

# ***Reflections on Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Warhol and Baudrillard in Dialogue***

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**Abstract:** At the beginning of the 20th century, the Industrial Revolution promoted the invention and application of modern mechanical products. The rapid development of productivity led to a speedy improvement in the material standard of living and a surplus of material goods, but the problem of "depersonalisation" arose as individuals gradually lost their sense of satisfaction and individuality in the same mechanised work. The Pop artist Andy Warhol reflected on this era of mechanisation through the reproduction and imitation of forms, initiating his discourse and reflection on the industrial age. A century later, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard put forward the concept of "Simulacra", pointing out that in the information technology and consumer society, the media, such as television, advertisements and the Internet, create a large number of virtual images and information, blurring the boundaries between the reality and the fiction, so that people gradually lose their sense of authenticity and personality in the "Simulacra". This paper will analyse the roots of Warhol's ideological evolution from the individual to the times through the understanding of Warhol's self-description as well as the social activities and values of the time, and use Baudrillard's "Simulacra" and "Surrealism" to explain why Pop Art has transgenerational significance and the exploration of public values it opens up.

**Keywords:** Andy Warhol, Jean Baudrillard, The Pop art, Simulacra, Surrealism.

## **1. Introduction**

At the beginning of the 20th century, the modernity brought about by the Industrial Revolution led to increased urbanisation, factories sprouting up and rapid leaps in technological advancement. The industrial model of production required workers to follow a standard process, and everyone became part of the mechanical operation. Depersonalisation[1] is exceptionally evident in this environment, where people's individuality is suppressed, and they become anonymous cogs in the chain of mass production. The richness of the individual appears small and helpless in front of the huge industrial system. People are no longer independent individuals but are integrated into a huge and cold machine.

In 1996, Baudrillard unreservedly expressed his praise for Warhol in his publication *The Conspiracy of Art*, "I think Andy Warhol was the only artist at a time when art was caught up in a very important transitional movement, the only artist who was able to situate himself at the forefront, before all the changes"[2]. He believed that Warhol was not only the founder of commodity fetishism but also the fountainhead of artistic modernity, profoundly altering the thinking and aesthetic direction of artistic creation by means of mechanical reproduction. At the same time, he revealed the

phenomenon of alienation in the industrial age, where price became the only criterion for measuring the value and authenticity of things. Accordingly, after observing the drastic changes of the times, Jean Baudrillard proposed the concepts of " Simulacra " and " Surrealism "[3]in response to the crisis of modernity that has become more pronounced in human society after the continuous development of consumerism and the rapid advancement of media technology.

Although Warhol, as a representative artist of modern Pop Art at the beginning of the 20th century, has been the subject of many studies on his artistic methods and personal experiences, most of them focus on the artworks themselves. However, most of them focus on analysing the artistic value of the artworks themselves, and there is still much room for in-depth analysis on the level of contemporary and social value. This paper focuses on Campbell's Soup Can (Tomato Rice), a work of art that took shape as a reproducible work of art after Warhol's complete transformation into Pop Art in 1961, to Brillo Box, which in 1964 posed a poignant question to the general public in terms of determining the authenticity of an object. Taking Warhol's ideological changes and roots behind commercialisation and reproduction as a guide, the zeitgeist and public value of his work are analysed through Benjamin's The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction and Baudrillard's simulacra and simulation.

## 2. Andy Warhol and His Works Analysis

### 2.1. Objects Emerge: Life as Art

In 1961, due to his family's circumstances and the influence of consumerism in the United States at the time, Andy Warhol focused his attention on everyday consumer goods in the lives of the general public in an attempt to reshape people's understanding of art itself in a commodified world.

Born in Pittsburgh to Czech immigrants, Warhol's poverty was compounded, coincidentally, by the Great Depression of the 1930s. In comparison, the young Warhol saw how happy people were to be able to eat canned gumbo after World War II. As an adult, Warhol ate the same Campbell's soup cans for breakfast because of his childhood regrets, and one day in 1961, he stared at the open soup cans on the table for a long time and suddenly said, "I'm going to make a real work of art out of that"[4]. Thus, he drew a pencil drawing of the soup cans and what the soup cans would have looked like. In the process of comparing the drawn image with the original picture, Warhol was shocked to realise why the soup can in the advertisement could not be directly turned into a work of art. Eventually, Warhol produced a series of screen-printed portraits of Campbell's Soup Cans between 1961 and 1962.

