

Andy Warhol: The Art*

The most publicly celebrated figure to emerge from Pop Art is Andy Warhol. Claes Oldenburg and Roy Lichtenstein may well have received more serious consideration from the official art world, but to the American public-at-large Andy Warhol is Pop. Not that Warhol is taken any less seriously by the art world; his paintings are sought after by collectors and museums and command prices as high as those of his colleagues. But the focus on Warhol has been more on Warhol the celebrity than Warhol the artist.

True, Warhol's attitude may have encouraged this reaction. He is notoriously evasive about his art and seemingly indifferent to interpretation. The same cannot be said of Oldenburg or Lichtenstein, for much of what they have to say about their work is intensely illuminating. But Warhol's super-cool attitude and ability to incite the wildest of edge of publicity has undoubtedly influenced the reception of his art. He has not, of course, been entirely silent. An implicit sense of irony, even outright mockery, feeds through his few casually recorded remarks. But if Warhol misleads us the fault is more ours than his, for underneath the campy mask he so carefully presents to the world there is obviously a first-rate mind at work. Whether or not he casts himself in the role of anti-hero, feigns indifference or (for whatever reason) provokes our sense of disbelief is not the issue, for ultimately judgement as to what is significant in the art is pivotal to the work itself. Pop is a cultural phenomenon, and like any other style it must eventually fall on its merit, as art. Within the Pop style Warhol has produced an important body of work. The time has now arrived to selectively sort through his art and to examine the nature of his contribution.

Of the several artists who were to emerge as the leading proponents of Pop Art in the sixties nearly all were professionally trained painters; many had years of serious endeavor behind them, even if in other styles. Some may have worked from time to time in jobs outside of their chosen career in order to support themselves, but their knowledge of art was extremely sophisticated. Warhol is possibly the only exception. Yet once he made the decision to switch from commercial art to painting,

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the rapidity of his transformation was startling. From the beginning of his painting career (sometime toward the end of 1960) Warhol has employed a banal and common imagery. His ability to intuit his entry into the art world with an imagery that shortly afterward was to prove extremely critical within the development of American painting was the token of his uncanny knack to incisively and speedily touch the heart of critical issues.

It is impossible, however, to discuss the origins and development of Pop Art – and especially the use of banal imagery so central to the style – without first remarking the influence of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Both painters unleashed into the art ambience various alternative proposals to Abstract Expressionism, chiefly by opening up painting (once again) to a greater range of imagistic content. Rauschenberg and Johns employed a type of imagery that evokes the ordinary, the commonplace of everyday life, and thus jointly freed banal imagery for use by a later generation of artists. Warhol was undoubtedly aware of Johns's and Rauschenberg's art (as were many other painters) but his direct use of comic-strip imagery as in *Dick Tracy* (1960) and *Nancy and Popeye* (both 1961) was an unexpected extension of their vocabulary – so much so that Roy Lichtenstein, on first seeing Warhol's comic-strip paintings at Leo Castelli's gallery at about the same time he brought in his own (in the spring of 1961), remarked in amazement at the similarity of Warhol's work to his own.

Warhol's first works are clearly exploratory and derive much from Abstract Expressionism as they connect to Pop. Though the cartoon imagery and the style of drawing obviously refers to the original models, the paint is loosely applied and dribbles in the "approved" Abstract Expressionist manner. In *Del Monte Peach Halves* (c. 1960–61) – a harbinger of the forthcoming Campbell's soup cans – the fruit can is more or less centrally positioned, with the image and subdivided background very loosely painted. In contrast, *Nancy* appears to be a literal blow-up from a frame of the well-known cartoon. In short, these paintings veer between reworked images and absolute duplications.

