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ANDY WARHOL'S MOVING PICTURES OF MODERN LIFE

David Carrier

Style is a precondition of aesthetic interest.

—Richard Wollheim¹

How did Warhol form his style? And what is his relation to tradition? “The rapid negligence of Warhol’s images parodied the way mass media replace the act of reading with that of scanning, a state of affairs anticipated,” Robert Hughes argues, by the classical camp writer Ronald Firbank.² This insight was not developed by Warhol because “lacking the prehensile relationship to experience of [Claes Oldenburg] (let alone Picasso), [he] was left without much material.” Hughes is worried that proper reading and looking are being displaced by debased parodies of those activities. In 1946, Robert Warshaw, another moralizing critic, complained that

the comic strip has no beginning and no end, only an eternal middle. . . . This . . . is a characteristic of Lumpen culture: all gradations and distinctions are broken down, even the distinction between art and life.³

Unintentionally predicting Warhol, he was on to something important.

Aesthetic conservatives hate Warhol’s vulgar subjects, and a leftist tradition thinks him socially critical. By now, the limitations of these approaches are obvious. That Warhol depicts “common” things does not distinguish him from Chardin or from seventeenth-century landscape artists; painters

learn to use what were previously thought unacceptable subjects. Warhol “produced his most powerful work by dramatizing the breakdown of commodity exchange”; his Coke bottles or soup cans “ought to be powerful and critical political statements”: these accounts are implausible.⁴ Jacques-Louis David, a very privileged man, participated in the French Revolution, which gives support to political interpretations of his pre-Revolutionary paintings. Could Warhol—commercially very successful, never politically active—really also be a crypto-leftist?

These aesthetic conservatives and leftists think that Warhol broke radically with tradition. So, too, does Arthur C. Danto, whose analysis cannot be understood in these politicized terms. Warhol “brought the history [of art] to an end by demonstrating that no visual criterion could serve the purpose of defining art.”⁵ How atypical is the Warhol on which he focuses, *Brillo Box*—a three-dimensional object that, unlike his painted images, can be mistaken for a mere object outside the art world.⁶ “I am not certain that I know what it is to view Warhol’s creations disinterestedly,” Danto adds, “and from across an aesthetic distance.” That is exactly what I am doing in treating Warhol like any old master or modernist who finds his style. Robert Rosenblum’s brilliant essay on the portraits presents the view I generalize.⁷ I explain Warhol’s stylistic breakthrough in terms of his desire to reinvent the tradition of what

Baudelaire called “painting of modern life.”

In much old-master art, a text is the picture’s source, and so recovering it constitutes the act of interpretation. “A history painting ought to represent a singly narratively critical moment in the unfolding of a significant human action.”⁸ Interpretation moves the picture—we identify or construct a narrative, telling what happens before and after that moment.⁹ Images are hard to interpret when no one knows what text, if any, they illustrate. Watteau’s and Manet’s textless pictures anticipate the problems posed by Matisse:

None of [his] invented compositions . . . can be precisely matched with texts. They do not, like more traditional Western figure compositions, tell known stories. They are closer to genre than to history paintings in telling unknown stories, but they are nonetheless unlike genre paintings in that their stories are indecipherable.¹⁰

It is hard to avoid interpreting Warhol’s images of famous people, knowing that he, born a poor outsider, was—like Pater’s Watteau—greatly in love with glamour. But however we try to move them, Warhol’s pictures remain inert, repelling the kind of attention that is natural to give to Matisse. Hermetic images whose meaning is so obvious that any interpretation seems obviously dumb threaten to be inaccessible; this is why commentary focuses on his content. Much has been said about Warhol’s dead brushwork, silkscreening, and the frontal composition. Something deserves, also, to be noted about his image sequences. The repeated *Mona Lisa* quotations function like movies not properly projected, not properly moving forward—films akin in some ways to a Warhol movie.

“Repetition is everywhere in Warhol, the repetitiveness bound up with photography could have been what attracted Warhol to it most of all.”¹¹ Normally, image sequences show development. Refusing to present forward movement, Warhol uses “simple ordering of repeating units” so that “the pictures seem actually to *assert* a regular, tracking movement.”¹² In *Dance Diagram*, numbering structures the image, giving an implied order to what otherwise would be an abstract design. The images of skulls, some of which cast a shadow showing a child’s face, imply narratives—an effect especially striking in the *Self Portrait*. Warhol’s odd populist cover for the Rolling Stones’ 1971 album, *Sticky Fingers*—blue jeans with a real zipper inserted—plays with implied motion. In comics, image sequence tells the story, and balloons represent speech.¹³ Warhol’s repeated images block narrative flow; his *Dick Tracy*, with blank balloon, undercuts storytelling.¹⁴ Comics, populist images, communicate unambiguously. When taken into high art, repetitions go nowhere, yielding stasis, a Warholian equivalent for what traditionally is called aesthetic pleasure. “The relative unreality of Warhol’s depicted world is augmented by its strange pervasive mood of inactivity.”¹⁵

