

Painting that Grows Back: Futures Past and the Ur-feminist Art of Magda Cordell McHale, 1955–1961

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Abstract

At the end of the Second World War, the Hungarian-Jewish painter Magda Cordell McHale fled to London, where she remained until 1961, when she moved to the United States to pursue a career in futurology with her husband, the artist John McHale (d. 1978). The decade or so she spent in London was the most prolific phase in her artistic career. It saw her involved in the foundation of the Independent Group (1952–55), and exhibiting at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Hanover Gallery. Although Cordell was widely recognized for her ambivalent portrayals of the female body as mythic archetype and techno-scientific testing ground, she has not received due acknowledgment in the recent literature on postwar Britain and the Independent Group. This article re-evaluates the legacy of her proto-feminist artworks, arguing for Cordell's important contribution to postwar British art and culture.

Magda Cordell's paintings from the 1950s are monumental and monumentally lurid. Reviewers have compared them to monsters and fertility idols, likening their texture to blood, amniotic liquid, and, on one occasion, "neon-lit pleura".¹ Born in 1921 into a Hungarian-Jewish family before the outbreak of the Second World War, Cordell fled Hungary to escape Nazism and eventually migrated to Great Britain with her husband, the English composer Frank Cordell.² Together they participated in the creation of the Independent Group (IG), an unofficial movement of artists, architects, designers, musicians, and critics who met at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London from 1952 to 1955 with the shared ambition of introducing mass culture into what they saw as the conservative establishment of the fine arts galleries.³ Cordell was the only female and non-British artist in the IG, with connections to the world of Continental painting and the community of émigrés artists of middle European and Jewish origin who gravitated in the orbit of the Hanover Gallery. What little posterity has made of her artistic legacy is tied to her founding role in the group, even though her canvases sit uncomfortably with the proto-Pop aesthetic of advertisements and Americana commonly associated with that moment. This article reconsiders a series of paintings and exhibitions that Cordell produced during her last London years (a period of about half a decade following the end of the IG meetings in 1955), with the objective of drawing attention to her consistent attempts to

denaturalize on the plane of the canvas the stereotypical identification of femininity with the nurturing maternal body.



Figure 1

British Library, London, *Uppercase* 1 journal cover, 1958.

The art historian David Mellor is right to claim that what is “exceptional” about Cordell’s paintings “lies in their aspect of female signs; that is, they act as signs for an internal and—crucially—maternal body, unrepresented elsewhere in British art at this moment”.⁴ In spite of this, or perhaps for this very reason, first-hand testimonies of her postwar activities are few and far between. The most comprehensive source of information is a lamentably short feature on her work published in the first issue of the journal *Uppercase* (1958; fig. 1), a remarkable experiment in the graphic arts initiated and edited by the British architect Theo Crosby.⁵ Among its illustrations the reader will find a compelling portrait of Cordell standing in front of *Figure (Woman)* from 1956–7 (fig. 2), a signature example of her treatment of the female body as a ballooned aggregate of pictorial lumps. Presumably included to give a sense of the epic scale of her canvases, the photograph frames a three-quarter-length Cordell glamorously posing against the figure’s swollen navel (fig. 3). Not only is this portrait a rare document of the artist’s legendary panache, but it is also a highly symbolic illustration of what is at stake in rediscovering her practice, for it dramatizes the naturalized correspondence of womb and woman in its midst.

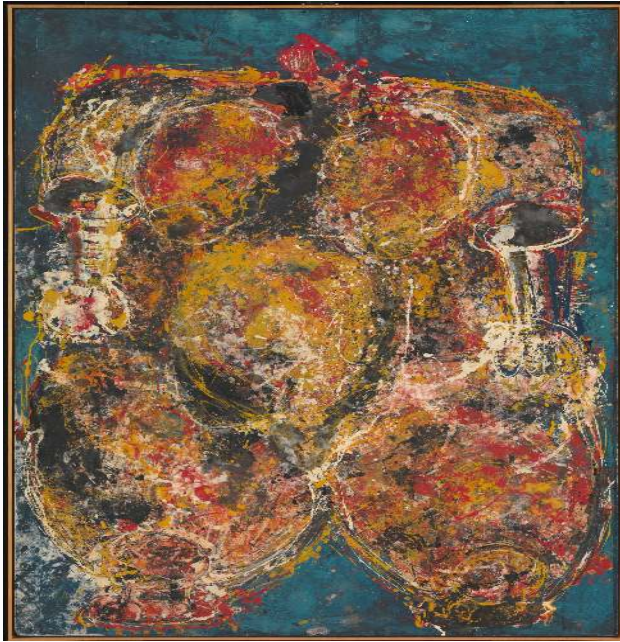


Figure 2

Magda Cordell McHale, *Figure (Woman)*, 1956–57, unconfirmed medium (mixed materials on canvas), 231.2 × 152.2 cm. Tate, London. Digital image courtesy of Tate, London 2015.



Figure 3

Sam Lambert, *Magda Cordell with *Figure (Woman)*, 1956–57, untitled photographic portrait reproduced in *Uppercase 1* (1958). British Library, London.

Little secondary literature is available on Cordell, and none of it revisits Crosby's feature in *Uppercase*.⁶ Being sidelined is not an uncommon fate for a woman active in a male-dominated art world, especially in the postwar period, but such a manoeuvre downplays the original circumstances of this artist's career, for Cordell was a successful painter, with shows in prominent London venues such as the Hanover Gallery and the ICA.⁷ This article is an attempt to make up for the neglect that her art has suffered. The works that will be considered were all made before 1961, when Cordell moved to the United States with her second husband, fellow IG artist John McHale, to pursue an academic career in futurology, an interdisciplinary research field concerned with postulating future global trends on the basis of patterns of continuity and change.⁸ Importantly, Cordell never stopped considering herself a painter. Looking back to the experience of the IG many years later, she wrote: "I am a European painter, for me that figure, that shape, is still superior to all that"—"all that" presumably meaning the spectacle of mass reproducible images that in the 1950s other artists in the IG had started to assimilate into their works of art through techniques of montage.⁹ In spite of such statements, Cordell's postwar paintings suggest that she shared the group's fascination with popular varieties of anthropology, ethnography, science, and science fiction. Like her peers, Cordell was interested in how these disciplines offered an evolutionary perspective on the nature of intergenerational change, and in particular on the mechanism of collective adaptation to changing environmental circumstances. This had become an intimate concern for a generation of young men and women who had survived the Second World War only to witness the transition to a mass consumer society and the new global configuration that emerged with the Cold War. The following pages posit that this is the arena in which Cordell's figures come alive. Her paintings from the late 1950s pit nurture against nature by reconstructing the effects of a changing techno-cultural environment on the

maternal–foetal organism, whilst also exposing this as a powerful symbolic vessel for the fantasies of collective regeneration of the postwar society.

