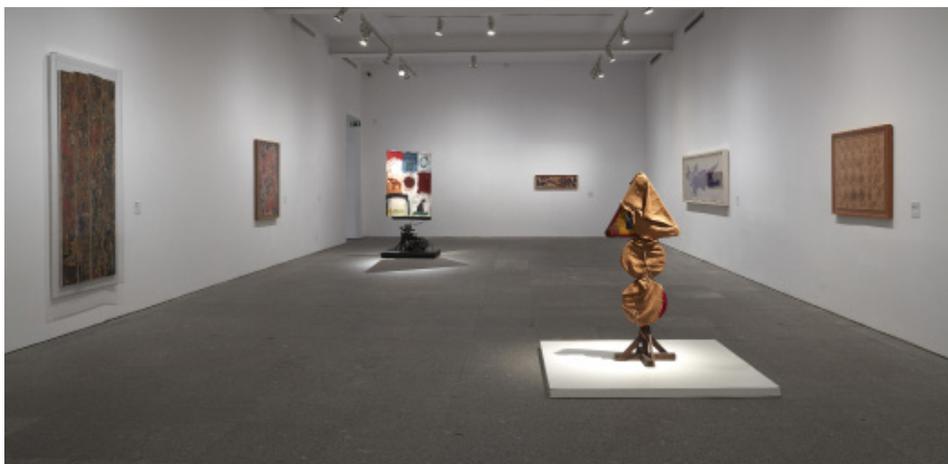


# New Realisms

Simple exhaustion from the numerous formulas of abstract painting and the new consumer society spreading across Western Europe gave rise to a series of proposals about a return to “the real”. The object, movement, the performative, the event and occupation of the public sphere became the new focuses of European artists who, all initially connected under the label *Nouveau Réalisme*, soon began to expand into a number of concepts that lit the fuse of the explosion of the 1960s and 70s.



Around 1957, a series of transformations in Europe together brought about a change in the paradigm of the arts. The communist party's disenchantment with the Soviet Union model, along with the United States' diplomatic, military and economic invasion of the old world, gave rise to a consumer society and market economy that would fill the vacuum left by pre-war ideologies and utopias and the post-war existentialism and alienation. During those years, the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett were substituted for the subtle analysis of consumer reality offered by Roland Barthes, who analyzed the new consumable idols in his book *Mythologies*, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, who saw the new man who rose from capitalist society as an actual anthropological mutation. The new, market-based world creates images and unprecedented icons that are the raw material for some of the artists represented in this room.

This same context produced the seed of a united Europe, ratified in the Treaty of Rome in 1957, just two months before the opening at the Apollinaire Gallery in Milan of an epoch-making exhibition: Yves Klein's *Proposte Monochrome, Epoca Blu*, which was to cause such an extraordinary impact among young artists. The new creative spirit was born of a dual feeling of enthusiasm and fear, involvement in and distance from the world being built. This period (1957-1962) formed a bridge between the preeminence of painting (particularly American) and the multiform explosion of other techniques in the 1960s and 70s, when assault on reality took place, through new strategies involving work with the object, the performative, the spectacle and interest in processes rather than the finished, introspective piece. Fostered by new gallery directors (and other established figures) such as Sidney Janis, Arthur "Addi" Köpcke, Anita Reuben, Leo Castelli and Arturo Schwarz, the new tide spread not only across Paris but out towards new centres like Milan, Stockholm and London, momentarily neutralizing New York's hegemony as centre of the arts. This was a time that demanded new ways of allocating territory and new visions of reality, not

based on geographic or nationalist coordinates, but on an awareness of collective integration in the international capitalist order.

While the “New Realism” label may have come from the French *Nouveau Réalisme* group in 1960, formed by the critic Pierre Restany (1930-2003), the fact is that the eruption of “the real” in the arts predates this, and is like a rhizome of concepts outside the program, from the work of the *affichistes* and *décollagistes* (Jacques Villeglé (1926), Raymond Hains (1926-2005) and François Dufrêne (1930-1982) to the monochromes of Yves Klein (1928-1962), via the machines of Jean Tinguely (1925-1991).

As far as Pierre Restany was concerned, easel painting was over. The new artists, considering “the world as a painting”, freed the work from the constrictions of the frame. The works were connected to the Dada and surrealist poetics of the found object, but added an aspect of real life; what stands out is not the aura of the fetishist object, but rather its use, the latent humanity in the objects. So the capacity of the object is put into action to trigger memories, placing a material, everyday, *life-experience* fact right at the centre of our attention, as opposed to the lyrical excesses of the time's abstract painters. So the human presence is invoked *in absentia*, in a way comparable to Yves Klein, when he began to turn the body into a way of writing in his anthropometries, which show the human mark, like a track, like an index. Klein was keenly aware of the public impact that

certain artistic practices had. His series of monochromes, far from being about taking refuge in silence, were actually the result of a whole strategy in which the return to the material purity of the paint itself makes the artist the medium; that which changes basic colour into artistic material. This followed a concept heavily influenced by Marcel Duchamp's "art in a raw state", already enthroned by the entire new generation. The pieces are done using raw, basic elements: different colours (among them, the IKB – the artist's patented International Klein Blue), and the effect of fire on canvas. They often revealed their deeper meanings in presentation events, which involved settings using models, audience participation and performances; elements that formed the basis for later developments such as conceptual art or the Fluxus projects.

The 'spectacle' relationship between the piece and the public, meaning the involvement of both in a performance, can also be seen in the work of Jean Tinguely. Renowned as one of the pillars of what was to become known as kinetic art, his motor-driven pieces were pioneers in the literal introduction of movement, an act that distanced sculpture from the introspection and fetishism that hung so heavily over sculpture's past. Irony came into play in his work with the possibility of automatic production of abstract painting through Méta-matics, or with the association of elements of industrial junk with icons of consumerism (which had also been thrown away). When it was presented at the Paris Biennale de Jeunes Artistes in 1959, one of the mechanical sculptures was set off by two operators at the exact moment that Minister of Culture André Malraux walked in – it was very clear that through Tinguely's closeness to Klein he had become very familiar with ways of promoting and drawing attention to his work that went beyond simple (and static) public exhibition. At this event, still marked by the supremacy of abstract painting, Tinguely and Klein were joined by the affichistes Jacques Villeglé, Raymond Hains and François Dufrêne, who saw their works put on exhibition in an outside area, having been judged "inappropriate" under the pretext that they were not painting.

The work of the affichistes and decollagistes was not, in fact, painting. It differed radically from traditional easel painting technique: the act of tearing down posters from hoardings and walls and other purpose-built supports was an attack on reality directly referencing the great element of communication in the public sphere; the printed poster, at the very moment that while recuperating its cultural hegemony, France was caught up in conscription and refusal to do military service in the bloody conflict in Algeria. There was a recognition among the affichistes of the anonymity of the urban gesture of protest, and of the collective unconscious behind these acts of tearing down that represented a sort of insubordination to imposed messages, whether they came from the world of consumerism or politics (rendered the same by the loss of each poster's explicit content.) As Jacques Villeglé said, "The affiche lacérée acquires its consistency and imposes its presence within the real, by the real and with the real. But the anonymous tearer acts precisely because he will not resign himself to reality, because he feels the limitations imposed on him by reification, and he reacts by protesting against this psychic rape of the masses by public propaganda. In this way, he brings childhood's control of potentiality directly into adult reality."

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