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Art and Society

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Postmodernism Displayed Through Andy Warhol's Work

The theory of postmodernism is one that arose from distaste for the rigid and exclusiveness of the modernist art society. High art was decided by the critics, whom were appointed by and a part of the dominant high-class society. Due to this, mass society was not a part of the art of that time. Many postmodern artists, including Andy Warhol, “emerged as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism... which conquered... the art gallery” (Jameson 111). Postmodernism is essentially a movement against modernist ideas. Postmodernism became all about being “arbitrary, relative, with no deep or authentic meaning, the value is momentary and fleeting (Cordero 9/28).” Andy Warhol, an artist that emerged in the 1960's, used the aforementioned postmodern characteristics in his art. Warhol's lack of interest or care for the previous conventions of art helped change the face of the art world, and established him as a postmodern artist. Warhol's artwork exemplified postmodern ideas specifically through his form, lack of originality, and use of celebrity figures.

Postmodernism introduces a new concept into the art world called anti-art. As postmodernism is no longer concerned with the previous conventions set by modernist art, the techniques and art produced are often considered as against art, or anti-art. Andy Warhol was often referred to as a non-artist, but also one of the greatest artists of his time. He, along with the postmodernist movement, moved away

from the previous high art styles such as Abstract Expressionism, which “were felt to be the establishment and the enemy”. Their goal was to separate themselves from the modernist art society, so “there will be as many different forms of postmodernism as there were high modernisms in place” (Jameson 112). Warhol’s ideas of form were unique in comparison to the previous modernist conceptions of art; he decided to expunge the paint drips and brush strokes from his paintings to see if they could still be art. The feedback was not well received at first by the art world, because “it was felt that his new style of paintings were anti-art” (*Andy Warhol* film). Warhol’s pieces started to look more like commercial work rather than art. This was considered to be a distinction that had to be kept separate in the high art world.

Warhol’s works were also considered anti-art because of the silk-screening process some of his works would undergo. In modernist art society, all aspects of a painting were done with intention and insistence. However, in postmodernism, the art was often not insistent. In Warhol’s silk-screened works, such as the images of Marilyn Monroe or Troy Donahue, the silk-screening process changed how each of the images appeared. In one of his silk-screened Elvis Presley paintings, the images of Elvis “often lighten in value toward one side or are deleted” (Judd 268). This was not what Warhol intended, rather an effect of the silk-screening process.

When modernists examined the work of Warhol, they believed that “the repetition should be made more insistent”. In their minds, all pieces of art should “be emphasized” and be done



for a specific reason (Judd). This non-insistent nature, however, is characteristic of postmodern works.

The silk-screening process that was arbitrary and non-insistent also introduced another postmodern idea to Warhol's works – that of the hyperreal. The hyperreal is a concept developed by postmodernist Jean Baudrillard. It encompasses the idea that in modernist society, “Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept... it is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1). Essentially, signs are no longer based on reality; they are based on something that is not real. There are three traits involved in the hyperreal – the real, the representation of the real, and the representation of the representation. Essentially, the hyperreal is a representation twice removed from reality, or from the real.

Andy Warhol demonstrates this postmodern idea in his work through the silk-screening process when he uses a picture to create another image. In his works of



Elvis, Warhol took a picture of Elvis and then silk-screened and added color to create his own piece of art. This demonstrates the hyperreal because his representation of Elvis is based off of a representation of Elvis (the picture), which is based on the real Elvis. His work is twice removed from Elvis in reality.

Warhol not only bases this work off of a representation – he also inadvertently changes Elvis' expressions through the silk-screening process. Through “an arbitrary change of color” the Elvis paintings all of a sudden “read out

‘purposeful rage,’ ‘affronted innocence,’ ‘murderous sullenness,’ ‘terror’” (Antin 288). These changes in the expressions of Elvis lead the hyperreal to really be grounded on nothing in reality. Elvis no longer looks like his true self in the real world – the images are so far off base that they have no true basis or origin.

Elvis is not the only work of Warhol that demonstrates this concept of hyperreal – this is also done with the image of Elizabeth Taylor.

Warhol takes a picture of Taylor and turns it into a mask of color that no longer demonstrates what she looked like originally, leaving an image that is no longer based in reality. Taylor’s “ideal face is transformed into a curious mask” (Antin 289). Taylor



no longer looks like herself, rather, the portraits show an expressionless mask.

