

## **Warhol's *Warhol***

Wayne Koestenbaum. *Andy Warhol*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001. Pp. 224. \$21.95.

Andy Warhol may have been the world's most famous living artist in the late 1960s; today his influence is more ubiquitous than his postage stamp. Critic Michael Kimmelman recently compared a photographer's work to Warhol's: "He adopts a deadpan tone, as if just recording what he sees, without comment, the way Warhol painted soup cans, down to Warhol's method of repeating an image over and over with minor variations so that we compare the little differences while noting the larger patterns that define our world."<sup>1</sup> In 2003, Warhol's early works are hot properties worth millions, from the pink electric chair in the *Disasters* series to the shoes he created for I. Miller. His early curvilinear close-ups of male genitals are the first of their kind -- sensitive and vulnerable, recalling Matisse's curvilinear odalisques rather than Rodin's obsessed late drawings of female genitals. The artist's photographs, films, paintings, and drawings in major collections and in the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh have changed the ways we look at people, things, and ideas. This review of Wayne Koestenbaum's biography *Warhol* will consider three points of view: Arthur Danto's, Koestenbaum's, and the reviewer's.

The artist was scheduled to be on the cover of *Time* magazine in June, 1968 after he was shot by an unbalanced groupie. The next day Robert Kennedy was shot; the times resounded with **political assassination, a remarkably popular form of domestic terrorism in the 1960s**. Warhol recovered, living another 19 years, but this incident deeply affected both his person and persona. Richard Avedon's photographs of Warhol's healing wounds memorialized a deep hole between the large gashes over his stomach and abdomen. Crowds buzzed around this image at Avedon's recent Metropolitan Museum exhibition, which also featured a room-length photo of regulars at the Factory, the loft where Warhol worked with poet Gerald Malanga and business manager Fred Hughes. Warhol also created *Interview* magazine, coined the word "superstar," and enjoyed socializing with Jackie Kennedy, Lee Radizwell, Mick Jagger, students, and the public. Despite celebrity, Warhol was driven to make art. He also collected curious things and attended church each Sunday.

During this period, Arthur Danto, Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, began reviewing art for *The Nation*. In one essay collection, Danto distinguished between "living in history" by literally changing one's era and using existing ideas to make "mere art." He argued that Warhol's art had been separated from history because, roughly stated, it is: 1)

a repetition of a real object that is not art (i.e., the Brillo Box or Campbell's soup can), 2) stripped of its former meaning, 3) meant to be an image for contemplation, and 4) embodies its own philosophy. Danto contended:

Bitter as the truth may be to those who dismissed him as a shallow opportunist and glamour fiend, the greatest contribution to this history was made by Andy Warhol, to my mind the nearest thing to a philosophical genius the history of art has produced...<sup>2</sup>

Warhol's series *The Last Supper* (1985 – 1986) was a huge success when 60 of about 100 works were shown in Milan in 1987, but it was "mere art" to Danto. Warhol's multiple heads of Christ and modified views of *The Last Supper* are intended to **converse** with da Vinci's masterpiece—arguably the most widely recognized work of Christian art.<sup>3</sup> Individually and collectively, Warhol's images address the nature of Christ in relation to spiritual practices today -- when many people feel "betrayed" by practices in daily life. This was Warhol's point: we are *all* closer to being like Christ. By combining history, his life story, and contemporary culture, he was moving from a personal to a universally-recognized truth. Both larger and smaller than da Vinci's fresco [420 x 910 cm.] in Milan, Warhol's series juxtaposed new and old signs of betrayal, compassion and love. His oeuvre already consisted of *tête à tête* conversations with everything from endangered animals to Superstars. He had gone to the Old Master for one last *Interview*.

Appropriately, Warhol is the first artist since Leonardo da Vinci to be featured in the Penguin Lives Series, and this should be an honor. Regrettably, Wayne Koestenbaum fails to make any connection between Warhol and da Vinci and barely mentions *The Last Supper* in his text *Warhol*. Instead, Koestenbaum – a poet, **member of the creative writing faculty at CCNY** and author of *Jackie Under My Skin: Interpreting an Icon* – has done his best to create an *auto-da-fé* – the burning of a heretic. From the opening quote by Genet that derides the buzz of fame, to the first page where he characterizes Warhol as a bag lady, to the last page where he claims that Warhol's "deathless didactic" work ethic left "no time...for love," Koestenbaum's *Warhol* is a dark profile. It glances over the artist's early years, his rise to fame, *Interview* magazine, and most **of his art**. **[deletion]**

Koestenbaum disparages the amount of work Warhol produced:

He left us too many hypotheses, too many images. Only a maniac or a masochist will want to absorb them all. His world is claustrophobically jam-packed – with people, artworks, collectibles, junk...Compared with Warhol, the other exhausting

modern figures (Picasso, Stein, Proust) are manicured miniaturists. (2)

Was Warhol's art equal to that of Picasso, Stein, Proust? Koestenbaum doesn't say.