The Campbell's Soup Cans series became representative of the early years of Warhol's Pop Art due to its more popular and consumerist nature of subject matter. In the 1960s, at a time when industrial civilisation and consumerism were in full swing in the United States, Warhol used this kind of disembodied art to express the unique social phenomenon that he captured in the development of contemporary capitalism. The development of modern industrial technology not only fulfils people's basic desire for survival but is also guided by the excess of material wealth and capitalism; people are immersed in the bubble of measuring "things" and people's own value and ability by the level of consumption - the prevalence of money worship.

In this process, "things" have been detached from their own use value and functionality and have evolved into a symbol of consumption and value. The symbolisation of everyday objects inspired Warhol at the time. He looked at the can of bisque that always appeared on the dinner table and realised that since the "thing" could abandon its own attributes and serve as a symbol of consumption, it could naturally be abstracted into a symbolic object of art. Every day, objects do not need to change their own characteristics; they are simply transformed into visual images. "Life is art" [4], objects that everyone sees and takes for granted are not impossible to be placed on the stand as unique and

creative works of art. Even the soup cans, which are only recognisable and consumable in their own image, are used as an expression of "elegant" art with a kind of everyday object whose deeper connotations cannot be explored. It is a clear representation of the empty social and cultural situation of the United States at this time of consumerism; that is, people are living in a world of materialisation and commodification.

## 2.2. The Inception of Reproduction: Art on the Assembly Line

Everything can be a consumer product so art can be built on the assembly line just like a consumer product. 1963, Warhol mentioned in an interview that "the reason I send samples to paint is that I want to become a machine, and whatever I want to do, the machine will do" [3], showing his preference for mechanical reproduction.

After the Industrial Revolution, a large number of modern mechanical products were invented and put into use [5]. The rapid development of productivity led to the rapid improvement of the material standard of living. People began to mention industry, science and technology in the same position as God. Artists began to imitate the form of the factory and the characteristics of efficient machine production, producing their works of art quickly and in large quantities and appealing to machine-like "depersonalisation" expressive techniques [1]. Between 1962 and 1963, Warhol continued to use familiar everyday consumer goods as thematic elements in series, such as Campbell's Soup Cans, Green Coca-Cola Bottles, and Martinson Coffee, reproducing them over and over again to form images of enormous scale. When a large number of similar symbols are arranged together, the viewer will be lost in the strong visual impact and will no longer explore the meaning behind the single symbol. Warhol's desired presentation of art is achieved - the deconstruction of the symbols of consumption and art that were originally assigned to it by placing it in a mechanised process.

Through countless mechanical repetitions, while reinforcing people's perception of symbolism, Warhol emphasised that the buyer could not distinguish between the original and the reproduction due to the unique nature of the screen-printing technique, which was used to print large numbers of copies. In each seemingly indistinguishable "work of art", Warhol focused more on the viewer's reflection and exploration of the "artwork in the assembly line" under the industrial system. In the era of machine mass production, both daily commodities and artworks can be seen as the same kind of symbols to be manufactured and reproduced in large quantities. Driven by consumerism, a large number of identical objects and aesthetics have been accepted by human beings, while at the same time, industry and urbanisation have made individuals play the role of machines in repetitive work. The repeated coincidence of symbols, the process of input and output of the same symbols, and the massive similarity have eroded the individuality of human beings, and thus "depersonalisation"[1], a characteristic of modernity, has become apparent.

## 2.3. The Unravelling of Reproduction: Reality Veiled

Alarmed by the uncontrollability of reproduction, which occurred in large numbers and continuously, Warhol exhibited his Box Series at the Staple Museum in 1964. By bringing the art form of simulation and reproduction from a flat surface into a three-dimensional field of vision, Warhol's questioning of the reality of the object was brought more directly to the viewer's attention.

