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Global Perspectives in Contemporary Art Fall 2018

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2v2885ms>

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Publication Date

2019-01-25

Global Perspectives in Contemporary Art

Funk's Not Dying, Our System Is: How Art Reflects The Inequity of Consumerist Culture Reniel Del Rosario

December 27, 2018
2384 words

The consumer market today is deeply intertwined with life; everyone uses (or desires) the constantly new and mass-produced objects in their daily lives whether it is what they eat, what they wear, or what they see. Even more intertwined in the discrepancy between socioeconomic classes is the desire for more and better products within the lower socioeconomic classes. As Teddy Cruz, a urban-architect with a focus on rethinking spaces for marginalized communities, simply stated, “[T]he income gap between the very wealthy and all other Americans reached record levels¹. In both 1928 and 2008 the top one percent average an income approximately 1,000 times higher than America’s bottom 90 percent.” This large gap feeds the fire of consumer hunger for goods often recursive to their lives or unreachable in their situations, and from the years given, it has for a while. In this essay, I will explore the ways that artists critique the consumer market and the capitalism that encapsulates it through visibly ugly, raw, and crude portrayals within their art. Some artists attack the issue by infiltrating inversely, often going for a more polished, refined look only for it to critique the very same thing. However, these approaches often become lost (or more so absorbed) by the same entity or institution it is critiquing.



Left: Robert Arneson, *The Pisser*, 1963. Courtesy of Laguna Art Museum.
Right: Joan Brown. *Fur Rat*, 1962. Courtesy of California Digital Library.

A little backstory is definitely needed. The middle of the twentieth century brought with it revolutions that changed the way people could relate to the objects they buy. Objects were now commonly mass-produced and advertised for consumption in homes, lifestyles, and diets everywhere in America. The love for consumer goods was

aligned with their factory finish and strength in numbers—plenty of them, all perfectly uniform and ready for consumers. The rampant and constant access to these items led to a plethora of advertising, branding, and *brainwashing* that some artists finally had enough of; their reaction were works that were purposefully sloppy, unrefined, “ugly,” and the opposite of the items many people were used to seeing. This was the Bay Area Funk movement.

The movement began as people reacting to the current culture of the late 1900s that included reflected tensions from the Vietnam War and popularization of pop art and culture. From music to painting to sculpture and more, funk was everywhere in the arts. In terms of fine arts,

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sculptures were made in response to the mass-produced consumer market and the beloved finished look (nice and shiny, to put it short) that paralleled the former. Consumers could easily buy a toilet or a rendered sculptural display piece, but to display them in a crude, raw form turned the works ugly in comparison to the refined objects they could have been. This was the power behind works such as *The Pisser* (1963) by Robert Arneson or *Fur Rat* (1962) by Joan Brown. They both represented unappealing sculptures whose market counterparts (a porcelain toilet and a finely crafted sculpture) did not contain the cracks, drips, nails, and errors the funk artists' pieces contained. They were rebellious acts towards the kitschy, marketable objects easily absorbed by the public and best of all it was obvious and did not seek to replace their market counterparts as true alternatives. The approach to create purposefully incomparable and crude art takes marketable objects and literally shows their ugly side. The irony in depicting a coveted object as now hideous one (in comparison to its appealing, store-ready version) is a move that challenges the love of the luxury and the pleasure in goods.



Above: Didi Rojas. Untitled (Margiela, Balenciaga, HBA, Gucci), 2017. Courtest of Gestalten.

When we are talking about the pleasure in goods, shopping is often a pleasure loved by consumers. What's better than getting the next best thing or expanding your wardrobe even more? If it is not obtainable, the goods do not stop—they constantly prod at you through advertisements in billboards, papers, and now social media. Who would have thought Gucci advertisements are unavoidable now as they plunge into “free” electronic platforms through unskippable ads in attempts to

make people hop onto affluent trends. Didi Rojas is a Brooklyn artist who challenges fashion covetation by transforming high fashion, luxury sneakers into ceramic versions with obvious differences. Though her time at the Pratt Institute was originally for Communications Design, Rojas moved into ceramics in 2016 by creating ceramic footwear and she still does to this day. The footwear is often modeled after high-end brands whose products have notoriety in the fashion and social media world. The bright color palette gets knocked down into a murky color and the satin-sheen of the shoe's lavish leather becomes matted out and lumpy due to the imperfections and impressions Rojas leaves in the clay. The shoes are nothing close to high fashion alternative's finished look. Rojas's shoes mock the expensive, high-end, out-of-reach luxury fashion through a crude interpretation that literally shows the hideousness of costly couture.

