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A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF POP ART

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by

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## INTRODUCTION

Pop Art:

'It springs newborn out of a boredom with the finality and oversaturation of abstract expressionism which, by its own esthetic logic, is the end of art, the glorious pinnacle of the long pyramidal creative process.'(1)

The aforementioned comments are an extract from an interview with the sixties Pop artist Robert Indiana and are succeeded by the following question put to him by Gene Swenson:

'Is pop art here to stay?'

To which Indiana replied:

'Give it ten years perhaps; if it matches abstract expressionism fifteen or twenty it will be doing well in these accelerated days of mass-medium circulation, in twenty years it must face 1984.'  
(2)

A quarter of a century has elapsed since Indiana made these comments and in hindsight the era of the 1960s and its cultural expressions could be viewed as being more easily recognized and defined, than in comparison to the complexities of our own time under the banner of post-modernism. Something of this dichotomy may perhaps be deduced from Indiana's comments. In the historical frame of his own time, he is afforded the opportunity and simplicity of identifying his art as but a reaction to abstract expressionism and in doing so, participates in the regimentation of art as a process of rational linear progressions. In today's art no such simple

equivalences are sustainable given the present diversity in pluralist art practices where Neo-Geo, Neo-Expressionism, Neo-Abstraction and Neo-Figuration get along marvellously in an atmosphere of indifference, predicated by the effectiveness of mass communication. The escalation in mass medium circulation and the advancements in communication technology relate to his own observations and his possible anxiety for the mortality of pop art in its confrontation with a world of Orwellian dimensions.

It is at this juncture that one can identify with his comments and by further extension, identify with the fictitious character of Winston in Orwell's novel Nineteen Eighty Four. For today, one can see the possibility of transferring the identity of the 'Ministry of Truth' and the 'Ministry of Plenty' onto those functions operating within western culture as advanced information technology and consumerism. Although this juxtaposition would be an oversimplification. In an Orwellian world it is much easier to recognize and to oppose a culture that is perceived to be a prison. For the gates of such a prison are equally impervious, surveillance equally rigorous, icon worship equally persuasive, where little difference is made whether its prison wardens are inspired by right or left wing ideologies. In the context of the present, this hypothetical confinement or control over cultural expressions becomes an aberration, for by way of contrast to Orwellian conventions 'Big Brother does not watch us by choice. We watch him, by ours.' (3)

Intrinsic to either of these positions is the recognition that advanced technology, its aims, methods and codes, have immeasurable impact on cultural perceptions and expressions. In real terms the impact of such

developments are plainly obvious to us in the second-half of this century. Where the veracity of communication technology permeates all aspects of Western Culture and aligns itself with such definitions as Late Capitalism, Post-Industrialism and Post-Modernism.

Its ramifications in the creation and definition of art have been no less significant. In this respect the 1960s in many ways represent a key transitional period towards this new order. Not least for the emergence of Pop Art, but also for the increase in wider socio-political developments such as multinational capitalism, computer technology and ecology. Factors which continue to impact upon us today.

As with all transitions to a new order, difficulties will emerge in the process of adjustment. Sixties Pop Art can be located as a key expression of this adjustment process leaving in its wake a representation of art that continues to influence our perceptions of art today. In particular the work of Andy Warhol, as an icon of Pop Art, casts a long shadow into the present context of art. If Warhol's contemporary Indiana, viewed the possibility of Orwellian conventions to be a source of anxiety, no such anxiety can be deduced from Warhol's own comments:

'Someone said that Brecht wanted everybody to think alike, I want everybody to think alike. But Brecht wanted to do it through Communism, in a way. Russia is doing it under Government. It's happening here all by itself without being under a strict government; so if its working without trying, why can't it work without being Communist? Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and we're getting more and more that way.

I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should like everybody.' (4)

Here his comments reflect aspects of a dialogue that surrounds his own work, a dialogue in the erosion of difference, expressed as an ambivalent relationship between high art and mass culture. His work intimates that his experience as a commercial artist influenced his acknowledgement of the connections between art and commerce. The position being that a fundamental determination of his art was intrinsically linked to the principles of distribution; to the codified representations that determine the distribution of commodities in the wider commercial framework of industrial societies.

So in recognizing Pop Art and the significance of Warhol's influence, one is drawn into accepting a dialogue of dissolution through the disintegration of qualitative judgments based on paradigm equations, a dialogue that is not necessarily confined to art but also spills over into the workings of contemporary life. Where the priorities of commercialism, through the aegis of the mass media, contribute to the vagaries of trans-aestheticization and assist in the fragmentation and neutralization of western cultures capacity to differentiate between any number of polarities. It is this ongoing process that I wish to observe in general, whereby Pop Art is a signpost in that direction. A direction towards uncharted social phenomena for which one is not at liberty to fully envisage at this stage.

## CHAPTER 1

### A Signpost in the Direction of Commerce

As I have suggested, having worked as a commercial artist Warhol was in a position to interpret and observe the relevancy and influence of commercialism in manipulating cultural perceptions. His stance in relation to these commercial aspects may be confirmed from the following statement in his writings 'The Philosophy of Andy Warhol', though at the same time, as with all intimations expressed by Warhol, one is left with a sense that there is an underlying camp attitude:

'Business art is the step that comes after art. I started as a commercial artist, and I want to finish as a business artist. After I did the thing called "Art" or whatever it's called, I went into business art. I wanted to be an Art Businessman or a Business Artist. Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art.' (5)

Here one is left with a difficulty in understanding this equation, that is, whether there is a difference between business and art (as euphemistically expressed, business is business and art is for art's sake), or whether there are cross-over points that erode any intrinsic difference.

