



The New York Times

Andy Warhol and the Persistence of Modernism

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The June 20th issue of The New York Review of Books contains a devastating portrayal, by the art critic Richard Dorment, of the activities of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and its (now dissolved) sister institution, the Andy Warhol Art Authentication Board. The foundation was established, according to Warhol's will, to provide for the "advancement of the visual arts," and was to be funded by the sale of a large number of works the artist left to his estate. The board was assembled for the purpose of deciding whether a given work was an original Warhol. As I'll explain, that task is hardly straightforward.

Dorment's fundamental accusation is that members of these overlapping organizations were in a position to profit from the authentication process, and that this affected their decisions. Whether these accusations hold up or not, the Warhol situation epitomizes a curious fact about the art world since the postmodern period.

Postmodernism in the arts repudiated many of the basic teachings of modernism: the myth of individual genius, for example, and the concept of originality. Yet arts institutions continued to operate throughout the postmodern period, and do so right up to the present moment, as though that critique never happened. Museums, foundations, government endowments, and university art departments all effortlessly absorbed a movement which was more or less devoted to destroying their conception of the arts. They treated the postmodernists exactly the way they'd treated the modernists.

As the ur-postmodernist, Warhol's entire artistic practice and persona stood, quite intentionally, in opposition to modernist ideas. He was the very antithesis of a Van Gogh, a Picasso, a Pollock. Where they (it was held) re-made the world visually and emotionally in the smithies of their tortured souls (to paraphrase James Joyce), Warhol blithely swiped subject matter from mass media. He presented himself as a kind of empty mirror for the images that were already all around us in advertising or entertainment or packaging. And his persona was famously cool and withdrawn, or even blank: just the opposite of the outsized, impassioned personalities of Picasso or Pollock.

Nevertheless, like the arts establishment generally, the Andy Warhol Art Authentication Board proceeded as if the postmodern era that Warhol crystallized never happened at all. The board stamped, in indelible ink, works it rejected as original Warhols. Their decisions make a substantial difference in the art's value.

Warhol left behind tens of thousands of items, many of which he never touched, except in some cases to add a signature. Both prints and "original paintings" were instead more or less designed by him and executed in various shops around town, which Warhol typically didn't even bother to visit. The whole thing could be interpreted as a pointed demonstration that "originality" is over or pointless in the era of mass media.

What is and is not an original Warhol, in the Authentication Board's definition, seemed to depend on what Warhol was aware of as it was being made: mere awareness is analogous, in Warhol's case, to the hand of Pollock. Now the hand of Pollock may be difficult to distinguish from the hand of, say, a copyist, but an expert or true connoisseur could tell the difference. Discerning the direction of Warhol's fleeting awareness in 1973, on the other hand, would be a challenge for an omniscient deity.

Yet remarkably, the entire discourse and institutional context which was developed in relation to Manet, Kandinsky or de Kooning, and explicitly attacked by Warhol and the postmodernists, is simply



reproduced by the foundation, the board, and indeed by virtually all institutions that deal with postmodern art. It's roughly analogous to scientists trying to account for the latest results in physics using the intellectual equipment of medieval theology.

Why is that? If modernism died in actual art practice, why did the art market and museum system go on as though nothing had ever happened? First of all, modernist ideology is extremely effective commercially. Once you jettison ideas like originality and genius, there is no justification for prices in the millions.

It is quite plausible to assert that, unlike most modernist masterpieces, a decent reproduction of a Warhol is as good as an "original," or for that matter is just as original. In virtue of what, precisely, would you distinguish them aesthetically? Is it that the original was brushed at a distance of some miles by Andy Warhol's awareness?

Warhols are, to put it in Walter Benjamin's terms, "works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." Benjamin famously asserted that, in a situation in which images could be copied cheaply and en masse, works of art were losing their "aura": the sense of mystery and transcendent value that attended them. But aura is associated with rarity and preciousness: it limits supply and hence enhances or exponentially increases price. So, for those who stand to profit from postmodern art, the aura has to be imposed, invented, or (dis)simulated.

Second, whole generations of art lovers have been trained in modernist dogma, and arts institutions' access to various forms of state or foundation support depend on it completely. One goes to the museum to gasp at stunning works of incomparable, super-human genius by beings who are infinitely more exalted and important than the mere humans staring at their paintings. That's why ordinary people staring at a Picasso (allegedly) experience a kind of transcendence or re-articulation of their lives and world.

This quasi-religious approach was questionable enough with regard to the objects around which it developed, but it seems merely ridiculous when you are staring at a Warhol Brillo box, a Lichtenstein comic strip, or a Jenny Holzer text. You are definitely going to need experts to explain how these things could possibly be appreciated this way. And if they can't be or shouldn't be, or if they appear ridiculous or incomprehensible when they are, the institutions that house them stand to lose the justification for their existence and funding.

The institutional economics of art — public or private — depends on what the postmodern art theorist Rosalind Krauss called "the originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths." It doesn't matter what you do: if you are an "important artist," arts institutions will portray you and market you as an original genius and your work as the high-water mark of human transcendence, which not incidentally increases its price. The canvas on which you have someone in Bangladesh stencil "this is not a work of original genius" will be "authenticated" as a work of original genius, and probably turn out to be more valuable than the Bangladeshi economy as a whole.