

Andy Warhol: a revisionist critique

The following is my response to an article by Richard Dorment about the work of Andy Warhol, published in the *New York Review of Books* of Oct. 1, 2009. For brevity's sake, my letter to the Review (not printed) consisted only of the first ten paragraphs below, a story (true) of mine followed by a brief polemic. The remainder was written to express in a bit more depth how I see the significance of Warhol.

Dear NYRB:

Richard Dorment's article "What Is an Andy Warhol?" (*NYR*, Oct. 1, 2009), besides illustrating the special problems of authenticity with Warhol's work, shows how the art of one whose theme was largely our commodity-oriented culture was itself commodified, by Warhol himself, and by those who have a vested interest in his work. Let me offer an experience that has always colored my notion of just what a Warhol is.

Around 1980 I worked for a small studio in New York that made conservation mats for photographs. Our clients were mainly galleries and dealers of fine-art photography. At one point we got a big job from the Factory. We were to make mats for an edition of black-and-white prints of snapshots taken by Andy Warhol of various celebrity-friends of his. I recall Henry Kissinger, Bianca Jagger, and Truman Capote – people like that, you know. The photos themselves were nothing special (nor was any such thing ever intended), though Capote, always a great subject, was charming stretched out on his sofa. Perhaps twenty subjects, maybe 25 exemplars of each.

We had a look at the prints. It was evident immediately that most of them had been insufficiently washed – on the backs were broad, distinct areas of the pale yellow stain that results when the fixing solution is not completely removed from the fiber-based paper. They even smelled of hypo. The front sides were basically clean, but in such cases the silver of the image is almost sure to discolor, possibly in the short term.

A conservation mat serves, aside from the scope of presentation or framing, to provide a neutral chemical environment that will protect the print from degradation over time. But if the print itself is chemically contaminated, a mat will do little or nothing to save it. My coworker and I – both of us art photographers, orthodox in the matter of craftsmanship, and worshippers at the altar of Archival Quality – could see no sense in matting such prints, much less releasing them to the public, and supposed there had been some gross oversight. We called the Factory.

The Factory took the prints back and Andy, we were told, checked them out. They replaced a few of the very worst examples, but most of the edition was returned to us with the order to go ahead with the job. Something was said along the lines of "Anyway, it's part of the work."

This might have been perfectly kosher, conceptually and ethically, if in selling the works the hypo stains were pointed out as "part of the work" and if it were mentioned that the prints would thus be subject to degradation.¹ If this is what happened, I take it all back, and I award Andy and the Factory the plastic gold medals for good business practices and conceptual consistency. But somehow I doubt it. (As a shrewd visionary once said, "Honesty is *one* of the better policies.")

I know of no other case, and have no idea whether such indifference to technique was typical of Warhol's production of photographs, or of works in other media. Museums and collectors have an interest in the longevity of the works they hold. But this is only one issue, a material one. More fundamental is, what has been the value of Warhol's contribution to our culture?

There has always been this idea of Warhol's critique of mass culture, which was perhaps more evident in the early years, when he was brand-new and seen as in need of explanation. It's not clear, however, how serious he was about any such critique. I think he was far more off-handedly ironic – ironic without trying to make much of a point about it – than truly critical. The critique, if it really existed as "part of the work" in Warhol's conception, would serve the work (without diminishing it) as an

ethical backbone – something plausible and maybe essential, a saving grace, because the art refuted so much else of what was considered artistic value.

With no critique, however, his art quickly becomes as superficial as the pop world he took as his subject. He was under no obligation, of course, to preach to us or to be serious underneath the camp irony. But we needn't take him any more seriously than he took himself. As he said himself, there's nothing past the surface. Taking his word, we see his work in a truer proportion.

Whatever his merits – and I do like some of his things – I fear that Warhol's net effect on the art world has been to lower our expectations. This may well have happened anyway, but I blame Andy for actually championing the negation of value, as if it were something to be proud of. If you told him that he had done for art what Ray (McDonald's) Kroc did for cuisine, I think he might agree with enthusiasm.

