

# IN[]VISIBLE CULTURE

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### Andy Warhol's Iconophilia

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In Andy Warhol's serial art, a media-reflexive gesture appears in the endless reproduction, dissemination, and simulacra made possible by photography and machines. Warhol's serial work is the "unpresentable presentation"[1] of infinite image repetition. It is this self-referentiality toward perpetual reproduction which gives these works their power and larger importance. In spite of his superficial naïvete, Warhol demonstrates self-awareness of his illimitable action, and presents this unpresentable infinity by implication. By completely covering the canvas with images, Warhol suggests that the picture plane continues ad infinitum and that there are always more images beyond the frame. One perceives more dollar bills, Coca-Cola bottles, and publicity photos of movie stars existing outside any one painting. Indeed, this implied repetition exterior to the painting takes place in the imagination. Gilles Deleuze points out that 'repetition is itself in essence imaginary... it makes that which it contacts appear as elements or cases of repetition.' [2] In any serial Warhol work, visual repetends may or may not exist in the work itself, rather the absent repetition of a work's image is located in other Warhol art and the recurrence of similar images or objects situated in the rest of the world. Any notion of the 'original' is constantly deferred based on the repetition of such works and their endless

return. Depending on the context of seeing a Warhol work, there seem to be multiple levels of repetition at play inside the piece, in other Warhol works, in the world, and as I shall examine below, in art history. One must ask what this repetition is, that defers and moves toward framing infinity. Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return of the same, like Warhol's photographic works, deals with problems of repetition, difference and history.

The eternal return of the same is the thought that the world always recurs, that the actions we make have been repeated infinitely before us and will be repeated infinitely thereafter.<sup>[3]</sup> This concept is not as simple as saying that history repeats itself, because, as Deleuze points out, "The eternal return does not bring back 'the same', but returning constitutes the only same of that which becomes."<sup>[4]</sup> This concept of 'the same' demonstrates that the repetition is understanding the same from the basis of each representation. However, Warhol in his image manifestations does not emphasize the world of difference, rather, his repeated works show that representation is a receding perspective. Warhol's art makes the standard, stereotyped, and repeated intensely perceptible. Rather than extract from difference like the Abstract-Expressionist artists did in their celebration of 'autonomous' works, Warhol conceded to repetition.

Warhol's serial works operate on the principle that the infinite depictions invoke a foundation,<sup>[5]</sup> however, this 'original' source is always displaced in Warhol. Because the viewer of Warhol works is always aware of his multiples, the eternal return is unobtrusive, yet there is still a fascination with finding 'originality' in these works. Anyone visiting the Andy Warhol Museum will be treated to the spectacle of the Warhol archives which contains the source materials for Warhol's art works. Though the archival goods have little monetary value compared to the art objects made by Warhol, they are "fetishized as the lost object" in lieu of Warhol's "hyperreal"<sup>[6]</sup> paintings. In these materials, one can see the master's selection process, choosing images for his works. However, upon closer examination, we see that these archival ghosts used to make the art works themselves are simulacra of simulacra. Warhol's art is, as Deleuze defines simulacra, "not simple imitation but the act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position (an original) is overturned."<sup>[7]</sup> The archival

sources of Warhol's images appropriated from earlier art serve this function of 'originality' in a strange way. These sources are the bases of Warhol's works and often exist in a state of singularity (one silkscreen, one maquette, one cropped photo) that seems more original than the 'authentic' works examined below.[8]

Perhaps the Warhol works which best fit this examination of repetition and simulacra are the paintings, prints and drawings derived from earlier well known works of art by other artists. Warhol appropriated such images throughout his 'fine' art career from 1963 until his death in 1987, a few days after the premier of his Last Supper works. The images selected by Warhol for re-presentation in silkscreened works are all art historically canonical. In Roland Barthes' terms, Warhol's appropriationist strategies are "archetypal acts" in their "imitating and repeating the gestures of another." [9] In his decisions to once again make images that themselves have had a history of multiplicity, Warhol pays ritual obeisance to simulacra's worshipped ancestors.[10] For this investigation of originality and recurrence, I will focus upon the images taken from Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa and Last Supper; Giorgio de Chirico's Italian Square, Orestes and Pylades, Hector and Andromache, Furniture in the Valley, The Poet and His Muse, and The Disquieting Muses; Edvard Munch's Eva Mudocci, Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm, Madonna, and The Scream.[11]

In choosing to render the images of Giorgio de Chirico, Warhol reenacted de Chirico's own strategy of repeating his own imagery. For de Chirico, this repetition was a means of remaining fiscally solvent in his later years. De Chirico still made works from his World War One era *pittura metafisica* style in the 1950s and 1960s. It was these later paintings that Warhol was to use as models for his After de Chirico works. Warhol said of, and projected through de Chirico,

