

Warhol: The Businessman and the Artist

At the start of the 1960s Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg were the kings of the emerging Pop Art era. These artists transformed ordinary items of American culture into famous pieces of art. Despite their significant contributions to this time period, it was Andy Warhol who later became the most recognizable icon of the Pop Art Era. By the mid sixties Lichtenstein, Oldenburg and Rauschenberg each had their own niche in the Pop Art market, unlike Warhol who was still struggling to make sales. At one point it was up to Ivan Karp, his dealer, to “keep moving things moving forward until the artist found representation whether with Castelli or another gallery.”¹ Meanwhile Lichtenstein became known for his painted comics, Oldenburg made sculptures of mass produced food and Rauschenberg did combines (mixtures of everyday three dimensional objects) and gestural paintings.² These pieces were marketable because of consumer desire, public recognition and aesthetic value. In later years Warhol’s most well known works such as *Turquoise Marilyn* (1964) contained all of these aspects. Some marketable factors were his silk screening technique, his choice of known subjects, his willingness to adapt his work, his self promotion, and his connection to art dealers. However, which factor of Warhol’s was the most marketable is heavily debated. I believe Warhol’s use of silk screening, well known subjects, and self

¹ Polsky, R. (2011). *The Art Prophets*. (p. 15). New York: Other Press New York.

² Schwendener, Martha. (2012) "Reinventing Venus And a Lying Puppet." *New York Times*, April 15. 10. *Business Abstracts with Full Text* (H.W. Wilson).

promotion were the most important marketable factors, which Warhol relied upon to become as successful as Lichtenstein, Oldenburg and Rauschenberg in the 1960s.

The appeal of a unique medium as well as a more efficient means of production prompted Warhol to silkscreen. Silk screening is a process which involves placing various amounts of pigment upon a stencil with mesh. This technique was different than just painting because it put “action on screen” and had a “deliberately mechanical process.”³ During this period technology underwent a period of rapid growth. Warhol took advantage of the public’s attraction to technology by transferring images of celebrities from the television screen onto his silk screens. In doing so the images were recognizable, yet distinctive enough to capture the art world’s attention. Also the mechanical look of silk screening made Warhol’s art more closely associated with commodities.⁴ Society connects mass produced items with commercialism and handmade items with art. In spite of this, “the mark of the artist’s own studio/factory” gave Warhol’s work a more artistic element. The mechanical process gave the pieces a more modern look that society associated with the technology of that day. Ironically, silk screening is over a century old, albeit this technique served its purpose to mass produce art in the sixties.⁵ When Warhol and his Factory workers created his flower paintings

³ McCarthy, David. (2006) "Andy Warhol's Silver Elvis's: Meaning through Context at the Fetus Gallery in 1963." *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2: 354-372.

⁴ De Duve, Thierry. (1989). "Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected." *October* no. 48: 3. *Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File*

⁵ Richardson, T. D. (2010). "Andy Warhol: Folk Artist in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Disclosure* no. 19: 23-34.

over 900 were produced. ⁶Moreover although artists such as Rauschenberg used silk-screening, it is evident that Warhol used this technique the most frequently. Lichtenstein used a basic canvas, which was not a unique medium by any means. Oldenburg, however, incorporated a variety of materials into his work. This variety was disadvantageous though because society did not associate a particular medium with Oldenburg as they did silk screens with Warhol. However, in parts of the sixties Oldenburg concentrated his efforts on soft sculptures. Oldenburg, like Warhol, discovered that having a signature medium was beneficial. For Warhol though, silk screened pieces had a marketable appeal for both artist and consumer.