The most decisive move apparent in Warhol's body of paintings that follows (from 1961 to 1962) is the rejection of paint handling. This decision again sharply connects his work to Lichtenstein's. It is aston-

ishing that the two should simultaneously strike the notion, especially since they were the only artists to do so among the many involved with Pop imagery at that time. But, while Lichtenstein persistently and unwaveringly narrowed his style, Warhol at this time worked his way through many ideas with great rapidity, dropping each idea immediately once it was dealt with. If Lichtenstein proceeded with greater clarity and apparent purpose, it was for obvious reasons. He was a much more experienced painter than Warhol (his first one-man exhibition was held in New York in 1952); he had a greater theoretical grasp of his aims. Characteristically, once Lichtenstein narrows down a range of imagery suitable to his esthetic purpose he systematically plugs the gaps. However, both artists during this period selected images which, though different, nevertheless reflected corresponding ideas. In addition they sometimes lifted their images from similar sources, especially newspaper or yellow-page phone book advertisements. For instance, Warhol's 1962 painting *Before and After* is subdivided into two side-by-side images that sequentially reveal the silhouetted head of a woman, identical except for the reshaping prominent aquiline nose to a pert *retroussé* accomplished by cosmetic surgery. Lichtenstein's *Like New* (painted about the same time) is a hinged diptych that also uses a sequential image. On the left-hand panel is a piece of woven cloth with a large cigarette burn in the centre; on the right is the same piece of cloth in impeccable condition after reweaving. Obvious, too, at this time is a shared vein of humor – both artists' imagery is often simultaneously funny and devastating. They relish thumbing a nose at the art world by choosing an outrageous sub-esthetic range of subject matter.

Warhol's body of painting clearly underwent three principle stages of development: 1) he would select an image and rework it informally; 2) he then began hand-painting selected images to simulate mass-production; and 3) he finally dealt with mass-production directly through the use of various reproductive processes. The transition from one stage to another is not always clear, for there are occasional lapses.

Within the second category are the paintings derived from newspaper pages; match covers; dance step diagrams; paintings-by-numbers sets; stamps; single and multiple images of glass labels; money; S & H stamps; single and multiple airmail stamps and Coke bottles; and most

famous of all, single, multiple, and serial images of Campbell's soup cans. With the exception of the Campbell's soup cans, which came last, the sequence and order of these works are difficult to establish.¹ Throughout this period Warhol made numerous drawings either related as preparatory to the many images enumerated above or as proposals that were never painted: a record cover, a baseball, and others.

In these works there is a heavy amount of lettering, which he later discards. (Lichtenstein also gave it up, but he initially did a lot more with it than Warhol.) Warhol drops lettering entirely after the Campbell's soup cans, concentrating instead on the punch of his visual imagery. Also missing in much of this early work is a sense of brutality and morbidity common in later work. In short, in the earlier subject matter the possibility of the imagery being charged is there, but the temperature is low. The "charge" at this point is still below the surface. Nor is it a question of these works being painted by hand, though this is partially a factor; due simply to choice of imagery and inertness of handling, they lack the grotesqueness and sense of horror transmitted throughout the later work.

Within this group of paintings the highly varied "Do It Yourself" images are the most offbeat. Taken from hobby shop color-keyed painting sets, these banal images are transformed by Warhol into strange paintings that are themselves supremely banal metaphors for paintings. Though the color is literal, its lyricism is sharply at odds with the banality of the image. The "Do It Yourself" paintings pose the question: can a painting be made that looks mechanical but is not? The numerous numbers (that, in the hobby sets, indicated which areas were to be painted which colors) are of mechanical origin, printed onto transfer paper and affixed to the canvas surface by the application of heat. They mark the first suggestion of Warhol's finding the means to eliminate the use of the hand from his painting.

Some of the most important paintings from this second period, at least as far as Warhol's esthetic evolution is concerned, are the images of complete front and back pages from the *New York Mirror*, *Post*, or *Daily News*. Newspapers inherently suggest the use of mass-production and reproductive processes, especially the photograph, which appears in large scale on the cover pages of these newspapers.

Implicit in these paintings are Warhol's later charged images of disasters and public personalities who make the news. But most important are the associations they contain of the manner in which the newspaper consistently touches the pulse of life. As a medium the newspaper is central to what Lawrence Alloway has described as the communications network of the urban environment. Once gathered, written, edited, composed, printed and distributed, news – like the paper it is printed on – becomes stale within a few hours of its production, and then is immediately disposable. What is topical one moment is dead the next, only to be replaced by the next headline or next piece of sensationalism, sandwiched between a constant barrage of messages to consume.

