



Pop life: Meet the stars of the New York and London art scenes

BY ARIFA AKHAR SATURDAY 26 SEPTEMBER 2009

Share Tweet Share in Share Reddit Shares: 3 PRINT I.A.A



VIEW GALLERY

When new york city's Gramercy Park Hotel opened its doors in May 1994 to a group of gallery owners showcasing the works of their young artists, a "spontaneous" event in one of its rooms involving a British dealer and his female protégé made the city's adrenaline-fueled art world stop and start. Tracy Emin, a tousle-haired artist from Margate, had accompanied Jay Jopling, her London dealer and the owner of White Cube Gallery, to the contemporary art fair, which was spread across 32 hired rooms at the Manhattan hotel – and on that Sunday morning, she crept into the bed on which Jopling was perched, implicitly covered them both with the embroidered bedspread she was there to sell for (\$4,000), and smiled for the cameras.

Emin's gesture – reminiscent of the romantic idealism of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's famous "bed-in" of 1969 but with a sharp, commercial edge – caused a sensation and was captured on film by dozens of press photographers and passers-by. However, it was not love or peace that Emin and Jopling's image appeared to represent but ideals of a different kind. This new 1990s "bed-in" was between the artist and the dealer, and the image marked the moment when a new generation of "Young British Artists" – so close to their dealers and galleries that they were willing to get into bed with them – burst on to the international art scene.

Emin instantly became the most popular "exhibit" at the Gramercy and the poster-girl for the whole YBA movement with its troupe of artists set on exposing the commercial enterprise behind the trade.

It was no accident that the event took place in New York, where the thriving art scene was already filled with bold, brassy stars vying to the idea that their work was a capitalist commodity – from Andy Warhol and his Factory to Jeff Koons, Keith Haring and Takashi Murakami. Some of these artists had their own branded shops, factory-floor "assistants" and mass produced artworks that had diversified into the lucrative worlds of advertising and design.

The YBAs had witnessed the methods of their New York counterparts, and had imported many of the same ideas to create a dynamic movement. This new breed made much of their cozy relationships with their dealers, starting with that utopian "bed-in" of 1994 and the rise and rise of Jopling's White Cube Gallery. (Indeed it's an intimacy that persists to this day – though last year she speculated that things may finally be changing when Damien Hirst, the brainy YBA of old, sold his work next to White Cube but at Sotheby's, forcing his dealer to forgo his usual cut.)

Now an exhibition, Pop Life: Art in a Material World, opening next week at Tate Modern, presents the stars of London's 1990s scene alongside their New York predecessors, who had caused their own sensation a decade earlier. So while Emin has coyly referred to the Gramercy Hotel episode as a spontaneous and naive moment, the quilt from her "bed-in" will feature in the new show as a starting point for an artistic movement that went on to make a critique (and several small fortunes) out of commerce.

Jack Bankowsky, co-curator of the exhibition and editor-at-large of Artforum magazine, says the New York movement was born in the East Village at the start of the 1980s with 20 galleries emerging quite suddenly – like a cultural "big bang". Unknown artists – including future stars like Jeff Koons, Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Richard Prince were shot to fame – and galleries such as Nature More on East 10th Street and the Fun Gallery on East 11th became places to be seen.

The scene died away as quickly as it emerged, but left a significant imprint on the city's culture, self-image and even the way it branded itself. And, of course, many of the artists involved would go on to become fully fledged "superstars".

The East Village artists appeared to take Andy Warhol's guiding principle – that "good business is the best art" – and run with it. Haring and Murakami took the step toward artistic commodification one stage further by opening up their own shops selling branded bric-à-brac. It was, they said, an effort to democratise art.

Haring's downtown Pop Shop, which opened in 1986 with Warhol's backing, was covered wall-to-ceiling with black graffiti drawings and a rap DJ spun discs in the background. The artist sold his signature works – neon signs, graffiti images of barbing dogs and men with glowing emissions – at the "cheaper" end of the business. At the top end, he was appealing to the city's elite through Tony Shafrazi's gallery, and also had design commissions with Absolut vodka and Swatch watches. For the new exhibition, Tate Modern is borrowing original items from the Pop Shop, which closed in 2005, and re-creating the store so that there is no distinction between the "art" in the exhibition and the merchandise viewers can buy.

According to Julia Gruen, who was Haring's assistant until his AIDS-related death in 1990 and who now runs the Keith Haring Foundation, his idea was not to become a "brand" but maintain New York's downtown graffiti scene of the 1970s, the milieu from which he arose. "He wanted collectors to buy his art but also kids from Brooklyn to collect his art too," she says. "With Pop Shop, he made it deliberately affordable."