New figures

In 1945 the Allied victory had tipped the balance of world power in favour of the United States, paving the way for the dissolution of the British Empire and the onset of inflation and austerity in the motherland. Britain's foreign policy was increasingly assimilated within a broader Western bloc piloted by the US in the ensuing Cold War against Soviet Communism, while the emphasis on techno-industrial regeneration and military capability dominated domestic politics across parties.¹⁰ It was only in the late 1950s that efforts to intensify the rate of technological innovation and accelerate consumption came to fruition under the wings of the dollar. Cordell's move to figuration coincided with Britain's recovery from the war. It was in 1955, in fact, that she switched from abstraction (large grid compositions, none of which survive today) to figuration, a genre that was to dominate her work for the rest of her life. She exhibited her new paintings in 1956, the year in which the consumer-driven economic boom officially ended a decade of rationing, giving way to a general—though by no means truly inclusive—sense of rising affluence.¹¹ The mass media played a key role in cementing the psychological effects of this epochal regeneration; and even before the verdict of economic growth was official, American magazines and films in Technicolor projected the cathartic fantasy of an unprecedented opulence. The IG was quick to register the euphoric effects of this bonanza. “In some sense we felt that the new images might help us to prevent the repetition of the inhuman and unseemly past”, Cordell later remembered. “It was with some excitement, then, that we approached the new and tried to erase the old.”¹²

Cordell started experimenting with a range of techniques and binders (including oil, ink, wax, acrylic, and polymer resin) to achieve different degrees of density and transparency on canvas. She worked in series, testing out the variations on two main iconographic typologies, often differentiated with the alternative titles of “Figure” or “Presence”. The former tend to be acephalic (headless) and gynomorphic (female shaped), though Cordell also produced a number of male variants with elongated necks, reminiscent of Francis Bacon's screaming creatures of the same period. The gender is sometimes noted in the title, as in the case of *Figure (Woman)* (fig. 3), against which she had her portrait taken in 1958. Lost in the black-and-white reproduction is the bright blue background against which the figure emerges as a blazing assemblage of bright orange and red body parts, which, far from being anatomically accurate, are concentrated around three areas with overt feminine connotations: thighs, breasts, and navel.

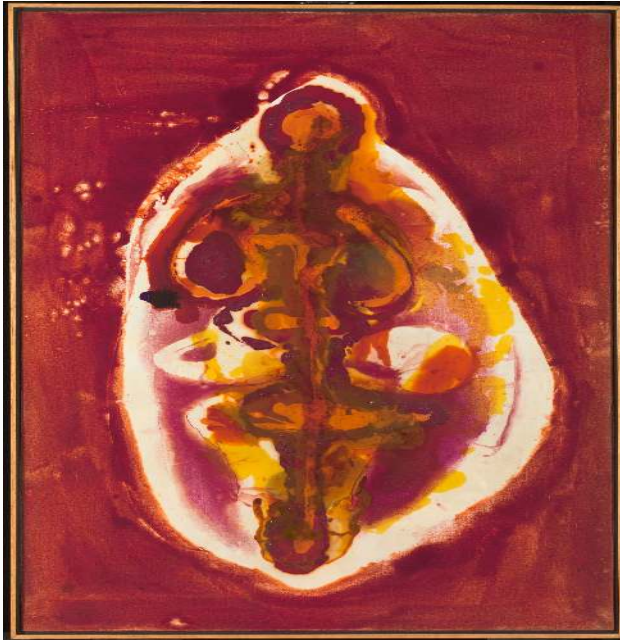


Figure 4

Magda Cordell McHale, *No. 12*, 1960, unconfirmed medium (mixed materials on canvas), 152.4 × 101.6 cm. Tate, London. Digital image courtesy of Tate, London 2015.

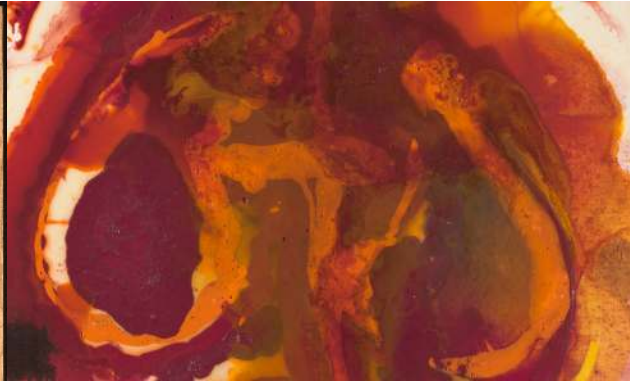


Figure 5

Magda Cordell McHale, *No. 12* (detail), 1960, unconfirmed medium (mixed materials on canvas), 152.4 × 101.6 cm. Tate, London. Digital image courtesy of Tate, London 2015.

More so than the Figures, whose labyrinthine tangles of paint sometimes look flattened by the pressure of a rolling weight, the Presences emerge out of the pictorial frame in relief. They are smaller, abstract entities that tend to be organized in concentric haloes, combining the mystical tradition of religious icons with the recently discovered dimensions of sub-atomic physics and cytological cross-sections on a Petri dish. Whether their core is in fact a relief or a gaping hole is left to the imagination of the viewer. Take painting *No.12* (fig. 4), for example. The background is deep crimson and encircles a thicker, oblong halo, inside which floats an even more clotted globular nucleus (in bright pink, yellow, and red), whose texture betrays the use of liquid plastic (fig. 5). Not only do Cordell's Presences evoke the body on the plane of the haptic imagination, but often they also resemble internal organs in formation, oscillating in the eyes of the beholder between embryo, placenta, kidney, liver, and pleura. Their ambivalence as signs treads the line between abstraction and figuration, complicating the idea that Cordell simply dropped one for the other—rather, the figure here appears “under abstraction”, to borrow from Andrew Lee.¹³ Perhaps it would be accurate to say that Figures and Presences represent an ecosystem of interdependent organisms, with the former depicting a grotesque maternal body and the latter hinting at its embryonic content, though both can also be seen to collapse the relation between inside and outside.

Theo Crosby's introduction to Cordell's work in the first issue of *Uppercase* offers the most authoritative account of her technique to date. After crediting her for having “heralded the abstract expressionist movement in this country”, the editor informs us that “the AE [Abstract Expressionist] fallacy of the happy accident does not apply” to this painter. According to him, she was more concerned with “reconstructing the human image” through a painstaking, quasi-sculptural process of accretion that involved collaging, glazing, and overpainting, and which

ultimately led her to work directly with pigment and plastic on canvas, “producing some quite remarkably beautiful effects”.¹⁴ Only a few years earlier, Lawrence Alloway—possibly the most imaginative art critic in the IG and a very close friend of Cordell’s—had compared her working method to a speeded-up movie of a tapestry being woven.¹⁵ On her part, Cordell called herself a “binge painter”, who would go on layering pigment until she was “limp and all wrung out”.¹⁶ Everyone agreed that her works were monuments to process.