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Nov. 26, 2009

The following links are to the original article and to two series of letters published in response:

What Is an Andy Warhol? <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/23153> (Oct. 22, 2009 issue)

An Exchange on Warhol: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/23390> (Nov. 19, 2009 issue)

An Exchange on Warhol: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/23522> (Dec. 17, 2009 issue)

Further comments of mine, not sent to the New York Review:

Despite all I've said above, I have to admit that the Red Self Portrait is really something.

Given all I have to say against Warhol, I should mention what I like about him, which I'll try to outline in increasing order of substance. For starters, he had a great graphic sensibility, though as a basic ability for any visual artist (and no surprise given his background in illustration), this does not set him apart from many. In itself it is no sign of genius – though we speak of the art of design, a well-designed ad or catalogue or book is still not a painting.

Secondly, Warhol's predilection for experimentation with his art-making techniques – not only in painting and printmaking but in film and video – finds sympathy with me, who has always been eager to try lots of things, and who as a printmaker liked to see the result in various media of the same image (e.g., printing block prints and etchings with the usual ink-based techniques and also as inkless embossments, or with different combinations of ink and paper, or printing editions of abstract, color photographic imagery in which no two "impressions" were alike, but rather the product of a planned series of color combinations.) But my experiments were always for the sake of the artistic ideas I was working with, whereas I think Warhol's enthusiasm was more for the experimentation itself, which was related to his artistic content only insofar as he was trying to achieve an impersonal, manufactured look, like that of cheap gift wrap, packaging, and advertising).

Thirdly, though Warhol was not the first to use the appropriation of images in his picture-making activity, he often did it very effectively. This is of legitimate art historical interest, since appropriation strategies are now widespread in contemporary art, as indeed they suit a wide range of expression. (Rauschenberg used it more evocatively, however, a bit like Whitman's poems, collages of reference that open vistas to the imagination. Warhol's appropriations by contrast seem like deliberate dead ends, and do not stimulate the senses in this way. They still somehow "connect" with our sense of the imagery of mass culture seen in daily life, and are much more interesting than Richard Prince's appropriations of commercial images (which seem, fetishistically and uninterestingly, to refer only to themselves, even if their subjects would seem suitable targets for criticism). Another brief comparison is with Barbara

Kruger, who uses appropriation not for its own sake but to get her message across, which she does powerfully, her polemics never boring or narcissistic.)

Lastly (and mostly) I appreciate the aforementioned cultural critique. The “redeeming social importance” of Warhol’s work – whose context we can recall more vividly when we think back to the mood of the 1960’s and the shock of the Brillo boxes – lay in its commentary on our material culture, on our worship of goods, money, celebrity, and images. Warhol’s critically ironic take on consumerism and mass culture, was as valid and “relevant” as it gets, without meanwhile reducing his meaning to a banal – but still very worthy – critique of materialism.

All these together sometimes produced very strong expressions, thanks mainly, as I see it, to this last “ingredient”, the cultural critique, the most substantial and only truly interesting one. (After all, with other artists we don’t attach as much importance to technique as we do to the aesthetic side.) The images of the electric chair and of police dogs attacking civil rights demonstrators come to mind, which work well thanks mainly to their unusually strong subject (even if the photos are generic). The large works with these subjects, with multiple prints sewn together in a grid, are iconic in a very good sense. Some portraits, such as of Mao and Jackie (in Dallas), can be evocative too, although you could say they were easy shots, and our reaction may not go deeper than a trite, tabloid sensibility, like when you see the New York Post. But by the time we get to Marilyn and Elvis, aren’t we a bit bored? They no longer represent their subjects, but only the iconic status of those subjects in the public perception, without attempting to suggest the depth or complexity of the reality.

Despite Warhol’s own lack of affect, his neutral, almost anesthetized stance towards his subject matter, we sometimes have a strong emotional response to his work, largely owing to the subject matter itself. (In this Warhol differs, refreshingly or surprisingly, from much contemporary art which does not much elicit emotion and which has a whole other idea about subject matter.) His stronger works seem to occur almost by accident, a bit like a photographer of indifferent talent who shoots indiscriminately but by sheer chance makes a good image now and then. (I will leave undisturbed the well-known monkey with the typewriter, he is still typing away.) With Warhol at his best, the subject matter carries him. Perhaps this is why his electric chairs are so much more compelling than his Elvises.²

