

Inanimate objects reimagined in Contemporary Art

By

Molly Rose Summerfield

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Summary of Topic: The title ‘Inanimate objects reimagined in Contemporary Art’ explores themes of consumerism, material culture, conventional society, and modern society. Therefore highlights the controversy between the modern and conventional. It also examines beauty and aesthetics of inanimate objects.

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Introduction

The title 'Inanimate objects reimagined in Contemporary Art' was inspired by the heightened connection with the everyday, the ordinary, and the home during the lockdown of COVID-19. As mundane as it was, staring at all four walls day in, and day out, made me appreciate everyday inanimate objects. We often overlook the ordinary in the busy schedules of daily life, however, in lockdown, I started to analyze and question the meaning of beauty in the everyday. Society has become so focused on the environment, economy, and politics that we are moving away from the physically attractive appearance, to a repetition of consistently new forms and concepts in a society with disinterested tastes. Where is the beautiful art?

My practice draws attention to still-life, therefore this thesis will explore conventional still-life and society compared to modern contemporary society. This thesis will examine why inanimate objects have been reimagined and will include sub-genres such as values, representation, and consumerism.

Chapter one compares and contrasts conventional society and traditions with modern contemporary society. It examines conventional ethical values on the way beauty and inanimate objects were once seen, exploring stoicism and mimetism.

This is contrasted by the twentieth century's failure to acknowledge the beauty in the everyday, and instead, focusing on the physical functions and properties as opposed to visual qualities. It also highlights the way objects have devalued due to the paradigmatic shift in society. By comparing two historical counterparts in society, I am able to evaluate and identify why inanimate objects have been reimagined.

Chapter 2 focuses on the representation of still-life, true society, and repetition. It discusses particularly the Dutch seventeenth-century trade, class system, and morals. As an opposition to conventional still-life, I compare this to how modern contemporary art has reimagined the still-life genre. This chapter also explores consumerism and commodification.

Chapter three focuses on modern contemporary society and the way we have reimagined inanimate objects of the everyday. The artists explored in this chapter cover Jeff Koons, Peter Blake, and also mentioning Balenciaga. It focuses on the controversies of modern capitalism and material culture, and gives insight into the way objects have been reimagined through exploitation.

This thesis is inspired by essays on aesthetics, beauty, and politics written by critics such as Arthur Danto, Elaine Scarry, Mark Cousins, and Paul Wood.

Chapter 1:

Arguments to support why inanimate objects have been reimagined in Contemporary Art

Society has shaped the way we view and perceive everyday inanimate objects through philosophical ideas, cultural hierarchies, and social practices. There has been an expansion of the conceptual parameters that acknowledge the critical values of the avant-garde. However, these values are significantly different from those of the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, we no longer enjoy the elevated experience of the beauty of inanimate objects, as depicted in Dutch still-life paintings of the Golden Age.

The 'self' and 'other' establishes the relationship between the viewer and the artwork (Steiner, 2001, p.46). The 'self' acts as the perceiver; the 'other' is the inanimate object. Modernism has taught us to interchange this act of power between the 'self' and 'other' where this experience has become disorienting and restricts the artwork to a form or thing. The placement of the arrangement of an object has now become highly significant, adding economic and political value, and therefore lacking value in its appearance. There are paradigmatic 'problems about material objects' that are apparent in their paradoxical features (Inwagen, 2016). In today's society, we often overlook the simplicity of the fundamental foundation of everyday life. 'For Aristotle, the beautiful object is one which has the ideal structure of an object; it has the form of a totality' (Cousins, 1994, p.145). Beautiful objects have become problematic to our society; instead, values lie within physical functions rather than

visual qualities. Therefore, the relationship is now between ideas and perfection.

However, philosopher Plato believed that 'beauty makes us fall in love with what is perfect' (Higgins, 1996, p.32). There is a significant difference in hearing one say the 'self' and 'other' compared to the 'idea' and 'perfection.' The action exchanged between the 'self' and 'other' requires a sense of connection between the viewer and the object. On the contrary, the idea and perfection are almost an active pursuit that subverts into a disconnection. The sense of disconnectedness has diminished the act of looking as 'we no longer see beauty the same way' (Scarry, 1999, p.38).