Crosby was also quick to remark on the visceral physicality of Cordell’s paintings, claiming that they offer the human body “sliced any way you like”.¹⁷ This choice of words situates *No.12* at the interface of surgery and butchery, drawing out the impression of violent bodily disintegration transmitted by its bloody tonalities. In this respect, Cordell’s work is in keeping with that of a generation of postwar painters who tried to reduce the brutalities of the recent war to a common denominator that would transcend history’s contingencies: truly abstract horror, distilled at the limit of the amorphous. For artists as different as Francis Bacon, Jean Dubuffet, and Alberto Burri this meant dismembering and tearing at the human form on the plane of the canvas. Bacon called it “a complete interlocking of image and paint and *vice versa*”.¹⁸ In 1955, the architectural critic Reyner Banham explicitly linked Cordell’s work to the European context of *Tachisme* and *Art informel* (as well as American Abstract Expressionism). In a manifesto-like article titled “The New Brutalism”, Banham announced the emergence of a new avant-garde movement with international affiliations and a local epicentre in the context of the IG.¹⁹ “As a descriptive label”, he wrote, Brutalism “has two overlapping, but not identical senses”: the first is architectural and is indebted to the postwar designs of the British couple Alison and Peter Smithson; the second refers to the *art brut* of Jean Dubuffet and includes Jackson Pollock, Karel Appel, and Alberto Burri, among the foreign artists, and Eduardo Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson and Cordell in London.²⁰ Together with the Smithsons, these last three artists were to represent the Brutalist sub-faction of the IG. There is no evidence that Cordell welcomed the epithet of Brutalist artist, though she was familiar with, and perhaps inspired by, the work of Dubuffet and Burri, which travelled to London for major exhibitions at the ICA and the Hanover Gallery.²¹ Indeed, her paintings appear just as distant from Dubuffet’s funereal bricolages of mud and ashes, as they are from the rustic iconography of scarification recognized by many in the stitched up *Sacchi* that Burri made after serving as a military surgeon in the Second World War (whereas his experiments with red plastic came later in the 1960s).²²

In a 1960 interview, Cordell used the metaphor of organic self-repair to describe her works, and explained that “they can cut away huge pieces of your internal organs and you will grow them again or compensate for their loss. And also, all the time that your body is renewing itself, so in your lifetime you are remade countless times. This to me is an incredible thing.”²³ Clearly the question of biological endurance was close to the bone for someone who had escaped the Holocaust. Yet, her paintings resist being reduced to symptoms of wartime trauma. More than open wounds and existential incisions, they evoke supernatural embryos in formation, or organs waiting to be transplanted whilst still beating to the artificial rhythm of a technologically inflected vitalism. Crucially, the solidified blotches of polymer resin on Cordell’s canvases cast the allusion of biological plasticity in a highly synthetic facture. Hence, when she said that “for me that figure, that shape, is still superior to all that”, Cordell did not dismiss the material world of the postwar society. Quite the opposite, her paintings show fantastical regenerative properties precisely because their surfaces are visibly projected towards the high-tech sensorium of the consumer miracle. Ultimately, the event of physical renewal appears simultaneously a meta-

commentary on painting's cathartic faculties and a signifier of the transformations of the postwar epoch—Cordell's complete interlocking of image and paint.

Prototype



Figure 6

Magda Cordell McHale, *Cortex and Nova*, 1955, reproduced in *Paintings and Drawings by Magda Cordell*, 1956, exhibition catalogue. National Art Library, London.

Cordell discovered the power of speculative thinking in popular science fiction magazines imported from the United States, such as *Galaxy Science Fiction*. That she approved of sci-fi is evinced from the titles of the works on display in 1956 in her solo show at the Hanover Gallery (all 1955): *Android m* and *Android f* hint at trans-human robots; *Osmotic I* and *II*, as well as *Algal*, speak of elemental life forms; while *Nova* and *Supernova* take the evolutionary poetics of origins to the realm of the galactic, imagining atomic explosions in white dwarf stars.²⁴ If the androids are Figures of sorts, the outer space series fits in with Cordell's more abstract Presences, displaying the same concentric structure. A black-and-white close-up of the nucleus of *Nova* (fig. 6) reproduced in the exhibition catalogue tells us that the painting was organized around an oblong spark of white paint bursting out of a cloud of darker washes, as in a contained galactic explosion (Wols may have been a direct reference here). Taken together, the different works in the exhibition can be imagined as tracing the evolution of the human into the alien—be it by interstellar breeding or terrestrial gene modification. Importantly, popular science's fantasies of genetic rewiring had just come one step closer to reality with the discovery of the double helix, made in 1953 in Britain with the aid of X-ray crystallography. In truth, however, the audience of Cordell's solo show did not make the link with this particular discovery, comparing it instead to the paintings of Jackson Pollock and Willem De Kooning on display at the same time at the Tate, in *Modern Art in the United States: A Selection from the Collections of the Museum of Modern Art* (1956). The first major display of Abstract Expressionism in London, its reception rapidly permeated Cordell's own exhibit, even though she maintained not to have been aware of the work of Pollock and De Kooning beforehand.²⁵ Alloway corrected this misapprehension in the catalogue of the Hanover Gallery show, explaining that Cordell's paintings actually “reconstruct Action Painting's missing content” with a “compulsion of found iconographies”. The critic then goes on to launch into an equally compulsive list of descriptive adjectives from the realm of physics, chemistry, and physiology:

solar, delta, galactic, amorphous, ulterior, fused, far out, viscous, skinned, visceral, variable, flux, nebular, iridescence, hyper-space, free fall, random, circulation, capacious,

*homeorphism, variegated, reticular, entanglement, multiform, swimming pool, contraterrene.*²⁶

In another passage, Alloway put the same concept into prose: what struck him at the Hanover Gallery was Cordell's lyrical superimposition of the body's internal organs on outer space. It would be hard not to relate this impression to the levelling of micro and macro vision operated by camera.

Cordell's generation witnessed several revolutions in technological imaging, chiefly as a result of the new demand for scientific techniques of recording prompted by the two world wars. In the early part of the twentieth century, the photographic medium was successfully adapted for use in defence. Most notably, in 1945 aerial reconnaissance photographers were instrumental in planning D-day. In the aftermath of the Second World War, British scientists and captains of industry were united in calling for further strategic investment in the medium's military and peacetime applications. Scientific photography was recognized as having the potential to deliver a new order of reality, with almost limitless possibilities for advancing the frontier of human knowledge and rationalizing the natural world into increasingly precise visual data. The business community was adamant that mechanical techniques of visual recording could be used to boost the country's competitiveness in the most disparate fields, from agriculture to biomedical research.²⁷ To promote this argument, illustrations of the camera's versatile uses—from X-rays to space photography, electron photomicrography, aerial reconnaissance, and infrared imaging—started to circulate widely across a range of specialized and popular magazines, quickly gaining iconic currency in the collective imaginary. The IG's enthusiastic discovery of recent avant-garde experiments with the visual world of science—particularly László Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion* (1947) and György Kepes's *Language of Vision* (1944)—was in keeping with this context.²⁸

Cordell's paintings suggest that she owed as much to sci-fi plots as to the—only marginally more sober—visual landscape revealed by the scientific forays of the day. *Figure 59* (1958; fig. 7), for example, demonstrates that the artist was interested in registering the impact of the X-ray on the visual identity of the human body. This decapitated, life-size figure does indeed look sliced up or squashed into the dirty-white background to the point of implosion. Its silhouette is reduced to an irregular rectangle with only two pathetic lumps protruding at the bottom (limbs once, perhaps), while its interiors appear as a formless halo of soft body parts in dark pinks, yellows, and browns. A red exoskeleton emerges in relief against this mess of muddled viscera, with the anatomically incorrect addition of a couple of breast-like rotundities on either side of the spine. Presumably, this is the X-ray of a female. Unsurprisingly, given how elaborate it is, *Figure 59* was selected by Theo Crosby for publication inside *Uppercase 1*, albeit in black and white. Here it features next to another one of Cordell's Figures, again photographed in black and white, but this time toned in orange—a choice of Pop design that was perhaps intended to convey the Horror B-movie connotations of the originals (fig. 8). If anything, however, the lack of colour and three-dimensionality corroborates the impression that *Figure 59* conjures a radiographic vision of the body.



