



The artist and the brand

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the brand

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to argue that greater awareness of the connections between the traditions and conventions of visual art and the production and consumption of images leads to enhanced ability to understand branding as a strategic signifying practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Several prominent, successful artists served as case studies to illuminate the potential for insights into the interconnections between art, branding, and consumption by turning to art history and visual studies. Discusses the cross-fertilization of art and branding, focusing on three contribution areas: the interactions between art, brands and culture, the self-reflexivity of brands, and brand criticism.

Findings – Successful artists can be thought of as brand managers, actively engaged in developing, nurturing and promoting themselves as recognizable “products” in the competitive cultural sphere.

Originality/value – This paper places brands firmly within culture to look at the complex underpinnings of branding, linking perceptual and cognitive processes to larger social and cultural issues that contribute to how brands work and argues that art-centred analyses generate novel concepts and theories for marketing research.

Keywords Brand management, Arts, Marketing strategy

Paper type Conceptual paper

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Introduction

Recent research has shown that brands work in multiple ways, prompting an important and illuminating reconsideration of branding processes and shifting attention from brand producers toward consumer response to understand how branding creates meaning (e.g., Aaker, 1997; Firat and Shultz, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2003; Johar *et al.*, 2001; Ritson and Elliott, 1999; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004; Thompson, 2004). Cultural codes, ideological discourse, consumer’s background knowledge, and rhetorical processes have been cited as underlying influences of consumer’s relationships to advertising, brands and mass media. Consumers are seen to construct and perform identities and self-concepts, trying out new roles and creating their self-image within and in collaboration with, brand culture (e.g., Elliott, 1997; Hirschman and Thompson, 1997; Holt, 2002; Wikström, 1996). In other words, neither managers nor consumers completely control branding processes – cultural codes contribute to, and constrain, how brands work to produce meaning.

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Brands are inherently visual; brand logos, product design, packaging, brand identity, and brand marketing campaigns each draw upon visual materials to create distinctive brand images, yet marketing scholarship has seemed reluctant to embrace the art world's potential contributions to branding knowledge (see, for example, Brown and Patterson, 2000; Witkowski, 1999). This paper forms part of a larger call for inclusion of art historical issues within the marketing research canon (Schroeder and Borgerson, 2002), and joins in the contention that art history can provide a necessary contextualizing counterpoint to information processing views of branding's interaction with consumer behavior and visual perception. This is not to claim that brands are wholly visual, rather to point attention to the visual aspects of branding that might benefit from an art-based approach. In this paper, several prominent, successful artists serve as illustrative examples of the interconnections between art, branding, and consumption, placing cultural brands firmly within culture to look at the complex underpinnings of the branding process.

This paper argues that greater awareness of the connections between the traditions and conventions of visual art and the production and consumption of images leads to enhanced ability to understand branding as a strategic signifying practice. Artists offer exemplary instances of image creation in the service of building a recognizable look, name, and style – a brand, in other words. Successful artists can be thought of as brand managers, actively engaged in developing, nurturing, and promoting themselves as recognizable “products” in the competitive cultural sphere. However, the intellectual, disciplinary, and semiotic separation of art and business has obscured the potential of studying the art market as an exemplar of image-based branding. An art-centered approach suggests augmenting the branding research tradition to acknowledge both the commercial mechanisms inherent in the art market and brands prominent place in visual culture.

Three leading artists will serve as case studies: Andy Warhol, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman. Warhol provides a stunning example of artist as brand – he was extremely articulate about his ambition to become famous – and his work reflectively comments on brands and consumer culture. Warhol's contributions to branding are many, and he remains a hot brand almost 20 years after his untimely death. Barbara Kruger, a contemporary artist whose work focuses on the production and consumption of images, has exerted a profound influence on contemporary artists and graphic designers use of combined text and images. Perhaps best known for her photomontage *I Shop Therefore I Am*, Kruger's combinations of text and found images address a host of representational issues relevant to branding, consumption, and identity. Her images resonate with marketing scholarship on the critical interaction between consumption and identity, as she consciously calls attention to marketplace strategy, much as Andy Warhol marketed himself as a brand name. Yet, unlike Warhol, she seems to maintain a critical stance toward commodification and consumer culture. Cindy Sherman's haunting, enigmatic portraits have earned her the title of *artist*, rather than mere photographer. Her *Untitled Film Stills* – a series of self-portraits in the style of movie publicity photographs – are an icon of twentieth century art. Sherman, while not as self-reflexive about the branding process, constitutes an important figure in the realm of brand identity and image creation.

