

The No Man Show: Technology and the Extension of Presence in the Work of Andy Warhol

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When Andy Warhol died in 1987 he left behind an unfinished project, the working title of which was *Andy Warhol: A No-Man Show*. The Pop artist was in the process of having his robotic double produced: this artificial twin was to host a television show directed by Peter Sellars, during which it would gossip, philosophize and spout quotes from Warhol's writings. It is hard to imagine a more apt venture for the artist who famously declared 'I want to be a machine...I think everybody should be a machine' (Swenson, 1963, p.24) and who had a great and oft-stated ambition to appear on television. The latter aim was fulfilled several times over with Warhol involved in many television projects, even moderating his own MTV show in the 1980s. The television presenter, he writes, 'has all the space anyone could ever want, right there in that television box', before declaring:

I like to take up a lot of personal space. That's why I love television. That's why I feel television is the media I'd most like to shine in. (Warhol, 1975, p.147)

The artist's television work, however, like his innovations in print journalism and his video work, has been largely ignored by critics and art historians. Yet, *The No-Man Show* project explores some of the most important concerns of Warhol's work: technical reproduction, mass media and the dynamics of absence and presence. This discussion will focus on these issues as they surface in Warhol's work across a variety of media, contrasting his techniques in painting, film and textual production in order to highlight the conceptual threads which run throughout his extensive catalogue.

Responses to Warhol's art tend to focus on the more famous serial paintings of the nineteen-sixties. Post-structuralist thinkers have claimed Warhol as representative of Debord's society of the spectacle. In 'Pop: an Art of Consumption?' Jean Baudrillard situates Pop as caught in the world of the signifier and operating in the mode of the simulacra; colluding with consumer culture and mindlessly repeating it without any critical comment (Baudrillard, 1998). According to this widely-accepted reading Warhol's work is silent and reflects the spatial extension of the image without depth: the absence of the signified creates a vacuum in which meaning is impossible. The *No-Man Show* could, accordingly, be read as the image surpassing the referent, the simulacra of Warhol replacing the artist himself.

In direct contrast, other critics have seen Warhol's work as making an important comment. Arthur Danto, for example, suggests that Warhol is 'the nearest thing to a philosophical genius the history of art has produced' (Danto, 1989, p.201). Rather than existing purely in the realm of the signifier or spectacle, Warhol's work is seen as highly referential. Situating Warhol within social history, for example as a homosexual artist expressing his desires, or as a subject of late capitalism articulating his loss of freedom and choice, these critics read depth and meaning into his work.¹ According to this reading, then, the *No-Man Show* might be read as, for instance, a comment on the superficiality of celebrity. This type of reading, however, sits uncomfortably with Warhol's own flippant and perhaps even ironic pronouncement:

If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There is nothing behind it. (cited by Buchloh, 2001, p.1)

¹ See for example: Danto, Arthur C., 1992. 'The Abstract Expressionist Coca Cola Bottle' in A. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. And Doyle, J. J. Flatley, & J.E. Munoz. (eds) 1996, *Pop Out* Durham & London: Duke University Press.

The critical situation regarding Andy Warhol's work, then, results in an unhelpful dead end. One reading will not, it seems, admit the other. It is worth considering, however, whether there might be another approach that would allow us to move beyond this repetitive and ultimately irresolvable debate and engage with Warhol's work in a different discursive space.

The relationship between man and machine, and in particular the increasing power and effects of media technologies, is perhaps the key problematic of Warhol's work: in approaching the issues raised and in exploring how they resurface across his art in various media, the concept of *telepresence* proves particularly useful. The term comes from the work of cultural theorist Paul Virilio (1997) and can be understood as the ability to transgress the physical borders of perception, to move beyond the limits of the body and to be, via technology, simultaneously absent and present. Telepresence is a key effect of the media and technology developments of the twentieth century. The boundaries imposed by the physical body vanish as technology enables the eyes, ears and mind to traverse space: we can sit at home and witness events unfolding on the other side of the world; we can have a conversation with someone hundreds of miles away; we can even watch as humans step onto the moon. 'For the first time,' wrote Marshall McLuhan in 1964, '[man] has become aware of technology as an extension of his physical body' (McLuhan, 1964, p.47). Warhol is perhaps the artist who most fully interrogated and explored the new spaces opened through the concept of telepresence, the new spaces of twentieth century media culture. It is in relation to these spaces that Warhol's work can be most effectively resituated and thereby removed from the critical tug of war in which it has become embroiled.

