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Author(s): Paul Bergin
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Andy Warhol: The Artist as Machine

Andy Warhol the man is a difficult creature to grasp. His art, at least some parts of it, is familiar to us; so familiar, in fact, that it is becoming difficult not to think immediately of Warhol whenever we see a can of soup or an automobile accident. Yet in spite of this almost-overpowering presence of his work, Andy Warhol has managed to keep himself apart, a kind of enigma, a striking enigma, it is true, with his artificially grey hair, dark glasses and leather clothing, but an enigma nonetheless. His presence is as striking as one of his canvases, and just as devoid of a narrative sense. Warhol offers his image, his mask, for public consumption, but deprives the public of anything more. Asked about his background he once replied, "Why don't you make it up?"* The remark is characteristic. It shows Warhol's unwillingness to expose himself beyond his public mask. The exact function of this image will be taken up later; but it should be mentioned now that Warhol apparently would prefer not to be thought of as a man, with a past, no matter how obscure, and a future, but as a unique entity, a thing of our day, who sprang into existence fully grown to do his work and who will someday vanish just as abruptly and mysteriously. That we know such is not the case doesn't matter. The presence of the desire, although it has remained largely unarticulated, is more important than the objective possibility. With regard to the public, Warhol does not want to exist outside of his image. For all intents and purposes, the image is Andy Warhol. This emphasis upon a stylized exterior and the lack of concern for anything other than the obvious is a major theme in Warhol’s art, as well as in his deportment.

All of Warhol’s art takes shape and exists close to the unconscious. It is not conceived in a conscious mind; neither is it intellectually precise. Warhol’s images are the products of “a semi-aware mind that duplicates without the awareness of the original identity.” Warhol sees without reflecting and reproduces without understanding. We are left with an image—nothing more. Warhol’s is the art of the machine but not, it should be made clear, a glorification of it, such as attempted by the futurists. Warhol’s work is a statement, not a song. It is art stripped of personality and emotion and concerned only with the image, the obvious. It is art of the machine, not about it. The machine is, to the artist, a way of life, representative of a unique field of twentieth-century experience, and all of Warhol’s art is a striving to express the machine in the machine’s own terms.

Warhol attempts this through the use of primarily two devices, or approaches. First, and of the most importance in terms of “doctrine,” is the already-mentioned approach to and reproduction of the subject. This lack of consciousness, this emphasis upon mere reproduction of the image without any understanding of its original identity, is the act of a machine. Whir, click, and there you are, ma’am, another can of soup. Besides this mechanistic approach to his subject matter, Warhol comes yet closer to the machine through the use of a mechanical aid in his painting and sculpture—his now-famous silk screen. There are a number of advantages to the use of a silk screen, some of which Warhol has made haste to mention. First of all, it is easier to silk-screen images than to paint them freehand. Warhol is very fond, judging from the number of times he has mentioned this, of letting people know that he, like any well-designed

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machine, acts along the lines of least resistance. Also, the use of the silk screen permits his assistant to turn out an original Andy Warhol as easily as Warhol himself. The artist apparently wants his studio to be considered more of an "art factory" than an artist's studio in the traditional sense. Everything is part of his continuing attempt to give expression to the machine. The lack of consciousness, the employment of the easiest means of reproduction, the numbing similarity of the "end products"—in his search for the most valid means of expressing the machine, the artist himself has become one.

If the machine remains the artist's main concern in all of his work, the way in which he expresses it differs with each of the four main phases, or types, of his work. Probably the best known of these is his "commercial product" phase. Although all of his work in one way or other relates to the mass-produced machine product, and consequently to marketing, this phase best deserves to be called commercial due to the exclusively commercial nature of the subject matter. With the exception of the Brillo carton sculpture, Warhol's overriding interest in these works is food. For the first time in history, man is able to satisfy his hunger with food untouched by human hands, machine food. Food is the most elementary of our needs and the availability of it in such a sterile, inviolate, form is, in itself, an eloquent expression of the mechanistic trend which has made it possible to satisfy all our material needs with the products of machines. Warhol recognized this and in his commercial work, most notably in the Campbell's Soup canvases, he presents us with images which are the final reduction of the importance of the machine in our lives—art untouched by human hands (Fig. 1). The sterility of the subject matter is magnified to such an extent in these works that they emerge ultimately as a brilliant statement of the influence of the machine on our everyday lives. The choice of such elementary subject matter is indicative of a certain amount of genius at Warhol's command; because they are so common, so everyday, Warhol's images reduce the statement to inescapable terms. The commercial works are the least subtle and most mechanistic of Warhol's works. A machine is incapable of subtlety and in these works that fact is brought across via the power and authority of the canvases and sculpture. There is no escape from one of these works.