Aesthetics, art and marketing

The branded world intersects with the art world in numerous ways – art museum shops play increasingly important roles in revenue streams and consumer/viewer experience, branded organizations sponsor art exhibitions, art auction houses such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s have developed strong brands, and branding strategy informs the contemporary milieu of superstar artists and collectors. Furthermore, many contemporary artists utilize brands in their work, commenting on, critiquing, and creatively interrogating the branding concept and its role in consumer culture. German artist Hans Haacke’s work consistently denigrates what he sees as the negative influence of corporations such as Philip Morris within the cultural sphere (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995). However, the separation of art and business – into high and low forms of communication and culture – has had a profound influence on how art is viewed by researchers, cultural critics, and consumers alike. An art-centered approach suggests re-framing this research tradition to acknowledge both the commercial mechanisms inherent in the art market and advertising’s prominent place in visual culture (see also Bogart, 1995; Fillis, 2000; Joy, 1998; Joy and Sherry, 2003; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2002; Scott, 1994; Witkowski, 1996, 1999).

Typical turns to art, artists, and aesthetics in management and marketing often involve ill-defined groping for “innovation”, “creativity”, or “play”. But art is serious business. Successful artists – those that manage to have their work widely exhibited, bought, and collected – may be seen as twin engines of branding knowledge, both as consummate image managers, and as managers of their own brand – the artist. Art creates enormous wealth – for artists, dealers, collectors, and investors as well as via tourism and cultural development. Paintings consistently rank among the world’s most valuable objects, exemplified by Sotheby’s recent sale of Picasso’s *Boy with a Pipe* for \$104.2 million (Hughes, 2004). The art market is all about money, value, and investment, and artists – at least most of the well-known examples – are tremendously occupied with successfully selling their images. Art, then, has become an emerging asset class (Clayton, 2004). So why not turn to artists for insight into, say, branding, brand management, images, and value creation? How do artists manage images? What can brand researchers learn from visual artists’ use of consumer culture themes and images?

Art history and criticism, traditionally outside the realm of consumer and marketing research, add a necessary component to understanding contemporary marketing practice, as well as useful methods for interpreting and analyzing the historical trends in representing, consuming, celebrating and critiquing cultural goods. Art historical tools can provide a rich picture of the underlying mechanisms driving the evolution of consumer culture. In addition, art is a commodity, subject to market forces and consumer behavior processes (e.g., Caves, 2002; Jensen, 1994; Schroeder, 2000; Sturken and Cartwright 2001; Watson, 1992; Witkowski, 1996). By analyzing content, form, and the uses of art we gain insight into numerous components of consumer culture – consumer behavior, demand, price, and patronage, to name a few. Art, then, offers an excellent, underutilized vehicle for studying and understanding cultural forces in brand marketing (see also Holbrook and Hirschman, 1992; Stern and Schroeder 1994). My framework views branding as a powerful representational system that produces knowledge through discursive practice, in addition to its traditional role as marketing strategy.

Work in consumer research has suggested that the pop artist, Andy Warhol, could be productively viewed as a consumer researcher. His output – paintings, prints, films, books, and designs – was put forth as offering insights into consumption and marketing outright. Moreover, Warhol was adept at building his own image into a brand – the Andy Warhol brand, which continues to command auction prices among the highest for any twentieth century artist. This study pointed out several research areas that a close study of Warhol might illuminate, including fashion, imagery, packaging, and identity (Schroeder, 1997). However, the potential insights for close study of artists such as Warhol remain under developed within marketing scholarship.