Figure 7

Magda Cordell McHale, *Figure 59*, 1958, oil and acrylic on Masonite, 243.84 × 152.4 cm. Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Magda Cordell McHale.



Figure 8

Magda Cordell McHale, *Figure 59*, 1958, and an unidentified painting, reproduced in *Uppercase 1* (1958). British Library, London.

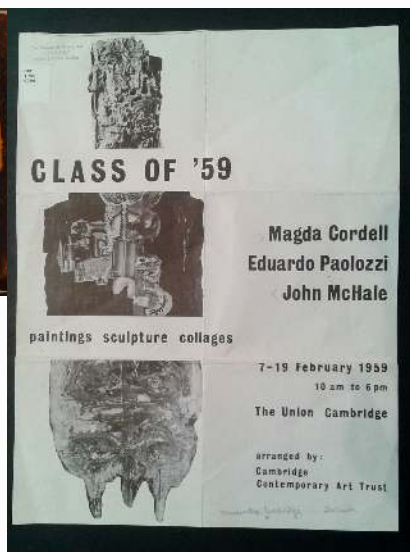


Figure 9

Magda Cordell McHale, *Class of '59, Paintings, Sculpture, Collages: Magda Cordell, Eduardo Paolozzi, John McHale*, exhibition brochure, recto. MoMA Library, New York.

In his study of Cold War “visuality”, John Curley has persuasively argued that photo-pictorial hybrids are symptomatic of the epoch’s blossoming romance with the illustrated press, citing an article that appeared on 16 November 1959 in *Life* magazine, under the title “Analogies with Nature Help Explain Abstract Expressionist Work”, which primed the audience for interpreting De Kooning’s paintings with the aid of nature photographs that came seductively close to abstraction.²⁹ Curley suggests that the comparisons invited by the article were not all that misguided, in so far as what passed for non-objective painting in the West was often tied to the indexical mechanism of the camera.³⁰ Whether Cordell was painting directly from photographic sources or not is open to speculation, however. What is clear is that her solo show at the Hanover Gallery came into focus through the lens of a hybrid photo-pictorial viscosity seeped in the Cold War’s cult of scientific discovery. The exhibits were immediately recognized as superimposing the domains of anatomy and astrophysics on the ground of the canvas, appearing to Alloway as a sort of meta-atlas of the most popular discoveries of the day. The numerical titles of so many of Cordell’s paintings (*Figure 59*, *No. 5*, *No. 12*, and so on) reinforce the parallel with the world of repeatable scientific experiments, suggesting that they are visual specimens of sorts, serial prototypes testing the mutual contamination of mechanical and biological reproduction. The question of survival loomed large in the context of early Cold War debates about the long-term clinical and environmental effects of new subatomic technologies, from the H-bomb to the more realistic threat of nuclear energy plants, inaugurated in Britain in 1956.³¹ Indeed, scholars such as Julian Myers have previously considered the IG’s distinctive “future fetish” in relation to the nuclear arms race and the space race.³² What has gone unremarked is how Cordell explored

these anxieties in relation to the maternal–foetal body, the ultimate “future fetish” and the symbolic ground par excellence for imagining the survival of mankind as well as its demise. Nowhere was this more explicit than in Edward Steichen’s world-touring photo-exhibition *The Family of Man*, which opened in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and one year later at the Southbank Centre in London.³³ Curated in the name of global peacekeeping, but widely criticized as a vehicle of US propaganda, the exhibition led the audience through a tour of essentialist fantasies of universal brotherhood centred to a significant extent on the motif of pregnancy and family-making. The MoMA installation ended with a large-scale colour transparency of the mushroom cloud, a reassuringly abstract reminder that the future of all life on earth hung by a thread. In such an ideologically charged context, the swollen womb came to symbolize the budding nucleus of a humanity to be globalized under the paternalist wings of capitalist democracy. So Allan Sekula argued in 1981, writing that the exhibition was a musty “celebration of patriarchal authority that found its global expression in the United Nations”.³⁴ Cordell’s solo show at the Hanover Gallery coincided with the Southbank iteration of the *Family of Man* as well as with the Abstract Expressionism exhibit at the Tate. The dystopian undertones of her exhibit are exacerbated when this is read against MoMA’s attempt to deliver an idyllic snapshot of American soft power in the complementary image of free gestural expression and universal love. In her plea for a more humane tomorrow, Cordell breathed life into a species of monumental ogresses and androids whose X-rayed interiors reveal mutating organs and a progeny worthy of the Cold War’s worst apocalyptic fears. Their glowing nuclei metaphorically evoke the phenomenon of radioactivity and by extension the atom bomb, whose atrocious effects on the human body had only become evident in the early 1950s, when visual documentation of the aftermath of the American attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was leaked in the international press (and then deliberately left out of the *Family of Man*).³⁵ Pregnant women were seen to carry the most monstrous consequences of the explosions, and even those who were not expecting at the time were cursed with the stigma of having “damaged” and “dangerous wombs”.³⁶ While not explicitly referencing these stories, Cordell’s paintings symbolically warn against the perils of another armed confrontation on a global scale. If they display regenerative faculties, then, they also cast a dystopian shadow on the scientific achievements of a civilization which had already gone too far down the road of technologized imperialism.

Archetype



Figure 9

Magda Cordell McHale, *Class of '59*, *Paintings, Sculpture, Collages*: Magda Cordell, Eduardo Paolozzi, John McHale, exhibition brochure, recto. MoMA Library, New York.

