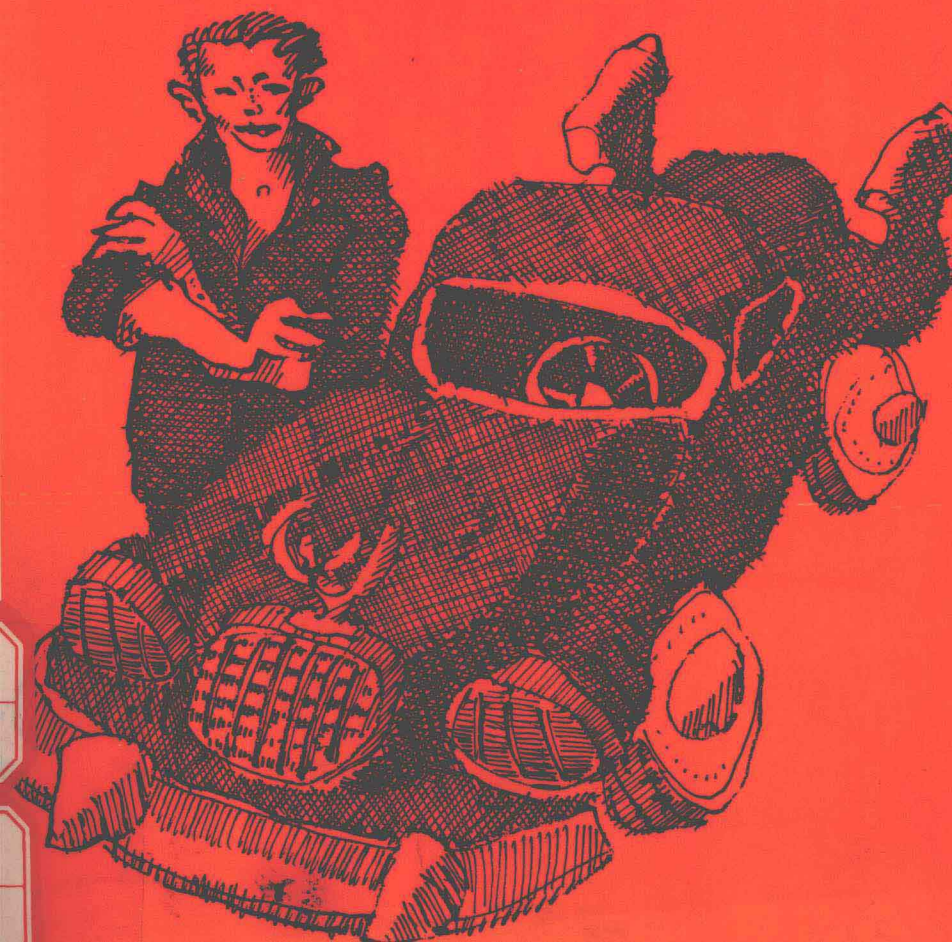


TOM WOLF

THE KANDY-KOLORED
TANGERINE-FLAKE
STREAMLINE BABY



**THE
KANDY-
KOLORED
TANGERINE-
FLAKE
STREAMLINE
BABY**

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Library of Congress catalog card number: 65-19050

Published in Canada by HarperCollins*CanadaLtd*

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Printed in the United States of America

Designed by Patricia de Groot

Twenty-second printing, 1996

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following chapters were first published in *Esquire Magazine*: "Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't Hear You! Too Noisy) Las Vegas!!!!," "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby" (under the title, "There Goes [Varoom! Varoom!] That Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby"), "The Marvelous Mouth," "The Last American Hero" (under the title, "The Last American Hero is Junior Johnson. Yes!"), and "Purveyor of the Public Life" (under the title, "Public Lives: *Confidential Magazine*; Reflection in Tranquility by the Former Owner, Robert Harrison"); "The New Art Gallery Society" first appeared in *Harper's Bazaar*; all the other essays first appeared in the New York *Herald Tribune's* Sunday magazine, *New York*. "The Big League Complex" is reprinted from the book, *New York, New York*, © 1964 by the New York *Herald Tribune*, with the permission of the publishers, The Dial Press, Inc.

