Consumerism And The Value People Associate With Objects

The society I reside in has no doubt impacted my work. It’s trends, what’s fashionable, what people want now at this moment. Sometimes when I’m not caught up in it myself, I stop and question myself…why? Why do we value such material objects? Using both sculpture and relational aesthetics as investigative tools, what influence does the internet have on the sign exchange values we place on material objects?

For me, this question manifests itself in the form of sculptures and installations.

Developing my practice, I started looking at consumerism and the value people associate with objects (what it means socially, personally and individually to the consumer). This is also known as sign exchange value; where what we consume is less about the thing itself and is more about its abstract idea or image. Interested in challenging these values, I became concerned with the absurdist dichotomies that utilitarian and everyday objects can construct through their numerous combinations. By combining objects with unusual materials, it unavoidably changes its symbolic value and meaning. By turning something beautiful and useful into something useless and tasteless, it creates something pointless and absurd, while questioning is original purpose.

After these objects are deconstructed and reconstructed, they turn into something that simulates their real-world equivalent. These artworks refer to representation and illusion, better referred by philosophers as hyper-reality and simulacra. Additionally, these objects evoke a sense of absurdity with its mimicry. This year I want to incorporate relational aesthetics into my work. Most relational artworks show ways of living and models of action and focus on social interactions or interhuman relations. So relational aesthetics can be used as a medium to show consumerisms influence of culture and relations.

At the end of my research, I may come to a deeper understanding of these subjects and find more ways to describe my findings through physical forms.

American literary critic and Marxist political theorist Frederick Jameson argued that postmodern society can be said to focus on conditions of life that came increasingly prevalent in the late 20th century in the most industrialised nations. Including the ubiquity of mass media and mass production, the rise of a global economy, and the shift of manufacturing to service economies. Where manufacturing and distribution have become inexpensive but at the cost of community and social connectedness. Jameson describes this as consumerism.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of the Value System is an extended concept of the ‘use and exchange value’ by Karl Marx. The theory is that consumption is the main driver in a capitalist society, where demand outweighs the usefulness of products. Baudrillard argues that purchases because they always signify something socially, has a fetishistic side. Consumption practices are based on ‘symbolic exchange’ value. That means that the object’s value is related to its sign value. What we consume is less about the thing itself than its abstract idea or image. Thus, consumption should not be understood in terms of material utility, but primarily as consumption

of signs.

In his book, Symbolic exchange and death, Baudrillard contends that Postmodern consumer society is so saturated with aesthetics to the point where art is no longer possible. For Baudrillard, the all-encompassing production of images in society mean that the distinction between reality and image has become effaced. This is his idea of simulacra. And everyday life becomes aestheticized to the point where art is everywhere. For Baudrillard, this means the end of art. Not because art loses its critical transcendence, but rather because reality has been confused with its own image.

In the words of Baudrillard

“We have reached the point where ‘consumption’ has grasped the whole of life…work, leisure, nature and culture... have finally become mixed, climate-controlled and domesticated into the single activity of perpetual shopping”

Baudrillard, Jean and ProQuest (Firm), Symbolic Exchange and Death, 1st ed. London: SAGE Publications, 2016. https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/lib/griffith/detail.action?docID=4771734

Consumerism has continued to develop into the postmodern era where we are now faced with Hyper-consumerism. Hyper-consumerism refers to the consumption of goods for non-functional purposes. As those goods shape one's identity, there is a significant pressure to consume those goods exerted by modern, capitalist society. Frenchy Lunning refers to this as: 'a consumerism for the sake of consuming.'

While not strictly postmodern, the pop artists were particularly interested in the way that consumer society and art could intersect.

One exhibition that most represented the relationship between pop art and consumer culture was the American Supermarket exhibition (1964). The exhibition featured artworks from Andy Worhol, Jasper Johns, James Rosenquist, Robert Watts and Tom Wesselmann and Roy Lichtenstein. The artwork celebrates the spectacle and the aesthetics of consumption. American Supermarket exhibition was an installation that had real-world items next to constructed art items. Fake eggs, watermelons and bananas were sold alongside real ones. As there were not many ways to tell the difference between an artwork and a commodity, it was commonplace that a person would go in and buy real-life bananas for $15 because they thought they were works of art. Paintings of Campbell’s Soup Cans and signed Campbell’s Soup Cans were sold for $15 (where it would normally be a lot cheaper). The exhibition was an installation as well as a gallery setting, elevating shopping to an art form.