The newspaper image presents, in a very forthright way, the issue of duplication, which is never quite raised in the work of Lichtenstein, who deals only with the reproduced process itself through the use of Benday dots. With Warhol one senses the use of the chosen image as a whole, as an entity, especially in the later photographic images. The imagery that Warhol finally selects is in the range of charged, tough notions that in Rauschenberg's work, for example, become transformed by painterly handling. Warhol's imagery is transformed in much the same manner that Lichtenstein transforms the comic-strip, but the crucial issue is that the transformation is not immediately apparent. More immediate to the viewer is that the painting looks as disposable as the original it is modeled from: something to be thrown away, or the cheapest kind of advertising, of no value except as a message to sell. This is exactly what infuriated Erle Loran as well as many others of the art audience. What these viewers failed to sufficiently consider was the power and ironic efficiency of the various concealed formal devices operating in the paintings: critical alteration of the contexts of the images, changes of scale, suppression of paint handling, compositional inertness, etc. But if Johns takes the American flag and with his formal innovations and painterly touch magically rehumanizes it, Warhol on the other hand, almost by choice of imagery alone it seems, forces us to squarely face the existential edge of our existence.

The money, Coke, airmail and S & H stamps, glass label, and Campbell's soup can paintings enforce the issue of multiplicity of the image itself, which as a motif is endlessly repeated. Two important

formal innovations edge into these paintings. First, the actual against the simulated use of an anonymous and mechanical technique, the second, the use of serial forms. Several of the money paintings were silk-screened, as were the modulated rows of images imprinted on the surface of the Whitney Museum's *Green Coca-Cola Bottles*. (However, though Warhol even much later never entirely removes hand touches from his paintings, it is not until he uses the blown-up photographic image taken from newspaper or other sources that he becomes crucially involved in photomechanical and silk-screen printing processes.) And with the Campbell's soup cans which are the last of the hand-painted images, he shifts very decisively into the use of serial forms.²

Central to serial imagery is redundancy. The traditional concept of the masterpiece as a consummate example of inspired skill that sets out to compress a peak of human endeavor into one painting is abandoned in preference for repetition and abundance. Serial forms also differ from the traditional concept of theme and variation. In the latter, the structure may be the same, but the composition is sufficiently varied so that each painting, though belonging to a set, can be recognized as unique. In serial imagery, uniqueness is not the issue; the structure and composition are sufficiently inert so that all the paintings, even though they can be differentiated, *appear* to be similar. Basically, it is a question of a shift in emphasis. Theme and variation are concerned with uniqueness and serial imagery is not. Serial forms are virtually boring; there is very often a low threshold of change from painting to painting. But each painting is complete in itself and can exist very fully alone. Obviously, when serial paintings are seen together within the context of a set, the serial structure is more apparent. Serial paintings or sculptures, however, are all equal in the sense of being without any hierarchy of rank, position or meaning. They may also be added to indefinitely, at any time. This, of course, depends upon the approach of each individual artist and the manner in which he sets up (or alters) the parameters of his particular system.

Including Campbell's soup cans, Warhol's most serial paintings are those which thematically concentrate on a single image: for example, the various portraits as well as the Brillo and other boxes, the aluminum pillows, some of the disasters, and all the flowers. The power of these

images derives from their seriality: that there are not only many more than a few in any given series, but that it seems to the viewer there are many more than can possibly be counted. This has partially to do with choice of imagery. Warhol invariably selects an image that pre-exists in endless multiples. Thus his series gives the appearance of being boundless, never finished and without wholeness. Moreover, the larger the actual number of paintings in any one series, the greater the sense of inertia or input. Warhol's series, then (like the work of many other artists), speak of a continuum.

Some of Warhol's paintings seem to have affinities with the modular. This may well be true, especially for the S & H and airmail stamps, the multiple Coke bottles, the glass labels, some of the Campbell's soup can images and the Marilyn Monroe paintings. However, the use of a modular structure is not central to these works, which are hard to distinguish in essence from the more serial ones. There is never any sense of wholeness or completion, or of a holistic or unitary quality, to any of his modulated forms, which invoke endlessness and appear to be a segment of something infinitely larger. Obviously Warhol's work is hard to compartmentalize, but there is no doubt that the use of modular forms has greater power in the hands of other artists.