He repeated the same images over and over again. I like the idea a lot, so I thought it would be great to do it. I believe he viewed repetition as a way of expressing himself. This is probably what we have in common. The difference? What he repeated regularly, year after year, I repeat the same day in the same painting. All my images are the same, but very different at the same time... Isn't life a series of images

that change as they repeat themselves?[12]

Warhol recognized that de Chirico was making each repeated image outside of the historical framework in which the works had first gained their notoriety. The repeated de Chirico works of the '50s and '60s had little to do with the proto-Surrealist agenda through which these works would become known. These repeated works, however, did satisfy the art market conditions of 'originality' since they were executed by the hand of the master.

Warhol also appropriated the works of Edvard Munch because, like de Chirico, Munch often repeated his own imagery, especially when he sold a painting which he felt conveyed a personal experience. The reason for this repetition Munch said, "...is that we see with different eyes at different times. We see things one way in the morning and another in the evening, and the way we view things also depends on the mood we are in. That is why one subject can be seen in so many ways and that is what makes art so interesting"[13] In addition to simply repeating his images in painting, Munch also rendered the same forms in wood block prints, lithographs, and etchings. These printed forms were all produced in multiple editions and often in several different media with color variations. Also, since Munch was skilled in all of these media, he sometimes developed images in prints that would later become paintings and vice-versa. This working process once again makes it impossible to identify any one original as multiples are made simultaneously.

Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa also suffers from an identity crisis as this work has had much history, myth, and speculative commentary constructed around it which has rendered it a simulacra. Surely the Mona Lisa is an iconographic simulacra in the context of popular art history. The identity of the subject of the Mona Lisa, Lisa di Antonio Maria Gherardini, has been lost in the popular attention given to this work, which among other readings; denies her existence as some see the image as a transvestite portrait of da Vinci; or tell of an apocryphal love affair between her and the (now thought to be homosexual) artist. The Mona Lisa is one of the world's most reproduced images, as it has been used in advertising, consumer products, and art history, as a symbol for the infinitely more complex ideas of purity, love, the Louvre, 'high' culture, art, painting, and the Italian Renaissance. In

1963 Warhol rendered the Mona Lisa in response to its exhibition in the United States at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.[14] In addition, the Gioconda has been labeled as an ideal in portraiture, the perfect infusion and revelation of a sitter's character by an artist. The holding up of this painting as such an ideal is a media (and intellectual) bastardization of the Platonic ideal, the defining notion from which all forms are derived.[15] (Perhaps all paintings are imperfect copies of the Mona Lisa?)

Warhol also painted The Last Supper at a time when it was receiving much publicity upon the event of its restoration. The Warhol rendition, however was many times removed from The Last Supper on the wall at Santa Maria delle Grazie, in that Warhol used derivative source materials for these works. The photograph used for these works was taken from a cheap, mass-produced reproduction of a nineteenth century copy.[16] As a Catholic, Warhol certainly knew the image first in this form, in the reproductions of the painting that were standard issue in the blue collar kitchens and dining rooms of his fellow Eastern European Americans.

With Munch, de Chirico, and da Vinci, Warhol uses the same strategy of rendering the appropriated paintings so that these purloined works lose their identity and context and become images about images through seriality within and outside of the picture.[17] Warhol often makes paintings containing different numbers of repeated images. When Warhol produces a single image on the canvas, that image relies on the others like it in Warhol's series to give it its meaning. The viewer of the the individual image work knows that others like it exist through the trace of the instrument of reproduction, the silkscreened dot. These works can not be seen to exist for themselves but are dependent on the perception of the rest of the Warhol series (or at least familiarity with the Warholian strategy) to impart their import. In doubling the image on one canvas, Warhol makes the viewer even more immediately aware that the image is a replicate by showing a copy of a copy. Warhol's works with reproductions of three or more images on one canvas reveal that this copying is potentially infinite, especially when there are dozens of the same image in one space. In works like *Thirty Are Better than One*, there is the suggestion of more images beyond the picture plane and title as those contained within bleed out to the edges and are sometimes truncated. Moreover, these repetitions are often rendered by Warhol in a grid



pattern which implies the infinite through the Euclidian geometry of the picture plane where the parallel lines never meet and infinite perpendiculars frame the same image.

