Mad Men, Mad World
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The final episode of Mad Men’s first season, “The Wheel” (1.13), revolves around what is perhaps the creative director Don Draper’s most memorable sales pitch: a plan to brand Kodak’s clunky plastic slide projector wheel as “the carousel.” Harnessing the associations of the carousel with childhood fantasy and its dreamlike suspension of linear time, Don explains that the wheel should be understood not as a gadget, but a time machine. “It goes backwards, and forwards,” he intones as the clients sit transfixed in front of the projector’s screen; “It takes us to a place where we ache to go again.”

In the tightly orchestrated reflexivity of this incident, the nostalgia Don invokes by way of “the carousel” is doubly operative. Kodak stopped manufacturing slide projectors in 2004, and in all likelihood, Mad Men’s adult audience will be the last generation to recall both the slide show’s enchantment and the intensely physical aspect of its visual apparatus. Before an image in a darkened room became a vacation snapshot or a masterpiece of art history, such an audience might remember, it was first a material thing: a clackety square of plastic with a frayed label, a thing that might be put in backward, or upside down; a thing that could be lost, traded, or left forgotten in a box.

I call attention to Don’s Kodak Carousel pitch both for its double articulation of nostalgia and because the magical transmutation of material thing
into dematerialized image seated literally at the heart of the slide projector encapsulates much of what is at stake in Mad Men’s imagination of its own relationship to both avant-garde art and the culture industry of the 1960s. Don’s brilliance as an ad man and his interest as a character lie in his ability to turn matter into metaphor, objects of consumption into dreams (or here, memories), the vulgar exteriority of the commodity world into the interior realm of the psyche.

Don, in short, turns surface into depth, and this alchemical quality recurs as both visual cue and narrative trope for his character throughout the show. In the opening credits, for example, Don is blasted into silhouette within a vertiginous sea of skyscrapers glazed with scrims of colossal female bodies. Yet as his jet-black contour doubles in reflection against the buildings’ impenetrable panes of glass, we realize that this image of surface is in fact a diagram of depth. Unlike the flexing bodybuilder of Richard Hamilton’s famous proto-pop collage Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing? (1956), who gleefully merges into a mediascape of television images and advertising copy, the flatness of Don’s silhouette does not facilitate his assimilation into his surroundings. Rather, it throws him into relief. He is a virtual flatness descending through the illusionistic space of the spectacle. But the depth he experiences, the credits sequence would seem to suggest, is real.

Indeed, it is ostensibly Don’s depth that is on display in the Kodak Carousel scene as he cycles through intimate vignettes of his family’s domestic life in order to demonstrate a sales pitch more powerful than the “itch” of the new (fig. 9.1). While the slides evoke the actual etymological roots of nostalgia in nostos (homecoming) and algos (pain, grief, distress), Don’s recounting of a Greek salesman’s definition of the term sounds remarkably like Roland Barthes’s description in Camera Lucida of the punctum—a photographic detail that provokes an emotional shock in its viewer. The punctum, Barthes writes, is “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). As “a sting, a speck, cut, little hole,” the punctum pierces through the surface of the image and lodges itself deep within the viewing subject. It is the sign of Don’s emotional authenticity in his slide-show presentation, and it emerges in details such as the child’s squinting eye, a mouth half-open in sleep, the glitter of confetti illuminating a forgotten kiss (fig. 9.2). These details touch us, touch Don, and reveal his psychological depth even as he expertly exploits them for the purpose of sales. This is the magic of the ad man who manipulates the mechanism of projection, and it is not for nothing that Don’s subordinate Harry Crane, moved to tears by the re-
verberations of Don’s presentation for his own marital woes, is thrown into flat silhouette by the slide projector’s stream of light as he leaves the room.