Crucial to Pop Art is the ironic power of its banal imagery. But it would be a mistake to think that Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, and Warhol, for instance, are attached to their material in the sense of praising it or liking it for itself. (They may like it for the purpose of their art, which is another matter altogether.) Unlike the English Pop painters, who often express a romantic view of American culture, these artists are strictly neutral; they are neither for the material nor against it. Instead they use banal imagery ironically, and consequently detach themselves from emotional attitudes about their subject matter. Furthermore, this detachment does not mean they cannot be viewed in any measure as moralizers. Without doubt, a strong vein of tragic humor pulses through Oldenburg's sculpture and drawings. Lichtenstein's images of love are full of pathos, and at the same time, ironically, his lovers (and heroes) are fully exposed in their shallowness. Warhol's images are particularly savage and uncompromising. They appear in some curious way abandoned, as it were, to public gaze; and once there they demand quite

persuasively that we face them, ourselves, and the twentieth-century landscape we cohabit.

Warhol's large, sparse, black and white painting of a single Coke bottle is a brutally baleful icon. There is nothing delectable about this painting. The sensuousness of the original glass bottle (designed by Raymond Loewy Associates) with the dark brown liquid gleaming through the container is thoroughly negated in the painting. But Warhol has a very special capacity to select images, which, when presented in a painterly context, associationally press upon the nerve-ends of certain aspects of our daily existence. It is not that Coca-Cola is so bad or so good. As a sweet, carbonated drink it is essentially no better or worse than other brands that are marketed. But what is perturbing is the ferocity of the overall effort that goes into advertising, marketing, and distributing something that is ultimately so trifling. Like so many other manufactured products, the packaging promises much, the advertising more, yet the product delivers little. Coca-Cola is prototypical of the desperate urgency abounding in a free-enterprise, technological society to bend and habituate the consumer to the producer's will, regardless of the intrinsic worth of the identical products made by different manufacturers. The shriller the advertising, the more ferocious the battle to gain and maintain a major share of the market. Unfortunately, there is more to it than this. Markets today are international, to be fought over in the same style as in America. Coca-Cola is symbolic of the new American industrial imperialism in which technology, marketing techniques and culture become irretrievably and inseparably intermixed to spawn on new territory the same manic set of goals and values.

Similarly, Campbell's soup promises much and delivers just as little. The thirty-two different soups mass-marketed each have a different name redolent of the gustatory delights of many nations and traditional good cooking – Scotch Broth (A Hearty Soup), Consommé (Beef) Soup, Minestrone (Italian-Style Vegetable Soup), Cheddar Cheese Soup (Great As A Sauce Too!), Old-Fashioned Tomato Rice Soup, etc. So much diversity within multiplicity! Though the names and ingredients may be different, however, the soups are all equally tasteless and may as well have come out of the same vat. Campbell's canned soups – Warhol seems

ironically to assert – are like people; their names, sexes, ages, origins, tastes, and passions may be different, but an advanced consumer-oriented, technological society squeezes them all into the same vat.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what combination of circumstances led Warhol to change his imagery and technique so rapidly, radically and simultaneously toward the end of 1962 and in early 1963. Warhol's first New York exhibition in late 1962 included a very diverse range of paintings – Campbell's soup cans, Coca-Cola match covers, modular rows of Coke bottles, modular Martinson Coffee tins, at least one of the newspaper images (*129 Die in Jet*) and various portraits, in particular the modular heads of Troy Donahue, Elvis Presley, and Marilyn Monroe. In this exhibition, including at least one painting of rows of Coke bottles, all the portraits employ the silk-screen technique. The impersonal method of hand painting the images hitherto employed is subjected to a powerful transformation.

