From Pop to Popism: products of time

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Warhol's obsession with time is ambivalent: he tries to make it pass as fast as possible with work and endless triviality and, at the same time, with a kind of amused compulsiveness, to hold onto it at all costs, as if it could be produced and made into something. Into countless things, here and now, in spatial succession. The assembly-line paintings, the films turned out daily and often shown at the slow speed of silents, the photos and Polaroids that came to make up a bottomless archive, tape recordings sometimes transcribed, sometimes put into storage and forgotten, and the dozens and dozens of boxes—the Time Capsules—he filled with all sorts of stuff including letters, invitations, press cuttings and other ephemera.[1] He had to be able to contain what took place, to make himself master of the dreamlike course of events in Manhattan and inside the silver walls of the Factory. He had to encapsulate time, as if his art depended on it. And anyway, life was worth looking back on... Unless it was ultimately only to be looked back on in the clarity of its shadows. "I knew," he wrote, "we'd never screen it in this long way again, so it was like life, our lives, flashing in front of us—it would just go by once and we'd never see it again." Here we have one of his rare admissions of nostalgia, something almost totally absent from the writings.[2]

Doubtless because of the claims his indifferent, untouchable image made on him, sentimentality was out. Nor should we be hoodwinked by the effeminate postures he affected: Warhol brought an unrelentingly virile determination to exercising his rights over time. To this end writing was an appropriate tool and one which in different forms—experimental or conventional, dilated or contracted—he would use more than once. After a novel in 1968—a word for word transcription of a continuous flood of words, the outline of his philosophy in 1975, a trendy photoreportage in 1979 in which he stays in the wings the better to occupy center-stage, and the diary he had begun to keep in 1976,[3] Warhol set about writing the memoirs whose title, *POPISM: The Warhol Sixties* summed up an entire agenda and its realization.[4] Warhol was the decade personified, a one-man American epoch: he became *his* time.

Written with the indispensable Pat Hackett, this book is an odd exercise because the period it covers (1960–69) is not given the scrupulous, day-to-day documentary attention as the one that followed in the 1970s. To refresh his memory, he went to see friends and contacts of the time with his tape recorder[5] and turned the results into a compact account of the events that fueled his chronicle of the dual

coming: of Andy Warhol himself and of pop culture. Since 1950, when he had set out to conquer New York, the advertising world had been for him a matchless observatory from which he could anticipate the changes coming to a society of abundance destined, via the endless consumption of images rather than products, to egalitarian boredom. On the one hand new conventions were taking over through the influence of the media and advertising, while on the other taboos were falling like ninepins and leaving a vacuum in their place. But while the upholders of hippie culture in its various forms—slammed by Paul Morrissey on Warhol's behalf—saw a radiant new day awaiting at the end of their forced march to Freedom, Warhol saw things as a prelude to an encroaching, ever harsher nihilism. His painting is the exact, prophetic reflection of a self-satisfied world whose mindless laziness he observed as, at a single stroke, he exalted and demolished its illusions.

In the late 1950s Warhol was tirelessly telling anyone who would listen, "There's going to be a new movement and a new kind of person and you could be that person."[6] Obviously he was mainly thinking about himself. Rather than being the founder of a movement that Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg anticipated without actually breaking with the past, and which Roy Lichtenstein publicly launched before him, he meant to become its principle and embodiment. A pope who would cancel out his predecessors. Very soon Warhol was not only a professional who could have rested on his laurels, he was spending most of his time checking out the margins of New York society for clues to a swing that could come from any direction: from the theater, the movies, music or the visual arts. To be the right man in the right place at the right time he had to cover as much ground as possible, spreading himself, as he put it, rather than trying to rise to the top via High Art,[7] and mingling in circles where something new seemed most likely to crop up without warning. And collecting—relentlessly collecting information and sources, moral codes and passions, certainties and contradictions.