Andy Warhol

Warhol's career was largely about producing the ultimate consumer good – oneself. Celebrity, brand, superstar, artist, genius – Warhol revelled in the mechanisms of fame. Warhol mastered images. His artistic output, including prints, paintings, sculpture, photographs, books, films, and clothing, radiates insight into image culture, branding, and success. His idea that “everyone will be famous for 15 minutes” comments on a world where image reigns supreme. Warhol's prominent reputation derived both from his phenomenally prolific output and his omnipresence as a famous figure and celebrity endorser.

His iconic Marilyn Monroe pictures “comment not only on the star's iconic status as a glamour figure, but also on the role of the star as a media commodity – as a product of the entertainment industry that could be infinitely reproduced for mass consumption” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p. 39). Warhol's work demonstrated the power of mass production, the infinite possibility of reproduction, and the disconnection between the image and lived experience (see Francis and King, 1997; Schaffner, 1999). Warhol deliberately chose tragic figures for many of his portraits. Monroe's image was glamorous, sexy, and famous – yet she lived a miserable, lonely, notorious life ending in a sordid suicide in 1962. In Warhol's portraits, we see some of the contradictions of fame, outward appearance versus inward experience, and the artifice of fame. Yet, his art circulates in consumer culture too, and, like his subjects, refers back to mass-produced, branded objects like Campbell's soup, Coke, and Marilyn Monroe, movie star. We remember Marilyn partly via his enigmatic portraits, just as his soup can pictures helped to immortalize Campbell's soup.

One of Warhol's most famous quotes is “A Coke is a Coke. You can't buy a better coke.” This banal quip may seem like just another of his notoriously flip and trivial pronouncements, yet it captures the core strategy of one of the world's most successful brands. Coca-cola developed their distinctive brand on distribution power, marketing might, active awareness, and emotional connection. Coke chose not to segment their market based on quality, price, or additional features. Some consumers might be willing to pay more for Coke with organic ingredients – to alleviate guilty feelings, perhaps. Others might be interested in limited edition flavors, antique-style bottles, or seasonal variations. However, this is contrary to Coke's branding campaign. As Warhol notes, Coke is always the same, always Coke[®], never different. Coke represents America – a land of opportunity, a melting pot of classes and races, a place where class distinctions fade. Coke's sameness points to the triumph of mass

production, where quality control insures consistent product outcomes. Warhol's work captures the essence of Coke's brand strategy – Coca-Cola remains a psychological entity as much as a physical product; its brand equity goes beyond mere material ingredients.

Warhol's soup can series showed that brands are psychological, unattached to the goods they inhabit (see also Gardner and Levy, 1955), which empowers brand equity, brand extensions, and brand image (see Plate 1). We consume the brand as much as the soup, in other words. By taking the famous soup can out of its consumer context and into the art gallery, Warhol, along with other artists, illuminate the power of brands. In many ways, Warhol's soup cans are an extension of the long tradition of still life painting – “depictions of inanimate objects such as fruit, flowers, jugs, plates, bottles, or dead animals” (Cumming, 2001, p. 432). Warhol merely painted twentieth century versions: Coke bottles, Campbell's soup cans, canned vegetables, and so forth (e.g., Danto, 1992). His repeated images comment on the ubiquity of brands, and their ability to appeal to different consumer groups. For example, in his *Two Hundred Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, although the visual effect is one of similarity, each can appears slightly different from the others and several soup varieties are included. Mass produced goods, then, appeal uniquely to individuals via the power of personalization (see also Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). Furthermore, Warhol's own “product line” was highly developed – he painted many variations of the Campbell's soup can, including ones with torn labels, opened cans, discolored labels, and cans of different flavors. His sustained “brand” analysis provides a rich, relatively untapped archive for insight. Warhol's soup can series questions the boundaries between brand culture and high culture as it celebrates aesthetic dimensions of product design, packaging, retail display, and mass production.