Prior to the emergence of Pop Art, American Abstract Expressionism assumed the status of being the main avant-garde art movement originating out of aspects of modernity and for which the critic Clement Greenberg was positioned as its critical defender. As early as 1939 Greenberg had written his widely acclaimed essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' in which he

expressed his concern and anticipation of a cultural crisis in the West:

'A society, as it becomes less and less able, in the course of its development, to justify the inevitability of its particular forms, breaks up the accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend in large part for communication with their audiences. It becomes difficult to assume anything.' (6)

In confronting this cultural dilemma he argues that the standards of cultural excellence should be maintained against the pervasive encroachment of mass culture and that two main factors to be avoided were academicism and kitsch. He maintained that the survival of living culture was dependent on its ability to progress which for him was the pivotal function of the avant-garde artist.

'Retiring from public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. "Art for art's sake" and "pure poetry" appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.' (7)

Greenberg indicates the parameters for the maintenance of High Culture, that art should be self-referential, engaged in the priority of formalist aesthetics and evaluated according to its own laws so as to avoid its debasement through the appropriative and reproductive logic of mass culture. An avant-garde art which constantly renewed itself in order to keep culture moving.

With Pop Art there emerges an erosion of the distinctions between high art and kitsch. Kitsch being referred to by Greenberg as popular, commercial

art and literature, with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fictions, comics. The boundaries of each converge with such examples as Lichtenstein's appropriation of comic strip imagery recreated in a high art fashion utilizing a device which could be defined as abstract formalism, that is through the use of the Benday dot. An abstract image engaged with the two-dimensionality of the flat surface, the arrangement of spaces, shapes and colours. Pop Art also lays claim to being avant-garde, in challenging the transcending form of art espoused by Abstract Expressionism. That is, to challenge, criticize, agitate and explode the dominant culture in its traditional forms from within and using the dominant cultures own methods.

Pop Art takes on board the images of kitsch which are seen as a dangerous phenomena precisely because of its complicity with the 'laws' of industrial society that reinforce the inherent sameness of mass production and a purported threat to high culture. Where Warhol's work seems to align art as fundamentally indistinguishable from the products of commerce. IN assimilating the labels of commodity distribution, it gives recognition to the literacy of kitsch, a by-product of industrialization and consumerism. The pervasion of markets for all commodities, where the real tin of Campbell's soup can be purchased in a supermarket and its simulcra purchased as a high class art-commodity (Fig. 1) in a commercial gallery.

Whether avant-garde or kitsch, the position remains that they are only definable as such by a cultural elite. For in a bourgeoisie society there is never a lower-class culture that is not highly compromised with bourgeoisie culture. The superstructure always remains intact, for it is



Fig. 1: Campbell's Soup Can, 1964  
Silkscreen on Canvas, 34 3/4" x 24"

unlikely that the power elite will choose such cultural expressions that would evidently undermine their power brokerage. A position recognized by Greenberg who, in 1989, in reference to his original essay commented: 'the avant-garde art survives because the elite come around to buy. In "avant-garde and kitsch" I said they are tied to the bourgeoisie by a golden umbilical cord.' (8) But here also, kitsch operates as just the other side of the same coin. For today what we call 'popular' or 'mass' culture is nowhere a culture of the people and of the masses but a culture fabricated for the people and for the masses.

## CHAPTER 2

### Fabricated Structures

Many of the established critics in the sixties viewed avant-gardism solely in terms of its hostility to mass media culture. The referencing of popular media images by pop artists was seen to be a betrayal of the value of art, a pacification of the critical stance appropriate to avant-garde artists (in a modernist sense). In the seemingly unchallenged advocacy of machine technology within the broader social framework, the media represents an ideology of technology that constitutes an aberration of democratic ideals towards the semblance of totalitarianism. A panoptic institution for the control of information where those who speak through the media have access to a mass of people, while those within the mass public watch in relative isolation from each other.

In this respect, Pop Art touches upon a raw nerve of democratic ideals, those aspirations of freedom and individualism. This position challenged by Warhol in his approach and methods to art. His negation of those concepts related to craft and skill oriented modes of aesthetic production through the adaptation of the factory framework in which the serial production of his art stresses the anonymity of the producer or author and assists in disarming the principles of originality and authenticity.

Warhol's use of the photographic image further diminishes the critique of a transcendental value to art, the privileges of aura and authenticity. A position explored by Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Work of Art in the

Age of Mechanical Reproduction', where he states:

'Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be .... Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so vis a vis technical reproduction.'(9)

Its material reality constituting its authenticity, its testimony to the history which it has experienced, its traditional value within a given cultural heritage, these factors become subjugated too, and they lose their autonomy under the processes of mechanical reproduction. A process whereby the art object becomes downwardly mobile, its acquisition more democratic but also less sacred. For Benjamin that which is lost through mechanical reproduction is arts claim to a unique 'aura'. What was special in the original its aura is liquidated, fragmented and deconsecrated in the copy. When the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable through the dissipation of arts aura and its contiguity to art based on ritual, then the function of art in Benjamin's view begins to be based on politics.