The drawings for "Teen-Age Male Hairdos" first appeared in the Springfield (Mass.) *Sunday Republican*, those for "New York's Beautiful People" first appeared in *Venture Magazine*, and the other drawings first appeared in the New York *Herald Tribune's New York*.



Introduction

I don't mean for this to sound like "I had a vision" or anything, but there was a specific starting point for practically all of these stories. I wrote them in a fifteen-month period, and the whole thing started with the afternoon I went to a Hot Rod & Custom Car show at the Coliseum in New York. Strange afternoon! I was sent up there to cover the Hot Rod & Custom Car show by the New York *Herald Tribune*, and I brought back exactly the kind of story any of the somnambulistic totem newspapers in America would have come up with. A totem newspaper is the kind people don't really buy to read but just to *have*, physically, because they know it supports their own outlook on life. They're just like the buffalo tongues the Omaha

INTRODUCTION

Indians used to carry around or the dog ears the Mahili clan carried around in Bengal. There are two kinds of totem newspapers in the country. One is the symbol of the frightened chair-arm-doilie Vicks Vapo-Rub *Weltanschauung* that lies there in the solar plexus of all good gray burghers. All those nice stories on the first page of the second section about eighty-seven-year-old ladies on Gramercy Park who have one-hundred-and-two-year-old turtles or about the colorful street vendors of Havana. Mommy! This fellow Castro is in there, and revolutions may come and go, but the picturesque poor will endure, padding around in the streets selling their chestnuts and salt pretzels the world over, even in Havana, Cuba, assuring a paradise, after all, full of respect and obeisance, for all us Vicks Vapo-Rub chair-arm-doilie burghers. After all. Or another totem group buys the kind of paper they can put under their arms and have the totem for the tough-but-wholesome outlook, the Mom's Pie view of life. Everybody can go off to the bar and drink a few "brews" and retail some cynical remarks about Zora Folley and how the fight game is these days and round it off, though, with how George Chuvalo has "a lot of heart," which he got, one understands, by eating mom's pie. Anyway, I went to the Hot Rod & Custom Car show and wrote a story that would have suited any of the totem newspapers. All the totem newspapers would regard one of these shows as a sideshow, a panopticon, for creeps and kooks; not even wealthy, eccentric creeps and kooks, which would be all right, but lower class creeps and nutballs with dermatitic skin and ratty hair. The totem story usually makes what is known as "gentle fun" of this, which is a way of saying, don't worry, these people are nothing.

So I wrote a story about a kid who had built a golden motorcycle, which he called "The Golden Alligator." The seat was made of some kind of gold-painted leather that kept going back, on and on, as long as an alligator's tail, and had scales

Introduction

embossed on it, like an alligator's. The kid had made a whole golden suit for himself, like a space suit, that also looked as if it were covered with scales and he would lie down on his stomach on this long seat, stretched out full length, so that he appeared to be made into the motorcycle or something, and roar around Greenwich Village on Saturday nights, down Macdougall Street, down there in Nut Heaven, looking like a golden alligator on wheels. Nutty! He seemed like a Gentle Nut when I got through. It was a shame I wrote that sort of story, the usual totem story, because I was working for the *Herald Tribune*, and the *Herald Tribune* was the only experimental paper in town, breaking out of the totem formula. The thing was, I knew I had another story all the time, a bona fide story, the real story of the Hot Rod & Custom Car show, but I didn't know what to do with it. It was outside the system of ideas I was used to working with, even though I had been through the whole Ph.D. route at Yale, in American Studies and everything.

Here were all these . . . *weird* . . . nutty-looking, crazy baroque custom cars, sitting in little nests of pink angora angel's hair for the purpose of "glamorous" display—but then I got to talking to one of the men who make them, a fellow named Dale Alexander. He was a very serious and soft-spoken man, about thirty, completely serious about the whole thing, in fact, and pretty soon it became clear, as I talked to this man for a while, that he had been living like the *complete artist* for years. He had starved, suffered—the whole thing—so he could sit inside a garage and create these cars which more than 99 per cent of the American people would consider ridiculous, vulgar and lower-class-awful beyond comment almost. He had started off with a garage that fixed banged-up cars and everything, to pay the rent, but gradually he couldn't stand it any more. Creativity—his own custom car art—became an obsession with him. So he became the complete custom car artist.

