

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

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This issue of *Hyperion* is dedicated to the memories of
Harold Pinter and James Purdy.

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HYPERION

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The
Picturesque
E
lement



American

OP

Art

or The Media in Disguise

by Marcella Tarozzi-Goldsmith

A distinctive trait of American Pop Art is that its images are recognizable in any city or suburb of developed countries. These familiar images reflect the desires of people who know that these objects can be functional in at least two ways: first, they are a reminder of their produced origin, and second, they can also be admired. This does not mean that Pop artists focused only on the commercial side of their art, but, by presenting itself as the product of a specific social reality, Pop Art reveals its adherence to the present, providing the general public with a display of familiar images, a duplicate copy of the quotidian, in tune with that portrayed by the media.

But to limit a study of Pop Art to the canvases depicting commercial items and celebrities as Warhol profusely did would be misleading and reductive. Thus, the first question that must be answered concerns the appellation itself of “Pop,” what this term indicates and, moreover, whether it refers to the specific type of public these artists had in mind. Art is art—and Pop Art is no exception—if it can be conceptually described with aesthetic categories that place it in a precise context inclusive of its contents and techniques. In an artwork, there is something compelling that demands to be interpreted. In the case of American Pop Art, its modernized Picturesque element has to do with an apparent casualness and an appeal to a public that looks at its surroundings with both eager participation and disenchanting eyes.

The Picturesque artistic movement, to place it in its historical context, flourished in eighteenth-century England. Among its first theorists were the Reverend William Gilpin, who characterized the movement as being an expression of beauty that is the source of a pleasant effect on the viewer, and Sir Uvedale Price, who drew a distinction between picturesque beauty and the sublime.

If one takes the Picturesque to be the vivid art genre that availed itself of—as well as responded to—the natural resources of the English countryside (valued and safeguarded at that time by the nation), then the Picturesque is indeed an aesthetic category that can be applied Pop Art. Through their portrayals of scenes of rustic charm and beauty, the British painters of the era celebrated a particular type of society that was admired because it was intrinsically

expressive of values—one of which was nature. The Picturesque evokes landscapes and charming scenes, often overtly sentimental, so as to bring to mind warm, pleasant feelings in such a convincing way that the viewers are captivated by similar feelings. Picturesque art bore witness to nature and life as it was lived then, so that nature became a legitimate source of art, devoid of mythological embellishments and complications. But this apparent simplicity does not mean that nature was represented in its immediacy. It was, rather, transformed by the vision of these artists thanks to colors and shapes that stand in-between a direct approach to nature. In other words, nature is not depicted in its primal aspect; it is, instead, seen as already worked by human hands and tools. The importance of nature to the eighteenth-century artist is comparable to the importance of our current urban environment.

The picturesque countryside of the past was idealized by painters and writers; among the painters, John Constable is one of the most important, and among the writers who theorized about the Picturesque, the most prominent in the eyes of art critics and art historians was Gilpin. To define an art movement in its generality risks limiting the originality of the styles of individual painters, but in the case of the Picturesque movement it is possible to detect some distinctive characteristics, most notably the soothing glorification of beauty, coupled with the cult of nature. Both add to an aesthetics of the beautiful. But nature is not viewed with nostalgia by these artists. Nostalgia, although permissible, would not be a “rational” emotion if the world were thought of remaining always, or at least for a long period of time, the same.

It is not surprising that beauty, being one of the most complex concepts of the art world, is the subject of debate among scholars. And the parallel I am establishing here between the Picturesque and Pop Art is centered on the concept of beauty. The Picturesque of the past considered beauty a combination of the pleasing, the tasteful, and the psychologically soothing. Present day Pop Art is one of the forms of the beautiful, or at least an attempt at representing beauty in a different guise. It reverses the ideal of beauty predominant in the Picturesque of the eighteenth century by disregarding nature but still retaining the idea of beauty as agreeable. To the extent that this is true, the parallel I draw here between the two different forms of the picturesque is based on a similarity of function and a dissimilarity of content.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, beauty had been put aside as an artistic ideal. Therefore, the fact that Pop Art reinterpreted it and made it a crucial component of art is a remarkable event. Being post avant-garde, Pop Art declared itself a style to be consumed like the objects represented by the Pop artists. In contrast, the emotional experiences invoked are similar to those elicited by the media; that is, they are “mediated” to the point of losing their specificity. At the same time, Pop Art displays objects that are part of our lives to such an extent that they can be played with as desired. Yet, the result is not

pastiche. Rather, by extracting the most noticeable items from the most visible aspects of society, the style became ubiquitous and yet differentiated.

