

Art in Society

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Abstract:

Whereas traditional artists prioritized museums and galleries to show their work, recent modern artists seek to make art more extensive by incorporating the audience, whether aware or not, within the artwork's meaning. Artists implement unconventional mediums such as social media, street art, mass media, or public performance, pushing the public to interact with art. Recently artists also address many controversial socio-political issues and concepts such as modern materialism, consumerism, racism, and gender inequality through art to advocate for what they believe in and interconnect art with these different forms of expression. Instead of art being a separate realm, these artists make it part of everyday life by utilizing the news, social media, the streets, and TV commercials, driving people to notice and appreciate art by merging them together.

1. Introduction

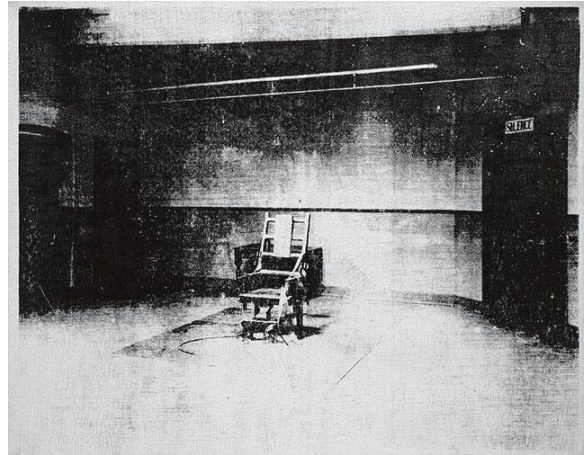
Having been considered to be high-culture and aesthetic for centuries, many feel intimidated or excluded from interacting with art, pushing it away as a different world. Because of this, artists traditionally strive to create conventional art so captivating and enthralling that even people outside of the “art world” could be intrigued. However, the new era of pop culture pushed the boundaries of art from being a separate realm to an integration of everyday life. Rather than standing with tradition, modern artists strive to interject art into society through mediums of graffiti and social media, as well as using art as activism or a way to critique modern consumerism and materialism. With art slowly integrating with society, it poses a more extensive concept of intersectionality, how art interconnects with social

media, activism, and much more. Using art to address issues such as women’s rights or modern materialism not only merges art into the everyday lives of people but makes controversial and delicate topics more approachable for the public to engage in. With the utilization of social media, mass media, and street art, the stereotype that only “high-art” is art subsides and evolves art to be more inclusive and accessible for everyone. Understanding this transition is essential to see how art has its way of interjecting itself into our everyday lives. Therefore, it is no longer just art imitating life or life imitating art, but instead existing within our daily life.

2. Consumerism

As the pop art movement emerged in the late 1950s in America, many artists started revolting against the predominant traditional approaches to art by including images and texts from popular mass culture. As the post-war era of the United States created a period of prosperity and stability, an inevitable rise of free-market capitalism and consumerism where a lifestyle of consumption and leisure were promoted. Being one of the most important protagonists of the movement, Andy Warhol combined modern art with consumerism to bring high art to the masses. With the abundance of consumer culture, mass-production, and materialism, Warhol saw familiar products and imagery around him as inspiration for his works. Many of his works used imagery from pre-existing corporate logos and material objects, often repeated on large scale canvases. His early works, which include *Campbell's Soup Cans*, *Green Coca-Cola Bottles*, and *200 One Dollar Bills*, are works that exemplify how he mimicked commercial methods of mass production and in a way, critiqued the way "high art" was regarded in society. By creating high art with a "low," mundane subject, he wanted to bridge the gap between the art world and everyday life. The repetition of images in his artworks allude to how consumerism and commercialism have defined American society and how depersonalized and banal American life has become. Warhol's works drew much attention from the media, being one of the pioneers of the pop art movement, and

pushed people to accept his bold, aggressive style of art, rather than distancing traditional art from well-known commercial designs. Furthermore, he also commented on the mass media's fascination and interest in death and tragedy with his *Death and Disaster* series, especially *The Electric Chair*.