INTRODUCTION

And he said he wasn't the only one. All the great custom car designers had gone through it. It was the *only way*. *Holy beasts!* Starving artists! Inspiration! Only instead of garrets, they had these garages.

So I went over to *Esquire* magazine after a while and talked to them about this phenomenon, and they sent me out to California to take a look at the custom car world. Dale Alexander was from Detroit or some place, but the real center of the thing was in California, around Los Angeles. I started talking to a lot of these people, like George Barris and Ed Roth, and seeing what they were doing, and—well, eventually it became the story from which the title of this book was taken, “The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby.” But at first I couldn't even write the story. I came back to New York and just sat around worrying over the thing. I had a lot of trouble analyzing exactly what I had on my hands. By this time *Esquire* practically had a gun at my head because they had a two-page-wide color picture for the story locked into the printing presses and no story. Finally, I told Byron Dobell, the managing editor at *Esquire*, that I couldn't pull the thing together. O.K., he tells me, just type out my notes and send them over and he will get somebody else to write it. So about 8 o'clock that night I started typing the notes out in the form of a memorandum that began, “Dear Byron.” I started typing away, starting right with the first time I saw any custom cars in California. I just started recording it all, and inside of a couple of hours, typing along like a madman, I could tell that something was beginning to happen. By midnight this memorandum to Byron was twenty pages long and I was still typing like a maniac. About 2 A.M. or something like that I turned on WABC, a radio station that plays rock and roll music all night long, and got a little more manic. I wrapped up the memorandum about 6:15 A.M., and by this time it was 49 pages long. I took it over to *Esquire* as soon as they opened up, about 9:30

Introduction

A.M. About 4 P.M. I got a call from Byron Dobell. He told me they were striking out the "Dear Byron" at the top of the memorandum and running the rest of it in the magazine. That was the story, "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Stream-line Baby."

What had happened was that I started writing down everything I had seen the first place I went in California, this incredible event, a "Teen Fair." The details themselves, when I wrote them down, suddenly made me see what was happening. Here was this incredible combination of form plus money in a place nobody ever thought about finding it, namely, among teenagers. Practically every style recorded in art history is the result of the same thing—a lot of attention to form, plus the money to make monuments to it. The "classic" English style of Inigo Jones, for example, places like the Covent Garden and the royal banquet hall at Whitehall, were the result of a worship of Italian Palladian grandeur . . . form . . . plus the money that began pouring in under James I and Charles I from colonial possessions. These were the kind of forms, styles, symbols . . . Palladian classicism . . . that influence a whole society. But throughout history, everywhere this kind of thing took place, China, Egypt, France under the Bourbons, every place, it has been something the aristocracy has been responsible for. What has happened in the United States since World War II, however, has broken that pattern. The war created money. It made massive infusions of money into every level of society. Suddenly classes of people whose styles of life had been practically invisible had the money to build monuments to their own styles. Among teen-agers, this took the form of custom cars, the twist, the jerk, the monkey, the shake, rock music generally, stretch pants, decal eyes—and all these things, these teen-age styles of life, like Inigo Jones' classicism, have started having an influence on the life of the whole country. It is not merely teen-agers. In the South, for example, all

INTRODUCTION

the proles, peasants, and petty burghers suddenly got enough money to start up their incredible car world. In fifteen years stock car racing has replaced baseball as the number one sport in the South. It doesn't make much difference what happens to baseball or stock car racing, actually, but this shift, from a fixed land sport, modeled on cricket, to this wild car sport, with standard, or standard-looking, cars that go 180 miles an hour or so—this symbolizes a radical change in the people as a whole. Practically nobody has bothered to see what these changes are all about. People have been looking at the new money since the war in economic terms only. Nobody will even take a look at our incredible new national pastimes, things like stock car racing, drag racing, demolition derbies, sports that attract five to ten million more spectators than football, baseball and basketball each year. Part of it is a built-in class bias. The educated classes in this country, as in every country, the people who grow up to control visual and printed communication media, are all plugged into what is, when one gets down to it, an ancient, aristocratic aesthetic. Stock car racing, custom cars—and, for that matter, the jerk, the monkey, rock music—still seem beneath serious consideration, still the preserve of ratty people with ratty hair and dermatitis and corroded thoracic boxes and so forth. Yet all these rancid people are creating new styles all the time and changing the life of the whole country in ways that nobody even seems to bother to record, much less analyze.

