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Pop Art and the Society it was Made in

During the mid 1950s, a new trend in art exploded onto the scene. This particular style, coming to represent material interests in the modern man, came to be known as *Pop Art*. As time went on, this style spread to the US and peaked in the 60s. This essay seeks to explore the essence of pop art and how it embodied the “abandonment of the uplifting role of culture in favour of base and selfish pleasures” (David Crowley 2015). This shall be explored using several theorists and artists. A semiotic analysis of some works shall also be present.



Roy Lichtenstein (1965), *Little Big Painting*.

Pop art amalgamated such a large portion of life for people of the 50s and 60s. Pop Art embodied the changing face during a post-war world. As Gerald Laing (1993) stated, “there was a general feeling of optimism fueled by our emergence from the post-war period”. This is an important context to establish the attitude of the people around the time when Pop Art was coming into its own. As Alan, R. Solomon (1963) describes, “stimulating extremes of unabashed

delight or renewed anguish". This informs us that pop art was explicitly visualizing the newly found superficial interests within the modern man which then manifested in the discarding of traditional values within both art and politics.

This idea is further cemented by Mary Whitehouse (Hove, 1977) who described that the western world had descended into a world of sex before marriage, abuse of authority, moral values, and religion. This helps us further grasp the general attitude that the common man harbored towards tradition. Life was no longer sacred and outlined by non-negotiable rules, instead favouring the blind pursuit of shallow pleasures and ideals. Another motivation to swiftly ignore prior traditions may also be due to arguably oppressive religious paragons which may have encouraged younger persons of the time to seek freedom of their religious upbringing and ironically seek salvation of the ever pretentious and all-knowing clutch of God. As Nicholas Cullinan (2009) describes, "to refuse to adhere to traditional and constricting notions of decorum and conservative ideas of taste", this may have pushed artists to utilize the newly found pushback of traditional values in order to revolutionize art as a medium and begin exploration of a facile attitude towards past "art", whatever that is perceived to be. Despite this new trend in art itself, art critics were finding it particularly insulting to the medium of art. Lawrence Alloway (1958) details; "Clement Greenberg, an art critic and a good one, but fatally prejudiced when he leaves modern fine art". This establishes the ongoing dynamic between critics and artists at the time. The artists were beginning to reject the classical art that had come to be expected of them, meanwhile the critics were refusing to adapt to the newly blossoming art scene. A final example of this new art scene would be perfectly summarized by Jeff Koons (1986) "We were the great manipulators, and we have given up these intrinsic powers of art, its effectiveness". This is the product of a growing unrest within society that only art could represent at the time.

However, what the art symbolized isn't the only important thing to discuss. The history of the practice is also integral to its development. We can trace its roots in many sub genres within art itself, initially being spotted within Dada and eventually inspired newly forming styles such as post-modernism and conceptual art. However, it is not simple to find the roots of the practice. As Dan Cameron (1991) eloquently describes, "it is not easy to generalize about the relationship between Pop and Conceptual Art". This encourages further investigation into pop art as an art form. Alan, R. Solomon (1963) states "the new figurative art, or as it is called, "*New Realism*," "*Pop Art*," "*Neo Dada*," etc.". which implies that the Practice of *Pop Art* may have some of its roots in Dadaism as well as the before-mentioned post-minimalism and conceptual art.

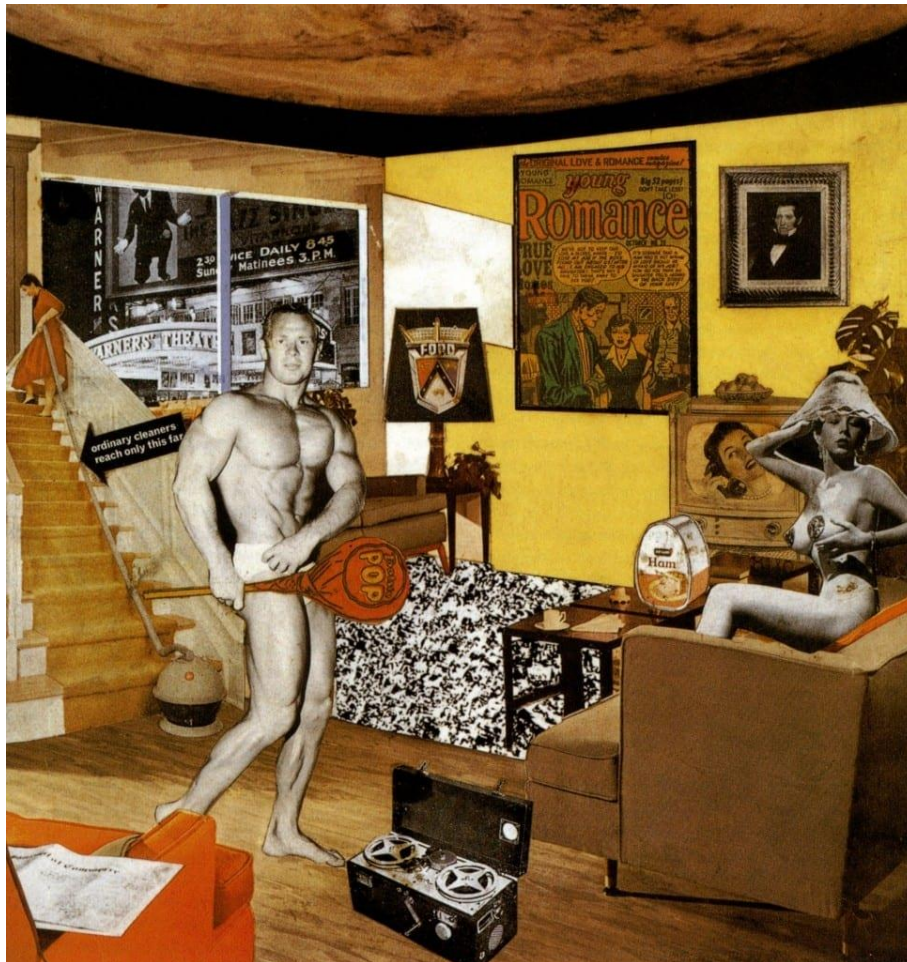
Dada historically came to the mainstream art world as a result of World War 1's outbreak, Albert Gleizes (1881-1953) speaks upon Dadaism's role in saying "pre-war Cubism was affected