Warhol himself did not provide the account of the early parts of his febrile education that continued in *POPISM* until 1963, when his new studio was christened The Factory by Billy Name and became the mythical center for the New York underground; when, without his having to ask, the world came to his door. America belonged to him. No longer a simple popster among plenty of others, he became Pop's core figure: thanks to such beautiful losers as Emile De Antonio and Jack Smith, he had realized that Pop was absolutely not an esthetic confined to the narrow world of art, but a lifestyle with a lot more to it than the galleries and museums wanted to admit. Its underground component, so thoroughly domesticated in Broadway shows and—even if Warhol took care not to say so—in the painting of Lichtenstein and Rosenquist, was Pop's true leaven. For him it would have been a fatal error to forget or repress this fact and one of *POPISM*'s aims was to face up to its complexity and importance. Witness his conversation with Ivan Karp, who admits to not understanding Warhol's interest in his host of decadent hangers-on: "Your art is partly voyeuristic, which is completely legitimate, of course—you've

always liked the bizarre and the peculiar, and people at their most raw and uncovered—but it's not so much a fascination for me. I don't need to see that so much... You have a group of people around you know that's essentially destructive."[8]

Karp's point of view was that of an expert, and as an expert he was wrong: this entourage of eccentrics, so disorganized and unpremeditated that it would appear to be the product of spontaneous generation, was what Warhol fed off; and after the assassination attempt that almost cost him his life, he was afraid of losing it. "I was afraid that without the crazy, druggy people around jabbering away and doing all their insane things, I would lose my creativity. After all, they'd really been my total inspiration since '64, and I didn't know if I could make it without them." The variable geometry gang of junkies that Billy Name succeeded so well in keeping under control without the "happening" stopping for a single moment was not only a vital pool of inspiration and a distraction, it was also a cover, a diversion that allowed Warhol to plow his own furrow with jealous discretion. This meant that in the most isolated room in the Factory, with the day-for-night atmosphere he so fastidiously created, he could turn out considerable quantities of paintings which at the time seemed to suddenly appear out of nowhere, as if by magic. Work was the vital, constant value in his philosophy and the only thing he refused to turn into a public spectacle. Painting was not a mere gesture: it was the invisible, indescribable work of thought.

Far from coming to a halt, the parade became incessant and the crowd of unlike characters in search of an author—unruly superstars who would never be stars, crooks on the run from their own shadows, junkies and wackos living on borrowed time, narcissists paralyzed by their own image—never stopped growing and never became exclusive, either. The Factory parties, the shooting and screening of films, the ever more scandalous reputation the place developed, all pulled in and gelled the crowd until the media, with its mix of curiosity, enthusiasm and mistrust, generated fresh, different additions. This was a fresh secret of Warhol's success: because "in the sixties everybody got interested in everybody else,"[9] he was smart enough to foster the mix he observed with such delectation at Max's, his favorite hangout: "Max's Kansas City was the exact place where Pop Art and the pop life came together in New York in the sixties: teeny boppers and sculptors, rock stars and poets from St Mark's Place, Hollywood actors checking out what the underground actors were all about, boutique owners and models, modern ballet dancers and go-go dancers—everybody went at Max's and everything got homogenized there." The top and the bottom, the center and the margins could all get together and dissolve into each other with the help of all the available artificial aids, of all the illusions made so immediately and poisonously available by drugs and fashion.