One look at the brochure of *Class of '59* (The Union, Cambridge, 1959), a group exhibition that Cordell shared with McHale and Paolozzi, is enough to show that from the outset her series were brought together under the sign of the womb.³⁷ A single, poster-like foldable sheet, the document parades a grotesque *cadavre exquis* with a sculpted head by Paolozzi, the entrails of a collage by McHale, and the pelvic extremity of one of Cordell's figures (fig. 9). On the back, Alloway's commentary reinforces this hierarchy, explaining that, while Paolozzi's heads "peppered with mechanisms" are all male and McHale's collages represent consumers, "Cordell's transparent anatomies are like the object of the cult of the female."³⁸

Alloway goes on to describe what we can safely guess to be one of Cordell's Presences with a series of metaphors borrowed from Theodore Sturgeon's science-fiction bestseller *More Than Human* (1954): "Like a stone in a peach, a yolk in an egg . . . It was passive, it was receptive, it was awake and alive."³⁹ This reading imbues the artwork with a sense of narrative suspense, as if the canvas itself was in the process of gestating and coming into being. The young photographer Robert Freeman followed Alloway's lead, praising the subject of Cordell's canvases—"the idol of fertility, the great Mother-Whore and creator"—for reawakening a savage instinct in "this age of corsets, cosmetics and celluloid sex".⁴⁰ Never mind the fact that the paintings in question are just as synthetic as celluloid, Freeman's interpretation consigns them to the archetypal myth of the procreative body—and to some extent it gets it right. For Cordell almost certainly drew on prehistoric statuettes believed at the time to be fertility idols and spuriously renamed "Venuses" (the most widely admired of which was the Venus of Willendorf, dated to approximately 25,000 BCE and discovered in 1908 in Willendorf, Austria).⁴¹

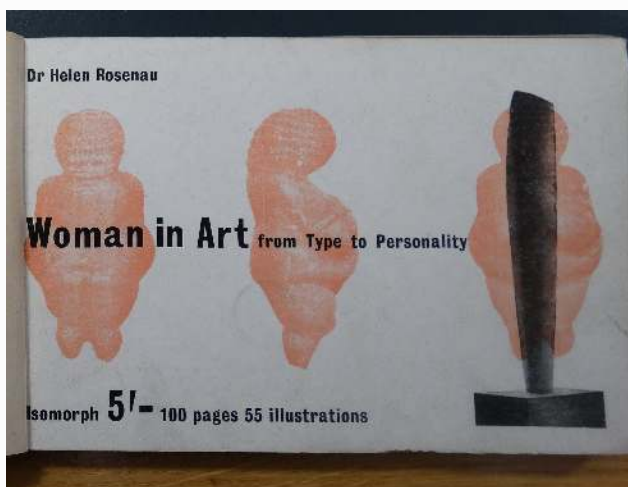


Figure 10

*Reproductions of the *Venus of Willendorf*, circa 25,000 BCE, Reproduced on the cover of Helen Rosenau, *Woman in Art: From Type to Personality* (London: Isomorph, 1944). British Library, London.



Figure 11

*Reproduction of the *Venus of Willendorf*, circa 25,000 BCE, Reproduced in Amédée Ozenfant, *Art. I: Bilan des Arts Modernes en France. II: Structure d'un nouvel esprit* (Paris: Jean Budry & Cie, 1928). British Library, London.

Cordell seemingly reconfigured the archetype of the genetrix into a monumental portrait of her own might and arguably a grander vision of universal female empowerment. She would not have been the first to do so. In 1944, the *Venus of Willendorf* was reproduced in faded red and from three different angles on the cover of Helen Rosenau's book, *Woman in Art: From Type to Personality* (fig. 10).⁴² Herself a Jewish refugee who came to England, Rosenau here charts the development of artistic form from prehistory to Barbara Hepworth's abstract effigies (one of which is superimposed onto the last *Venus of Willendorf* on the cover), correlating this visual history with the evolution of the female sex from "mere biological phenomenon" to an individual "with a mind and a will of her own".⁴³ It is tempting to play off Rosenau's proto-feminist art history against Freeman's male gaze. After all, Cordell was the first to pit self-expression against stereotype, the first to set the stage for a gargantuan confrontation between the haptic drama of her "binging" brushstrokes and the abstracting logic of seriality and common denomination at the level of the species. Indeed, the figures in her paintings are often only distinguished by their gender, as with *Figure (Woman)*.

It is certainly possible that Cordell encountered the *Venus of Willendorf* in Rosenau's book, but not quite as likely as her finding it inside Amédée Ozenfant's *Foundations of Modern Art* (1928), where the *Willendorf* statuette is reproduced next to a woman in a modern swimming suit (fig. 11).⁴⁴ Among the pages of Ozenfant's book, Cordell would also have found an image of the *Venus of Lespugne* (ca. 25,000 BCE; discovered in 1922; fig. 12).⁴⁵ The striking resemblance between the painter's binary iconographic typologies and these two artefacts leaves little doubt as to their connection. On the one hand, the rotund outline of the *Venus of Willendorf*, with its plump limbs and overinflated breasts, is the archetype for Cordell's *Figure (Woman)*, with the

notable difference that the latter is headless. On the other hand, some of Cordell's Presences are unmistakably linked to the oblong assemblage of dangling body parts that is the statuette uncovered at Lespugne. Let us return to *No. 12* (fig. 4). We can just about make out a head, a trunk, and a number of breast-like body parts; the rest is an elongated and vaguely gynomorphic aggregate of carnal tints characteristic of Cordell's palette. Similarly, the anatomy of the Lespugne Venus is distorted by rotundities which have gone all limp and out of place.



Figure 12

*Reproduction of the *Venus of Lespugne*, circa 25,000 BCE in Amédée Ozenfant, *Art. I: Bilan des Arts Modernes en France. II: Structure d'un nouvel esprit* (Paris: Jean Budry & Cie, 1928). British Library, London. Digital image courtesy of The Paul Mellon Centre, 2015.

In the late 1940s, *Foundations of Modern Art* had become something of a cult text for the artists and critics at the ICA, who were mesmerized by its transhistorical juxtapositions of black-and-white reproductions of artefacts from disparate epochs and disciplines.⁴⁶ While doing away with linear chronology, Ozenfant's montage nonetheless visualizes a fundamentally evolutionist teleology, according to which the machines of the Industrial Revolution and the art of the avant-garde correspond genealogically to prehistoric tools and cave paintings. Man's technological instinct, the reader is shown, survives across millennia of adaptations. In 1959, McHale penned a comparable argument for the value of fertility idols in the age of consumer choice, equating "the ikonic content of the mass media" with ancient masks and totems that from the dawn of time had enabled mankind to understand and deal with its environment—"external and internal".⁴⁷ As noted by Mark Wigley, McHale put forward a universal theory of the visual as adaptive prosthesis, whereby "images are literally consumed as a form of nutrition."⁴⁸ This analysis provides a compelling rationale for the sustained anthropomorphism of his montages of the second half of the 1950s, following earlier experiments with geometric abstraction in works such as *Construction Kit* (1954), reprinted in *Uppercase 1*, 1958 (figs. 13 and 14). As paintings such

as *Figure (Woman)* show, Cordell was similarly concerned with the archetypal function of the human image as the original “artificial organ”.