Well known subjects were integral to the public recognition of art pieces. Warhol used celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Kennedy and Elvis Presley. This choice in subject matter “embraces marketing and celebrity.” ⁷ The general public was able to connect to art through the celebrity gossip they were exposed to daily. Warhol relied on established, known celebrities to make a name for himself. Works such as in his full length silver Elvis’ were “not about American film in general but rather a highly marketable genre.” ⁸ This western genre was embodied by Warhol’s Elvis silk screens. These scenes depicted Elvis in cowboy boots with a pistol on his hip. It’s important to note that these images of Elvis did not sell well originally at the Ferus Gallery. It wasn’t until the Western genre gained speed that the public began to take notice of these

⁶ Foundation for the Visual Arts,(2008). "Gallery Warhol.". (Accessed October 9, 2012)
<http://www.gallerywarhol.com/andy-warhol-flowers-1964-FS-II.6.htm>.

⁷ Gelshorn, Julia. (2012). "Two Are Better than One: Notes on the Interview and Techniques of Multiplication." *Art Bulletin* 94, no. 1: 32-41.

⁸ McCarthy, David. (2006). "Andy Warhol's Silver Elvis's: Meaning through Context at the Ferus Gallery in 1963." *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2: 354-372.

particular prints. Elvis was not the only celebrities Warhol silkscreened; he also produced silk screens of Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy. Warhol chose only the most famous of celebrities for his portraits. Although Rauschenberg sold some portraits of the Kennedy's neither Rauschenberg nor Oldenburg *focused* on the glamorous people of the sixties. Lichtenstein, in comparison, created portraits of some known icons, but many of his works such as *Drowning Girl* were more general than Warhol's. The aesthetic appeal of celebrities in person, as well print, attracted buyers to Warhol.

Although Warhol's celebrity images were successful other well known subject matters did not sell as well. Warhol's Death in Disaster series is a prime example. This series contained images of car crashes, suicides and deaths due to consumer goods. Although the images did not make sizable profits they captivated the art world. These critics detected underlying meanings against capitalism. Historian Jane Shattuc presented the possibility that Pop Art serves "as a sharp critique of mindless consumption and capitalism."⁹ Just as with the celebrities, Warhol's Death and Disaster series had recognizable images that the general public could connect to. However the images in Death and Disaster series were of real scenes that society would rather not be reminded of. The scenes of violence in the mass media due to the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War and the political assassinations of this time jolted many. The shock of these images was overcome by the numbing effect of the relentless repetition of death in the mass media.¹⁰ Other Pop artists such as Oldenburg, Lichtenstein and Rauschenberg

⁹ Shattuc, J. (1993). "Contra" brecht: R. w. Fassbinder and pop culture in the sixties. *Cinema Journal*, 33(1), 36.

¹⁰ Golec, Michael J. (2009). "Media Aesthetics, Sense Perception, and Andy Warhol's Blue Electric Chair." *Senses & Society* 4, no. 1: 23-46.

created images which reflected the turning times. Oldenburg's *Lipstick Monument* protested the war and Lichtenstein created comic book drawings of the war.¹¹ Similarly, Rauschenberg created pictures of John Kennedy throughout his presidential term.¹² These artists had comparable ideas, but Warhol's work lacked of consumer desire and aesthetic value. Nonetheless the familiarity of the pictures made a connection with the public that gave Warhol the edge he needed.

The subject matter of typical consumer goods allowed customers to relate well to Warhol's art. Simply put, "potential collectors longed for art that they could grasp more easily. Pop art had an attractive market appeal..."¹³ Works such as Warhol's Campbell Soups are an example of this basic triangular connection between artist, good and consumer. Anyone can understand a can of soup, whereas an abstract painting is considerably more ambiguous. Although consumer goods were wanted by society, the concept was not openly accepted by more traditional thinkers in the art world. This backlash hurt Warhol's reputation in the art world since many influential critics were traditional thinkers. Historians in later years, such as Thierry De Duve, scathingly called Warhol's works "a repeated accumulation of ordinary consumer goods".¹⁴ This, however, was precisely Warhol's intention. De Duve's critique does not examine Warhol's pieces through the eyes of a consumer, but as a skill based artist. Furthermore,

¹¹ Elmaleh, Eliane. 2003. "American Pop Art and political engagement in the 1960s." *European Journal Of American Culture* 22, no. 3: 181-191

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Polsky, R. (2011). *The Art Prophets*. (p. 14). New York: Other Press New York.