Here the argument can point to Andy Warhol's work as an art that reflects the political instruments of standardization through the use of commercial imagery, which in the wider social context directs itself towards the individual as a conduit unit within a mass. The negation of individuality implicit in the bureaucratic work structures of contemporary consumer culture, that militate against the freedom to act creatively, to realize oneself through engagement with the world. A sense of wholeness eludes the person whose daily tasks are encompassed by acts which have little meaning

in and of themselves, which are fragmentary pieces within a larger corporate enterprise which he or she cannot fully comprehend.

Pop Art, like advertising, is ultimately indifferent to the reality it enshrines in a magnificent image. Pop Art thus deals in illusions and the pop artist is essentially a publicity agent for the familiar illusions expressed through advertising.



Fig. 2: Marilyn Monroe, 1964  
Silkscreen and Oil on Canvas, 40" x 40"

## CHAPTER 3

### The Magnificent Image

A common feature in the work of Andy Warhol is the magnificent image located in the visage of the celebrity appropriated from the Hollywood publicity photographs of Liz Taylor, Marilyn Monroe (Fig. 2), Elvis, et. al. Images that are chosen precisely for their mass familiarity and which incorporate an already loaded and preconditioned public response. A commercially cultivated response, whereby the personal lives of celebrities are closely monitored and continually represented in the mass media, becoming role models for which people aspire to emulate. The lifestyle of the 'stars' seem to inhabit a utopian universe of bounty. They seem to live in castles where their encounters with interior designers lead to unrestrained flights of fancy. Their desires, their fantasies, their whims, are painlessly translated into the objective forms that surround them. Their lifestyle seems to float beyond the terms of the real world, cultivated by the mass medias ability to invest the individual life of the celebrity with a secularized imprint of the sacred. Where as Walter Benjamin states (and by way of contrast to the dissipation of arts 'aura'):

'The cult of the movie star fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality", the phoney spell of a commodity.' (10)

The more the image of an individual celebrity is reproduced mechanically, the more captivating they appear to be in the 'flesh'. Just as Warhol created a persona about himself that typifies the eulogies proclaimed by

commercial imagery. He built a space around himself that was the exact photocopy of the isolation of the objects in his paintings. An assimilation of the specialness of the objects and people that advertising conveys. Both creating a distance and an allure to its audience. Where the halo of prestige covets the indefinable empty zone of distance from the reality of people and things.

In a highly mobile world where first impressions are important and where selling oneself is the most highly cultivated 'skill' the construction of appearances becomes more and more imperative. Where style offers a representation of self, defined by surfaces and commodities. Style transmitted through the mass media that tends to reinforce this outlook in intimate detail. Through commercial photography in advertisement, fashion magazines, catalogues, we are offered visions of perfection, a constellation of pristine worlds, the habitats of celebrity. Role models of appearance that are both lifeless and object orientated.

Reflected in urban centres or in huge shopping malls where the visual juxtaposition of style and self is continual. Passing by shop window displays with broad expanses of gleaming plate glass, people confront a reflection of themselves superimposed against the dream world of the commodity. Where the studied display of perfection provokes a comparison to our own imperfections and the dreariness of necessity. Images of style endorsed by Pop Art.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Package

In a media saturated consumer society, multiple pictures are offered of material and technological progress that convince the viewer of their good fortune in material abundance. A condition alluded to through the popularization of disposable products, a culture of convenience, a pre-packaged experience to be consumed and disposed of. A commercial strategy of obsolescence where the nurtured condition of consumer dissatisfaction is played upon by the spectacular entrance and representation of newer and better products. Where waste and destruction have become an aestheticized experience. Through film, the familiar chase scene, as cars tumble over cliffs and burst into flames, the multiple car pile up or the spectacle of explosions, where buildings, shop fronts etc. are demolished. The unremitting aestheticization of waste however is seen in the continually changing style of packaging, aimed to stimulate sales. The packaging destined to end up on the waste heap, to clutter an already cluttered world.

Different packaging styles satisfy the need for novelty in a live for the moment ideology of consumerism. Where the style constitutes a politics of change, albeit 'a change', that resides wholly on the surface of things and art becomes the commercial management of style. As Warhol has stated:

'How can you say one style is better than another? You ought to be able to be an abstract expressionist next week, or a pop artist, or a realist, without feeling you've given up something

.... All you have to do is read the magazines and the catalogues.  
It's this style or that style, this or that image of man.' (11)

The consumption of style has become inextricably woven into the fabric of the consumer society, a hallmark of democracy. Style, linked to the power of the mass media to convey, magnify, refract and influence popular notions of style.

Where it is mediated through the cliches of mass advertising it aims to loosen the reflexes of the spectator so that he will take the product without resistance. To create an active and mythical belief in the product's promise. To sell the product before its character can be carefully questioned.

'Advertising presupposes ignorance and inexperience; it is most successful with the uncritical believer. As has been said, good advertising can sell anything - but only to those who accept things at face value, and those who can hardly comprehend what it means to search out the truth about things.' (12)

It encourages the assumption that the world as known through advertising is the actual world. As an instrument of standardization it masks and inhibits our penetration of social and personal reality and restricts our search for its meaning to prescribed paths of conformity and consumption.