Don has depth. More depth, for example, than the bohemians he meets through his girlfriend, the artist Midge Daniels, who while away their time prancing around her loft and reciting beatnik poetry at Village clubs (fig. 9.3). Don’s brief encounters with this bohemian world are Mad Men’s only forays into the world of living artists, and they are shown to be cliché in their drug habits, predictable in their political critiques, and most important, bad
at art. (When a young poet recounts an erotic dream involving Fidel Castro, Nikita Khrushchev, a plucked chicken, and the Waldorf Astoria hotel, Don remarks, “Too much art for me.”) Indeed, if Don is attracted to Midge’s status as an outsider, the relationship between art and this “outside” remains elusive at best. While Midge’s friends endlessly lampoon the shallowness of Don’s profession and bourgeois lifestyle, it is ultimately he, rather than they, who approximates the traditional visionary role of the artist—in this case, to reveal hidden truth—when he takes a Polaroid of Midge and her friend Roy at the end of “The Hobo Code” (1.8). Gazing down at the shiny surface of the developed photograph he has just peeled away from its bulky cartridge, Don recognizes in a flash that Midge and Roy are in love (fig. 9.4). And while he knows “what love looks like” from its simulation in advertising, his ability to read and interpret code is linked explicitly to the social marginalization of his youth, for it is precisely during the temporal interim of the Polaroid’s development that the narrative flashes back to Don’s childhood, when a hobo teaches him the secret marks wanderers and transients leave to communicate among themselves. The bohemian world of artists, the episode suggests, is only a simulation of this outside; all play acting and histrionics, it offers little alternative to the narratives spun by Madison Avenue advertisers uptown.

Perhaps for this reason, the period art that appears most worthy of pause
in the narrative arc of *Mad Men* appears not in Midge’s downtown loft, but in Bert Cooper’s upscale Madison Avenue office. If Don’s approximation of an artist in “The Hobo Code” relies on traditional roles of interpretation and revelation, however, this art offers a rather different rubric of signification based not on the romantic notion of the visionary but on a modernist model of pure aesthetic experience. During “The Gold Violin” (2.7), Jane Siegel, Harry Crane, Ken Cosgrove, and Sal Romano break into Cooper’s office to inspect his new painting—a Mark Rothko—but are left fumbling as to what it “means” (fig. 9.5). Only Ken, the aspiring writer, appears to “get” the painting. And he puts it this way: “Maybe it doesn’t mean anything. Maybe you’re just supposed to experience it. Because when you look at it, you feel something.” As the camera zooms in on the painting, he continues, “It’s like looking into something very deep. You could fall in.”

Paradoxically, the operative critical term for abstract expressionist and color-field paintings such as Rothko’s was not depth, but flatness, as famously expounded by the American critic Clement Greenberg in essays such as his “Modernist Painting” (1960). Here Greenberg argued that the self-critical tendencies of the modernist ethos dictated that its most advanced practices would explore the limiting conditions of the painterly medium. Hence it would be the ability of a Rothko painting to suspend the pictorial illusion of
fictive three-dimensional space in favor of a flattened scheme of color intensities vibrating against, and identical to, the rectangular surface of the picture plane, that secured its place within the modernist tradition. Yet as the art historian David Joselit has argued, the priority on optical flatness elaborated by Greenberg was sustained by a simultaneous insistence on emotional depth that, initially expressed by the figure of the artist, was ultimately understood to translate into the psychological experience of the viewer (see Joselit). It is precisely this appeal to authenticity that is mapped out in Cosgrove’s comments about “experience” in front of the Rothko. The painting itself is rigorously flat; it is Cosgrove himself, by contrast, who is shown to have depth.

In this episode, the Rothko painting stands in for a modernist art that requires emotional nuance and the ability to suspend the artifice of “meaning” in favor of an aesthetic experience in which, as Greenberg wrote in his 1952 article, “feeling is all.” Yet by 1962, the setting for Mad Men’s second season, Rothko was already an outmoded representative of the avant-garde. By the late 1950s, young artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns had begun to ironize the abstract expressionist appeal to metaphysical interiority and subjective expression that provided the rhetorical trappings for modernist paintings like Rothko’s. Their deadpan appropriation of American flags, Coca-Cola bottles, and mechanically produced marks appealed to the conventionality of culture rather than the primal workings of the unconscious. Rauschenberg and Johns thus made way for the full-blown elaboration of American pop art in the coming years. If Cosgrove displays emotional depth
by way of aesthetic “feeling,” after all, “feeling” is also the catchword in the same episode for a pitch to sell Martinson coffee to the young.