When, at the beginning he could not afford canvas, Haring produced his graffiti art on tarps, which still hangs on the walls of the Broadway studio from which Gruen now works. But by the early 1980s, in response to the overwhelming demand, his simple "chalk drawings" had ironically become such a hot commodity that they were sold through his gallery.

Although the pop shop thrived – and its online version still exists – his former assistant Julia Gruen recalls that Haring did express some doubt about "assembly-line art, of a studio full of assistants making things".

Takashi Murakami, the Japanese artist who also came to prominence in New York in the 1980s, appeared to have had no such qualms. Even today, his Long Island studio – in which he sleeps, month-like, in a sleeping bag – is based on the "corporation" model and employs 40 workers.

Murakami has been unapologetic in his commercial collaborations, creating album artwork for Kanye West and, earlier this year, unveiling a sculpture collaboration with Pharrell Williams. He also designed a hugely successful range of handbags for Louis Vuitton in 2003 – and his animation characters, Kai and Kiki, which became his trademark figures, have been used to create his own Murakami merchandise.

If it all sounds familiar, it's clear that this factory culture was an influence on our own Damien Hirst – whose company, Science, famously enlisted a number of "assistants" to help with the construction of his work. It may also have led Tracy Emin and fellow YBA Sarah Lucas to open their own shop, based along the same democratic lines as Haring's Pop Shop, in east London in the early 1990s. Emin burnt much of the material from the shop when it closed down in 1993, although its ashes – contained inside a latrine – will appear as part of the new exhibition.

While we're looking for similarities, we should note that another feature of the New York artists of the 1980s was how they put themselves at the centre of their work in a way that well beyond the bounds of self-portraiture. By this stage in his career, Warhol was portraying his fellow artists as the glorified subjects of his screen prints; in the same way he had given us Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, he now produced silkscreens of David Hockney, Basquiat and Joseph Beuys. The artist had become one of society's stars – and nowhere was this better illustrated than in Jeff Koons' controversial 1991 series "Made in Heaven". Based around explicit sexual acts and featuring himself along with his Italian porn-star wife, Iona Staller, better known as "La Cicciolina".

Related articles

- Pavvy finds Olympic form in New York
- Deals of the week: Nike, Microsoft, New York
- Two days in New York: Mike's Bikini doing in New York City?
- New York hotel sale to raise \$250m for investors
- Sticks Great at New York City opens

Ads by Google

- SME Card Payments Expert
- Competitive Merchant Services From Streamline. Join Today & Save
- Streamline.com/Card-Payments-Expert
- Express Artificial Grass
- Express Artificial Grass Ltd 4m Width From Only £4.99 sqm Free Next Working Day Delivery (0m)
- www.expressgrass.com
- Modern Conservatories
- Modern Conservatories On Offer From Approved
- www.aproved-conservatories.com

Suggested Topics

- Graffiti
- Tate Modern
- Tracy Emin
- Jeff Koons

While we're looking for similarities, we should note that another feature of the New York artists of the 1980s was how they put themselves at the centre of their work in a way that well beyond the bounds of self-portraiture. By this stage in his career, Warhol was portraying his fellow artists as the glorified subjects of his screen prints; in the same way he had given us Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, he now produced silkscreens of David Hockney, Basquiat and Joseph Beuys. The artist had become one of society's stars – and nowhere was this better illustrated than in Jeff Koons' controversial 1991 series "Made in Heaven", based around explicit sexual acts and featuring himself along with his Italian porn-star wife, Iona Staller, better known as "La Cicciolina".

The YBAs, of course, used out just their image but their own flesh and blood as the subject of their art. In the same year that Koons was coveting with Cicciolina, the British artist Marc Quinn went even further to create "Self", a frozen cast of his head made from 100 pounds of his own blood. Three years later, Emin called her first White Cube show My Major Retrospective and used her early sexual experiences as inspiration to embroider quilts and tents, while her 1999 Turner Prize-nominated "My Bed" featured her dirty knickers.

To the British tabloids, this was all shocking stuff – though New Yorkers were well used to such tactics. Ten years before Emin's tent, Richard Prince's "Spiritual America" – the artist's "re-photograph" of a ten-year-old Brooke Shields emerging naked from a bath tub – caused the original "sensation", and ushered in a decade of shocking artworks that were often branded as "publicity stunts". Prince placed his "art work" in a gold frame and exhibited it prominently in a Fast Village gallery window. The scenario, which will be restaged by Tate Modern in their new, deeply unsettled the industry's notion of what "art" should be – and by placing such "low" art in a "high" art space, the artist appeared to be casting a damning indictment on the whole endeavour.