Plate 1.
Andy Warhol, *Campbell's
Soup*, 1962

Barbara Kruger

Best known for her photograph *I Shop Therefore I Am* (see Plate 2), Barbara Kruger's photomontages combine text and found images addressing a host of representational issues relevant to consumer culture, economic power, consumer identity, and representational ethics. A former picture editor for Condé Nast publishing house, her work has appeared on billboards, book covers, matchbooks, shopping bags, and in museums worldwide. She is also a writer – her columns appear regularly in *Art Forum* and other outlets and have been collected in a book (Kruger, 1994). Her message resonates with brand researchers whose work reflects the notion that consumption is a critical component of identity, as well as consumer culture scholars interested in the relationships between consumption and identity (e.g., Campbell, 2004). *I Shop Therefore I Am* resembles an advertisement or a flyer for an event but defies typical genres: “her wily manipulations elude aesthetic categorization: no formal criteria can explain them, just as they do not lodge easily within the established traditions of posters, art photography, and so on” (Linker, in Kruger, 1990, p. 13). She focuses on the power of representation; by means of “her arsenal of visual devices, Kruger proposes to intervene in stereotypical representations, disrupting their power, displacing their hold, and clearing a space for enlightened awareness” (Linker, in Kruger, 1990, p. 12). Kruger's stated purpose remains skeptical about brand culture and mass consumption.

Kruger's work reflects marketing techniques, “invoking the snares and innuendoes by which the viewer is beckoned and captivated” (Linker, in Kruger, 1990, p. 75). This linking of culture and consumption mimics brand discourse by appropriating peppy slogans, creatively combining image and text, and isolating consumer culture claims within a complex web of meaning and representation. Unlike Warhol, she seems to maintain a critical stance toward commodification and consumer culture. However, the works of both are readily appropriated by the market (Schroeder, 2000). For example, *I Shop Therefore I Am*'s ironic power was diminished when the *New York Times*



Plate 2.
Barbara Kruger, *I Shop
Therefore I Am*, 1985

Magazine reprinted it to publicize its advertising possibilities; it has also appeared on shopping bags. Still, Kruger's work remains optimistic in its power to reshape representation: "if sexual roles are constructed in representation, they can also be revised and restructured in discourse" (Linker, in Kruger, 1990, p. 63). Kruger's work interrogates consumer culture by highlighting its role in representing identity, the promises of brands, and the hidden power of producers. If consumers create themselves via brands, what kinds of identities are available to them? Of course, *I Shop Therefore I Am* appropriates Descartes famous maxim "I think therefore I am". For hundreds of years, philosophers have argued over the implications of that statement – perhaps Kruger's words and works will provide as much insight for brand researchers.

Like many artists, Kruger's continued success is partly based on "a highly recognizable, consistent visual language" (Whitney Museum web site, 2000). Kruger explains her technique: "I work with pictures and words because they have the ability to determine who we are and who we aren't." Ironically, her distinctive style is based on bits and pieces of commercial clutter – ad slogans, brand names, nostalgic stock photos – combined in an advertising-like manner. Like advertising, Kruger's work juxtaposes often-contradictory themes, transforming unrelated pictures and words into a coherent, catchy image. However, she maintains a critical stance to branding: "You think you can escape commodification – you can't" (Kruger, 1994). Analogous to contemporary marketing scholarship, Kruger's work centers on "the decentered nature of contemporary culture, the struggle between the sign and the signifier, the commodification of the sign, and involves her viewers in the universal flow of power" (Rider, 1999). This confrontational component distinguishes her work from advertising agencies, and distances it from Warhol's enthusiastic embrace of consumer culture.

Kruger asks viewers to question the power of images, commodity culture, and branding processes. She presents an advertising alternative, albeit one that draws on marketing conventions. In her work, branding generally reinforces power, maintains the status quo, and promotes difference (see also Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002). Kruger's images rejects stereotypes, reapportions consumer power, and recirculates advertising logic. For example, *Buy Me, I'll Change Your Life* makes absurd a typical brand claim – don't all brands encourage this Utopian notion? (see Heilbrunn, 2005). Kruger's work, informed by critical cultural theorists like Baudrillard, Jameson, and Foucault, "disarms by subtly implying a long history of intellectual, political, economic and class antagonism" (Rider, 1999). This historical, critical awareness is largely absent from branding discourse (see also Alvesson, 1994). Kruger aims to shake up her viewers, to make them aware of market power, branding, and commodification. She shed critical insight into branding strategy, while at the same time benefiting from the market for her provocative art.

Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman's staged "film still" photographs traverse the realm of portrait, fine art, and identity creation in ways that helped make her one of the most important artists of the past 25 years (e.g., Danto, 1990; Krauss and Bryson, 1993). Sherman's images, in the words of an art theorist "are taken out of history as they are taken up into art" (Kelly, 2002, p. 128). Interestingly, Sherman is known as an artist, not a photographer – her work, although photographic in material – has merged into contemporary art, unhindered by genre conventions. Her works seems simple. Most often her pictures

consist of a photograph of Sherman in a nondescript setting, blankly looking (see Plate 3). By appearing in her own work – as movie star, model, housewife, centerfold, monster, anything except “herself” – Sherman works with contemporary concepts of identity construction, image management, and representational ethics (see Barrett, 2002; Harvey, 1989; Kelly, 2002). Her later work, involving doll parts, sexual themes and violent images, has mirrored the rise of shock advertising – she “produces often bizarre, sometimes graphically unpleasant images that can disturb yet beguile at the same moment” (Morris, 1999, p. 5). She has also produced fashion advertising (Morris, 1999).

Sherman’s film stills are not based upon actual films, rather they implicate the logic of filmic narrative to create mini-stories, framed by Hollywood glamor, celebrity, and identity characterization. This series, all “untitled” secured her fame and fortune, and have entered the canon of twentieth century art. Madonna sponsored their unveiling at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in an interesting “co-branding” event, thus insuring Sherman’s rise as famous artist (Galasi, 1997). Like brand advertising, her work focuses attention on the viewer-consumer as much as the producer-artist “I am trying to make other people recognize something of themselves rather than me” (in Morris, 1999, p. 69).

Sherman’s work gives visual expression to central issues in branding and consumer research, such as what is the relationship between identity and image? And how can identity be constructed and circulated? Her pictures, like Kruger’s, appear to criticize – and creatively deconstruct – consumer constructions of identity, glamorized notions of



Plate 3.
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*
Film Still #54, 1980

representational practice, and the gaze (see Schroeder, 2002). Her consistent – until recently – starring role in her own work has helped her become of the most recognizable art world figures; ironically Sherman herself is relatively reclusive, shunning the spotlight. Thus, her fame, her recurring image in her pictures, and her reclusive public persona pose provocative questions about identity and its essence, echoing brand manager's concerns about corporate identity and its relationship(s) to the firm's core or "innate" values (see also Schultz *et al.*, 2000; Urde, 2003).

As a masterful image-maker, Sherman demonstrates the potential of photography, film, and contemporary art to influence how we see. In the words of one art writer, "so profoundly has she reoriented our thinking about cultural icons, notions of beauty, the role of women in society, and human nature as we *think* we know it, that we no longer regard photography as art form that captures 'reality' or objective truth" (Morris, 1999, p. 111-112). Sherman, and other artists of her time, showed "the role played by photographic images in the world, in their participation in the processes of culture and consumption and in the formation of ideology and subjectivity" (Lowry, 2000, p. 4). Her appropriation of the film still points out a central, if unacknowledged, component of the marketing process – the publicity photograph routinely sent to media outlets to promote films, television shows, and celebrities

