WARHOL: EXPLORING OSTENSIBLE KITSCH

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There is a certain charisma associated with the constant and quick development of convenience in modern Western culture. Moving sidewalks, electric can openers, and other labor-saving devices seem inviting, but in a culture that delights in physical shortcuts, it is only reasonable to assume that intellectual shortcuts will naturally follow. In the art community, such shortcuts are called "kitsch." Commodity culture often provides the means through which kitsch is truly manifested, producing immediately-interpreted images that have a few swift seconds to capture the consumer's attention. However, not all representations of commercial products are considered kitsch. Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* is a primary example of commodity culture as high art. Visually uncomplicated, easily understood, and representative of commodity culture, Warhol's soup cans are simple compositions consisting of repeated images of a product on a white background. By definition, this imagery should be kitsch. Nevertheless, Warhol is one of the best known names in American high art. What, exactly, elevates Warhol's work above the kitsch category? What is the boundary between dignified high art and quick kitsch?

The manifestation of kitsch in the world of high art can be considered a rude debasement of the intellectual association that generally accompanies high culture. Theorists and art critics alike agree about the dangers of kitsch. Critic Clement Greenberg uses the term "predigestion" to describe art that spares the viewer the effort of contemplation (Greenberg 546), and kitsch predigests art by diluting the intellectual processes necessary to appreciate art with layered meanings. Kitsch borrows from commodity culture because it is easy to understand and, therefore, easy to sell. The eye quickly accepts commercial imagery because it is already desensitized to its visual information, and because the imagery is digested quickly, its marketability rises. The danger of "predigestion" is that people do not have to use higher cognitive processes to understand and appreciate it. Kitsch is considered the antithesis to artistic and cultural intellectualism; however, in the case of Andy Warhol's art, the line between kitsch and high art becomes blurred. Art historian David Joselit asserts that "Pop Art collapses 'high' art into 'low' by incorporating commercial imagery and industrial modes of mechanical reproduction into painting

and sculpture" (65). Certainly, there is a deeper contextual meaning behind Warhol's seemingly kitschy and commercial imagery.

In the Fall, 1939, *Partisan Review*, Clement Greenberg wrote that "Kitsch is the product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy" (543). Though he was writing decades before Warhol's prime, his ideas on kitsch were relevant then, in Warhol's time, and certainly in contemporary times as well. The "universal literacy" of which he speaks translates to the modern term "globalization." In order for something to be understood through cultures, a common element from all cultures must be at the center of the text. The danger of the search for such a common element in a globalized mass society is that the intricacies of complex thought could be lost. Dwight MacDonald observes that

> a mass society, like a crowd, is so undifferentiated and loosely structured that its atoms, in so far as human values go, tend to cohere only along the line of the least common denominator; its morality sinks to that of its most brutal and primitive members, its taste to that of the least sensitive and most ignorant. (70)

The necessity of the "least common denominator" is inherently logical. Although the world today is facing exponential globalizing factors, colloquial cultural components differ. While there are intellectuals in every society, the "least common denominator" is certainly helpful in overcoming communication barriers. The easiest and most basic element in any media or text is the one that will be understood by the largest number of people. The globalizing factor can be seen in movies as well as art. At the 2004 Cannes Film Festival in 2004, Lynn Hirschberg found the most popular movies were those that translated across cultures via simplicity and colorful imagery (Hirschberg 2004). The same may be said of art in high culture. Certainly the wonderfully gaudy art of Jeff Koons could be considered kitschy. Some may even say the same of Warhol's art. However, are we overlooking the contextual content behind ostensible kitsch?

Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* was first exhibited in 1962 in Los Angeles at the Ferus Gallery. Warhol used silk-screen on canvas to display repeated imagery of soup cans, identical save for their flavor. Repetition is one of the greatest tools of "universal literacy," as one can infer from the sameness of advertising imagery worldwide. Because of mass society's proclivity towards repetition, soup cans are

universally recognized. However, can one really call the work kitschy because its subject is universally familiar? Maybe not. Carter Ratcliff writes that the esoteric art world of the 1960s was "horrified" at the aesthetic audacity of Warhol and other commodity culture artists, like Claes Oldenburg.

