

This ability of the balloon to shift its shape, to change, was very pleasing, especially to people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned, persons to whom change, although desired was not available. The balloon, for the twenty-two days of its existence, offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of the precise, rectangular pathways under our feet. The amount of specialized training currently needed, and the consequent desirability of long-term commitments, has been occasioned by the steadily growing importance of complex machinery, in virtually all kinds of operations; as this tendency increases, more and more people will turn, in bewildered inadequacy, to solutions for which the balloon may stand as a prototype, or 'rough draft'.

-Donald Barthelme, *The Balloon*

This passage is from Donald Barthelme's postmodern short story, *The Balloon*. In the story citizens contemplate the meaning and purpose of a large, enigmatic balloon hanging over their heads in New York City. The balloon changes the way citizens live their lives; a change in perspective is felt throughout the city. Upon hearing this one cannot help but think of Andy Warhol, and how his oeuvre can be viewed in a similar

light. The purpose of this paper is to make clear these parallels by showing that the exhibition of Warhol's "Brillo Boxes" in 1964 was a paradigm shifting moment in arts and culture that made it possible for anything to be art, and anyone an artist. In doing this, the meaning and philosophical importance of the "Brillo Box" will be discussed.

The logical starting point for such a discussion is to examine what exactly "Brillo Box" is. The Brillo company sells a product called Brillo Pads that are used for cleaning pots and pans. In the 1960s these soap pads came in large white cardboard boxes covered with colourful writing that said " 24 GIANT PKGS. New! Brillo Soap pads with rust resistor, shines aluminum fast" (Danto, Andy Warhol, 63). It is interesting to note that the man who designed the boxes for the company, James Harvey, was an abstract expressionist painter who designed packages for companies in his spare time (or vice versa)(Danto, Andy Warhol, 64). In 1964, Andy Warhol had a show where he displayed sculptures he made of the boxes that look like exact copies. The naked eye wouldn't be able to tell the difference between Andy's and the original (Danto, After the End of Art, 35). One difference worth mentioning is that Warhol's sculptures are made of wood instead of cardboard (Danto, Andy Warhol, 53).

Warhol's "Brillo Boxes" were subject to controversy from the very start, as the designer of the original Brillo Box, James Harvey, had to 'choke back' an impulse to start a lawsuit against Warhol for stealing his idea. Harvey didn't attempt to press charges because he gave up the rights to his work to the Brillo Manufacturing Company; the company was getting free publicity from the popularity of Warhol's work, so they were quite content and wouldn't press charges. Time Magazine even ran an article titled *Boxing Match* that appeared in May of 1964 that documented the situation

(Golec, 5). Another controversy occurred one year later when an art dealer tried to bring a collection of “Brillo Boxes” into Canada for a showing; at customs the artworks were not considered to be art, but rather merchandise. Instead of being let in duty free, a tariff of \$4000 was charged (Danto, Andy Warhol, 68). During this period Warhol did sculptures of many other products, for example, Heinz Tomato Ketchup, Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, and Mott’s Apple Juice (Danto, Andy Warhol, 56). None of these pieces achieved as much fame as the “Brillo Boxes” did.

In *The Balloon*, the citizens of New York are perplexed by the presence of the balloon; Barthelme writes that “There were reactions. Some people found the balloon ‘interesting’ (Barthelme, 46). Different groups of people all have different attitudes towards the balloon; children play games on it, city officials feel threatened by the unknown, some see it as a reward and others a burden. Barthelme continues to say that “There was a certain amount of initial argumentation about the ‘meaning’ of the balloon; this subsided, because we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena. It was agreed upon that the meaning of the balloon could never be known absolutely” (Barthelme, 47). This screams postmodernism. The talk of not insisting on meanings can be seen as a consequence of Nietzsche’s famous claim that God is Dead: human kind reaching the point where they don’t believe in *capital-t-truth* anymore. Barthelme has certainly given the situation a grave nihilistic tone. This is an attitude that often gets associated with Andy Warhol.

Andy’s artwork is often just a depiction of an everyday object and usually nothing more, so art critics are often perplexed by the meaning of the piece and there is a wide

spectrum of responses. Critics called him “nothingness himself” (Andy Warhol, 7) and say that “Values, feelings, seemed not to exist for Warhol. He registered race riots, suicides, airplane crashes, the atomic bomb, the electric chair with the same cool detachment that he brought to registering soup cans, revolvers, flowers and Brillo boxes” (Ruhrberg, 323).