This is not the same as the case of an artist who creates stronger and weaker works even if his or her level of commitment is consistently high. The weaker works, as part of the development of the artist’s ideas, make the stronger ones possible. But there is no question of the artist’s indifference to the outcome of the work. Warhol, on the other hand, seemed not to care, in general, about his production in this way. He had a different idea of artistic significance, one which could be satisfied without a lot of fuss. (He would have related to what we in the cyberage now call “work flow”.) All things were equal to him. It is perhaps this apparent disinterest in sociopolitical issues as such, this lack of passion or opinion (even about the subjects of his own work), this failure to judge or discriminate, this vacuousness, that disturbs me most about Warhol. One wishes he had shown more in the way of convictions or values. Even with an image that can make me feel something strong, I never feel as if Warhol ever *felt* anything about it or what it might mean. He just used the image. (It is odd that he should have come to such fame and popularity in a decade otherwise noted for passion, confrontation, upheaval, moralism, and rebellion – non-indifference.)

Let’s assume for the moment that Warhol’s cultural critique was “for real”. This ironic take on consumer culture, the prominent feature of his work, seemed just what we needed in the beginning. I had inferred, from the hype about the cultural critique in those days (when I was just a kid from Long Island), that he had some kind of corresponding ethical stance, though Warhol seemed to make few if any such pretenses. For me at thirteen (with my own nascent sense of disgust with our consumer society), his soup cans and Brillo *only* made sense – a kind of obvious but perfect sense – seen in this light. The work itself was superficial, frivolous, even crass, but fun. (After all, we presumed, it was for a good reason.)

For fun, he played the clown of materialism and superficiality, telling us all about his trip to the department store to buy underwear, and why he insists on paying cash. He was the unwitting avatar of consumerism, a new sort of holy fool, the “What – Me Worry?” kid of modern art. And we enjoyed the

act. There was a dissonance between his artistic stance (presumed critical on some level) and his antiheroic persona. This ambiguity has always been a part of his appeal. But what if it was a double-act – what if he really *was* what he seemed to only play at being? This seems to me a weak foundation for an art that might impress us deeply.

What was freshest and most evident and (and important) in Warhol's early works seemed to morph, spurred along by the self-reinforcing success of his enterprises, and by his own transformation into megacelebrity, into little more than another manifestation of the culture he was making fun of that provided him his raw materials. To go back a moment to his innovations, Warhol's genius was not so much in art as in marketing, merchandising, and image-creation, fields which are bigger than ever today. Their substantial relevance to art is another question. His achievements lie closer to those of Henry Ford and F.W. Taylor or P.T. Barnum than to Vermeer, Cezanne, Picasso, or Pollock.

If we realize that the cultural critique, the most substantial aspect of his work, was perhaps never much a part of Warhol's game, mustn't we reevaluate both his importance and our own reactions and attitudes to it? What if we misread him and imputed an agenda to the work that it never had, at least not to the degree we imagined? What if such critique as there may have been (which seemed to diminish over the years) was outweighed for him, belied, by a more fundamental interest in success, fame, ego-gratification, and yes, money? What if we discover that he himself was superficial to the core (as he insisted), and not just playing at it? How far can the admiration go? Are we so used to thinking in terms of the star system that Warhol the icon eludes real criticism? Do we in fact take for granted Warhol's values, or do we have some of our own we are willing to defend?

Must we not be dismayed at a devaluation of art, a thing we like to think of as possessing higher values, and at a reinforcement of the quasi-religious celebration of fame and money, as Warhol's work seems to represent? It is true that we render unto Caesar as we must, but we still look to art to redeem us somewhat from base material concerns. For the most part Warhol's does not seem to me a great artistic achievement, at least not a welcome one, and I regret the influence it has had. Superficiality, in both art and life, has never been more acceptable. His big breakthrough, in making art out of our lowest common denominators, was something, but it took us in a direction that I wish we hadn't taken. From an artist we can't ask always to be satisfied, but we can hope for some kind of fundamental seriousness.