Pop Art, in appropriating the signs of manipulation advocated by mass media advertising and raising them to the sanctity of art, gives credence and a stamp of approval to a consumer ethos. Where the control of appearances underscore commercial interests and the more general goal of social control. Pop Art does not stand in judgment over the signs of an

industrial and consumer landscape, but accepts it as a given reality where there is no difference between unspoilt landscape and desecrated landscape. A landscape saturated with objects and their signs of representation. Where there is no longer any privileging of the object over the image in essence or signification. Pop Art has become an agent of exteriority and supersedes the idea of interiority as a reality. In the words of Jean Baudrillard:

'Whereas all art up to Pop was based on a vision of the world "in depth" Pop itself claims to be homogeneous with that imminent order of signs - homogeneous with their industrial and serial production, and thus with the artificial, manufactured character of the whole environment.' (13)

## CHAPTER 5

### The Present Moment

'There is some agreement that the older modernism functioned against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the like. Can anything of the sort be affirmed about post-modernism and its social moment?' (14)

Words that form part of Frederic Jameson's closing statements in his essay 'Post-Modernism and the Consumer Society', in which he delineates two significant features to our post-modernist era, identified as pastiche and schizophrenia. With pastiche, Jameson distinguishes it from parody. Where the use of parody implies a linguistic norm, a model against which parody can be voiced.

'Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language .... Without parody's ulterior motive, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal.'  
(15)

Pastiche is thus blank, a hollow imitation of dead styles stored up in the imagery museums of a now global culture. The manipulation of surface, the recycling of past styles to satisfy the needs of a consumer society with a predisposition towards instant gratification. A condition he also locates in the phenomena of schizophrenia. A condition of society not to be interpreted as a literal medical diagnosis but one which relates to the breaking down of the relationships between signifiers, whose 'normal' interrelationship produces the effect (or the illusion) of meaning. But

interpreted in the sense that the schizophrenic is condemned to live in a perpetual present isolated from both past and future, a dislocation of identity as experienced over time, confined to the overwhelming intensification of the present.

A position that can draw analogy to our own peculiar sense of time. No longer are we tied to ancient rural seasonal perceptions of time, the yearly cycle of the earth's rotation around the sun. But that we have emerged out of an industrial representation, such as the analog clock, which like its seasonal predecessor allows us to perceive time to be a fragment of the whole, through the predictable movements of the hands around the clock face. Today, time as a digital format, provides its owner with the most 'up-to-date' technology dividing hours and minutes into a blinding whirr of tenths of seconds. Telling time has become unskilled labour, it no longer requires a sense of whole. In a live for the moment environment, each moment lives only for itself, with no trace left only to be replaced by a new moment.

Like the flickering picture frames of the large and small screens we are entertained as passive participants in the replays of historical drama or futuristic promise. The t.v. provides us with the assembled facts, joined together by the familiar and authoritative personality of 'the news', it becomes the most accessible version of the larger reality. Consciousness about the world is continually drawn away from a geo-political understanding of events as they take place in the world. As nations and people are daily sorted out into boxes marked 'good guys', villains, victors and lucky ones, reality becomes appearance. Through edited news

footage, with clipped viewing frames condensed into the formula of the 'sound bite' for easy consumption.

Likewise the purveyance of art 'news' is subjugated to a similar process of promulgation and consumption, through magazine and television briefs. Where time and critical distance have become abbreviated reflecting the diversity of pluralist art practices. The artist today can no longer position him/herself within a linear art historical frame as the minute hand of the clock marks time around the clock face in rational consecutive movements. Instead, the artist is placed at the centre of the clock face, a face without hands, a point to which there is an implosion of information on art. Without time in which to discern critical judgment or value, art is reduced to a 'sound bite' where hurry and hype continue to create a sense of our intensity and significance.

'Hyping art masks the fact that today we are less interested in immortality than in the moment. We exaggerate the moments of arts appearance and no longer expect it to ripen into immortality, because we find it hard to conceive of anything beyond the instant. And hype exists to make the moment spectacular.' (16)

Hype returns us to the speculative interests of the market place where the 'selling' of art supersedes the 'truth' of art. The past decade has seen a boom in art market prices, a price explosion accompanied by an absence of real value judgments.

'Just as aesthetics run mad without any rules to govern it, the art market slides unchecked into wild speculation in the absence of laws governing value. Crazes, madness, excesses - the enormous growth in the publicity surrounding art is directly related to the impossibility of making aesthetic evaluations.' (17)

The value of money itself having become an abstraction, where economics are no longer solely dependent on hard goods but are also predatory to immateriality and the ephemeral. Big money being made through the evanescent markets in information, imagery and services, not to mention the now discredited 'junk bond' syndrome. Witnessing frenetic trading in the financial markets that has little to do with the production of real goods and services. Economic wealth is derived more than ever in the circulation of detached and imponderable representations of value. The substantiality of money, as in hard cash, has dissipated into the less weighty substance of the plastic credit card ascending to Gold and Platinum cards and beyond to the abstracted status value of formless electronic blips. Here the record of wealth is kept in the evanescence of a magnetic charge, a prerequisite for speculative mobility. Hype the illusive 'Scarlet Pimpernel' between the value of art and the value of money. Where art today has become a fore-ordained assertion of the banal values of modern life rather than functioning as arts means to autonomy.