Further repetition, return, and simulacra exists beyond these Warhol works. Each Warhol artwork has been reproduced by The Andy Warhol Estate and Foundation in several four by five inch photographic transparencies. These transparencies have each been used dozens of times to reproduce the images by the thousands (sometimes millions), in articles, catalogs, and even on consumer schlock like postcards and jewelry boxes. Just like the dual eternal paths encountered by Nietzsche's Zarathustra on the mountainside,[18] the levels of simulacra develop endlessly on each side of Warhol's art objects. We see that the paintings are but a sequence of recurrences already preceded by the thousands and to be followed by the thousands. Reveling in the nature of seriality, Warhol shows a simultaneous understanding of the past and the future of the images in these works.[19] The privileged physical art object represents in Nietzschean terms, 'the moment,'[20] the gateway from which eternal recurrence precedes and recedes, and where precessions and future yield come together. The painting, rather than the singular silkscreen is analogous to 'the moment' since the painted canvas is the object of an artwork come into being, a tangible presence, a commodifiable object that is the final output of artistic communication. With the image serigraphed onto canvas, and stretched, signed, or stamped, all the codes are resolved, indicating to the art market that a work of art has been made. The silkscreen itself is but a precession of the recognizable artwork. The silkscreen, in its ephemeral appearance and barely perceptible value inversion serves not as the artwork, but as a deictic device of possibility. If the silkscreen has any commodity value, it is as an agent of reproduction, a means of making more artistic 'moments' or paintings.

An examination of any series of Warhol works reveals the strategies of the artist to create much difference in repeating the same simply through the manipulation of the placement of the image. 'Placement' in this sense means how Warhol and his assistants stretched each canvas around one or several screened images. In producing these images, Warhol usually painted a large sheet of canvas with selected ground colors, and would then have an image

silkscreened several times on that canvas. Once the paint had dried, the canvas was cut and stretched onto uniform purchased stretcher bars. As the screened images were either slightly larger or slightly smaller than the stretched canvas' surface, some variation occurs in the visual presentation of each image, giving the appearance of registration or mis-registration as would be produced by a mechanical printing process. It is in this process that Warhol causes any real differentiation in his images. Colors and registration vary slightly allowing the viewer to actually perceive differences among the works. Also, Warhol made the decision as to how many repeated images would appear on a single canvas. A lack of centering in these paintings illustrates Zarathustra's observation of perpetuity, "The middle is everywhere." [21] By comparing these differences one sees that what is the same in each of these paintings simply returns unto the image itself. Simultaneously, the similar returns to another object for comparison. [22] Thus the eternal return in Warhol's arena affirms difference within the same. From the perspective of dissimilarity, no matter how slight, the viewer can not deny the existence of similarity.

In Warhol's screened works, the optical properties of the image are clear to the viewer. The variation in tone achieved by Warhol's use of one or more screened colors of paint is decorative rather than illusionistic. Any highlights or shadows created in these works is incidental and the seemingly arbitrary manipulation of colors that occurs both in one work or a series of works is so extreme that it defies illusionistic depth in his pictures. What the viewer reads as the highlights of these Warhol works is nothing more than optical colors advancing over dark tones or the space between the dots on a ground of canvas or paper. Notice here that I say ground and not background, for the figure-ground relationship is not easily established. Despite the fact that the screened ink is on top of the painted surface, the ground in these works is not the background as there is no depth. The ground is part of the medium which makes the gestalt perception of the images possible at all. Indeed, depth is eliminated in the appropriated image's dot pattern and this surface existence at its fundamental negates the image's 'being'. The critic Robert Melville pointed out this contradiction of the subject stating, "The successful work is in short a paraphrase of the blank surface it adheres to. American Pop painting is an ingenuous way of painting Nothingness." [23] In negating the image it is difficult to discuss difference if images at all, since all of

Warhol's images are essentially, perceived in the same manner of diminished extensity. When we reduce the Warhol image to its base elements of dot and color, we see that the "parts precede and make possible the representation of the whole." Thus, as Kant would note, there are no 'internal differences' in these Warhol images, rather, difference would only be perceived as an 'external relation' that must be perceived by the 'empirical intuition' of the viewer.<sup>[24]</sup> From this perspective, one could see that these optical properties subsume all of the Warhol serial works, since all of the paintings, prints, and works on paper operate with the same optical strategies and their images are all subject to the same optical metaphysics.

Warhol made the dot, ground, and depth problem most obvious in his *Shadows* works of 1978. In these works, there are no recognizable images for our gestalt sensibilities to tangle with. The images are seemingly fully abstract; yet, like the appropriated images, they are derived from photographs, blown-up, contrast-reduced in the making of the silkscreen, and painted. The figure-ground relationship is further problematized in these works by the fact that Warhol painted the canvas surface in impasto expressionistic swaths of Liquitex, thus the 'grounds' in these works usually suggest more depth than the screened 'figures'.

