-image cameras - and to an even higher degree accessory Polaroid Land Camera backs which, like ordinary sheet-film holders can be used in conjunction with most 4x5 inch cameras - are highly prized by many professional photographers as invaluable aids in making instant tests for a



last minute check of everything, from the distribution of light and shadow, to the correctness of the contemplated exposure before taking a difficult picture. Artists also discovered that they could sketch with SX-70. David Hockney has used SX-70 extensively as a sketching tool for his well known works on paper and canvas.. His SX-70 prints have served in the examination of his particular fascination with the visual effects of water movement. In (Fig.26) Hockney has used the camera to charter the motions of the swimmer beneath the water surface, using its stop action properties to reveal' motions not distinguishable to the human eye.'<sup>24</sup>

#### Flack and Samaras.

Audrey Flack's use of Photography is essential to her Photo-Realist work, and it is the photographic image which determines the photo-like qualities of her paintings.

She employs a photographic technician to assist her in setting up the objects she uses in her compositions and to arrange the correct studio lighting. The still is then shot on slide film, from a number of angles, using various lighting techniques and adjusting the composition, if necessary, between each frame.

Flack shares with the other Photo-Realist painters their use of photography, both as a technical tool to assist the artist, and in the use of the photographic image as subject matter. Characteristically Photo-Realism is the style associated with skillful photographically images of every-day urban America. Its typical artists paint the shining parts of motorcycles, polished chrome, airplanes, boats (Fig.17) horses (Fig. 16) together with "a straightforward worship of standard male idols - girls, sex, cars, machines, speed, technology."<sup>25</sup>

Flack's use of photography, however, by comparison with mainstream Photo-Realists displaces her from their typically cold rendition of the photographic image.

She uses photographic images in an original and ambitious way to give her paintings warmth of colour and a human feeling. Her subjects blend popular art and culture with historical references, including: perfume bottles lipstick, jewellery, beads, old photographs watches, fruit and so on.

She is also involved with the human and social content of every image she paints. One of her first experiments with photography resulted in a picture of

President Kennedy's motorcade at the Dallas airport, shortly before his assassination. She has painted nuns on civil rights marches, Marilyn Monroe (Fig 26), and survivors of Buchenwald, the latter two which were part of her three 'Vanitas' paintings of 1976 to 1978.

She also makes reference in her paintings to the historical past, as with Michelangelo's David and she pays homage to Luisa Rolan, for whom she had great admiration, in her painting La Macarena, 1971, which depicts the statue of the patron saint of Seville, Macarena Esperanza, 1695 - 1700.

Wheel of Fortune (Fig 29) 1977-78, also refers to the past, but in this instance to her own personal history. The painting was inspired by "Invictus", a poem which had great meaning to her as a child. Wheel of Fortune also depicts 'her strangely beautiful mute, autistic child' on the canvas, with other symbolic objects from her personal life.

It is Flack's choice of subject matter, combined with the manner in which she approaches it artistically, that associates her work with the recent 10 x 8 Polacolor prints by Lucas Samaras. Although Flack's work is collectively too monumental in itself to be dealt with here, there is a common ground between the two. I made these associations initially, purely by observing the nature of the works in themselves, as bearing a striking resemblance to each other. After further investigation it became clear that work is both autobiographical, iconographical and object orientated.

Samaras' 10x8 Polacolor prints (fig2,3,4,5) are the first from his latest series started in the summer of 1978. They are taken from the book "One or a kind, recent Polaroid Color Photography", which features the work of artists and Photographers, including Arnold Newman, David Hockney, Ansel Adams & many others, each using Polaroid cameras, ranging from the early SX-70 to the 4 x 5, 8 x 10 and only recently developed 20 x 24 inch format.

