



Pop life  
Everybody can't be on top  
But life – it ain't real funky  
Unless it's got that pop!

The curators have missed a trick by not taking this as their manifesto. The space they had to fill overflows like a Primark warehouse. It is a one-stop sampling of the greatest hits of the movement: a Now That's What I Call Art compilation – Warhol, Koons and Haring and the various cover versions that have followed. Pop art is nothing if not familiar, and walking through the rooms is like being force-fed old jokes on a loop; you are weary of the punchlines long before you arrive at them. A video by Andrea Davies, in which she fellates and has enthusiastic sex with a “collector” who paid her \$20,000 for that particular pop, was being viewed with perfect diffidence even by teenagers who passed by it: more dull porn.

Despite the boredom, or perhaps because of it, “Pop Life” is in some respects timely. If anyone can help us to understand the current economic catastrophe it is Andy Warhol, the pre-eminent philosopher of consumerism, who was there at the outset. That he would probably have taken deadpan pleasure from its threatened demise is beside the point. No one better demonstrated the forces which decide that certain individuals within a market economy – celebrities, artists, bankers – can do no wrong. Warhol knew that after a certain point he and many of his subjects would be too big to fail. The show is, in that respect, a kind of “I told you so”; whisper it, but behind these glittering surfaces, there was never much going on other than money and media.

Warhol was the first to understand exactly how to manipulate those forces to the artist's benefit and the only one to emerge with nearly all his cleverness intact. “Good business is the best kind of art,” he liked to say, the scam of creating value becoming the masterpiece itself. This con trick, always executed in full view, required a context, and Warhol manipulated that, too. He knew that end-of-millennium America, shaped by the Reaganite Hollywood economics of which he was a cheerleader, was always going to create a glut of capital for the very few. He knew also that owners of capital have always lacked one thing – the certainty that their wealth meant something beyond the luck or avarice of having acquired it.

That is where artists came in. The Medicis needed the masterpieces of Renaissance Florence to assure themselves of the boundlessness of their judgement and taste. The investors in pop art – without whom nothing in “Pop Life” might have seemed remotely as interesting – bought it for a comparable, if shallower, reason: to demonstrate that the market they helped to control could make any image priceless if enough belief was attached to it; to show

CRITIC AT LARGE

## End of the irony age

Once shocking, much of the work in Tate's latest survey of pop art now seems tired. It shows how inured we've become to big-bucks banality. By *Tim Adams*

The most prized commodity of late western capitalism has been empty irony. If, back in 1970, you could have bought futures in it, you would be a master of the universe today. How else to understand Lord Griffiths's demand last month that we “tolerate inequality as a way to achieve greater prosperity for all”, or the stubborn growth of the market for Damien Hirst's spot paintings, or even Peter André?

The “Pop Life” show at Tate Modern, which has been on show to glazed-eyed consumers for a month now, was apparently originally to

have been called “Sold Out”, until one of its artists – Hirst is the likely candidate – intervened to demand a more upbeat banner for what has been the financially dominant aesthetic of the past 30 years. The replacement moniker, appropriately enough, was recycled from a Prince lyric, itself purple with ironies:

Pop life  
Everybody needs a thrill  
Pop life  
We all got a space 2 fill



**Flog a dead horse: Maurizio Cattelan's *Untitled* (left) seems a fitting symbol of a worn-out genre, as does an ad for Jeff Koons's *Banality* series (facing page)**



that value is not a product of truth or beauty, but simply a trick of investment capital. On 23 October's *Have I Got News For You*, when Ian Hislop was railing against bankers and their bonuses, even the benighted craftsman Grayson Perry was moved to interrupt to argue in mitigation that "they do buy a lot of art".

In his landmark essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin argued that the loss of originality in the age of mass media – the possibility of Mona Lisa postcards – would rob great work of its "aura", that intrinsic quality which gave it the power to communicate the exact time and space of its creation, the authentic voice of the dead. Warhol and the artists who followed him found one answer to that argument by exploiting the instantaneous aura of media attention – the whole world looking – and bottling it as art.