Owing to the elimination of the object's visual components and the retention of merely its functional components, there is a 'visual indifference' (Beech, 2009).

'Visual indifference' proposes an insight into Adorno's 'crisis for beauty' where the twentieth century has abolished the view of beautiful objects due to commodification (Beech, 2009). Thus, commercialization has been the main disenchantment of modern society where it puts the power of political and economic needs before taking necessary measures to truly appreciate the object.

The way we view the 'self' and 'other' in modern contemporary society is disparate from the traditional relationship of the seventeenth century. The Golden Age was the epitome of the seventeenth-century Dutch, which I will go further in-depth in the second chapter. Still life was one of the many genres that had been discovered during this new era as a visible and realistic representation of their contemporary lifestyle. This is rendered through paintings of everyday life and objects. Realism played a huge role in depicting a 'visible world' where paintings have very 'descriptive' functions, and painters were encouraged to focus on the 'properties' of objects (Jackson, Richards and Westeijn, 2008). Jackson, Richards and Westeijn (2008) briefly outlined that seventeenth-century society had to fundamentally follow a

foundation requiring a virtue-oriented code of conduct. This is where ethical values were purely represented in paintings through pictorial imitation acting as a 'mirror of nature' (Jackson, Richards and Westeijn, 2008). Plato's concept of mimesis was pivotal to the teachings and learnings of aesthetic thought that challenge 'status and value' (Jackson, Richards and Westeijn, 2008, p.37). Imitation derives from the greek terminology 'mimesis', however, on the contrary, is often mistaken as a criticism that characterizes mimesis as a pointless duplicate. However, platonic critics argue that mimesis is just a 'meaningless copy of a world of mere appearances' (Jackson, Richards and Westeijn, 2008, p.126). This argues against stoicism where in their opinion, the artist should be able to choose their own path. Nevertheless, the virtues are evident in the paintings and have embedded true ethical ideals portraying stoic ethos of naturalness, which gives this aesthetic experience a fulfilment of life; a moral significance of 'living by following nature' (Jackson, Richards and Westeijn, 2008). Brun (1635) argues that in order to discuss paintings 'one must speak of them as if things were real, not painted' (Jackson, Richards and Westeijn, 2008). This helps distinguish the relationship between reality and material objects in everyday life to identify the physical qualities that aid in summing lifelikeness.

Twentieth-century modernism has provided us with artworks that physically and functionally resemble everyday objects, leaving many tilted heads and raised questions. This is not negative by all means, however, it is questionable how little we hear the words 'that is beautiful.' Beautiful has become problematic when defining artwork in the twentieth century when beautiful objects began to vanish from existence as if appearance acted as a stigma. Dutch painters provided a sense of harmony; a place of comfort, 'traditional conceptions of beauty understands it as

involving harmonious agreement among elements' (Higgins, 1996, p.32). Meanwhile, Danto (2003) argues that 'dissonance had been the favoured ambition for art for the proceeding century.' Harmony; dissonance. Viewing these two words together provides insight and reflection into the era that had the utmost value, to the least value, being in both the values of objects and ethical values. The clash and collision of the two eras create a sense of discourse and uncertainty. The two words reflect two historical counterparts that juxtapose the contradictions of realism and everyday life. This highlights the controversy between ancient and modern times and has created an aesthetic conflict. 'Querrelle des anciens et des modernes' translates as a quarrel between the ancient and modern, where there features a contemporary resonance in the conflict of protection of ancient or traditional culture, compared to a newfound, developing culture that advocates for a sense of supremacy (Taylor, 2020). Jameson (1980) calls it the 'birth of historicity' through the demonstration of historical difference, and argues that it is the 'return of the repressed' where this conflict is a political repetition of the seventeenth century. This adds conceptual tension to an artistic discourse such as theorists like Barthes transform reality into an illusion, creating a new value by affirming its truth. It is now 'a new value, contemporaneous with the secularisation of the world under capitalism' (Jameson, 1980, p.219). As previously mentioned, the seventeenth century followed a code of conduct of morality obtained through strict religious beliefs, however, it is apparent through the secularisation that we no longer follow the same system or codes of conduct that were once followed. I believe these values have a big impact on how the world was once viewed, to the way it is seen now, and they reflect on why inanimate objects have been devalued because we no longer follow the same virtues. Through disinterested judgments, we are yet to experience a relationship

