

Revenge of the Mere Real Things

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It is an irony Arthur Danto surely appreciates still: an exhibition by an as yet unheralded artist mounted for fewer than three weeks at an upper east side gallery in Manhattan is the source for over forty years of reflection about the nature of art. In celebrating the twenty-five years *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* has been in print, we also certainly celebrate the private epiphany that Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* made for Danto at the Stable Gallery in late April, early May, 1964. Everything leading up to *The Transfiguration* and everything that has flowed from it in Danto's contributions to philosophical aesthetics points to that event, to that intersection of two arguably different senses of art, one decidedly diachronic and art worldly, the other markedly synchronic and this worldly. What I want to explore in this short entry are the more or less specific parameters of that event, how these parameters became fixed in the main thesis of Danto's *Transfiguration* and how that thesis makes an unlikely connection with a theory of art found in the writings of Jean Baudrillard.

Now, before you reach for that mouse or touch pad to click your way to something you expect to find, on the assumption it won't include a discussion of Baudrillard, more satisfying, the connection is not far fetched or trivial. *Simulacres et simulation*, Baudrillard's best known work in the U.S., also came into print twenty-five years ago (Galilee 1981). In that text, published as *Simulations* in Sylvère Lotringer's Foreign Agents Series,¹ and throughout his writings, we find that Baudrillard appreciates contemporary art more, like Danto, for what it means than for how it looks or makes him feel. More importantly, Baudrillard could be fairly described as the cause, in spite of what he has written and said, of so much art produced in the 1980s and 90s becoming, in a way, its own philosophy. And, not incidentally, Baudrillard reserves a special place in his writings for the art of Andy Warhol, holding his work to be, like Danto, the apotheosis of contemporary art. Of course, what counts as the perfection of art for Danto and Baudrillard is very, very different. And it's this contrast that invites the comparison. What I show below, is that the devaluation of mere real things in Danto is redeemed in Baudrillard without jeopardizing the main thesis of *The Transfiguration* but not without a challenge to what will qualify as meaning and, so, not without questioning what can be discerned as art in what are otherwise mere real things.

If you're still with me, look back at the events that led up to the "Sculpture Show" at the Stable in the spring of 1964. Warhol first showed at Eleanor Ward's gallery in late fall, 1962. It was his first solo exhibition of pop art in New York. It followed a solo show of pop art at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in July of that same year. At the Ferus, Warhol showed 32 canvases of Campbell Soup cans. At the Stable, Warhol showed the *Marilyn* diptych, *100 Soup Cans*, *100 Coke Bottles* and *100 Dollar Bills*. Michael

Fried wrote about the exhibit

Of all the painters working today in the service - or thrall - of a popular iconography Andy Warhol is probably the most single minded and the most spectacular...but I am not at all sure that even the best of Warhol's work can much outlast the journalism on which it is forced to depend.²

Just over one year later, Warhol established the first Factory on the fifth floor of a building on East 47th Street where, over a period of several weeks, working with several assistants, he produced several "three dimensional photographs" of shipping cartons for products whose repetitive and machine-like effect displayed on the shelves of supermarkets fascinated him.³

These are the objects, the first created at the Factory, that made Danto's epiphany. The show was titled "The Personality of the Artist," and it included facsimiles or, as Baudrillard would say, for reasons we'll get to below, simulacra of the shipping cartons for Heinz Tomato Ketchup, Kellogg's Corn Flakes, Mott's Apple Sauce and, of course, Brillo Soap Pads. Gerard Melanga, one of Warhol's assistants, describes the process of producing these works as follows.

And so would begin the arduous task of taping the floor with rolls of brown paper and setting out each box in a grid like pattern of eight rows lengthwise... Billy Name and I would take turns painting with Liquitex all six sides of each box - which numbered nearly 80... Andy and I repeated this process silk screening all five sides again down the line. The sixth side - the bottom side - remained blank... Completing the work took nearly six weeks... (*Archiving Andy Warhol*, 147-48)

The boxes were made to order by The Havlicek Woodworking Company, the silkscreens were manufactured by Harry Golden. And, yet, on Danto's argument, an aura, something of "the man himself," *l'homme même*, shined through this, to all the world, mechanical production of otherwise mere real things. An inner system of representations, a way with the world, a style could be discerned in these external forms, and, on these terms, the *Brillo Boxes* were vindicated, for Danto, as art.