A curious example of what is happening is Society, in the sense of High Society, in New York City today. Only it isn't called High Society or even Café Society anymore. Nobody seems to know quite what to call it, but the term that is catching on is Pop Society. This is because socialites in New York today seem to have no natural, aristocratic styles of their own—they are taking all their styles from "pop" groups, which stands for popular, or "vulgar" or "bohemian" groups. They

Introduction

dance the Jerk, the Monkey, the Shake, they listen to rock music, the women wear teen-age and even “sub-teen” styles, such as stretch pants and decal eyes, they draw their taste in art, such as “underground” movies and “pop” painting, from various bohos and camp culturati, mainly. New York’s “Girl of the Year”—Baby Jane Holzer—is the most incredible socialite in history. Here in this one girl is a living embodiment of almost pure “pop” sensation, a kind of corn-haired essence of the new styles of life. I never had written a story that seemed to touch so many nerves in so many people. Television and the movies all of a sudden went crazy over her, but that was just one side of it. A lot of readers were enraged. They wrote letters to the publisher of the *Herald Tribune*, to the *Herald Tribune* magazine, *New York*, where it appeared, they made phone calls, they would confront me with it in restaurants, all sorts of things—and in all of it I kept noticing the same thing. Nobody ever seemed to be able to put his finger on what he was enraged about. Most of them took the line that the *Herald Tribune* had no business paying that much attention to such a person and such a life as she was leading. Refreshing! Moral Outrage! But it was all based on the idea that Jane Holzer was some kind of freak they didn’t like. Jane Holzer—and the Baby Jane syndrome—there’s nothing freakish about it. Baby Jane is the hyper-version of a whole new style of life in America. I think she is a very profound symbol. But she is not the super-hyper-version. The super-hyper-version is Las Vegas. I call Las Vegas the Versailles of America, and for specific reasons. Las Vegas happened to be created after the war, with war money, by gangsters. Gangsters happened to be the first uneducated . . . but more to the point, unaristocratic, *outside* of the aristocratic tradition . . . the first uneducated, prole-petty-burgher Americans to have enough money to build a monument to their style of life. They built it in an isolated spot, Las Vegas, out in the desert, just like Louis XIV, the Sun King,

INTRODUCTION

who purposely went outside of Paris, into the countryside, to create a fantastic baroque environment to celebrate his rule. It is no accident that Las Vegas and Versailles are the only two architecturally uniform cities in Western history. The important thing about the building of Las Vegas is not that the builders were gangsters but that they were proles. They celebrated, very early, the new style of life of America—using the money pumped in by the war to show a prole vision . . . *Glamor!* . . . of style. The usual thing has happened, of course. Because it is prole, it gets ignored, except on the most sensational level. Yet long after Las Vegas' influence as a gambling heaven has gone, Las Vegas' forms and symbols will be influencing American life. That fantastic skyline! Las Vegas' neon sculpture, its fantastic fifteen-story-high display signs, parabolas, boomerangs, rhomboids, trapezoids and all the rest of it, are already the staple design of the American landscape outside of the oldest parts of the oldest cities. They are all over every suburb, every subdivision, every highway . . . every *hamlet*, as it were, the new crossroads, spiraling Servicenter signs. They are the new landmarks of America, the new guideposts, the new way Americans get their bearings. And yet what do we know about these signs, these incredible pieces of neon sculpture, and what kind of impact they have on people? Nobody seems to know the first thing about it, not even the men who design them. I hunted out some of the great sign makers of Las Vegas, men who design for the Young Electric Sign Co., and the Federal Sign and Signal Corporation—and marvelous!—they come from completely outside the art history tradition of the design schools of the Eastern universities. I remember talking with this one designer, Ted Blaney, from Federal, their chief designer, in the cocktail lounge of the Dunes Hotel on "The Strip." I showed him a shape, a boomerang shape, that one sees all over Las Vegas, in small signs, huge signs, huge things like the archway entrance to the Desert Inn—it is not an

Introduction

arch, really, but this huge boomerang shape—and I asked him what they, the men who design these things, call it.