with form or aesthetic experience. This is due to 'the older ways of life of the people have been eroded economically by capitalism' (Lukács, 2020, p.52). The way that traditional values have been 'eroded' reflects how realism has been pushed to the background by modernism. It also reflects on whether the values of virtues affect the way we now see things or judge objects. Jameson (1997) also calls for an 'end of art'. Have we been led too far afield?

Dutch still-lives now exist as a replica of our world, reminding us of what we have lost during a period that has compromised still-lives. Is it possible to reanimate these traditions?

Chapter 2:

Representation of still-life, true society, and repetition.

As mentioned in the first chapter, the seventeenth century was a time of extraordinary affluence and cultural production, a period called The Golden Age. The prosperity of the Dutch was generated by industry and mercantile trading, establishing a lavish lifestyle after the struggle for the Dutch Republic's independence (National Gallery of Art, 2008). New trading opportunities emerged as there were 'commodities gathered from around the world' through global exploration (Berger, 2011). In addition to its remarkable opulence, the Netherlands also opened the door to intellectual independence, introducing theology and philosophy. Sociopolitical, economic, and religious factors were combined to produce a unique and successful environment for the arts. Homes were significant to the artist or artwork, as it would be their place of work and where the artworks were displayed. This demonstrates that artists were significantly influenced by everyday domestic life. The sense of familiarity of every day filled the Dutch with pride that 'Dutch citizens felt in their nation and its success' (National Gallery of Art, 2008).



Fig.1. *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie*

Heda was one of the greatest masters who represented the genre of Dutch still-life painting. *Banquet Piece with Mince Pie*, is an oil painting representing a typical lavish banquet that was a recurring theme of still-life. Realism helps us depict the kinds of traditional lifestyle Dutch citizens were living through the use of iconography defined by the mastery of mimesis, and decorative richness. The lifelike scale of the objects reinforces a sense of reality, composed as a harmonious whole. This piece illustrates the noticeable wealth of trade in exotic goods, acknowledging the food had

been eaten by the upper class. We can identify what class system the banquet belongs to by symbolic references through iconography. 'The rich could afford elaborate meals at lavish dinner parties, while the average citizen's fare was plain' (National Gallery of Art, 2008). The upper-class feast would include mince pie, bread, olives, and fruit, as depicted in the painting. It appears as if the banquet is finished due to the scrumpled tablecloth, the half-eaten mince pie, the half-peeled orange, the untouched bread roll, and the blown-out candle. The fact this food is unfinished, reveals wealthy consumption, but also wealthy enough to leave food behind. The level of attention to detail acknowledges the values presented on the table where each object depicts economic value or personal value. Value 'touches our deepest concerns' where one discovers a valuable other (Steiner, 2001, p.48). However, whilst acknowledging the prestigious everyday life underlies flaws in the 'visible-invisible dichotomy' suggests that the external may be a facade of the internal truth (Jackson, Richards and Westeijn, 2008, p.330). Nevertheless, the use of iconography aids us in revealing its truth, like the way the orange is half peeled; unravelling the truth. Relatable to the 'visible-invisible', is a fundamental moral message that can be evident in this painting; 'that the sensual pleasures of the feast and luxuries of the world are only temporary and not eternal' (Arthur K, and Wheelock J, 2014). Heda challenges theological issues where the bread, a fundamental focus to the viewer, has been overlooked. However, in modern contemporary society, moral institutions according to Danto are a faith we have lost, along with crucial moral and theological principles of our time (Higgins, 1996, p.32). These representations hold substantial informational value, that reveals the truth behind the external features. Therefore, the truth lies within the moral institutions that are often portrayed in Vanitas. Vanitas was the epitome of dutch still life painting that