Faced with virtual statues that are highly similar to everyday objects, people will wonder whether the sculptures they see are artistic while at the same time wondering about the difference between the sculptures and consumer goods, which is precisely Warhol's intention at this time. In the exhibition represented by Brillo Box, Warhol used custom-made wooden partitions to create box-sized shapes and then screen-printed five of them with logos that are often found in the marketplace. In practice, the Brillo box here, in the process of simulating the symbols of consumption with the symbols of art,

serves as an elaborate imitation that makes it impossible to distinguish between sculpture and consumer goods and asks the viewer, "What is the difference between an artwork and a non-artwork? And what is real?", these kinds of series of questions about authenticity.

The way people perceive objects is usually based on hearing, smell, taste, touch and sight, with trust in touch and sight being the most common. It is common to believe that one's eyes and sense of touch cannot be deceived, but this is often not the case.

When faced with a Brillo Box that is identical in size and appearance, how can the audience tell the difference between the real thing and the imitation? In an era where mechanical reproduction is becoming more and more dominant, technological development is blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, and in a symbolic world, people are losing their ability to judge the objective reality of objects.

### **3. Jean Baudrillard's Response**

The rapid development of time and technology, when the reproduction of fiction is no longer confined to the printed page but fictionalised to falsify the real, has plunged people into a fictional cocoon of information without the possibility of identifying the real. Baudrillard heard Warhol's question at this point in the late twentieth century and responded.

#### **3.1. The Conceptual Exploration of Objects**

Like Warhol, Baudrillard begins with objects. Unlike Warhol's study of consumer goods from the perspective of mass production, Baudrillard initiated his exploration of Objects from a semiotic point of view. The theoretical model of consumer society is constructed with "things", so as to establish a symbolic system of "things" to discover the deep-seated alienation of consumer society [6]. He argues that in today's consumer society, which is rich in material goods, the value of commodities has become the only standard of value, but what is really bad is that this kind of "objectified" value has made the principles of formalisation and standardisation enter the entire commodity society and people's value judgement system [7]. The inherent richness of the individual and his or her individuality is gradually replaced in this process by the rules of commodity production. Individual potential is submerged in the formalised production process, and human beings are ultimately unable to escape the fate of being objectified.

In a subversive move, Warhol's mass production and reproduction of the "everyday shop" has diverted the art market from its true standard of measurement and plunged it into an orgy of price orientation. Such an ironic move has briefly awakened people from the illusion of consumerism, and instead of indulging in the sacralisation of the commodity system, they have been rethinking the properties of "things" and the value system itself.

#### **3.2. Interpretation of Simulacra and Surreal Domains**

In response to the process of reproduction, with the general characteristics of the era of mechanical reproduction, Baudrillard proposes "three sequences of simulacra" [3]. The first sequence is imitation, which was the dominant mode from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution, and the analogies in this sequence follow the "natural law of value"[7]. Analogue in this period seeks to imitate nature and reflect it. The second sequence of simulation is production; production is the dominant mode of the industrial era, and the analogy in this stage follows the "market value law"[7]. In this stage of the simulation, according to the law of value and market domination, the purpose is to market profits. The third sequence of simulation is simulation, the dominant mode of the day. This stage of simulation follows the "structural law of value"[7]. For the stage of simulation, the uncontrollability of replication, that is, one cannot make judgements about authenticity; he explains that "the production

of simulation is unlimited and uncontrollable and culminates in a surreal social picture" [3]. In this stage, objects become infinitely simulacra, large numbers of undifferentiated replicas are produced, and the simulacra symbol "obscures and inverts the fundamental reality" [3]. These three sequences correspond exactly to the three stages in Warhol's creation of commercial artefacts. Firstly, through the imitation of consumption patterns to make everyday objects become symbols; secondly, in the process of mass-producing replicas, to satisfy the market profit while blurring the boundary between consumption and art symbols; and finally, using the symbols as a clue, through the overlap of everyday objects and consumer goods, to make people unable to judge the objective reality of the object, and then degenerate into a surrealistic social picture.