The most consequential aspect of Warhol's art objects that is invariably overlooked by scholars is Warhol's ability to exploit the art market by creating works containing the same images in both paintings and prints. For these appropriated paintings made between 1963 (*Mona Lisa*) and 1986 (*The Last Supper*), Warhol produced hundreds of works. The art market however, regards each one of these paintings as a Warhol 'original,' thus the price of each work is commensurable with unique paintings by other artists. The confusion sets in when one considers that Warhol allowed numbered limited edition prints of these same works to be published as well. In 1982 (*Goethe*) and in 1984 (*Details from Renaissance Paintings*), Warhol also made limited edition screen prints of the same appropriated images he used in paintings. In printmaking, the concept of an edition is that of limiting the repetition, and the numbering of each print is a means of quality control for the prints. Traditionally, editions of wood block prints and etchings were numbered due to the wear to the soft material plates that occurred with each printing cycle. With these methods of printing, the finest details were often lost in the



later repetitions, thus collectors sought the prints struck first, corresponding to the lowest numbers. This privileging of the primary prints struck by a certain plate is the means by which print connoisseurs retain the idea of the "aura of the original" as defined by Walter Benjamin.<sup>[25]</sup> Since the first prints have a higher degree of integrity reflecting the artist's conception, they are closest to the idea of the original. Warhol's method of making prints, however, is antithetical to this valuation process since his printing plate was a silkscreen which if kept clean, would not deteriorate during the creation of the prints. (Silkscreened edition prints are usually called serigraphs or screenprints.) Despite the uniformity in quality, Warhol's prints are still vestigially numbered and the lowest numbers are still the most valuable.

In addition to the prints, Warhol also manipulates the category of 'drawing' in his appropriated works. Because of the curatorial skills needed to maintain works of art on different media, an artificial distinction has been established between works on paper and works on more stable supports, such as panel or canvas. Works on paper (with the exception of prints) have become associated with the curatorial and art market niche for drawings, whether they are actually paint, graphite, ink, etc. on paper. Furthermore, the large auction houses, Christie's, Sotheby's et al, divide 'types' of works including paintings, drawings, and prints, to be sold at different sessions. Warhol has executed thousands of works screened onto paper that have come into this gallery and auction market niche. For instance, his *Madonna* (after Munch), 1983, was executed on Arches Aquarelle paper, but it has the exact same screen (image) size of the works made on canvas. To further confuse the issue of works on paper as drawings, Warhol made thousands of bona fide hand executed drawings with graphite or ink on paper. Each of these drawings is unique in image although the subject matter is often repeated by Warhol in several drawings. These individually rendered works operate as they should in the art marketplace, as individual works. However, these legitimate drawings also prop up the legitimacy of the other Warhol works on paper by giving the aura of individuality by association.

The idea of the published print or work on paper is further corrupted by Warhol, as he made thousands of screen prints that were never published. Some of these works have been designated 'trial proofs' that are unique insofar as they include different color combinations from the published

editions. Some of these prints are even more unique in that they were made in anticipation of editions that were never executed or published. The poignant aspect of these proofs is that they are valued less than screen prints that have been designated individual works on paper, though the proofs at times may be less numerous. One means of valuing these prints in Warhol connoisseurship is the presence or absence of a printer's chop mark, an embossing which reveals the printing studio where such a work is made. In the case of these works, the chop is that of Rupert Jason Smith, Warhol's print publisher from 1976 until Warhol's death in 1987. This mark seems inconsequential, however, when one considers that in Warhol's studio, a number of painting assistants (not Warhol) also rendered the image on to paper or canvas through the silkscreening process that was identical to that used by Smith.

In reviewing the problem of the relationship between Warhol's screened prints, paintings, and drawings, one concludes that all of these images are rendered by the same process, but the art market differentiates the value based on whether such an image is reproduced on canvas or paper; published in a portfolio or unpublished; or designated a 'unique' work on paper or a unique print proof. These qualities determine whether a particular Warhol work is worth a few thousand dollars or tens of thousands of dollars. Remember that this differentiation in price is usually determined by the relative rarity of the original compared with the multiple. It is an amazing fact that this differential valuation still occurs in the auction and gallery market today, although it has clearly been determined that any one Warhol is hardly an original. Moreover, the paintings and 'works on paper' are not numbered or valued according to number, though in reality they have been executed just like a print. Because these prints are derived from the paintings, and the paintings themselves are not numbered, it is impossible to say that there is any 'original' Warhol work.[26]