Warhol's flower paintings express the twentieth-century machine in different terms, deliberately calling upon the viewer to make a comparison between Warhol's flowers and "real" flowers (Fig. 2). In the commercial works there is no need to go beyond the canvas itself to realize what Warhol is saying, but the flower pictures demand at least a rudimentary knowledge of what flowers look like before any sense can be made of them. Warhol's flowers are the flowers of the city rather than of the field. Flat and unrealistic, they bring to mind both the plastic artificial flowers so common in our society and the floral print designs stamped into fabric, especially that of awnings. The latter is the more obvious reference. Warhol's flower images are the machine flowers of the twentieth century. They are flower images stripped of their flowerliness, the reduction of the flowers which gape at us from awnings, wallpaper and contemporary centerpieces. Silk-screened onto the canvas, Warhol's flowers reside there in all their machine-made glory, a valid presentation of the twentieth-century flower or, as Allen Ginsberg put it in "In Back of The Real," the "Flower of Industry." Warhol as a conscious mind seems to be active in these pictures, as they are more subtle than the commercial works. This may, however, be a function of the subject matter rather than of the artist, and my observation is, at any rate, merely a personal reaction.

A third phase of Warhol's work, the death-image paintings are the most striking of his creations and, to me, the most interesting as well. In these pictures, news photographs of suicides and auto accidents are silk-screened onto the canvas, sometimes blown up in size but more often arranged in rows and repeated a number of times (Fig. 3). The colors used are the black and white of the original photo and the result is a striking, if at first somewhat enigmatic, visual experience. The most common ideas seen in these canvases are the theme of the automobile accident and the technique of "side-by-side" or repeated images. The automobile theme at once links the death-image pictures, which at first may seem to mark a departure from Warhol's earlier ideas, to the prevailing theme of the machine. The machine-death link here ex-
hibited is a strange one and one which constitutes a danger to anyone too ready to impose his own value system onto the painting. The juxtaposition of the machine (automobile) and death is likely to cause the casual observer to cry, "Here's what he's been trying to tell us all along! The machine is an agent of death. The machine is killing us!" The people who fall into such a trap do so almost consciously, searching for an easy way out of what is in reality a very complex, I think Warhol's most complex, series. The most obvious mistake such people make is the placement of too much emphasis upon the machine which is depicted and not enough on that one which does the depicting. The at-first shocking image of an automobile accident has, probably because it is, after all, a news photo, something of a narrative sense, which is an element completely absent from Warhol's other work.

The casual observer is likely, then, to regard these paintings as didactic, Warhol as a low-tone Goya. Such a person is likely to think the repetition of the image an immature attempt to drive the "message" home. Overlooked in this incorrect interpretation is the fact that the source of the image is a news photo, taken by a camera, which is incapable of making a value judgement and reproduced by a printing press, also a machine and also lacking a conscious mind. It is in this twice-removed way that the artist receives the image. He has no contact with the death itself and can react then only to the image, not the actual death. The sources of the images are important but it is the technique of repeated images that finally convinces the sincere observer that the artist is not making a value judgement. The repeated image technique was used in a few of Warhol's commercial works but was less striking, probably because we are used to seeing soup cans and boxes stacked up. The death images, however, when stacked up force the viewer to do a double take, force him to consider the picture longer than he might have and finally force him, if he is observing the canvas at all objectively, to admit that the repetition renders the image meaningless. The death image is seen to be just another product of the twentieth-century machine, and as such is neither better nor worse than any of its other products. The death image is neither good nor bad; it is. The automobile-death link in the image itself may hint at a connection between the two but the relationship remains undeveloped, if, in fact, it is there at all.

Finally, some consideration should be given the portraits Warhol has done. In the long run, it may be these works which emerge as his best, because in the portraits, especially in those of Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor, the artist has carried his theme of the machine product to its logical, if disquieting, conclusion—people as machine products, commercial property.

