

Jordan Peterson, the Controversial Pro-Male Philosopher, Says He Hates Postmodern Art. But He Secretly Loves It!

The author of "12 Rules for Life" loves Socialist Realist art.

Ben Davis, May 24, 2018



Jordan Peterson. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

“Buy a damn piece of art! Find one that speaks to you!”

So sayeth Jordan Peterson, the psychologist-turned-celebrity philosopher-turned Mephistopheles of the Manosphere (Kanye is a fan), in one of his YouTube lectures on art. Last weekend, the *New York Times*’s peek into the Peterson phenomenon also offered a look at the guru’s own collecting taste: He is, unexpectedly, a connoisseur of

Socialist Realism. (If you want a taste of his collection, Toronto's Leonardo Galleries offers a [selection online](#).)

Peterson's most famous mantra is "clean your room, bucko." For lost young men feeling that they lack prospects or a place, he offers tough love, blaming a gynocratic, PC society that has taught them not to value their natural drive for mastery over the world around them.

As it turns out, there's an aesthetic theory nested in here as well: "it's also not that you clean it up, it's that you make it beautiful—if you have just made one thing beautiful, you have established a relationship with beauty," Peterson has explained. His own personal quest to "establish a relationship with beauty" has involved decorating his own home floor-to-ceiling with Soviet-era propaganda.

In matters of art appreciation, Peterson otherwise has essentially normie conservative taste that sounds like old-school Romanticism. He is fond of portentous generalities like "artists articulate the unknown," etc.

In art, his *bête noire* is postmodernism, which he declares "equally destructive in all realms, especially when allied with neo-Marxism." It's not 100 percent clear what he means, but I assume the target is political installation art and conceptualism, because what he rails against especially is a culture "driven by revenge and resentment" and a "hatred of quality and qualitative distinctions," abandoning Man's primordial quest for higher beauty.

As a rule, generalizing about an undefined "postmodernism"—let alone postmodernism "in all realms!"—is lazy. The term covers diverse and mutually contradictory bodies of thought.

But step back for a second: the "postmodern" insight that perceptions of beauty are *culturally constructed* and therefore benefit from reflection on the appropriate standard of value actually makes a lot more intuitive sense than Peterson's notion of some embattled primal, "transcendent" universal standard. And it actually expands, rather than contracts, the "qualitative distinctions" that one is able to make—one can, for instance, recognize that the qualities that make a good hip-hop verse are different from the qualities that make a good lyric poem, while still liking examples of both.

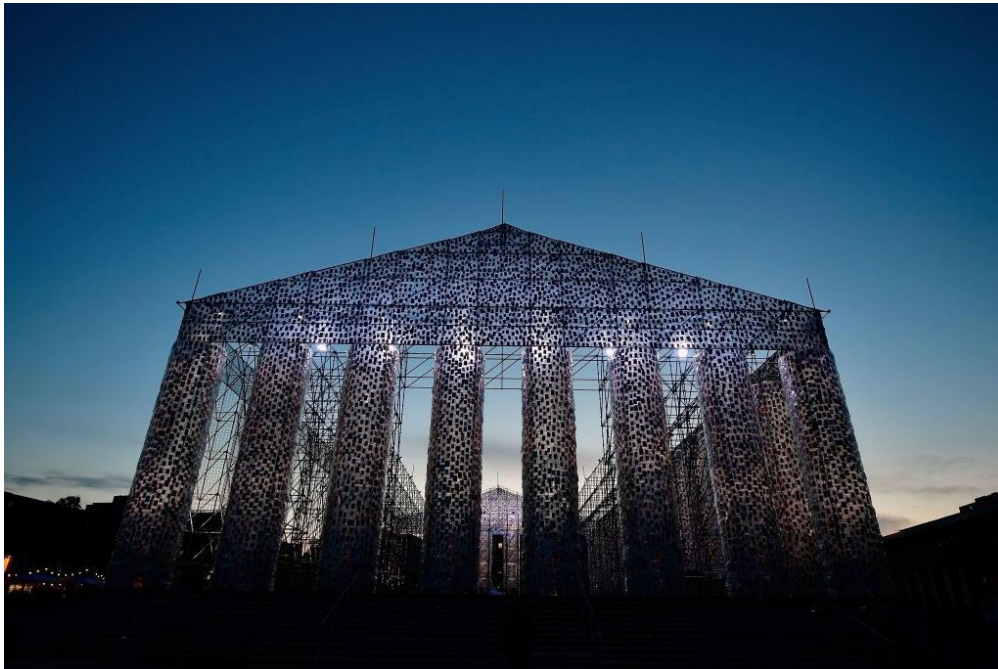
The funny thing is, Peterson's *own taste in art* is the best example of this postmodern understanding of artistic value!

Why does he decorate his house with Soviet propaganda? What *pleasure* does it give him?

First, he says he loves the craft, which he sees as triumphing over the propaganda. But his appreciation is also concept-based: He also likes it, contradictorily, as negative propaganda. It is “a constant reminder,” the *NYT* relays, “of atrocities and oppression.” (Also, he loves the First World irony of the fact that he purchased these Communist castoffs on capitalist eBay. The first item he collected was not a painting, but a silk flag made to commemorate a Soviet Five Year Plan.)

So the pleasures Peterson gets from his art collection are actually not really reducible to their role in “articulating the unknown.” They are, you might say, rooted in a very postmodern aesthetic of “revenge and resentment,” in his case towards the looming dangers of leftwing totalitarianism.

Is his affection for surrounding himself with this accumulation of propaganda so distinct from the satisfaction derived from political installation or conceptual art of any kind? As a genre of aesthetic gesture and as a rhetorical intervention, it mirrors the kind of accumulation of damning artifacts as evidence that one might have found—though with a very different target—at the recent “post-colonial” documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel.



The Parthenon of Books by Marta Minujin on documenta 14's opening night. The structure is clad with books that have been banned in countries around the world. Photo by Thomas Lohnes/Getty Images.

The Peterson Collection shows that the guy may be a reactionary in content, but he's a postmodernist in form.