Pop Art: past, present, and future

The American pop art movement originated in the latter part of the 1950s and would, within the very short time span of six years (Mamiya 7), become the dominant art form in the Western world. Deeply rooted in American popular culture – epitomized by its consumerism, brand-name worship, and immediacy – pop art had every opportunity to be no more than a passing fad. Andy Warhol, who came to personify the Pop art movement in the popular mind, predicted in 1968 “in the future everyone will be world famous for fifteen minutes” (qtd. in Doris 195). This could have also become the fate of the Pop art movement. The 2007 retrospective Pop Art at Princeton: Permanent and Promised, exhibited works by artists considered to be the greatest exponents of the 1960s pop movement. Not surprisingly, from the iconic artists represented at that exhibition, many are no longer alive, while the youngest ones are now venerable sexagenarians. The impression that there exists a shortage of contemporary artists rivaling the fame and influence of artists such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, and Robert Indiana is almost unavoidable. Nonetheless, many of the socio economic factors that conspired to enable the success and, for some time, ubiquity of pop art are even now very much in the mainstream of contemporary Western society. Furthermore, the present age of instant messaging, Facebook, and social networks provide the perfect conduit for truly democratic art expressions that can be shared and appreciated by millions throughout the world, virtually in an instant. The hunger for consumption, the brand identification, the
sacrifice of identity in favor of the stereotype, all are factors more prevalent today than ever before. The exposure of people’s lives to all kinds of media today is a Goliath to the 1960s David. And yet where do we find contemporary pop art? Where is the Campbell’s soup canvas of the early part of the 21st century? In this essay, I will make a case that the 1960s explosion of pop art was not a phenomenon restricted to the past; it continues to influence and be relevant to contemporary art and culture in sometimes surprising ways.

To understand how pop art came to be, we need to understand the environment in which it flourished. In summary, with the end of World War II, the United States became the undisputed leader of the western world. As the major industrial powers of Europe – England, France, Germany and Italy – were busy rebuilding their infrastructure, American industry was churning out goods at a fast pace. The GI Bill was making it possible for common people to attend college, thus stimulating the expansion of the middle class. This fast expanding middle class, in its turn, proved to have an insatiable appetite for the goods made available to it by industry. One positive side effect of this newly acquired wealth was a focus on American art. Up to this point, American art had been viewed as being of secondary importance in comparison to European art. As a result, American art discovered its strengths and gained its own identifiable voice. Nowhere in America was this so palpable as in New York City, which quickly rose to the status of cultural and artistic center of the world.
In literature, the 1950’s New York City was the launching pad for the beat generation. Beat writing shocked American society through their call for personal liberation and championing of several practices that ran against the prevalent norms of the time. The pop art movement would reflect a similar philosophy. In the sphere of the visual arts, the years following World War II saw the increasing popularity of abstract expressionism, an art movement characterized by non-representational painting, employing in most cases combinations of lines, shapes, and forms meant to capture and communicate emotions rather than conventional images. The painting *Greyed Rainbow* by Jackson Pollock provides excellent illustration. It is in a sense the antithesis of what came to be Pop art, with its preoccupation with depicting recognizable everyday objects. Yet, as different as these two movements would become, the two artists recognized as the first Pop

![Figure 1: Jackson Pollock. American, 1912-1956. *Greyed Rainbow*, 1953. Oil on linen. 182.9 x 244.2 cm.](image)

ferent as these two movements would become, the two artists recognized as the first Pop
artists, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg began as abstract expressionists and evolved towards Pop (Mamiya 7).

The age of pop art began officially in January 1958 with the exhibition of Jasper Johns’ works in New York City (Doris 124). This exhibit was followed in short order by one featuring the art of Robert Rauschenberg (Marquis 16). It is quite remarkable how the paintings being produced by these artists evolved away from the abstract expressionist norm into what was to become pop art. One of Jasper Johns’ earliest paintings, *Green Target*, is a representative example. If not for the faintly discernible image of a target’s bullseye, this painting would have been a clear example of an abstract expressionist work due to its use of several shades of green in carefully arranged brushstrokes.

*Figure 2:* Jasper Johns. American, born 1930. *Green Target,* 1955. Encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas. 152.4 x 152.4 cm.
New York City would become the mecca for the American Pop art movement, ultimately significantly influencing the evolution and language of this art movement, because New York was at the same time the advertising and publishing capital of the world. Pop art borrowed heavily from this environment and pop artists sought to use the language and images of advertisement, and the methods of mass media to portray their perception of the world around them. Moreover, Pop art adopted the mentality of mass production and came to reflect the consumer society of the time. In Pop Art and Consumer Culture, Mamiya observes:

> Through their incisive selection of images from the contemporary environment, the Pop artists provided immediately recognizable references to the highly organized consumer society of the 1960s. The predominance of Keynesian economic theory and the attempts by the government and corporations to promote consumption served as a fertile breeding ground for Pop art. (158)
This fertility bore fruit and, within six years as noted earlier, came to dominate the art world. The creativity and furious rate of output by the painters of the time was remarkable. Andy Warhol alone produced an astounding number of drawings, sculptures, and paintings – more than 15,000 between 1948 and 1987. The publisher’s website for the first volume of Warhol’s Catalogue Raisonné advertises listing 546 works produced between 1961 and 1963 alone. It is impressive how many of these works came to be iconic of that period. *Gold Marilyn, 1962,* and *Double Elvis, 1963* provide good illustrations of Warhol’s work of that period. They also illustrate an important characteristic of the Pop art of the 1960s, a characteristic that helps establish a connection between the Pop art of then and the one of today – the connection between Pop art, obsolescence, and camp. In

