

CULTUREBOX

ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT, AND MORE.

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Stef and Jeff

Lady Gaga stands up for the rights of starving artist Jeff Koons.

By Ben Davis



“For the art:
bad. For the

Lady Gaga performing beside a statue of her made by Jeff Koons, on Nov. 10.

Photo by Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images for 42 West

entertainment: good.” That was the text I got from a fellow art critic when I asked for the verdict on Lady Gaga’s epic ARTPOP ArtRave, which drew 1,800 special guests to the Brooklyn Navy Yard on Sunday. That assessment pretty much sums up the whole co-dependent bad romance between the art world and Gaga, actually: Gaga gets credibility and the art world gets publicity, though it’s unclear that it is at all a fair exchange.

Lady Gaga, of course, has never been shy about her arty pretensions. In a way she has built her career on them, packaging catchy but fairly conventional dance music with operatic visuals. But for the release of her new album, she’s cranking the art stuff up—way, way, way past 11. Her ArtRave, which served as the launch for *ARTPOP*, was also the occasion to unveil a larger-than-

life statue of herself by blue-chip American art star Jeff Koons, who did the cover art for the new album as well. It's a hulk of a sculpture, a bleach-white Gaga effigy, straddling a blue orb. Everywhere around the space of the ArtRave, the words "GAGA" and "KOONS" blared at fans, billing them as twin brands.

Celebrating Koons and Abramović for their rebel cred is like nominating Michael Bay as your favorite indie filmmaker.

Gaga's other main art muse of late has been Marina Abramović, the Serbian-born performance art pioneer who became a pop-culture sensation thanks to her *The Artist Is Present* show at MoMA a few years ago. Abramović also made the scene at the ArtRave, which featured promotional videos of Lady Gaga demonstrating the so-called "Abramović method" of performance, touting the artist's soon-to-open institute in Hudson, New York. Earlier this year, Gaga drew plenty of ridicule for her starring role in a video promo for the Abramović Institute, walking through a

field in a naked trance, spooning with a human-sized crystal, and performing other acts of pokerfaced wackiness.

"I wanted to thank [Koons] tonight for giving this gift to me, this beautiful sculpture, for sharing his work with all of us, for sharing this night with all of us,"

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Gaga declared from the stage on Sunday's ArtRave, dedicating her new tune *Gypsy* to him. "We will no longer stand for the harassing of the artist, for the torturing of the artist, for taking advantage of the vulnerability of these beautiful young creative minds. Tonight we will put art in front." Yes, Little Monsters: Lady Gaga *really* likes artists!

The affinity goes way back to her college days at NYU, when she was still known as Stefani Germanotta. There, she supposedly wrote a thesis on British artist Damien Hirst—known for his pickled shark and diamond-studded skull, and for embodying pretty much everything everyone hates about the tabloid-baiting sensationalistic side of the art world—as well as "mass-nude" photographer Spencer Tunick, who takes panoramic pics of very large numbers of people in the buff. Someone has posted online a fragment of a text that purports to be a 2004 response paper on Tunick's work by Germanotta. I have no idea if this paper is the real deal, but it's at least believable in its mish-mash of college-student philosophizing and proleptic Gaga-ish-ness:

In the eyes of some of his critics, Spencer's work invades social privacy not only through the art, which to them degrades the sacredness of the body by exposing it in mass nudity, but also in the making of his art which requires an abnormal amount of public nudity, indecent exposure. Tunick challenges traditional ideas of intimacy, and asks us to free the body of sexuality and view it aesthetically for the purpose of his art. The social body cannot exist, most specifically in the nude, as anything other than a sexual thing. This is our naked condition.

That, I think, more or less sums up Gaga's vision of "art," that it is a place where you can be freaky and exhibitionistic and ... well, there's not much more to it than that.

If what art gets out of the art-pop alliance is promotion, it's notable that Gaga has seized onto figures who really, *really* don't need promoting. Koons has become superrich making high-gloss, programmatically brainless ornaments for rich people. A few years ago, he infamously tried to stop a San Francisco bookstore from selling balloon-dog-themed bookends, claiming that they ripped off his signature "Balloon Dog" sculptures ("As virtually any clown can attest, no one owns the idea of making a balloon dog," a complaint filed by a lawyer on behalf of the store quipped.*) One of these just set the world record for a work by a living artist at Christie's, selling for an obscene \$58.4 million. As for Abramović, post MoMA show she has busied herself as James Franco's Oscar guest and giving her blessing to Jay Z's goofy "Picasso Baby" video, which ripped off the format of her MoMA staring-contest performance. Back in 2011, she got in some trouble for staging a kinky, comically tone-deaf gala for L.A. MOCA, serving up nude women as human centerpieces for the rich and famous. Promoting the event, Abramović publicly declared her love of the American system of art patronage where "industry," "business," and "banks" are the new Medicis, but paid her performers peanuts, thereby touching off a public debate about art-world inequality. She's so overexposed that some wag recently launched a "Marina Abramović Retirement Fund." Celebrating these two artists for their rebel cred is like nominating Michael Bay as your favorite indie filmmaker or paying tribute to the overlooked culinary wizardry of the Cheesecake Factory.

As for Koons' "beautiful gift" to her, he didn't even bother to *try* to do something original—though to be fair, that's apparently exactly what Gaga wanted. The Lady Gaga sculpture seen at the ArtRave is a simple variation on his recent "Gazing Ball" line, which she saw when it debuted at David Zwirner gallery in New York earlier this year. "One second I'm a Koons, then suddenly the Koons is me," she sings in "Applause," following up with this Warholian quip: "Pop culture was in art, now art's in pop culture in me!" But if the Koons sculpture is her tribute to Pop Art, it's not in the vein of the early, sparky Andy Warhol; it's more in line with the Pop prince's lazy late-period celebrity portraits-for-hire. It's as close to assembly-line production as you get in art.

Hey, if a pop star wants to be an ambassador for contemporary art, great. I actually admire how ambitious Lady Gaga's whole multifronted *ARTPOP* initiative is—which is exactly why it bugs me that, in general, her artistic taste is so unambitious. At least she's also giving a boost to a young designer like Benjamin Rollins Caldwell, whose microchip chair has been part of her promotional onslaught. But in general her commitment to raw spectacle and ultra-deluxe celebrity artists limits her. I'd love to see what she could do with an artist like Liz Magic Laser, who stages unnerving performances with a social conscience and a comic touch ("GAGA," "MAGIC LASER" would look better on those banners anyway!) There are literally thousands of worthy, underknown artists trying to say something deeply felt in a new way. Moving in that direction would benefit everyone—and that includes Gaga herself.

After all, one way to think about the insane excess of the ArtRave might be that it's part of a kind of pop-star arms race, an attempt to command the spotlight after the creeping irrelevance that haunted her VMA performance, where her frantic costume changes were overshadowed by Miley Cyrus' Furry-baiting twerking fiasco. ("People think I'm finished," Gaga complained to the *Guardian* after the event.) Lady Gaga's exaltation of "art" is meant to elevate her, like that rocket dress she also debuted at the ArtRave, up a to a level above her competitors. But, ultimately, art stripped of any content besides exhibitionism can't be distinguished from any other pop-star's desperate plea for attention.

Correction, Nov. 14, 2013: This article originally attributed the statement, "As virtually any clown can attest, no one owns the idea of making a balloon dog" to a judge. It was actually made in a complaint by a lawyer representing the store selling balloon-dog bookends. (Return.)

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