

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## TRACKS: Peter Young: An Unlikely Artist

by *Ben La Rocco*



In the deeper recesses of my psyche, I preserve the ideal of the artist as a perennial radical—someone consistently at odds with convention in life and art, whose unorthodox choices often incite awe and bewilderment. I realize that characterizing artists as improvisational spirits is stereotypical and even a little juvenile. I understand the maturity and discipline it takes to stick with the arts beyond one's early years and how the accompanying self-deprivation can curtail many avenues of expression that one might otherwise be inclined to explore. Yet I am convinced that part of the beauty and risk of great art is its potential to change the way we think and feel, and this change starts with the artist. In my imagination, the result of this change is the break with convention. Predictably, reality does little to encourage my ideal. While there is much to admire in New York's artists, I have found that the spontaneity often present in their work finds little purchase in lives dictated by the exigencies of what it takes to make it in the art world. They tend to stay put, rarely venturing far from the city, and keep their noses to the grindstone for decades on end. If they are serious and dedicated, they might create a body of work that contributes to the general discourse of the arts, and if they are also lucky, they are rewarded with museum retrospectives such as those held recently at the Museum of Modern Art for Richard Serra, Brice Marden and Elizabeth Murray. But now, Peter Young's reemergence has raised doubts about this latter model of the New York artist and buttressed the pillars of my ideal. Forty years after his New York debut, a retrospective at PS 1 and concurrent exhibition at the Mitchell Algu Gallery have repositioned this unlikely artist at the center of attention.

Peter Young was born on January 2nd, 1940, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the son of Lloyd Arthur Young and Hazel Dickinson, a distant relative of the poet Emily Dickinson. When Young was 10, his father took a job with Rand Corporation in California, moving the family from the quiet environs of Pittsburgh to the Pacific Palisades 'Riviera' above Santa Monica Canyon. Despite his position at the center of the military industrial complex, Young's father, who had been a student of Albert Einstein's, had declined an offer to work on the Manhattan Project (unlike Robert Oppenheimer and Niels Bohr who had also studied with Einstein). He was exceptionally cosmopolitan and introduced Young to modern culture at a very early age. Lloyd Arthur's professional colleagues, among them Robert McNamara, Curtis LeMay and Herman

Kahn, mingled in Young's childhood home with figures such as the poet, photographer and publisher of Jargon Press, Jonathan Williams, and the avant-garde film makers, John and James Whitney. Lloyd Arthur outfitted the house with furnishings by Alvo Altar and Eero Saarinen, in addition to work by friends of the family, Charles and Ray Eames. His collection of Hopi art adorned the walls and a lamp designed by Isamu Noguchi hung above the dining room table.



Peter Young and Twyla Tharp c. 1967

At school in Santa Monica, Young found himself rubbing elbows with the children of actors and artists, among them Daniel del Solar, son of Luchita Hurtado and stepson of the painter Lee Mullican. It wasn't long before Young became a regular visitor to Mullican's studio. The experience was formative, and Young soon came to know the artists and friends with whom Mullican had created the 1951 Surrealist-inspired exhibition Dynaton in Santa Monica: along with Hurtado, there was Wolfgang Paalen, Gordon Onslow-Ford, and Jacqueline Johnson. Paalen, an Austrian-born immigrant, and Onslow-Ford, an Englishman, were both painters who had known André Breton in Paris and contributed to the formation of Surrealism there. In the summer of 1958, Young traveled to Mexico City where Paalen then lived. While there, Young began a lifelong friendship with the poet George Oppen and his wife Mary, who had fled from McCarthyism to settle in Mexico. Oppen, an ardent communist, World War II veteran and political activist, was co-founder of the Objectivist movement in poetry, an art form to which he was just beginning to return after a 25-year hiatus. In Young's youthful eyes, he must have cut an impressive figure. Shortly after his return to the United States, Young entered Pomona College as a "poetry-spouting beatnik" and spent two years there, during which he met Twyla Tharp. He remembers abstract painter Frederick Hammersly's classes as excruciatingly tedious and, in 1960, after his expulsion from Pomona for "amorous indiscretions," he packed his bags and hitchhiked to New York City. There, he reconnected with Tharp who had begun her conquest of the New York dance world. They would shortly be married.