It was Koons' "Made in Heaven" series that caused the biggest fuss of all, however. Reflecting on its inception nearly 20 years later, in his unsubtle studio in New York's Meat Packing District, the artist says the idea came from an original commission to create an advertisement for New York's Whitney Museum. "The Whitney called me up and asked if I wanted to be in a show [featuring] art that was about image and advertising," he recalls. "Could I make something for billboards for outer New York?" I said, "Sure." I thought I would make something related to advertising and film, so I hired Iona and decided I would be the "ready made" – I would put myself in "Made in Heaven" ..."

When the series was exhibited, many overlooked its meaning and accused Koons of producing pornography – and using the resulting publicity as the medium for peddling an empty message. It was much the same criticism as that attracted six years later by Charles Saatchi's Sensation show at the Royal Academy of Arts – which provoked protests in Piccadilly.

Here, art spilled over into the real world: Marcus Harvey's portrait of Myra Hindley, made from children's handprints, provoked an outcry across the country – and Chris Ofili's black Madonna (decorated with a resin-covered lump of elephant dung) in the entrance from Rudolph G. Gilder, MD Mayor of New York, when she showed to the Brooklyn Museum (which Giuliani threatening to withdraw the museum's annual \$7m grant.) At the height of their powers, the YBAs, who had looked to the New York for inspiration at the beginning of the 1990s, were now shaking up the city.

Alison Gingeras, another of Pop Life's co-curators, suggests that at a time after New York's most flamboyant artists had set the wheels in motion, they were now looking "aspirationally" at the London art scene where "art could matter in a populist vein, where an artist could transcend elitism, and where they had harnessed the populist appetite for scandal".

While Tracy Emin had looked to New York to get into bed with her dealer in 1994, so the New York performance artist Andrea Fraser nearly a decade later found her London counterpart to make an artwork out of sleeping with a collector and filming it in a hotel room. The New York and London connection had come full circle.

Pop Life: Art in a Material World opens at Tate Modern, London SE1, on Thursday and runs until 17 January 2010. See tate.org.uk for more information

Your chance to buy a signed limited-edition print by Gavin Turk
one of the most acclaimed works of the YBA movement was Gavin Turk's "Pop", a waxwork featuring the artist dressed as punk star Sid Vicious pointing a gun at the viewer. The sculpture, which also carried allusions to Andy Warhol's famous portrait of a gun-slinging Elvis Presley, toured London, Berlin and New York as part of Charles Saatchi's seminal Sensation exhibition of 1997. Now one of the highlights of the new show at Tate Modern, Pop Life: Art in a Material World, it has also provided the inspiration for our latest limited-edition signed print offer

Turk says he originally started with the notion of self-portraiture but wanted to create a piece that would embody the "familar yet unfamiliar" and become a piece of "high touristic art". "I wanted it to be a waxwork sculpture that was associated with tourism," he says, "and more specifically, tourism within musical culture. What was to me a 'hiatus' moment in musical culture was probably the punk phenomenon."

Specifically, Turk was inspired by himself, the notorious Sex Pistols bassist who personified the punk period and wound up dead in a New York hotel room in 1979. "I saw the video of him singing 'My Way' and it had everything about Elvis Presley – his hair was spiky, he had a slight snarl, his collar was turned up. Somewhere in the subconscious was the rock'n'roll legend. I also thought of Andy Warhol's picture of Elvis which is obscured and repeated and in which the image appears quite psychodelic. Altogether, the piece of work seemed to be about repeating something, about using derivation in art."

Turk says that while both "Pop" and the new print "Triple Pop" could be considered as kind of self-portrait, it was not an attempt at self-glorification. "I was actually trying to critique the notion of mythology," he recalls. "I was hoping my work would be iconoclastic rather than iconic. I felt that what I was doing was constructing or creating an artist after ego which I could then control, almost as if it were a character that was not necessarily me."

How to buy an exclusive edition of 'triple pop' (2009) by Gavin Turk

The Independent Magazine has secured 20 copies of "Triple Pop" (2009) by Gavin Turk, exclusively for readers at the guaranteed launch price of £95 (normal price £450). The print, produced by Counter Editions, is a screen print on Somerset Tuck-sized paper. Printed by K2, London, and measuring 100x70cm (40x28ins) it is produced in a strictly limited edition of 75, and is signed, numbered and dated by the artist. It is also available (£245) in maple frame sprayed with soft white lacquer, measuring 107x77cm (42x30ins). The edition is offered on a first-come first-served basis from today, Saturday 26 September. To buy "Triple Pop" (2009) log on to countereditions.com/independent and following the on-screen instructions. Delivery within the UK and VAT are included in the price. Alternatively you can order by phoning 020-7684 8888, Mon-Sat 10am-6pm. Delivery is by UPS courier and is within 10 days for unframed prints and 18 days for framed. For full terms and conditions, see countereditions.com, phone 020-7684 8888 or email info@countereditions.com