Painting

Gold Marilyn Monroe (Warhol, 1962) is a large rectangular canvas covered with reflective gold paint and featuring a small, centrally positioned image

of Monroe. The work is part of a larger series of paintings featuring the same piece of 'found' photographic material, in this case a publicity still of the actress: Warhol's choice of material is notable as it evidences an engagement with the medium of cinema as well as with the language of studio advertising. Unlike the earlier Campbell's Soup Cans series, throughout which Warhol had painstakingly reproduced each image by hand, the Marilyn series was created by silk-screen printing. Silk-screen printing is a stencil-like process which involves the application of paint through a screen onto which the image has been fixed. Prior to developing this method, Warhol had experimented with the rubber stamp as a technological means of reproduction, even having a stamp produced of his signature. The silk-screen, however, gave him the stronger 'assembly-line effect' he was after. Through the use of processes such as these, Warhol made the traditional idea of the importance of artistic skill problematic: silk-screening, after all, can be done by the technician as easily as by the inspired artist. Indeed, on a number of occasions Warhol went as far as to claim that his paintings were actually produced by his assistants. The artist's use of technological production techniques extended his reach: a Warhol painting, though requiring the artist's direction, does not depend on the direct touch of his hand. The signature stamp was used to authenticate his work, but, again, any one of his assistants could have inked and pressed it. In other words, by design and by dint of the technology used, 'Warhol' paintings can be produced when the artist himself is not physically present.

The diptych *Gold Marilyn* (Warhol, 1962) features two round canvases: one simply painted a matt gold, the other silk-screened with the now familiar image of Monroe. This work is unusual in shape; Warhol's canvases are most often rectilinear. The strategy of producing an accompanying monochrome canvas, however, is typical. According to art critic Benjamin Buchloh, Warhol's use of the monochrome is 'a complete *devaluation* and *inversion* of one of the most sacred modernist pictorial

strategies' (Buchloh, 2001, p.16). High modernism used the monochrome in order to allow art to transcend the ideological function of representation; Buchloh sees Warhol's work as a negation of this metaphysical element. In other words, he echoes and reinforces Warhol's claim that 'it just makes them bigger and mainly it makes them cost more' (Buchloh, 2001, p.19). A different approach is implied by Warhol's own term for the monochrome – the blank. Unlike the term monochrome, suggesting the presence of a single colour or tone, Warhol's 'blank' suggests the absence of an image. In *THE Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (1975) the artist writes of his attitude to 'blankness':

When I look at things, I always see the space they occupy. I always want the space to reappear, to make a comeback.
(Warhol, 1975, p.144)

This statement points to another way of reading the blank: as space regained. Warhol's monochrome panels not only extend the pictorial space of the image they accompany, in this sense they are an extension beyond the boundaries of the single canvas, but also give us a painting of that pictorial space itself. The blank doubles pictorial space, repeating the space of the painting – simultaneously empty *and* occupied. The image is simultaneously present and absent, and what stands between these states is a simple technological operation. The monochrome then, in Warhol's work, marks an interest in the dynamics of media space; how the image traverses various spaces and how these spaces can be evacuated and/or occupied.

The grid is a mechanical structure which appears time and time again throughout Warhol's work. The Marilyn series is no exception, featuring the grid as a format for both printing and exhibition. Works such as *Marilyn Diptych* (Warhol, 1962) which features two canvases, one colour and one black and white, each featuring the image of Monroe printed fifty times in a grid layout, are thus particularly significant in terms of Warhol's catalogue. In art historical terms the grid has been understood in one of two ways;

either *centrifugally*, ‘operat[ing] from the work of art outward [and] compelling our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame’, or *centripetally*, as:

a *re*-presentation of everything that separates the work of art from the world ... a mapping of the space inside the frame onto itself. (Krauss, 1985, pp.19-20)

Rosalind Krauss has argued that, in fact, the grid is a bivalent structure – meaning it can work in *both* directions at once. Warhol’s grids, I would argue, also function in this manner. Centrifugally, in that they represent and extend into the world beyond the frame, mirroring the concepts of space that resulted from developments in media and technology: any boundaries imposed on the grid are as arbitrary as those imposed on the telepresent user of technology. Centripetally, in that they self reflexively highlight the processes and structures of the medium in which they are created. Warhol’s grids remap, within the space of the work, the frames which constitute our experience of the medium of painting: repetition of the subject, reproduction, composition and exhibition. They repeatedly re-enact and blur the literal edges of the paintings which separate them from the world, thus generating a reflexive investigation of the space of painting, how that space operates and how that medium interacts with and is affected by other media and technologies.