Can we honestly compare his achievements to those of innumerable other artists, even many not of the highest ranks, both famous and forgotten, of every epoch, who were serious in the way we usually think of artists as being? I prefer even an austere, esoteric work of conceptual art, a kind of work which I tend not to enjoy, whose creator's notions of what makes for an interesting and worthwhile work of art I may find alien or incomprehensible, but whose seriousness of purpose is nonetheless evident, to a work in which I detect no commitment at all. There is a fundamental poverty with his project, ethically speaking, if the man is insincere or has no ideas or values worthy of the terms. Aside from questions of philosophy, I think there is an ethical contradiction between a body of work whose main theme is an ironic critique of consumer culture and modes of doing business that are utterly conventional and, if my story of the badly-washed prints means anything, sometimes questionable.

We can't blame Warhol for our materialism, a phenomenon far bigger than he is. Nor can we hang on his neck the rampant commercialization of the art world in recent decades (although here his influence has perhaps been more strongly felt). Warhol is no longer able to answer for his part in the reinforcement of negative trends in society, but we are able to answer for ours. My critique here is directed as much at our overestimation of Warhol's importance, as at Warhol himself. We have failed to identify him for what he is. It's not enough for us to follow facile habit and think of him as an intuitive artistic genius. (This would be like thinking that Chance the Gardener, the slow-witted protagonist of Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*, was a true oracle of economic wisdom.) Our mass culture is "progressing" apace, and we are as materialistic as ever, Warhol having not quite shamed us into trying to develop higher values in our lives (if this was ever his idea). Now, nearly 50 years after Warhol's advent, the interest in him seems more a superficial one in his iconic status than a serious interest in what his work, supposedly, really means.

When critics refer enthusiastically to the revolutionary nature of Warhol's innovations, it seems

they look at the situation from a mainly historical point of view, without considering the true value of those achievements (something critics are supposed to do). As if he gave us something that really helped us. (It's a bit like saying George W. Bush was a great President: of course he has been enormously influential and historically important, but are we better off now thanks to him?)

(I think of the Andy story, which I recall imperfectly, in which he describes to a friend all the things he put into a certain work, as if it were a recipe. The friend listens and says, "But Andy, you left *art* out." And Andy says, "I knew I forgot something.")

I beg the reader's indulgence for the defects in the above commentary, (beyond the first ten paragraphs, omitted from the letter to the New York Review for brevity's sake). It may be repetitious, but I am sick of attempting to cobble it down any further. *Pazienza*; I'm trying to make a few points (I indeed have an axe to grind), not write a perfect and concise essay. I am put in mind of Leszek Kolakowski, the Polish scholar and disaffected communist, who ended his massive (and supposedly well-written and well-argued) history of Communism, *Main Currents of Marxism*, with the comment that probably it was never worth the trouble. In a like way, I feel that Warhol is so far from my concerns, regardless of his reputation in others' eyes, that perhaps I shouldn't bother myself. But because I see him as representing such a polar opposite to so much of what I believe and how I think about art, I feel compelled to write.

¹ I am acquainted with a photographer (who shall remain nameless, both now and in the future, I expect) who released a series of works with precisely this distinction. In my opinion the images are otherwise undistinguished, and the idea itself is fairly lame, but at least the artist is clear about his intentions.

² Perhaps Elvis – a performance artist manqué – shooting his TV would have been more compelling.

Appendix I:

Large Works in Limited Editions: Art as a Highbrow Commodity, and true artistic value

Since Dorment's article concentrates on the problems of determining authenticity in the work of an artist who specialized in a sort of delegated, deliberately depersonalized mass production, this seems an appropriate place to make a few comments about the common practice in art photography of establishing limited editions. This is done of course to attach some aura of rarity to objects that are, inconveniently, inherently reproducible – we're going a bit against nature here when we establish such limits. Before photography was fully accepted as a fine art, its reproducibility was seen as an impediment to such acceptance. The custom evolved, following the general practice with fine-art lithographs and etchings, of limiting the edition so that a photographic print might acquire a similar allure. But whereas such techniques of printmaking have their natural limits – after a certain number of impressions, the image on the stone or plate begins to degrade – no such limitation has photography: a negative can be printed ad infinitum with no loss in quality. So we see that the only legitimate reason to limit an edition is to limit the edition.

