Integrative Seminar : final draft due November 29th 2016

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A *Hopeless* painting, by a hopeful Roy Lichtenstein

In the 1960s America, while a generation of pop artists raised the copy to the rank of original, converted the cliché into an icon and erected commercial art as the emblem of an industrial and consumer society, Roy Lichtenstein seized the figure standardized by comics and advertising imagery.[1] In a world set to conquer new technologies, how did Roy Lichtenstein mark, with subtlety, the contrasts and paradoxes facing artists of his time, especially in his painting *Hopeless*?

In order to answer this question, we will first discover Roy Lichtenstein's biography, then describe the piece *Hopeless*. Lastly, we will look at the historical and artistic context of the chosen art piece and its contemporary reception.

Roy Lichtenstein was one of the first worldwide well-known American Pop artists. He was born, on October 27th 1923, raised in Manhattan, New York, in a Jewish family. He died in September 29th 1997, in Manhattan as well. Lichtenstein was a big figure in the art world and was able to develop and put forward new ideas. He went to school until the age of twelve, and he restarted it to attend Benjamin Franklin high school in New York City. After he graduated the high school, he attended watercolor classes at Parsons the New School in 1937[2], and Ohio State

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[1] Chris Hunt. *Roy Lichtenstein*. RM Arts Documentary Film. 1991.

[2] History | Parsons School of Design. "History." http://www.newschool.edu/parsons/history/. Accessed November 27, 2016.

University for both undergraduate and master's degree[3]. The American army interrupted his education to join it, in order to fight World War II. After the war, he came back to finish his degrees in fine arts, and he taught art to students for 10 years at Ohio State University.[4]

When Lichtenstein was growing up, he was very interested in two domains: comic books, and science. Later on, in his teenage years, he became very interested in art and design. At the beginning of his artistic career, he focused on abstract expressionism art. After 1961, however, he made a turning point through working on comics and showing his own unique independent style, which was very successful.

In 1951, Lichtenstein held his first exhibition at Carlebach Gallery in New York, for which he was strongly criticised by the *The New York Times* newspaper. In the article "Is He the Worst Artist in the U.S", from a *LIFE* magazine published in January 31,1964, was written that "a critic of the New York Times, hedging only a bit, pronounced Roy Lichtenstein "one of the worst artists in America". Others insisted that he is no artist at all, that his paintings of blown-up comic strips, cheap ads and reproductions are tedious copies of the banal." Yet, an "equally emphatic group" of critics, collectors and museum officials found Lichtenstein's Pop Art "fascinating", "forceful" and "starkly beautiful".[5] Roy Lichtenstein's paintings and style had stirred up controversy and divided the art-world, from the beginning.

During this time, when he faced much criticism, he met Allan Kaprow, who was a professor at Rutgers University, a painter and the inventor of happenings. This encounter made

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[3] Roy Lichtenstein Biography - Life, History, School, Son, Book, Information, Born, College, Time. "Roy Lichtenstein Biography." http://www.notablebiographies.com/Ki-Lo/Lichtenstein-Roy.html. Accessed November 27, 2016.

[4] Berman, Avis. "Biography". Roy Lichtenstein Foundation. 2016. http://lichtensteinfoundation.org/biography/. Accessed November 14, 2016.

[5] Chris Hunt. *Roy Lichtenstein*. RM Arts Documentary Film. 1991.

Lichtenstein interested in Pop art. In 1961, Roy Lichtenstein got first major publicity from publishing his oil on canvas painting *Look Mickey*. This artwork is the first example of the artist's employment of Ben-Day dots, speech balloons and comic imagery as a source for a painting.

Moreover, he became a popular artist when he started to make a series of works based on comics from 1965 to 1966. Lichtenstein's most well-known works, part of this series, are *Whaam!*, *Girl with Ball*, *Drowning Girl*, and *White Brushstroke*.[6] Roy Lichtenstein was 40 years old, when he painted *Hopeless.* At that time, he was in the middle of a divorce procedure with his first wife.

Hopeless is a 44x44 inches oil and acrylic painting on canvas, made in 1963, depicting a woman's face lying down on a blue fabric. She is crying and we can tell from the thought bubble reading "THAT'S THE WAY--IT **SHOULD** HAVE **BEGUN**! BUT IT'S HOPELESS", that she is consumed by a momentary love related frustration. The text in the bubble is about the dynamic between hope and lost hope. Love is symbolized as inescapable and we can see this through the position of her right hand on the fabric and the emotion of the woman. The situation can be qualified as melodramatic and humorous at the same time because of the painting's style. Indeed, it is an imitation of an illustration called *Run For Love!* from the comic book *Secret Hearts* by Tony Abruzzo, revealing the idealized comic figure of an American woman struggling with her own love life, as if she was part of a romantic novel.[7]

The beautiful and glamorous woman possesses straight blond hair, blue eyes with big

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[6] Janis Hendrickson. *Le Musée du Monde, Série 5 : Lichtenstein.* Paris. France. September 2016.
[7] Avis Berman. "Image Duplicator". Roy Lichtenstein Foundation. 2016. http://www.imageduplicator.com. Accessed November 12, 2016.