In New York, Young reacted ambivalently toward success, which came suddenly and with considerable ease. It all started in 1968, when he was sharing a studio at 94 Bowery with painters Ronnie Landfield and Lawrence Stafford. Young remembers the skid row neighborhood as, "Stench, vomit and death." There, within a small, close-knit community of painters, none of whom had much money or much reason to hope for it, bonds formed quickly. One day, on the recommendation of friends, Green Gallery founder Richard Bellamy visited Young at his studio and, in Young's words, "It all came to me. I never had to look for anything." Bellamy soon brought curators and collectors with open checkbooks. This rapidly led to connections with galleries in Los Angeles and Cologne, culminating in 1969 with Young's inclusion in shows at the Corcoran and Guggenheim museums as well as a breakthrough exhibition at the Castelli gallery. In the span of a few years, Young had gone from obscurity to international visibility

By the time of the Leo Castelli exhibition, Young was in Costa Rica living and painting with the Borucca Indian tribe. Amazingly, he only heard about the independently organized exhibition from friends. He had left the city several months earlier, at age 28, and would never call it home again. At the moment that it would have seemed imperative to establish himself fully in the New York art world and delve deeper into the emergent downtown scene of which he'd become an important part, Young pulled up stakes for good

to embark on a wandering life that would finally lead him to Bisbee, Arizona. When, shortly after his first show, Castelli offered to represent him—a proposition that probably would have included a stipend in addition to the high prices that Castelli's artists commanded—Young again defied expectations by opting to stay with the comfortably disorganized Bellamy. He later wrote to Bellamy that, “The best thing you can do for me as my dealer is to do nothing for me.”

Young suggests this behavior was due in part to paranoia about the “media massacre” awaiting young artists who exhibited their work too soon. For the ill-informed newcomer to the art scene, this could mean an immediate avalanche of publicity and sales followed by a rapid reduction in visibility and eventual neglect from critics, dealers and collectors. Young had the foresight to perceive a phenomenon that is now well documented, but his surprising choices also had more complex origins. The time between his arrival in New York and his early success were a whirlwind during which he benefited from his uncanny proclivity for finding those who could help and inspire him. After arriving, he rapidly completed an art history degree at NYU, moved summarily in and out of the military as a medic and dental assistant, found brief employment as a respiration therapist and finally cast himself into the downtown scene. He befriended Ray Johnson, Dick Higgins and Jackson Mac Low and attended Fluxus and Judson Church events. He gave poetry readings at the 10th Street Coffee House and Deux Maggots and hung out with other young artists at the 9th Circle, owned by Mickey Ruskin, a well known supporter of the arts who would go on to open Max's Kansas City. By 1966, he'd begun working at the emergent Pace Gallery for Fred Mueller and Arne Glimcher who remembers Young as “a charming intense guy, marching to his own drummer.” Working at Pace as a preparator, Young had the occasion to visit Agnes Martin's studio. By this point, he had begun making his own grid paintings, a practice he abandoned shortly after his visit. Martin would twice play a pivotal role in his development. On this occasion Martin herself was not present but her paintings were enough to convince him that he had better reconsider his subject. He turned to images of the night sky and the dotting technique that would shortly bring him notoriety.

“The question,” says Young, “is not why I left New York, but why I ever went there in the first place.” He left just as he was gaining recognition and did not wait until he was established. He did not go in order to make a reputation in another context. He left because he couldn't stand it anymore. His community had been atomized by the onslaught of new drugs in the 60's, and financial success among artists rapidly separated the haves from the have-nots. His marriage had dissolved and his uncertainty about the merits of financial success persisted. But in a larger sense, Young was conscious of the fact that, prior to his arrival in New York, he had already experienced the most essential thing for a working artist, that which New York was now failing to provide: a sense of community. Young had traveled east with a sense of his own good fortune: “Twyla and I really felt privileged—we had a nice window on the world.”

