

Articles

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The Independent Group

The Independent Group: Working-class culture and collage

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Abstract

The history and work of the Independent Group, this important collective of creative practitioners which met from 1952 to 1955, has recently attracted unprecedented levels of attention. However, within the fields of architectural, art and design history, the issue of social class is largely absent in recent work and oversimplified in twentieth-century accounts. This is despite the recent increase in class analysis being applied to the British creative and university sectors. Using the methodology of agency ([Potvin and Marchand 2020](#)) and the work on social class by Bev [Skeggs \(2011\)](#) as well as my own background, the article brings more specificity to the question of the working-class avant-garde and the Independent Group, using new research into the backgrounds of its members. Public funding enabled many who would not traditionally have benefitted from tertiary education to undertake full-time study, and this class dynamic made a difference to the post-war cultural landscape in the United Kingdom. The power of working-class agency within and against pre-existing elite structures is a key theme of the article. Working-class culture is a vital, yet hitherto marginalized, component of the Independent Group project. The article asks why references to social class are notably absent from accounts of post-war British art and design.

Keywords: Independent Group, collage, social class, Institute of Contemporary Arts

Introduction

The Independent Group met at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London from 1952 until 1955 and comprised a rich mix of creative practitioners including architects, artists, designers, musicians, photographers and writers. The Group's activities included discussions, exhibitions and publications and their fresh view of cultural hierarchies and history has proved important in the history of British art and design. The Independent Group has been the focus of increased attention in the field of art history over recent years. This interest was sparked with the *October* Group's Special Issue ([Kitnick and Foster 2011](#)), followed by the 2014 Richard Hamilton retrospective at Tate Modern; books by Thomas [Crow \(2014\)](#), Ben

[Highmore \(2017\)](#) and Kevin [Lotery \(2020\)](#); plus a Special Issue of *Art History* ([Tickner and Corbett 2012](#)). Victoria Walsh and Claire Zimmerman co-curated the Tate Britain research display *New Brutalist Image 1949–1955* ([2014](#)) and published the photo-article ‘New Brutalist image 1949–55’ in *British Art Studies* (2016). The work of this loose collective of architects, artists, designers, musicians and writers has also been included in recent exhibitions held in Munich, Wolfsburg and London and formed part of the 2021 Paul Mellon Centre seminar series, *Cutting Edge: Collage in Britain, 1945 to Now*.^[1]

To give more detail, the Independent Group met at the newly founded ICA from 1952 to 1955 and included the art critic Lawrence Alloway (1926–90); art historian Mary Banham (1929–2019); artists Magda Cordell (1921–2008), Richard Hamilton (1922–2011), John McHale (1922–78), Toni del Renzio (1915–2007), Sylvia Sleigh (1916–2010) and William Turnbull (1922–2012); the architects Theo Crosby (1925–94), Alison (1928–93), Peter Smithson (1923–2003), James Stirling (1926–92) and Colin St John Wilson (1922–2007); curator Muriel Wilson (1933–2018); design writer Peter Reyner Banham (1922–88); photographer Nigel Henderson (1917–85); graphic designer Edward Wright (1912–88), and music producer Frank Cordell (1918–80). The group met semi-clandestinely under the patronage of ICA Director Dorothy Morland (1906–99), who was subsequently marginalized, to discuss art and design theory, science and technology alongside popular culture within this avant-garde space ([Massey 2020](#)). Their meetings were by invitation only, as the members had a very clear idea of who was welcome and who was not, based on a shared set of interests in modernism, technology and popular culture. For example, the ICA’s founder members were not included on the guest list. This laboratory of ideas led to exhibitions at the ICA as well as contributions to the public programme. The discussions also underpinned the later work of the erstwhile members of the Group, beyond the ICA ([Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1: (From left to right) Roland Penrose, Henry Moore, Peter Gregory and Dorothy Morland in Piazza San Marco, Venice, on a visit to the Biennale, 1948. © Lee Miller Archives England 2024. All rights reserved. leemiller.co.uk.

It is perhaps not surprising that this interdisciplinary group has attracted increased attention, given the rising reputation of some of its members and increased coverage of global, post-war culture. However, the thorny issue of social class is largely missing from these recent accounts and oversimplified in preceding accounts. This article aims to bring more specificity to the question of the working-class avant-garde and the Independent Group, using new research based on the backgrounds and education of the members within the context of agency. It looks in particular at the phenomenon of the ‘scholarship boy’ and increased financial support to study art and design in the post-war years, plus the social mix which created a frisson and new, more authentic understanding of popular culture. Public funding enabled many who would not traditionally have benefitted from tertiary education to undertake full-time study at art school, and this class dynamic made a difference to the post-war cultural landscape and the development of a significant avant-garde. Looking again, working-class culture is a vital, and hitherto largely marginalized, component of the Independent Group project. This was manifest in the discussions as well as the creative work of the Independent Group, whether in art, design or writing, and the culture of collage in particular.

Why are references to social class so absent, and why do they remain absent in the majority of work that covers the history of modern, British art? Does it reflect the social origins of art historians, predominately middle class since the demise of art history courses in most post-1992 universities in the United Kingdom, or the lack of understanding of the nuances of the British class system by researchers from the rest of the world?² Much of the recent work outlined in this article’s introduction has been focused around aesthetic appreciation of New Brutalist traits or the relationship of the United Kingdom with the rest of the world, the latter a

welcome response to the decolonization project. Therefore, the relationship between the Independent Group and social class has never been extensively investigated. The only publication to do so lies within the discipline of American studies. Although a broad-based study of the post-war years, [*Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World* \(2012\)](#) by Daniel Horowitz presents an accurate picture of the Independent Group and social class:

Thus IG [Independent Group] members stood outside the most obvious sources of social and cultural power in mid-century Britain: the working-class that Hoggart both came from and focussed on; the academic world, especially as shaped by Oxford and Cambridge; the upper class; and bohemian literary circles in London. Insisting on knowledgeable and professional standards as artists and critics, they found problematic the amateurism of both dilettantes and the independently wealthy in the British art world.