If Pop Art and the pop lifestyle were both rooted in the same crazed imitativeness, the mix certainly didn't happen as easily as Warhol claimed. From the Underground to the monster public parades and the pages of the magazines, from the lower depths of homosexual culture to the cult of high-priced superficiality, the

move was by no means automatic; and Warhol the voyeur delighted in the conflicts between people who had managed to identify their interests and their role, and others who had everything to lose—their money and/or their reputation. Between Ondine, a marvelous talking machine in the remorseless grip of amphetamines and Edie Sedgwick, the poor little rich girl with a mind increasingly addled by her self-created images of herself and the pitiless mirror of the camera, there was a gulf—and not just a social one—that not even drugs could bridge. Between that authentic woman of the world Susan Bottomly and timid Candy Darling, the transvestite icon of a world in search of itself, there was at best only a surface relationship, an interplay of appearances and fleeting reflections. The extremes varied as the situation changed in all sorts of unexpected ways, but someone was always desperately trying to get the upper hand on someone else. The Factory was simultaneously paradise, purgatory and hell, where the angels were more often fallen than triumphant and ended up dying a thousand interminable deaths. Being cured was a delusion: by the time Ondine finally got off drugs he was no more than a shadow of himself, a boring specter reduced to inconsequential chitchat.

Less systematically than the *Diary*, but with more heightened contrasts, *POPISM* is, to borrow the title of Brett Easton Ellis's novel,[10] a full-time *glamorama*. Just as the sovereign, omniscient novelist allocates characters and plot, Warhol organized his field of vision and handled all the deviations and excesses in masterly fashion. Unlike the novelist, he was there in person in the midst of the crowd; and yet, like the novelist, he was alone. "A lot of people thought that it was me every one at the Factory was hanging around, that I was some kind of big attraction that everyone wanted came to see, but that's exactly backward: it was me who was hanging around everyone. I just paid the rent, and the crowds came simply because the door was open. People weren't particularly interested in seeing me, they were interested in seeing each other. They came to see who came."[11] Warhol's loneliness, all the more fundamental and pronounced for being hidden behind jokey masks, automatically put him at the center of things. And as he had total control of the charms so many of them fell victim to—drugs, success, money, image—he remained elusive even for those who considered themselves closest to him. The former denizens of the Factory vie with each other in recounting what a gifted manipulator he was, with the films as one of his main instruments; sometimes they angrily assert that his perverseness pushed them towards self-destruction. But they were all the more easily duped by him in that they thought they themselves could use him while continuing to ignore his real aims and his ambition as a painter of modern life. As long as the images stay in place, he doubtless thought to himself, the world can continue or collapse as it wants.

In Warhol's world as in his oeuvre, death is omnipresent, and in *POPISM* it constitutes the inevitable negative backdrop for the images. This lurking threat ultimately prevailed in the fragile destinies of, among others, Freddy Herko, Eric Emerson, Edie Sedgwick and Andrea Feldman. Herko's death, which Warhol

relates on three different occasions, was the most spectacular and the most revealing. Vibrant with an artificial energy that stripped him of his art and his own personality, this talented dancer was gradually paralyzed by his planned suicide, which he finally carried out in a swan dive from a fifth-story window, to the strains of the Sanctus from Mozart's *Coronation Mass*. If this macabre mise en scène awed Warhol to the point of saying he regretted not having been able to film it, it was because Herko brought all the elegance madness is sometimes capable of to actually going through the looking-glass so many of those around him collided with. There was nothing behind the mirror, Warhol never stopped repeating, nothing beneath the surface of things: Herko was no more than an abstract image on the sidewalk a few feet down.

Warhol himself came close to death three times. The first time subliminally, when Dorothy Podber got into the Factory with a revolver and shot holes in four *Marilyn* pictures before leaving with no further comment. The next time round was comical: a junkie out to extort a few dollars played Russian roulette—one empty chamber, one bullet in the ceiling—and almost annihilated Warhol's image by plunking a ridiculous plastic straw hat on his head. The third time could have been the last, and was in a tragic vein. Valerie Solanas was an earnest young woman who was not about to settle for a purely symbolic killing. With an unwavering hand she fired four times and did not miss her target. The dead Warhol immediately became a cult figure, except that no, it was like a film, a film he was never to make and whose plot he incredulously analyzed during his convalescence: "[The doctors] brought me back from the dead - literally, because I'm told that at one point I was gone. For days and days afterward, I wasn't sure if I *was* back. I felt dead. I kept thinking, "I'm really dead. This is what it's like to be dead—you think you're alive, but you're dead. I just *think* I'm lying here in a hospital.'" This was a crucial experience, as much in its effect on Warhol's daily life—from then on he had a bodyguard with him at all times—as on the way things were organized at the Factory, where visitors were now screened, and above all in terms of the shock wave that reverberated through the rest of his oeuvre. In particular the monumental series *Shadows*, painted ten years after the assassination attempt, can be seen as a commemoration of this near-transit to the other side of the void.