Why did Warhol abandon his very successful career as illustrator to become a “serious” painter? “Andy wanted to be shown in a real gallery. . . . He wanted to be a real artist.”¹⁶ Commentators easily focus on his obvious economic motives: “I want to be Matisse. . . . I want to be as famous as the Queen of England.” This does not adequately explain the radical transition from commercial to fine art—“The line between his first and second careers is astonishingly sharp.”¹⁷ When Caravaggio,

Poussin, and Matisse found a style, they ceased to be eclectic; like Warhol, they were emphatically concerned with fame and fortune. Warhol, it was claimed, killed the concept of style; he said, "Style isn't really important."¹⁸ But to speak of "style" as I do, following Richard Wollheim, is to indicate how an oeuvre is visually distinctive; the historian's goal is to explain how an artist found a style. Warhol's prestylistic 1950s illustrations are akin to David Hockney's domestic scenes or to the drawings of Edward Gorey, another figure straddling the gap between illustration and "serious" art.¹⁹ The July 1952 review associating Warhol's drawings for Truman Capote's writings with Beardsley, Lautrec, Demuth, Balthus, and Cocteau intelligently concludes: "At its best it is an art that depends upon the delicate tour de force, the communication of intangibles and ambivalent fuelings."²⁰ Had Warhol not changed direction so dramatically, he would hardly be memorialized today with his own museum.

After a style is found, it is natural to look backward, seeking precedents that might help explain this dramatic change. Rainer Crone, Nan Rosenthal, and other commentators reasonably concerned about emphasizing the continuity of Warhol's career identify links between his advertising images of the 1950s and the paintings of the 1960s. But we need also consider the visually obvious discontinuity between his advertising art and the paintings that made him famous, and ask why he changed so drastically.²¹ The moral dimension of Warhol's career, what I most admire about him, is his astonishing capacity to be self-critical. After a very successful decade making clever, unoriginal images, he unnostalgically abandoned this manner and dis-

covered a very different, much tougher, original way of working—he found his style.

"Between the autumn of 1959 and the spring of 1961, Andy Warhol's art underwent a dramatic, wholly unexpected, and largely inexplicable metamorphosis."²² Inexplicable given just the visual evidence and Warhol's own characteristically inarticulate comments, it is more comprehensible if we consider that the subjects of Baudelaire's painter of modern life—war, the dandy, woman, cosmetics—are passionately Warholian, and that Guys, "spiritually in the condition" of a convalescent, is recognizably like Warhol, whose Carnegie Tech teacher advised him "to carry a sketchpad at all times, and to draw the life around him."²³ Benjamin Buchloh speaks of "the aloofness, unreliability, and cynicism that distinguished a certain type of modernist artist."²⁴ This is not the whole story; it leaves aside entirely that positive pleasure in popular culture of everyone who enjoys a crowded city. When Baudelaire speaks of the need for rapid execution to capture modern subjects, and especially when he points out that "the pleasure which we derive from the representation of the present is due not only to the beauty with which it can be invested, but also to its essential quality of being present," then it is natural to think of Warhol. "I've never met a person I couldn't call a beauty."²⁵ A snob, Warhol had oddly democratic notions of beauty, as did Baudelaire.

By early in this century, this Baudelairian tradition seemed exhausted. When, however, we get to the early 1960s, then Warhol's breakthrough art resumes this Impressionist (and Post-Impressionist) tradition, as if he took up the tradition of the

painting of everyday life where it had been left, before Picasso and Matisse, by Manet's successors. Warhol substitutes for direct depictions of his city environment representations of representations, as if only through such mediation were it possible to retain that contact with urban reality that Baudelaire calls presentness.

This finding of a style will seem less odd if we understand Warhol's relation with painters who, judging just from the appearance of their work, seem to have almost nothing to do with him. In 1964, Robert Mangold recalls,

the early instances of Pop Art were refreshing—it cleared the air coming as it did on the heels of the prevailing Abstract Expressionist attitudes, where you were facing the white canvas, supposedly free from preconceived ideas, the painting becoming a record of the encounter, a record of a sequence of moves, decisions. Pop art reintroduced the outside, the street, the familiar, the banal, and the idea of a preconceived picture. . . . I wanted to make paintings that extended the kind of serious dialogue I saw in the work of Newman and Rothko, but the only way seemingly to do this was through a door that Pop Art opened.²⁶

An abstract painter also can be a “painter of modern life.”