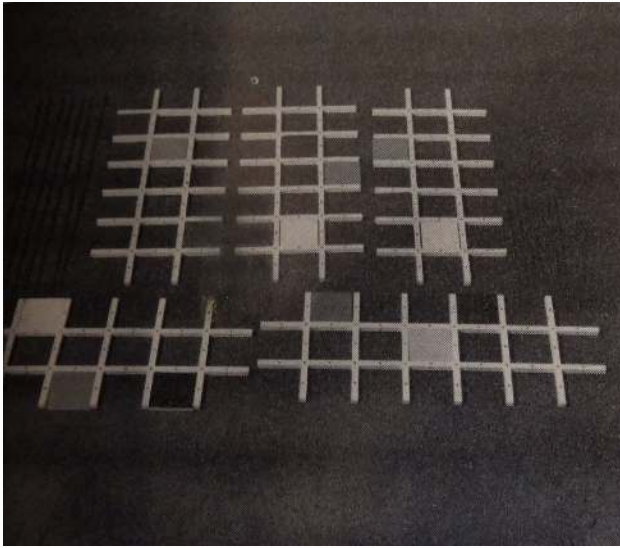


Figure 13

John McHale, *Machine Made*, 1957, mixed-media montage, reproduced in *Uppercase 1* (1958). British Library, London.

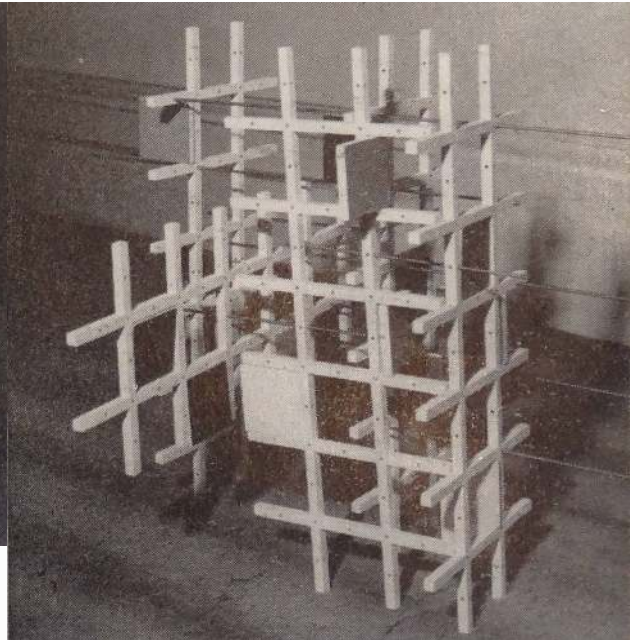


Figure 14

John McHale, *Machine Made*, 1957, mixed-media montage, reproduced in *Uppercase 1* (1958). British Library, London.

More importantly, however, McHale’s ruminations chime with widespread debates about the role of habitat versus biology (or, in the philosophical terms of postwar existentialism, existence versus essence) in shaping the development of the individual and society. The war, the emergence of the welfare state, and, later, the onset of the consumer society, put the question of adaptation and “natural” development under the spotlight, reigniting the age-old nature/nurture dispute across a wide range of academic and popular platforms. Unprecedented advances in embryology, epigenetics, and genetics called for greater understanding of biological plasticity and recognition of its limits, while a new political commitment to welfare was responsible for an efflorescence of sociological studies that stressed the role of the environment. Anthropology offered a theoretical model for mediating between biology and society, and McHale and his peers were quick to apply it to the particular phenomenon of a changing visual landscape. A case in point, Alloway drew on evolutionary anthropology in his introduction to *Class of '59*, suggesting that each of the artists on display had presented a universal “generalisation” and a “stereotype” of the generation in question (the class of 1959). Yet, the reader is told, there is nothing innate at the core of the anthropomorphic figurations presented by Cordell, McHale, and Paolozzi. Their only “survival characteristic”, Alloway writes in markedly Darwinian spirit, is the “legibility of the outline”. For the rest, they “exist in a state of ambiguity, which means they have a potential for change”.⁴⁹ This pseudo-epigenetic interpretation resonates with Cordell’s *Figures and Presences*, whose dripping insides are barely kept together by their silhouettes.

It seems plausible to infer that Cordell had a manifest interest in denaturalizing the rhetoric of biological destiny at the heart of the postwar reconsolidation of the nuclear family. Speaking from the perspective of psychoanalysis, Juliet Mitchell remembers that “child-and-mother was

the theme song” of postwar Britain.⁵⁰ Handbooks on family interaction became a phenomenon; while a chorus of male experts placed “an almost mystical importance” on the figure of mother as an agent of national restoration.⁵¹ In the media and in the pages of women’s magazines the popular psychoanalyst John Bowlby and his adepts promoted the idea that maternal care was the only antidote to the feral imprint left by the war on British children. Read against this context, Cordell’s portrait in *Uppercase* takes on a more polemical value than it would otherwise. *Figure (Woman)* appears to merely parody the ur-female—the woman as pure flesh, untainted by “make-up and celluloid”. For her the nurturing attributes of Mother Nature are ballooned to a point of saturation and toxic chemical explosion. Equally, the abject misogynist fantasy of the alien maternal interior is overstated by Cordell to a point of caricature. This aligns her with later, so called “essentialist” feminist artists, who found in the representation of the abject female body a powerful channel through which to play up their “feminitude”.⁵² Crucially, unlike femininity, feminitude indicates the problem of a female condition (rather than essential quality) rooted in the body, real and imaginary.

Ur-feminism

In 1961, in a short introductory note to the last exhibition that Cordell had at the ICA before leaving London for good, the visionary architect Buckminster Fuller felt it appropriate to describe her as so “pre-occupied in her painting” as to be “aloof to her gender”.⁵³ Since then, her canvases have been saluted as “feminist Ur-paintings” anticipating the future strategies of feminist art rooted in the body. In 1998, Marc Mayer, the curator of a small retrospective of Cordell’s work, opened the door for revision: “Until I saw these works”, he admitted, “I had believed, naively it turns out, that the aesthetic of blood and guts, of entrails and viscera, was a major contribution to art history that women had very recently made.”⁵⁴ If the works already spoke for female empowerment, Cordell’s vocal condemnation of gender inequality came only years after she and McHale had joined Buckminster Fuller, their friend and inspiration, in the United States to become futurologists.