**Figure 3:** Left: Andy Warhol. American, 1928, 1987. *Gold Marilyn Monroe, 1962.* Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas. 211.4 x 144.7 cm.
Pop Art and the Contest over American Culture, Sara Doris observes that Pop art was one of the engines behind the fast rate of cultural innovation observed in the 1960s and a necessary consequence of this rate of innovation was an equally high rate of obsolescence (183). She explains these arguments in the following way:

… the more quickly new things are introduced, the faster the formerly new becomes old. Consequently, the old comes to outweigh the new at an accelerating rate, producing great heaps of cultural rubbish – goods not worn out, but discarded simply because they are no longer stylish. (183)

In principle, of course, this could have been a fatal flaw for the Pop art movement as it churned out new culture at a fast rate; however, Pop artists got around this problem and maintained their compositions fresh and relevant by working with subjects that were, actually, no longer very new. Case in point, the two Warhol works shown above. When Andy Warhol started his long sequence of Marilyn Monroe studies in the early 1960s, Marilyn was, for one, already deceased; in addition, the picture of Marilyn that Warhol used was a publicity shot for her 1953 movie Niagara (Doris 199), not a movie that counts among her greatest. The same is true of the Elvis Presley picture in Double Elvis. This picture comes from the Western Flaming Star of 1960, not one of Presley’s best movies (Doris 211). The concept at play here is that, by using clearly dated references to the subjects, the artist gained a temporal distance that rendered the image at once nostalgic and a bit kitsch. Many critics, theorists, and commentators have analyzed this last factor in detail. In her 1964 essay Notes on “Camp”, Sontag explains the concept of “Camp” by describing 58 characteristics that define the Camp sensibility. Two such characteristics that are relevant to this discussion are:
1. To start very generally: Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization. (2)

…

25 The hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance. Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers…(6)

These characteristics give us a gauge through which to judge contemporary artistic expressions in terms of their relationship to the 1960s Pop art.

The world of emerging contemporary art appears quite different from that of Warhol, Lichtenstein, and so many others. However, we can recognize present day Pop artists by the patently camp aesthetic present in their works. If we consider, for example,

![Figure 4: Jeff Koons. American, born 1955. Inflatable Flower and Bunny (Tall White, Pink Bunny), 1979. Vinyl and mirrors. 81.3 x 63.5 x 45.7 cm.](image)

Jeff Koons, it is easy to detect the camp “cheesiness” conveyed by his art. Taking as an example his 1979 work *Inflatable Flower and Bunny (Tall White, Pink Bunny)*, we can
detect the same levels of stylization and artifice that characterized the 1960s Pop artists.

Another of Koons’ work worth mentioning is his Michael Jackson and Bubbles of 1988. As with Warhol’s Marilyn and Elvis works, here too, we find the artist capturing the image of a famous person and reinterpreting it in a way that can only be described as camp.

Lize Muller in The Recurrence of ‘Pop’ in Contemporary Visual Art has identified a number of trends in contemporary art where the aesthetics of the 1960s Pop art can be readily identified. She examines these connections under three perspectives, namely those of commercial culture, art and design, and art and technology. Muller offers a particularly good insight of the interplay between ‘traditional’ art on the one hand and the new media and technologies available today:

**Figure 5:** Jeff Koons. American, born 1955. *Michael Jackson and Bubbles,* 1988. Ceramic. 106.7 x 179.1 x 82.5 cm.
Electronics have proven to be an important factor for the popularization of all fields, especially with respect to new trends in visual culture. Various new forms of popular expression are the result of an interaction of art and technology, with new media art such as video and computer generated art. Not only have new media problematized the conventional understanding of the art object, … [The] Conceptual art movement facilitated the use of media technologies in video art, performance art, and installation art. It is clear that the traditional methods associated with fine art practice had expanded to include techniques originally utilized in commercial visual production and other art forms such as stage performance, film production, architecture, and graphic design, so that collaboration between various media is underscored. (55)

This blurring of the boundaries of ‘traditional’ art forms in our digital age, forces us to constantly re-evaluate our perceptions as to where a contemporary artwork fits in the underlying landscape. As the means of delivering art transcend the canvas, sculpture, or installation, what other formats might be relevant for the expression of pop art in contemporary culture? In a recent article, Corona analyses in considerable detail the aesthetic of Lady Gaga and its nexus to the Pop art vision. There is certainly some truth to Corona’s argument. Even though the primary art form in the case of Lady Gaga is song, the blurring of the lines between art modalities would, in my view at least, justify looking at Lady Gaga’s concerts as art installations and the stage persona she projects as the canvas where Lady Gaga provides us her own rendition of a Warholesque Marilyn portrait.
In this essay, I have investigated the connections between Pop art and contemporary culture. Fifty years after first dominating the art world and producing artists such as Warhol, Lichtenstein, and Indiana, I have found satisfactory arguments to justify the conclusion that Pop art is still very much alive. Furthermore, I concluded as well that the influence of the Pop art movement on contemporary culture is indeed so pervasive as to have become part of our quotidian. One question, however, is still left, what should we expect for the future of Pop art? Muller answered this question brilliantly:

Regarding the future of pop in the visual arts, various speculations can be made; however, based on the persistence of pop during the last five decades, a strong argument can be made that its continuation will endure alongside the systematic progress of technological development and cultural globalization, the increasing interdependence of different visual disciplines, and the narrowing association between high art practice and mass cultural production. (78)

I gladly echo this statement.
Works Cited


Bibliography