Film

In his essay ‘Basic Film Aesthetics’ F.E. Sparshott writes:

one’s sense of space in film is somehow bracketed or held in suspense: one is aware of one’s implied position and accepts it but is not existentially committed to it. (Sparshott, 1992, p.328)

In other words cinema works by short-circuiting our sense of distance and space and allowing us access to spaces from which we would normally be excluded: it allows us telepresence.

Chelsea Girls (1966), perhaps Warhol's best known 'feature' and famous for its innovative use of split screen presentation, plays with the conventional notion of cinematic telepresence by giving us access to more than one film space at once. The film consists of eight reels which are unified by the idea that they all take place in rooms at the Chelsea Hotel. The program of the first screening listed room numbers for the sequences. Each reel is the same length with the action set in a different room. Other than this common location, however, there is nothing in the way of a unified narrative: this is not a story about the occupants of the hotel. Rather, it is a work which draws attention to its own conditions of production and exhibition. The manner of projection – two reels shown simultaneously, side by side on one cinema screen – does not indicate simultaneous action in adjoining rooms, as it might in the conventional continuity system of film production. Instead, it effects a distancing which forces the viewer to acknowledge the strangeness of the implied position; it draws our attention to telepresence.

While there are two periods, one at the start and one at the finish, in which there is only one film on the screen, *Chelsea Girls* has no recognizable beginning, middle or end, no narrative and no plot. Moreover, as Stephen Koch writes 'tradition, rather than Warhol himself, has established the standard sequence of the reels' (Koch, 1991, p.87). Simply stated, the reels which comprise *Chelsea Girls* can be shown in any number of combinations. The manner of projection means that the reels could easily be increased or decreased in number without much change to the 'feature' itself. It would also be entirely possible to project all the films one after another, extending the time of the viewing but contracting its space, or equally, to project them at the same time, contracting the time but extending

the space. Thus, the borders, spatial or temporal, imposed during a screening of *Chelsea Girls* are more or less arbitrary. In this sense Warhol's film can be linked very closely to the grids of his paintings which can also be extended to infinity or contracted to the single module without significant structural change. Viewing *Chelsea Girls* is an experience which draws attention to, rather than masks, the frames of cinematic experience. Like Warhol's paintings then, *Chelsea Girls* is part of a reflexive interrogation and transgression of the conventional boundaries of the medium.

Just as the use of silk-screening had allowed Warhol to remove himself from the painting process, the use of a static camera enabled him to remain absent during the process of filming. He is well-known for walking off and leaving his camera running, for working without scripts or plots and for giving his stars no direction other than to act as they normally would: 'it's so easy to make movies,' he declared 'you can just shoot and every picture comes out right' (cited in O'Pray, 1989, p.61). What went on in front of the camera was equally effortless:

Everybody went right on doing what they'd always done – being themselves (or doing one of their routines, which was usually the same thing). (Warhol, 1981, p.180)

The film enables the viewer to be telepresent at the Factory, enables what seems to be unmediated access to a space otherwise beyond the physical boundaries of perception.

It would be wrong, however, to imagine that this telepresence is only experienced by the subsequent viewer. Whether he is physically present or not, through the technology that he uses Warhol is always telepresent: the camera becomes an extension of the artist himself and thus influences what is recorded. When filming, those in front of the lens can feel the eyes of the artist/audience and this awareness of the camera and the time/space in which the film will be watched undoubtedly affects their performance. Ondine's fury at being called a phony in *Chelsea Girls* is a good example: it is a

minor insult not warranting the violence it receives. It is the presence of the camera rather than the attack that prompts him to act out an exaggerated performance: insulted in front of the imaginary viewer he becomes enraged. His interlocutor then becomes confused and does not know how to respond to what she at first, imagining herself and Ondine colluding in a camera-driven act, refuses to take seriously. The episode finishes when, after being slapped, she walks off set in tears. The boundary between 'real' space/experience and mediated space/experience is blurred. The telepresence generated by and experienced through technology affects our experience of meaning: Ondine overreacts to a minor insult because of the camera; his anger, at least initially, seems less threatening to his target because of the camera; the whole episode, moreover, caught by the camera feels like staged 'entertainment' to the viewer of the film.