It will not do, of course, to object that Warhol rejected the suggestion that there was the kind of depth in his work that would be required for the immanence Danto attributes, in general, to style. Nor is it enough to insist that Warhol also rejected claims of uniqueness in what Danto would call his "way with the world." Danto could simply reply that Warhol's true beliefs were unknown to him until he, Danto, came along to make them visible. Warhol really did want to be enfranchised in the art world, on Danto's view, even if outwardly he claimed he did not. And this is what makes the meeting of Warhol and Danto an event, taking that term in a way Gilles Deleuze might: something present in neither the trajectory of the one as an artist nor the other as a

philosopher completes the arc of both, making more of his *Brillo Boxes* than Warhol could have imagined and giving Danto a theory that would carry his contributions to aesthetics for four decades.⁴

Indebted as Danto's trajectory is to Warhol, however, it cannot be said that Warhol's arc owed much to Danto. Following the Stable show and into the early 80s, Warhol iterated himself, his so-called unique way with the world, in films of banal human existence, in portraits commissioned by celebrities and in serial images painted in series of sizes with several versions in each size --- a few of the largest size, more of the medium size and several more of the smaller sizes, like the packages of portraits made for children at school --- without any obvious evidence of the philosophy his art was, in a way, supposed to have become.⁵ According to Danto, there is nothing in this *curriculum vitae* that advances on the arrested development of art transparent in the *Brillo Boxes* of 1964, and, yet, on another view, there is something profoundly different here. The *Brillo Boxes* were, Danto says, indiscernible from the mere real shipping cartons for retail boxes of soap pads, but the subjects in a series of *Drag Queens* (1975), *Torsos* (1978), *Shadows* (1979) or *Skulls* (1979) are indiscernible from one another or, rather, they are discernible only in relation to one another, only in their equivalence to one another, each indifferently the simulacrum of the others, a copy without an original.

In "The Orders of Simulacra," excerpted from *L'exchange symbolique et la mort* and included in the Foreign Agents Series edition of *Simulations*,⁶ Baudrillard describes three general attempts to give order to appearances, or simulacra, in a world where the meaning of appearances, as signs of the real, has lost its connection to the relevant signifiers and refers, instead, to "the disenchanting universe of the signified, common denominator of the real world" (85). Translating and abbreviating the point for our purposes, here, the breakdown of the feudal order, in which appearances irrevocably signed a hierarchy terminating in the authority of the lord, led, in the bourgeois order that succeeded it, to the production of appearances that signed the value of goods competing for attention in the marketplace. In this first order of simulacra, signs are appearances of a value defined by the law of supply and demand that cannot be independently verified.

In the industrial era which followed, where machines produce serially what had formerly been made by hand, signs are the appearance of an equivalence, the equivalence of machine to manual labor and of one product to another. This is the second order of simulacra, perfected by technique, and Baudrillard glosses the difference in the simulacra of the bourgeois and industrial eras as follows (94-5).

The first order simulacrum never abolished difference. It supposes an always detectable alteration between semblance and reality (...art lives entirely off this gap). The second order simulacrum simplifies this problem

by the absorption of appearance or by the liquidation of the real, whichever.

In signs generated on the industrial model of production, the relation of one sign to another is a matter of indifference. All traces of uniqueness and originality in them have vanished, and we are left with a series of indiscernibly different things. In the post-industrial era, reproduction absorbs industrial production altering its purposes as well as the relation between product and producer. In this third order of simulacra, serial production yields to generation from models and “all the forms change once they are not so much mechanically reproduced but even *conceived from the point of view of their very reproducibility*” (100).

On this scheme, the art Danto laments the loss of trades on the first order of simulacra. Such art gives us a representation of the real world, and its value can be measured against the claims of art like it which, starting at a remove from the truth, offers its approximations of that truth to the court of common appeal, presided over by the critic who discerns for popular consumption what is aesthetically meaningful about it. Such art is distinguished, as Danto would say, by its style, by the palpable presence in it of a way of seeing the world. But so described, it is not at all clear how Warhol's art fills this bill. The system of representations that would define Warhol's style is not unique to Warhol, as suggested above, but appropriated from “the system of objects” in the commercial world around him.⁷ Moreover, Warhol did not start at a remove from a truth he tried to approximate but in the thrall of a third order simulacrum of the truth, advertising, which he took to be so obvious he did not even pretend to an ironic detachment from it.

