

Note: these are exhibition notes from my time as the Visitor Services Specialist in Education at the Walker Art Center, printed as pamphlets and distributed among museum Visitor Services employees and volunteers to help with visitor questions and concerns. The show's curator would walk me through the exhibit, explaining their vision and thinking, and I would "translate" this high-level talk into something that might connect with the average museum-goers' experience.
 –Jeff Henebury

This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980's exhibition notes

Curated by: Helen Molesworth, chief curator, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

Originating institution: the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago

Walker coordinating curator: Bartholomew Ryan

What is *This Will Have Been*?

This Will Have Been focuses on the years between 1979 and 1992 and features over 100 works made by more than eighty artists during that era. This period begins with punk, sees the rise of conservative politics in the Reagan and Thatcher eras, and ends with the presidency of Bill Clinton. *This Will Have Been* shows artists' attempts to navigate the first days of true mass-media saturation, the ascension of art as a luxury commodity, and movements for social justice clashing with the era's reigning conservatism. Fun and stressful times!

Themes

This Will Have Been is laid out into four parts:

- “The End is Near” explores the end of painting, the end of the counterculture, and the end of history. (Think postmodernism, the fall of sixties’ and seventies’ idealism, and the rise of hyper-self-awareness in art). The show has some international artists, but the main focus is New York, which the curator sees as going through its final decade as the “center” of the art world in the 80s. By the end of the decade with the fall of the Berlin Wall and other precedents, New York’s status as the center was collapsing as Globalization became the new reality.
- “Democracy” focuses on artists’ work in the street and their burgeoning awareness (and exploitation) of mass media, as well as a broader commitment to the political and the increased prominence of Central American artists and artists of color.
- “Gender Trouble” shows work evolving out of 1970s feminism, expanding gender roles and addressing new ideas about sexuality and the human figure in art.

- “Desire and Longing” combines the art of appropriation which was often related to commodities and how the mass media and advertising construct desire through selling new notions of identity with art (often using appropriation) that longed for new forms of intimacy and visibility for Queer culture, much of it sparked by the loss and anger of AIDS crisis.

What problems might people have with this show? What are some strategies to talk about these problems?

One issue people might bring up about the exhibit is, “But this wasn’t my experience of the eighties *at all*.” If this is brought up, it might help to explain that this is a very consciously subjective show, in that the show’s curator, Helen Molesworth, decided early on against attempting an all-encompassing critical survey of the decade. Instead, she concentrated on works that she personally felt still had resonance today. In her words:

“The first path I took was to organize the show based on the kind of critical nomenclature of the period ... and it looked, to my eye, really terrible, really stale. I realized I needed an organizing structure that remained true to what was important in the work in that period, but also offered a way to think about what is important for now. Instead of looking at the material in the way it was discussed at the time, I tried to reimagine what was still vital about it for our present.”

A second issue people might take is the difficulty of a lot of the pieces on display. *This Will Have Been* is not an easy show; this was the first tour guide training I’d attended where a tour guide said, “I object to this piece’s inclusion,” and other guides hotly debated other work’s intentions and meanings. When the people who are volunteering their time to the Walker because they *love* art are getting angry about the art, it’s a good sign that others might get angry, too. A good strategy here might be a redirection of that anger by pointing out that, for a lot of people, the eighties themselves were a very angry and tumultuous time. With the rise of Reaganism, the progressive politics of the sixties and seventies seemed to be unwinding right in front of everyone’s eyes; the AIDS crisis was affecting friends, family, and (for many artists featured in this exhibit) the artists themselves, with little being done on the governmental level to combat it; and fights for racial, gender, and queer rights faced very real opposition. This is art in reaction to a time of huge political and social upheaval; but although many of the issues are very similar to those of today (the rise of the far right, opposition to gay marriage and abortion rights), artistic protest in the eighties was incredibly strong. Again, in Molesworth’s words:

“I also think the emotional quality of the exhibition, which was apparent at the opening at the MCA last winter, also comes from the sense of urgency that the work still has. It’s prickly and unresolved, and very little of it is designed to be comfortable in a domestic interior. You know, I feel like in the ’90s and the 2000s we’ve all gotten ... not complacent, but very, very good at accommodating power. And there was a period when we were a lot more vocal about not wanting to be so accommodating. I think people kind of miss that.”

Example of a piece in the show:**What is it?**

Jeff Koons, *Rabbit*, 1986

Why is this in this show?

Rabbit is a really good example of a “Desire & Longing” piece. Koons’ work holds the record for the highest auction price by a living artist. He’s followed the Warhol path of selling reproductions of his work for international fame and more money than you can shake a stick at—yet many people want to write his balloon-animal sculptures off as kitsch. Curator Molesworth describes *Rabbit* as “perfect,” and the *Daily Planet* does a good job explaining why this is so:

“‘Perfect’ is exactly the right word for Koons’ bunny: it’s both a stunning object in a very traditional sense and an ironic commentary on itself, a heavy and expensive reproduction of a cheap, hollow, mass-produced plastic toy. One way to define a perfect work of art is to say that it’s beyond criticism, and Koons’s bunny is perfect in precisely that sense, encapsulating its own criticism and literally reflecting the viewer’s perception back upon themselves.”

In other words: a very self-aware and postmodern bunny! *Rabbit* is a mirror which reflects the viewer back to themselves, pointing to the increased narcissism of the 80s: a cute bargain-basement stuffed bunny transformed into a priceless “eternal” work of art after being cast in mirrored stainless steel. What you see is what you get!