In the 1980s, Sean Scully, too, sought to anchor his painting in his concrete experience of the city.²⁷ Warhol, he has said, is “a very frontal artist, and remained very frontal—that caused his work to be quite static.”²⁸ Images in popular culture move very quickly. A static painted image—how can that escape being a boring image?

One of the reasons I do karate is that it keeps me honest, it stops me from getting away from that brutality of the real. When you're doing it, you're tired; when you do pushups what you are looking at is the floor. Most people in their lives certainly in Western culture don't look at their floor, that's just for their house cleaner. But I put myself in a position where I'm staring at the floor. That's a pretty humbling situation to put yourself in. And Warhol immersed himself in another way. . . . You don't try to portray from a distance—you become a thing.

Immersion is precisely what I allude to in speaking of Warhol's taking up of Baudelaire's conception of “painting of modern life.”²⁹

NOTES

1. Richard Wollheim, *The Mind and Its Depths* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: 1993), p. 174.

2. Robert Hughes, “The Rise of Andy Warhol,” in *The First Anthology: Thirty Years of The New York Review of Books*, ed. R. Silvers, B. Epstein, and R. Hederman (New York: 1993), p. 221.

3. Robert Warshaw, “Woofed with Dreams,” in

The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture (Garden City, N.Y.: 1962), p. 53.

4. Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven and London: 1996), p. 51; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: 1991), p. 9.

5. Arthur C. Danto, *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York: 1990), pp. 287, 291.

6. *My High Art: Charles Baudelaire and the Origins of Modernist Painting* (University Park, Pa.: 1996) treats Danto as a post-Greenbergian Baudelarian figure. "No one can seriously object to being compared to Baudelaire!" he replied; but his view that art's history has ended is obviously inconsistent with my suggestion that we, like Baudelaire, live in an age of transition. My different view of history leads to a different interpretation of Warhol.

7. Robert Rosenblum, *Andy Warhol: Portraits of the 70s* (New York: 1979).

8. Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism; or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago and London: 1996), p. 295.

9. Here I extend the account of *High Art*, ch. 4.

10. John Elderfield, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: 1992), p. 34.

11. David Sylvester, *About Modern Art: Critical Essays 1948–1996* (London: 1995), p. 386.

12. Richard Morphet, *Warhol*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1971), p. 28.

13. See my "Piero della Francesca, Hergé, and George Herriman: Comics and the Art of Moving Pictures," *Word & Image*, forthcoming.

14. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 21–22.

15. Morphet, p. 18.

16. Bob Colacello, *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), pp. 26, 25.

17. Carter Ratcliff, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Abbeville, 1983), p. 17.

18. Rainer Crone, *Andy Warhol: A Picture Show by the Artist*, trans. M. Scutt (New York: Rizzoli,

1987), p. 81.

19. Warhol illustrated Ronald Firbank; but Mark Francis, curator of the Warhol Museum, knows no connection between Warhol and Gorey.

20. James Fitzsimmons, quoted in *Andy Warhol: His Early Works 1947–1959*, compiled by Andreas Brown (New York: Gotham Book Mart, 1971), p. 10.

21. See Nan Rosenthal, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Warhol as Art Director," in *The Work of Andy Warhol*, ed. G. Garrels (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), pp. 34–51.

22. David Bourdon, *Warhol* (New York: Abrams, 1989), p. 62.

23. Bennard B. Perlman, "The Education of Andy Warhol," in Calli Angell et al., *The Andy Warhol Museum* (New York: Art Publishers, 1994), p. 153.

24. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Andy Warhol Line," in *The Work of Andy Warhol*, p. 61.

25. Warhol, p. 61.

26. David Carrier, "Robert Mangold's *Gray Window Wall* (1964)," *Burlington Magazine*, (Dec. 1996):826–828. In the early 1950s, similarly, Ellsworth Kelly abstracted from architectural shapes; see *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948–1954*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: 1992).

27. See my "Sean Scully: The Painter of Modern Life," in *Sean Scully*, exh. cat. (Bologna: 1996).

28. Interview, Morocco, May 1996; a portion of this interview will appear in the book publishing Scully's photographs of Morocco.

29. This essay is for Bernd Klüser, who explained to me one key point—Warhol, he said, is the first American artist to owe nothing to European art. I thank Paul Barolsky, Arthur C. Danto, Marianne Novy, and Sean Scully for comments and the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh for inviting an earlier version.