In other words, Sherman utilizes the tools of branding: photography, strategic image building, and tapping into cultural myths such as Hollywood, celebrity, and fantasy. Her pictures illuminate the dark side of branding, turning persons into commodities, the relentless looking that characterizes contemporary consumer culture, and pornography's role in shaping sexuality, attractiveness, and sex roles. In this way, she may be seen as an important precursor to Oliverio Toscani's similar reorientation of advertising photography via his shock campaigns for Benetton in the 1990s (see Antick, 2002; Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002). Sherman visualizes processes of identity creation, the urgent looking of consumption, and photography's intertwined interconnections with branding, image management, and the relationships between appearance and lived experience. Sherman's portraits point this out, perhaps making us more aware of the power of images to construct and deconstruct our lives. Photography comprises one common thread between Warhol, Kruger, and Sherman's work. Both Warhol and Kruger used stock photography and celebrity photographs in their work. Warhol and Sherman produced dramatic photographic self-portraits. Each capitalizes on the ready reproducibility of photographs, mimicking and matching the ubiquity of photographs and the mass production of digitized photographic images.

Wisdom from the workshop

This turn to art enlightens three issues:

- (1) the interconnections between art, brands and culture;
- (2) self-reflexivity of brands; and
- (3) brand criticism.

Art, brands, and culture

I have suggested that contemporary artists interact with brands in a number of ways. First, they appropriate brands and commercial symbols in their art – brands provide visual raw material. Second, the art market itself is greatly concerned with brands –

well known global brands like Picasso, Van Gogh, Rembrandt, and Caravaggio. Perhaps in no other market is the relationship between name recognition, value, and branding so clear. Third, artists create visual brands via their work – their style or look. At times, this style directly derives from the branded world, in Andy Warhol's case, for example. Moreover, the logic of marketing – including strategic tools such as creating distinctive products, segmenting the market, brand extension into other genres and media, controlling distribution and fostering exclusivity – often informs artistic production (see Postrel, 2003; Schmitt and Simonson 1997). Barbara Kruger's work formally resembles advertising; Sherman utilizes a strategic marketing tool – the film still – as a central theme in her work. Finally, artists' use of branding helps articulate cultural meanings and associations that constitute brands. Brand managers do not exert total control over brand meaning. Warhol affected the iconic value of Campbell's soup, contributing to its success as a global brand. Other artists bring unwanted negative attention to brands, although this work rarely finds its way into museums (e.g., Bourdieu and Haacke, 1995). Warhol's images have appeared in many ads, and he created the famous Absolut Warhol ad, kicking off the incredibly successful Absolut campaign. Currently, Chanel promotes its iconic No. 5 cologne with a Warhol designed print campaign, completed for the company before his death in 1987. Kruger's work has been appropriated by many ads seeking a cutting edge attitude, and Sherman's controversial style crept into many current ads that unsettle the genre's visual codes.

Artists create images that abstract and reify things, people, and holy figures. They have honed these skills for centuries, building up a visual vocabulary that expresses our highest hopes and our deepest failures. Advertising, in turn, developed in close contact with fine art, and continues to interact with the art world on a daily basis (see Lears, 1994). It should be no surprise, then, that artists know a little about branding, which is all about making emotional connections and image management. As one of his many biographers put it, "Warhol's *Dollar Signs* are brazen, perhaps even insolent reminders that pictures by brand-name artists are metaphors for money, a situation that never troubled him" (Bourdon, 1989, p. 384). Yet, within marketing and branding literature, art remains relatively unseen, unappreciated, and untapped for strategic insight.

Reflexive brands

Warhol's use of Campbell's soup vividly illustrates how brands function outside the realm of the product. By isolating the Campbell's brand image, reducing it to the bright white and red label, and transposing it to canvas and art collection, Warhol uncovered links between Campbell's soups, visual design, and other mass-produced products. Today, Campbell's remains inextricably linked with Warhol, as well as the image of Marilyn Monroe. For many, Warhol's Absolut ad is *the* exemplar of Absolut vodka's spectacularly successful campaign (e.g., Hamilton, 2000).

Brands interact with, 'talk to', and exist among, other brands. From a brand management perspective, this might be considered the competitive arena. General Motors, for example, develops brand *character* for their automobiles that include other brand images. Cadillac aims to resonate with Bang and Olufsen stereo components, Dansk silverware, and Issey Miyake cologne, for example (Nobel, 2000). Siebel Systems cultivates a Volvo image, rather than a Porsche, to discuss their conservative, but safe approach to e-commerce solutions (Siebel, 2001). Artists often actively animate brand

reflexivity by taking brands out of the marketing context and into the gallery, often identifying and highlighting the essence of the brand. Just as often artists appropriate existing links between brand images, brand names, and marketing campaigns. However, artistic use of brand names almost always runs counter to that expected or intended by brand managers, and therein lies its capacity for innovative insight.