Eugenia P. Janis in her introductory essay describes Samaras' prints as "personal biographical yardage, in which his present and past collide in the commonplace materiality of the junk and its genuinely mythical associations." I see them as a climax to all his previous work with Boxes, Mirrors, Fabric Reconstructions and Autopolaroids. The Samaras self is everywhere, not only mirrored as a distorted form but also peering out of glasswear, bearded and beardless, young and old (Fig49). Egyptian courtesans are reproduced in graphic form, adulterating their classical elegance and stripping them of their formal beauty, just as he used mass produced printed fabrics to



emulate the intricacy of Byzantine Mosaics. He uses the courtesan reproductions as a foundation sheet for the rest of the composition. The pensils, magazines, paper clips, playing cards, flashlights, glass, knives, scissors, kitchen utensils, are all jammed into the claustrophobic 10 x 8 print reminiscent of Box 38

He has made this miniature print into a highly sophisticated fantasy shrine, in which he is the bystander, not just simply 'taking' photograph of the composition, but becoming part of his own creation. Staring at himself controlling the camera (Fig'S. 3,4,). All attention is directed towards him: Autopolaroids; pile-up of objects; Boxes & Bearoom 1964 (Fig 1)

Moreover it is the sneer sophistication of these images that transcends them and puts them on par with the paintings, Audrey Flack. Although they are stylistically diverse from each other, they both have used the technology of the camera to achieve their own distinctive images. Flack uses conventional slide photography as a source for her paintings, which enables her to choose one suitable image from a selection of images. Samaras has used the polaroid camera, which gives him an image seconds after he has taken the shot. He cannot adjust the size of the print, whereas Flack uses a projector to enlarge the image on to the canvas, on which she masks and airbrushes the projected shapes.

They both exaggerate their representation of subject matter. Flack uses acrylic paints with an airbrush to "make a painting as luminous as a colour slide".

In Fig 28 she depicts a pear as a smooth transparent surface, using super-intense green to exaggerate its natural form and colour. Samaras uses the inherent colour characteristics of the polaroid process combined with coloured plastic filters to strip his objects of their inherent characteristics. In Fig.5 he has used a butchers knife to cut open a pomegranate, expelling turquoise and primary colours that transform the fruit into a synthetic - like form.

Although it is not evident from book illustrations of her work, Flack's paintings are very large. Wheel of Fortune for example 96 X 96 in. By contrast with Samaras' 10 x 8 prints, which are given equal emphasis in book form, the size of Flack's paintings are an indication of her Abstract Expressionist background. Samaras is conversely tied to Abstract Expressionism by the nature of his rich, energetic and dense surfaces. He rejects Abstract

Expressionists scale. Audrey Flack's work expresses both autobiographical and universal truths. Samaras, however has confined himself to the autobiographical. She proclaims her art Historical and current affairs themes in her paintings, whereas Samaras makes elusive suggestions to his Byzantine past. While Flack proclaims her Americanness, Samaras the product of a small country clings to his marginality, keeping his work secretive and mysterious.

This paper has dealt specifically with one artist working as an individual trying to avoid stylistic categorization. It has taken on my behalf, the form of a retrogressive search starting from the moment I first saw his four 10 x 8 Polaroid prints, which then fascinated me and proved only to be the tip of a creative iceberg. After accumulating enough material on the artist, which was in itself an arduous search, I examined the interrelated themes and recurrent visual elements manifest in his diverse use of media, which have in turn, been critically examined and assessed during the course of the paper. By firstly setting his work in context with other 60s artists. it enabled me to establish a perspective with which I could view his work objectively and find a common ground <sup>or which</sup> I could examine style as trans-historical. It also served to highlight the autobiographical nature of his <sup>work</sup> in the light of other artists who kept a relatively neutral attitude towards their subject matter. It was concluded that Samaras uses his art as a sanctuary in which to keep his ties with a byzantine culture and in doing so kept artistic styles that reflected images of a materialistic culture and sought to de-personalise the hand of the artist. It was also concluded that by very nature of his Trans-historical style he was able to evoke a personal integration with his art.

Just as Samaras describes himself as a General Practitioner' I have covered all of the main areas of his work, and have examined how they are interrelated. How for example he adulterates everything from mirrors, to fabrics, and from boxes to the polaroid camera, in his effort to create a personal fantasy, a world of artificiality. His recent polaroid work is seen as culmination of all the various themes characteristic of his other work.

His recent polaroid work makes it clear that Samaras is a major artist working in what could earlier have been described as a mirror mode. But the effect of his work is cumulative rather than immediate; he offers fragments of an underlined and perhaps undefinable form. He is a sort of existentialist, exploring the situation of art rather than zeroing in on some assumed ontological identity.



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