> Serious painting and sculpture had offered, among much else, a refuge from hamburger joints and girlie magazines, and, more generally, from the pressures of advertising, the movies, and television. . . . Pop art was widely taken as an insult to the hopes and values of these artists and to the modernist tradition they were trying to sustain. (7)

If indeed pop art was such an insult, why were critics taking Warhol seriously? Though his work was kitschy in subject matter and by his own insistence on its simplicity, Warhol's soup cans are layered with meaning.

The bright colors and clean lines of Warhol's *Soup Cans* are aesthetically pleasing and lean towards kitschy, but the concept behind his repetition is the definitive element. At this point, Warhol was known for the immersion of commodity culture into his art. Taking recognizable images and products, he repeated the images over and over again until they ostensibly lost their meaning in repetition. He intended for *Soup Cans* to look as if they were pumped out of a machine. No doubt, there is some level of aesthetic unity in this piece, but its contextual meaning far outweighs its seeming kitsch. Warhol once said that he liked being a machine because then you can do whatever it is you do over and over again. In an interview printed in the November, 1963, *ArtNews*, Warhol seemingly praised the social homogenization of Communist Russia: "I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should [be] like everybody" (747). Through his work, Warhol references the general mechanized culture of Russia after the Industrial Revolution, and the odd parallel between machine-like Communism and the intense repetition in American commodity culture. Perhaps it is implications like this that separate Warhol's art as high art from kitsch.

It seems unlikely that Warhol was interested merely in the aesthetics of Campbell's Soup cans, so one can only infer there was a specific purpose behind such repetition. In the same interview, just one year after the *Soup Cans* exhibition, he remarked that

> I think artists who aren't very good should become like everybody else so that people would like things that aren't very good. It's already

> happening. All you have to do is read the magazines and the catalogues. It's this style or that style, this or that image of a man—but that really doesn't make any difference. (748)

Warhol recognizes that society is conforming to the "least common denominator" ideology that is produced by the "money boys and efficiency experts and audience-reaction analysts" who develop the formula or standard by which we prepackage our society (MacDonald 72). MacDonald's interpretation of commercial culture suggests it is meticulously planned by a team of experts who can predict which commodities will sell best. The explicit purpose of kitsch, MacDonald writes, is to sell culture to the masses; however, because it is a "manufactured commodity," it tends to be a cheap standard of production (72). Warhol took a cheap product and replicated it in a cheap medium over and over again, exploiting the idea of kitsch for his own purposes. It is not the actual image of soup cans that interested him, but the concept of pumping out imagery like a machine, like a government, that truly separates this type of work from kitsch. In the same way a government pumps out propagandistic imagery to suit its purposes, Warhol repeats his imagery without explicit purpose. The subtle game of interpretation involves the interaction of the viewer.

Warhol's subjects were both commonplace and culturally significant. As Joslit observes, "Warhol was consistently drawn to products with a special emotional charge, such as Coke or Campbell's Soup, which for anyone raised in mid-twentieth century America conjures up an idealized version of home and family" (77); Joselit calls this attitude *faux naïveté.* Warhol's naïve denial of a specific purpose is a clever way to force the viewer to come to a conclusion unassisted. Warhol knew this, and his *naïveté* was a cheeky way to enlist viewer interaction. Warhol refused to interpret his own work, but seeking out images that demand an emotional charge clearly demonstrates artistic, not decorative, purpose. Images like Campbell's Soup cans and Brillo Boxes are familiar icons of American culture in the mid-twentieth century. Warhol and his contemporaries were playing with these icons. "On the one hand," Joselit observes, "[pop artists] chartered the commercialization of public space, and on the other they demonstrated how commodities came to serve as public icons which possess ideological values well beyond their ostensible functions" (65). It is not the commodities themselves that have a function, but their placement in the context of human ideological values.

