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Are You Buying What These Artists Are Selling? The absurdity of American commercialism is laid bare in the Hirshhorn's latest exhibition

By Roger Catlin



Pieces like this one, Erika Rothenberg's 1989 *Freedom of Expression Drugs*, put a sardonic spin on everyday products. (Erika Rothenberg)

For five years, Barbara Kruger's 6,000-square-foot installation *Belief + Doubt*, a barrage of insistent commercialist maxims—WANT IT, BUY IT, SELL IT, HATE IT, FORGET IT—has sprawled cleverly from the Hirshhorn Museum's lower level lobby to the gift shop.

Now, a just-unveiled exhibition fittingly titled "Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s" is looking to expand on the theme. Unsurprisingly, Kruger is represented in the new show—indeed, her 1987 *Untitled (I shop therefore I am)* is on the cover of the accompanying catalog, available in that

gift shop downstairs. There's a second gift shop counter in the exhibition, too—shaped like a dollar sign to drive home the idea of art as commodity—with a number of pamphlets and items

from General Idea, the artistic collective that created it. None of it is actually for sale, but it serves well to set the tone. The swift rise of art qua consumer good, the willful self-branding of artists, and the widespread co-opting of advertising imagery are all central themes of the show, which

includes nearly 150 works by 70 artists, largely from New York's East Village.

"There was a robust art market, there was a stock market high," says Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu. "There were a lot of crossover moments between art and marketing. And in some ways the genesis of where we find ourselves today can be found in the '80s."

A few of the artists in the show, such as Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, soared to art world stardom; most others did not, despite all the elaborate self-branding.

In some ways, Chiu says, the history of 1980s art has been written around the boldly staged, politically charged cinematic work of the so-called Pictures Generation. "Brand New," she says, is "another kind of account. You could almost call it an alternative account."

It is also an alternate worldview, as shown by David Robbins's 1987 bronze *Prop* at the entrance of the

exhibition, quoting the epigraph at the Disneyland entry: “Here You Leave Today and Enter the World of Yesterday, Tomorrow and Fantasy.”

Not far away, running on a loop, is the famous “1984” Big Brother Super Bowl ad heralding the Macintosh computer, presented as though it were intended to be art. Between the two, in giant wall text, is Haim Steinbach’s 1988 on vend du vent, whose iterated French title translates to “we sell wind.”

Appropriated advertising abounds in “Brand New.” Images that were in advertising photographs are photographed again and repurposed in pieces like Richard Prince’s 1980 Untitled (Hand with cigarette and watch).

There are reimagined commercial products in “Brand New” as well, some with original, lampooning labels that harken back to “Wacky Packages” trading cards, such as Erika Rothenberg’s 1989 Freedom of Expression Drugs or Alan Belcher’s 1983 \$51.49.

Putting products on display as art was the stock-in-trade of Andy Warhol, whose obsession with icons of American culture is readily apparent in his famous portrayals of Campbell’s soup cans and Marilyn Monroe.

Warhol’s blue-hued 1986 Self-Portrait, a fixture in the Hirshhorn’s collection, appears in “Brand New” both in real life and in an investment bank magazine ad of the same era. The original, though, is placed on a brazenly ripped-off expanse of Warhol cow wallpaper from 1984, which artist Mike Bidlo attributed to “Not Warhol,” as if to avoid copyright lawyers.

Opposite the portrait and appropriated wallpaper are a series of slides depicting costumed figures clearly modeled after Warhol’s Factory characters. This scene of artistic

apery was staged by Bidlo and his friends in 1984.

Warhol, according to Gianni Jetzer, the Hirshhorn curator-at-large who spent two years organizing the show, was “a master of self-branding.” In a way, it’s only fitting that Warhol’s commercially influenced work was stolen and spun by followers like Bidlo looking to create personal brands of their own.

An underlying notion in “Brand New” is that painting was supposedly dead—an odd declaration, since some of the most successful art of the 1980s was by painters, including David Salle, Robert Longo and Julian Schnabel.

Jetzer says that the artists of “Brand New” may have represented different approaches, “but I think they all agreed the enemy was neo-expressionist paintings. They didn’t really like it. They saw it as a dated position, an anachronistic position.”

Politics play a surprisingly small part in the show, considering artists were largely working during the Reagan administration, and fighting that new scourge in the creative community, AIDS.

The disease gets a nod with a neon sculpture of the ACT UP logo, Silence = Death, which is noted for its branding. But the work of outspoken pop artist-turned-political activist Keith Haring, whom the disease claimed in 1990, might have been included.

There was one political casualty in “Brand New” on the day it opened. A planned three-night projection of a piece by Krzysztof Wodiczko titled Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C., first shown on the curved exterior of the museum in 1988, was cut to one night only following the shocking Parkland, Florida, high school shooting massacre on February 14, which killed 17.

Meant to comment on the politics of its day—and the “thousand points of light” of the 1988 presidential campaign—the work also seemed to serve as a direct commentary on contemporary gun violence. Three stories in height, the projection shows a menacing handgun and serene candle flanking a bank of microphones.

It was cut by the museum after one night “out of sensitivity to our community in D.C. and beyond,” Chiu said. “Now is a time for mourning and reflection.”

Chiu did add that it was only a postponement, saying that “we look forward to restating the work in its original format at a later date.” (Ed Note: The projection of Krzysztof Wodiczko’s 1988 work is rescheduled for March 7, 8 and 9 from 7:30 to 9 p.m.)

Wodiczko, who called the 30-year-old projection “strangely familiar and at once unbearably relevant” before its one-night appearance, later said in a statement, “To me, the silence feels most respectful. In this case, not showing the project shows respect and sensitivity to the people who suffer from this great tragedy.”

Footage of the projection will show in the museum’s lobby.

With the three-story projection gone, the largest work in “Brand New” is a 10-by-22-foot Smirnoff billboard for canned cocktails, which the controversial Jeff Koons appropriated and put his own name on without changing anything. He is said to have been attracted to the largest words on the ad, which became the title of “his” piece: New! New too!

*“Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s” continues through May 13 at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington D.C. Barbara Kruger’s Belief + Doubt continues indefinitely on its lower level. On March 7, 8 and 9, the project artwork of Krzysztof Wodiczko will be restaged from 7 to 9:30 p.m.*