Warhol once said "I think every painting should be the same size and the same color so they're all interchangeable and nobody thinks they have a better painting or a worse painting... Besides even when the subject is different, people want the same painting." [27] "And they'd all be masterpieces because they'd all be the same painting." [28] In light of this statement one remembers that the screened images in Warhol works were all

produced in the same way, and this collective of images produced by similar means encompasses a majority of the works in Warhol's oeuvre. Of course, any one of these images stands in and refers to images of its likeness, and the art historical 'original' from which it was derived. However, due to similarity in process, any one of these images may refer to all of Warhol's screened works. For any Warhol serial, the overarching subjects are repetition, levels of simulacra, and an image's potential for infinite representation. Of course, the choice of the image's subject results in that subject's being carried by the vehicle of endless return, and often results in that image becoming decorative or having that image's sense of 'originality' debased. What the viewer really sees is the surface of painted grounds, and silkscreened dots that have been repeated ad infinitum. The viewer must not forget, however, that the slight differences in Warhol's works are also made perceptible by the process of the eternal return. It is precisely these subtle differences that make the repeated images on the same canvas visually interesting and which can make the observed recurrence return from the infinite to the individual canvas. It is this gesture of wanton repetition that showcases Warhol's awareness of this same action of repeating, as repeated in the images examined above, by others and society at large.

## Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 125. ↑
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994), 76. ↑
3. Joan Stambaugh, *The Problem of Time in Nietzsche*, trans. John F. Humphrey (Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg, PA, 1987), 163. ↑
4. Deleuze, 41. ↑
5. Deleuze, 49. ↑

6. For more on the fetishized lost object see Jean Baudrillard, "The Hyper-realism of Simulation", in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, ed., trans. Charles Levin (Stanford University Press, 1988) 143-47. ↑

7. Deleuze, 69. ↑

8. For more illustrations of Warhol's appropriationist art works see, Jorg Schellman, ed., *Andy Warhol: Art from Art*, (Edition Schellman, Munich, 1994) ↑

9. Roland Barthes, "That Old Thing, Art" in *The Responsibility of Forms* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 202. ↑

10. Carol Anne Mahsun writes a section regarding "The Consciousness of the Primitive" in the sixth chapter of *Pop Art and the Critics* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1987), 111-114. ↑

11. Warhol also appropriated for other silkscreen works from St. George and the Dragon, by Paolo Uccello; Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus; Piero della Francesca's Madonna and Child with Angels and Six Saints and St. Apollonia; Lucas Cranach the Elder's Portrait of a Young Woman; Johann Tischbein's Goethe in the Compagna; Henri Matisse's Woman in Blue; and Pablo Picasso's Zervos. These works will be referred to in the discussion below regarding Warhol's estrangement of art market categorizations. ↑

12. Victor Bockris, *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol*, (Bantam Books, New York, 1989), 326. ↑

13. Ragna Stang, *Edvard Munch: The Man and His Art*, trans. Geoffrey Culverwell (New York, 1979), 16. ↑

14. Laslo Glozer, "A Guest Performance on the Painters' Olympus" in *Andy Warhol: Art from Art*, ed. Jorg Schellman (Edition Schellman, Munich, 1994), 7. ↑

15. Deleuze, 60. ↑

16. Michael L<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>thy, "The Apparent Return of Representation: Ambivalence Structures in Warhol's Early Work" in *Andy Warhol: 1960-1986* (Fundacio Joan Miro, Barcelona, 1996), 211. ↑

17. Rupert Jason Smith, in Schellmann, *Andy Warhol: Art from Art*, 77. ↑

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common, (New York: Heritage Press, 1967) 148. "Two roads come together here: these hath no one yet gone to the end of. This long lane backwards: it continueth for an eternity. And that long lane forward-that is another eternity." ↑

19. Donald E. Carr, *The Eternal Return*, (Doubleday & Co., Inc., Garden City, NY, 1968), 109. ↑

20. Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, 148. "They are antithetical to one another, these roads; they directly abut on one another:-and it is here, at this gateway, that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: 'This moment.'" ↑

21. Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, 207. ↑

22. Deleuze, 300. ↑

23. Robert Melville, "Sewing is Connection," *New Statesman*, April 7, 1967, 481. ↑

24. Deleuze, 232. ↑

25. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Video Culture*, 30. ↑

26. Might a drop in the value of these paintings occur when the catalogue raisonné of Warhol's work is published? Surely collectors will be scandalized when they reveal that there are hundreds of 'originals' in existence. ↑



27. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B & Back Again)*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1975), 149. ↑

28. Ibid., 148. ↑



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