

Question 4. From the series of IMAGINED WORLDS research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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Graphic Design

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Timi O'Neill

Pop Art first appeared in the 1950s but not everyone was astounded by it like society is today. Society, in the 1950s, thought Pop art as an endorsement of the capitalist market. Although, others agreed that the Pop art movement aimed to blur boundaries between high class and low-class culture. Pop art was a movement that challenged the traditions of fine art.

Pop Art is one of the most popular art movements of the Modern Era, it arose from a rebellion against Abstract Expressionists. It is characterized by techniques and themes drawn from popular mass culture, like comic books, advertisement, and mundane objects. The movement was widely interpreted as a reaction to the ideas of Abstract Expressionism. “abstract expressionists believe that when you create art you should create art that can only be done using that medium. In this way, Abstract Expressionism is a celebration of the medium.” (theartist 2016.) Pop Art with intent, was to go against elitist culture in art, emphasizing the mundane elements of any given culture, usually using irony, “Many used parody and irony in an attempt to subvert capitalism.” (History of Pop Art, 2013)

The movement had socio-political implications that still get realised today. Pop Art could be considered more of a cultural movement or a social movement. The influence of Pop Art also enhances the business world and continues to transform culture, making it an even greater artistic sight. It looked to limit artworks with the majority and included applying symbolism that normal individuals could perceive and identify with.

It was a reintroduction of identifiable imagery, for example, drawing things from the mass media and pop culture, it “was a major shift for the direction of modernism.” (The Art Story 2000.) The subject matter went far from traditional high art themes, such as morality, mythology, and classic history, to artists celebrating commonplace objects and people of everyday life. Which commenced the movement to raise the level of popular culture to the level of fine art. Pop Art was the final chapter for the Modernism movement in the early 1970s, holding up a mirror to contemporary society.



Although, once the postmodernist generation looked hard into that mirror, self-doubt took over and the Pop Art movement faded away.



Figure 1 (Pollock, 1952)

In societal views, Abstract Expressionism explored art in its purest form; Pop Art challenged what art is by using a culture that exists all around us. But, because of this, some critics were “enraged by the Pop Art movement as they did not feel that the image of a soup can, nor comic books could have artistic merit” (theartist 2016) and be aprecated the way elitist culture in art is aprecated. Refer to figure two.

But, with Pop Art’s bold colours and sharp edges, this caused further criticism as it looked more like a design than any other art that was recognized at the time. Not only that, but Pop Art was also very fun and light-hearted, it was much more accessible than Abstract Expressionism as it was images that were more recognizable to people even if both challenged the traditional values of art. The reason I believe pop art was light-hearted was that it soon came after world war two and there was a cultural revolution where TV replaced the radio and societies were embracing an entrepreneurial culture, with pop singers like the Beatles and Elvis becoming popular there was room for pop art to challenge what fine art meant and become a reaction against Abstract Expressionism.

Andy Warhol was one of the most successful Pop artists and quickly became synonymous with Pop art. Warhol was an American artist, who was a leading figure in the Pop Art movement. His works explore the relationship between artistic expression, advertising and celebrity culture. He essentially utilized popular icons to become iconic-which brings up controversy of whether he was a visionary genius, a sell-out or an amazing businessman. New York City’s Museum of Modern Art hosted a Symposium on pop art in December 1962 during which artists such as Warhol were attacked for ‘capitulating’ to consumerism. Critics were scandalized by Warhol’s open embrace of market culture. This is what set the tone for Warhol’s reputation. He was born and raised in Pittsburgh, he first pursued being a commercial illustrator but after exhibiting his work in galleries in the late 1950s, he started to be seen as an influential and controversial artist. His New York studio, The Factory would be where he’d bring distinguished intellectuals, drag queens, playwrights, celebrities, street people and patrons. He lived openly as a gay man even before the gay liberation movement, as well as he also experienced being shot.

Before I was shot, I always thought that I was more half-there than all-there—I always suspected that I was watching TV instead of living life. People sometimes say that the way things happen in movies is unreal, but actually, it’s the way things happen in life

Figure 2 (Warhol, 1965)

that's unreal. The movies make emotions look so strong and real, whereas when things really do happen to you, it's like watching television—you don't feel anything. Right when I was being shot and ever since, I knew that I was watching television. The channels switch, but it's all television.

