

American Exports: Pop Art and Democracy?

"I am for an art that takes its forms from the lines of life itself,
that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips and
is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself."
(Claes Oldenburg, 1961)

At first sight this statement by Claes Oldenburg might not sound unusual to contemporary ears. But about a generation ago, it definitely did. This comment one could argue reflected the basic thoughts and 'philosophy' of a completely new form of art which emerged in the 1960s in America and came to be called 'Pop Art'. Just as the statement above implies, the overall idea behind Pop Art was based on a thorough affirmation of life itself, which, one can argue, was a characteristic feature of that period. The 1960s were an era of cultural awakening, economic boom and national self-confidence in America. Strengthened by the triumph over nazism and fascism, the US adopted the role of the white knight of democracy and took over the leading position not only in politics and economy but also increasingly in cultural terms. This cultural hegemony however was conceived of as a threat by parts of the European cultural elite and therefore severely criticized. (Kroes, 1996, pp. 13-15) Americans, however, responded - and do so even today - to this criticism by underpinning the importance of democracy and its extraordinary role in American society. They depicted their culture as democratic instead of exclusive and elitist as European culture looked like from an American perspective. (Kroes, 1996, p. 25) This democratic culture, one could claim, is apparent not only in music or media, but is also very much in evidence in the fine arts.

The aim of this paper is to show that Pop Art was one cultural expression of this American "democratic ethos" (Kroes, p. 46). It will further discuss in how far Pop Art as part

of American culture had an influence on Europe and if the fears and criticisms by European intellectuals of being 'Americanised' are justified.

Regarding the former aspect of Pop Art being a 'democratic art', it seems necessary to first single out the basic features that make art democratic and then to analyse the impact of a democratic character on art itself. Just as the political form of democracy is described by Heywood (2002) as 'government of, for and by the people' (p.76), one could describe the cultural dimension of democracy, as aspired by pop art, as 'art of, for and by the people'. Thus, one could claim that in order to fulfill these criteria, Pop Art had to abandon certain features of traditional art and create new ones instead.

First of all, and maybe most important, was the fact that Pop Art no longer required pre-knowledge, a certain standard of education or much thinking. (Krauß, 1995, p.114) The objects and images used by Andy Warhol, Roy Liechtenstein and others were primarily those which occupied a central place in consumer society – which was due to commercial advertisement - and were thus familiar to everyone. Thus, almost from one day to the next, Campbell's soup cans became 'famous', thanks to Warhol who built a pyramid out of them and granted them status as pieces of art, one could claim, by the following statement: "An artist is someone who produces things which no-one needs, but which he considers worthy of giving to the people for whatever reason."¹ (Ruhrberg et.al., 2000, p.323) These things included not only soup cans, but also portraits of Hollywood stars like Marilyn Monroe or Elvis Presley or, in the case of Liechtenstein, comic strips, which he took out of their context as part of a story and painted them through a raster in overdimensional size, thereby "monumentalising" them and bringing their simplicity and banality to the fore.(Krauß, 1995, p.115) The barriers between art and everyday life had thus been removed. As Warhol, the great figure of Pop Art, put it: "Everything is beautiful. And Pop is everything." (1981) And,

one could claim, as everyday life and its banalities were something that everyone was able to identify with, art did indeed gain a democratic character in so far as no-one who was not an 'insider' or educated in art was excluded from understanding and enjoying it, as had been the case in previous times.² But not only in such an 'intellectual' way did art become democratic. It was also affordable, in monetary terms. The new production techniques such as the "Siebdruck"³ (i.e. silk-screen printing), used especially by Andy Warhol, made it possible to produce so-called "multiples" (Krausse, 1995, p.115) i.e. a great number of one and the same work, resembling industrial mass production of ordinary consumption goods. Thus, the prices for such prints remained rather low compared to traditional works of art, as the cost of 'production' was lower, too. (The Fine Art Organisation Inc.: tfaoi.com) Consequently, a piece of art was no longer something unique, which needed a lot of time and effort to be created, a feature which had up to then been vital not only for defining the quality of a piece of art, but also its price. Especially these two 'innovations', the removal of intellectual and monetary barriers, which allowed 'free access' to art, seemed to make Pop art appealing to the masses and not just to a tiny fraction of society. Therefore, as had not been the case with other kinds of art⁴, Pop Art was readily accepted by most of the population. (Ruhrberg et.al., 2000, p.303)

