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Scandals and Vandals  
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## **The Movie**

In the documentary “Mona Lisa Curse” Robert Hughes suggests, ever since the Mona Lisa arrived in the United States in 1963, the world of art started to decay landing itself on today’s “worsen commercial” art market. The documentary parallels La Gioconda’s trip to New York to the beginning of the Pop Art movement, which was about to spread around the art world and dominate auction houses.

In the beginning of the documentary Robert Hughes paints the life of young artists from the 60’s generation as having a thrilling an exciting life though certainly not a luxurious one. Their artwork rarely afforded these artists enough to go by.

The criticism begins as private collectors and auction houses started to purchase a large number of paintings for a low value they initially cost and sold them for hundreds of thousand of dollars to museums and private collectors. This practice generated an entire market for private art as well as new jobs such as art advisers who “helped” buyers make informed purchases. According to Robert, the problem with these practices wasn’t the amount of money spend in the paintings but the fact it was going to the auctioneers rather than to the artists themselves, these issue was also taken by many of the artists themselves.

Robert claims the new practices transformed New York from a place of the arts to a place of the art market. According to Robert Hughes the shift to a market driven art form happened so quickly that a painting’s value stopped being measured due to it’s aesthetics and emotional strength to become fully depended of it’s price tag. This new form of value then renders a generation of artists who’s main “artistic” goal is to produce expensive and easy to manufacture pictures which can be sold in large quantities and supply the luxurious art buyers.

In the end of the documentary the narrator compares a diamond-covered skull, the highest valued contemporary sculpture of the time, to the Mona Lisa. Robert then implies the skull is a completely worthless piece of art measurably inferior to Advance’s masterpiece and blames the new art market for the ugly skull’s high value and the contemporary visual art trend he openly dislikes.

## **Response**

I believe Robert Hughes blames a new market culture, which likely influenced contemporary art into becoming what it is today. However his disapproval of today’s art may be a matter of taste rather than the impression of a measurably inferior movement. One of the possible reasons for his distaste for the new movement may be explained by a misunderstanding between Pop Artists and their buyers.

My interpretation of 1960's visual art is not that it attempted to challenge the barrier that separates which objects represent art and which represent commercial products. This is a common interpretation often attributed to Duchamp and Andy Warhol pieces. I believe what Pop Art best challenges is the value of an object which has its artistic value disconnected to its physical properties. It is possible that Duchamp looked at the job of a composer and wondered if they were musicians or painters when they wrote their music on paper without touching an instrument. At the end of the composer's job their only product is ink on paper but the paper used for the composition isn't the object that grants the composer their income. In fact the value of a composition increases the more physical copies composers are able to sell. It is possible to compare the art market problem to a hypothetical person buying Bartok's manuscripts for thousands of dollars but never listening to the music. The same can be said of an author.

When Andy Worrall reprints the same picture multiple times I believe it is the thought behind the picture he is attempting to sell. As the market continues buying the reprints as if those objects are the artworks rather than their meaning (sound, poetry) a disconnection between market and art is born out of a misinterpretation of value.

Another problem with Robert's documentary is that he claims the problem with contemporary art is that it became a business rather than a separate kind of practice. However it is possible to look at the culture of art making and realize the problem might be that at one point it stopped being a business and became a separate kind of practice to begin with.

Through most of music's history, the art of composition served the practical purposes of entertaining, advertising and enhancing spiritual experiences. When studying Bach's commissions it is hard to look at his career as anything other than a great jingle writer. When a church needed a particular piece for a funeral, music was commissioned to the church's composer. When a king got married, Mozart would be called to quickly write a sonata to serve the occasion. Before the end of the Classical period there was more demand for music than people able to supply the demand therefore many famous composers famously re-orchestrated pieces they heard in other concerts as if it was theirs. This attitude towards musical art forms only started to change with Beethoven who famously expressed his belief in the separation of product and artistic craft. This happened when Beethoven stumbled on a prince while walking in the streets of Bonn and said "There are and will be a thousand princes; there is only one Beethoven." - (Beethoven)

The impression that art is fundamentally different from service, decoration and entertainment may simply be dying, returning to its initial state. To the discomfort of people such as Robert Hughes the commercialization of works of art might mean, it was never separated from capitalism or even special at all. Still, I believe it is possible for people to critically consume art and experience the rush of emotionally reacting to works outside the auction house. Robert might just need to leave the museums, private galleries, financial buildings and start going to places where he can experience street art, slam poetry and free jazz.