(2012: 204)

While the term working class is difficult to concisely define without being simplistic, the work of feminist scholar Bev Skeggs is particularly useful with the context of this article. Her analysis argues that the working class defines itself as a category in opposition to those with cultural capital. The working class, those who relied on physical labour in the workplace or in the domestic sphere, struggle to find their place in society if they do not subscribe to the narrative of middle-class respectability and knowledge. I quote from Skeggs:

The attempt to make the working class recognize their classification is also noted by Carolyn Steedman (1999, 2000) who introduces an important factor into the performative emergence of the category class. She traces how a working-class self as a moral categorization came into existence through the religious discourse of redemption, a self that had to be respectable and prove itself to be capable of narrating itself in the terms established by the state-legal interlocutor systems of poor relief. If they could not speak the narrative of redemption – an aspiration towards middle-class morality – they were unlikely to receive money for living – eating, safe water (beer), and sanitary conditions. Steedman's analysis is supported by David Vincent's (1981) extensive study of working-class autobiographies in England which details

how specific narrative forms and techniques are used to tell the stories of a working-class life lived through narratives of redemption and dignity.

([Skeggs 2011](#): 276)

Within the context of the ICA, the Independent Group did not subscribe to the redemptive desires of the upper-class founders in relation to modernism but used their agency to challenge this cultural capital and introduce a questioning approach to modernism and culture based on working-class backgrounds, arts education and expert technical knowledge. This understanding of the dynamics of working-class culture underpins this article. As an undergraduate in the 1970s, I first read of the Independent Group in Alloway's chapter, 'The development of British pop' ([Alloway 1970](#)). At last I had found a cultural project I could identify with, admiring both design and fine art, but also mass culture on the same level playing field. This aligned with my own social background and experience, both my grandmothers hailed from the north east of England but found work in the south of England during the 1930s as housemaids in private homes; both were Hollywood fans ([Massey 2000](#)). I studied architecture, art, film and design in unison on my undergraduate course and also found the Independent Group resonated with my own experience of viewing culture in the round, across disciplinary divides. The insertion of popular culture was the final missing piece of the jigsaw in my knowledge and understanding of the history of art and design. It was this class and cultural dynamism which attracted me to study the Independent Group over the succeeding 50 years.

Historiography and social class

Twentieth-century art history writing on the Group, including the 1990 exhibition catalogue, *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* also focused on aesthetics, as its title belies, of a post-war, British and American relationship in the context of postmodernism. In such work, there is a broad-brush approach to the social origins of the

Independent Group, a shorthand homogeneity is assumed, which does not consider the finer detail. Jacquelyn Baas, one of the exhibition organizers and then director of the University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley to where the show toured, outlined her approach to the history of the Independent Group in the catalogue Introduction. She is not alone in exaggerating the ‘underprivileged, “street-smart” backgrounds of most of its members’ ([Baas 1990](#): 8). This reductionist view of the Independent Group was first created by the Independent Group itself, and later amplified by authors such as Dick [Hebdige \(1983\)](#) and questioned by others ([Massey and Sparke 1985](#)). This skews the make-up of the Independent Group too far towards a predominately working-class character. The Independent Group was not entirely ‘a gang of low born pirates’ ([Hebdige 1983](#): 55); nor was it a ‘rough lot’ according to Banham ([Cooper 1979](#)), but neither were the members entirely of the middle class. It was the subtle mix of different backgrounds and classes that constituted the unique flavour of the intellectual project, and it was the working-class ingredient that set the Group apart from others and which ensures its lasting importance in the history of art.

The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945–59 was based on my Ph.D. thesis ([Massey 1995](#)). I discussed social class but argued that it was more an adulation of modernism that brought the Independent Group together. Much of the research for that publication was based on archives, but also on interviews with the main protagonists, and hence reflected their own 1980s class position. At that stage in the development of art history, social class was not given due attention and ambitious artists and art historians airbrushed out their backgrounds, myself included. As Alex Turnbull observes about his father, the sculptor and Independent Group member, William Turnbull: ‘Interestingly I don’t think I ever heard Bill mention class during his entire life. I’m certain he felt it was what you did that really counted. Not what your background was’ ([2022](#)).