On the same scheme, the art Danto laments the introduction of trades on this third order of simulacra. Such art changes without developing, is content with combining and recombining known forms for the purposes of decoration, self-expression and entertainment. Practically and historically, Baudrillard says, for art, but also fashion, the media, publicity, information and communication networks, third order simulacra signify “the substitution of social control by the *end* ... for social control by anticipation, simulation, programming and indeterminate mutation directed by the code. Instead of a process which is finalized according to its ideal development, we generalize from a model” (111). If Baudrillard is right about the most recent shift in the order of appearances (if it makes sense, in the first place, to talk about the world in terms of appearances and shifts), then his commitment to an Hegelian history of art commits Danto to reject art so disposed, and the rest of us should be seriously concerned --- this is the point pressed recently by Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and others -- about the indeterminate mutations in the cultural and communications networks of our time which are preparing us, apparently, for more insidious forms of social control.

It's not clear, again, however, that Warhol himself belongs to this third order of

simulacra. With his emphasis on production, on the transparency of technique, on seriality and the equivalences between images, not just of one *Skull* to another but of *Skulls* to *Torsos* to *Drag Queens*, Warhol and his art fit more comfortably in the second order of simulacra, the order of appearance in the machine age, the industrial era. Baudrillard put it this way, in an address to the Whitney Museum in 1987.⁸

Andy Warhol advocated the radical imperative to become an absolute 'machine', even more mechanical than the machine, because he sought the automatic, machine-like reproduction of objects that were already mechanical, already manufactured (be it a can of soup or a star's face) ... (102)

Of course, none of these orders is entirely discreet. Renaissance men, no doubt, cohabited with modern women, and both, very likely, dwell among the denizens of our own era, which is why it is fair to say that Warhol, in his second order way, was able to produce his art, even when he was not making it himself, without succumbing to the mutations of what Danto calls pluralism and Baudrillard calls the model or the code. Following Baudrillard's order of simulacra, we can make sense of an arc in Warhol's art from the middle 60s to the early 80s that seems unaccounted for by Danto in *The Transfiguration* and after.

So, what can we conclude from this brief and hasty comparison? That for both Danto and Baudrillard it is a theory that makes Warhol's art special, the brash metaphor secured by the presence of the man himself, on the one hand, and the absence of metaphor manufactured by the man as machine, on the other. For Danto, where this metaphor does not obtain, the cause of art is not advanced, and we have sheer, directionless entertainment. For Baudrillard, apart from Warhol, the metaphor obtains everywhere, and fatally. Art, today, Baudrillard said at the Whitney, far from being dead, and despite Warhol's heroic efforts, lives on and thoroughly saturates reality. "It is in museums and galleries, but also in trash, on walls, in the streets, in the banality of everything that has been made sacred without any further debate" (105).

Baudrillard sees in mere real things the bourgeois sentimentality Baudelaire objected to in the art of his time which, in our time, sustains, in art and in things, the arbitrary value of the market as a substitute and simulacrum for "real" value, tied to archaic hierarchies, which cannot serve us, today. While Danto may be right to say the development of a certain artistic technique was arrested with the *Brillo Boxes*, he may have overlooked, to his detriment, the persistence of this sentiment and its insidious insertion not just in art but in ontologically degraded mere real things. Where Danto wants to discount the claims to art of anything that does not advance the cause of self-knowledge, Baudrillard critically evaluates the efficacy of those claims, including the claim that art advances self-knowledge. If Baudrillard is right, the self Danto would have art reveal to us is a siren seductively simulating a truth we cannot learn the more to bind

us seductively to her song.

ENDNOTES

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1. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, Foreign Agents Series (Semiotext(e) 1983).
 2. Michael Fried, *Art International* (20 December 1962), 57.
 3. Gerard Melanga, *Archiving Andy Warhol* (Creation Books 2002), 34.
 4. See Gilles Deleuze, A Twenty-first Series of the Event, @ *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (Columbia 1990), 148-53.
 5. On the serial production of these series of images see Bob Colacello, *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* (Harper Collins, 1990), 267-8.
 6. Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Gallimard 1975) published in English as *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. unknown (Sage Publications 1993). In text citations are to the Foreign Agents Series edition of *Simulations*.
 7. The phrase is borrowed from the title of Baudrillard's first book *Le système des objets* (Gallimard 1968) published in English as *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (Verso 2006).
 8. Jean Baudrillard, A Toward the Vanishing Point of Art@ (Lecture at the Whitney Museum, 1987) reprinted in *The Conspiracy of Art*, trans. Ames Hodges, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, Foreign Agents Series (Semiotext(e) 2005), 98-110.