

Condo for Kanye

Auctioneer and art specialist Simon de Pury, in conversation with Anneli Botz on Kanye West, Jay-Z, auction concerts and the potential of music to change the art world.



Kanye West is a big collector of George Condo's work, and the artist collaborated with him on five different versions of the cover for his *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* album



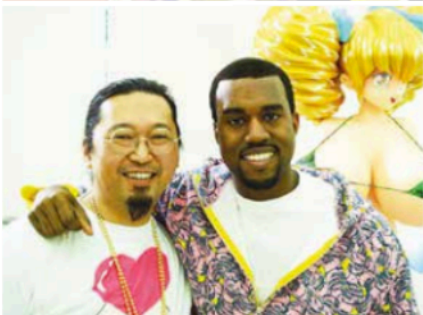
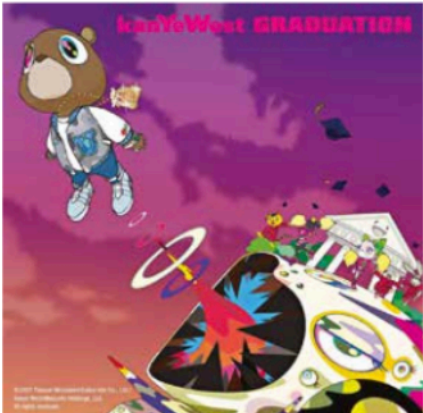
Warhol was commissioned by *Time* magazine to paint Michael Jackson's portrait in 1984

connection to music – like the Michael Jackson prints – made by Andy Warhol or the cover for the band “The Hours” by Damien Hirst. There are many pieces of contemporary art that depict musicians or have some kind of reference to music. Then there are also many musicians who have done great artwork themselves such as Bob Dylan, David Bowie, Miles Davis. We would combine such music referencing auctions with a DJ set, played by the musician Matthew Herbert. Herbert started to adapt the music accordingly to the piece up for sale. For instance, a portrait of Beyoncé Knowles clearly required a Beyoncé song, which led to a great example of how music encourages

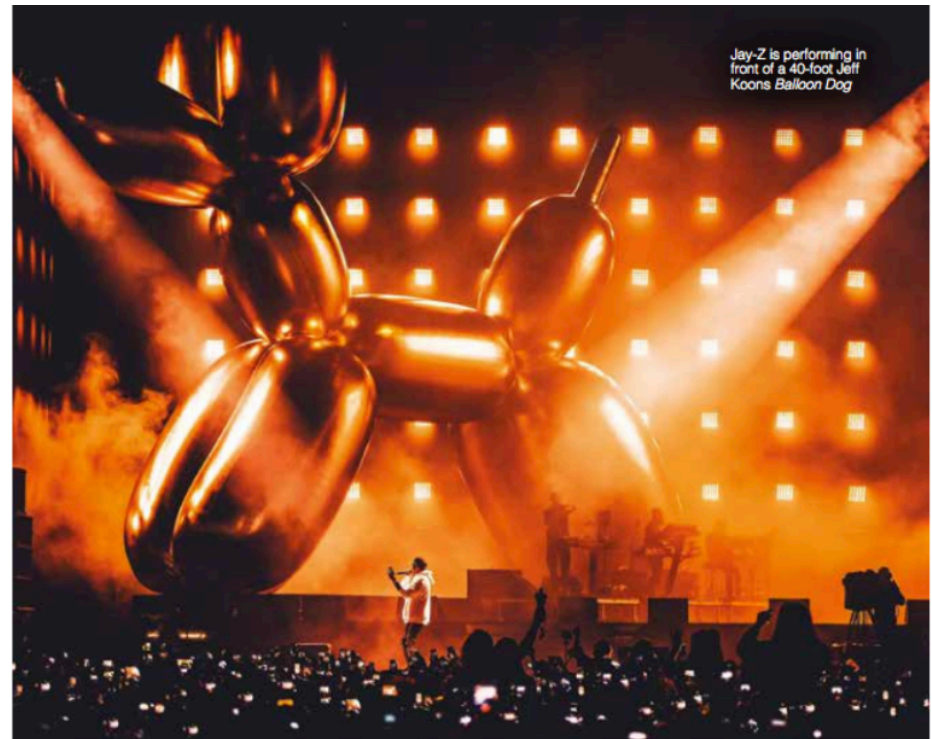
“I have always been as interested in music as I have been interested in art. One, I follow with passion, the other, I make a living of. At a point in my career, I thought about how to merge both worlds, how to establish a crossover between art and music. This was the starting point of having concerts at auctions, which turned into quite a tradition ever since. The first auction concert we did, starred “George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars”. George Clinton, who is known as the godfather of funk, went on stage with a band of eighteen people right after the auction. They were basically hidden in a cloud of marijuana, and everyone had the time of their life. I vividly remember Cindy Sherman dancing on stage. Another time “Kid Creole and the Coconuts” were playing. At this auction, we were selling a fish tank by Damien Hirst. Everyone was dancing around the tank, and I felt the fish were slightly irritated with what they were witnessing outside the glass. But the tank sold. Which is also one of the main keys why we had these concerts: they were supposed to bring joy to the auction, just as much as they were meant to gather a fun crowd that would be encouraged to buy art. One time in London, we organized a marathon auction of Russian art, followed by a collection of Chinese art. Right when the last blow of the hammer went down, the curtain fell, and Nile Rogers and Chic started performing *Le Freak, C'Est Chic*. This concert happened even before Nile Rogers got big with his hit *Let's get lucky tonight*; it was fantastic. We loved inviting these bands from the eighties because their music was great and also they were not as pricy as the top bands. These concerts usually turned into parties. When we invited “The Human League,” with their wonderful hit *Don't you want me*, the neighbors started complaining because of the noise. But we let them keep playing until the police came and literally cut off the power. After a while, we also started doing music auctions at Phillips, which basically meant that we were selling artworks that had some