Yet, at this point one might consider the impact which this democratic aspect did have on art and also on culture as such. In this context of new production techniques mentioned above, one cannot deny that a certain standardisation took place along with democratisation of art, an issue that had already been addressed by philosophers like de Toqueville. In several volumes published, he analysed the impact of "egalitarian democracy" on society and culture, claiming that democracy and its central concern with equality ultimately led to a "levelling of differences between individuals", thus rendering individualism - which democracy actually claims to protect - nothing more than "a form of hidebound conformism". The same, he

argued, was also true for “cultural standards” and art. (Kroes,1996, pp.16-17) In this respect, one could claim that his vision of “...surface effects taking the role of ‘profondité’ (depth)” (p.17) was indeed true for Pop Art as not only used the products of mass culture, the way it was created also resembled industrial production of an ordinary consumption good. (Krauß,1995, p.115) Thus, the multiples produced in Andy Warhol’s “Art Factory” (p.115) strongly conveyed the impression of being a kind of ‘art from the assembly line’. Indeed, one could argue that implied in the combination of the terms ‘art’ and ‘factory’ is a kind of tension, which results from the attempt to combine ‘art’ as a traditionally subjective, unique creation process with the concept of ‘factory’ which one may generally consider as embodying anonymous, homogenous mass production. That the concept of ‘art’ as part of culture gets thus a commercial character, which is even more underlined by the fact that Pop Art uncritically incorporated the icons of mass and consumer culture, is consequently not surprising. Besides, this change in conception away from individuality and depth was even intended, as the following comment by Andy Warhol suggests: “I began as a commercial artist and I want to finish as a commercial artist. Doing well in business is the most fascinating facet of art ... and making a good deal is the best art.” (Ruhrberg et. al., 2000, p.323) Thus, he made clear, that PoP Art was not meant to be criticism or protest against mass consumption and consumer society, but seemed, on the contrary, fully integrated in this framework⁵ .(p.322) Needless to say that such an attitude towards art and profit-making clashed with rather traditional notions of art and its function. Especially European intellectuals and artists were alarmed by the spread of American popular culture (p.321), which also included pop music and comics. Just like pictures seen in the media or images taken from songs, the European population

“soaked up a range of images of the America that...Pop Art artists published about America and its life style. The picture about America is refined through (artwork) and Europeans arriving in America for the first time have moments of recognition, of déjà vu. (Europeans) remember the places in America not only as places in our heads but also as fragments of (art) that have been seen before in Europe.”

Those pictures were drummed into the heads of people and thus belonged to their experiences. They did not remain American property, but “became a part of individual life histories”, also those of Europeans. Thus, one can conclude that American “culture has become other people’s property” and mass consumption culture began to take root in Europe. (Kroes, 1996, p.176). Hence, the influence of American culture has been heavily criticized by many European philosophers and intellectuals. Hans Richter, for instance, a German Dada artist, conceived of Pop Art as being “... no art of protest like DADA, but only a documentary of the adaption to today’s world of consumption” (Ruhrberg, 2000, p.322). Comments like this were the rule rather than the exception among the European cultural élite as they felt threatened by the standardized mass culture due to the fact that it replaced “consciousness with conformity”. (Adorno, p.90) Popular culture, according to them, enforced the predominance of a rather passive acceptance of the status quo instead to reinforce the ideal to improve life through active and reflective thinking (pp.88-92). They feared that the great part of the population “wanted to be deceived” (p.89), while further claiming that popular art “lives parasitically from the extra-artistic technique of the material production of goods”(p.88). The art produced by culture industry “is essentially a mixture of streamlining, photographic hardness and precision on the one hand, and individualistic residues, sentimentality and an already rationally disposed and adapted romanticism on the other”(p.88). Thus many intellectuals accused popular culture of conformity preventing people from reflection. Walter Benjamin alludes on this respect and blames popular art for destroying the important uniqueness of art in every sense. The critical view of Walter Benjamin on the modern developments are expressed in his book "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" where he defines the unique existence of a work of art -- its originality and authenticity -- as aura. (Belton, R.: <http://www.jahsonic.com>). He criticizes the swindling

away of this aura of things, the loss of the latter in an age of mass production and mass consumption. Art, as one example, becomes just like any other commodity an easily reproducible and standardized element of life (Lee, M.J., 2000, p.15).