conveyed moral and theological messages, yet consequently are also mortal. Whilst the main theme was based on mortality, which is extremely foreboding, the aim of these symbolic messages was 'about the triviality of life and its pleasures, as nothing could withstand the permanence that death brought' (Art in Context, 2022). The representation of the end of life can be depicted in Heda's painting through the burnt-out candle. Inanimate objects were very important to the sub-genre of still-life painting; Vanitas, where the brevity of life is juxtaposed with inevitable death. Vanitas consist of ordinary objects such as vases, food, flowers, and all the luxuries in life, however, is contradicted by the images of skulls, dead flowers, and burnt-out candles. The contiguity of the objects representing life and death that are arranged together suggests the moral message, alluding to the fact people should endure and appreciate the world, and others before their time are inevitably up. These vanities are placed with one's 'eventual death' (Art in Context, 2022). It is questionable whether we still obtain this moral message today, considering the throwaway culture and consumerism, which I will be discussing in my third chapter. Wood (1994) argues that if we were to open historical art to contemporary art 'ethical effectivity is not necessarily a conservative desire' however, we do require human nature. The culture was a significant representation in still-life paintings of the seventeenth century that displayed recurring motifs such as musical instruments, religious elements, stoicism, and nature that all form a harmonious balance as mentioned in the first chapter. Therefore, society was very prideful in their gain of success, thus, the moral message was not to be too prideful, but to appreciate materialism. Wood (1994, p.187) also argues that 'it is fundamental to historical materialism in the exact sense of being part of its theoretical foundation.' However, modern society is facing complications with ethical values arguing to cancel culture by the radicalisation of

disenchantment in consumerism. Meanwhile, traditional western culture was 'specific and peculiar' through methodicalness and standardization (Beech, 2009, p.15).

As opposed to conventional still-life, it is interesting to see how modern contemporary artists have put their stamp on the genre of still-life. On the topic of culture, through an intersectional lens, we can familiarize ourselves with twentieth-century capitalism, identity, commercialism, and community. I am curious to see how artists use inanimate objects in the twentieth century compared to conventional use. To form an understanding of human nature, modern life has nurtured us in the commodification of consumer culture. Modernism focuses on the idea of beauty, where products are made to be more functionally desirable creating an economic value. Therefore, the product is there to attract and sell by its properties and functions, not necessarily by its qualities or external features.



Fig.2. *Retrato de la Artista Primavera*

Hierro is a conceptual, minimalist, and pop artist who confronts capitalism and uses mixed media artwork. Hierro states 'I, a Dominican-American consumer, implicate

myself in the way that history is still playing out today,' (Cohen, 2020). This suggests that these material objects combined with politics become significantly more complex. Hierro was inspired by the material goods of the Dutch still-life, which is reflected in her work. Therefore, conventional still-life has been reimagined as depicted in her work. The act of cutting up and combining ordinary objects with works of Italian artist Giorgio Morandi's work, reforms new concepts and reinterprets still-life to her own. In the first chapter, I mentioned the 'self' and 'other' (Steiner, 2001, p.46), however, in nineteen-sixty-five Judd argues a new theory for recognizing relationships between 'viewers and forms' (Cortes, 2021). Hierro alludes to this theory through the manipulation of collages of the selected objects and identities of utilitarianism. Hierro's work can be seen as similar to Andy Warhol's, *Brillo Boxes*, with ideas of consumerism, and material goods.

Reflecting on the modern consumerist society could be seen as similar to that of the Dutch trade, where beautiful art sells creating an economic value. They both have significant economic values, where Dutch still-life paintings are turned into products in commercialisation through acts of trade. Meanwhile, products of modern society attract viewers to question their functional needs as to 'why they please us' (Danto, 2003, p.60). This demonstrates that there is a repetition in selling a lifestyle.

Chapter 3- Contemporary society; objects reimagined

Modern contemporary society has entered a world of controversy intertwined between subjective and social factors. It has wholly stripped traditional forms and relations creating characteristics of exploitation and competition. Therefore inanimate objects have been reimagined through new forms and concepts. The controversy of inanimate objects is extracted from modern capitalism that is embedded through the transcendence of tension between society and the individual. An era that reengages with the world beyond itself, amplified by the luxury economy, and celebrates ugliness. However, many curations are remarkably predictable, in an environmentally conscious era full of consumer commodities.

