

2014

Warhol's Aesthetics

Jonathan Flatley

Wayne State University, jonathanflatley@wayne.edu

Anthony E. Grudin

University of Vermont, agrudin@uvm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Flatley, Jonathan and Grudin, Anthony E. (2014) "Warhol's Aesthetics," *Criticism*: Vol. 56: Iss. 3, Article 1.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol56/iss3/1>

INTRODUCTION: WARHOL'S AESTHETICS

Jonathan Flatley and Anthony E. Grudin

Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic.

—José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (2009)¹

The essays in this volume show an Andy Warhol who was deeply engaged in the *aesthetic*, if we understand that word in its ancient Greek sense to refer to “the whole region of human perception and sensation,” as Terry Eagleton put it.² Warhol, these essays propose, was fascinated by the ways in which the human sensorium was interfacing with new technologies of reproduction and mediation—indeed, with the vast set of processes that characterize mid-twentieth-century modernity in the United States (commodification, urbanization, the expansion of mass culture and its audiences, and the mass production of everything from food to cars and music) and the new object and image world created by these processes: “comics, picnic tables, men’s trousers, celebrities, shower curtains, refrigerators, Coke bottles—all the great modern things that the Abstract Expressionists tried so hard not to notice at all,” as Warhol and Pat Hackett put it in *POPism*.³ The Warhol we read about here sought to understand the possibilities of sensing and feeling in this world, to explore the full range of “affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces,” with an emphasis, to be sure, on affections: pop art, for Warhol, is “liking things.”⁴ Here, we see Warhol exploring what kinds of experiences, affects, sensations, or modes of collective and singular being are possible in relation to amphetamines, the toilet, tape recorders, paintings, dogs, rock and roll, pussycats, dollar bills, the human face, strobe lights, shadows, and televisions.

In this respect, Warhol’s practice as an artist is neither cynical nor ironic, nor is it (as Marcel Duchamp and Arthur Danto have suggested

in different ways) merely a philosophical or conceptual provocation designed to question what art is or who can be an artist, although it often does these things, as well.⁵ Rather, Warhol is seen here to be thoroughly engrossed with the particularities of the different media he worked in. These particularities were often highlighted precisely when the perceptual experiences of one medium were translated into another: from strobe lights to cinema, drawing to printmaking, photography to painting, sound recording to writing, computation to disco to painting.⁶ That is (to borrow from Miriam Hansen describing Siegfried Kracauer), Warhol seemed to be most interested in a “configuration of intermedial relations in which the unstable specificity of one medium works to cite and interrogate the other.”⁷

Despite Warhol’s occasional public claims to the contrary, his work with and between media seems to have been specific and careful, a tendency that is elucidated in many of the essays in this special issue, including Homay King’s examination of the intersection of film and lighting practices in and around Warhol’s *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*; Tan Lin’s reading of Warhol’s *Shadows* paintings as themselves complex remediations of strobe lights, television, and information science; and Neil Printz’s discussion of Warhol’s unexpected reliance on drawing as the basis for his first silk screens, which took dollar bills as their subject. Gus Stadler tracks Warhol’s attention, not just to music, but to public and private sounds of all sorts, a project documented in *a: a novel* (1968). Lucy Mulroney’s essay focuses on Warhol’s pre-pop illustrated books, arguing that these publications collaboratively contributed to the production of queer codes and communities. Chelsea Weathers and Juan Antonio Suárez both investigate the prevalence of amphetamine use in Warhol’s Factory, and the ways of feeling and making it permitted. With an eye to the modes of experience enabled by the specificity of the American experience of mass culture and the commodity (as compared to the Soviet experience), Oleg Aronson examines how Warhol dramatized the “split between commodity and image” by “discover[ing] the site where they cannot coexist” (526): the human face. Anthony Grudin’s essay investigates Warhol’s lifelong fascination with animal lives and ways of being. And by offering us a look inside one of Warhol’s *Time Capsules*, Matt Wrbcian invites us to consider the particularity of Warhol’s engagement with the object world evident in his remarkably constant collecting practices.

In their emphasis on Warhol’s engagements with the particularities of different media, the essays in this volume have benefited from the insights into Warhol’s artistic practice that are found in two major recent catalogue raisonné projects: Callie Angell’s work on the film catalogue

raisonné, which showed how careful and considered Warhol's choices were, how he was constantly trying out new techniques and exploring the possibilities of the medium, and Neil Printz and Georg Frei's catalogue raisonné of paintings and sculpture, which demonstrates Warhol's assiduous move toward the silk-screen method and the explosion of activity that resulted from its discovery. These essays have also built on groundbreaking research on the queerness of Warhol's aesthetic by Douglas Crimp, Richard Meyer, Jennifer Doyle, and José Esteban Muñoz.⁸ Almost twenty years after the editors of *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (1996) decried "the de-gaying of Warhol that places whatever is queer outside the realm of critical consideration," the spell now seems to be broken.⁹ It is taken for granted, in these essays, that Warhol is not only gay, but a key queer icon, leaving the authors free to elaborate the modes of Warhol's queerness without first needing to justify the legitimacy of such a critical enterprise.