As part of this generalizing approach, there is a tendency to highlight individual practitioners as distinct from the Independent Group and reinforce the low born pirate myth. This is vital in terms of analysing the backgrounds of the artists and designers, rather than accepting the mythos sometimes projected, either directly by the subject, or on to others. Victoria Walsh identifies the photographer and member of the Independent Group Nigel Henderson as having a ‘removed relationship [...] with the group – a relationship which was determined partly by his seniority in age and partly by the extraordinarily cosmopolitan and culturally privileged circles in which he had moved as a young man’ (2001: 9). Henderson was not alone in this; the same could be said of the artist and critic Toni del Renzio, who was older than Henderson and had been born in Russia to aristocratic parents, lived in France and Spain and was one-time leader of the British Surrealists. Similarly, the graphic designer Edward Wright was even older and was born in Liverpool. His father was Ecuadorian vice-consul, and his mother was Chilean. Magda Cordell’s work has recently received an increased level of interest, mainly due to her striking paintings within the New Brutalist genre. A Hungarian born refugee and daughter of wealthy grain merchants, she settled in the United Kingdom as the wife of music producer, Frank Cordell, the son of a doctor. The architect Colin St John Wilson was the son of a bishop and his wife, Muriel Wilson (nee Lavender), the daughter of two artists. Alison Smithson’s father was a college principal. Therefore, on balance, around half of the Independent Group hailed from a range of middle-class backgrounds. Where is the working-class avant-garde within this collection of securely middle-class Independent Group members? Using new research into the backgrounds and education of seven, key working-class and lower middle-class members of the Independent Group – Lawrence Alloway, Reyner Banham, Richard Hamilton, John McHale, Eduardo Paolozzi, Peter Smithson and William Turnbull – I will demonstrate the key role that their working-class agency had in its history which has not been part of accounts of the Independent Group to date.

Backgrounds and early education

It was through a shared, childhood experience and positive regard for working-class, popular culture that Independent Group members formed a bond. Lawrence Alloway, the leading art critic and second convenor of the Independent Group, was largely self-taught as he suffered from tuberculosis as a child and was confined to bed. He developed an enthusiasm for American comic books at that time as well as a broad range of other reading matter. He came from a lower middle-class background, growing up in Wimbledon where his father had owned a book shop which he lost, then worked for other people, while his mother had been a secretary ([Alloway 1981](#)). A seminal member of the Independent Group was the design writer, Peter Reyner Banham, who convened the first full session of the group's meetings at the ICA during 1953–54. He was the son of a gas engineer and a scholarship boy who attended the Edward VI Grammar School in Norwich, one of England's oldest public schools. This school included 10 per cent of pupils on publicly funded scholarships during the 1930s, of which Banham was one, gaining entry to a fee-paying school on a grant by means of passing an entrance exam.

In 1964, Reyner Banham discussed social class in relation to his intellectual biography in the article 'The atavism of the short-distance mini-cyclist' ([Figure 2](#)). This was originally delivered as the Terry Hamilton Memorial lecture, staged at the ICA, in which he maps out his childhood and roots in working-class cycling in Norfolk. The atavism is meant as a return to an ancestral trait, a way of being derived from your family background. He describes: 'I've had for what I thought was the best of reasons in the world to describe myself in print as a "scholarship boy", to define my position for people who don't know the English social scene' ([1964](#): 91). And, Banham was keen to point out that this background gave him the authentic experience of growing up with popular culture. By not then treating his heritage with disdain when he entered the world of middle class, professional life, this experience gave him agency. This is in sharp contrast to his contemporary, and critical arch enemy, Richard Hoggart (1918–

2014) who Banham was alluding to with this quote. For Hoggart, in his autobiographical 26-page concluding chapter in *The Uses of Literacy*, ‘Unbent springs: A note on the uprooted and the anxious’ on the scholarship boy, he lamented the gulf between educated son and comparatively ignorant parents ([Hoggart \[1958\] 1973](#): 273–317). For Banham, this was not the case, and he treasured the popular culture he grew up with and continued to value it as a piece of vital creativity throughout his lifetime. It is also significant that out of the seven working-class members of the Independent Group, five came from beyond London and the Home Counties. Banham came from Norfolk, in the east of England, McHale, Paolozzi and Turnbull from Scotland and Peter Smithson, like myself, from the north east of England.

[Figure 2: Reyner Banham riding a Moulton bicycle along Carteret Street, Westminster, London, 1963. Banham was a keen user and advocate of the newly designed Moulton bike. © RIBAPIX.](#)

The background of Peter Smithson is not often mentioned in accounts of his and his wife’s career – that of Alison Smithson – which usually attracts attention as she was the daughter of a college principal. Nigel Whiteley claims: ‘[T]he backgrounds of the Smithsons could in no-way be described as working-class, let alone “rough”’ ([2002](#): 94). In complete contrast, Baas personifies him as ‘a working-class boy in Newcastle’ ([1990](#): 8). Further research has revealed that Peter Smithson was indeed working class but born in Stockton-On-Tees, a north-eastern industrial town 40 miles south of Newcastle, where his father worked as a travelling salesman: ‘They had a very humble house they shared with others, a toilet in the back yard’ (van den Heuvel 2020). Like Banham, Peter Smithson was a scholarship boy, gaining a place at the Stockton-On-Tees Grammar School, which was located on the other side of town. He had to cycle there and parted ways with most of his childhood friends, who attended the local secondary school. Soraya and Simon Smithson have vividly described his sense of alienation in moving away from his area of familiarity ([2022](#)). Therefore, for Banham

and Peter Smithson, the experience of being scholarship boys catapulted them into a new middle-class world of learning. However, they did not eschew the experiences of their early lives.

William Turnbull was the same – he was born in Dundee, Scotland, and his father was a shipyard worker – definitely hailing from a working-class background. He left school at 15 and studied art at evening classes. On the recommendation of one of his teachers, he gained employment in 1939 at the Dundee-based magazine and newspaper publishers D C Thompson, where he illustrated children's comics including *The Beano* and *The Dandy*. Turnbull also studied American comic books, as cousins who lived in America sent them over to Scotland.

Richard Hamilton was one of the few working-class members of the Independent Group to grow up in London, where his father was a grocery delivery driver and then delivered sports cars. He had also left school at a young age and studied art at evening classes in 1936 before gaining employment at the Reimann School of Art and Design, the first commercial art school in Britain which had relocated from Berlin in 1937 due to Nazi persecution. He worked in the display department and studied for free there in his own time. Hamilton then enrolled at the Royal Academy Schools in 1938 but had to cease his studies when war broke out and the school subsequently closed in 1940.