There is an inherent content and a need for interpretation which define a work as art. In her famous essay "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag argues that the interpretation of critics and art historians usurps the true meaning behind art. "Abstract painting," she writes,

> **is the attempt to have, in an ordinary sense, no content; since there is no content, there can be no interpretation. Pop Art works by the opposite means to the same result; using a content so blatant, so "what-it-is" it, too, ends up being uninterpretable. (7).**

This *laissez faire* approach to modern art can only work to a certain extent. It may seem ideal in some ways, but modern art seems to require interpretation. By insisting he painted soup because he liked it and drank it daily, Warhol deprives his work of critical interpretation, leaving it as a debased form of kitsch. However, given Warhol's own reference to machine society, it is unlikely the function of the repeated imagery to express admiration for the product. Without understanding traditional symbolism, literary context, or social context, a piece of art is left with little meaning and only tidbits of aesthetic quality. Without interpretation, Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling would just be two guys hanging out on clouds rather than an intense religious moment. Without interpretation, Marcel Duchamp's *The Fountain* would be just a urinal. It seems very likely that Warhol was looking back to artists like Duchamp, who, in 1917, entered his image of a urinal into an art competition. There was much debate surrounding the authenticity and vulgarity of the work because it was literally a urinal turned upside down with Duchamp's pseudonym marked on the side. By choosing the object and presenting it in an unfamiliar context, Duchamp altered the meaning of the object itself. Warhol's soup cans are presented in the arena of high art, not in the rows at the grocery store. In this respect, the contextual meaning has been changed. Duchamp is recognized as the author of this response to *The Fountain*'s rejection, "[Mr. Mutt] took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object" (Duchamp 252).

Warhol was working with similar ideas of meaning reassignment through manipulation of context. By taking the soup cans out of the grocery store, the new meaning is one which can only be discovered through interpretation of the artist's message. Warhol's work loses much meaning if the viewer does not question its

meaning. For this reason, Sontag's anti-interpretive position seems like one which would effectively reduce high art, which requires thought, to common kitsch. Sontag believes that any interpretation of a work automatically alters the initial meaning of the work (3). In line with such ideology, perhaps Warhol was trying to preserve the authentic objective of his work, willing to reject intellectual theory to save his work from violation. However, some theorists argue it is the interpretation that justifies the work of art. In an essay in *Critical Inquiry*, Paul Mattick quotes critic-philosopher Arthur Danto, "What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art" (967). Mattick and Danto both support the idea of art constituted solely by theory, placing little importance on aesthetic value. The silk-screened *Brillo Boxes* of 1964 is an excellent example of an artwork justified as such by the theory behind it. The bright boxes look most like a grocery store display. However, as Mattick points out, the media used are superior to the actual printed cardboard one may find in the supermarket (967). The theory behind this work, which justifies it as art, is similar to that of *Soup Cans*. Instead of being a painted image, it is an object that is pumped out and plopped down at several museums. One could again draw parallels between the cyclic image reproduction and the ideologies of Communist Russia. The idea is to pump out one person, thing, image, product one after another.

While this is one of the most well-known of Warhol theories, many scholars interpret Warhol differently. In an interview at the City University of New York, scholar Wayne Koestenbaum mentioned Warhol's interest in disappearance via metamorphosing into a machine (3). The Campbell Soup imagery seems to be so playful; however, Koestenbuam questions Warhol's thinking:

> is the can empty or full? It's empty because we know that it's just an artwork and there is no real soup in it, but the real can is filled with real soup that it stands for: is the artwork filled with real? Aren't there empty calories? Or isn't canned soup always a replacement for real soup so you can have real soup as empty soup? (3)