In this light, it is useful to consider not simply the period art that cameos within Mad Men, but also that which is conspicuously absent from view. For 1962, the year in which Mad Men’s Rothko episode is set, was the year that Andy Warhol, who had been trained as a commercial illustrator (we might imagine him as a blonder, more anemic, and diffident version of Sal) had his first show at a fine-art gallery (fig. 9.6). There, at Irving Blum’s Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, Warhol exhibited thirty-two paintings of Campbell’s soup cans, one for each of the thirty-two varieties of soup that Campbell’s made. Each painting, in turn, was not mounted on the wall, but propped up on a shallow shelf, as if to mimic the display of objects in a grocery store. Unlike Rothko’s painting and its presumption of interiority, Warhol’s Soup Cans proffers an art that is fully aware of its commodity status, that flaunts it, and indeed, that revels in its character as surface and empty value.

This is perhaps what is most interesting about Mad Men’s engagement, or rather nonengagement, with the advanced art of its time. Namely, that while the television series utilizes period art to propose a narrative model of psychological depth in antithesis to the flat surfaces of advertising spectacle...
(a narrative, paradoxically, which ends up endowing the advertisers, rather than the artists, with such depth), the most significant forms of 1960s art analyzed the logic of this spectacle and threw it back to the culture industry intact. Thus it was precisely Warhol’s willingness to apply a logic of flatness, repetition, and bland surface to soup cans as well as race riots that disclosed the insidiousness of an American culture that could conceive of equivalence only through commodities rather than in the social, economic, and political parity of its citizens. We are accustomed to critiquing advertising’s position as the middleman between avant-garde art and the culture industry. Appropriating art’s modes and rhetorics, as we see in Sterling Cooper’s “feeling” pitch for Martinson coffee, advertising co-opts aesthetics for the purposes of producing commodity desire. Warhol’s brilliance was to recognize that art does not escape this commodity circuit. Rather than presuming originality, by contrast, he chose to appropriate advertising’s codes for art.

In so doing, Warhol effectively evacuated the psychological depth presumed of the modernist work of art. If his works stand in for subjective experience, they do so only in relation to endlessly repeatable subjects with endlessly replicable desires. Don himself is fully aware of this condition: in “The Color Blue” (3.10) he acknowledges that people don’t want to see the world differently; in “A Night to Remember” (2.8) his wife Betty functions as the ideal subject of consumer research; and as he retorts to the bohemians at Midge’s apartment in “The Hobo Code,” “‘There is no big lie, there is no system. The world is indifferent.” Yet if Don correctly recognizes that the bohemian art world offers no outside, Mad Men consistently implies that he does so because he himself constitutes an outside posited in the midst of the encompassing system. This is perhaps why Don does not need to appear in the Rothko episode. Like the modernist painting, he is an image of surface whose effect is to produce depth.

I end these observations by referencing a work by the artist Dan Graham called Homes for America, which made its first public appearance as a slide-show installation in an exhibition titled Projected Art at the Finch College Museum of Art in 1966 (fig. 9.7). The installation consisted of a slide projector mounted on a pedestal that cycled through a series of deadpan shots of tract housing in New Jersey that Graham had taken with an Instamatic camera over the summer of 1965. In this work, Graham departed from the serial, additive forms of minimalist sculpture that had started to be shown in galleries around this time. In Homes for America, he found this repetition ready-made in the landscape around him: the endless sprawl of housing develop-
ments buttressed at its edges with, as he wrote, “bowling alleys, shopping plazas, car hops, discount houses, lumber yards or factories” (Graham, 22).