Brand critique

Although often portrayed as transgressive tramps rallying against the oppressive system, many artists – particularly the famous ones – have for centuries participated in the persuasive mechanisms of the market, tapping sympathetic subjects, aggressive agents, and powerful patrons. The visual artist's critical role emerged later, heavily embroidered with myth, and today expresses itself in performance art, body art, and shock imagery. Suffice it to say that the twentieth century revealed the intricate interconnections between the aesthetic and political realms. However, artists do critique society, even if public recognition, fame, and appropriation mute that critique by the very objects of its reproach. Art remains deeply entrenched with power. Museums celebrate wealth, images create wealth, and the art market remains a monetary machine.

Commentaries on Cindy Sherman often inscribe a progressive agenda to her work, particularly the disturbing later images, infused with body parts, sexual motifs, and grotesque violence, which seem to critique pornography, horror movies, gruesome fairy tales, and images of sexualized mayhem (Lowry, 2000). Thus, as she disrupts notions of beauty, art, and viewer receptivity, she simultaneously relies on her fame to generate audience attention. One can see a connection between Sherman's recent work and shock advertising of Benetton, Sisley, and Diesel.

In the hands of art critics, artists like Warhol, Kruger, and Sherman do provide cogent critiques of consumer culture. They point out potential dehumanizing processes of commodification, the sameness of the branded environment, and the debilitating effects of celebrity and its quest (see also Holt, 2002). However, their works sit comfortably within a celebratory, liberatory mode of consumption, too. Perhaps it is unfair to group Warhol together with Sherman and Kruger, whose work radiates critical concerns in ways that his never did. Kruger, furthermore, is much more articulate about her oppositional artistic mission, both in her writings and her public appearances. But, like brands, her work circulates in commodity culture, largely outside her control once it leaves the studio, and the market easily appropriates her slogan-like images.

Conclusions and future directions

The visual arts are an impressive cultural referent system that brand managers, art directors, and advertising agencies draw upon for their strategic representational power. This paper called upon three iconic visual artists to illuminate potential cross-fertilization of art and branding, and focused on three contribution areas: the interconnections between art, brands and culture; the self-reflexivity of brands; and brand criticism. Many contemporary artists invoke branding issues in their work – Warhol, Kruger and Sherman provide useful examples that cannot exhaust the potential of this approach. Like Holt's "citizen-artists" (Holt, 2002), this trio produced compelling images that attracted attention and exerted a profound effect on

contemporary visual culture. Further work might look to other artists who engage in the cultural codes of branding via interviews, reviews of their work, and art market studies. Other avenues include video artists, performance art and graphic designers. Finally, how do consumers, viewers, and art patrons respond to commercial and branding forces at work in art, what one art historian labeled “the cultural logic of the late capitalist museum” (see Krauss, 2004)?

Artists often criticize marketing, branding, and consumer culture, shedding light on negative implications of consumption and market forces. However, marketing research can take advantage of useful tools developed in art history and cultural studies to investigate the poetics and politics of branding as a representational system, explore the visual genealogies of contemporary marketing communication strategy, and perhaps become more sensitive to representational politics. Finally, art-centered analyses often generate novel concepts and theories for research on visual attention, information technology, retro-cycles, for example, or counterfeiting – as the art world has had its share of forgery. With their skill at image creation, juxtaposition, and attention building, this trio of artists commands a vast audience, creatively conjuring visions of identity, fame, danger, and values. Brand managers have much to learn from them, and they leave an enormous, accessible archive to work with – a compelling, celebrated catalogue of an epoch’s intense infatuation with brands, identity, and fame, evidence of the aesthetic flows between culture and commerce.

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