Warhol acknowledged this technology induced blurring of boundaries when he wrote: 'Nothing was ever a problem again, because a problem just meant a good tape' (Warhol, 1975, pp.26-27). The artist evacuates himself by the use of technologies which allow him, just like his images, to be simultaneously absent and present (or present at a distance) thereby generating a space around himself, a buffer zone which allows for meaning to be evacuated but not eradicated.

Text

When he decided that, in the spirit of Pop, he should really 'cover' literature too, Warhol turned to another machine, this time the tape-recorder. Consisting of a sequence of transcripts, *a: a novel* (1968) was conceived and marketed as a novel recording, quite literally, one day in the life of Warhol superstar Ondine. The relative ease of having others redact and transcribe his recordings must have been irresistible to the artist – he need have no part of the actual production. Warhol chose his immediate environment to record, the transcribed recording granting access to a space/time which

would normally be off limits. In this manner the tape recorder functions as the film camera did, in allowing Warhol to be present when absent, the awareness of this extended presence having its effect on those involved. Both artist and subject are able to influence what is recorded and, conversely, it is evident throughout the text that they are themselves influenced by the process of recording.

The novel was apparently left in the form in which it first reached Warhol as each typist handed in their copy. The result is a text that switches inexplicably from double column to single column, from centered text to left or right justified text. Each typist's idiosyncrasies are also evident and spelling, punctuation and grammar largely disappear as they attempt to transcribe noises, overlapping dialogues and barely audible sections. The effect of this method of production is startling. Flouting the conventions of written language as well as those of the novel form, Warhol forces his reader to question the relationship between the spoken and written word, between signifier and signified and, indeed, between blank page and word. Section 6/2, a dialogue between three people, serves to illustrate how the artist challenges our assumptions regarding the appearance of text on paper. While the dialogue between the characters Taxine and Ondine appears in a column of text on the left side of the page, the far less frequent comments of another character, Moxine, appear in much smaller type on the right side of the page.

O – Which is a . . .

...

T – But . . .

M – Pülter gast.

But uh, no, pulta geist is really

pultra geist. Nobody ever says what it is,

they say pulter- geis

M- Oh yeah?

O- But pul, but pultra gast . . .

(Warhol, 1968, p.132)

There are a number of possible explanations: perhaps Moxine has a quieter voice, perhaps she is intervening from the background, or perhaps the typist felt her voice was less important. Thus issues such as volume, distance and status come to bear on the appearance of the final text.

Warhol's writing, then, is less the result of a desire to produce a pop literature than a continuation of his desire to occupy the media spaces made available by new technologies and a reflexive interrogation of the medium of written language. Like his films, Warhol's texts generate a telepresence which both allows access to and alters the particular space that it creates. Warhol himself is once again evacuated from his work, the traces of his involvement in writing as invisible as those in painting or film, if indeed present at all.

Like the telepresent user of technology, Warhol and his work resist conventional boundaries and definitions. Neither entirely present nor entirely absent, neither entirely referential nor entirely simulacral: understanding Warhol in this manner allows the artist's work in different media to be approached from the same theoretical platform and opens the door to readings which trace other references in his work. Warhol's art evades the arbitrary boundaries imposed on it by convention and moves freely between art-forms, genres, and media. His work self-reflexively interrogates the relationship between man and machine, between original and reproduction, and between image and referent. It occupies, explores and makes visible the media spaces that new technologies have opened and the effects that these spaces generate. Re-situating Warhol's work in relation to media space and technology creates a different discursive space in which Warhol's art can operate at its most meaningful: allowing the artist's catalogue to be understood as more than just a mindless reflection of American consumerism but at the same time avoiding the imposition of the kind of philosophical meaning that the artist himself so often mocked.

In *THE Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, the artist writes:

Before media there used to be a physical limit on how much space one person could take up by themselves ... [but] with media you can sit back and let yourself fill up space on records, in the movies, most exclusively on the telephone and least exclusively on television. ... I always think that quantity is the best gauge on anything ... so I set my sights on becoming a 'space artist'. (Warhol, 1975, pp.146-148)

Paradoxically, while attempting to fill up as much media space as possible, Warhol erases himself from the process: he uses technology to achieve a *telepresence* through which he can remain *absent*. The space he generates then is perhaps best understood as a kind of buffer zone, an evacuated space, a shifting and contested site of multiple meanings: a no mans land, or perhaps after all, *A No-man Show*.

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