black eyelashes and pink lips, painted in a single color. Her light pink skin and the light blue fabric are made of Roy's famous Ben-Day dots. These dots call attention to the mass-produced image that he inspired himself from. This motif was named after the inventor of the newspaper printer Benjamin Day.[8] The Ben-Day dots system involved optical illusions, by creating the impression that a color is actually painted, although it is composed of different colored dots, either closely spaced, widely spaced or overlapping.[9] For example, blue dots and red dots could create the illusion of the color magenta. Using this innovatory way of printing allowed printers to save money, especially when it came to printing comic books, as it enabled them to inexpensively create shading and secondary colors. Roy Lichtenstein used dots because they have no sensitivity. It symbolizes a lack of nuance, and the lack of interests in something you would print on a surface because it was used by industrial machines mass printing comic books . [10] Yet, in this painting, he made the dots somehow elegant. In order to paint them, Roy artificially reproduced a mechanical frame like those used in four-color photogravure.[11] When looking at this painting from far, the viewer cannot notice them. Heavy black painted outlines frame the areas of flat bright colors or the areas that have these Ben-Day dots.

Roy chose to paint on a white canvas because it allowed him to project his pencil sketches on it, using a projector, in order to find the right size for his drawing and to draft its contours more easily on his final medium.

Hopeless is considered to be one of Roy Lichtenstein's most famous artwork embracing

[8] Maggie Burgan. "Roy Lichtenstein: Benday Dot Technique". December 2009. http://www.awdsgn.com/classes/fall09/webI/student/trad_mw/burgan/final_project/pages/technique.html. Accessed November 12, 2016.

[9] Francis Morel and Pascale Bertrand. *Connaissance des arts, Hors série : Roy Lichtenstein*. 2015.

[10] Avis Berman. "Image Duplicator". Roy Lichtenstein Foundation. 2016. http://www.imageduplicator.com. Accessed November 12, 2016.

[11] Chris Hunt. *Roy Lichtenstein*. RM Arts Documentary Film. 1991.

the style of the Pop art movement, in which he became one of the key figures.

During the 1960's the 'Pop art' movement emerged in New York and the United Kingdom. In 1955, the British curator Lawrence Alloway invented the term Pop art to describe art that inspires itself from popular vernacular visual forms[12]. Pop art is characterized by bold, simple, every-day imagery, and vibrant block-colours. Pop art has a hip, fresh and new feel to it, whilst artists part of that movement attempted to embrace the post-war manufacturing and media boom.

Roy Lichtenstein was one of the pioneers in the Pop art movement together with Andy Warhol. In Andy Warhol's work, specifically in *Campbell's Soup Cans* from 1962, there was a major focus on fame, mass consumerism and the fast-paced nature of production in factories. Lichtenstein chose to use comic strips as inspiration for his artwork, a mundane object, used for a person's entertainment to escape reality and emerge themselves into a fantasy world.

During the late 1950's whilst Lichtenstein was a professor at Rutgers University, he mainly painted artistic subjects from mythology and American history.[13] He also experimented with different media forms, subjects and methods. Lichtenstein's' work *Hopeless*, operates as an artwork to reveal how a comic strip scene can embody something totally different out of context on a canvas in an art gallery. During the 1960's, his work was deemed provocative, yet in the eyes of contemporary viewers it triggers a different reaction. Today, the audience would first look at the formal values before discussing the effects drawn from the image of a girl crying.

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[12]Hendrickson, Janis. *Le Musée du Monde, Série 5: Lichtenstein* . Edition *Le Monde*. September 2016. Paris. France.
[13]Hendrickson, Janis. *Le Musée du Monde, Série 5: Lichtenstein* . Edition *Le Monde*. September 2016. Paris. France.

This piece Hopeless, was produced in 1963 during a period of mass consumerism, and interestingly, the boom of plastic. The widespread use plastic allowed the creation of acrylic paint, a highly pigmented resin, which inspired Lichtenstein to create vibrant and loud pieces. During that period, silkscreen printing was predominantly used and has influence Lichtenstein's painting technique aiming to make the brushstrokes invisible.[14]

Finally, we can ask ourselves why Roy Lichtenstein is more often portraying women reacting to love affairs. He is not portraying women in a empowering way, in fact we could say he is stereotyping women as being melodramatic and over emotional, always crying for men. Yet, it is through his emphasized, almost caricatural style, that he was hopefully able to make his artwork's viewer aware of the superficiality and fakeness in the modern society. Nonetheless, he did not consider that when it comes to love affairs, it is not only women that cry for men, but different genders with various sexual orientations as well.

To conclude with, Roy Lichtenstein marked, with subtlety, the contrasts and paradoxes facing artists of his time, by translating the impression of a constant play of double meanings and allusions, and by reproducing the effects of wefts, surfaces and contours, banishing emotion, lyricism and perspective. In a world set to conquer new technologies, he only exposed the mechanical appearance of comic books, notably in his painting *Hopeless.*

Today, Roy Lichtenstein's message has an ongoing relevance to our society, as there are still issues on stereotyping women, and issues about massive consumption, especially in the

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[14] Editors of Phaidon Press. *The 20th-Century art book*. Reprinted edition. London: Phaidon Press. 2001.

context of globalization.

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