Jeff koons looks at popular culture, advertising and consumer culture and appropriates existing objects and images to use in his art.

His aestheticization of consumer goods creates a synthetic environment of desire. His artworks look at how this aestheticization occurs and how the ready made and everyday object can act as a vehicle to explore the concept of fetishism.

In his early works such as The New Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polishers (1980), he encased

household appliances inside brightly lit plexiglass cases as if isolating them from any hint of everyday function. So, preserving them as pieces or art. In this way he fetishizes the objects beyond their use value. So they don't have value because they are useful to clean the floor, rather they have symbolic value because they are being elevated to art. The way they are displayed -like they are precious- are like they are unattainable dreams and desires and expectations that we place on consumer goods.

Koons has aestheticized the vacuum cleaner to the point that they are art and so made it outlive its usefulness as a functional object.

Jeff Koons along with many other artists such as Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami has established themselves as celebrity artists and as brands.

Artists have harnessed the power of the celebrity system to expand their reach outside of the world of art into the wider world of commerce. Notoriety and transgressive behaviour part of artistic persona that achieves media attention to promote artist as brand. As with advertising campaigns, luxury brands have collaborated with artists to create consumer goods that are endowed with cultural cache.

Relational Aesthetics is a term coined by French critic and philosopher Nicolas Bourriaud in the mid-1990s. The term refers to the work of a group of artists and their new approach to a socially conscious art of participation: an art that takes as its content the human relations and reactions elicited by the artwork. Nicholas Bourriaud published a book called Relational Aesthetics in 1998 in which he defined Relational Aesthetics as:

A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space. (pg. 113)

The artist is seen less as an individual and more of a collaborator or facilitator. The audience as the 'viewer' changes into the co-producer, changing from passive to active. In this sense, the artist, gives audiences access to power and the means to change the world.

Bourriaud cited the art of Douglas Gordon, Gillian Wearing, Philippe Parreno and Liam Gillickas artists who work to this agenda.

Relational aesthetics tends to break with the traditional social space of the art gallery and artist studio. Its subject is the entirety of life as it is lived and it's the social environment, rather than attempting a mimetic representation of daily life.

Nicholas Bourriaud:

'… the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action.' (p.13)

The goal of relational aesthetics is to create a social circumstance. The viewer's experience of the constructed circumstance becoming the art. The circumstance can be any type of social experience including a discussion, a communal meal or even just sitting around. The focus being social interactions or interhuman relations.

The relationship between art and consumer culture is regularly questioned, both in critique and celebratory practice.

Artists including Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach and Sylvie Fleury have used ready-made consumer objects as a vehicle to explore ‘commodity fetishism’ and the displaced value of the product.

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Luxury brands have employed the ‘cultural capital’ (power and social standing achieved through cultural knowledge and concepts of taste) associated with art to symbolically improve the status of the product and the consumer. Seeking out artists to collaborate with them. Examples being Cindy Sherman for Mac 2011.

I am interested in the discussion of the displaced value of the product and what online influence was made to get it there. Previously, my practice was changing a product from normalcy to abnormity, thus changing its value and meaning. Now I am looking forward to combining this with relational aesthetic, thus now looking at the object's impact on social interactions or interhuman relations.

At the start of a project, it is a process of standing back, distancing and alienating oneself and viewing into humanity, looking at what people feel like they need or need to be. Once I realise an interesting aspect of human behaviour, I then research it online through news outlets, social media, etc. Then I research any visual arts practitioners and theory researchers who say anything on the topic.

Simultaneously while creating a mind map, I combine materials in the studio to see if something clicks. As the artwork is also materially driven, the artist's statement may change slightly until the piece is completed.