by the post-war 'call to order'. [...] Dada a manifestation of the decay of bourgeois society.” This is vital context for understanding the society in which Dada as an art form was popularized. It was a response to the breakout of war in the mid 1910s and a result of the death of the middle class, at least, how it was perceived to decay at the time. This also draws similarities to Pop Art, being the response of a post-war world, it embodies the newly found hope in people's hearts. It may have also symbolized the birth of the 'American dream' to an extent as it further pushes the idea of material interests and superficial ideologies. This has been seen within Pop Art, as already established. The label '*Neo-Dada*' has persisted through history as it has continuously been used in reference to Pop art as an art form, however, Barabara Rose (1963) argues that “Dada, the art of the politically and socially engaged. Apparently has little in common with the cool detached art it is supposed to have spawned.” and further argues that “it is certainly debatable whether the Dadaists succeeded in creating anti-art, they at least pretended to want to”. This implies that Pop Art may indeed have not originated in Dadaism, at least, in the way they intended. Even so, it remains that Pop Art shares many aesthetic similarities with the Dadaism of the early 20th century.



Derek Boshier (1961) *Man Playing Snooker and Thinking of Other Things*.

It should also be noted that all of that which has been discussed has certainly been seen within the art itself. As an example, we look toward Richard Hamilton who produced a work I feel best visualizes the culmination of that which has been highlighted.



Richard Hamilton (1956), *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*

As seen above, the meaning of Hamilton's work is very broad and could be taken in a range of directions. Be it social commentary, an expression of vanity or otherwise. One interpretation, however, is that this is the most authentic visual representation of the growing need for material objects in the eyes of the common man. Life was no longer about being a 'gentleman' or holding traditional values as rules. Rather, this is the frustration of one's desires to embrace the shallowness of society, to stop basking in the complexities of life and engage in meaningless activities that only serve self-gratification, which is represented through the cut-outs of

attractive models and popular new technology, being a sign of the new culture that was emerging around sex, consumerism, and the outlook on life.

This is something that's still very relevant today, as those in power refuse to address issues that is only feasibly possible to solve by themselves, yet we still see the common rhetoric that all life's problems can be solved through selfish acts of sex and self-care. To emphasize this point, Paul Moorhouse (2007) describes, "the imagery of Pop evinced a fascination with the human aspects of these cultural changes. No less than mass-produced objects, individuals achieved instant visibility". This also allowed the common man to also achieve a sense of fame for flaunting what material objects they possessed. This continues to be a pattern within celebrities and sponsors, all promoting products that do nothing but serve our intriguing vanity. In fact, Paul Moorhouse (2007) also comments, "models such as Twiggy would achieve celebrity, most – particularly those advertising consumer goods – were condemned to remain nameless stereotypes". As Critics looked upon the work with vitriol, perhaps they recognized the equation of expressing one's freedom with the growing consumerism and materialism within the heart of man. In Hamilton's work, traces of Dada can also be seen within. This again echoes the history of its roots within the post-war art world, and it may also again reflect the meaning of Dada, being the deterioration of bourgeois society. Another theme we can still see today within Pride and BLM movements in today's age is the growing frustration of youth and the desire to simply enjoy life's pleasures.

In conclusion, the culmination of that which has been discussed today has put the topic to a satisfying conclusion. Pop art initially had its roots in the mid 1910s with Dadaism and the growing unrest as a reaction to the outbreak of war. Dadaists also intended to represent the death of bourgeois society and attempted to create anti-art to express the ideas of a dying age. Then during the 1950s-1960s, the post-war optimism resulted in the call for a new era, one where traditional values were disregarded and replaced with a newfound interest in selfish, shallow and vane desires to see material interests, attractive women and a lack of complexity in day-to-day life. Nowadays, Pop Art is the root of several new art styles such as post-modernism and Conceptual art. The age of Pop Art may be over, but its influence will be seen within art for decades to come.

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