Certain images, charged with the collective gaze, could become instant obituaries of a lost moment and acquire power by being endlessly reproduced. Warhol chanced upon this fact. In the week he began experimenting with silk screens, at the start of August 1962, he lacked a subject; he was using Warren Beatty but the image did not have the edge he wanted. Then he opened the paper to read that Marilyn Monroe

had died of an overdose and within days he had concocted pop art's headline mix of throw-away sex and death.

As you walk around this exhibition, one of the striking things about it is that the highlights – Jeff Koons's silver blow-up bunny, Hirst's golden-hoofed calf in a vitrine (false idol for our times) – already feel very much like period pieces, consigned to the art-history archive as they were always intended to be. You begin to see what will survive and what won't. Good investments: Warhol's self-portraits, particularly those in which his wig hair stands on end as if in shock at its own electric resonance; Takashi Murakami's manga world. Bad investments: Tracey Emin's crappy T-shirts; Cosey Fanni Tutti's 1970s centrefolds; Gavin Turk's Sid Vicious wax mannequin, called *Pop*.

You are also struck by the sense that this is the last pop-art show anyone will need for a good long while. Were these images ever fresh? Looking at them now, en masse, leaves you with the same feeling as a night wasted channel-surfing TV, or a half-hour following a thread of comments attached to a piece of celebrity gossip on a newspaper website: they drain you of attention and make you gag for fresh air. That sensation, of there being nothing new under the sun,

may reflect the times, but it is not exactly in short supply. To note that Richard Prince's reproduction of *Playboy's* photograph of the ten-year-old Brooke Shields caused a stir and was replaced is to add to its predictability, which is part of its tired point. It's not hard to shock with child pornography, nor should it be. Does anyone still need Prince, and his "exploration of authenticity", to make that understood?

At a time when the culture is in thrall to the price of everything; when we dissect every nuance of the vacant utterances of hundred-grand-a-week footballers because money must make them meaningful; when we are bombarded daily with news of ludicrous billions that should, but don't seem to, affect our lives, this exhibition at the very least asks urgent questions about where worth lies.

William Blake, the ultimate anti-pop artist, used to argue, with an eye to his flashy enemy Joshua Reynolds, that "where any view of money exists art cannot be carried on". That argument may have long been lost, but it shouldn't go away. One of the ultimate ironies of pop art is that pop culture will always outdo it for bleak wit. Warhol, who by the end of his career had long taken to stamping his signature on silk screens that he'd had no part in creating, would have no doubt approved of Katie Price/Jordan putting her name to bestselling books that she would possibly never even read.

The most pointed critique of the show comes in another gallery entirely. Leaving "Pop Life", I went immediately to see Hirst's woeful paintings of skulls and sharks' jaws in among the Poussins and Rembrandts at the Wallace Collection. Their only shock value lies in their absence of interest. Ten years ago these pictures might have been passed off as a bit of chutzpah, akin to the Chapman brothers taking their art GCSEs. These paintings, however, appear to have been done in earnest, and there is something comical in their lameness. They are like a confessional, an almost touching renunciation of all that has gone before: the high concepts, the sharks and the butterflies, the easy manipulation of the markets and the money-making.

Hirst's great pop-art coup – a gesture that even Warhol might have struggled to pull off – was "Beautiful Inside My Head Forever", the garage sale of mass-produced new work on the day after Lehman Brothers crashed, which netted him £73m. His paintings are a perfect expression of the most indelible concept of his generation, one that might have served as a subtitle to "Pop Life": "The Possibility of the Artist Laughing All the Way to the Bank". ●

"Pop Life: Art in a Material World" is at Tate Modern, London SE1, until 17 January 2010  
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TITLE: End of the irony age  
SOURCE: New Statesman (Engl) 138 N 9 2009

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