

# Examining the pop art movement



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In attempt to bring art back into American daily life, the Pop-art movement depicted elements of popular culture by using common everyday objects, chiefly advertising and product packaging, television and comic strips. The images are portrayed with a blend of humour, criticism and irony. Through this, the movement ascertained the position of art into everyday and contemporary life. It assisted in decreasing the gap between “ high art” and “ low art” and abolished the distinction between fine art and commercial art methods. The Pop-art movement rebuffed the abstract style because of its cultured? And aristocratic nature. (World Wide Art Resources 2009)

It was during the 1980's that there was a renewal of interest in the Pop-art of the well known Andy Warhol and contemporaries, this resurgence of interest was known as neo-Pop. Adapted from its forefathers, contemporary Pop-art consists of a reworked form; a revival of identifiable celebrities and objects from popular culture with icons and symbols of the current times. (Art History Archive n. d.) Contemporary Pop-art lends from the past, maintaining the critical evaluation of Western culture, relationships, values and interactions. It frequently satirises celebrities and candidly embraces ideas that are challenging and controversial.

Although the bombardment upon society of Popular culture and advertising has become significantly greater since the Pop-art movement began, I believe that the critiques of Pop-art are not appropriate to the original nor the contemporary Pop-art scene. Pop-artists artists have continually been engaged in a crucial dialogue with mass culture. They are noted for exploiting these increasingly despised images of mass culture in order to facilitate the critical examination of the effects of consumerism on human

thought, emotion and creativity and challenging our assumptions about the purpose and identity of art in a world inundated with media images and messages (University of Virginia 2006), as the following examples by contemporary artists will demonstrate. (expand on this?)

Jeff Koons is perhaps the most renowned Pop-artist of the current day. He addresses society's fixation with Pop culture and counteracts the division between appearance and reality, surface and depth, and art and commodity (reword more?) Koons forms his art pieces on consumer products and manipulates everyday objects in order to overemphasise mass-produced cultural objects while uncovering the nuances of marketing. In difference to his 1960's forbearers, Koon's desire is to remark on societies psychological investment in consumerism and how these consumer products are fabricated to allure. (Art Knowledge News n. d.)

Jeff Koon's first exhibition was titled Equilibrium, which was displayed in 1985. One of the defining features of this decade was the forceful growth of consumerism. For this exhibition he produced a series of works displaying consumer items in glass cases. In Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank (Fig 1), three basketballs were suspended in a glass case, surrounded by authentic Nike posters displaying basketball players in positions of power. The posters in the work represent sport as a means to achieve fame and fortune for young working-class Americans. The posters almost exclusive use of black athletes not just as stars, but in roles associated with elevated power and respect is a comment on the traditional social system that in reality refutes this power or respect to a large majority of African-Americans. According to

Koons, the suspended basketballs also suggest death and fame, the ultimate states of existence. (Tate Collection n. d.)

Koons Made in Heaven (Fig 2) series is a collection of overtly sexually explicit photographs and sculptures featuring the artist in moments of sexual passion and intimacy with his then pornstar wife Cicciolina. The exuberant images were first displayed during the 1990 Venice Biennale, among more conventional forms of expression. The series produced both shock and excitement among audiences, and stirred much controversy in the art world with a scandalous subject matter that pushed the limits of twentieth century censorship. Although pornography has been a widely acknowledged aspect of society, it deemed controversial because it is a form of Popular culture that was and still remains taboo in polite company. Koons is notorious for testing the boundaries of acceptable taste; his intention in Made in Heaven was to critically examine love, romance and sexual desire, involving the viewer by making them a contributor to the artwork, as most pornography necessitates an outside viewer to be classified as such. (Christie's 2009)The Made in Heaven series was also in part a response to The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, by the fifteenth century painter Massacio. Koons remarks, "In The Expulsion, there's all this guilt and shame that were on Adam and Eve's faces, and I wanted to make a body of work that was about guilt and shame and the importance of removing that, so that people could have transcendence over guilt and shame in their own history." (Nance 2010)

Made for part of his Banality series, is Michael Jackson and Bubbles (1988) (Fig 3), a six feet long ceramic gilded white and gold statue depicting mega Pop-star Michael Jackson with his pet monkey Bubbles, immortalised as cultic

and sacred personalities in an idealised state. It's initially blatantly kitsch appearance gives way to reveal its hyper-realistic approach to evoke the fragility of modern day's most eminent star. The situation illustrated in the piece deals with society's idolisation and the ever more bizarre media narrative of Michael Jackson's life. Koons states, ' It really wasn't so much about Michael Jackson. It was about celebrity status, and about hopes, ideals, hierarchies that are placed on structures which take human form.' (Nance 2010) Michael Jackson is the archetype of the glamorous, eccentric tragic and ambivalent and Koons encourages numerous interpretive possibilities. (Astrup Fearnly Museum n. d.)

An additional example of a contemporary Pop-artist is American sculptor, Daniel Edwards. His sculptures deal with celebrity and Pop culture in a manner that frequently rouses controversy. The release of his works are usually paired with a press release. (Capla Kesting Fine Art n. d.) While frequently denigrated for his use of celebrity, Edwards artwork are also acknowledged as prophetic and consistent in their capacity for humanising social issues that the media and public have difficulty addressing.

Autopsy of Paris Hilton (2007) (Fig 4) was produced as a confrontational and graphic interactive display to communicate to the young the dangers of drink driving. The sculpture is life-sized and depicts Paris Hilton sprawled on a bench with her legs splayed. In one hand she clutches her mobile phone whilst in the other is a glass of wine, in this sculpture she has supposedly died as a result of her drink driving, in which in reality she has been convicted of on numerous occasions. The public are encouraged to remove her innards through a cavity in her abdomen, giving a coroners perspective.

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Contained within this cavity is also her uterus containing twin dead fetuses, which Edwards says is to bring attention to the teen pregnancy crisis. The sculpture is an attempt to de-glamorise the life of a diva and partier which Hilton is renowned for. (Rayme 2007) The sculpture perhaps also alludes to the cult which is celebrities and their every occurrence and the media and public's unquenchable hunger to get as close as possible to their idols.

Daniel Edward's Monument to Pro-Life: The Birth of Sean Preston (2006) (Fig 5), portrays celebrity Britney Spears in a position of natural birth, whereas in fact she gave birth to her son via c-section and was heavily drugged. The piece created much political debate. According to Edwards it promotes pro-life. At its reveal he called his piece an "image of birth" and mentioned that it was a new take on the pro-life perspective. He states that pro-lifers generally endorse bloody images of abortion and his aim is to generate debate about a topic that is as he states 'greater than either pro-life and pro-choice advocates.' (Rayme 2007)

Japanese artist Masumasa Morimura is a well-known example of appropriating worldwide recognised images taken from mass media and popular culture

In my view, there can be no generalisation about the quality, meaning and social significance of works of art, given the discrepancies of aesthetic responses and interpretations. Furthermore, Donald Kuspit's view expressed in his article suffers owing to the fact that he assumes that artists should be critics of society rather than witnesses or simply narrators of it. Kuspit is an

example of a critic who universalises his personal opinion of Pop-art and delivers his judgement whilst ignoring other responses to Pop. (Walker 2009)

Pop art was and still remains one of the most popular styles of art, it was successful in communicating to the general public in a mode in which few art movements did or have since done. (Encyclopedia of World Art n. d.) The reality that Pop-art is effective in generating such a broad range of responses is a tribute to it's at first seemingly ambiguous character, a testament that it is more complex and diverse than some critics have accepted, and an indication that it is not as trivial and straightforward as some commentators believe. (Walker 2009)