Outer space, inner space, cyberspace

Space is not really the right word. Spaces would be better. Outer space, our own interior space, consumer-society space, media space, cyberspace. The microscopic space of DNA and the astronomically vast cosmos. Even the most famous of James Rosenquist's paintings, the gigantic *F-111*, painted exactly 50 years ago, and first exhibited by Leo Castelli in his gallery on 4 East 77th Street in New York in 1965, is seen in some sort of space. Or as Rosenquist put it himself: The F-111 fighter-bomber "is flying through the flak of consumer society to question the collusion between the Vietnam death machine, consumerism, the media, and advertising". Pop art has always had a political dimension, not least in Rosenquist's work.

I can see a connection – though whether it really exists is another matter – between William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and Rosenquist's paintings. Burroughs' famous book was published in 1959, the same year that Rosenquist, then 26, abandoned the abstract expressionism which he had embraced up to that point. Together with Warhol, Lichtenstein, Indiana, Dine, Wesselmann, Oldenburg, Rosenquist would revolutionize contemporary painting through pop art. Was this mere accident or was there a connection? Who knows? But while Warhol increasingly devoted himself to repetitive series, Lichtenstein worked on his "Ben-Day" dots and Oldenburg monumentalized trivial everyday objects, Rosenquist, in my view, created his own visual equivalent to Burroughs' *cut-up* technique. His earliest works in the pop-art genre have more in common with Rauschenberg's *combines* than with Warhol's screen painting, though with the important difference that Rosenquist did not incorporate real physical objects into his work.

Burroughs' technique really consists of two different techniques, and there are correspondences to both of them in Rosenquist's paintings. There is the cut-up process which Burroughs claimed to carry out "by taking a finished and fully linear text and cutting it in pieces with a few or single words on each piece. The resulting pieces are then rearranged into a new text"[1]. The visual equivalents to this are the collage and the fragment. The second technique Burroughs called *fold-in*. This was "the technique of taking two sheets of linear text (with the same line-spacing), folding each sheet in half vertically and combining with the other, then reading across the resulting page"[2]. In Rosenquist's paintings this corresponds to juxtapositions. Two or more hitherto unrelated visual elements are brutally juxtaposed, for example

---

[1] William S. Burroughs, "The Cut-Up Method", *The Moderns: An Anthology of New Writing in America*, NY: Corinth Books, 1963.
[2] *Ibid.*

a colour picture of tinned spaghetti beneath a black and white image of a recumbent woman's face in turn beneath a black and white picture of the front of a car (*I Love You with My Ford*, 1961, in the collection of Moderna museet, Stockholm). There is not the slightest trace of a conciliatory or synthesized transition between the three visual elements that make up the painting. Rosenquist has used these two techniques or methods throughout his production. And he applies them to commercial culture – with which he has a decidedly ambivalent relationship. True, he takes his material from mass culture or popular culture but he does not just reproduce it straight off. Rather, he complicates it, stroking it against the grain, sometimes turning it in the opposite direction, against advertising and the commercial culture. Or, as he puts it himself: "When I use a combination of fragments of things, the fragments or objects or real things are caustic to one another, and the title is also caustic to the fragments". The almost surrealist impact sometimes created by Rosenquist's paintings does not come just from his intense colours, but equally from the caustically corrosive collisions between fragments and juxatposed iconic elements that occur all the time in the pictorial space. Rosenquist consciously creates defects or glitches in the stream of information and these force the glossy, seductively commercial mass culture into a haphazard, defective, disturbed and disturbing reality.

In Rosenquist's new paintings the spaces are more present than ever. The word "universe" also appears in many of the titles. While his technique is largely the same as before, with cut-ups and fold-ins in abundance. His current paintings, however, are more kaleidoscopic, more fractal and more fragmented than formerly. Organic forms are embedded in and collide with geometric forms against a backdrop reminiscent of the Milky Way. Rosenquist's art has always conveyed a strong sense of a political and cultural "Now". In the 1970s he was critical of the American space programme which, he maintained, deprived the federal budget of money that might have been used for more urgent purposes. So when in 1970 he paints *Apollo 13* he is not paying homage to the wonders of space technology. Rather, he paints Apollo 13 exploding, an explosion that, in actuality, took the lives of three astronauts. In his new paintings he seems more reconciled with space, with the cosmos, with the universe itself, though his anxiety and his critical stance have not been silenced. What we encounter is a cosmos in which chaos is close, if not to God, so at least to a zapping consciousness. In *The Richest Man Gazing at the Universe* (2014) a human skull in the form of something reminiscent of an x-ray image floats around in the Milky Way. In the foreground there is a pile of gold coins, while on the left an object which might be a buckled hubcap hovers in space. I read this painting as though it is a contemporary *Vanitas* image. What do money and riches mean from the point of view of an eternity posed by the universe? *O memento mori!* Or, as the title of the exhibition has it: "*All Things are Devoid of Intrinsic Existence*". From a cosmic angle our human existence

is, as it says in the cosmic opera *Aniara*, no more than a "tiny bubble in the The Holy Spirit's breath".

Back in the 1960s, when there were no computer games, no Internet, no Twitter, no Instagram and no Facebook, Rosenquist's cut-up technique allowed him to capture – better than any of the other giants of pop art – our contemporary consciousness characterized not by contemplation but by a vernacular glance; a consciousness that pans in, flickers, jumps, zigzags and zaps. In the course of a single minute in front of a screen images of a catastrophic earthquake in Turkey, a TV ad for shampoo, a selfie, a picture of a friend's dog, a combat helicopter in action and a picture of today's lunch can all flutter through our consciousness. And so it is not surprising that Rosenquist's paintings from the 1960s and 1970s still seem topical, even prophetic. A year or two ago he commented on his *F-111* painting which hangs in the Museum of Modern Art in New York: "When you come out of the contemporary room right across the hallway and you look and you see part of my painting, it looks like it's avant-garde, or it's in the future, and the damn thing is 47 years old".

James Rosenquist has created some of pop art's most remarkable images. Today, at the age of 80, he qualifies as an *Old Master*. But with his new paintings he shows that he remains very much in the present, even though this is spiced with a dash of melancholy. Art is long and the universe is even longer. And life? It is merely a momentary flicker in the darkness of eternity.

Lars O Ericsson

March 2014