Now that the category of the beautiful has been modernized—because its classical ideal has become unsuitable for describing and explaining Pop Art's significance—it is important to ask what categories best apply to Pop Art. The category of the picturesque is the one that, *ex negativo*, points to a similarity of function between the two artistic movements. Having similar conceptions of beauty, Pop artists and the artists of the Picturesque movement considered a robust concept of beauty unessential to making art an object of admiration. The reasons of this change are to be found in a shift in sensibility on the part of not only the artists themselves, but also the public and the critics.

Pop Art draws its themes from modern society, from themes that are considered significant in and of themselves. It presents familiar objects to a public interested in the transformation of their current everyday life into art (lipsticks, planes, cakes, telephones) in such a way that they “become what they are,” i.e., emblems indicative of the way of living of the Western world. In this sense, Pop Art is a “local,” picturesque art. Yet, the fact that the West plays such a prominent role both historically and economically makes Pop Art a specific and *sui generis* form of the picturesque that depicts objects not previously thought to be viable objects for art.

Because of this approach, imagination does not play an important role for these artists, other than the initial one of conceiving something like Pop Art in the first place. What followed was the result of the transformation of objects and events of a given historical time into something made visible, yet, distant. Even taking into consideration the brand names of enlarged, edible things and the portraits of celebrities, Pop Art's artworks—and Warhol's in particular—rely on a semantic anonymity, a detached anonymity, whose persuasive effect depends on complex social processes.

These varied and multifaceted artworks are there to testify that the past (that is, tradition) is something that must be overcome, if not altogether rejected. It is the present, in its repeatable variety, that supersedes tradition, whose influence is not denied *per se*, but it is set aside, maybe only momentarily. Warhol's repeated images, for instance, are in tune with the insistence with which the contemporary media keeps presenting the same topics and the same images. That these repetitions do not contradict the overall significance of an art that sides with externality rather than interiority is a consequence of the fast pace with which the media present their images, which does not allow, or hardly allows, an in-depth consideration or comprehension of a given topic. In a similar manner, Pop Art does not hide anything: the objects and artifacts of daily life are there to be seen. Nothing is lost, except nature's landscapes, which have been marginalized as an artistic theme and considered, not

actually useless, but at least dispensable, and, therefore, assigned a minor role.

The indisputable emphasis on the present, in this case, brings the products of industrialization to the surface. The “landscapes” of Pop Art certainly do not depict nature in a wild state. As to Pop images, they are brought to the surface to be vividly enhanced. Their presence can be overwhelming, and the more familiar the painted object, the more convincing is its effectiveness at the emotional and visual levels. This is because the recognition of a familiar image is reassuring, and when it is seen in a different context, such as a museum or a gallery, it becomes all the more relevant.

By insisting on the proliferation of objects already consumed (or ready to be consumed) by the media, Pop artists reduced, but did not eliminate, the distance between artworks and the general public. There is repetition, but also a new, different type of narrative that glorifies the surface of things, and, consistently, the paintings present flat surfaces and colors used in such a way that the effect of flatness predominates. This is how these artists detached themselves from their preferred themes: they dispensed with the poetic element, understood in the specific sense of involving “auratic” emotions, and thus they put in evidence the non-tragic aspect of art.

Irony, instead, appeals to these artists who are detached from their own work. In this way they avoid overt sentimentality and affectation to the extent that irony, although it can be sentimental, is used to emphasize the reversal of accepted notions of what constitutes a prosaic reality. Their affectation is limited to a minimum, that is, to take note and to recognize—without really transforming—a reality that is thought to be already well-known, transparent, and ubiquitous by a public ready to consider reality at its disposal. Pop Art differs from what is displayed but does not negate the environment from which it originates. Indeed, irony plays a considerable role in the world of Pop artists, who operate within a given *Zeitgeist*. Their art is to be consumed in its own particular way, with a touch of irony, either sentimental as in commercials, or more critical, but still with an irony that does not hide itself but proclaims the legitimacy of its themes by reiterating them, just as commercials do.

We have become accustomed to the changing images of today’s world, which replace the old images with ever-constant transformations. No doubt Pop Art has taken this development into account. The imagistic superabundance of its works, their scale and quantity—all aspects of our cities—are the first features that strike the viewer; yet, by insisting upon familiar images, they leave human imagination unaffected. In fact, all these desirable objects are presented in such a way that there is no need to contemplate them. Imitation and images show themselves for what they seem to be, with almost no residue.

Although the intentions of these individual artists cannot be ascertained

with absolute certainty (notwithstanding their statements, diaries, and correspondence), their works, if one looks at the content, do not speak the language of open satire. Their irony is subdued and yet it makes its appearance in the very content of these paintings.

