

Art and Appropriation

Katie Vivan

Moreton Bay College

You wouldn't steal a car; you wouldn't steal a handbag; you wouldn't steal a television; and you wouldn't think a renowned artist would steal from an already existing artwork, would you?

Appropriation refers to the art of 'borrowing' elements from a pre-existing source and using them in the creation of a new work. One of the simplest examples of an artwork based on appropriation is a collage, as it combines mixed media and images that have appeared in some other form. However appropriation is by no means a simple technique; it has been used in various ways for hundreds of years and has been applied very successfully by many esteemed artists. For example, in some respects Leonardo da Vinci could be classified as an appropriation artist as he synthesised components of biology, mathematics and engineering into amazing works of art. Appropriation continued in the art world from Pablo Picasso incorporating newspaper clippings in his artworks, to Marcel Duchamp creating 'readymade' art by taking an object such as a urinal and using it in an unprecedented manner.

Fast forward a few decades and Andy Warhol, undoubtedly one of the most innovative artists of the pop art movement, began to incorporate elements of everyday life into his artwork, from his Brillo boxes to the Campbell's soup can. Warhol was fascinated with popular consumer culture and, based on this, created extraordinary artworks by utilising the ordinary.

It is no surprise, though, that due to the nature of appropriation several copyright issues have arisen over the years and many heated arguments have taken place over whether appropriation is a form of stealing and if it can be considered a legitimate art form. Some particularly restrictive copyright laws have even made aspects of appropriation in artwork extremely difficult, if not illegal. Although both sides of the argument hold their own merit, we must consider the context of the argument... art. As we all know, art is simply a form of expression which is generally the result of an inspiring thought, image or message that the artist feels the need to convey: so why is it that this inspiration cannot be recognised within the final artwork?

Ben Frost is a perfect example of an artist who uses appropriation in his work. Frost, an Australian artist, creates mesmerising artworks that consist of a concoction of the darker side of beloved Disney characters, familiar advertisements and recognisable logos. Frost's artworks mirror consumer culture and the massive amounts of advertising we are bombarded with on a daily basis. His works challenge the status quo by juxtaposing the innocence of cartoon characters, like Hello Kitty and Bambi, with shocking images of porn stars, nuclear bombs and guns. It is not only the aesthetic value of his artworks which is notable, due to his vivid and bold use of colour, but it is the way in which he constructs his artworks which make them truly remarkable. Frost uses the familiar characters and household logos as the vehicle that drives his hard hitting opinions and views straight to the audience. He applies a new and powerful message to the pre-existing images which creates a long-lasting effect with a high degree of shock value. Although Frost has to some extent 'stolen' the already existing imagery, it is his own originality and innovation which make the amalgamation of well-known figures a work of art.

It is the prior knowledge that the audience brings to the artwork which also makes the appropriation successful or not. If we did not previously view Hello Kitty as a naïve and innocent character we would not be nearly so disturbed by Frost's depiction of her holding a gun. Also, the technique of appropriation can affect our own sense of identity, as we so often mindlessly accept the images and messages we see which influence our view of our place in society. When we see

an image with a new and unprecedented message, it forces us to look at things in a new light and reassess and question our own surroundings and, to an extent, our individuality.

Therefore, although superficially appropriation may not seem to be a highly technical and involved practice, it is in fact a refined art style which has the potential to alter the way we perceive ourselves and our society. To answer the question: would a renowned artist steal from an already existing artwork? No. A great artist would, however, use whatever means necessary to convey their message to the audience. Thus there is no need to question the legitimacy of an artwork that incorporates appropriation as it is not the raw images that are of the most important, but rather the power that these images have when combined with an artist's vision.