The portrait of Elizabeth Taylor is representative of Warhol's portraiture and it provides a good example of my point (Fig. 4). The background of the canvas is chartreuse; onto this the image of Elizabeth Taylor's face has been silk-screened and amateurishly daubed with comic-book colors. The hair is a black shape, perfectly flat except for a small area at the top which is highlighted with chartreuse. The lips are a smear of red in the general vicinity of the mouth; the eyes are surrounded by monstrous patches of blue eye shadow and the skin is a pale, rather uncomfortable, pink. The painting is at once shocking, familiar, and garishly eloquent, for in this picture Warhol shows Elizabeth Taylor's transformation from woman to public property. We do not see Elizabeth Taylor the woman on Warhol's canvas; we see only her public image, what John Rublowsky calls her "mask." * The woman is not at all visible in the picture; yet we know that somewhere behind the mask there is a woman. In the canvas it is impossible to see the woman for the mask and in real life, it must be admitted, it isn't much

* Rublowsky & Heyman. p. 110. Rublowsky used the term in discussing Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe, but it is applicable as well to the portrait of Miss Taylor.
easier. In a case like Miss Taylor’s, it is difficult, in some cases impossible, to determine where the public mask ends and the person begins. Elizabeth Taylor is a commercial property, as commercial as a can of Campbell’s Soup, albeit turned out by a different type of machine. She is a thing of our day, and whether we like her or wish for the old National Velvet girl we cannot escape her, as we cannot escape soup or death. Miss Taylor is the person become machine product, commercial property, and Warhol’s portrait of her is the final reduction of the theme of the machine, the central concern of all his work.

Warhol’s idea of a person’s public mask, his commercial aspect, exhibited in the portraits relates at once to the artist’s personal behaviour. Warhol’s own personal mask, discussed earlier, doesn’t seem unlike those in his portraits, and when one considers the commercial aspect of the portraits it becomes clear that the function of the mask is, in both instances, the same. Seen in this light, Warhol becomes his own greatest work. His appearance, his actions, and his flippancy are all part of Warhol’s public mask and it is hard, almost impossible to distinguish the man from the image.

This offering by Warhol of himself as probably the best example of his art allows him to fit in perfectly with the art world that surrounds him and is his, as well as contemporaries’, primary outlet. Alfred Kazin told me recently of his conviction that in our age art has taken on a new authority. Although he was speaking specifically of literature, the same phenomenon is easily observable in the contemporary art world. Contemporary art has become, for a great number of people, a means of social advancement, a way of showing that one has taste and, more important, “connections.” One’s collection, especially of just-recognized artists, is one’s social ticket and great care is taken and a good deal of money spent to amass a significant number of significant works. The collecting and display of contemporary art has become a very serious business. The emphasis is placed on the personality rather than on the work and personal contact with a given artist is sought after as a further item of social prestige. As one collector is reported to have put it, “I collect Jasper Johns.” The grammar is significant. It tends to show that in contemporary America the artist, rather than the art, has become the commodity. That Warhol fits in easily can be immediately seen. Warhol has made himself a commercial product and as such has offered himself to the art “establishment.” He has recognized their game and decided to play it, and in doing so has stayed within the scope of his art. Warhol’s docile acceptance of a world which other artists, even other pop artists, have rejected as, at the very least, depressing, as well as his decidedly unpoetic work, clearly marks him as the primitive of the pop art scene. The pop artist, James Dine, speaking of the contemporary art world, has said, “I felt like a commodity, because no one really knew or cared about my work.” Warhol, on the other hand, wants to be a commodity and has attempted to become one. He, probably more than any other artist, is one with his work and this exterior fact adds something to his art.

Yet, even after we accept this position of Warhol, we must acknowledge certain failures in his art. Most obvious is the problem raised whenever two words, constantly used in talking of Warhol, enter the conversation. The words, “like” and “delight,” bring up the problem of consciousness, supposedly absent from Warhol’s work. Warhol has time and time again claimed that he likes soup cans, Brillo boxes and floral print designs. Yet at least as many times as he has said this he has claimed, “I want to be a machine.” We know that a machine is incapable of liking or, as a number of critics have put it, “taking delight” in, anything. If the validity of Warhol’s art depends on his actually becoming the machine, it surely fails. If we interpret “like” to mean “accept” the problem is not solved but merely put off. Even acceptance presupposes a conscious mind, an element supposedly banished from Warhol’s work. Sartre would have it that any acceptance involves a corresponding rejection. The act of selection is, as we know, a conscious one. Every sensible person knows that an artist must edit, but


+James Dine, as quoted by Elkoff, p. 112.
we also know that a machine is incapable of the act. If Warhol is serious about wanting to be a machine, he should not edit at all. In doing so he is giving his art the lie. This may seem like nit-picking but Warhol’s art is expounding what amounts to a new aesthetic and when the art fails the theory, even on a semantic level, it is significant.