'Now that the avant-garde is embraced, accepted and enshrined, its previous power has been demolished. What we have today is an institutionalized avant-garde used as a marketing tool for the masses (and turned into kitsch), and kitsch elevated by an educated elite as a potent, edgy form of expression still capable of the kind of shock value that only vanguard art used to have.'  
(18)

A move in this direction is epitomized in the activities of Jeff Koons. For which the pseudonym 'Warhol of the eighties' has been allotted to him, which illicit no surprise for one may assume that it does not discredit his art but subtly enhances its commercial appeal, already enshrined in the

celebrity status of the 'Warhol' persona. In effect, his work is the recycling of the sixties Pop Art agenda, a reiteration of the high art - mass culture dialogue, aligning himself with the affirmative ideologies of late capitalism expressed through advertisement design and commodity styling. An alignment that in his opinion is more effective for the artist 'for a very long time art has not been very effective and artists have not taken the responsibility to communicate', (19) a responsibility taken over by other commercial interests 'we've seen this occur with the advertising industry and also the entertainment industry; they've been much more effective in communication than the fine art.' (20) Like Pop Art he does not stand in judgment over the signs of an industrial and consumer landscape but accepts them as an absolute reality inclusive of their manipulative qualities. In describing his art he said:

'This is not subjective art, it is very objective, and in this aspect I want my pieces to really erase themselves as far as form is concerned and the amount of space they take up. They're really about everything that is just invisible, that's in the air, that's ephemeral perhaps.' (21)

Which can be read as the disenfranchisement of real substance to the preferred illusions of surface mediated through the mass media. By choosing the politics of the familiar, Koons provides us with images of Buster Keaton (Fig. 3) and Michael Jackson with their antecedents in the pop images of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis. Manufactured kitsch images such as 'Ushering in Banality' (Fig. 4) in polychromed wood are served up to liberate the masses from their inhibitions about what constitutes art, to break down social barriers, all within the limited confines of the commercial galleries. Baptized in banality, he seeks to serve the



Fig. 3: Buster Keaton, 1988  
Polychromed Wood, 167 cm x 127 cm x 67.3 cm



Fig. 4: Ushering in Banality, 1988  
Polychromed Wood, 96.5 cm x 157.5 cm x 76.2 cm, Edition of 3

bourgeoise 'to remove their guilt and shame so that they would be able to liberate themselves and have the confidence to become the new upper class.'

(22)

It is a liberation without real substance, a ploy in commercial self-promotion, whereas Koons states 'art to me is about becoming, its about what Jeff Koons can become and how evolutionary I can be within myself at the present time.' (23) A liberation, in that all commodities are negotiable and that his commodity is such, insofar as the audience is prepared to purchase it, on the basis of his sales pitch. A sales pitch based on the political strategies of commercial productivity and the ushering in of the 'new'. Koons is completely aware of the art-as-commodity situation today and instead of throwing up his hands and bemoaning the fact that art used to be alienated and spiritual, he embraces the current trend, an apogee of Pop Art. The feeling is that if you can't beat it, join it. Making the most of his art, treating it as fashion and changing the season's model. In a sense, it is the perfect reflection of the business world of art today, where style guarantees the illusion of change in absence of substance.

The legacy of Pop Art (now enshrined in the art museums) through its quotations of photographic reproductions and commercial imagery, facilitates their immunization whether appropriated to contest or collude in an already disaffected cultural arena. Where Jeff Koons is seen to be in collusion with mass cultural quotations, then the imagery of Barbara Kruger is seen to contest them. Her work incorporating a critical potential though not without its limitations. A challenge to the assumed

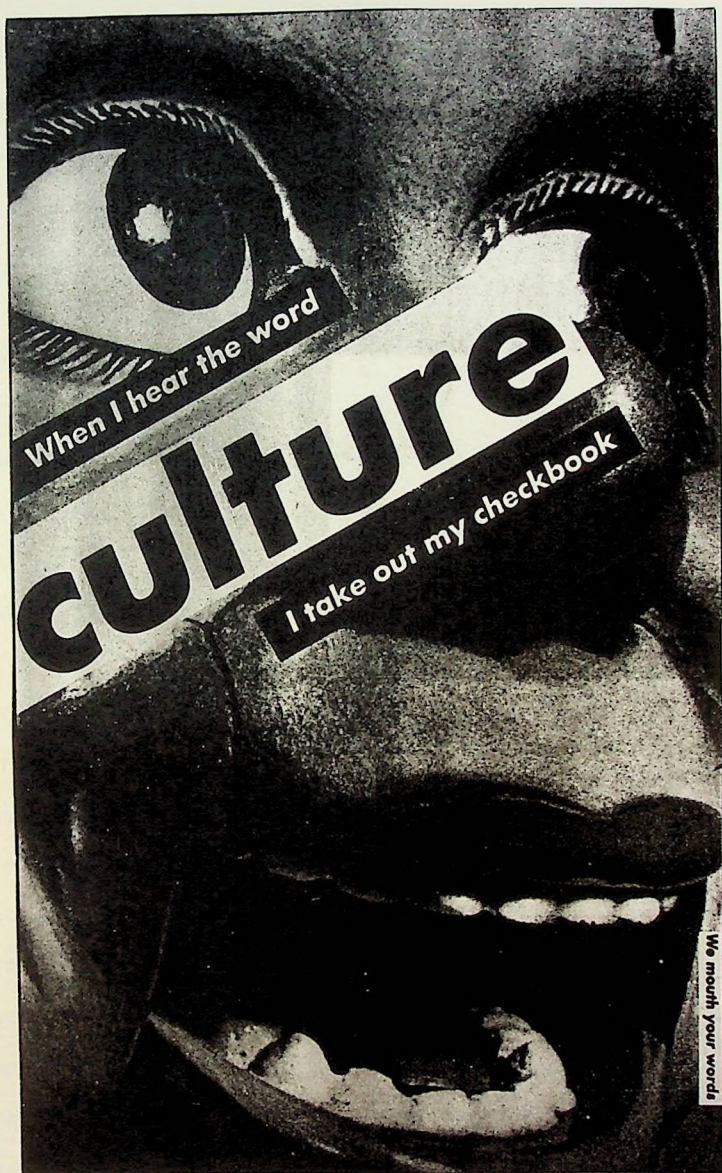


Fig. 5: Untitled (When I hear the word culture I take out my checkbook) 1985  
351 cm x 152 cm

authority of a Patriarchal order and its modes of representation.