American popular culture played an important part in Eduardo Paolozzi's childhood, as he recalls:

I was very happy in Scotland [...] in an archaeological sense it was a culture that has disappeared; it was a culture that [...] was littered with lots and lots of what were called flea-pits, they were small cinemas, and [...] they were all geared to the poorest people, we were talking about pennies, you could get in for a penny, and they had all the most outrageously wonderful American films. And occasionally, occasionally, a boring English one, occasionally. But they all had serials, and in my grandfather's shop [...] and my father's shop [...] they had cinema bills, which they displayed, and you had a little blue book, and I used to go to the cinema

with my mother [...] called the Alhambra down Leith Walk, and I remember showing the book and them stamping it. So I saw a lot of films in my childhood.

([Paolozzi 1994: 8](#))

Paolozzi enjoyed his elementary school, where he shone academically and in physical activities; he then attended a Catholic School until the age of 16, which he loathed. He left school with the ambition to become a commercial artist and so attended Edinburgh College of Art in 1940 on a part-time basis during the evenings.

Elsewhere in Scotland, John McHale was born in a tenement, the eldest of five children in the reputedly rough, working-class district of Maryhill in Glasgow, where he enjoyed going to see Hollywood films as a child ([McHale 2010](#)). His father, also John McHale, was a bricklayer's labourer at the time of his birth ([General Register Office of Scotland 1922](#)). As his daughter-in-law and widow of the late John McHale Jr. recalls:

John McHale Sr came from a particularly poor background. His family was Catholic Scots Irish in a very tough Maryhill neighbourhood where the men worked on the docks & fought with razor blades. His mother was an Irish orphan from Cork County who John remembers (when he & his brothers lived with their grandparents during their parents' split) taking him to the train yards to gather coal for heating. As well, his grandfather, fired because he had been a union leader, had to turn to rat catching to support his family.

([Levcovitch 2022](#))

McHale left school at 14 and worked as a lab technician at Glasgow University before the war ([McHale 2022](#)).

While this class experience was at times burdensome, it also served to form and inform a positive and nuanced understanding of popular culture, which for some also provided means of employment and a proletarian rather than merely theoretical engagement with these emerging mass media.

Wartime experiences

Without exception, the working-class members of the Independent Group played vital roles during the Second World War and were deeply affected by their wartime trauma. In particular, they gathered a certain technical confidence and knowledge. They understood the tools of modernity in a hands-on way. Whether flying an aircraft or maintaining one, undertaking detailed technical drawing or working onboard a ship, this experience armed the Independent Group members with invaluable knowledge about how things worked. In 1941, Turnbull joined the RAF and served in Canada, Europe and the Far East as a pilot. Due to Paolozzi's Italian heritage, which had marked him out at school, he and his family were interned as enemy aliens. He was released into the Pioneers Corps after three months and spent the remainder of the war in a makeshift camp at Slough Town football ground, where he continued to draw. Richard Hamilton was too young to join the forces, so he was dispatched to a Government Training School and learned technical drawing; he then worked as a jig and tool draughtsman at Electric and Musical Industries (EMI) until peacetime. John McHale served as a medic on ships, including HMS Samphire based in Malta, which was sunk in January 1943. Reyner Banham spent the war years undergoing a management training course as an engineer with the Bristol Aeroplane Company, having won a national scholarship. Peter Smithson's family discouraged his aspirations to become an architect, as they perceived it as a precarious career. Nevertheless, he studied architecture at King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (then part of Durham University) from 1939 to 1942. He then served with the Queen Victoria's Own Madras Sappers and Miners in India and Burma.

Following these wartime experiences, the working-class members did not return to their working-class roots or locations; the fracture caused by the war severed their geographical connections. Due to generous support from the government in the post-war years, they were able to leave their backgrounds behind and begin to acquire that all-important cultural capital of the middle and upper classes through government funded education.

Post-war education reforms

Two government schemes were introduced in the post-war years, which supported students from working-class backgrounds in the study of art and design at tertiary level. The 1944 Education Act gave Local Education Authorities the power to grant living allowances to students above the compulsory school leaving age, raised by the act to 15 and implemented in 1947. Those who stayed on at school to take their higher examinations could then benefit from University, Technical College or Art School education with no fees and a maintenance grant. The Further Education and Training Scheme funded those who had served during the war for at least one year to study in recognition of the disruptive effect of wartime. This support and opportunity were groundbreaking and enabled many ex-service personnel and school leavers to benefit from post-compulsory education, particularly in the creative arts. The fresh intake of students from the working class and those who had served during wartime from the lower classes added a new vitality to post-war British culture. As Alexander Massouras has outlined:

Art students were likely to be more socially diverse because state support had broadened the educational franchise: the proportion of assisted students had been 41.1% in 1938-9 but was 75.7% in 1956-7, a shift which meant that even as student numbers underwent dramatic growth, the absolute number of unassisted students dropped.

([2015](#): 43)

This sea change in access to art and design education support was a major instigator in the creation of the Independent Group. As Lawrence Alloway comments: 'I had no University education which I think was something I shared with most IG members and it separated us from establishment attitudes which were otherwise easy to take for granted' ([1981](#): 1). The British post-war establishment, much the same as now, was dominated by those who attended public schools such as Eton, Harrow and Winchester, followed by degree level education at Oxford or Cambridge University. The ICA itself was founded by an upper-class group led by Roland Penrose who attended the private Quaker school Leighton Park in Reading and then

studied architecture at Queen's College, Cambridge. The other chief source of income for the ICA was Peter Watson, one of the wealthiest men in Britain at that time who had attended Eton and Oxford University. The ICA also received funding from the newly founded Arts Council, part of the post-war settlement which revolutionized art and design education, but that was not necessarily the case for the state subsidized arts ([Kennedy 2024](#): 161–92).

