Pop Art and the Decline of the American Dream

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John Truslow Adams, an American writer and historian, described the American Dream as “not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable.”

The works of Richard Hamilton and Andy Warhol during the Pop Art movement critically examined the new culture which thrived on mass consumerism and capitalism after the Second World War. This paper will be examining the destruction of Adam’s definition of the ‘American Dream’ as displayed by Richard Hamilton’s *Just What is it That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing* which was produced in 1956 as well as Andy Warhol’s *Two Hundred Campbell’s Soup Cans*, 1962. Hamilton and Warhol’s work shows how Pop Art was the documentation of the decline of the ‘American Dream’.

*Just What is it That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing* by Hamilton is one of the works that pioneered the Pop Art Movement. Although, Hamilton was a British Pop Artist, this work displays changes that were also taking place in the American society. *Just What is it That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?* is a bold colored and vibrant collage made from different materials from catalogues, magazines, photographs and comic strips. A muscular body builder is shown holding an oversize lollipop in his right hand while a bare-breasted pin-up sits on the sofa. The living room in which they are situated is filled with pieces of technology such as a television, a Hoover vacuum cleaner, a tape recorder, a telephone and the cinema outside of the window. On the wall hangs a
photograph, an excerpt from a comic strip as well as an insignia of the Ford motor vehicles attached to a lamp. Adding to the overcrowded living room, Hamilton placed a planet instead of a ceiling at the top of the collage. iii

Andy Warhol’s *Two Hundred Campbell’s Soup Cans*, is one of Warhol’s numerous iconic works. Here Warhol paints on silk screen 200 red Campbell Soup Cans on 72 x 100 inch canvas material. Just like in his other *Campbell’s Soup Can* series, Warhol labels each can with the different soup flavors that were being offered at this time.

*Two Hundred Campbell Soup Cans* was produced as a result of a printmaking method which uses a machine to uniformly spread the ink all over the canvas in the desired areas. At the bottom of the work, the ink gets lighter probably as a result of its repeated use. iv Just like Hamilton, Warhol was not merely displaying iconic products of the time, he was hinting at a deeper underlying meaning that the American society had become delusional. The semi-mechanic process and repetitive process involved as well as the abstraction of the actual product shows the dehumanizing effects of mass consumerism.v

The end of the Second World War resulted in a revitalized America in which the effects of the Great Depression were no more. As a result of spending on the development of the economy, the United States government remedied the previous economic crisis. Because of the economic upsurge, a buyer demand arose for purchasing goods. vi These goods were made in assembly lines and factories by the men and women who had just returned from the war - a reflection of hope for creating a better and more prosperous America. But Warhol’s *Two Hundred Campbell Soup Cans* mocked this idea of mass consumption and mass production which was a result of the buyer - supplier demand. vii Americans were
now obsessed with products. Lucia Biere’s review of Andy Warhol’s From A to B and Back Again: The Philosophy of Andy Warhol, Biere writes:

Take up the pose of American Gothic and the simpler virtues of life, he writes a book that is a savage indictment of the American Dream. If we accept what he says at face value, then his philosophy seems to be a celebration of modern life: he claims to admire the entire value structure of the urban part of the U.S.A, its passion for work, business, money, plastic idols, blue jeans, cleanliness, and brand names. But the naive simplicity with which he states his admiration serves unequivocally to condemn and mock the system. Warhol hates the rich, however cynically he panders to their taste, and the insensitivity, brutality, and loneliness of the life he sees seep through every page of this book. viii

Two Hundred Campbell Soup Cans represents the destruction of the American Dream. The soup cans are presented in an abstract manner which makes it difficult to recognize that these are individual flavored soups. Obviously influenced by the mechanical aspects of photography, Warhol did not want to show any brushstrokes or his particular painting style in his soup cans. He had the desire to produce his artwork just as a machine does - with no personality or individuality - by applying a film of color on the canvas surface repeatedly. ix A society which once had dreams of individuality, freedom, fulfillment, and leading successful lives was now dehumanized and immersed in brand names and product.
Pop art was mainly based on using ready-made objects or ideas that were associated with mass production and mass consumerism. By using photographs, magazine cut outs and other objects that the public was familiar with, Hamilton and Warhol were able to detach themselves from work in order to address the imagery they found in mass media. According to John Moffat in his review of *Pop Art Redefined* by John Russell and Suzi Gablik, Hamilton and Andy Warhol approached the subject matter of consumerism differently because Hamilton was more subjective whereas Warhol was more impersonal.\textsuperscript{x} Marco Livingstone, the author of *Pop Art: A Contemporary History* states that “Through such ready-made images Hamilton here addresses himself to modern concepts of love and leisure, to the comforts of consumerism and the overcrowded conditions now accepted as the norm in Western society...”\textsuperscript{xi} Although it is harder to find the same message in Warhol’s *Campbell Soup Cans*, both artists recognized that society had changed and there was no turning back. By incorporating recognizable imagery from people’s everyday lives and mass media, these Pop artists turned to representation rather than the abstraction of the previous art period. What once had been dreams of living a successful and fulfilling life was now mechanically replaced by products of mass consumption.

Although the subject matter of Pop Art was representative of the decline of the American dream, ironically, Pop Art itself was consumerist - another channel through which Hamilton and Warhol expressed the concerns with post-war America. Hamilton described Pop Art as, “Popular (designed for a mass audience), Transient (short term solution, Expandable (easily forgotten), Low Cost, Mass Produced, Young (aimed at youth), Witty, Sexy, Gimmicky, Glamrous, [and] Big Business.”\textsuperscript{xii} This idea is mainly brought out in Andy
Warhol’s Campbell Soup Cans in which he produces on silkscreen, a cultural symbol with which many Americans identified. During the fifties and sixties, Campbell Soup was associated with family and family ideals, so by making an image of a product that Americans knew so well, Warhol was questioning the ideals and aspirations of a nation that consumed what it promoted. xiii

Hamilton and Warhol’s work shows how Pop Art was the documentation of the decline of the ‘American Dream’. Their work took a critical look at the way of life in America that thrived on a new culture of capitalism and consumerism that emerged after WWII. Borrowing from popular imagery from newspaper cuttings, photography, and other readymade images, Pop Art was documenting a society obsessed with images of itself. The American Dream was no more because the society was now obsessed with material wealth and as Adams stated, “[The American Dream is] not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable.”

(Figure 1)

ii Marco Livingstone, Pop Art: A Continuing History (New York City, NY: Thames and Hudson, 2001), [Page 35].

iii Livingstone, Pop Art: A Continuing, [Page 36].


v Foster, The First Pop Age, [Page, 131]

vi Ibid., 131.

vii Livingstone, Pop Art: A Continuing, [Page 36].


ix Livingstone, Pop Art: A Continuing, [Page 116].

x Biere, "From A to B and Back," [Page 80].

xi Livingstone, Pop Art: A Continuing, [Page 36]

xii Ibid., 36.

xiii Foster, The First Pop Age, [Page, 131]
Bibliography