The references to death were not always explicit, as shown in *The Electric Chair*, but simply input elements that would push the media to interpret it and arouse curiosity from the public. His allusion to the death penalty also raised significant questions about the morality and social utility of the death penalty, sparking political debates in the media. Warhol often included political messages and ideas in his artworks, but denied any engagement of social or political critiques; however by indirectly making socio-political and socio-economic critiques through his artworks, Warhol successfully generated a relationship between art and law, allowing more people to engage in the art field. Similarly, Jeff Koons, an American artist dealing with pop culture and everyday objects in his artworks, helped merge art

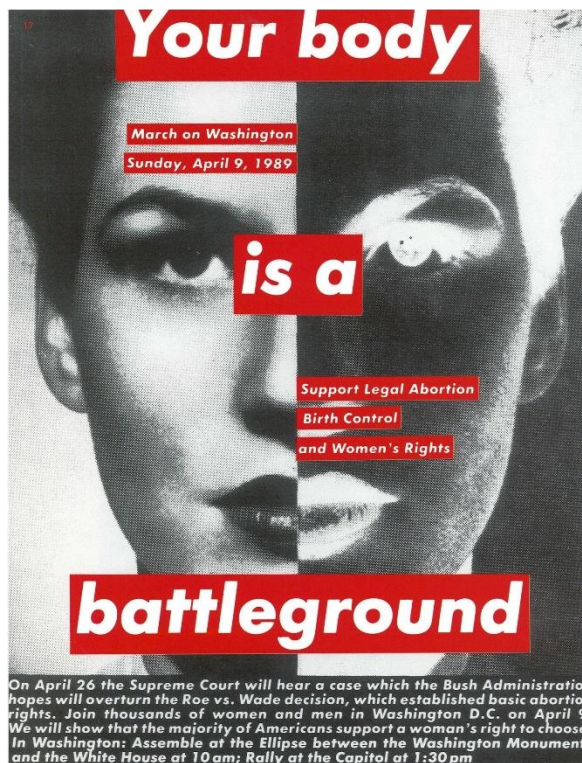
into the everyday lives of the American public. He often recontextualized advertisements and traditional commercials into artworks to critique the consumerist and materialist culture that strives for luxury and “newness” all the time. By converting pre-existing promiscuous consumer signs and advertisements of alcohol bottles such as Hennessy or Gordon’s Gin into stainless steel figures. While observing alcohol advertisements, he noticed that ads intended for the less affluent had more explicit messages whereas the ads for the more prosperous were more abstract and luxurious. Noticing that advertisements pushed and furthered socio-economic immobility and stereotypes, he created a series called *Luxury and Degradation* where he gathered advertisements with significant differences and unified them into a series of stainless steel figures. He mentioned in an interview with Austrian daily *Der Standard* that “[he] tries to show people that they should learn to preserve their political and economic power rather than strive for luxury,” and explained the anti-consumerist message behind his series, *Luxury and Degradation*, stating how he chose stainless steel, an artificial, proletarian luxury, to create a seamless and glimmering surface to represent the “faked luxury” people strive to achieve. He also said that he “could have melted it and turned it into pans and pots,” instead of creating beautiful shiny sculptures to illustrate to the public how the material itself is not what creates value, but rather the public’s desire for luxury that fuels the value of

superficially luxurious items. His anti-consumerist bias is also illustrated in his first exhibition, *The New*, where he presented a display of four brand-new vacuum cleaners in clear acrylic cases with different colors of fluorescent lights. Unlike *Luxury and Degradation*, he comments on the whole of the public, how people crave new materials and objects and value them for their “newness” and how an object becomes worthless once used or sold. However, he furthers his comment on the obsession of all new things by alluding to the fact that the vacuum cleaners, being in the acrylic cases, will soon become obsolete with the arrival of more new things and technological advancements; this demonstrates the futility of the public obsession for new commodities, essentially criticizing the materialistic values American society was adapting.

3. Art Activism

Artists also brought art into society through art activism, where artists combine art and activism to address sociopolitical issues and bring about social change. Merging strategic activism with the creativity of arts, art activism was influential in bringing changes for social institutions, behaviors, and relations. Most particularly, feminist artists used art activism to bring attention to gender inequalities and eventually succeeded in making tremendous political and social changes, not only in the art world, but society in general.

Barbara Kruger, pioneer of the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, used art as a way to redefine the social construct of gender roles and sexism. For example, her artwork, "It's a small world but not if you have to clean it," utilizes graphic images and texts to address notions of sexism in society, especially regarding gender roles and stereotypes. She also incorporates humor into her artworks to mass-communicate her ideas into magazines, street posters, and newspapers, moving to tie art into the real world.