Rauschenberg and Warhol seem to have developed an interest in the silk-screen technique at about the same time (though Warhol may have anticipated Rauschenberg somewhat, in the money paintings of 1962). Rauschenberg's purpose was to find a means to alter the scale of the photographic material that he had formerly affixed to his paintings as elements of collage. Silk-screening allowed him to include the blown-up image as an integral element of the canvas surface. Warhol, on the other hand, used the technique as a device to control the overall surface of the painting. Warhol first lays down a flat but often brilliant ground color and then unifies the surface and image by repetition of the middle of the screen. The final image, however, is very arbitrary and quite unlike the impersonal handling of the serial Campbell's soup cans, from which all trace of paint handling has been suppressed. In employing the silk-screen technique, which is used in commercial art to give evenness of surface and crispness of outline, Warhol reverses the effect. In his hands the technique becomes arbitrary, unpredictable and random as the paint surface appears to be in an Abstract Expressionist painting.

In essence, silk-screen is a sophisticated stencil process. On the bottom of a box frame several inches deep and considerably larger than the image to be printed, a suitable porous material is attached (silk in the hand process and fine metal mesh in the mechanized process). The

image can be affixed to the material by a variety of means, either by hand or photomechanically. Warhol uses the latter method. All areas other than those parts of the image to be printed are occluded and made impervious to the print or a water-soluble dye. The frame is then placed on top of and in close contact with the surface to be printed. The liquid printing medium is poured in at one end of the frame. It is then stroked across the image with a rubber squeegee and forced through the mesh to print on the surface of the material beneath. Though the silk-screen process is simple, many things can go wrong. For instance, if the medium is stroked across the image unevenly, if the density of the medium varies, if the squeegee is worn or dirty, or if there is insufficient medium to complete a stroke, the image will not print evenly. Parts of the image will become occluded or the dirt will print tracks, etc. The sharpness of the image will also vary according to the pressure exerted on the squeegee, or the angle it is held at. Many of these deficiencies will often work their way into the mesh and, unless the screen is cleaned, will show up in subsequent images.

These normally accidental effects are often deliberately sought by Warhol. At other times, his images are printed more evenly. In many of the latter, especially some of the Marilyn Monroes, the nearly identical images are heightened by touches of color applied with a brush. A compelling aspect of Warhol's silk-screen images is that the transformation of the images is effected in the technique; thus it is embedded in the various processes.

The silk-screen process is capable of breeding a tremendous amount of paintings. Yet not only are Warhol's images very few; by the time the identical images are either printed many times on a single canvas, or alternatively printed on small canvases and then assembled into one serial painting, the number of his paintings shrinks considerably. In fact, the overall body of his work is surprisingly small. Since a major part of the decisions in the silk-screen process is made outside the painting itself (even the screens for color can be mechanically prepared in advance), making the painting is then a question of screening the image or varying the color. These decisions can be communicated to an assistant. Perhaps this is one reason why Warhol doesn't count how many works he ever made, or care. Those he doesn't like he can throw

away. It is not so much that he is uninterested in his own history (though that may well be a factor); his indifference arises partly because of the processes involved. It is always possible to make more, and what obviously interests Warhol is the decisions, not the acts of making.

Neither Lichtenstein's nor Warhol's painting (nor Johns's nor Rauschenberg's for that matter) is involved in edge-tension in the same manner as the field painters (Stella, Noland, Kelly). Lichtenstein's method of organizing the painting has more to do with Cubism, particularly his method of cropping the image. The actual borders of Warhol's paintings, on the other hand, are arbitrary and not at all critical. In fact, Warhol's paintings lack edge-tension. To him the edge is merely a convenient way to finish the painting. Like Lichtenstein, Warhol crops, but the final edge of the painting is determined by the repetition of the module of the screen, or the size of a single image contained on the screen. In Warhol's paintings of Elvis Presley, which reproduce the whole figure, the background is a flat silver. Either single, double or treble repeats of the figure are centered on the canvas. The top edge of the canvas cuts the head and the bottom edge cuts the feet. Because of the nature of the silk-screen process, which necessitates the unmounted canvas being placed in the press in order to be printed upon, the edges of these paintings are determined afterward, though obviously their general location may be known in advance. Very often the single images printed on one canvas are united to form a larger unit of several canvases. In any event, the edge is always positioned as an outgrowth of the margins of the image on the screen. At times Warhol will add to a screened canvas another blank canvas of the same size painted the identical color – as for instance the Liz Taylor paintings or the very large dun-colored *Race Riot*. But unlike photographs or movies, which localize space delineating subject, surroundings, background, etc., Warhol's paintings present images in a surrounding space that is felt or perceived as a continuum. This is enhanced by the fact that his portraits are without a literal background. His heads or figures are positioned on a flat-painted surface.