A photographic artist might be as happy to sell 5,000 copies of an image for \$10 each (or even 50,000 postcards for a dollar each) as to sell five copies for \$10,000 each if the net profit is the same – perhaps happier, because of the greater diffusion of the image. (The dealer, however, might feel more like a common storekeeper if he were selling in such volumes, and so lose his self-esteem.) Unfortunately for the artist who would like to be popular in this sense, the market is much too limited – there are too many artists (good ones, even), too much work, and far too few collectors to sustain sales in the hundreds or thousands of particular works. Conceivably there might be more people ready and able to buy fine art if lower prices were offered for larger editions, say, 500 copies for \$100 each. But art dealers are not about to take any such step. Probably they sense correctly that the market just isn't there, and so the market has to be controlled.

I have no solid information in the matter, but I have a strong impression that over the past few

decades the typical number of a limited edition has gone down, while the typical size of an image has increased. By now it is common with “major” (established) or “emerging” (sponsored) photographic artists to set a limited edition of three or five, for prints that will each fill up a wall, at a price in the range of four or five figures. Sometimes the image benefits from and deserves such monumentality; sometimes the practice seems only to follow current fashion. Often I feel it is just another sort of inflation, a regrettable, promotion-driven, self-aggrandizing tendency, like so much else in the life of our day.

A big obstacle to this goal of mass distribution is, it must be admitted, that the work of the most advanced artists (the supply side), in terms of taste, tends to be over the heads of most of the public (the demand side). This is to be expected; too bad that people are not more sophisticated, but good that artists challenge them instead of dumbing down. We see an indirect proof of this if we look at the types of art that do sell successfully in a mass market, produced in the form of posters, calendars, note cards, and so on. Besides classics of art which are well-known and accessible enough to be appreciated by many people, we mainly find contemporary work that is middle-of-the-road, beautiful, and decorative, some of it worthy, some innocuous, and some execrable.

The aspect of art that creates the most confusion over its value or meaning (when we don't think clearly about these terms) is the fact that it exists in the context of a commodity system. Most art is inextricably and unavoidably involved with commerce: to be distributed, it must be transformed into a commodity and given a price. The trouble is that too many believe the price is a measure of artistic value., forgetting the ways the market is manipulated, often shamelessly, for the sake of profit. The fact remains that art deals with something that has nothing to do with money. Art's true value simply cannot be put in such terms.

Appendix II:

The Impersonal Touch

Warhol's mechanical approach to making artworks, in which the distinctions between painting, drawing, and printmaking become blurred, was in itself a welcome innovation in art, and in fact a key strength. The closer he stayed to straight photomechanical reproduction and the more he avoided any touch of the artist's hand, such as the pencil strokes in his portraits, the better the works tended to be. I feel his squiggly pencil strokes, about the closest he got to a personal touch, to be pointless, sketchy, too casual, even though surely they were exactly what Warhol wanted. Such embellishments add little or nothing to the works – or indeed they subtract. Here, less would truly have been more. His sense of line is not especially strong; in fact it has little sense, as it seems one stroke would be the same as any other. If Warhol had a true and interesting personal touch, it was precisely the most impersonal and flat effect possible. His works that consist essentially of drawing – the cats, the boots, the hands holding flowers – are mostly decorative at best, at the level of greeting-card art. “If you like it, you buy it!”

Appendix III:

Warhol and Religion

I was surprised to hear of Warhol's religious streak. He was a Byzantine Catholic. Though it was a very private thing for him, he seems to have been sincere and serious in his faith. All the same, I can't imagine how he could have reconciled such religiosity with a philosophy that reduced everything to the level of the ordinary. The non-values he espoused in his work seem the antithesis of any sort of religious sensibility. To Allen Ginsberg everything was holy, but for Warhol, there was nothing sacred, nothing truly to revere, despite the fact that in our consumer society all goods are transubstantiated into objects of worship. This seems a disrespect for Creation, a blasphemy even, and I do not speak as any kind of old-time monotheist, but merely as someone who reveres life. If it comes down to the common belief that faith alone brings grace, whereas works and deeds belong to some other department, this convinces me no more than other manifestations of conventional religion in which believers find quick and easy absolution. Could it be the case, simply, that Warhol was in his faith as he was in the rest of his life, a caricature of an unthinking believer who supposes that grace is as instant as Tang or Jell-O?

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December 2009

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