However, the intellectual criticism about Pop Art and popular culture in general omitted important features of culture throughout history. Philosophers demarcating popular culture from high culture seemed to ignore that culture was not only reserved for the elite but was an issue for everyone: During the Shakespearean period, “plays were performed and adapted versions to fit particular occasions, people drew on them for commercial messages... and for parties.” (Kroes, p.46) In that epoch, “Shakespeare belonged to everyone, ..(whereas) the public was critic and director at the same time”(Kroes, p.46). During the course of time this spirit was forgotten as was its importance for the public. Shakespeare mutated to a sacred icon that excluded the influence of the common folk (p.46).

Furthermore it is important to keep in mind that there have always been periods of time where certain national cultures dominated the whole of Europe. Eighteenth century France can serve as an example of such cultural domination. French court culture and language spread all over the continent, but in contrast to American influence today, this was not seen as a threat but was highly welcomed. (p.163)

Therefore, the post modernist Andrew Ross qualifies the severe dangers of mass consumption expressed by Adorno and Benjamin. According to him, foreign cultural influences do not inevitably lead to homogenisation, but may result in cultural plurality as well. Hence, he wants the intellectuals to play the role of cultural missionaries and to do the political leadership but nevertheless, he wants the public to have the chance to take part in cultural life. Ross is of the opinion that kitsch that is elements of low culture, are part of every human being and can therefore not be eliminated ... (p.44). Eventually he blames the

intellectuals of being the shift of society that is not contributing to any social or cultural progress accusing them of clinging to their “ancestral patrimony” (p.62).

It might make sense to reach a compromise taking the different voices about popular culture and its influence on Europe into account. To soften both opinions about Americanisation and the impact of mass culture, one must not forget Kroes’ argument about the way cultures influence others, which he defines as “creolization” (p.163). This term is used by the author in his book “If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen the mall” and suggests a soothing compromise between a curse and blessing of American influence on Europe. Thus, he claims that American culture will never fully wipe out original cultures that have been enshrined in those countries for a long time. The only effect it will have is rather a further mediative mixture of elements of both. Cultures that are subject to foreign influence may integrate certain elements of this foreign culture without fully adopting them. This, so Kroes, should not be seen as a threat but rather be understood as a chance to enrich national culture. Besides, it should be realized as a further individualization of the people and therefore a reinforcement of democratisation (p.177/178).

After having compared these different attitudes towards Americanisation, one might now wonder if the fears of European intellectuals of being overrun by American popular culture are justified. To people who share a rather modernist attitude like Adorno or Benjamin, claiming the superiority of historically rich European culture, such concerns surely seem plausible. To others, like Ross and Kroes, however, it is especially this euro-centric view that displays conformity because ‘anti-Americanisationists’ like Adorno and Benjamin fail to conceive of culture as something dynamic, regarding it instead as something static defined by the past. According to their point of view, influences of American popular culture, including Pop art, do not constitute a real threat to domestic cultures, as these would react to such

influences in a dynamic fashion, namely by integrating these influences and thereby enriching their own culture.

Yet, at this point, one cannot deny that certain characteristics of the traditional form of culture may be alienated or even get lost, as some European intellectuals have complained about. But, in turn, one may also claim that this is indeed even an advantage, as certain traditional aspects and values no longer seem compatible with today's internal and external dynamics: it becomes evident that in an era of democracy and equality, the feeling of cultural superiority and hierarchy seems contradictory. Thus, also Europe has to question its perception of culture, one could argue, instead of assigning this task to Americans only.