Her most famous work, "Your Body is a Battleground," is explicitly stated to be part of the Women's March to Washington protest for reproductive freedom after the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision that outlawed abortion. In the artwork, a woman's face is split in half, one

positive and one negative exposure, with red, bold text on top. By using her large-scale photographic works and cultural texts, she publicizes her opinions regarding women's freedom of choice of what happens to her body. Rather than gatekeeping her works in museums and galleries, she posted printed copies of her work on billboards, buildings, and street walls where people could easily access. Another feminist artist group in North America that pushed the realms of art into society are the Guerilla Girls. Formed during the 1980s, the Guerilla Girls, instead of conforming to embodied female experiences and social trends that dominated feminist artworks before, used personal experiences and observations that somewhat radically expressed their wants and needs. With a more liberal mindset, they started what was called "radical feminism," which sparked much controversy among government organizations and businesses; although there were mixed opinions regarding the Guerilla Girls, they helped feminist artists take a huge step in earning acknowledgement and recognition from society. The Guerilla Girls ignited disputes in the male-dominant American society of the time by plastering posters with graphics and slogans all over New York City, speaking out against the government and powerful businesses. Because they wore gorilla masks and used pseudonyms, it made it easier for them to speak up for their beliefs without worrying about repercussions. Much of their work was attempts to make political changes, often incorporating

controversial statements that degraded the American government and society as a whole. They astronomically expanded the scope of feminist art by renting out public buildings, speaking up at venues, and covering street walls in posters that urged big businesses and the government to initiate changes for gender equality. Their most famous work was called “Women in America Earn Only ⅓ of What Men Do,” which confronted the gender pay gap in jobs and highlighted the gender discrimination of men and women in the workplace, more specifically the art industry. By epitomizing radical idealism, more people started paying attention to feminist art, which created a butterfly effect where thousands of women in the following years confidently and publicly voiced their opinions.

Art activism was also widely used by black artists who sought to overcome the barriers of racism in America. Popularized after the Harlem Renaissance, black artists used art as a medium to speak up against systemic racism using their experiences embedded in segregation and discrimination. Particularly, in the following years of the Civil Rights Movement, many black artists started voicing their opinion through art. Seen as a precursor to the upcoming Black Arts Movement (BAM), activists such as James Baldwin and Chester Himes brought light to the possibility of embracing black culture and making it a so-called “aesthetic,” rather than to adapt and conform to the predominant Western culture and aesthetics.

A number of art and literature groups, most famously the Spiral Arts Alliance and Umbra Poets, emerged during this time period, creating black-owned media outlets, art foundations, journals, and publishing houses that spread politically, culturally, and socially challenging messages through its literature and art. With more and more progressive black artists emerging, it started the BAM in the 1960s, conveying a message of black pride and confidence. Referred to as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of Black Power” by Larry Neale, one of the leading members of the BAM, applied political ideas such as ensuring black rights and creating new cultural institutions to art, literature, and theatre to resist Western influences and control over black arts. To present the black experience and history from their perspective, they created organizations across the country, providing opportunities to hesitant black artists to openly express their opinions regarding the longstanding racial discrimination and oppression in the United States. Pioneer of the movement, Amiri Baraka, established the Black Arts Repertory Theater School, encouraging young, poor black artists to develop their passion for arts and to use their work as a form of activism to make changes.

4. Graffiti

Graffiti and street art can be controversial, especially with many complaining about urban space disruption, countries illegalizing graffiti, and being looked down upon as ‘cheap’ or

'unprincipled.' Graffiti and street art are commonly associated with unruly youth culture in urban cities, typically New York City or Las Vegas, and criticized for damaging public property. Beyond these stereotypes though, are thousands of young artists seeking to spread awareness of social inequalities and wrongdoings using graffiti and street art with the acknowledgement of its publicity and controversiality. As aforementioned, art activism comes in many different mediums and forms, one of them being graffiti and street art. For poor, young artists unable to seize opportunities in the 'real' art world, many resort to graffiti and street art to speak up for themselves and publicize corruption of society and the government. One of the most prominent and controversial graffiti artists is Banksy, an anonymous graffiti artist and painter, who combined dark humor and strong political messages in his street art, leaving many in confusion as to whether his art is simple vandalism or phenomenal art activism. Many of his free-hand graffiti arts include political messages of anti-authoritarianism, anti-consumerism, anarchism, and many more, most of which rebels against traditional societal beliefs and the current government.

Surpassing famous, successful graffiti artists such as Banksy or Keith Haring, thousands of graffiti artists exist in the world with the majority of them having been oppressed and marginalized their whole lives; they use graffiti art as an attempt to

spread word of their experiences of discrimination, segregation, and suppression.