Danto refers to Warhol as a Socrates-esque character, always testing definitions for art, pushing the boundaries and challenging our views of what art can be (Danto, Andy Warhol, 79). I find this comparison quite interesting and appropriate because Socrates was a ‘midwife for ideas’, he claimed to have no knowledge of his own but he assisted others in reaching a conclusion; this is most apparent in Plato’s earlier dialogues (Annas, 2). Socrates’ statement about having no knowledge comes to mind in many of Warhol’s interviews. For example, Andy says “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of all of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it” (Danto, Andy Warhol, 145). Barthelme has a similar opinion on his work. As Trachtenberg puts it, “Barthelme has explicitly disclaimed any interest in the kind a psychological study that would mean going beneath the surface of his characters” (Trachtenberg, 34). Barthelme stresses the importance of not knowing about the subject matter, rather than approaching it with a ‘Tolstoyan understanding’ (Trachtenberg, 38) which keeps in line with Andy’s maxim: *it’s all on the surface, baby*.

Of course, it is thoroughly absurd to accept Andy’s statement literally. There is much more meaning than appears on the surface, even when the work in question is an apparently meaningless object like “Brillo Box”. In *After the End of Art*, Danto quotes

T.S. Elliot from his essay, *Traditional and Individual Talent*: “ No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His signification, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, you must set him, for contrast and comparison among the dead” (Danto, *After the End of Art*, 164). When we are judging the “Brillo Box”, we can’t think of it as a lonely object in a vacuum and judge it solely on its appearance. We should instead recognize that it is dependent on everything that has ever happened, everywhere on the planet. Danto does this when discussing monochromatic art, he says that works like Malevich’s “Black Square” (1915) are “dense with meaning” (Danto, *After the End of Art*, 156) and that two squares of the same colour have “very different stylistic attributes” (Danto, *After the End of Art*, 167). Danto says this because of the historical importance of the works. The paintings aren’t admired for their blackness, but rather their place in history.

We will now briefly discuss why Arthur Danto takes the “Brillo Box” to be such an important piece of philosophy, why it signifies *the end of art*. To do this we first need to discuss the Age of Manifestos. According to Danto, this movement in art started in the beginning of the twentieth century. “The point about the Age of Manifestos is that it brought what it took to be philosophy into the heart of artistic production” (Danto, *After the End of Art*, 36). Each movement within the Age of Manifestos - Dadaism, Cubism, Constructivism, Surrealism etc. - were “driven by a perception of the philosophical truth of art” (Danto, *After the End of Art*, 28). For example, Danto quotes Picasso as saying that “the Cubists abandoned colour, emotion, sensation, and everything that had been introduced into painting the impressionists” (Danto, *After the End of Art*, 28).

Warhol's facsimile boxes end the Age of Manifestos because of the questions it raised, mainly: why is this art? and If we accept that "Brillo Boxes" are art, then what isn't art? as well as the various questions stemming from the intellectual property dispute between Warhol and Harvey. Danto says that "one could not any longer understand the difference between art and reality in purely visual terms" (Danto, *After the End of Art*, 125). This is apparent since Andy's sculptures look identical to the boxes sold in grocery stores. Danto continues that thought by saying "that there is no special way a work of art has to be" (Danto, *After the End of Art*, 125). There is no way to distinguish art from non-art, no set of criteria to follow. So the distinction is rather arbitrary. Because of this, all previous work in the philosophy of art becomes obsolete (Danto, *After the End of Art*, 125).

Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp is often compared to Warhol because Duchamp's sculpture "Fountain" (1917) is cited as the first piece of 'readymade art' (Danto, *Andy Warhol*, 51). Why is it the case that Warhol's "Brillo Boxes" cause *the end of art* and not Duchamp's urinal? I think this is because the "Brillo Boxes" were subject to more of an intellectual property controversy à la James Harvey. Don't get me wrong, Duchamp and the entire Dadaist movement are controversial, but for entirely different reasons. Duchamp's controversy stems from his desire to "liberate art from having to please the eye" (Danto, *Andy Warhol*, 56). Duchamp's urinal is plain white porcelain, a completely generic object. Unlike with Harvey's case, the person who created the original urinal and the company that manufactured it would have no way of knowing that Duchamp was showing their urinal specifically, so there are no intellectual property issues. This minute difference between "Brillo Box" and "Fountain" is enough

to spark the end of art because Andy's sculpture makes us think more philosophically about art in that respect.

The citizens of New York City in Barthelme's story are inspired by the random fluctuations balloon. Barthelme writes that because of the randomness of the balloon and its contrast to the rigidity of the city, "more and more people will turn, in bewildered inadequacy, to solutions for which the balloon may stand as a prototype, or 'rough draft'" (Barthelme, 50-51). Andy Warhol's "Brillo Box" had a similar effect on not just New York City but the entire world. As mentioned earlier, after Warhol there is no distinction between art and non-art, so anything goes; everything is art and everyone is an artist. In *the \$12 Million Stuffed Shark*, Don Thompson brings up something rather interesting. While discussing subsidies for artists he cites a belief of Robert Storr's: that the "government should offer a living wage stipend to **all** who say they want to create art, a guaranteed annual income that rewards effort rather than output" (Thompson, 180). I think the bolded word in that assertion makes the statement important. It doesn't exclude anyone or anything, no degrees, experience or talent is required. Anything made would be art. Despite the fact that this system isn't in practice, I think that this idea is a testament to Warhol's legacy. Such an idea is possible only after 1964. Also in the spirit of artistic freedom, in an interview with Art News, Andy says "How can you say one style is better than another? You ought to be able to be an Abstract-Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling you've given up something" (Warhol and Swenson).