As Don does in his Kodak sales pitch, Graham’s work lays bare the mechanism of projection and presents the carousel as a material object that produces a sequence of images on a screen. The slide show, in other words, does not simply convey the work of art; it is itself the work of art. But in Graham’s work, the reflexivity of the mechanism is used to the opposite effect of Don’s presentation, where of course the slide show is meant to sell the actual wheel. Unlike the family photos in Don’s slide show, the images in Graham’s work studiously avoid the punctum. They offer no relief of that pinprick of emotion. Instead, they linger on the blandness and uniformity of the American suburbs, showing not the intimacy of domesticity, but its external container and standardized architectural form. If in Don’s slide show the wheel is an instrument of magic, transmuting material things into de-materialized images that wind through time to reveal the hidden recesses of what was once called the soul, Graham’s projecting apparatus refuses to escape the deadening metronome of the instrument itself. Each click of the projector announces an image of monotonous architectural surface we have seen a thousand times but cannot remember, and which we will certainly forget once the next slide drops down.
If artists such as Dan Graham and Andy Warhol help us understand Don’s Kodak Carousel presentation as an object lesson, it is because their work exposes the historical limits of the depth model on which the episode “The Wheel,” and the narrative presumption of Mad Men as a whole, relies. As scholars of postmodernism such as Fredric Jameson have persuasively argued, the 1960s marked the beginning of a shift in which traditional modes of cultural interpretation (based on oppositions such as authenticity and inauthenticity, high and low, surface and depth) were rendered obsolete. Within the new configurations of capital and their parallel cultural regime, objects of culture no longer functioned as portals to a larger reality or more truthful experience set apart from commodity culture. Instead, like Warhol’s soup cans or Graham’s tract housing, they were situated solidly within its bounds, and their critical capacity, if operative at all, functioned not in terms of penetration or revelation, but in terms of equalization, deflation, and the emptying out of value.

Mad Men clearly positions itself in relation to this historical sea change. It is, after all, Don’s unforgiving insight that we are all constructed as images that drives the story line of the show. Yet in retaining a dialectic of surface and depth, even as its terms are inverted and displaced in often unexpected ways, Mad Men stops short of engaging the radical implications of Warhol’s Soup Cans and Dan Graham’s Homes for America at the narrative and structural levels of its plot. Indeed, despite Don’s facility with the workings of the new cultural order, it is precisely his shifting of roles as visionary artist, in the romantic mode, and aestheticized work of art, in the modernist mode, that indicates what was at stake to be lost in postmodernism’s cultural flattening out.

To we viewers sitting transfixed before computers and flat-screen televisions rather than the slide-projector screens on which Don’s Kodak clients fix their gaze, Mad Men offers a series of constructed historical punctums that speak to our distance from the past. Such punctums induce both nostalgia and discomfort, and in so doing, they offer complex entry into the 1960s as an object of historical desire. Yet to read Mad Men’s historical drama “against depth,” as I would argue Warhol and Graham have taught us to do, is to recognize that the series is about an operative, rather than simply represented surface, one that does not remain within the meticulously crafted realism of the series’ diegetic world but sprawls out into the historical present of today. Ranging from product placement and sponsorship to licensed Barbie Dolls and Mad Men–themed shop windows, from social networking applications and Twitter personas to buy-by-episode iTunes availability and
“Mad-vertising” spots, this operative surface weaves diegetic content into a continuous fabric of commercial solicitation in which we, the viewers, rather than the muse of the 1960s, are the ultimate objects of desire. So while Don’s Kodak presentation may make us nostalgic for the time when we bought into our current condition, it is useful to remember that the most advanced art of that time reflected this condition back to us, and still does, as pure, unrelenting surface with nothing behind it at all.

NOTES

1. Dan Graham was born in Urbana, Illinois, but grew up largely in New Jersey, from where he drew his inspiration for *Homes for America*. He initially displayed the work as a slide show to friends in his loft. See Graham.