the audience. People bid in the rhythm of the music, and it led to a complete fusion of music and art. During the music auctions, a special kind of audience came to the shows. The Damien Hirst album covers, for instance, were bought by people mainly interested in music. This way a different access to art was found. It was a nice extension to the usual audience we were accustomed to. Over the past twenty years, an interesting change has happened regarding the crossover between art and music. At the auction house, we have had thought about many ways on how to get art and music together but it were actually the Hip Hop artists who enabled a more direct contact between their profession and the art world. The first one to really do so was Kanye West, who commissioned many artists throughout the years. When he asked Takashi Murakami to design the artwork for his album, Murakami created his famous bear sculpture that also ended up to be on the cover. Again it was West, who called up George Condo. Condo, by the way a very talented musician at the guitar himself, had never heard of Kanye West, which was quite unbelievable to everyone. Nevertheless, he took the job and designed another cover for West. Unfortunately, you hardly ever get to see the full version of this artwork, as it shows a woman's breast with nipples, and those are usually highly pixelated, even on iTunes. Then there was Jay-Z who did the song *Picasso Baby* that he recorded at the Pace Gallery, Downtown New York. As a performance piece, he danced with a number of people and amongst them artist Marina Abramović. Ultimately, Jay-Z had turned himself into art. Kanye West and Jay-Z also composed a song together, based on an original by Otis Redding. In the video, they dismantled and crashed a Maybach in New York. This car was then sold at a contemporary auction at Phillips. During the auction, we had an incredible number of teenagers stopping by to look at the car. Finally, a Chinese collector bought it for her eighteen-year old daughter as a graduation gift.

Image credit: DISCOGS, Time.com



clockwise
Kanye West and Jay-Z collaborated for their song *Otis*. In its accompanying video clip, they dismantled and crashed a Maybach, which was then sold at a contemporary auction at Phillips
De Pury in action: Swinging the gavel along with DJ Matthew Herbert
Fine Art meets Hip Hop: Takashi Murakami and Kanye West
The album cover for *Graduation* by Kanye West was designed by Takashi Murakami



Jay-Z is performing in front of a 40-foot Jeff Koons Balloon Dog

Pop music was very rebellious in the sixties, but then got more and more mainstream, followed by fashion, which also became more and more mainstream. And now, this is the same for art.

These are just some examples of crossovers between music and art, and I think they helped art to become more mainstream. Pop music was very rebellious in the sixties, but then got more and more mainstream, followed by fashion, which also became more and more mainstream. And now this is the same for art. Most of the big artists are sold outside the small circles of art loving insiders these days. And the influence of Hip Hop in this development is crucial. The idea of collaboration is deeply rooted in that culture. I saw a Kanye West concert in Las Vegas, where he had asked the artist Vanessa Beecroft to take care of the whole enactment of his show on stage. He is probably the one artist that has been working the most interdisciplinary, crossing all kind of borders between music, art, fashion and film. Unfortunately, people often seem to underestimate his influence, as his personality polarizes. Although artists and musicians are both artists, I guess one of the

main differences is that music is often produced in collaboration with others, whereas art is mainly created in complete isolation. In the eighties, I saw a number of concerts where musicians also did art work, like Graffiti on stage at the same time. I never witnessed anything great coming from that, so not every merger of music and art is productive. However, what is great about the current times is that people accept an artist to also be a musician or the other way around. This kind of diversity was not possible for a long time. You were focused on one field, and that would be it. Take Victor Hugo, who was not only a great writer, but also an artist with an exceptional skill for drawing. Yet, he is only known for his written work. People have to distance themselves from being biased by the things they know the artist or musician by. Just because you are a great artist does not mean you can not be an outstanding musician as well. About sixteen to twenty years ago, we produced a soundtrack to accompany the auction. This caused quite a discussion among colleagues, as apparently they felt bothered by the sound. But my point was always that we have to distinguish ourselves from others, that we have to be different from the established competition. When I went to Christie's last Sunday for a viewing, they played all kind of contemporary music. Today, nobody opposes anymore. I think, in the future, the crossover between music and art evokes the complete opposite: Silence. Now, music and sound are everywhere. There is hardly a place, a restaurant or a cafe, that does not play any kind of music. So people might start longing for absolute silence. There should always be the right balance for everything.

Image credit: The Otis Maybach via Phillips Auction, GC, Tumblr, Wikipedia

Image credit: Jeff Koons Instagram



The artist is present. No, two artists are present: Jay-Z and Marina Abramović at Manhattan's Pace Gallery, performing *Picasso Baby*