CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Being Edward Hopper

It's no longer enough to like our favorite artists' works. By putting on Hopper's fedora, Picasso's striped shirt, Warhol's wig or Kahlo's colorful couture, we want to become their avatars.

By Blake Gopnik

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6 MIN READ

The Musée Picasso in Paris, home to a vast trove of its namesake's masterworks, is offering a striped Breton shirt that makes it easy to adopt the great Cubist's signature look for a mere $70 or so.

On a web page for the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, in Washington, you can buy high-top sneakers covered in the "infinity net" pattern that is an artistic trademark of Yayoi Kusama, the 93-year-old Japanese art star. They cost $360, and the Hirshhorn shop has sold 44 pairs.

The gift shop at the Whitney Museum of American Art displays a $118 Hopper hat, a felt fedora that's an almost perfect match for the one in Edward Hopper's most famous self-portrait, which the museum owns.

If visitors are willing to spend that kind of money to dress up like a favorite artist, that's because today's art-loving public finds as much inspiration in creators' personas as in the works they create.

Jennifer Heslin, director of retail operations at the Whitney, said that over her quarter-century in museum marketing, she's seen visitors become ever more interested in goods, like the museum's Hopper hat, that give them "a connection to that creative impulse" in the great artists who act as role models.

Edward Hopper's "Self-Portrait," 1925–30. Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper/Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

A felt fedora, chosen to imitate the one in Edward Hopper's iconic "Self-Portrait," is at the Whitney Museum store. via Jens Mortensen

One of the world's many immersive "experiences" dedicated to Vincent van Gogh sets itself apart from all others with a virtual-reality component that gives the chance to be "fully immersed in the mind" of van Gogh. An immersive built around Frida Kahlo can proudly proclaim that it is "presented without reproductions of the artist's paintings" so that it can dwell instead on "the incredible story behind the legendary artist." It's been popular enough to get programmed in 15 cities worldwide.

Six decades ago, Andy Warhol helped set us on this course, for good or ill, when he first made his persona count for as much as his paintings or films. The creation that truly changed the whole future of art was the living sculpture called Andy Warhol, forever updated to suit the times it was in.

There was his striped shirt borrowed from Picasso, used to create a cheerful, Pop-y version of Warhol that signaled his ambition to take the Spaniard's place in art. Then there was the vampiric Warhol, in a biker's leather jacket and drug-user's shades. The '70s saw Warhol in jeans, white shirt and tie, casting off his outdated '60s rebellion, and then in the '80s he could be seen in shoulder pads to court the New Wave. And throughout it all that shocking platinum wig, now for sale in any costume store.

An early critic billed Warhol as the culmination of "that curious yet significant tradition in which the artist is his own work of art" — a tradition that was peaking just when Warhol came on the scene. In the early 1960s, the cutting-edge did its best to dissolve all frontiers between art and life, declaring salad-making an artistic act, or wheeling a baby carriage, or in one sad case, overdosing on drugs.

Warhol conjoined art and life better than almost anyone, and that is what continues to keep him so much in the public eye. Four decades after his death, this winter he's onstage alongside Jean-Michel Basquiat, that other larger-than-art persona, in a Broadway play and is at the heart of two other plays in Chicago, after his star turn last year in "The Andy Warhol Diaries" on Netflix. All those shows let Warhol's artistic creations almost disappear behind the man who created them. He led us to Hopper hats and art-free Kahlo events.

Warhol clearly wasn't the first artist to have a persona that attracted attention. The public's interest in van Gogh was always split between his works and his life story, however little he had planned on that outcome. A host of great women artists took care to craft personas that helped them stand out from a horde of male colleagues. A few years back, a Brooklyn Museum show about Georgia O'Keeffe highlighted the signature outfits she sewed and bought and had herself photographed in. A show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art displayed all the many great photos that spread news of Frida Kahlo's own colorful, well-tended persona. But where the splashy images of those artists helped to pitch works that stood up fine on their own, Warhol's endless Marilyns and Flowers and Soup Cans have come to seem more like mere pointers to their creator.

The fame of Kusama, which only seems to grow by the year, is likewise less about any actual aesthetic rewards delivered by her unending stream of dot-covered objects than about the self-declared madness that gave birth to those dots.

The Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama towering over shoppers on Fifth Avenue.
Blake Gopnik

Kusama's dots say "Yayoi was here" as much as they ask for the deepest of readings. Their constant repetition doesn't work to dilute some powerful artistic message, as you could argue is the case with notable repeaters like Gerhard Richter or Richard Serra. Kusama's repetitions, like Warhol's, work wonders in getting her persona known far and wide. Right now, she — or at least her magnetic persona — is attracting crowds outside the Fifth Avenue window of Louis Vuitton in New York, in the form of a dot-painting robot avatar, which does its work below a 10-story mural of the artist herself.

A robotic avatar of the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, on display in the window of the Louis Vuitton shop at 57th Street and Fifth Avenue in New York. Blake Gopnik

Banksy's worldwide street art also plays a role in persona-building, which is surprising given that the Northern Hemisphere's most popular muralist stays anonymous. But that anonymity only increases our fascination with the Man of Mystery behind the work so that in his very absence Banksy comes to matter at least as much as the pictures he puts before us.

Before we get cranky about celebrity replacing aesthetics, we might want to recognize that some of today's best artists do fine work in Warhol's footsteps.

Theaster Gates makes and sells individual art objects that are hard not to like, for their own sakes: lovely sculptures that explore the history and meaning of ceramics; compelling abstractions made out of urban detritus. But I'd say those only take on their full role when seen as elements — props, almost — in a larger artistic "project" that includes all the ways Gates intersects with the world, and the art world, wearing hats as urban activist, music impresario, cultural archivist … and as the best-selling object-maker whose sales fund the rest of what he gets up to. That is, what Theaster Gates does is what makes him matter; his art works are just a small part of that.

A window display at the Guggenheim Museum gift store features Nick Cave-style decorated mules for the artist's ultimate fans. Barbara Graustark/The New York Times

There's one object-making artist, in the spotlight right now in New York, whose greatest objects address the very "problem" of the artist's presence as a persona. In his survey show at the Guggenheim Museum, Nick Cave has filled an entire fifth-floor gallery with 16 of his Soundsuits, the elaborate, gewgaw-covered onesies that are quite rightly his signature works.

One covers its wearer head-to-toe in twigs, permitting perfect camouflage in a forest. Another, seen "alive" in a video, is a garish-pink rabbit suit, for a wearer who wants to stand out in a crowd. And in every case, I think the first wearer we imagine donning these costumes is Nick Cave himself as he comes face-to-face with the invisibility that all Black artists have faced, and with the excessive presence that also gets imposed on them — and on other Black males, such as Trayvon Martin or Eric Garner. Cave, the "bunny" in his video, therefore takes on the classic artist's role of Everyman, generating avatars that the rest of us are invited to try on as well, as we negotiate our own private absence and presence in the culture.

Valentina Primrose, who visited the artist Nick Cave's show and Guggenheim museum store display, prefers to craft a signature look than to borrow someone else's. Barbara Graustark/The New York Times

Valentina Primrose, a fashion artist who identifies as a trans person of color, was moved to tears after two visits to the Cave show. Primrose recognized Cave's own strong presence in his Soundsuits, "but I also imagined myself, my whole family, a whole slew of people inside the Soundsuits. Nick Cave is not one person. He's multitudes of persons, multitudes of spirits, multitudes of embodiment."

Which led Primrose down five stories to the Guggenheim gift shop, which is offering gewgaw-covered, Cave-inspired mules by the shoe designer James Sommerfeldt. Costing as much as $3,500, they ask for more of a commitment than the Whitney's Hopper hat. Primrose sighed at not being able to afford them, but hardly needed such goods to stand out from the Guggenheim crowd: A wild orange headdress and faux-ermine jacket more than did the job of establishing their creative credentials.

A replica of Gustav Klimt's 1903 painting smock, available for purchase through the Neue Galerie Design Shop. Neue Galerie New York

A few blocks south of the Guggenheim, another museum shop has jumped on the persona bandwagon. The Neue Galerie, dedicated to the first modern artists from Central Europe, is offering "an exact replica of Gustav Klimt's painting smock, circa 1903." For $395, you can look just like a painter that almost no one would ever recognize. But I guess if the Neue gets enough people parading through town in those smocks, Klimt will join Kahlo as yet another artist whose look has as much appeal as the work.