In this context, it seems also necessary to mention, that Americanisation, whose existence depends on personal interpretation, is definitely not a one sided phenomenon. In order to make Americanisation a real threat, Europeans are required to accept and adopt it. In short: such a process always takes two. And if European culture adopts the American one so easily that it becomes a threat, then Europeans might analyse what their own culture is lacking that it needs to import from abroad. Maybe it is a little portion of American openness towards 'cultural innovations'. A further concluding thought might be added in order to come finalize the discussion of the relationship between democracy and Pop Art. Popular culture, and therefore also Pop Art, "allow" a society the unlimited acceptance of thoughts and ideas. Pop Art can be seen as a symbol for a tolerant society in which new opinions should be considered:

"Everything is beautiful. Pop is everything."

Endnotes:

¹ This is a translation into German. The original statement as taken from Ruhrberg et. al. sounds as follows: “Ein Künstler ist jemand, der Dinge produziert die kein Mensch braucht, von denen er aber aus irgendwelchen Gründen glaubt, es sei wichtig, sie ihm zu geben.” (p.323)

² One example of an art that required extremely much pre-knowledge was Classicism in the eighteenth century. Although the content, i.e. the topic of the picture is clearly visible, as in contrast to highly abstract art of the twentieth century, it was nevertheless necessary to know a lot about history or Roman and Greek Mythology, from which Classicist painters gained their inspiration. (Krauß, 1995, pp.51 -53) Otherwise it was and is not possible to fully grasp the hidden message that lies beneath the ‘surface’. Thus, art was to a large part a carrier of meaning.

Another example is the work of Paul Gauguin, a late nineteenth century artist who represents the transition to Classical Modernity in painting. His pictures are full of Christian symbolism which has been transferred into the world of the Caribbean indigenous peoples. Here, again, one has to know something about Christianity, its symbols and also a bit about the symbolism of indigenous cultures. (Krauß, 1995, p.81)

These are, of course, only two examples out of many more.

³ A technique in printing that was an important ‘tool’ for Pop Artists . A flat strainer is used like a stencil, through which the colour is painted onto the canvas or another medium. A work created in such a manner is consequently reproducible in large numbers. It became especially famous through the works of Andy Warhol. (Krauß, 1995, p.123)

⁴ As an example, one could mention twentieth century expressionism, which was geared towards severe criticism of (bourgeois) society. Artist associations like “die Brücke” (The Bridge) in Dresden, for example, tried to distance themselves as much as possible from the rest of society. In doing so, they disregarded all traditional conventions about how to create ‘good art’ and openly rejected a bourgeois way of living. Their new way of painting, characterised especially through the use of extreme colour contrasts made it hard for their art to be accepted as society was used to the decent topics and style of Impressionism and other currents. (Krauß, 1995, pp. 86-87)

⁵ At this point, however, it seems necessary to point out that art, including Pop Art, and its perception are nevertheless highly subjective. As is pointed out by Krauß (p.115) and also by Ruhrberg et.al. (p.305), one may well regard Pop Art as critical, stimulating a distanced reflection, both of the artist during the production process and of the observer during the

reception process. As has already been mentioned, Roy Liechtenstein's comic paintings may provide an example of such criticism. He takes out only one picture, a fragment of the whole story and monumentalises it, a process through which the piece seems to get importance and a kind of 'dignity' via its size. This "monumentalisation" of a trivial piece can, as Ruhrberg et.al. point out, be regarded as a ironic response to the habit of traditional art, separating glorification and size as its embodiment. (p.321) But also this view is due to personal interpretation, of course and most critics of Pop Art seemed to have a different attitude at that time.

⁶ Dada was a form of art that emerged during the first World War, as a reaction to a world that had been turned upside down and sunk into chaos. In such a context, art got a new function. It was a means to rebel against conventional forms of art as an expression of a decadent world and bourgeois life style, which had thrown the world into war. Thus, Dada was a means of criticism, a so-called "anti-Kunst" (anit-art) that had followers around the globe, in America as well as in Germany, France and Switzerland. Well known names include George Grosz, Francis Picabia and Hans Arp.

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