The presentation of her work assimilates photographic images in black and white aligned with text not unlike the commercial billboard format. A strategy that incorporates the already accepted authoritative hold that the commercial image implant has on public perceptions.

Combining a large scale format with strong tonal contrasts in photographic imagery and the judicious placement of text in bold lettering it aims to captivate the viewer's attention in the sense of 'what is this ad about'. To take for example Fig. 5. Here it is plain to see that she is challenging the status-quo of contemporary culture in the work 'when I hear the word culture, I take out my checkbook' against the backdrop of an inanimate puppet. The message is clear, direct and like Pop Art quickly absorbed. At the same time being pre-conditioned to reading ads in fractions of a second, one has moved past this image, not taking the trouble to notice the words in the bottom right-hand corner 'we mouth your words' which are undoubtedly aimed to provoke the question as to who or what is being considered by the word 'we' and perhaps the most pivotal critical element in the completed image. A position perhaps overcome in the representation of (Fig. 6) the message being more subtly diffused in its construction. In what could be viewed as a symbolic reference to the Biblical apple (the tree of knowledge) or as with the placement of the text 'the marriage of murder and suicide' within the frame of the apple, does this relate to New York as the 'big apple' where the participation in the consumption of the apple by the giver and receiver ultimately leads to dissolution.

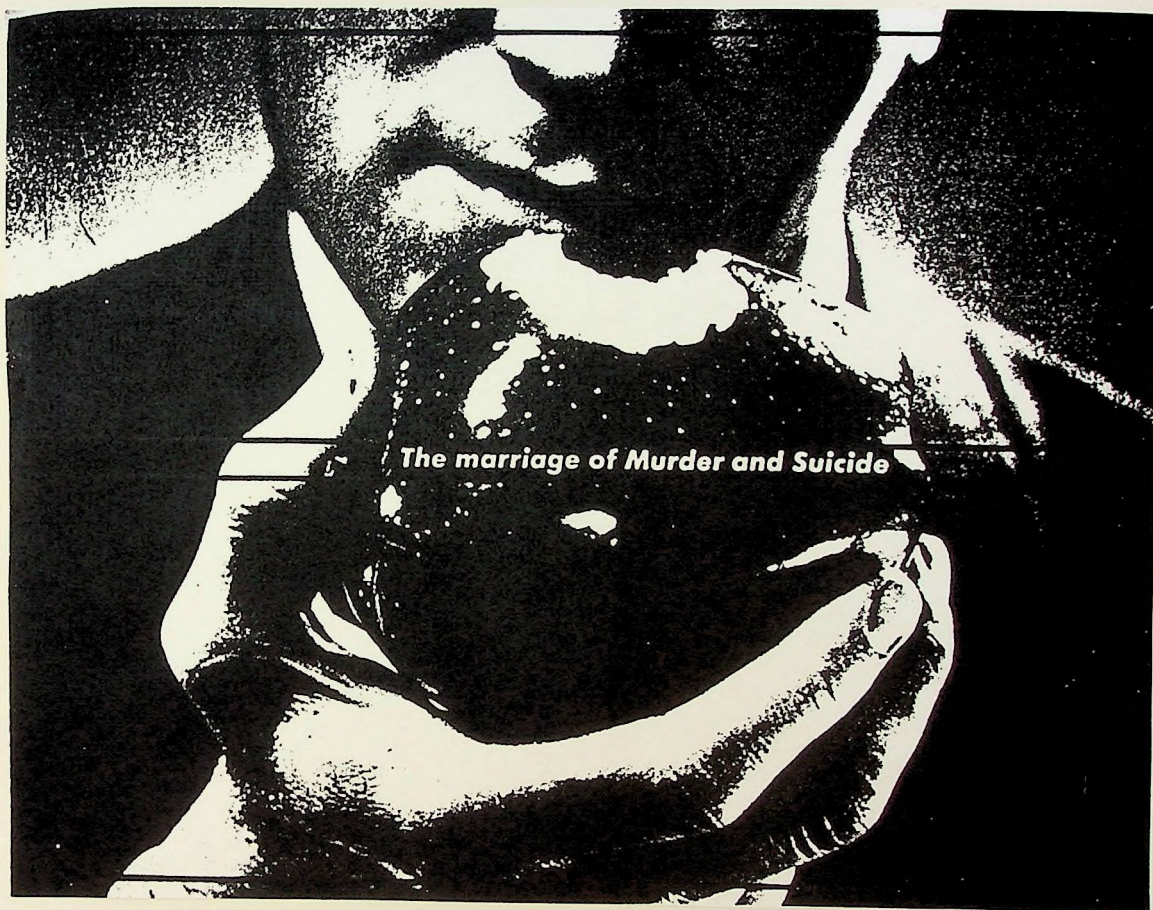


Fig. 6: Untitled (The Marriage of Murder and Suicide), 1988  
Photographic Silkscreen/Vinyl, 205.7 cm x 259.1 cm

One can appreciate Kruger's approach in conveying her message in ways similar to the dominant commercial modes of representation as a means to undermining the latter's strategy. But inevitably one is left with a sense that as a challenge its outcome is a foregone conclusion in that Kruger's work will be purchased by, and possibly sponsored by, the multinational and corporate structures that effectively administrate our cultural condition. Where avant-garde art is reduced to avand-gardism and becomes a commodity of style.