¹⁴ De Duve, Thierry. (1989) "Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected." *October* no. 48: 3. *Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File*.

the art market in the sixties was said to “treat art as commodities and absorbs aesthetic values into the sole value of exchange.”¹⁵ From the perspective of a traditional art critic art was devalued as commercialism seeped into the fine art market. However for Warhol, art as a commodity was the intended goal. For artists such as Oldenburg this was the objective as well. In the case of Oldenburg his studio acted as a store. Likewise, Rauschenberg’s “use of popular imagery also includes real American cultural icons, such as the four Coca- Cola bottles in *Curfew*” revealed the importance of commodities to other pop artists.¹⁶ The fact that both Warhol and Rauschenberg used the exact same brand during their art careers is important to note. For Warhol and these other influential Pop artist consumer goods served as a subject which everyone could relate to.

Another factor that contributed to Warhol’s success in the art market was the help of knowledgeable art dealers. These art dealers gave Warhol critical advice and helped him to become established with reputable galleries. In the course of the sixties Warhol had multiple art dealers. Ivan Karp was Warhol’s first main art dealer followed by Irving Blum who exhibited the first of Warhol’s soup cans in 1962. Blum was particularly important because he kept all the Campbell Soup Cans together, which was a major selling point years later. Another known art dealer who helped Warhol promote his work was Eleanor Ward of the Stable Gallery. In 1962 Warhol showed *Marilyn Diptych*, *Green Coke Cola Bottles* and *Campbell Soup Cans* at the Stable Gallery. This exhibition brought even more publicity to Warhol’s name. The exhibition gained the attention of the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Smith, P. (1986). *Andy warhol's art and films*. (p. 87). Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press.

respected art magazine, *Art International*, wrote that Warhol was “spectacular.”¹⁷ After a financial disagreement, in which Warhol felt he was being cheated, Warhol switched to Leo Castelli. Castelli, at the time had been working with other well known Pop artists such as Lichtenstein and Rauschenberg. Richard Polsky remarked that this switch represented Warhol “taking his place at the banquet table with his idols.”¹⁸

Unquestionably, Castelli was a powerful dealer in the art business. Throughout the mid-sixties Warhol created pieces and “supplied [them] to Leo Castelli to satisfy demand after having become a businessman artist.”¹⁹ However, it is important to note that even though there is a correlation between Warhol’s success and his change of dealers this is not necessarily the single most important cause of his success.

Another factor which made Warhol’s works marketable was his ability and willingness to adapt to meet his buyer’s wishes. For instance, Warhol stopped using his dripping technique as the art world began to transition into the cleaner, cut world of Pop Art. The idea to not drip originally came from Ivan Karp. Karp felt that buyers wanted to transition out of Abstract Expression, which relied on this technique. Another way in which Warhol accommodated his buyers was through the production of numerous copies of the same picture with variations. His images of Marilyn Monroe differed in color and number of repetitions. These variations allowed the consumer to pick whichever portrait they most desired of Marilyn. Buyers wanted to be a part of the “enormous amount of

¹⁷ Comenas, G. (2011). *Andy warhol's first ny pop gallery exhibition*. Retrieved from <http://www.warholstars.org/warhol1/13stable.html>.

¹⁸ Polsky, R. (2011). *The Art Prophets*. (p. 16). New York: Other Press New York.

¹⁹ De Duve, Thierry. (1989). "Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected." *October* no. 48: 3. *Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File*.

press coverage that it [the Marilyn images] generated.”²⁰ Some of the wealthy, such as Lita Hornick, agreed to pay eight thousand dollars for one of Warhol’s famous silk screened Marilyn’s.²¹ It was evident that Warhol accommodated his buyers by concentrating on the current celebrity culture.