As he soon became aware, Young's “window on the world” opened the opposite way from his peers in New York. Though the downtown scene in the early 60's fostered a supportive environment not dissimilar to what Young had known on the West Coast, things were changing rapidly. If Young, through his experience of Mullican's circle, saw the American art world through the eyes of the foreigners and forebears who had helped to form it, New York conceived history through the scrim of the contemporary moment that it alone was in charge of defining. New York was the new center of the international art world and when Young arrived there in 1960, Barnett Newman and Willem de Kooning—the men who had wrested the lead in modernist art from Europe—could still be seen talking and drinking in the Cedar Tavern. New York was now the place where things got done. Clement Greenberg was deciding exactly what art was and why while Donald Judd emerged to combat him writing in *Arts* with a rhetoric every bit as didactic as that of his nemesis. Artists were expected to take sides and they did. The future of the arts was being clearly defined and divided, and many young artists had shown up, wittingly or no, to stake their claim to a piece of the newfound territory. This was a grim and competitive business and in one sense, Young's background placed him in the perfect position to grab a piece of the action—he already knew the lingo. In another, more important way, it left him disinclined to do so. He came from a world where art was a part of the fabric of everyday life and not the monastic discipline now imposed on artists in the country's largest

metropolis. Young's experiences in the west had placed him near the center of American creativity and its European roots. What he found there was free and easy to love. The powerfully creative personalities who had guided him were not academics. They didn't teach him art. Instead, as Young describes, "What they were teaching me was a *joie de vie*—things that went along with painting." As such, their influence could not have been stronger—Young still considers himself a Surrealist in essence. His congenial relationship to history was out of keeping with the exclusive ambition of New York's new artist and the culture clash he experienced could only have confounded him. It must have been a little like coming from another planet. Young's departure was not an attempt to expand his world, but a return to the expanded world he already knew.

When he left, he moved quickly: traveling from Costa Rica for a brief stay in New York, then on to Europe, Mexico, and Topanga Canyon, where he stayed with his brother, John, and finally to Bisbee, Arizona, where he resides today. He continued to exhibit in New York, but with steadily decreasing frequency and visibility. In Bisbee, he is again a part of a richly textured culture that he has helped to shape. He counts among his neighbors the Pop / performance artist, Alex Hay. He helped organize the now-famous Bisbee Poetry Festival, which ran from 1979 to 1985, bringing in such poets as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and John Ashbery to take part. He is active in border politics and environmentalism in addition to participating in an array of art groups and hosting his own radio show of Mexican music. Young's contributions to the Bisbee community are an extension of the communities that helped form him. Though his travels took him far from the so-called center of the art world, they did not take him far from painting. In several loft-like storefronts of the old Philadelphia Hotel, which he owns, Young continues to work, elaborating and combining longstanding themes with undiminished lyricism.

Perhaps the reason Young's career seems radical is due to the degree to which conditions in the art world have changed. It is so much larger than it was. The amount of cash that an artist can now earn has created expectations that make it almost impossible not to use money as a criterion for success. This is capitalism at work and competition is a big part of it. Artists compete with each other for spots in residencies, for grants, and for inclusion in exhibitions and galleries that could engender financial success. Of course artists have always competed, but market-gear'd competitiveness—as distinct from ambition in one's art—combined with the art world's global reach have made it harder to find the supportive communities to which Young was early accustomed. If the "art star" status enjoyed by a few is the brass ring, it is a dangerous standard because of the unlikelihood of attaining it and because of its lack of correlation with the development of richer ideas in the arts. I am glad Young made it to New York when he did and I wonder if what he did then would still be possible today. I wonder if today he would simply get lost in the flood. Maybe he wouldn't have come at all but pursued his unflagging love for painting elsewhere as a reward in itself. This is what he ultimately concluded and in the process became a model for a younger generation in search of independent thought and maverick dedication.

The second time Young encountered Agnes Martin caused him to again begin painting grids. It was 1970, and Martin was living in the forests of New Mexico. Young decided he would surprise her. He had a big van and to reach her he had to follow a dirt road that unexpectedly ran into an impassable flooded wash. Backtracking, he struck out in the van through the forest and finally happened upon her home. At first the elder artist was taken aback—"If you can find me, you can do anything," she said—but she soon warmed to him and his companion, Carmen Megeath, and invited them to stay the night. There were two buildings, one a dugout where Martin lived, and the other a large studio made of logs driven vertically into the ground like a stockade. Martin cooked dinner for her guests. The next day, she looked at some of Young's work and lingered admiringly on one grid painting from his early days in New York. He suggested that the painting might resemble hers. "This," replied Martin, "is nothing like my work." She dispelled the stale but persistent notion that proprietary rights accompany artists' motifs and bore expert witness that Young's own painting was unlike anyone else's. With that he was once more on his way.