Futurology, or future studies, can be broadly explained as the predictive analysis of the impact of technology on global populations and the environment. In the 1960s, it flourished across Europe and the United States through networks of think tanks sponsored by private firms as much as academic institutions. The nature of their research varied, but a key distinction can be traced between what is sometimes called “technocratic” or “elite futurology” and “liberal futurology”. The former is distinguished by consultants working directly for military or corporate agencies, while the latter is comprised of university based groups cooperating with a wider range of experts—anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and even artists—to widen science’s public sphere and monitor its ethical mandate (also known as “liberal futurology”).⁵⁵ The Center for Integrative Studies set up by Cordell and McHale at various universities in the United States fell into the second category, presenting itself as an alternative to the expansionist logic of military and industrial planning.⁵⁶ Only as part of this operation did Cordell denounce gender inequality in print.⁵⁷

The artist made a statement about her position on matters of biological destiny in a report titled *Women in World Terms*, authored with McHale and fellow futurologist Guy Streatfeild. Armed with plenty of statistics and trend charts, the report foresees the continued oppression of women across both developed and undeveloped countries unless change is implemented immediately. Crucially, the authors maintain that it is only as a result of social convention that the “mythical stereotype” of biological destiny assumes the form of a natural law that justifies patriarchy by

positioning women in the subordinate role of reproductive carers (as opposed to matriarchal leaders, for example). “Though myths may not be history they do make history”, explain the authors of *Women in World Terms*.⁵⁸ According to their analysis, one particularly nasty piece of mythology is the archetype of the woman as duplicitous life giver and man-eater: “it is not surprising that from the social control of such mythic ambivalence, most societies have developed elaborate sets of institutional rules to govern, control and channel the assumed latent powers of women.”⁵⁹ This passage in and of itself offers a commentary for the subject of Cordell’s earlier paintings, suggesting that they can legitimately be called ur*-feminist and for two different reasons. Firstly, because they can be seen to denaturalize the idea of “natural” gender roles at its archetypal root, by appropriating and re-imaging the modern reception of the Venus of Willendorf; and secondly, because they anticipate the attention to the body and the demand for reproductive freedom of the feminist movements of the 1970s.

The American journalist Betty Friedan’s landmark publication, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), took the first steps toward disclosing the oppression of the “happy housewife heroine” of the early Cold War period, sparking a so-called “second-wave” of feminist liberation movements in the United States.⁶⁰ Friedan’s book documents the devastating psychological effects of a decade of female “withdrawal into fertility”, citing the words of the popular American anthropologist Margaret Mead, who had only just spoken against a “return of the cave woman” in the heyday of technological advancement.⁶¹ Mead was connected to Cordell and McHale through futurology and had likely been an influence on their critique of biological determinism. Importantly, anthropology and the study of myth underlie futurology’s evolutionary concept of time and the notion that the transformations of the future are always already incubated in the past. Mark Wigley used this model to his own ends when he argued that the seeds for McHale’s futurological studies of the 1970s (which were addressed primarily to an audience of economists and sociologists) were actually planted in the creative context of the Independent Group.⁶² With *Women in World Terms*, Cordell and her collaborators were joining what was by that point already a loud chorus pointing the finger against the paternalist emphasis on domesticity and maternal nurturing that had accompanied the turn to social welfare in the aftermath of the Second World War.⁶³ Reproduction was elevated to become the “yardstick of womanly virtue”, and women’s disenfranchised lives were filled with a “highly dysfunctional” and “essentially false” cult of motherhood.⁶⁴ In conclusion, they write, “we may posit that much of the ‘reproductive ambition’ of women is socially inculcated and maintained.”⁶⁵ It is worth repeating one more time that Cordell (who never had children of her own) had already expressed her feelings about the cult of motherhood on canvas, where she had repeatedly exposed reproduction as a site of techno-imperialist colonization. Indeed, her paintings from the 1950s strike a dystopian note, at odds with her own belief in the powers of auto-repairing mechanisms, biological and man-made. Not only do these works imply a grave critique of nuclear life from sub-atomic to familial, but they also put pressure on contemporary expectations for growth and sustainability. True, they stage the event of biological regeneration with ineluctable seriality, but each and every single time they also bear the eco-nihilistic question of whether it is wise to reproduce at all.

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About the author

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Footnotes

1. Lawrence Alloway, Commentary, in *Class of '59, Paintings, Sculpture, Collages: Magda Cordell, Eduardo Paolozzi, John McHale* (Cambridge: Contemporary Art Trust, 1959), exhibition brochure.
2. David Robbins, ed., *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2000), 64.
3. Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945–59* (Manchester and New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995).
4. David Mellor, “A ‘Glorious Technicuture’ in Nineteen-Fifties Britain: The Many Cultural Contexts of the Independent Group”, in *The Independent Group*, ed. Robbins, 235.
5. Theo Crosby, ed., *Uppercase 1* (London: Whitefriars Press Ltd, 1958).
6. A notable exception is Martin Harrison, *Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties* (London: Merrell with Barbican Art Galleries, 2002), exhibition catalogue.
7. Importantly, in the 1950s the Hanover Gallery and the ICA were run by two formidable women: Erica Brausen and Dorothy Morland, respectively. James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain During the Cold War, 1945–1960* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 5.
8. Since the 1960s, Magda Cordell and John McHale worked to consolidate this discipline within American academia. For further insight into their research, see John McHale, *The Future of the Future* (New York: George Brazillier, 1969).
9. “Magda Cordell McHale: Obituary”, *The Times*, 21 April 2008, 50.
10. Jon Agar, “Science and Information Technology”, in *Britain Since 1945*, ed. Jonathan Hollowell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2003), 348–49. In the 1920s, approximately £6 million per year was spent in Britain on research and development between government establishments, universities, and industrial laboratories. Between the Second World War and the 1960s the same figure shot up to £777.4 million.
11. David W. Ellwood, *Rebuilding Europe, America and Postwar Reconstruction* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), 219. The phrase “economic growth” appeared for the first time in 1956 in the reports of the Organization for European Economic Cooperation.
12. Magda Cordell, quoted in *The Independent Group*, ed. Robbins, 190.
13. Andrew R. Lee, “Vulgar Pictures: Bacon, de Kooning, and the Figure Under Abstraction”, *Art History* 35, no. 2, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ahis.2012.35.issue-2/issuetoc> (April 2012): 387.
14. Crosby, “Magda Cordell”, in *Uppercase 1*.
15. Lawrence Alloway, Foreword, in *Paintings and Drawings by Magda Cordell* (London: Hanover Gallery, 1956), exhibition catalogue.
16. “Magda Cordell McHale: Obituary”, 50.