Through self promotion Andy Warhol marketed himself, which directly contributed to the success of his sixties works. He was called a “shrewd marketer, his [Warhol’s] public image designed for maximum impact and appeal.”²²

Unquestionably, Warhol’s odd appearance attracted the public’s attention. His silver-grey hair wig and lack of pigment in his skin were as unique as the images he created within the Factory. Warhol’s distinct image remained in the minds of many. Society was easily able to connect artist to the images. Also, he purposely gave short, yet ambiguous answers to reporter’s questions. This heightened his mysterious aura, which amplified his publicity. As a result the public became interested in Warhol as both a person and an artist. Experts such as Jennifer Dyer suggest that art observers see these works “through his powerful public persona.”²³ This persona was exclusive to Warhol. Lichtenstein, Oldenburg and Rauschenberg had distinctive art styles, but they all had relatively normal

²⁰ Adams, Ruth. (2004). "Idol Curiosity: Andy Warhol and the Art of Secular Iconography." *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal Of The Institute For The Study Of Christianity & Sexuality* 10, no. 2: 90-98

²¹ Watson, S. (2003). *Factory made: Warhol and the sixties*. (1 ed., p. 368). New York: Pantheon Books.

²² Schroeder, J. (1997). Andy warhol: Consumer researcher. *Association for Consumer Research*, 24, 476-482.

²³ Dyer, J. (2004). The metaphysics of the mundane: Understanding andy warhol's serial imagery. *Artibus et Historiae* , 25(49), 33-47.

personas. They did not promote themselves as they did their work. Self promotion for Warhol gave the edge he needed.

Warhol's marketing abilities played a significant role in his success as an artist. The factors analyzed such as his silk screening technique, his choice of known subjects, his willingness to adapt his work, his self promotion, and his connection to art dealers are all important. However, these marketable factors are not equal in importance. Some factors, particularly his choice of subjects, were more pivotal than others. Well known subjects had the ability to connect to the general public as a whole. In contrast, Warhol's willingness to adapt his work for his buyers, although effective on a small scale, did not have that large of an impact overall. Many of Warhol's marketable factors are weak by themselves, but strengthened when together. For instance, take silk screening. Silk screening has a unique medium and allowed Warhol to mass produce art. However, without the addition of well known subjects silk screening would not have been as powerful of a factor. Likewise, self promotion added to this combination, by promoting Warhol, as well as his work. This selection of factors (use of silk screening, choice of well known subjects and self promotion) together gave Warhol an incredible advantage.

Although Warhol's willingness to adapt his work and connect to art dealers did not have the same effect as the above combination, they should be taken into account. This lack of effect is due the lack of exclusiveness as seen with other factors. All Pop Artists, not just Warhol, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg and Rauschenberg, accommodated their works to their buyers. They had to make these alterations in order to keep the consumer happy, and maintain profits. Similarly, Warhol's connections to art dealers were not special cases. The art dealers Warhol associated himself were used by his competitors.

Ivan Karp, Eleanor Ward, Irving Blum and Leo Castilli all had worked with the artists as famous as Warhol. These factors exhibited considerably less significance in comparison.

Although many marketable factors allowed Warhol to be as successful as Lichtenstein, Oldenburg and Rauschenberg in the sixties it was Warhol's silk screening technique, self promotion and well known subjects which were the most important. Silk screening appealed to the public's attraction to technology and was a more efficient means of production for Warhol. Furthermore, this silk screening technique was strengthened by well known subjects such as commonly purchased consumer goods as well as celebrities. Other factors, which contributed to his success but did not play as significant of a role, were his willingness to adapt his work and his connection to art dealers. Undeniably, this Prince of Pop was a star business man in addition to being a one-of-a-kind-artist.

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