Whenever a new school of art comes into prominence I suppose the obvious question is: “What do we do after this?” Usually more of an expression of frustration and dismay than an intelligent question, it nonetheless takes on definite significance when the art in question is that of Andy Warhol, or of the whole popular-image school for that matter. In Warhol’s art, impact has superseded order and this immediately relates his art to such short-lived and self-defeating movements as representational surrealism and, most notably, dada. If pop art is not, in itself, dadaistic in nature, it has given birth to a movement which is a revival of dadaist and is even more open to charlatanism than the original movement. I mean “yes art,” in which the old dadaist idea of found-object art has been given new life. But it has all been tried before, by the original dadaists, and found to be self-defeating. This revival can hope for no better fate. It would seem, then, that at least on this front, pop art has defeated itself—by giving birth to a self-defeating child. I am at present aware of only two artists who have absorbed the pop influence and moved on, successfully, to newer things—Jasper Johns, whose newest paintings show as much the influence of action painting as of pop art and are really a return to open experimentation, and Howard Jones, whose light paintings combine the poetic allusion of some of the other pop artists and the regard for the machine exhibited by Warhol. On all other fronts, pop art, and especially that of Andy Warhol, seems to have defeated itself.

It would be comfortable to be able to sum up Warhol in a simple sentence, to say that his art is either good or bad. It just isn’t possible. His art fails in certain ways but it excels brilliantly in others. Some of his work is hardly worth bothering with and some of is is potentially great. It remains for Warhol himself, who is still very young, to show us how (or whether) to remember him.

“As for myself, I was born in Philadelphia in 1944 and am presently living in upper New York State. I have two plays in progress”—PAUL BERGIN.

Gregory Battcock

Notes on THE CHELSEA GIRLS: A Film by Andy Warhol

Among Warhol’s more recent films, The Chelsea Girls¹ is in some ways different from any of its predecessors, for it has the full complement of sound, movement, multiple images, and story line that the artist had laboriously discarded in his earlier cinematic work. The introduction of enriched content can be taken as yet another attempt by the artist to criticize formal cinematic procedure. For in this film, it is most particularly the way a movie is looked at and the way the information is assimilated by the audience that comes under scrutiny. As in Screen Test, the apparent and the real subject are two different things.² In The Chelsea Girls two different films are shown simultaneously side by side on a wide screen. Occasionally they may overlap. The pictures are said to suggest a series of rooms at the Chelsea Hotel (on West 23rd Street in Manhattan) and to depict what goes on in them. Each program is more or less the same, with the films (some black and white and some in color) shown in

¹ In this film, the familiar Warhol superstars appear without using fictional names. Of course, this is not an entirely new idea. The characters in the W. C. Fields movie International House (1933) also retained their own names.

² Critics writing in the popular journals have pointed out the “dirty” subject matter of this film. Other writers have made an analogy between the subject matter of The Chelsea Girls, on one hand, and the napalm and torture of the Vietnam war, on the other. In this sense, the popular critics may therefore be accurate—however, it is the absence of sentimentality coupled with a total and unfeeling dedication to verité within this movie that makes the comparison with the ghastly war in Vietnam an appropriate one. A somewhat different view has been taken by Nicolas Calas, writing in Arts, who feels that Warhol’s selections are frequently sentimental and that the film suffers because of this sentimentality. Calas says: “Warhol is full of self pity. One after another his hernaphrodites dissolve into a Mimi and Mignon sentimentality with canned soup in the tradition of Praxiteles and Cocteau.” (Arts, Vol. 41, #4, February, 1967.) A different observation is noted by David Ehrenstein (Film Culture, No. 42, Fall, 1966) who writes: “Warhol has no axe to grind, he’s just an innocent bystander at the scene of the accident. No moralizing, no message you can wrap up and take home with you, just the facts.” The movie must have had some kind of moralizing-effect on Ehrenstein, however, for he ends his article: “Can our lives be filled with such intense pain, our minds diseased, our souls ravaged?”