17. Crosby, "Magda Cordell".
18. Francis Bacon cited in David Sylvester, "Post-War" (1955), in *About Modern Art: Critical Essays, 1948–96* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), 51.
19. Reyner Banham (1955), "The New Brutalism", *October* 136 (Spring 2011): 19–28, and *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Architectural Press, 1966).
20. Banham, "The New Brutalism", 21.
21. In 1955, *Painting and Drawings by Jean Dubuffet* opened at the ICA, while in 1960 both Dubuffet and Alberto Burri had solo shows at the Hanover Gallery.
22. Jaimey Hamilton, "Making Art Matter: Alberto Burri's *Sacchi*", *October* 124 (Spring 2008): 33. In London, it was Herbert Read who presented Burri's sacks in biographical terms, writing in the catalogue of the Italian artist's solo show at the Hanover Gallery that "he began to saw pieces of this burlap into patterns—as a surgeon saws up incisions or wounds." Herbert Read, Preface, in *Alberto Burri* (London: Hanover Gallery, 1960).
23. Magda Cordell, in Peter Rawstorne, "Art is a Job, She Says", *News Chronicle*, London, 1 July 1960.
24. Lawrence Alloway, untitled contribution to "Comments on John McHale and his Work", in John McHale and others, *The Expendable Ikon: Works by John McHale* (Buffalo: Albright Knox Gallery, 1984), exhibition catalogue, 31. Alloway singled out the American periodical *Galaxy Science Fiction* amongst Cordell's favourite science fiction reads. According to him, Cordell preferred "organic" science fiction to the "mechanical" kind.
25. *Modern Art in the United States: A Selection from the Collections of the Museum of Modern Art* (London: Arts Council, 1956), exhibition catalogue. Cordell denied the influence of Abstract Expressionism on her technique. However, others have argued that it was this exhibition, rather than the influence of *Tachisme* and *Art informel*, that prompted painters in Britain to take up synthetic binders like polymer resin. These allowed them to paint in gushes and straight from the can, with the canvas on a horizontal plane. See Harriet A. L. Standeven, "The Appeal of An Image: The Explosion of Commercial Paint Use Amongst Britain's Abstract Artists in 1956", in *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (March 2006): 253–54.
26. Alloway, Foreword, *Paintings and Drawings by Magda Cordell*.
27. D. A. Spencer, "Modern Applications of Photography", *Science News* 7 (May 1948): 74–111.
28. László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (1947; Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1965), György Kepes, *Language of Vision: Painting, Photography, Advertising-Design* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1944).
29. John J. Curley, *A Conspiracy of Images: Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and the Art of the Cold War* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2013), 49–50. Curley's use of the term "visuality" is indebted to Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (1988).
30. Two exhibitions organized at the ICA by members of the IG explicitly immortalized the new photo-pictorial landscape: *Growth and Form*, curated in 1951 by Richard Hamilton, and *Parallel of Life and Art*, put up in 1953 by Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Alison and Peter Smithson. See Victoria Walsh, "Seahorses, Grids and Calypso: Richard Hamilton's Exhibition-making in the 1950s", in *Richard Hamilton*, ed. Mark Godfrey (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 62–68, and Alex Kitnick, "The Brutalism of Life and Art", *October* 136 (Spring 2011): 63–86.
31. Catherine Jolivet, ed., *British Art in the Nuclear Age* (Farnham: Ashgate: 2014), 2. The world's first nuclear power plant became operative in 1956 at Calder Hall in Cumberland. Initially the public responded with cautious hopes for meeting the energy needs of the future,

but things changed drastically after 1957, when a fire in the Windscale reactor produced radioactive discharges and the area had to be closed off for decontamination.

32. Julian Myers, "The Future as Fetish", *October* 94 (Autumn 2000): 62–88.
33. Edward Steichen, ed., *The Family of Man: The Greatest Photographic Exhibition of all Times: 503 Pictures from 68 Countries* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955).
34. Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs", *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 20.
35. Carol Jacobi, "'A Kind of Cold War Feeling' in British Art, 1945–1952", in *British Art in the Nuclear Age*, ed. Jolivet, 19–50. American intelligence censored visual evidence of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, making sure that the abstraction of the mushroom dominated the imagination of the bomb in the international press. Only after US troops left Japan in 1952 did images of the victims appear in a news-breaking reportage in *Life* magazine, headed "When Atom Bomb Struck–Uncensored", on 29 September 1952.
36. Maya Todechini, "The Bomb's Womb? Women and the Atom Bomb", in *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering and Recovery*, ed. Veena Das and others (Berkeley, CA, London, and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2001).
37. To my knowledge, there are no visual records of this installation.
38. Alloway, in *Class of '59*.
39. Alloway, in *Class of '59*.
40. Robert Freeman, "The Human Image", *Lady Clare: A Review* 44 (June 1959): 8.
41. Ian Chilvers, "Venus of Willendorf", in *The Oxford Dictionary of Art* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).
42. Helen Rosenau, *Woman in Art: From Type to Personality* (London: Isomorph, 1944).
43. G. P. Gooch, Foreword, in Rosenau, *Woman in Art*.
44. Amédée Ozenfant, *Foundations of Modern Art*, trans. E. Allen Asburn (1928; London: John Rodker, 1931).
45. In 1948, a reproduction of a similar statuette was also included in the ICA's inaugural exhibition curated by Herbert Read. See Herbert Read and others, *40,000 Years of Modern Art: A Comparison of Primitive and Modern* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1948), exhibition catalogue.
46. In 1962, Lawrence Alloway even cited Ozenfant's book in a statement titled "Pop Since 1949" which appeared in the *Listener* on 27 December 1962, and was broadcast on the radio on the Third Programme. See Lawrence Alloway, "Pop Since 1949" (1962), *Artforum International* 63, no. 2 (Oct. 2004): 57–58.
47. John McHale, "The Expendable Ikon 1" (1959), in John McHale, *The Expendable Reader: Articles on Art, Architecture, Design and the Media* (1951–79), ed. Alex Kitnick (New York: GSAPP Books, 2011), 48.
48. Mark Wigley, "Recycling Recycling", *Interstices* 4 (1996): 10.
49. Alloway, in *Class of '59*.
50. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (1974; London: Basic Books, 2000), 228.
51. Michael Rutter, *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed* (London: Penguin, 1972), 123.
52. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York; London: Routledge, 1991), 158. Minh-Ha makes a parallel between "negritude" and "feminitude" as strategic words that reclaim "difference" semantically, though often in a reactive rather than confrontational stance.

53. R. Buckminster Fuller, "Magda Cordell: Presences", in *Magda Cordell, John McHale* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1961), exhibition catalogue.
54. Marc Mayer, Commentary, in *Magda Cordell McHale* (Buffalo: Univ. of Buffalo Art Gallery, 1998), exhibition catalogue.
55. Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 174.
56. In 1968, the Center for Integrative Studies was set up at the State University of New York in Binghamton. In 1977, it moved to the University of Houston. The following year, John McHale died and in 1980 Cordell moved the Center to Buffalo.
57. Magda Cordell, John McHale, and Guy Streatfeild, *Women in World Terms: Facts and Trends* (Houston: Univ. of Houston, Center for Integrative Studies, 1975). See also Magda Cordell McHale and Peggy Choong, "A Measure of Humanity", *Futures* 21, no. 1 (Feb. 1989): 93.
58. Cordell, McHale, and Streatfeild, *Women in World Terms*, 5–6.
59. Cordell, McHale, and Streatfeild, *Women in World Terms*, 5–6.
60. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; London: Penguin, 1965), 39.
61. Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 148.
62. Mark Wigley, "Afterword: Never at Home", in *John McHale*, ed. Kitnick, 276.
63. Denise Riley, "War in the Nursery", *Feminist Review* 2 (1979): 85. Ironically, in the Britain of the 1950s, the token concessions of relative reproductive autonomy through contraception was matched by a new, psychoanalytically informed emphasis on maternal duty. In a series of regular radio broadcasts, psychoanalysts such as John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott popularized the idea that women should not choose career over family, insisting on natural mothering as the lynchpin of the future sociality of the child.
64. Cordell, McHale, and Streatfeild, *Women in World Terms*, 11–12.
65. Cordell, McHale, and Streatfeild, *Women in World Terms*, 52.

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