(Stiles and Selz, 1996, p. 345)

Around Warhol's era, the artwork would have been a lot less vibrant and more relaxed, "making money is art, and working is art and good business is the best art." (Michelson, 2002, p. 50.) This quote said by Andy Warhol as money was a very important influence on his decisions to challenge the artistic norms in society. This is one of the reasons behind the controversy of Warhol being a visionary genius, a sell-out or an amazing businessman. Due to this and him hitting his stride during the Pop Art movement made him a focus point to critics. "Warhol's films and his art mean either nothing or a great deal. The choice is the viewers." (Warhol's Critics 2016.) Even though his artwork resonated with the general public, the problem lied with the public having to interrupt the artwork and it depended on their point of view, simple or complex. Warhol contributed to the major shift of direction of modernism by dissolving distinctions between commercial design and serious art.

Andy Warhol relates to my area of practice, Graphic Design. Warhol did silkscreen prints of American icons, from Marilyn Monroe to Campbell's soup can. The plain, blotchy looks of these prints became a staple in Graphic Design. "Warhol once expressed his philosophy in one poignant sentence: "When you think about it, department stores are kind of like museums." (AnardDesign 2007.) As a graphic designer, I do agree with this statement, most people, when walking into a department store will see items useful for their everyday lives, but if you look closely, it is all art, all the packaging, the logos, everything you'd look at would be made by a designer, even the building itself would've been made by an architect.

Ed Ruscha was another artist who contributed to the Pop Art Movement. Creating works similar to Warhol which provided a new way of looking at and thinking about what creates the American scene, as well as connecting the verbal with the visual. "Ed Ruscha is the quintessential Los Angeles artist whose work catapulted Pop art from a form that merely highlighted the universal ordinary into a form in which the ordinary could now be viewed in relation to its geographically intrinsic cultural contexts. In his hands Pop becomes personal." (The Art Story.) Ruscha took geographically places that were ordinary and made it into Pop Art.

When Ruscha was a child, he dreamt of becoming a cartoonist and enrolled at university as an art student, "Initially, he experimented with Abstract Expressionism, but he soon turned to the found words and images drawn from vernacular culture that would come to inform all his work." (Wainwright, 2020) but later decided he wanted to become a printer. He worked as a commercial artist, painting signs and creating graphic designs. As a result, he began to apply commercial techniques and styles to his artwork. Ruscha experimented with painting and drawing words and phrases, often oddly witty and ironic sayings alluding to popular culture and life in LA. "When asked where he got his inspiration for his paintings, Ruscha responded 'Well, they just occur to me; sometimes people say them and I write

down and then I paint them. Sometimes I use a dictionary.” (Wikipedia 2020.) This is how he came up with his “liquid word” paintings: Words such as *Adios*, *steel*, *Desire*. They were written as if with liquid spilt, dribbled or sprayed over a flat monochromatic surface. In the 1970s, this became a distinctive characteristic of the post-Pop Art generation.

Among these career titles, he is also known as a Graphic Designer as well as Andy Warhol, in this media of work they both took mundane items and made it highlighted for people to gaze upon, their use of bold colours and sharp edges represents everything Pop Art is and was. Amongst his Pop Art work, he made a series of drawings in pastel using pithy phrases

against a field of colour and later he produced a series of paintings of words over sunsets, night skies and wheat fields which gave his artwork a romanticised atmosphere despite there being no romantic words or intentions in the pieces.



Figure 3. (Ruscha, 1962)

As shown in this figure, the similarities between Ruscha’s work and Warhol’s are present and the theme of Pop Art is a good description for both of these pieces, although Ruscha uses lettering for his works, they still run in the same theme as Warhol’s work. The yellow acrylic lettering sits in front of a dark blue background, with the deep red that is perpendicular to the yellow lettering, giving a suggestion of depth within the picture plane and the way the word is sat on the page cuts the image roughly in half, from the top left to the bottom right corner. They collectively, among other artists, turned the shift of direction for modernism.

Although, other artists have incorporated the use of type and lettering in their art, the language of advertising and signage, artists’ like Andy Warhol had an improvised, casualness about his reproduced small space ads and lettering, Ruscha’s lettering from the early sixties: See figure three. Is lovingly and respectfully precise. Ruscha would be creative and inventive, changing typefaces to suit the message and even creating new styles of lettering.



Figure 3. (Ruscha)

Ruscha got recognition for combining words and phrases in his paintings as well as for his photographic books which were influenced by the expressionless mockery of the Pop Art movement, although his textual, flat paintings have been linked with the Pop Art movement as well as the beat generation. The Beat Generation was a literary movement that was started by a group of authors whose work explored and influenced American culture in the post-war era.