Pop artists did not ask themselves “What is art?” in the abstract. Instead, they asked: “What *can* become art? What is at our disposal if we want to reflect our particular geographical and historical world?” Because of these questions, and the way they are answered, the paintings are explicit. There are no hidden meanings, no references to philosophy or mythical narratives. Rather, Pop Art’s narratives concern the quotidian aspects of life, whose impact is all the stronger because they are well-known and easily recognizable in an unusual environment, such as a museum. Moreover, the abstract ideal of beauty is no longer invoked. It is sufficient to avoid moralizing, sentimentality, and naïveté, that is, an approach to the painted canvas too close to a direct appropriation of their contents on the part of the artist. Since nature has no relevant role to play here, there can be no contrast between nature and art—as there is in sentimental picturesque art. Thus, being an anti-mimetic art, to the extent to which consumptive objects predominate, Pop Art revels in these mass-produced, commercial objects instead of approaching themes with a touch of nostalgia.

What, then, differentiates Pop Art as picturesque and the Picturesque movement? A comparison between two different societies—distant in both time and place—must be specified further but not carried to the point of indicating an identity. What is at issue is the juxtaposition of two ways of life: that of eighteenth-century England, valued because it was rural, pastoral, and (at least on the surface) serene, and that of a modern society, valued for being urbanized, “popular,” and accessible to all.

Not only are Pop Art’s works as popular now as were those of the English countryside then, but both styles present images of a world that does not aspire to change. Still picturesque—but not nostalgic, as there is nothing to be nostalgic about—Pop Art, however, is not on the side of frugality as was its counterpart . . . out of necessity. Instead, Pop Art displays the abundance of a world that is sure of itself. It is for this reason that it presents, in its own vivid style, a kind of self-portrait of a global world, where the eye prevails over the mind.

The fact that Pop Art has a picturesque side does not mean that it is the result of an uncritical approach to art. It results from artists having seen and thought about art and popular culture before venturing into art properly. Having learned from the world of advertising, some of them became full-fledged artists of a particular type. They combine different approaches and ideas in one stroke: they praise, they satirize, and they comment on their modern “picturesque”

world. Such is the rhetoric of Pop Art, which is well aware of its referents; the referents themselves are “popular,” that is, well-known at least to most American and European citizens. But they are popular also in another sense of the word: they are not meant to be grasped intellectually.

Picturesque without being provincial, and rusticity aside, Pop Art is at one with a society interested in the values that bring together a global community. It became so by letting itself be inspired by everyday objects, by reiterating the quotidian

and making it attractive to the urban middle and upper-middle classes. If one considers the extent of this phenomenon and the recognition it received, and still receives, what is striking is the indifference of Pop artists to an overt manifestation of feelings, which contrasts with what is usually meant by the word “picturesque.”

But also Pop Art is a style that dwells on the most manifest aspects of its geographical area and historical time. The Picturesque art of the eighteenth-century played a similar role: That of making the public realize that the scenes represented on the “canvas” were speaking of its own specific, historical world, which considered the countryside a source of bucolic pleasures. And as such it was lived day after day; it was a public, accessible space.

I now turn to Andy Warhol—the major figure of Pop Art style and constantly referenced by those art critics and philosophers who focus on the aesthetics of the last century. Warhol is also important to my point that Pop artists indulge in the reiteration of images to put forth their world view. Warhol is not the only one to do so, and, therefore, I will look, later, at other Pop artists who help substantiate my interpretation.



Andy Warhol, Marilyn Monroe, 1964

Aside from the actual content of Warhol's paintings is the importance of his technique, indicating as it does a new and different method of dealing with the canvas. Specifically, Warhol utilizes photographs and silkscreens, thus opening the way to serial multiplication. This facilitated production, so much so that a considerable part of his work was actually done by assistants—as was the accepted practice, certainly since the Italian Renaissance, when painters enlisted the aid of assistants in their *botteghe*. Warhol painted his famous Campbell soup cans starting with photographs, and indeed everything in his work relates to photographs. Yet, there are differences between a Warhol silkscreen and a straightforward realistic photograph. Certainly the portraits of Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe, reiterated many times, resemble these actresses, but, by repeating their images with the addition of colors and lines that underline the somatic traits of these visages, the impact on the viewer becomes stronger and more direct than if they were presented in a single image, especially considering the close resemblance to the initial photograph of these celebrities and the touches added by the artist. Such additions are all the more pleasantly effective because they are visually immediate and more noticeable than a black-and-white photograph.

Although viewers may be indifferent to the actual number of the repeated image, they will make a point of noticing how identical they are to each other. One can perhaps speak here of a desire to insist on a *déjà vu* that is nevertheless attractive because it is widely known, and, as such, does not require as great an interpretative effort on the part of the viewer as would be the case with an image never seen before. Warhol's paintings are also worthy of admiration because they may evoke in the viewers the desire for the perceived fame, beauty, and wealth of the subject. The celebrity may be someone who people would like to imitate many times for a variety of reasons, either out of rivalry or simply out of enjoyment.