**In the main, the book is a chronological biographical account. Instead of considering Danto's brief, Koestenbaum looks at the same Brillo boxes as sex toys:**

That same spring of 1964, Warhol exhibited his most audacious set of sculptures – wooden boxes silk-screened to resemble grocery cartons of Brillo pads, Heinz Ketchup, Campbell's tomato juice, Kellogg's corn flakes...these boxes...are vehicles for suggestive words...Like Warhol's comic strip heroes, the boxes caricature masculinity: giant size, largest!...He may be suggesting that manhood is a loud fib; masculinity, if reduced to an abstract form, is empty and null as a *box*, slang for female genitals (a fact that Miss Warhol, devoted to the words *pussy* and *beaver*, would not have overlooked.) Masculinity, as a system, fails, just as ketchup rarely pours...

These boxes without openings seem simulacra to Andy's body – a queer body that may want to be entered or to enter, but that offers ... no real opening... (108-110)

**Why is Koestenbaum fixated on Warhol's body? And fixated in a way that is not helpful to understanding Warhol's art or his homosexuality?**

**[deletion of paragraph]**

Koestenbaum's controlling images show Andy "gluing" on his silver wig and Andy the voyeur making movies. The films, including *Chelsea Girls*, *San Diego Surf*, *Lonesome Cowboys*, and *Blow Job* were notable for Warhol's odd uses of the hand-held camera; his wandering, out-of-focus, or lingering shots; and for sexual implication rather than overt action. *Four Stars* is two 24-hour-long films superimposed on each other. After discussing the unusually explicit sexuality in *Blue Movie*, Koestenbaum concludes: "He may have refused conventional sexual and social arrangements, but he also believed that homosexuality was a 'problem' and that straight men were real men...I believe that *Blue Movie* – his summa, his key to all mythologies – may have proved decisively to him that he was not a real man" (155). Koestenbaum always reduces art to the artist's sexuality or lack thereof. Perhaps Warhol saw an implicit metaphor (that could be applicable to both gay and straight sex) that Koestenbaum has missed.

The concluding chapter, "After," treats Warhol's life after the shooting as an anticlimax. For Koestenbaum, Warhol's *Last Supper* is pathetic: "Andy kidded himself that he was in Christ's position: he, too, wanted to disappear while remaining a static image, to make his eroded body an

emblem...Andy's *Last Suppers* are predicitive (*sic*) accounts of his own upcoming death as well as paranoid portraits of Factory behavior..." (197). Warhol died on February 22, 1987.

**As with all the Penguin Lives Series books, *Warhol* has no footnotes.**

Where is Warhol's *Warhol*, the true story of a very unconventional gay guy driven to make art? Because Warhol was self-effacing, we may never know. Koestenbaum largely disregards Warhol's humor and his array of portraits, instead inventing an ugly duckling unconnected to anything or anyone. This unintentionally suggests that Warhol developed a Buddha nature – a notion that puts his life in a different light. A thematic investigation of Warhol in the spring 2003 *CAA Art Journal* discusses Warhol's queer images, his "whiteness," and his film sirens. To further complicate our understanding, Warhol's use of grids, repetition, distorted images and signs has been reduced and prettified by the next generation of artists.

One key to Warhol is his syntactic manipulation of the vocabulary of advertising art into a radical new language. As a brief example of the original inscapes behind the artist's panorama of images, Warhol's giant portraits of Chairman Mao's head demonstrate his gift for investing a Chinese icon with alternative readings. His *Mao* at the Art Institute of Chicago is as inscrutable as Buddha, supporting workers everywhere. Yet each *Mao* has its own hues and mood. Warhol revolutionized art, in part, by confronting the propaganda of daily life.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Kimmelman, "Flies in Amber Caught at 1/250<sup>th</sup> of a Second: Placing someone who denies he's a photographer somewhere between Walker Evans and Warhol," *The New York Times*: 27 Oct., 2002: 18SR.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Danto, *Encounters & Reflections* (New York: Farrar Straus, 1986), p. 293. Warhol's art is a potent metaphor in Danto's later essay collection *Beyond the Brillo Box* (Farrar Straus 1992).

<sup>3</sup> See *Andy Warhol: The Last Supper* (Munich: Cantz Verlag, 1988).

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