

The Value Industry

Reflections on Art, Money and Celebrity

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extract from **Chapter 6: Weapons of Massive Consumption**

Don't Break My Art, My Achy Breaky Art

Miley Cyrus once said her goal in life is 'to not die a pop pop dumb dumb'¹. She was searching for redemption from a life lived in the spotlight: haunted by the ghost of Hannah Montana, plagued by a string of pop hits, cursed with a famous father and stupendous wealth, all played out through a haze of sex and drugs. So Cyrus turned to art in an attempt to save her soul.

Cyrus had a difficult time in 2014. She spent in hospital and her dog died, not to mention the gruelling schedule of her Bangerz tour. In the midst of all the chaos, she took time out to reflect on the tumultuous events of her life and on her posterity, and concluded that she would 'freak out' if she died having only ever been a trailblazing popstar. This introspection gave rise to Cyrus' big break into the artworld, with her debut exhibition, 'Dirty Hippie' at the offices of *V Magazine*, New York City.

Cyrus made exactly the sort of art anyone expected her to make: garish, clumsy, cheap, poppy sculptures that could only be the result of petulant, spoiled indulgence. The sculptures in question were collages of found objects, including vibrators, teddy bears, beads, hamster toys, party hats and drug paraphernalia. Such conglomerations of sickly sweet coloured plastic objects were reminiscent of Mike Kelley, on a somewhat charitable interpretation. Pristinely glued together to form phallic symbols, headdresses set upon pure white mannequin heads and bees-nest bundles of assorted detritus on plinths, they trod a line

¹ Miley Cyrus quoted in Kevin McGarry, 'Miley Cyrus Presents', *V Magazine*, 29 August 2014. All quotes are from this source.

between abstraction and figuration, expressing a frustration with the shallowness of consumer culture, as if they were the fruits of an infant Jeff Koons' untutored loins.

The story behind these sculptures is a gripping tale. The raw materials were donated by adoring fans or otherwise collected on tour by a popstar desperate to relieve herself of her abundant fortune. This accumulation of stuff inspired Cyrus to think about how money does not buy happiness. She reflected on her tortured existence, even despite the trappings of fame, and concluded that material possessions and adoration did nothing to cure the existential boredom she routinely dulls by smoking weed every day. Cyrus then started making art out of this clutter in order to both express her discontent with that clutter and in an attempt to create something more transcendent and durable than her pop career. It is a familiar story, straight out of Nietzsche, via Sophocles: the birth of art out of the spirit of discontent with consumerism and popular culture.

Cyrus followed in an illustrious line, where comparisons could be drawn with the likes of Koons, Hirst and Richard Phillips. Like Phillips, she aimed to expose the emptiness beneath the sheen of celebrity; like Hirst, she used a disparity between the materials and the ideas to raise questions about value; and like Koons, the sheer banality of it all was overblown to the point of irresistibility. Furthermore, the art of Miley Cyrus possessed the charming duality of being both an outward-looking critique of culture and an intimate expression of her tormented inner self.

Cyrus' own explanation of her art is somewhat less poetic. 'They say money can't buy happiness and it's totally true...Money can buy you a bunch of shit to glue to a bunch of other shit that will make you happy, but...obviously the shit you buy doesn't make you happier because I'm sitting here gluing a bunch of junk to stuff'. You almost felt sorry for her because, at the grand old age of 21, she was clearly having an existential crisis and she believed that art was a perfectly logical response to it.

The works that comprised 'Dirty Hippie' certainly looked like art. They were collaged sculptures, a fusion of the contemporary trend for upcycling found or appropriated materials with the traditional craft of sculpting. And they were expressive, in the manner of RG Collingwood's injunction that art should arouse in its audience an emotional response to the

artist's state of mind as embodied in the work². Moreover, they also commented more broadly on the human condition in the grip of late capitalism. But there was something awry in the claim, implicit in all the write-ups, that this art should have value as art, namely cultural value, precisely because it was made by a celebrity. The idea was that Cyrus' celebrity status infused the work with artistic kudos because she was expressing herself in sculpture, as she does in her music, thus demonstrating creative versatility.

There is an inherent perversion in the public response to contemporary art: when an established artist presents a work that mildly offends out-dated sensibilities about what art is, there is an outrage which asks, 'Is it art?'; but when a celebrity, well-accomplished in some field of entertainment but with little artistic background, presents a work that minimally simulates the appearance of art, nobody bats an eyelid. When a high-profile event like the Turner Prize proffers Emin's *My Bed* or Martin Creed's *Work No. 227 The lights going on and off* (2001), a braying public demands blood, but when a self-indulgent celebrity with too much time on their hands convinces a gallery to show their artistic fumbblings, such as Miley Cyrus' sculptures or Pete Docherty's well-meant but ghastly blood letters, the public accepts it as both art and another glittering example of that celebrity's genius.

The question of how to respond to Cyrus' work, then, is vexed by the willingness to accept celebrity art while rejecting genuine artworks. A fair, intellectually responsible judgement requires that we divorce the work from the person who created it, as if applying an aesthetic version of John Rawls' Veil of Ignorance whereby all judgements are to be made without the slightest knowledge of yours or anyone else's position in the grand scheme of things so that everything is treated fairly³. On this view, it looks like that kind of trendy, disposable commercial art that ticks all the right boxes to buy today and sell tomorrow. It is impossible to deny that Miley Cyrus has made a decent simulation of art, the illusion of which is sustained by an unfathomable self-belief. Nonetheless, if you want edifying contemporary art which does more than just look like art, then you could do better than the idling of a drugged-up, bored, pop pop dumb dumb.

² RG Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*.

³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 118.

For the value industry, celebrity status is enough to guarantee economic value, since somebody will buy the work, no matter how good it is, because it is by Miley Cyrus. This, given what we have already said about the power of operative mythologies to create value, cannot be contested. The point of contention, however, arises when we consider the further claim, implicit in the judgement of economic value and the optimistic comparisons with Kelley and Koons, is that the work possesses some cultural value. To be sure, some of that cultural value derives from the work's being sufficiently comparable to other extant sculpture, but some of it arises from Cyrus's celebrity status. Its cultural value, if it has any, derives from the novelty of Cyrus expressing herself, and thus showcasing her talents, in a different artistic medium.

The idea is that Cyrus is already an artist, a music artist, who makes a living from the expression of human feeling in aesthetic form, so when she transfers that skillset from music to sculpture, nothing is, artistically speaking, lost or changed. It is exactly the power of celebrity that makes this transference possible: in virtue of being internationally adored, lucrative and famous, she can switch at will from one artform to another, making no difference to the integrity of her message and effortlessly imbuing sculpture, as much as music, with the magic of her touch. Although the myth of celebrity is powerful, it is not powerful enough to transfigure *anything* into art. To understand why this is, we need to think soberly about what art really is and how cultural value cannot simply be magicked out of nowhere in the same way that economic value can be.