Jeff Koons; an artist, and a capitalist, is identified as the 'Ronald Reagan of sculpture' (Perl, 2020). Although Koons is not a political activist, his work was heavily related to contradicting Reaganism as a marketing strategy. Perl (2020) argues that Koons' strategic work is a 'sly complicity.' However, Koons himself argues that he 'tries to educate people about materialism', extending the visualisation of real luxury and alluding that it is 'intoxicating visually' (Brockes, 2015). Under the American cultural conditions, many artists began to obsess over the market for tax-free and power subversing the idea of visual pleasure (Hickey, 1993, pg.23). Koons' work represents commodity culture, guilty pleasures, and advertising, and one of his most popular series of works focuses on the theme of banality. For Koons, he saw beauty as being 'less privileged if it is going to capture us' (Beech, 2009, p.18). Although, this is ironic considering his polychromatic sculptures strive for an idea of perfection through the constructed materials using wood, porcelain, and mirror. Critics referred

to Koons' work as 'Kitsch' that has a function merely to 'flatter the masses' through demagoguery (Perl, 2020). Whereas Koons argued against this and preferred the term 'banal', also stating that his works appear to have a lot of 'light and shade' (Brockes, 2015). However, Koons' statement of 'light and shade' could be seen as relatable to 'the life of phantasy and the life of the world' that is governed by the economy (Cousins, 1994, p.150). The correlation between these two statements suggests that objects become desirable to benefit economic satisfaction through representation. This is noticeable by the external shiny features of Koons' sculptures; a manifestation of the American Dream. Therefore, these 'masses' were buying into a consumerist system where there is an aristocratization of objects.

Koons' work reminds me of *Through the Looking Glass*, a sequel to *Alice in Wonderland* (Wood, 1994, p.183). They both push boundaries between the conscious; unconscious capitalist society and challenge reality and idealism reinforcing the reimagined. However, society is bound by the duality of illusion that reinforces the idea of 'light and shade' and the distinction between fantasy and reality. Life is a shiny surface acting as a facade to the true problems of the internal world.

In light of Koons' work, the artist recreates a memory and connection to childhood in his *Balloon Dog*, series (1994-2000). He creates a fun play on everyday objects where society can reimagine these moments of childhood.



Fig.3. *Balloon Dog (Blue)*

Koons claims that 'we are all balloons ourselves' in response to anthropology and the quality of life creating dynamic energy (Mattei, 2021). Arguably, although it may appear as a fun replica of a typical balloon dog, there is a 'darkening circumstance' behind this reality, referring to the fantasy and fetishism of sexual objects established by the external features and materials Koons has used (Wood, 1994, p183). From a child's perspective, one is in awe of a large scale-sized balloon dog, whereas, an adult is intellectual enough to visualise the provocative iconography. However, it is concerning that modern society is normalising the visualisation of children's objects being sexualised.

Another contemporary angle on inanimate objects depicted and reimagined in still-life would be to explore an artist of the pop movement; Peter Blake. Blake deconstructs and reconstructs images through the use of collage, assembling them into a new arrangement that combines elements of the ordinary and the everyday. His work captures a positive outlook on the hopeful spirit of the sixties. Forming a new culture that shaped Britain in the nineteen-sixties, was a blend of modernity and nostalgia with Blake's 'idiosyncratic tastes' of fairgrounds, collections of badges, comics, and toy shops (Jones, 2022). Blake has achieved notions of the consumer culture highlighting subtle political factors and has done so respectfully. His latest works respond positively to the new smart meters being installed in the homes in the United Kingdom, introducing a new generation and helping reduce consumption. The Guardian, (2016), claimed that it is amazing to see 'one of our greatest living artists' has responded to smart meters that present a 'national significance.' The repetition of the smart meters being printed is symbolic of the people that have installed the meters around the nation. Therefore, Blake has reinforced the reimagined through the representation of a national everyday object. Blake argues that all a country