A style that is once again quickly assimilated under the banner of media advertising. A recent example of this, transmitted on English television in the ad for Nationwide Anglia Building Society (Fig. 7). Televised in black and white with a female voice-over and supplemented with word text. One immediately recognizes its similarity in style to Kruger's work, the relationship being convincing. The story of the ad is a simple one. A woman is dreaming of the things money can buy; foreign holidays, weddings, montages and the like for which the building society is the best option in achieving them. But it is the style in which it is conveyed with its perplexing undertones in the manner of its rendering that can place it alongside Kruger's work, though its aims are ultimately different. It positions the main protagonist in the ad as a young jewish woman, who recalls her youthful dreams in exotic Africa, her wedding, her ambitions for her daughter's education and fulfilment. The reading of the ad is a subjective one, but one could intimate possible undercurrents such as pandering to the cliches of Christian anti-Semitism or cashing in on feminist ideals (though through misrepresentation). The answer may rest with its maker 'the people who complain about its weirdness are exactly the



Fig. 7: Observer Newspaper, Photograph, 8 December 1990  
(A film still from the Nationwide Anglia Building Society's Television Ad)

same people who moan about advertising being stereotypical and never venturing outside of the wasp nuclear family'. (24) Here the sophistication in the distribution of cultural messages does not solely remain with the artist but also with the versatility of the ad men/women.

Their use of photographic images highlights its potential to mediate style through its simultaneous affinity to reality and fantasy. It can free itself from the encumbrances posed by material reality and still lay claim to that reality and has contributed to the dominant position of surface image over content, the creation of an ephemeral reality. A reality compressed into the time it takes to consume it where the hold or experience of it is short. A position that has become very prevalent in the reception of art today, as it mirrors the way in which we consume media images. Where the concept of that which is 'new' has become a cliché:

'What I find phenomenal is the way in which new art seems to have a shorter and shorter life span, the very concept of the new seems to be so ephemeral that its quite useless .... So the concept of newness has been so diminished in terms of time span that Andy Warhol's prophecy about every body being famous for fifteen minutes seems to have been reduced to fifteen seconds.' (25)

Art, that today, in referencing Pop Art's legacy through the use of mass media images, opens itself to the possible subversion of being consumed in the manner of 'fast foods'. Since they are so like ads or commercial products one may assume that they do not comprise of elements which have intrinsic depth or which may postulate real or tangible horizons for human growth.

## CONCLUSION

The persistence of the Pop Art dialogue today confirms the ongoing difficulty for western culture to disentangle itself from a kind of inertia behind the convulsive movement of contemporary art, an endless procession around the same axis in place of real progress. That even the idea of progress is attenuated by Pop Art's challenge to the historical process of art, whereby art movements are sealed off, finished and relegated to the past once something new has come along. Today's 'New Art' can be a past style appropriated from the now completed storage room files of art history for 'invention' is no longer the issue. The semiology of Pop Art leads us to a vision of western culture's final 'end game' where:

'The sole benefit to be derived from one of Andy Warhol's Campbell soup cans, is that we no longer have to feel obliged to ask ourselves about beauty or ugliness, reality or unreality, transcendence or immanence; just as Byzantine icons allowed people to stop questioning the existence of God, without asking them to give up their belief in him.' (26)

Pop Art draws attention to the mass media's cultural agenda as the ever present hieroglyphs of our time. The unequivocal sings of permanence to an artificial reality. An artifice based on the pervasive denial of mortality to economic strategies and the reductionism of human creative potential to a commodity status.

The way out of this situation is difficult to imagine for the mass market in images has had an unprecedented impact on the ways people have perceived, experienced and behaved within the world. A kaleidoscope of

imagery that mutates the ability to discern underlying meaning, where concrete possibility and evanescent style have become too often confused with one another.

To quote recent political developments in Eastern Europe with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, ironically erected during the Pop era of the sixties. The term 'Western style democracy' has become the catchphrase for East European countries to emulate. A style of democracy not qualified, but which appears to be able to operate everywhere as a marketable commodity. Its values have become universal, so accepted and recognized that virtually one disbelieves in them.

A similar disbelief occurs in the acceptance of ideological based contingencies such as communism. The media witnessing the failure of this monolithic structure where its authority is mistrusted for the espousment of conformity to the party line through the use of hollow slogans. The hypocrisy of their aims only revealed through the disparities between the privileges the ruling elite ingratiated themselves with and the lot they imposed upon their citizens. Images of deception are equally manipulated both sides of the now deposed wall.

Pop Art today, by ingratiating itself to commercial imagery, is also susceptible to the winds of change that effect the latter. The bankruptcy of business and commerce equating with the bankruptcy of Pop Art. With the downturn in economic growth worldwide the era of abundance, if not decadance, of the last thirty years may be drawing to a close. There is no longer the same amount of disposable income about as was artificially

created in the eighties. Today people, through a number of factors have become more socially aware of the economic conditions that effect them, not least is their perceptions of commercial advertising. An acknowledgement in this direction is accountable to the Feminist and ecological arguments. For which advertising has manoeuvred in order to placate public anxieties so that it may function unobtrusively. Along with this, advertisers are aware of the more fragmented arena in which they operate today. With the introduction of multi-channel satellite television, there is no longer any guarantees that the ads are being received by the relevant mass audience and the potential effectiveness of such advertising is being drawn into question. The larger corporate enterprises such as I.B.M., see advertising as it is formulated today to be uneconomical, an out-of-date formula that no longer has credence.