Thus, the death and resurrection of Warhol-Lazarus left a further mark on the shift from Pop to Popism, from a carefree, profligate world where in theory anything was possible, to a world designed to fit with ever stricter rules and an economy in which spectacle—the industry of compulsory identification—became a primary financial resource. History had given its verdict and for most of the Warhol entourage, as for many of the artists who would attempt laborious copies of some of its aspects, the only thing to do was relive it at best they could. Warhol himself had a decisive advantage over them: emerging from hospital weakened but radiant, he had taken on a mythical aura. In undertaking a memoir, he set out to formalize the past he had been involved in a way that would expunge its ups and

downs and defuse the criticisms still being aimed at him. The chosen form, which he succeeded in extracting as dramatically as possible from a jumble of circumstances, enabled him to look back over what had been, appropriate what had disappeared and idealize what would (never) be again. These memoirs were obviously not intended to tell the truth, but rather to serve the Warhol mythology. And quite rightly he used all possible means to achieve his ends: embellishments, additions, fact-bending, outright distortion and so on. His memoirs confuse the issue, ignoring or reversing the rankings of historical judgment even as they lead readers off the track. But they use one sure means of giving the myth a solid foundation: they purely and simply leave out what is seen as secondary or compromising, and declare null and void anything that fails to fit with this version of things.

The force of his omissions cannot be gauged independently of the feeling of abundance generated by the proliferation of anecdotes and revealing, unlikely, entertaining detail. As painter and filmmaker Warhol knew better than anybody how productive the relationship could be between image-proliferation and the abrupt framings provided by painting and the camera. The chronological structure of *Popism* automatically excludes his training years, but Warhol also deliberately vetoes his private life, to which he never admitted more than a few people. Cultivating the legend of his virginity, he opts for saying nothing of his love life: he reduces his lovers—Danny Williams, Rod La Rod, Jed Johnson—to mere extras or else purely and simply forgets them, as in the case even of Philip Fagan, whom he had filmed every day for more than three months.[12] He brought equal discretion to the question of his mother, living as a recluse in the basement of a private town house, but clearly playing a vital part in the very strict, self-imposed economy of his life.

Nor does the book say anything of the importance of advertising work in the financial balance of Andy Warhol Enterprises Inc. until 1964, even though this gave him the means of keeping the Factory financially afloat and standing up to the pressures of the new career he had begun at the age of thirty-two. His relationships with the art world, and Leo Castelli in particular, can be largely put down to this independence, which he had the prudence—and the guts, given the hostility of his peers—to ensure. Whatever the cost, it was also this that enabled him to be—and appear to be—detached, and to cast an amused eye on the rivalries that can so often become alienating. Other artists are rarely mentioned, except in a purely anecdotal vein, as if their painting was no more than a foil for his own. And indeed, history seems to have proved him right on this point.