Where many of Warhol's assertions distancing him from the expressive, creative self so energetically celebrated in the abstract expressionists—"I want to be a machine"¹⁰ or "just look at the surface"¹¹ or "I like boring things"¹²—have been taken to indicate Warhol's cynicism about art and feeling tout court, the essays here suggest that they were instead making room for alternative, queer ways of feeling and of being with others in the world. Warhol's persistent interest in sound recording, for instance, or the affective intensities he encountered through nonhuman animals, his commitment to collaboration, his experiments with lighting in film, his drug use and promotion of drug use—all show an artist who wanted to expand our usual ways of being and feeling in the world, to make room for a range of nonnormal ways of such being, and who saw *art* as a way to make that happen. In this, we also see Warhol's queer singularity emerge—queer not only in the sense of promoting same-sex desires, disrupting normal modes of sociality, and finding places and ways for misfits to "misfit together" (as Douglas Crimp has argued), but also just in the sense of strange and unexpected.¹³ This emergence complicates the now standard view of Warhol as a paradigm of postmodernism, concerned above all with repudiating "the myths of creativity, disalienation, dereification" that propelled modernism.¹⁴ Warhol's investigation of queer perspectives and affects, in other words, has for too long been misrecognized as a repudiation of perspective and affect.

Thus, while Warhol's turn to the pop aesthetic marked a dramatic and controversial rejection of the modernism of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning (and of various modernist ideologues like Clement Greenberg), he was still deeply interested in the ways in which aesthetic practices could alter the world and our experience of it. To be sure, pop

departed from the idea that art is *autonomous*, a special or singular space marked by its functionlessness and separateness from means–ends rationality, in which the alienations and damages of everyday life might be negated or redeemed or compensated for. Yet this did not make Warhol’s artwork any less ambitious. Indeed, his view of the pop aesthetic is well-nigh totalizing: once you’ve “thought pop,” he remarks in *POPism*, “you could never see America the same way again.”¹⁵

Warhol not only had a particular, charged, affect-filled relation to the persons, commodities, scenes, voices, objects, and animals he represented in his work but was also attentive to the affective quality of the aesthetic experiences these works created. In other words, Warhol here emerges as a feeling being, but also as one who was thinking about feeling, about how the “industrially altered environment [for] the human sensorium” has changed how affects come into being, how moods form, and how art might intervene in these processes.¹⁶ Perhaps we can understand Warhol as a modernist in Walter Benjamin’s or Jacques Rancière’s (anti-Greenbergian) sense, committed to “the idea of a new art attuned to all the vibrations of life: an art capable both of matching the accelerated rhythms of industry, society and urban life, and of giving infinite resonance to the most ordinary minutes of everyday life.”¹⁷

Jonathan Flatley is associate professor in the English Department at Wayne State University, where he was the editor of Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts from 2007–12. He is the author of Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism (Harvard University Press, 2008) and Like Andy Warhol (forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press).

Anthony E. Grudin is assistant professor of art history at the University of Vermont. He is the author of Working Class Warhol (forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press), and his essays have been published in October and Oxford Art Journal.

NOTES

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.
2. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990; repr., Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 13.
3. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 39.
4. Andy Warhol, “What Is Pop Art? Part 1,” interview by G[ene] R. Swenson, *ARTnews* 62, no. 7 (1963): 24–27, 60–64, quotation on 26.
5. For Arthur C. Danto, Warhol demonstrates that “what makes the difference between art and nonart is not visual but conceptual” (“Learning to Live with Pluralism,” in *Beyond*

- the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-historical Perspective* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], 217–31, quotation on 225). Marcel Duchamp famously claimed, “If a man takes fifty Campbell Soup cans and puts them on a canvas, it is not the retinal image which concerns us. What interests us is the concept that wants to put fifty Campbell Soup cans on a canvas” (as quoted by Samuel Adams Green, *Andy Warhol* [Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1965], n.p.).
6. See Friedrich A. Kittler, who points out, “In today’s media networks, algorithmically formalized data streams can traverse [all orders of sense experience]. Media facilitate all possible manipulations: acoustic signals control the optical signals of light consoles, electronic language controls the acoustic output of computer music, and, in the case of the vocoder, one set of acoustic signals controls another” (*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Writing Science [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999], 49–50).
 7. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 23.
 8. See Douglas Crimp, “*Our Kind of Movie*”: *The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014) and “Getting the Warhol We Deserve,” *Social Text*, no. 59 (1999): 49–66; Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*. The essays here share many concerns with two other recent queer considerations of Warhol: Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
 9. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz, *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 6.
 10. Warhol, “What Is Pop Art?” 26.
 11. Gretchen Berg, “Andy: My True Story,” *Los Angeles Free Press*, 17 March 1967, 3.
 12. *Andy Warhol*, exhibition catalog (Berlin: New National Gallery, 1969), n.p.
 13. Douglas Crimp, “Misfitting Together,” in “*Our Kind of Movie*” (see note 8), 96–108.
 14. Thierry de Duve, *Sewn in the Sweatshops of Marx: Beuys, Warhol, Klein, Duchamp*, trans. Rosalind Krauss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 26.
 15. Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, 39.
 16. See Miriam Bratu Hansen summarizing Walter Benjamin’s project: “To paraphrase Benjamin in the most general terms, these efforts concern the impact of the industrially altered environment on the human sensorium, the epochal restructuring of subjectivity and collectivity, the crisis of the aesthetic, and the conditions of possibility for postauratic forms of experience and memory, intersubjectivity and agency” (“Benjamin and Cinema, Not a One Way Street,” in “*Angelus Novus*: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin,” ed. Thomas Good, special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 [1999]: 306–43, quotation on 306).
 17. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Verso, 2013), 262.