Art school educated

The war-torn Turnbull seized the opportunity to return to art and secured a three-year ex-service grant to study at the Slade School of Art from 1946 until 1949. This support from the grant gave Turnbull the means to live and study in London, an opportunity which would not have been possible before the war. This was the same for Eduardo Paolozzi. After being demobbed, Paolozzi was awarded a grant in 1944 to study at the Slade that was, at that time, located in Oxford having been evacuated from London at the start of the war. Paolozzi recalls feeling out of place, withdrawn from the social privileges and intellectual guidance more readily available to others. In the British Library's *Artists' Lives* interview with Frank Whitford this is clearly demonstrated:

FRANK WHITFORD: 'You didn't have any guidance in Oxford worth talking about?'

EDUARDO PAOLOZZI: 'Not really, not really, sadly, sadly.'

FRANK WHITFORE: 'Even though, I mean Oxford must have been full of people who potentially could have played that role.'

EDUARDO PAOLOZZI: 'Well that's a theory, but I never experienced that, I never went to tea with a don, or anything like that. I mean a lot of it, ironically, in Oxford, was spent locked up in the Ashmolean and doing fire-watching, evening after evening'.

([Paolozzi 1994](#): 50–51)

When the art school returned to London, he met William Turnbull and Nigel Henderson. The trio enjoyed going to the cinema together and, in the case of Paolozzi and Turnbull, found the Slade an anathema to their working-class heritage – a working-class community formed

within an unwelcoming and unfamiliar environment. All three shared an admiration for the European avant-garde.

It was at the Slade that Henderson, Paolozzi and Turnbull met another future member of the Independent Group from a working-class background on a grant: Richard Hamilton. After his war service, Hamilton was keen to return to his art studies but was denied this due to his reserved occupation. This scheme covered 5 million men in a range of jobs deemed essential for the war effort and included dockworkers, miners and farmers. However, he was granted permission to study upon an appeal to the Hardship Tribunal and returned to the Royal Academy Schools. He did not prosper, however, under the traditional education fostered by sporting artist Sir Alfred Munnings and was dismissed only to find himself called up for National Service for eighteen months. In 1948, he took up a place to study painting at the Slade and there he met Henderson, Paolozzi and Turnbull. They shared his social class background and admiration for the avant-garde, as did John McHale.

McHale was at this time in receipt of an ex-serviceman's grant and studied to become an art teacher for one year at Nelson's Hall, County of Stafford Training College ([McHale 2022](#)). Opened as a women-only college in 1950, for three years prior to this it had been one of 55 temporary colleges established under the Emergency College Training Scheme to accommodate the high uptake of the offer of one year's teacher training for ex-service personnel ([Staffordshire County Council 1949](#)). McHale was one graduate of the scheme and worked in some tough schools, but his rough childhood and experiences in the Second World War meant he could keep control of the classes, he had a certain authority ([Levcovitch 2022](#)). He married his first wife, Evelyn Hitchcock, in 1945 and lived in properties in London owned by her family. He was friendly with the Australian artist, William Tucker (1914–99) and travelled to Paris with him in February 1948 before then hitchhiking with him to Pisa, Italy, in September 1948 ([McCaughey 2006](#): 78–99). Tucker was part of the Angry Penguin surrealist

group in Australia during the Second World War, where he explored the technique of collage which became so important for McHale's oeuvre ([Figure 3](#)).

[Figure 3](#): John McHale (attributed to), *Portrait of a Young Man*, 1944. Possibly painted when McHale was still serving or as an art school project; very much in the style of Picasso whom he wrote his dissertation at Nelson College on. Oil on canvas. 270 mm × 230 mm. Previously in the Miles-Anderson collection and now owned by Anthony Flynn.

The architects who were part of the Independent Group also benefitted from the ex-service personnel grant. For example, Peter Smithson completed his course from 1945 to 1948 in Newcastle; Reyner Banham returned briefly to his native Norwich, where he met and married the art teacher, Mary Mullett. The pair attended art history extra-mural classes at the Castle Museum with Helen Lowenthal, who secured Reyner Banham a place at the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1949 on the strength of his essays and newspaper art criticism. Banham was a convinced modernist by this point, as his reviews for the local newspapers attest. Relying only on his own reading and his art history classes, he extolled the virtues of 'Revolutionaries in art: Czechoslovak painters and sculptors' in the *Eastern Daily Press*: 'In this exhibition may be seen works which have affinities to all the leading revolutionary art groups of the past 40 years' ([Banham 1948](#): 2). After his degree, Banham registered for a Ph.D. at the Courtauld, which he completed in 1958 under the supervision of Nikolaus Pevsner. Titled 'The theory of modern architecture 1907–1927', Banham drew upon his technical expertise throughout the thesis. The first paragraph of its abstract embodies an important insight into the attitudes of the Independent Group:

This study of the architectural theory of the second and third decades of the present century rests upon the assumption that the main repository of such theory is to be found in the writing of Le Corbusier and the books published by the Bauhaus. This assumption conceals a further assumption – that architectural theory of consequence is that which directs or explains the practical work of architects alive in the period under review.

