

THE DAWNING OF THE AGE OF AQUARIUS

Fifty years ago, the “Summer of Love” marked a period of great civil upheaval and sexual revolution. It portended an idyllic future full of harmony and understanding. Peace, the hippies proclaimed, would guide the planets, and love would steer the stars. The spirit of the 1960s was embodied by anti-establishment and counterculture movements that gathered strength and energy throughout the decade, breeding a variety of grass-roots initiatives that resulted in “People Power” and “Flower Power,” concepts that could serve us well today.

These social movements of the sixties tried to counter war, racial prejudice, gender inequality, corruption, and poverty. Set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, and violent civil unrest throughout the United States and Europe, student uprisings and political protests of all kinds aimed to reconfigure the world in order to heal it. The threat of nuclear war loomed large as the ideological battle between capitalism and communism raged. During this decade, the Soviet Union tightened its grip on Eastern Europe, and China’s Cultural Revolution roiled. Meanwhile, in many areas of the globe, great strides were made in science, medicine, space exploration, and agriculture. An awareness of, and protection for, the earth’s fragile ecosystem began to germinate.

New and experimental forms of art and literature were conceived and nurtured in many regions of the world. In France, the *Nouveau réalisme* movement helped form the spirit of the decade. Artists in the group, founded by art critic Pierre Restany, including Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, César, Arman, and Daniel Spoerri, among others, redefined what an artwork is or could be. Early in the decade, the American poet Allen Ginsberg provided the Beat Generation with *Reality Sandwiches*, published in 1963. That same year, the Great March on Washington, D.C., led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called for civil and economic rights for all African-American citizens. By the mid-1960s, the sociopolitical climate in the U.S. was shifting. At once hopeful and chaotic, the times were marked by violent resistance to authority; sexual experimentation and nonconformity were de rigueur. As the Women’s Movement took off, and gay rights activism heated up, everything about the status quo was questioned by the second half of the decade.

“LIGHT MY FIRE!” Jim Morrison of the Doors pleaded over the airwaves in 1967, while Aretha Franklin demanded “R-E-S-P-E-C-T” for all women. The Beatles’s number one single reassured everyone that “All You Need is Love,” as the group’s *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* ruled the FM airwaves. The musical *Hair*, which debuted off-Broadway in 1967, introduced nudity to the Great White Way in the following year, while the cast proclaimed the dawning of a new era—the Age of Aquarius, indeed.



In the cinema, Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blowup* and Andy Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls* played to packed art-film houses. For Warhol, the U.S. Pavilion at the 1967 Montreal Expo was the apotheosis of Pop. He later commented in *Popism: The Warhol Sixties* that the Buckminster Fuller-designed geodesic dome enclosure was hung with “works by Rauschenberg and Stella and Poons and Zox and Motherwell and D’Arcangelo and Dine and Rosenquist and Johns and Oldenburg. But a lot of the show was pop culture itself—movies and blowups of stars, and props and folk art and American Indian art and Elvis Presley’s guitar and Joan Baez’s guitar. These things weren’t just part of the exhibit; they were the exhibit—Pop art was America completely.”¹

The art scene in the U.S. was inclusive and diverse. Abstract painting maestros such as Sam Francis, and Frank Stella, represented here by *Sunapee IV* (1966), had no qualms about showing their works beside those of artists like Richard Diebenkorn, who introduced a new form of figurative painting on the West Coast, and the East Coast’s Alex Katz, who, in a work such as *Beach Scene* (1966), reexamined the possibilities of the figure. Tom Wesselmann’s refined nudes were then, and still are, heralded as sexy, rather than sexist; and the furtive movements of a classic Calder mobile, such as *The Red Crescent* (1969), imply the movement of the human body—a form of audience participation that is a prime concern for many artists today. During the mid-1960s, the audience became a valued participant in the realization of a work of art. There was at that moment a general sense of cooperation and collaboration that too often seems in short supply today.

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