

Andy Warhol in The Age of Commercial Explosion

-- An Analysis of the History and Revelations of Repetitions in Artistic Creations

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Abstract. This article examines how Andy Warhol's arts have subverted traditional artistic values and revealed the essence of a commercialized society. Through a comparative analysis of pre-Warholian repetitions (e.g., Da Vinci's contractual replicas and Cabanel's market-driven reproductions) and Warhol's mechanized repetitions, the study demonstrates that Warhol uniquely elevated repetition to an artistic principle. By employing Walter Benjamin's theory of mechanical reproduction and Guy Debord's critique of the spectacle society, the article argues that Warhol's art epitomizes the transformation of art into a reflection of capitalist culture—where commodities and celebrities become hollow symbols. Warhol's deliberate erasure of artistic individuality and embrace of surface aesthetics expose a society obsessed with efficiency, standardization, and spectacle. Ultimately, this study contends that Warhol's works not only challenged the definition of art but also foreshadowed the postmodern condition in which reality is mediated by images and consumption dictates human experience.

Keywords: Andy Warhol; Consumer Society; Mechanical Reproduction; Pop Art; Spectacle.

1. Introduction

During the history of artistic creations, repetitions have rarely been encouraged. Finding their roots in all sorts of craftsmen, artists had long believed that the value of an artwork was strongly associated with its uniqueness. While potentially depreciate the original works, creating repetitional works is also commonly considered an action of indolence. However, American artist Andy Warhol has challenged this tradition by bringing replication to the core of art creations. In this article, employing biographical approach, formalism, iconography, and comparative analysis, I will first elaborate why the repetitions presented in Andy Warhol's works are unprecedented. Then, with a specific focus on modern societal structure and ideology, I will argue that those repetitions have completely revolutionized the value of arts by precisely revealing the nature of a highly commercialized society.

1.1 Repetitions in Traditional Arts: From Functionality to Commercialization

Indeed, there were a few instances where artists have repeated their own works, yet, unlike Andy Warhol, none of them have regarded repetition as a coherent part of artistic creation. Leonardo Da Vinci, for example, has painted two *Virgin of The Rocks* with minimal differences, but this was a result of contract obligations [1]. Alexandre Cabanel also painted multiple *The Birth of Venus* after his huge success at the 1863 Paris Salon. Similarly, he did so only to respond to soaring market demands from the upper class, and all the replicas are smaller in size and much less influential than the original piece which was purchased by Napoléon III. Additionally, although artists like Albrecht Dürer and Rembrandt have widely employed printmaking techniques, those works were, at that time, mainly created for advertising and publishing purposes. Andy Warhol, on the other hand, has made repetition the very foundation of his art where all the superstructures such as values, ideas, and critiques were built upon. As Walter Benjamin [2] has demonstrated in his book *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, while a reproduction of art lacks the *aura* that testifies its presence in time and space, the action of mechanical repetition also emancipates art from its “parasitical dependence” on ritual. Thus, it is more accurate to view Warhol's works as arts created for reproducibility instead of arts that simply get reproduced.

1.2 Warhol's Repetitions: An Inseparable Nature of Art and a Tool to Critique

Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Andy Warhol started his career in New York City illustrating magazines and designing shoes [3] (figure 1). It was the 1950s and America's development was skyrocketing. In order to meet the increasing demand, Andy Warhol came up with his iconic blotted line technique where he would draw on waterproof paper and print the image by covering it with absorbent paper before the ink dries out. Warhol gained great benefits, both financially and reputationally, from this rather rudimentary printmaking skill. But the most important aspect is that through these commercial experiences, the young artist realized that reproduction was deeply rooted in modern society.



Figure 1. Andy Warhol's Shoe Designs

From Adam Smith's theory of the Division of Labor to Henry Ford's first modern assembly line, craftsmanship, with its thousands years of history, has been overthrown. Nonetheless, as efficiency became the core of societal production, one inevitable drawback was that people were bound to monotonous and repetitive tasks which did not require any in-depth understanding of how things worked. Warhol, then in his thirties, had long aspired to become a "pure" artist [4]. However, instead of enriching his art with elegant forms and compositions, like almost all the artists before him, Warhol decided to copy everyday advertising images and infusing the idea of "art" into them.

1.3 Campbell Soup Cans: A Totem of Commercialization

Warhol's first major work was a series of Campbell's Soup Cans painted in 1962 (figure 2). Thirty-two small canvases corresponded to the thirty-two flavors of the then most popular canned food in America. For the purpose of increasing efficiency and assuring identical representations, Warhol used a projector to cast the image onto canvas and traced over it. By erasing the artist's hand, these paintings reflected a society where commerce replaced sacred rituals, and standardized goods dominated human experiences. Significantly, canned foods themselves were symbols of a commercially industrialized society because they were cheap to buy and fast to prepare. From a lower-class Czech immigrant family, Warhol has stated that Campbell's soup can was a staple on the dining table during his childhood [5]. And it was likely that this reliance had sculpted Warhol's sensitivity to consumer cultures [6]. Through these mechanically produced paintings, Warhol has undoubtedly

created a reflection of modern society: a society that had diminished the deity of Jesus Christ as well as the power of the aristocrats; a society that has regarded commerce as the new religion.



Figure 2. Campbell's Soup Cans

1.4 Marilyn Diptych: A Meaningless Spectacle

Meanwhile, along with such a society was a prominent culture of extensive entertainment. Also in 1962, having captured the virality behind Marilyn Monroe's sudden death, Warhol created one of his most influential arts: the *Marilyn Diptych* (figure 3). He took a publicity photo of Monroe and screen-printed it onto a large canvas. On the left panel are twenty-five colored repetitions where Monroe's faces are purple, hairs are yellow, and eyelids are green - all against a bright orange background. The right panel, on the other hand, consists of twenty-five monochromatic prints of the same photo. Warhol intentionally controlled the amount of printing ink so that Monroe's faces appear fading into a void towards the edge of the canvas, adding a sense of erosion. Here, through mechanical repetitions, the charm of a living person was downgraded into a disposable visual formula that audiences passively consume. Besides challenging the traditional definition of vulgar and elegant, this gigantic diptych went a step further to questioning the fundamental value of arts:

must it be beautiful, thoughtful, or unique?



Figure 3. Marilyn Diptych

In his own book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, the artist famously stated that there were no meanings behind his arts [7], and everything was on the surface. It is worth noting that before Warhol, Dada artists such as Marcel Duchamp had already stripped down the meaning of art with Ready-made objects. They have put forward a theory that art is not something feasible, it is all about the intention of the creator. With an idea or a common belief, even a mass-produced urinal can be turned into a piece of art. Andy Warhol also rejected the deep meanings that were customarily associated with arts. The way he achieved this was changing the action of “create” into “produce”, and his “productions” intentionally refused to bear any grandiose narratives. They were mere reflections of reality.

2. Conclusion

As commercialization speeds up, people are gradually deprived of the energy, time, and curiosity of pursuing deeper meanings. Just as Guy Debord has envisioned in *The Society of the Spectacle*, when production prevails in a society, all of life will turn into an immense sediment of spectacles that expresses nothing. Under this societal condition, analytical decision making becomes reactions of superficial stimulations, original creations are replaced by countless reproductions, and eventually, everything in a society is reduced to symbols. This is the very nature of a highly commercialized society: the most profound reality lies within the surface. Warhol had foreseen this unavoidable destination of modern society, thus had chosen to reveal and respond to it by mass-producing repetitional artworks that spotlighted on the most ordinarily essentials in our lives: canned foods and superstars.

References

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