As well as Ruscha's involvement in the Pop Art movement, he also had an obsession with symbols in pop culture: "The work highlights Ruscha's preoccupation with the symbols of American popular culture of the 1960s and the 1970s, with the monosyllabic invitation to dance invoking light-hearted entertainment." (Tate, 2008) See figure 4:

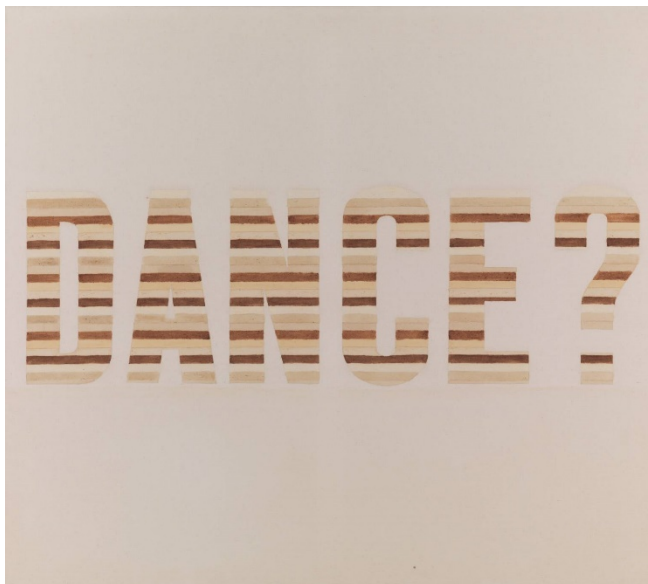


Figure 4 (Ruscha, 1973)

For this artwork, created by Ruscha, unusual materials were used to create it: coffee, egg white, mustard, chilli sauce, ketchup and cheddar cheese. What I can gather from this information is that they're typically things you'd find in an American Diner or what would accompany typical American fast food, such as hotdogs and burgers. Which would be the

stereotypical thing you'd imagine when picturing America, which leads back to Ruscha's obsession with symbolism with America and it contributing to his many works. He has combined the two symbols of American pop culture, typical American food and dancing and this has created a visual interpretation of what American pop culture in the 1960s and 1970s was like. Although, combining these two stereotypes can be seen as rather odd. The two do not usually go together. Asking one to dance has its usual setting of a bar or club, where a gentleman goes up to a lady and asks for her hand to dance with him and then condiments of fast food and aspects of an American Diner where it is busy and the air is full of different foods. The two settings do not really go together, so why has Ruscha done this? I believe it was to make a statement, to American pop culture that it is so obvious what society does and what is the 'norm' and Ruscha is making this clear to society by using condiments from one setting and a word from another.

All this contribution to the Pop Art movement and the movement being a huge shift for the direction of modernism, is it still relevant? Many people would say yes, it is. Pop Art provides commentary on the world's events and provides commercial culture. Although, some may say the Pop Art movement didn't progress after the 1970s, elements of Pop Art are still around in today's contemporary art. Also, with today's advancements in media and development in computers, video and interactive electronic productions it has allowed Pop Art to exist in a much more interactive form. For example, an artist used red sand to fill cracks in the ground to draw attention to the issue of human trafficking around the world. As well as another using film and photography to highlight gender inequality in the Middle East. Pop Art is all about using art to manifest the world's issues and showing society

In conclusion, I believe that Pop Art changed the world and how society saw art for the better. Art was seen as a high-class establishment and if you weren't from high class then your work was no good. Pop Art changed that, it changed the shift of modernism and it was a protest against Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art normalised art that contributed to society, in advertisements, commercials and books. Pop Art was more than just an art movement, it was also a social movement, it was the first movement to declare that forms of advertising and commercial endeavours were actually forms of art, which then immersed trends and fashions to the art category as well.

Pop Art's aim was to blur the lines between high-class and low-class culture, to challenge the traditions of art and to rebel against Abstract Expressions, which I believe it did successfully. How I believe it did this was by using every day, mundane objects and turn them into statements for society, they used symbolism of American Pop Culture and artists, involved in the Pop Art movement drew their inspiration to what was around them, what they saw and what they heard, rather than the influence of medium like Abstract Expressionism did.

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Figure 1: Pollock (1952) *Blue Poles*. Available at: [Abstract expressionism: everything you need to know in six easy steps - Time Out London Art](#) (Accessed: 15 November 2020)

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Figure 4: Ruscha (1973) *DREAM?* Available at: ['DANCE?', Edward Ruscha, 1973 | Tate](#) (Accessed 19/01/2021)