It can be seen that many of Warhol’s works were based off of celebrities. He created many silk-screened and painted images of famous celebrities, including Marilyn Monroe, Troy Donahue, Elvis Presley, and Elizabeth Taylor. These works were popular simply because they were of celebrities. This connects to the postmodern idea of political economy of the sign and the fleeting nature of postmodernism. The general idea of political economy of the sign is that “the explosion of commodity-signs implies that exchange of material products follows a new economy based on sign values” (Cordero 9/28). Essentially, the value of certain products is usually based off of something that is not actually real. This relates to the idea of celebrities, as they are often created based off of a myth hyped up by the media. The celebrities may not be whom they are made out to be, but their fame and

the media develops an image of them that is presented to the rest of society. They are appropriated sign values that create and help sell their celebrity. Warhol, through his use of celebrities in his artwork, took advantage of this myth of celebrity. According to Michael Fried, in his article *New York Letter*, “An art like Warhol’s is necessarily parasitic upon the myths of its time, and indirectly therefore upon the machinery of fame and publicity that markets these myths” (Fried 267). Essentially, Warhol preys upon the fame and myths of his subjects to draw viewers to his art - they are captivated simply due to the sign value placed upon the celebrities in Warhol’s work. This exemplifies the postmodernist idea of political economy of the sign.

Warhol’s use of celebrities also demonstrates the idea of the implosiveness of celebrity. Celebrities are only famous for as long as the media perpetuates them - once that is gone they fade away. Celebrities are essentially fleeting – important one day and then gone the next. For future generations “the myths will be unintelligible”, and Warhol’s works will probably not “outlast the journalism on which it is forced to depend” (Fried 267). The celebrities that are famous in society at a moment in time depend upon the media and journalism to remain important. Warhol’s work on celebrities, such as Troy Donahue and Elizabeth Taylor, is fleeting because after his generation the media storm surrounding them will stop, and his art will no longer be relatable to generations to follow. In this sense, Warhol’s works are indeed fleeting, and therefore postmodernist.

Postmodern art also generally lacks depth or authentic meaning, and Warhol definitely facilitates this through his art. Warhol’s artwork was not usually well thought out or planned - in fact, “he was the receiver of ideas, not the generator”

(*Andy Warhol film*). Warhol's first famous work, the Campbell soup cans, were not his idea to begin with. He was at a dead end with his art and did not know what to paint. When he asked his friend for guidance, he told Warhol to paint something common, like



soup cans. Warhol took this idea and painted 32 different kinds of Campbell soup, without any planning or reason. Warhol himself said, “Don't think about making art, just get it done. Let others decide if it's good or not. While they're deciding, make more art” (*Andy Warhol film*). Warhol did not put much thought into his artwork, which in itself is considered to be arbitrary, lacking in depth, and contrary to modernist ideas. In the high art society of modernism, every painting was laboriously planned out and had a meaning and reason. Warhol turned this modernist idea upside down by painting whatever.

Warhol's work was also arbitrary and lacking in depth because he would mechanically reproduce the same image. For example, Warhol decided to create 400 Brillo grocery store boxes. The set-up was just like a factory, quickly putting each box together. This work lacked any depth – there was no thought process and because



there were so many boxes, none of them were significant. In modernism, each item was carefully put together, but in this case each box was put together like an assembly line. These art pieces lacked any “aura” that is associated with modernist

art. The original piece of work done by an artist has an “aura” associated with it because it is the first and laborious piece of work done by the artist, and has the creative genius of the artist behind it. This helps give the artwork depth and meaning. However, with Warhol’s 400 reproductions of the same thing, there is no aura. It is taken away because of the lack of creative genius behind the work - and also because there are 400 repetitious art pieces. The Brillo boxes demonstrate Warhol’s lack of depth and arbitrary nature in his work because there was nothing to them – they were put together, and consistently reproduced. There was no creative genius, no thought process, and no real care taken.

Andy Warhol was at the forefront of the postmodern movement away from the control of the modernist art world in the 1960’s. The rigid characteristics of modern art were turned upside through Warhol’s work, and postmodernism began to bloom in society. The deep, meaningful, and exclusiveness of modern art was challenged by the arbitrary, fleeting, lacking in depth, reproduction art of the postmodernist movement. Warhol’s works, from the Campbell soup cans to the Marilyn Monroe paintings to the Brillo boxes, serve as clear examples of the postmodern movement. Warhol’s goal of becoming famous became a reality, and along the way he helped changed the face of the art world forever.