The theme of reiterations, which is part of the Pop Art's technique and is also integral to its content, is not only used to glamorize the celebrities. It is also typical of Warhol's Campbell soup cans, which speak of industry, commercials, and consumption. Their time is the *now*, which corresponds to an almost mythical reverence for the quotidian, spelled out with the sophisticated, smooth, and polished textures of the silkscreens.

From the formalist viewpoint, Pop Art's aesthetics, especially in the work of Warhol, isolates objects from a potential background to put into relief their quality of frivolous and striking imagery. They are far from being chaotic even when juxtaposed one to the other with the overall effect of evoking vastness in all its virtual ambiguity.

There is a critical element in Pop Art: Its multiple images are narrated with detachment but not indifference. Warhol, for example, presents repeated

images of Elizabeth Taylor—beautiful and haughty, as is necessary for an actress who must be protective of her image. But the artist, then, adds a few colored lines and blobs, so as to underscore the artificiality both of the photograph and of Taylor. However, Warhol did not—following Marcel Duchamp’s example—paint a defiling mustache on that beautiful face. Duchamp’s *Mona Lisa* had been a response to, among other things, the banalization of artistic icons. It was a provocation aimed at playing down what has been called “the most famous painting in the world.” But probably it was not a lack of courage that stopped Warhol from painting a mustache on the celebrity’s face, since, after all, it would have been merely an act of imitation on his part and nothing more.

Also, for Warhol the human element must be recognized for what it is, and resemblance must be in evidence. Consequently, he portrays the human face faithfully in his silkscreen paintings, even though it is elaborated in such a way by the artist’s creativity that it mirrors his own vision of what constitutes resemblance. The portraits must be instantly recognizable if they are to be seen as the icons of a mythical star system, and so the faces are shown preferably in close-up in order to have the strongest possible impact on the viewer. These public figures inhabit a world of material wealth that encourages them to stay in the public eye. They are far from the humble, self-effacing, and silent peasants of the British Picturesque paintings. The depicted celebrities inhabit the crowded city or the screen, they monopolize the paintings’ space in which bucolic landscapes have no role to play and where animals do not constitute a major element.

In Pop Art, landscapes have been replaced by appliances and other objects, sometimes hugely altered from their realistic sizes, like the telephone by Oldenburg, which is huge, black, and floppy. His soft sculptures of food such as cakes and ice cream are also to be mentioned in this context. In this way, Pop artists are saying that it is useless to moralize, to withdraw from the contemporary world. They are also indicating that their picturesque artworks are far from being a sign of provincialism. It is not, then, surprising that scale, for them, becomes a crucial element. An expanding world and oversized canvases identify the external objects and make them so noticeable that these paintings and three-dimensional objects become the definition of the objects themselves. In a similar manner, the comic strips of Roy Lichtenstein, with their Ben Day dots, announce themselves without any hesitation as resembling the vacuity of the comic strip—a “low genre” that is nevertheless welcomed day after day by popular newspaper readers.

The analogy between the Picturesque style of the eighteenth century and the picturesque aspects of Pop Art is based on their similar conception of what it means to feel at home in a given place and at a given time. However, the analogy must not be carried beyond its limits: The differences between



Roy Lichtenstein, *Girl with Hair Ribbon*, 1965

the two styles are also to be taken into account. One difference concerns the fact that Pop Art is not sentimental, at least not explicitly so. This, in part, is because the public itself has changed: The not-necessarily sophisticated or classy public that fills the Museum of Modern Art in New York or wanders around the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh—and those who see the works of these painters reproduced in books and magazines—are absorbed in a specific social reality that has

been expressed artistically through celebrated media figures. Pop Art, in fact, appropriates the 'star system' as it is displayed in magazines to indicate that luxury and frivolity are enjoyable matters. In this art there is no sentimental moralizing. As a matter of fact, there are not even heroes, notwithstanding Warhol's portraits of Marilyn Monroe, Lenin, Elvis Presley, Freud, Queen Beatrix, and others. Instead, we have idols, often presented in provocative facial expressions or body postures. Yet, there is nothing offensive in these portraits. They tell us that art cannot dispense with the human face, although the artist can alter it with a few strokes of the brush, so that the realism typical of photographs is attenuated and the artistic element is, instead, intensified.

Given that Pop Art is one of the contemporary artistic versions of picturesque beauty, it invites a comparison to the Picturesque conception of beauty of the eighteenth century. Picturesque beauty was a matter of controversy in the eighteenth century and often considered a low art form related to genre painting without encompassing a wider range of contents. The beauty of the Picturesque rests on the serenity it produces in the viewer. Its paintings soothe by combining beauty with the then popular pictorial aspects of nature. Similarly, the beauty of Pop Art, to the extent to which this appellation can be applied to it, rests on the appropriation of popular themes and their