For this reason, the work of pure aesthetes and historians plays a small part in this study, since their writings seem to have influenced chiefly by other aesthetes and historians. The bulk of the books, lecture, pamphlets and manifestos that are examined were the work of men engaged in architecture, in architectural education, journalism or the politics of the art world. In the upshot, there is little in the way of very deep reasoning, or the elevation of elaborate intellectual structures, and few individual theorists of sufficient standing to justify separate treatment at any length.

([Banham 1958](#): ii)

Even here, Banham is using his agency as an experienced journalist, and conversations with practising architects within the Independent Group and beyond at the ICA, to challenge the cultural capital he found at the Courtauld.

Lawrence Alloway was always keen to point out that the Independent Group lacked a traditional, university education, and he was right. Where university and art school education was enabled through the post-war grants, it was an experience notable for mutual support between future Independent Group members, at times its reluctance to convention and for a differentiated approach to academic art theory. Interrupted by the war years and hailing from working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds, the group was ambitious and socially mobile. Alloway studied art history at evening classes for four years from the age of 17 at the University of London and, like Banham, wrote exhibition reviews for various newspapers and magazines and edited the art education journal, *Athene*.

The shared, working-class backgrounds of Alloway, Reyner Banham, John McHale, Eduardo Paolozzi, Peter Smithson and William Turnbull fuelled a common enthusiasm for the visual culture of their childhood and the contemporary glamour of the American mass media. It was through collage that this energy is most clearly visible.

Collage culture

The Independent Group's first meeting happened around a collage performance. This was Paolozzi's famous *BUNK* lecture, when he fed images he had accrued whilst in Paris during 1947–49 through an epidiascope, projecting them onto the wall at the ICA in early 1952. As the convenor of the meeting, Richard Lannoy (1928–2018) recalled:

Well the first meeting we had of the Independent Group was an interesting occasion but it wasn't a happy one. I remember very well that Eduardo had, I think, generously offered to put his scrapbooks through the epidiascope, something he had never done before – baring his soul [...] I can remember his way of grunting over these things, a bit short of breath, the sheets were silently slipped up on the projector. Obviously Paolozzi was very reluctant to do this [...] it was an uneasy evening.

([Lannoy 2013](#): 28)

Why so uneasy? Paolozzi was not used to presenting in front of an audience, particularly an informed and critical audience which included the Banhams, Richard Hamilton, Nigel Henderson and William Turnbull. Paolozzi was also inserting working-class imagery into a cultured, upper- and middle-class space in the form of the ICA. He was not adhering to the redemptive model for the working-classes and aiming to middle-class wash his experiences. As Rosie Ram has argued: 'Collage can accommodate something more makeshift, informal and amateur, collectivised ways of working which threaten the power structures which legitimise and valorise artistic works' ([Ram 2021](#)).

This was the visual culture which Paolozzi admired, and he used his agency as a working-class artist to trouble the structures of knowledge at the ICA. As Paolozzi recalled:

[T]here was probably a kind of anger that the English were so parochial [...] like the curator of the Minorities in Colchester was very proud he had never been in Woolworth's down the street. It was a curious kind of English. And I had been probably a bit tired of having experiences at the Slade, this kind of English self-satisfaction, and also snobbish. That was part of doing BUNK that here was another more dynamic society.

([1994](#): 89)

Paolozzi's collage mentality derived from his childhood love of mechanical toys, Hollywood film and comic books. Cutting out and pasting your favourite images into scrapbooks had been, and remains, a popular pastime amongst the lower classes ([National Galleries of Scotland 2019](#)).

Collages such as *Heart's Desire* (1949) display Paolozzi's lifelong fascination with technology, glamour and the domestic interior ([Figure 4](#)). The work was created in Paris where Paolozzi had taken a break, seeking fresh inspiration when the education provided by the Slade bored him. Funded by the sales from his first show at the Mayor Gallery, during 1947 until 1949 he encountered modern artists such as Alberto Giacometti and Tristan Tzara. He also encountered a plethora of richly illustrated, American mass circulation magazines on the newsstands and in the possession of American GIs and their wives. Here lay unbeatable material for the artist, and Paolozzi set to work, assembling these technicolour idealizations of American consumer culture into collages. *Heart's Delight* is a key example, created during Paolozzi's last months in Paris in 1949 and brought back to London along with a huge collection of other imagery. Looking to a better future as a fine artist, he was able to present this iconography of American mass culture in the form of collage as a lifelong expert in the language of the mass media.

[Figure 4](#): Eduardo Paolozzi, *Heart's Delight*, 1949. Collage and watercolour on paper. 15.3/8 inches × 10.1/4 inches (39 cm × 26 cm). © The Paolozzi Foundation. Licensed by DACS 2024.

Paolozzi's approach to collage was partly inspired by the earlier work of artists such as Kurt Schwitters and Max Ernst. However, these modernist artists used everyday material culture in their collages, such as old bus tickets, Victorian engravings and news print. Paolozzi's work takes the art of collage to a different level, by using brash, illicit American imagery culled from mass culture sources. *Heart's Delight* is an example of his pioneering

work in this area, it succeeds in bringing a fresh vision to collage, buoyed by the artist's genuine enthusiasm for Americana. Simon Faulkner has argued that '[a] common approach to pop art in Britain is to establish a causal relationship between the social backgrounds of the artists – usually working or lower middle-class – and their choice of subject matter' ([2013](#): 163). He goes on to challenge this assumption by arguing that the pop artists used the medium of painting to represent such imagery and so were part of the art establishment ([2013](#): 165). However, Faulkner does not discuss the medium of collage in his chapter. I would argue that collage, rather than painting and sculpture, was the most important vehicle for expressing the Independent Group's knowledge of its working-class heritage.