What Warhol's paintings lack in edge-tension is compensated by other tensions he induces in his pictorial structure, notably that of slip-page. This is introduced in various ways – by the under-inked direc-

tional vector of the squeegee, or the printed overlap of the margins of the screen, or a lack of taut registration when several colors are used. Many of the large *Flower* paintings involve this form of color slippage. In addition, Warhol deliberately ensures that the color areas are larger than the natural forms they are designed to denote. For example, the red of the lips in the Liz Taylor portraits is very much larger than the lips themselves.

A strong feeling of time is also induced by the silk-screen printing method. It arises from the apparent variation of light in the modulated on serialized images. In fact, there is no actual change of light. Warhol takes the same image, repeats it, and creates in the viewer a sense of seeing a whole series of light changes by varying the quantity of black from image to image. Thus the same image runs the gamut of blacks or greys, apparently indicating different times or amounts of daylight, when in fact the viewer is perceiving a single photo printed with variety of screening effects. No other Pop artist is involved in the ideas of time, sequence, duration, repetition, and seriality to the extent Warhol is. These aspects of formal innovation are what make his work unique.

In at least one painting, *Robert Rauschenberg* (1963), time is used by Warhol in a straightforwardly literal or narrative manner. The painting was made by screening old photographs of Rauschenberg, first as a child with his family, then as a growing boy, and finally, as the artist Warhol knows. The time sequence of the images, which are repeated on the canvas in modulated rows, runs from top to bottom, the images at the bottom (of Rauschenberg the artist) being much larger in scale. Apart from this painting, Warhol's use of the time element is generally more abstract. Warhol seems to realize that his work is less sentimental or journalistic – hence of greater impact – if the painting suggests time without actually using it.

Because of the oblique time-element that Warhol introduces into the painting, each repetition of the same image seems to be unique rather than a duplicate of others. Thus the internal variations and the slippage that arise as consequences of the printing techniques give life to what was originally a static image, in particular by making the viewer think that time is moving. This, of course, is enhanced in the serial paintings by the linear qualities of the sequence of the images

from left to right and top to bottom. One reason why Warhol was readily able to drop words or written images is that his serial or modular images act in very much the same orderly sequence of parts that the structure of words evokes. The idea of movies, of course, is also inherent in the silk-screen paintings, the sequential presentation of images with slight changes first occurring in the money and Campbell's soup paintings, and particularly in the painting of tiered rows of Coke bottles that are in various stages of fullness or emptiness. Still other aspects of his painting lead toward movies – silver backgrounds of many paintings, as well as the blank silver canvases often adjoining, like movie screens.³

Warhol's instinct for color is not so much vulgar as theatrical. He often suffuses the whole surface of a canvas with a single color to gain an effect of what might be termed colored light. It is difficult to use any of the traditional categories in discussing Warhol's usage, which bends toward non-art color.

His color lacks any sense of pigmentation. Like the silver surfaces of the Liz Taylor or Marlon Brando paintings, it is sometimes inert, always amorphous, and pervades the surface. Though often high-keyed, his colors are at times earthy, as in one of the *Race Riot* paintings, which is covered in a flat, sickly-looking, ocherish tinge reminding the viewer of a worn, stained, and decaying surface. In other paintings Warhol moves into what may best be described as a range of psychedelic coloration. For the most part his color is bodiless and flat and is invariably acted on by black, which gives it a shrill tension. Further, the color is often too high-keyed to be realistic, yet it fits into a naturalistic image. This heightens the unreality, though the blacks he so often uses roughen the color and denude it of sweetness. However, in a number of other works Warhol successfully counterpoises two or more brilliant hues without the use of blacks.