In line with Koestenbaum's theories, it would seem Warhol manipulated a mass-produced commodity to make statements about space. Warhol's exploration of machine themes and space evaluation is intentional, though it is hidden behind a veil of the blinding familiarity and ease of commodity culture. The danger of mass

production is risky on a human level because it eliminates personal distinction. What is the effect of repetitive production in art? MacDonald observes that "[w]hen to this ease of consumption is added to kitsch's ease of production because of its standardized nature, its prolific growth is easy to understand. It threatens High Culture by its sheer pervasiveness, its brutal, overwhelming quantity" (61). Kitsch is easy because it is convenient and does not take much effort to understand at face value. If one accepts Sontag's ideas, Warhol's art is so "what-it-is" that interpretation is unnecessary. However, in this case, the banality of the imagery is the statement itself. To be fully understood, one must consider his works in relation to one another. Especially in the early 1960s, Warhol is making some serious statements about the repetition in commodity culture and how it might reflect machine-like governing bodies.

Consider the ease at which Warhol's images can be reproduced. Reproductions often indicate kitsch: visitors to the Statue of Liberty leave with a palm-sized reproduction of Miss Liberty, and after visiting the Louvre, with a knick-knack of the Mona Lisa. Artists like Warhol were taking a new approach to authorship. Rainer Crone notes that Warhol's paintings are designed to be reproduced, which casts doubt on the producer's sole authorship and strips the image of its centuries-old aura of autonomy, authenticity, and uniqueness (10). There is no doubt this type of reproduction is kitschy; however, Warhol's purposefully-reproduced imagery is not. Warhol uses the silk-screen medium and easily-reproduced subject matter to force the viewer into questioning the function of his paintings. Is his painting compliant to the reproductive demands of a machine-like commodity society? Or is his work a tongue-in-cheek embrace of an increasingly homogeneous society? Speaking about his medium, Warhol said, "That's probably one reason I'm using silk-screens now. I think somebody should be able to do all my paintings for me. . . . I think it would be great if more people took up silk-screens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or somebody else's" (Crone 10). It seems that Warhol is thumbing his nose at kitsch by working in its style. As Crone notes, "Reproduction robs the artwork of its uniqueness and authority, imparting significance instead to the image reproduced" (10). Standing in front of a wall full of soup cans forces the viewer to evaluate why such an image is repeated and reproduced. Questions about authorship, commodity culture, and machine-like

reproduction elevate the seemingly simple work to an area of true painting-viewer relationship.

Kitsch is generally defined as art in bad taste. The predigested imagery is massively distributed, like the plethora of Warhol paraphernalia available. Clement Greenberg says that kitsch "predigests art for the spectator and spares him the effort, provides him with a shortcut to the pleasures of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art" (61). Though the actual visual images require no explanation (they are after all just painted soup cans), the ideas behind the perceived kitsch contextually give the work meaning, which is not predigested. In fact, the viewer is really forced to question why Warhol painted such images or stacked soap-pad boxes. In the early twentieth century, Duchamp redefined traditional art by reassigning meaning through context, and Warhol continued that tradition several decades later. His specific artistic goals and the subsequent critical theory clearly answer the question, "Why is this art?" It is art because there are contextual statements made which do not translate through cultures. One may possibly call it kitschy at first, but only because the images themselves are easily consumable. However, their consumable nature is so purposely meaningful that common kitsch is out of the question.

Endlessly debated by critics and historians, Warhol's enigmatic allusions to commodity culture, machine societies, and reproducible imagery are serious statements which place his art far outside the realm of kitsch. Questions about function, interpretation, and meaning are themes in Warhol's art which can be applied to the convenience of contemporary culture. With the convenience of contemporary life, it is important to think about the images commodity cultures produce and consider its effects on our thought processes. Warhol's work and the subsequent theories encourage the viewer not only to question his contextual meaning, but it is also a warning to question one's society, being careful not to quietly accept any image which has already been interpreted for you.

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