The most famous collage associated with the Independent Group is Richard Hamilton's *Just What Is It that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956). But collage culture ran through much of the work of the Independent Group both prior and subsequent to this piece created for the Whitechapel Gallery's seminal *This Is Tomorrow* exhibition, including work that sought to investigate and expand collage as a medium. In 1953, Alison and Peter Smithson worked with Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi and Ronald Jenkins to produce the *Parallel of Life and Art* exhibition at the ICA, which was essentially a walk-in, three-dimensional collage. Less well known, but just as revealing about the Independent Group and its relationship with collage is the exhibition *Collages and Objects*. This took place at the ICA from 13 October until 30 November 1954, just at the moment when the Independent Group had started its second season. The season was led by Lawrence Alloway and John McHale, and it was Alloway who 'arranged' *Collages and Objects* ([ICA 1954](#): 5). He had made inroads into the ICA during 1953 and became a member of the Exhibitions Sub-Committee in October of that year ([ICA 1953](#): 1). He proposed the *Collages and Objects* exhibition following the success of the *Victor Pasmore: Paintings and Constructions 1944–54* show in the spring of 1954 which he organized ([Massey and Muir 2014](#): 98–99). The Pasmore show had been installed with the

help of Toni del Renzio, and Alloway reported to the Exhibitions Sub-Committee that he needed similar help with the hanging of *Collages and Objects* ([ICA 1954](#): 1). It was agreed that John McHale should assist Alloway in what was a demanding hang of 83 works.

This ambitious show was one of the first to focus on the modern collage and built on the exhibitions held at *Guggenheim Jeune* of 1938 and MOMA ten years later. It was essentially an historical survey with the Independent Group members added. The catalogue was an inventive assembly of artists' statements and the precise listing of the works. The juxtaposition of modernist collage work with that of the Independent Group reveals a clear departure from modernism on behalf of the Independent Group. Alloway situated a group of classic collages, still life works by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris on the end wall and Duchamp's *Belle Haleine* (1921), one of the collaged objects, faced the entrance.

By contrast, works by Independent Group members used collage to explore the New Brutalist landscape and contemporary world of advertising, technology and popular culture very unlike the modernist examples shown. Banham argued that collage 'was a flagrant insult to the aesthetics of the past' and the Independent Group members included in the show challenged prevailing fine art norms by introducing contemporary advertising imagery and new technology into the art gallery, prompted by the artists' shared backgrounds in working-class culture ([1954](#): 8). There was a physicality to the works; not still lives but human heads and interactive collage books. The sense of a brutalist handling of raw materials and the re-use of the torn, the marked and the damaged is evidenced in Paolozzi's four *Head* collages from 1953 to 1954 which Banham describes as 'junkyards of old machinery' ([1954](#): 8). Nigel Henderson's two works, *Head* and *Collage*, both from 1954, also explored the remaking of the damaged. Paolozzi's *Psychological Atlas* (1949) scrapbooked the world of visual, popular culture from a brutalist perspective whilst the works of John McHale, most notably *Transistor 16* (1953)

futuristically reflect a new technological era and the impact of mass culture with a cleaner, more precise aesthetic ([Figure 5](#)).

[Figure 5](#): John McHale, *Transistor*, 1954. Paper collage. 19.5 cm × 59 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale.

McHale also contributed two collage books to the exhibition, titled *Palimpsestuous* and *Secret Lives of a Talisman*, both from 1954. Now titled *Why I Took to Washers in Luxury Flats* ([Figure 6](#)) and *Shoe Life Stories* ([Figure 7](#)), he succeeded in pushing the boundaries of the scrapbook concept, pasting images and text onto the pages which he then cut to allow users to juxtapose different images. This exhibition reveals the Independent Group's use of a modern movement technique to reinterpret the world of mass media in a physical, hands-on way. This was further emphasized by the insertion of Paolozzi's *Screen* (1952) into the exhibition. At nearly 5 m in length, it was noted that it 'may be the biggest collage in the world' ([Alloway 1954a](#): 1).

[Figure 6](#): John McHale, *Why I Took to Washers in Luxury Flats*, 1954. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale. Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale/Yale Center for British Art (all rights reserved).

[Figure 7](#): John McHale, *Shoe Life Stories*, 1954. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale. Digital image courtesy of the estate of John McHale/Yale Center for British Art (all rights reserved).

The exhibition catalogue was also a serious attempt to disrupt existing norms. Each section was explained in historic and formal terms with key quotes from the leading practitioners and contained five illustrations, one by Hans Arp on the cover, one by Max Ernst, one by E. L. T. Mesens and the final illustration being John McHale's *Transistor No 16* (1953). Quotes from René Magritte and Stuart Davis eloquently outlined their approach to collage. More controversial was a quote from the former principal of the Reimann School of Art and

Design, Austin Cooper, who describes his collage *modus operandi*: ‘I do all sorts of things to them – put them in the rain, throw beer on them, and sometimes piss on them’, and a text by Alloway celebrated how ‘[c]ollages are urban: the contents of the artist’s waste-paper basket or the debris of a whole town. Blackmailers and kidnappers communicate with their victims by means of anonymous, ready-made, cut-out letters: collages’ ([Alloway 1954b](#): 6). This was a serious and scholarly exhibition, which succeeded in bringing collage to the fore and pushed back the boundaries of what was acceptable in the art gallery or the exhibition catalogue, driven by the ambition and scholarship of Alloway, but also his appreciation of contemporary mass culture. As he explained in his ‘Personal statement’ for the RCA student magazine *ARK* in 1957:

The popular arts reached, soon after the war, a new level of skill and imagination. Berenson, Fry, Read and the others gave me no guidance on how to read, how to see, the mass media. Images of home, the family, and fashion, in the glossy magazines; narratives of action and patterns of behaviour in the pulps; the co-ordination of both these images and these narratives in the movies. My sense of connection with the mass media overcame the lingering prestige of aestheticism and fine art snobbism.