Walking away from the runways, consumers are also put into the spot of well-bred objects for their home. Walk into any department store and there will be objects galore—just seemingly neverending supplies of households goods and products. While many might be taken for granted,

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Above: Woody Othello. *Homo Mundus Minor*, 2016. Courtesy of T293 Gallery.

the thought of the accessibility of these items (and specifically what items for whom) is an important area to dissect. Woody Othello challenges the everyday by exaggerating the ideas of who can possess what. Originally from Florida, Othello has worked in the San Francisco Bay Area since 2016, providing him an array of shows including the recent Yerba Buena Center for the Arts triennial *Bay Area Now 8*. His sculptures seem as if they're melting, breaking, and warping—box fans, remotes, telephones, chairs, fountains, and

combs. The objects they are based off of bring up thoughts on who uses them even in their current state. Who still has to use the box fan seemingly melting from already harsh heat? Who cannot replace the broken comb that is obviously still in use because of all the hair deep in the teeth? Who cannot keep up in a technological era and be left to use corded telephones? By creating sculptures that are relatable to archaic consumer products ready to be replaced by the new front of goods, Othello makes us acknowledge that the latter is not reachable by everyone.

When it comes to making ugly work, sometimes the literal product being depicted is too on the nose. Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn goes the full mile by using visibly unsettling materials—literal garbage, on-the-fly marker on cardboard, and other materials that make his work seem like rubbish rather than art. Looking at Hirschhorn's *Too Too-Much Much*, we can see piles and piles of soda cans, shopping carts, cooking foil, and plastic—all remnants of human consumption and



Above: Thomas Hirschhorn. *Too Too-Much Much*, 2010. Courtesy of Artsy.

objects we know too well. Hirschhorn leaves nothing pretty for the viewer to admire; there is nothing gorgeous about the tragedies humans (seemingly nonstop) inflict onto our environment. By going for a portrayal of consumer objects or our aftermath as hideous landscapes of filth, the

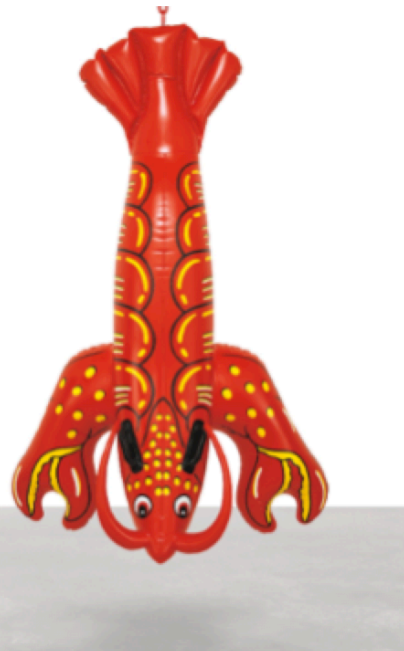
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objects are no longer really the things they are replicated after. They represent the terrible residue left them and the future they can cause.

The aim of the earlier artists have been to expose (to some degree) the inequality that consumer objects possess. There is an ironic strength that comes with portraying the usually immaculate as completely imperfect that does not transition the best vice-versa. As Hito Steyerl says in her publication “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy,” art is a site of condensation of the contradictions of capital and of extremely entertaining and sometimes devastating misunderstandings between the global and the local.² The misunderstanding cannot be bigger than the ironic absorption (or complicity) of critiquing the extravagant with the extravagant. The approach to go the other direction and to create refined works that are perfected, immaculate, and neat negate the conversation to some degree. Take, for example, how Virgil Abloh, artist and creative director of Louis Vuitton, roots his style in the brand around its cult following. In his debut in Louis Vuitton’s Spring/Summer 2019 runway show, he showcased high fashion using cheap plastic materials and silhouettes based off of apparel marketed for lower-income communities. Abloh understands that no matter what, the beauty in the branding will be seen and loved—whether the material is factory plastic or Italian leather or if the designs are in trend or not. He is no stranger to praise; his collaborations with Nike involving deconstructions of iconic models and the addition of arial font words and zipties have consistently sold out and been resold for soaring resale prices. Abloh’s approach says a lot about consumer culture; however, its artistic statement becomes shoved underneath the praise of Louis Vuitton and its following in the fashion industry. Through the brand, the art has been negated and it’s being swallowed up by consumers regardless.



Left: Virgil Abloh. *Louis Vuitton SS19 Runway*, 2018. Courtesy of Fashionista.
Right: Jeff Koons. *Lobster*, 2003. Courtesy of Sotheby’s.