A country with unexpected yet astounding amounts of graffiti art is Zimbabwe. Due to the colonial history of Zimbabwe, Zimbabweans used hieroglyphics and stencil drawings on walls to create remnants of their traditions and culture, inspiring young artists to follow through with modern graffiti art. Today, in a more integrated manner, Zimbabwean graffiti artists portray the oppressive conditions of their history of colonization and the lasting impacts of brutal colonization has on modern day society. Because of their decades-long colonization by Western countries, a racist economic divide emerged, forcing the majority of Zimbabweans into poverty. The youth of Zimbabwe attempts to address the wealth gap in Zimbabwe by creating graffiti in the most unexpected places; wealthy, educated areas are filled with graffiti art on the side of government buildings, university campuses, parks, and dilapidated mansion-houses.

5. Media

Apart from the aforementioned ways art brings itself into society, art interjects itself into the everyday lives of people with the use of media, often in unusual and unexpected ways. One of the most prominent examples would be Maurizio Cattelan's "The Comedian." On the cover of the New York Post, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram was a banana duct taped to the wall in the name of "art." Many critics debate whether this truly is art with the suspicion that contemporary art has become too abstract and conceptual. Some have said that Cattelan creates "tendentious tchotchkes" rather than art, some call it "anger-inducing and outrageous," but all in all, "The Comedian" has been successful in sparking debates and a social media sensation. Having been sold at \$150,000, many are curious as to why. Being endlessly mocked, parodied, and photographed by the public and media, the duct taped banana brings itself into people's everyday lives; it essentially relies on the suspension to make the obvious seem ridiculous and to deflate and defeat the pretensions of earlier art. Cattelan writes that "paradoxically, the most important aspect of a site-specific, well-conceived work is that it should also be effective outside the context for which it was created originally," confirming that the intention of simply presenting the banana rather than "representing" it was to arouse controversy around it and rewrite the standards of "art." By attracting such attention of the public, Cattelan effectively

pushes the regular person to rethink, or revamp, the perception and concept of art.

Another artist using a similar idea is Zardulu, an anonymous New York street artist.



Most famous for the "New York Pizza Rat," Zardulu creates a social media phenomenon with a "performance piece" where a rat carries a huge slice of pizza down the subway steps of New York. Zardulu, being anonymous, takes credit for such bizarre clips on the Internet, claiming for it to be real, rather than a hoax or stunt. Many are suspicious whether these clips, the Pizza Rat or the Selfie Rat, are real or mere trickery, but nonetheless, Zardulu confidently states in interviews and on social media that her works are aimed for publicity and social media exposure in art, rather than for capital or fame. With works rooted in surrealistic ideas and classical mythology, her works disrupt the mundane life of New York and recreate it into a work of art, intriguing millions around the world. Due to controversy that these videos are just mere trickery dressed in pretension, that these stunts were staged and practiced, or that Zardulu has no right to claim credit for it, further pushes this realm of art into

the lives of everyday people through social media. Trending on several social media platforms and even being on the headline of new articles, Zardulu “removes the framing mechanism that separates fiction from everyday life,” ambiguating the traditional perception of art. She then coined the term “Zardulism,” where she provides “pearls of merriment for the world to enjoy” through viral performance videos of animals doing abnormal, human-like actions; she claims to have reunified nature and man, as well as fiction and reality. These mythical performance videos have become the signature pieces of Zardulu, and now, with any absurd videos of animals, people are suspicious whether it is simply an interesting capture of the moment, or if it is a piece, or hoax, of Zardulu.

6. Conclusion

Throughout history, artists have been interjecting art into everyday lives to bridge the gap between art and society. With artists of the late 20th century pioneering such unconventional forms of art, a lot of controversy and publicity surrounded these artworks, essentially pushing the public to look into different forms and methods of art. Some artists utilize art as a means to critique or advocate for human rights activism and consumerism, while others employ different methods of art such as graffiti or social media to interject art into everyday life. These relatively new mediums and concepts within modern art pushes art to develop into being more than just visual pleasure, but a means of addressing socio-political

issues and popularizing art among the public. With these pioneering methods artists will strive to merge art with life, whether that be through social media, mass media, or street art. These are a few of the many ways artists blend art into life, bringing art out of the exclusive art world. These artists do not simply create art for the aesthetic; rather, interject art within society. Many combine art with pop culture, activism, biomedicine, architecture, and much more forcing an audience to interact whether willing or not. These methods are not only a new interesting form of expression but also a means for art to merge with the general public.

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