Ted was a stocky little guy, very sunburnt, with a pencil mustache and a Texas string tie, the kind that has strings sticking through some kind of silver dollar or something situated at the throat. He talked slowly and he had a way of furling his eyebrows around his nose when he did mental calculations such as figuring out this boomerang shape.

He stared at the shape, which he and his brothers in the art have created over and over and over, over, over and over and over in Las Vegas, and finally he said,

“Well, that’s what we call—what we sort of call—‘free form.’”

Free form! Marvelous! No hung-up old art history words for these guys. America’s first unconscious avant-garde! The hell with Mondrian, whoever the hell he is. The hell with Moholy-Nagy, if anybody ever heard of him. Artists for the new age, sculptors for the new style and new money of the . . . Yahl lower orders. The new sensibility—*Baby baby baby where did our love go?*—the new world, submerged so long, invisible, and now arising, slippy, shiny, electric—Super Scuba-man!—out of the vinyl deeps.



CONTENTS

Introduction

1 THE NEW CULTURE-MAKERS

- 1 *Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't Hear You! Too Noisy) Las Vegas!!!!* 3
- 2 *Clean Fun at Riverhead* 29
- 3 *The Fifth Beatle* 37
- 4 *The Peppermint Lounge Revisited* 51
- 5 *The First Tycoon of Teen* 58
- 6 *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* 76

2 HEROES AND CELEBRITIES

- 7 *The Marvelous Mouth* 111
- 8 *The Last American Hero* 126

- 9 *Loverboy of the Bourgeoisie* 173
- 10 *Purveyor of the Public Life* 180
- 11 *The Girl of the Year* 204

3 A METROPOLITAN SKETCHBOOK

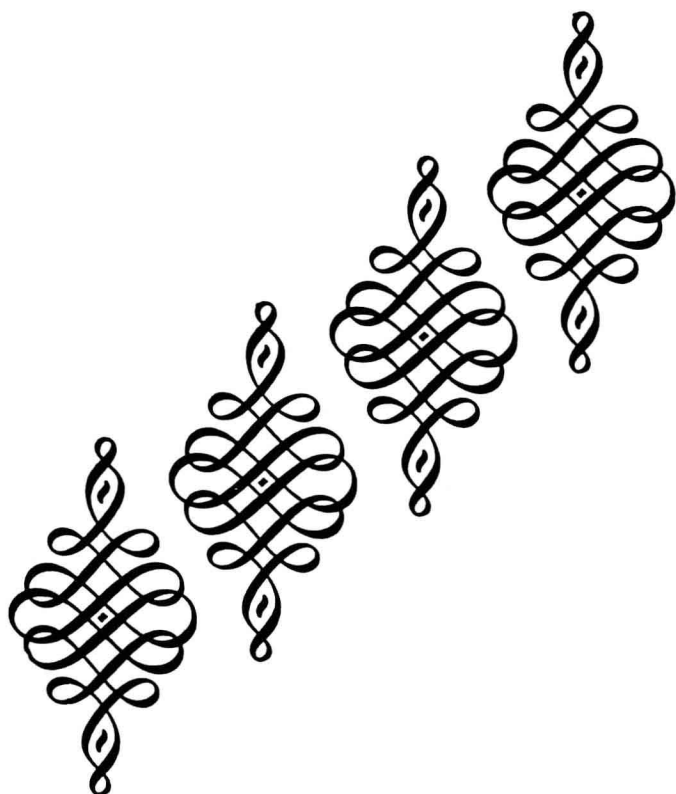
Old Faces, New Fashions
Teen-age Male Hairdos
The Sun-Worshippers
The Zoo in Central Park
The View in Central Park
New York's Beautiful People

4 STATUS STRIFE AND THE HIGH LIFE

- 12 *The Saturday Route* 223
- 13 *The Luther of Columbus Circle* 232
- 14 *The New Art Gallery Society* 245
- 15 *The Secret Vice* 254
- 16 *The Nanny Mafia* 262

5 LOVE AND HATE NEW YORK STYLE

- 17 *Putting Daddy On* 275
- 18 *A Sunday Kind of Love* 286
- 19 *The Woman Who Has Everything* 294
- 20 *The Voices of Village Square* 306
- 21 *Why Doormen Hate Volkswagens* 314
- 22 *The Big League Complex* 320



1

THE NEW
CULTURE-MAKERS