Another artist that follows suit in succumbing to their own critique is Jeff Koons—the artist well known for his kitsch. While many know Koons because of the infamous balloon dogs, we will be looking more specifically at Koons’s *Lobster* sculpture, a replication of an inflatable pool toy made of aluminum. Based off a Sunco brand pool toy, its refined finish and its new more alluring

material makes it the same appealing object it was before, catapulting it back into the market as a

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new, shiny toy (just for investors and institutions and not kids). These refined products are not seen as crude, but as whimsical, ready to sell packaged commodities that markets recursively sell to consumers. They are coveted for their beauty in a market that already covets the perfected, and thus they do little for advancing the discussion of perfected mass-produced as the ugly residual of an always-consuming society. There is even more tragedy in the matter as the original product Koons's sculpture was based off of had become a collector's piece with skyrocketing prices. Koons's critique on consumerism in the end had turned accessible items inaccessible.

These approaches that end up becoming absorbed into their own critique of luxury do very little for progress in terms of bringing awareness to the issue of capitalism and its firm grip on our lives. It might not be Koons's fault that his aluminum sculptures commenting on kitsch and commodification ended up as commodities in gift shops and it might not be Abloh's fault that the public bought the newest Louis Vuitton runway pieces without caring, but the complicity of it says something much stronger. Ben Davis, an art critic known for his written works about art and art economics, states in his work "Commerce and Consciousness," "[t]he rise of the values of aesthetic 'complicity,' then, represents a kind of simmering identity crisis, not some happy new equilibrium with popular culture... It heralds, finally, the sharpening of a dilemma for contemporary art—and is likely to promote angst, not to put an end to it."³ He alleges that complicity in contemporary art aesthetics promote the problem even more, rather than aiding the solution. By becoming absorbed into consumer culture, Koons and Abloh are promoting it, not denouncing as their original intentions might have been. Nato Thompson says, "For without a self-organized sense of how to make sure we are operating in equitable fashion, we can easily slide into producing the problems we are supposedly trying to solve."⁴ Taking into consideration the possible pitfalls in the way artists push their work can help prevent this spiraling back into the pit of complicity. The things we buy and the things we used are immortalized within crude artwork as parodies of things we have absorbed into culture. These works can portray us, the consumers, and our habits but it can, as WochenKlausur, a Vienna-based art collective with the goal of benefitting the less fortunate, states, "represent its commissioners and producers... it can affect snobby allures and satiate the bourgeois hunger for knowledge and possession. [It] can fatten up the leisure time of the bored masses; it can serve as an object of financial speculation."⁵ These raw, unfinished pieces display not only our wants, but the warped, ugly, lumpy cyclical system of desire (through capitalism's allowance of massive scale consumerism) we live in.

At the end of everything, the act of challenging the objects we want and the neatness we seek is a larger battle of changing desires in communities. Consumer culture leaves people wanting more or wanting the next thing. Communities are bombarded with images of things they do not have and are left with imagery of what they are supposed to have or what their goals should be—it's manipulative brainwashing for the most at risk. This is why it's problematic when we see artists such as Abloh ripping off the designs of shoes marketed towards lower-income communities and then proceeding to sell them at designer prices. This is why it's problematic for Koons to create art that talks about the commonality of kitsch and finish fetish being consumed so effortlessly into institutions (and back into commercialism) and to allow it to be consumed piece after piece of easily absorbed art. The end is often fetishizations of the objects accessible by lower socioeconomic classes (Abloh's copy of Avia footwear or Koons's take of Sunco pool toys), resulting in price gouging of these once-reachable objects. This is why Rojas's, Othello's, and Hirschhorn's works are so important because of their refusal to be the picture perfect artwork that is ready to be marketed as an immaculate product. By rejecting the norm of the mass-produced

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and the luxurious, they create work that asks for contemplation in relation to that norm—Why is this shoe so expensive? Why is a new fan so out of reach? Why is the future so bleak? Why is this capitalist and consumerist system still so dominant?

The approach of creating purposefully crude or raw work creates a stronger sense of counterculture against the hegemony of always wanting the newer, trendier, and/or readily-available thing (*there's always something you want, you just don't know it*). The replication or recreation of refined works to critique the same idea only seemingly enforces the idea of loving the fanciful and the marketable beauty that consumer objects already embody. By going the opposite route and attacking beauty with hideousness, the art piece made is not left with aesthetic pleasure but wonkiness and awryness that avoids desire and asks for comparison.

¹ Cruz, Teddy. "Democratizing Urbanization and the Search for a New Civic Imagination."

Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art 1991 – 2011. Creative Time Books: 2011; pgs 57 - 63.

² Steyerl, Hito. "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy," *e-flux*, December 2010.

³ Davis, Ben. "Commerce and Consciousness." *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*. Haymarket Books: 2013; pgs 127- 137

⁴ Thompson, Nato. "Seeing Power." *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Melville House* Publishing: 2014; pgs. 107 – 126.

⁵ WochenKlausur, "From the Object to the Concrete Intervention." www.wochenklausur.at, 2005.