([1957](#): 28)

Another Independent Group generated exhibition was the *Man, Machine and Motion* show of 1955, curated by Richard Hamilton with a catalogue written by Reyner Banham. Again, blown-up images taken from the mass media were displayed in specially designed frames to create a wraparound collage experience. Hamilton continued to work successfully with collage during the 1950s and 1960s, and many of his best-known works such as *\$he* (1958–61) and *Hers Is a Lush Situation* ([1958](#)) used collage elements. The same can be said of Eduardo Paolozzi who continued to create collaged works and built up the enormous Krazy Kat Archive of mass media ephemera, now held at the V&A, London.

The artist who used collage most avidly was John McHale throughout the 1950s and beyond. His design for the cover of *Architectural Review* in May 1957 consisted of collaged parts to depict a robot ([Figure 8](#)) ([Massey 2013](#): 163–65). He exhibited again at the ICA in 1958 in *3 Collagists: New Work by E L T Mesens, John McHale and Gwyther Irwin* ([Figure 9](#)).

[Figure 8](#): John McHale, *Machine Made America* cover design for *Architectural Review*, May 1957. © *Architectural Review*.

[Figure 9](#): John McHale, installation shot of *3 Collagists: New Work by E L T Mesens, John McHale and Gwyther Irwin*, 1958. © ICA.

Alloway curated the exhibition and it included seven of McHale's experiments with collage and polymer, four were titled *Telemath* in McHale's response to the mass media and the power of television in particular. In his artist's statement in the catalogue, he describes how

These images are in the nature of ikons. They attempt to define an approximate human image in terms of an iconography derived, often literally, from the context of the mass media. The extended environs of the movie, television, the picture magazines, and the glossy ad, reflects the current human situation – both as symbol and for real.

(McHale 1958: 1)

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the Independent Group consisted of a diverse mix of constituents, and a significant minority were from working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds, which introduced a novel reading of contemporary mass culture. Supported by broadening educational opportunities and the pioneering ICA, the working-class members of the Independent Group used their agency to challenge accepted norms by not jettisoning the culture of their childhoods. This was particularly apparent through the collage culture which the Group adopted. The Independent Group members who showed up at the newly founded ICA in the early 1950s were hungry for success in the world of culture, fuelled by their early

experiences, wartime suffering and state funded tertiary education. This can be evidenced through their published writing, art and design work, which stemmed from the discussions of this unique and vibrant collective. It was also the viscosity which came from discussing popular culture seriously with members who were from a more middle-class background that heightened the rigour of the shared investigation. The power of this working-class agency within and against pre-existing elite structures is a pivotal but, hitherto, neglected characteristic of the Independent Group. Comparatively little detail has been published to date on the group's class background, which was an important factor in their creative practice. These class backgrounds were a vital component for them and bringing this novel perspective helped them to shift the perceptions of visual culture in the British art establishment. The fact that social class has been largely ignored reveals something about who usually does the analysis and what the focus is. The power of a different perspective, in this case social class, will perhaps trouble established bourgeois and upper-class conventions held within higher education and the wider art establishment, just as the Independent Group ruffled feathers at the ICA and beyond.

Appendix 1

The initial inspiration for this article came from the current threat to funding for those from working-class backgrounds to study the creative arts and the humanities ([Thorpe 2024](#)). I and members of my family have all benefitted from funded places in higher education. My grandfather, Tom Carr, was a successful sporting artist who began his career working in the Durham coalfields. After a wartime injury he gained Ministry of Education funding to study fine art for two years at King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne from 1948 until 1950 ([Massey 2023](#)). His daughter (my mother), Gwen Carr, won a scholarship to Woolsingham Grammar School then studied to be an art teacher in the early 1950s with full government support. She went on to be a pioneering museum education officer ([Massey 2021](#)). My father also studied on a government grant at King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne during the 1950s and went on

to establish a successful architectural practice in the north east of England, earning a RIBA medal. I attended Newcastle Polytechnic and studied for a BA (Hons) in the history of modern art and design before completing my Ph.D. there on the Independent Group in 1984, all with government funding. I am grateful for the opportunities myself and my family enjoyed during, what now seem, the long-gone halcyon days of the working-class avant-garde. It is this agency which has inspired and informed this article.

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Notes

[1] *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945–65*, Stiftung Haus der Kunst Munich, 2016; *This Was Tomorrow: Pop Art in Great Britain*, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2016–17; *Postwar Modern*, The Barbican Art Gallery London, 2022.

[2] With the exceptions of Brighton, Oxford Brookes and Plymouth Universities, a single honours degree in art and or design history is only available to study at sixteen 'old' universities in the United Kingdom for 2024 entry. Those courses which were offered by former polytechnics, for example at Kingston, Leicester, Newcastle and Staffordshire have closed

down, It is rarely available as an A-level subject in state schools, although students can get involved with the extra-mural Art History Pearson Edexcel Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). It is also worth mentioning the Art History in Schools (AHIS) initiative which is a charity that aims to increase the number of young people in the United Kingdom with access to an education in art history.

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