needs is its culture and that the rest is all 'infrastructure' (The Guardian, 2017). This highlights the positive and peaceful insights of the artist providing unbiased works in reimagining popular culture. The theme of nostalgia and a trip down memory lane is apparent in Blake's work. As opposed to Jeff Koons' work which caused an artistic discourse on society and has sexual iconography through children's entertainment. However, to address my concerns about inanimate objects being reimagined through Koons' sexual iconography, there has also been an uproar in Balenciaga's most recent campaign creating a culture shock within contemporary society. Balenciaga's new campaign advertised young children featured with teddy bears. An inanimate object that refers to everyday life in childhood, and normally has the typical semiology of being cute and cuddly, creating a comforting environment for children. However, there is no class of dignity with the new trend of Trash Culture. Bad tastes and vulgarity achieve a rich aesthetic and construct new identities. Trash Culture has concerns about environmental factors and global capitalism meanwhile, introducing a new material culture. Alternatively, Balenciaga has discarded these featuring children modelling with teddy bears dressed in bondage. Balenciaga believed these to be simply just photos in a 'business office environment' (Norwin, 2022). These images were very disturbing, and Balenciaga has recently received a lot of hate in society from people wanting them to be cancelled. There have been multiple people that have previously bought from Balenciaga that are now ripping up clothes, throwing the branded clothes away, or even sealing the name as a response to no longer supporting the popular brand due to child exploitation. However, Balenciaga argues that they want to 'contribute to the end of child exploitation' (Norwin, 2022). This argument shows that they have reimagined this negatively, in a very corrupt and twisted way that has haunted many families.

Conclusion

To summarise my findings, it is evident that we live in an economically and politically driven world in today's society that is powered by the ugly and disinterested tastes. These tastes and values are far different from the conventional, and it is concerning that society is accepting the way we see the world. Artists use their artwork to make a statement about the problems happening in the world, however, sometimes it is not well executed just like Balenciaga's recent campaign that I discussed in the third chapter or Jeff Koons' work that conveys sexual iconography in his sculptures. Although Balenciaga has apologised for its campaign, it is questionable what their intent was and that lies within the truth hidden behind the mass market. Therefore, these artists are reimagining inanimate objects negatively. In response to this, our society has become way off-target in preferring to see the vulgarity and bad tastes in order to create a kind of culture shock, and instead neglecting the beauty. It is evident that the reimagined has gone too far. However, artist like Hierro have reimagined still-life positively and adapted it to today's society to create a sense of familiarity. Although these are by manipulating images and forms into new concepts. I am not against new forms or concepts, however I believe it could bring some kind of nostalgia back, a glimpse of hope if we were to see more paintings of still-life reimagined.

Objects are no longer valued as beautiful, or skillfully painted and executed as depicted in Dutch still-life paintings of the seventeenth century. Objects are now complicit with political power that cultivates a repressed value. These new aesthetic

forms require shock and disorder through subjective and ideological structures to create a new modernism of the reimagined. It has become so mainstream in ghettoising and mystifying objects that discloses 'a moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization' (Hickey, 1993, p.30). Society has the freedom to make judgments without fear of the unseen repercussions.

We have lost the beauty of objects in paintings, which comes with privileges, ideologies, reputation, and territories. These paintings need to be reproduced and reimagined along with traditional codes of virtue. Why is society demanding disinterested and bad taste when the world is dark enough? With the recent global pandemic, the war between Ukraine and Russia, the monarchy, and the rise of energy bills causing poverty; again, why are we still demanding bad taste in Contemporary Art?

The world needs to see some beauty in Contemporary Society by reimagining objects through the use of painting, rather than continuously seeking high value in deconstructed and reconstructed physical forms and structures. By connecting and appreciating everyday ordinary objects, inanimate objects can be reimagined positively. Therefore, in order to reimagine inanimate objects, we need to reimagine beauty. In beauty, we appreciate; with aesthetics, we have bad taste. However, perhaps the modern avoidance of reimagining the beauty of objects has a reflection on the deepest fears of a society. We have become excessively aware of what is ugly, that we can only see the reimagined as a threat. If only the world could believe in Danto's argument 'to transfigure the common place' in creating a sense of re-emergence and being able to transform Contemporary Art (Higgins, 1996, pg.35).

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