

Gallery Image



With a roster of artists that includes [Warhol](#), [Koons](#), [Hirst](#) and [Murakami](#)—among many other great art-capitalists—and curators from [Tate Modern](#) and [François Pinault Collection](#) as well as [Artforum](#)'s editor at large, the much-hyped appearance of “Pop Life: Art in a Material World” at the [National Gallery of Canada](#) initially struck me as simply a blue-chip cash grab *tout court*. Emerging from the show, I was left to ponder the curators' imbroglio: how to thoughtfully explore the relationship between art, commerce and celebrity through the format of a capital-B Blockbuster. Commercialism, self-promotion and sensationalism of all stripes are framed here as means for artists to go “beyond the confines of the studio, the gallery and the museum” and

into the broader, media-saturated culture, where most of the artists present have achieved fame, power and wealth. While the show's spectacle and its intentional and unintentional ironies effectively grapple with its "art-as-business" theme, one wonders if finding real coherency in this terrain is a fool's gambit.

"Pop Life" itself [gained notoriety at the Tate](#) when Scotland Yard forced the removal of [Richard Prince's](#) legendary, appropriated and guilt-framed pre-pubescent nude of Brooke Shields, *Spiritual America*, on grounds of obscenity. (The catalogues available in Ottawa cover the offending 1983 image with a sticker advising, "This image has been obscured on legal advice," and only his 2005 sequel featuring an adult Brooke, *Spiritual America IV*, is on display—with no mention of the brouhaha.) A factually inaccurate [April 14 *Globe and Mail* headline](#) tried to whip up some "Sensation"-al furor over the Canadian mounting of the show by howling that "two rooms with works involving sex, dead animals and Nazi images" were "to be closed to under-18s." But in fact only Murakami's life-size, milk- and semen-spouting manga figures, Koons' explicit *Made in Heaven* prints of his couplings with La Cicciolina—with their gloriously toxic hues—and the displays documenting [Andrea Fraser](#) and [Cosey Fanni Tutti's](#) subversive sexual escapades are preceded by benign "adult accompaniment" warnings. (The "dead animals" term no doubt refers to contributions by [Maurizio Cattelan](#) and Damien Hirst, while the "Nazi images" referred to are [Piotr Uklanski's](#) 1998 photo series of actors portraying Nazis, which has attracted a great deal of unwarranted infamy.) It seems that as a society, we want art to be *better* than mass culture, so the vanity and decadence, the exploitation and vulnerability so nakedly on display in "Pop Life" make the not-so-silent majority decidedly uncomfortable. It is somehow apt that an exhibition which at times feels like a greatest hits or one-stop-shop of "controversy" in contemporary art—with real sex, real dead animals and fictional Nazis apparently the biggest vexers—finds itself censored for an image produced almost 30 years ago.



Andy Warhol *Mick Jagger* 1975 © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/SODRAC (2010) / photo Tate Photography

The curators' ambitions are noble—an intelligent survey of “business art” from the 1980s to present—but “the market” is too diffuse and all-pervasive a thing to try to sum up through great artworks. In these artists' expanded field of production, it is the stories that circulate of their personae, their publicity stunts and their audacity that prove most fascinating. Therefore the archival ephemera and contextualizing material tended to draw my attention more than the actual artworks, which sometimes seemed beside the point. For example, deliriously edited footage of the 2007 Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade featuring Koons' massive inflatable rabbit screens in the gallery's lobby, and it contributes much more to the show than the precious real *Rabbit* sculpture from 1986 that sits, well-protected, in the exhibition proper.

The “Pop Life” curators' best decision was to position the exhibition's first room—which focuses on Warhol's much-maligned late work—as the origin story for all the mercenary dealings that come later in the show. Here, icons are piled upon icons: against self-portrait wallpaper,

against endless citations of Warhol's tried-and-true Marilyn, Mona Lisa and Mao. Ephemeral treasures from this period include a letter clarifying the legal terms of his paintings' inclusion in a 1985 episode of *The Love Boat* that he guest-starred in (a wall panel indicates that this episode was actually purchased by the Tate in 2005) and an ad for his modelling services. There is also a concise survey of his television projects—which, among many other qualities, disproves the perfidious lie that Warhol was dumbly inarticulate: he is consistently quick-witted in his numerous self-produced small-screen appearances.

Another key document in the exhibition is the video recording of [Damien Hirst's September 2008 auction *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever*](#), which saw the sale of his garish new body of work—cynical rehashes that raise Warhol's spectre (can we hope we have entered the period of "late Hirst"?)—offering nothing but glittering garbage.

There is also the question of the vast diversity of practices on view. Beyond their queerness, is there a connection between [Keith Haring's](#) street populism and [General Idea's](#) wry conceptualism? (They are one of the made-in-Canada additions to "Pop Life" organized by assistant curator of contemporary art Jonathan Shaughnessy; these show alongside such patriotic fare as a 1984 Warhol portrait of Wayne Gretzky and a Warhol photo album opened to a spread of Margaret Trudeau at Studio 54.) A vast gulf similarly separates Takashi Murakami from [Reena Paulings](#), yet here they sit side by side, with the fictional New York artist-dealer offering three final punctuating periods to the show with some decidedly unglamorous soiled circular tablecloths—the remnants of art opening festivities. Such nods to the vast, complex (and of course, heavily mediated) social world that swirls around the individual artworks and artists on display are what make this blockbuster show really pop.

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Jeff Koons *Rabbit* 1986 © Jeff Koons / photo Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection Los Angeles/Douglas M. Parker Studio Los Angeles