At first, the theme of Andy's entire oeuvre seems to be a celebration of capitalism, consumerism, and utilitarianism. This is apparent when Warhol says things like:

What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner of the street is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it (Andy Warhol, 100-101).

The most beautiful thing in Tokyo is McDonald's.

The most beautiful thing in Stockholm is McDonald's.

The most beautiful thing in Florence is McDonald's.

Peking and Moscow don't have anything beautiful yet (Andy Warhol, 71).

Here Warhol seems to advocate capitalism. He says that big brand names are the best because they are the most popular and available to everyone. This theme is also evident in his art, by presenting mundane consumer products, like "Brillo Boxes", Warhol is putting the items on a pedestal. Coke and McDonald's are typical,

normalizing, uncontroversial products that have mass appeal. It makes the most number the people the happiest, unlike a specialty drink that has a narrower appeal, Warhol seems to be defending the idea that this makes them better. This concept is something he wants his art to capture. This can be seen when he says “ This talk of bluejeans was making me very jealous. Of Levi and Strauss. I wish I could invent something like bluejeans. Something to be remembered for. Something mass” (Warhol, 13).

To stop here and say that pieces like “Brillo Box” are only about capitalism is a bit too easy. To appreciate the real meaning, we need to first unpack some of Andy's psychological issues. In the 50s before his art world success “he was the best known, highest-paid fashion illustrator in New York, making upwards of \$100,000 a year” (Bockris, 11). During this time Andy was in love with a man named Charles Lisanby. The two were good friends but had an asymmetric relationship. “Andy was so in love with Charles that their love was difficult to sustain” (Bockris, 11), whereas “Charles adored Andy but he did not love him the way Andy loved Charles and they never had sex or kissed or anything” (Bockris, 11). In 1956 the two took a trip to the Far East. On the trip the pair had a fight: Andy wanted to consummate their relationship , but he was rejected. Afterwards Andy lamented that “he'd gone around the world with a boy and not even received one kiss” (Burns, 54:35). Also on that trip Andy says:

I was walking in Bali, and saw a bunch of people in a clearing having a ball because somebody they really liked had just died, and I realized that everything was just how you decided to think about it. Sometimes people

let the same problems make them miserable for years when they should just say so what. That's one of my favourite things to say. So What.

My mother didn't love me. So what.

My husband won't ball me. So what.

I don't know how I made it through all the years before I learned how to do that trick. It took a long time for me to learn it, but once you do you never forget. (Bockris, 14)

These are clearly the thoughts of someone who is depressed, someone who has given up and decided not to care. Bockris writes that "this was a cornerstone of the attitude that made Andy Warhol famous in the 1960s" (Bockris, 14). It is at this moment where Andy "stops caring" and "gives up his sentimental strategies of the 50s in favor of a colder, more mechanical style in the 60's" (Burns, 55:30). One of the things Andy was best known for was repetition, churning out silkscreen after silkscreen. Only in this context can we see deeper into Warhol's work.

Warhol saw the world as an unbearable, unforgiving place; he was homosexual, ugly, lonely and rejected, he felt uncomfortable with everything around him. By making exact copies of the major symbols of the 60s he was able to nullify them. As Banksy said in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*: "Andy Warhol made a statement by repeating famous icons until they became meaningless" (Banksy, 1:19:14). Works like "Brillo Box" have no brush marks, no shading or imperfections; in doing this there is "no place for our spiritual eye to penetrate it" (Burns, 1:07:30). In doing this Andy attempts to make himself more comfortable by making a new world of reproduced images.

In my view, Andy was a tormented soul; he was a lonely, pasty-white, gay man who didn't really fit in anywhere. To cope with these demons he used his art. Warhol took the popular images of his time and made them meaningless by making hundreds of copies. For him this was a form of therapy. By reproducing mundane objects and presenting them as artworks he changed the way we think about art. This is so important because after Warhol the distinction between art and non-art is completely arbitrary. There are no rules one has to follow to create art, truly anything goes. Warhol had a great influence on the artistic community and pop culture. For example, Donald Barthelme is someone who we can see adapting Warhol's ideals; so much so that we can liken "Brillo Box" to Barthelme's balloon in the sense that they both serve as a symbol for inspiration and freedom.

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