There is some focus towards two-nation advertising, where specific key agents of information distribution are engaged such as educational programmes, exhibitions and books, incorporating a high-minded cultural ambience. This position only goes to substantiate that commercial imagery may not be recognizable in the literal terms expressed through Pop Art but that it may only continue to manoeuvre its position within society without necessarily giving up its current agenda of manipulating the surface of things rather than a real engagement with the substance of reality.

The challenge that remains for Western culture is a recognition of its own limitations. To find meaningful alternatives to the dialogue of commodity packaging, the dominance of surface over content. Where the principles and

practices of human interactions can perceive real goals, where social resistance can be meaningfully engaged with the resources and real options available to the world we inhabit.

Resources that have of themselves their own limitations. A position that bares down upon our present culture through the growing awareness of ecological factors. Here the reality of matter challenges the ephemeral substance of style and draws into focus the inevitable difficulties to be faced by a predominantly secular and consumer orientated society:

'Ecology stands at a critical cross-roads. Is it, too, to become another anthropocentric technique of efficient manipulation, a matter of enlightened self-interest and expert, long range resource budgeting? Or Will it meet the nature mystics on their own terms and so recognize that we are to embrace nature as if indeed it were a beloved person in whom, as in ourselves, something sacred dwells? .... The question remains open: which will ecology be, the last of the old sciences or the first of the new?' (27)

Pop Art is ill-equipped to address these issues but can hardly be reproached for making evident contemporary culture, that the truth of objects and products is their mark. The prognosis of which, being the 'mark' of immobility and vacuity, the only possible solution being global rejection that would assimilate higher cognitive abilities in the interpretation of reality. Lest we are left with Andy Warhol as the artist who cried 'Wolf, Wolf'.

## FOOTNOTES

- (1) Extracts from an interview with Robert Indiana by Gene Swenson in Carol Ann Mahsun (Ed.), Pop Art the Critical Dialogue, (Ann Arbor/London), U.M.I. Research Press, 1989, p. 122.
- (2) Extract from interview with Robert Indiana by Gene Swenson in Carol Anne Mahsun (Ed.), Pop Art the Critical Dialogue, 1989, p. 123.
- (3) Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death, London: Heinemann, 1986, p. 155.
- (4) An interview with Andy Warhol by Gene Swenson in Carol Anne Mahsun (Ed.), Pop Art the Critical Dialogue, (Ann Arbor/London), U.M.I. Research Press, 1989, p. 188.
- (5) Andy Warhol, The Philosophy of Andy Warhol, (from A to B and back again), London: Cassells, 1975, p. 92.
- (6) Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", in Francis Frascina, (Ed.), Pollock and After: the Critical Debate, Harper & Row, 1985, p. 21.
- (7) Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", p. 23.

- (8) Saul Ostrow in conversation with Clement Greenberg, '"Avant-Garde and Kitsch" Fifty Years Later', Arts, Magazine, December, 1989, pp. 56-7.
- (9) Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Illuminations, Fontana, 1973, p. 222.
- (10) Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", p. 233.
- (11) An interview with Andy Warhol by Gene Swenson in Carol Anne Mahsun (Ed.), Pop Art the Critical Dialogue, U.M.I. Research Press, 1989, p. 119.
- (12) Donal Kuspit, "Pop Art: A Reactionary Realism", in Carol Anne Mahsun (Ed.), Pop Art the Critical Dialogue, p. 212.
- (13) Jean Baudrillard, "Pop - An Art of Consumption?", in Paul Taylor's, "Introduction to Post-Pop Art", Art & Design, Magazine, 5:11-12:89, p. 61.
- (14) Frederic Jameson, "Post Modernism and Consumer Society" in Hal Foster (Ed.), The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Post Modern Culture, Seattle: Bay Press, 1983, p. 125.
- (15) Frederic Jameson, "Post Modernism and Consumer Society", p. 114.

- (16) Donald Kuspit, "We no Longer Expect Art to Ripen into Mortality", Art International, No. 12, autumn, 1990, p. 44, 46.
- (17) Jean Baudrillard, "The Contemporary Art Market is Beyond Good and Evil", Art International, No. 12, Autumn 1990, p. 54.
- (18) Lisa Phillips, Comments on "The Greenberg Effect", in Arts Magazine, December, 1989, p. 62.
- (19) Jeff Koons, "The Power of Seduction", an interview with Koons in Art & Design, 6:1-2:90, pp. 49-53.
- (20) Jeff Koons, Art & Design, p. 49.
- (21) Jeff Koons, pp. 49-50.
- (22) Jeff Koons, p. 52.
- (23) Jeff Koons, p. 51.
- (24) Emily Bell, "Nationwide's Dream Inspires", Observer Newspaper, 9 Dec., 1990, p. 65.
- (25) Robert Rosenblum, "In Search of the New", Art & Design, 6:1-2:90, p. 7.

(26) Jean Baudrillard, "The Contemporary Art Market is Beyond Good and Evil" in Art International, Autumn, 1990, p. 54.

(27) Warwick Fox, "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of our Time", The Ecologist, Vol. 14, No. 5-6, 1984, p. 195.

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