Warhol uses public pictures of people. With rare exceptions (e.g. *Ethel Scull*) he avoids candid snapshots that reveal private or idiosyncratic information about the persons concerned. His portraits are forthright, but of people wearing composed faces. The pictures are neither reworked nor touched up. What one finally must confront is the paradox that however correct its likeness, a picture never tells the truth. Photographs of faces are supposed to be revealing of more than the physical

structure of the face. However, they rarely reveal inner truths about the person concerned. That is why the *Jackie* paintings are so powerful (and touch us deeply). Mrs. Kennedy may have been photographed during a terrible experience or ritual, but in the Warhol paintings she looks normal even in her anguish. It is only in the car crashes, when people are caught imminently facing their own death, that they wear masks frozen in terror; otherwise Warhol's portraits transmit nothing of the inner psychic tensions of the persons portrayed. They are always dehumanized by never reflecting what they feel. Thus Warhol dehumanizes people and humanizes soup cans.

Within the *Disaster* series, the auto crashes with all their bloody, smashed and mangled bodies are finally made to seem real. If one evades looking too closely at the gory details of such a photograph in a newspaper, one is compelled, on the other hand, to look at them in a Warhol painting – if only because of the contradiction between what seems at one moment to be a very abstract painting and another which suddenly becomes an image filled with the most horrific details. Or again, though no one is present, the ritualization of judicial execution in all of its morbidity is fully revealed in *Silver Disaster* by the “Silence” sign that lurks in the foreground.

The *Flowers* were first shown in 1964. They consist of many series of different sizes within two main series, one of which has green in the background, and the other, black and white. What is incredible about the best of the flower paintings (especially the very large ones) is that they present a distillation of much of the strength of Warhol's act – the flash of beauty that suddenly becomes tragic under the viewer's gaze. The garish and brilliantly colored flowers always gravitate toward the surrounding blackness and finally end up in a sea of morbidity. No matter how much one wishes these flowers to remain beautiful they perish under one's gaze, as if haunted by death.

Warhol is open to everything. And everything these days seems to consist of violence and death. Both are central to his art and his life. He doesn't censor, nor does he moralize – at least not directly in the work, though in a paradoxical manner, by choice of material. When he presents his imagery he does so without any hierarchical or extra-symbolic devices. He can be related to the absurdist playwrights and

writers, in vision if not in style. He does not share the underlying dramatic structure apparent in their work. He also has no surreal, metaphorical or symbolic edge. His work is literal throughout: those are Campbell's soup cans, and nothing can be done to alter their existence; that is an automatic explosion, and there it is as an irrevocable fact of our existence; here is a car crash, and nothing can be done to place it in another world. It is anonymous as the accident that can happen to anyone. The car crashes are as anonymous as the movie stars; they are portraits of death without even the ritual that attends the convicted killer executed in the electric chair. True, with Jackie and especially the painting of the funeral one views the liturgy, but one is well aware that this is no answer either.

It seems at first that Warhol's imagery is catholic, but this is not so; his choices are very deliberately limited. On the rare occasions when a painting fails it fails primarily because his sense of choice has let him down. But his sensitivity to exactly the right amount of charged imagery is singular.

Notes

1. In addition, there exist photographs of a series of representations of automobiles, some of details (front, or wheel and mudguards) and others of repetitive side views of the whole. These works were made as illustrations for a magazine article and should not be confused with Warhol's exhibited works.
2. For a more extended discussion of the usage of serial forms see my *Serial Imagery* (exhibition catalog, Pasadena Art Museum, 1968; book, the New York Graphic Society, 1968).
3. Though Warhol's interest in movies – to whatever degree – was very likely long-standing, apparently the crucial event that directed him into film-making was his 1963 exhibition of Liz Taylor and Elvis Presley paintings at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. The attraction of Hollywood was too powerful to resist. Before making the journey for the opening of the exhibition Warhol obtained a hand movie camera and on arrival at Los Angeles with some of the factory crew he began shooting *Tarzan*. The opening shots of this movie begin on the LA freeways, and the subject is introduced by an approach shot of a "Tarzana" off-ramp freeway sign.