Even so, Warhol speaks very little of the crucial issue, his own painting, whose "invention" is covered in a few pages early in the book. He had to choose between two styles, he says: one an extension of the macho culture of Abstract Expressionism, the other an overt break with the past. As if he had given the matter no thought himself—as if ideas and decision were mere froth on the surface of the real business of work—the matter was expeditiously settled by Emile De Antonio

and Ivan Karp. Of his technical and stylistic gropings of 1960–61, not a word. Of his thousands of drawings, not a word. And concerning his impressive output of paintings in the period 1960–69—2110 entries in the three copious volumes of the catalogue raisonné—we find only a few scattered illusions that convey nothing of the ceaseless work of which they were the fruit. Is he saying that the painting was of no importance? That it was just the marginal activity he declared himself pleased to give up in 1965? That it had been no more than a transitory occupation for someone burning to become an accomplished filmmaker? Just some fun on the side whose results were destined to be put away in a closet?[13]

Obviously not. The cinema, which constantly crops up here, is a screen for the painting, a screen that both conceals and protects. On the one hand the elegant aristocrat pose brought with it the famous adage: think of it always, speak of it never. And it was painting he was thinking about as he manipulated, filmed of photographed his entourage, it was painting that all his activities were aimed at, so that, as he would say to Glenn O'Brien, he was working even when he wasn't working.[14] And on the other hand this put-down of painting underlies that major axiom which is far from a mere esthetic principle: "I'd like to be a machine." Painting and art in general have nothing to do with self-expression: a painting is a purely mechanical product, the outcome of incessant friction between individuals, their projections and their deaths, of an operation of detachment from a life and circumstances which, nonetheless, he continued to work at passionately.[15] What point is there in talking about machines? They are no more than the myth's blind spot.

Translation from the French:
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et Pat Hackett, *Popisme*,
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1 Warhol developed the habit of filling these boxes in 1974, when the Factory moved from 33 Union Square to 860 Broadway. **2** "I really hate nostalgia, though, so deep down I hope they get lost and I never have to look at them again [...] But my other outlook is that I really want to save things so they can be used again someday." *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, p.145. **3** In order *a: a novel*, New York, Grove Press, 1968; *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, *op. cit.*; *Andy Warhol's Exposures*, New York, Andy Warhol Books/Grosset & Dunlap, 1979; and *The Andy Warhol Diaries* edited by Pat Hackett, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989. He published two further books, *America*, New York, Harper & Row, 1985, and (with Pat Hackett) *Andy Warhol's Party Book*, New York, Crown, 1988. **4** According to the diary entry for 30 September 1977, an initial version of *POPISM* was already with Steve Aronson, who found the manuscript "fascinating because it's an era that hasn't been portrayed yet" and took on the job of editing it. On 12 August 1979 Warhol noted, "I took the manuscript of *POPISM* with me to read, and ended up working all day, then I called P. H. [Pat Hackett] to talk to him about it." The book was finally published in 1980. **5** See the interview with Emile de Antonio, in Patrick S. Smith, *Andy Warhol's Art and Films*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1981, p. 295. **6** Victor Bockris, *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol*, New York, Bantam, 1989, London, The Fourth Estate, 1998, p. 135. **7** "My style was to spread out, anyway, rather than move up. To me, the ladder of success was much more sideways than verticall.", *Popism*, p. 263. **8** See p. 83. In *Chelsea Girls*, "Pope" Ondine says as he prepares to hear confessions, "My parishioners are homosexuals, perverts of all kinds, transvestites, thieves, all sorts of crooks, the scum of society." See David Bourdon, *Andy Warhol*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1989, tr. Jeanne Bouniort, Paris, Flammarion, 1995, p. 247 [retranslated from the French by John Tittensor]. **9** *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, p. 25. **10** *Glamorama*, which owes a considerable debt to Warhol, might be considered the ultimate epilogue on the "Pop-ist" culture that swept New York. Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1998. **11** Page 74. **12** Callie Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests, The Films of Andy Warhol, Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, New York, Abrams, 2006. **13** See his interview with Edward Lucie-Smith in Kenneth Goldsmith(ed.), *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Collected Andy Warhol Interviews*, Carrol & Graf, 2004. **14** "I like to work when I'm not working—do something that may not be considered work, but to me it's work." Kenneth Goldsmith, op. cit. **15** "About how much time do you spend on your painting?" "No time..." Warhol to Joseph Freedman in 1965, Ibid.