In the end, Warhol's packaging of consumer goods as artworks is followed by his innovation of forging artworks as consumer goods. This process is intended to lead the public to think about how the real is hidden. While Warhol focuses on the questioning of the authenticity of objective objects, Baudrillard looks at the phenomenon of objects to see how the loss of authenticity affects people's values and the world as a whole. He believes that postmodern cultural phenomena are full of "simulacra activity", and simulacra is not the simulation of reality as traditional mimicry suggests, but the reproduction of fictional objects, and the whole postmodern society is a field beyond reality [7].

#### 4. Limitations and Responses

Based on the fact that this paper only selects Warhol's creative works from 1961 to 1964 for analysis, it does not analyse Warhol's overall artistic period. There is a suspicion of over-interpretation that corresponds to Baudrillard's point of view with a single period of Warhol. However, for Andy Warhol himself, the three years can be said to have opened up a new height of rebelliousness and creativity in his creative career, and his work Campbell's Soup Can (Tomato Rice) directly initiated the shift of art creation and aesthetics towards mass and pan-art [8]. From then on, art not only entered people's daily lives, expanding the boundaries of art, Danto even commented that "Pop Art means the end of art" [9]. From the beginning of Duchamp to the end of Warhol, "artists continued to question the very concept of art by challenging its form of existence, opening up new possibilities for its continued existence and development" [9]. Judged in this way, Warhol's dissolution of symbols and artistic values had reached its peak in the 1960s, and even Warhol's own later works were not immune to indulging in the illusion of the commodification of art, which, from Baudrillard's point of view, was "There is only one advertising genius left" [2]. The poignancy and irony of the early period are completely absent. The works at this stage are representative of Warhol's own artistic tendencies and expressions.

In addition, in another work of the same period, Benjamin expressed in 1963 in "Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that many artworks and any objects in the age of mechanical reproduction can be simply reproduced. At this time, society is detached from the natural law of value and its mode of operation and enters into the logical order of the law of the commodity of value [10]. Thus, the social problems brought about by the Industrial Revolution at this time have been of concern to many theorists and artists, and Warhol's reflections on social phenomena were not created out of nothing. Moreover, this period of artists, philosophers, thinkers and other views on the opening of modernity is particularly important to torture. With the passage of time, at the end of the 20th century, Baudrillard, as the coordinate system of postmodern culture, was alerted to the same period of Warhol and Benjamin's questioning and reflection on the social phenomena of the present time and there is no imposed connection.

Finally, it is perhaps a coincidence that on the cover of the monograph *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 1993, the designer has reproduced and stylised the nine skull prints in multiple colours, following the artist Andy Warhol's technique of repetitive screen-printing of heads. However, through



the above understanding of the authors' self-representation, as well as the social activities and values of the time, Warhol's questioning at the beginning of the twentieth century was finally answered by Baudrillard at the end of the twentieth century, and this dialogue that unfolded in the void came to an end. Therefore, it can be considered not as an overinterpretation but as an exchange of representative views between Baudrillard and Warhol.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, in this great confrontation between the concept of art work and modern industrial society, Warhol dissolved the inherent symbolic and aesthetic values of art, and while constructing the symbolic value of art, he also dissolved the attributes of the "thing" itself. Between construction and deconstruction, Warhol's fear and reflection on the opening of modernity are implied. This paper deeply analyses this process, using Baudrillard's evaluation of Warhol as a medium to build a bridge between the dialogue between the two from the early 20th century to the 21st century. Through analysing Warhol's work in the 1960s, it intends to jointly articulate their answers to the question of authenticity. Due to the limitation of space, the connection between the two perspectives is only briefly explained, and it is hoped that more detailed analyses and in-depth explanations of their individual perspectives will be added.

From Warhol to Baudrillard, conclusions are drawn from their unique but similar perspectives. In the continuous process of reproducing and creating mimetic worlds, the essence is that the viewer, the public, continues to accept false images as real. Driven by consumerism, the masses are gradually reduced to a silent majority in an anthropomorphic space manipulated by capital. Worse still, as the boundary between the real and the virtual dissolves, the system of reference for judgment disappears. Individuals are unable to judge the true and the false; the true loses its basis for being true, and the false loses its virtual basis because there is no reference to the true; individuals lose the ability to make value judgements, which will ultimately lead to the dissolution of public values at the social level.

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