

## An Interview with Andy Warhol

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

**BENJAMIN BUCHLOH** I am currently doing research on the reception of Dada and Duchamp's work in the late 1950s, and I would like to go a bit into that history. I read, I think in Stephen Koch's book, that in the mid-sixties you were working on a movie project on or with Duchamp which apparently has never been released. Was it actually a project?

**ANDY WARHOL** No, it was just an idea. I mean, I shot some pictures, but not really. They're just little sixteen-millimeters. But the project only would have happened if we had been successful at finding somebody, or a foundation, to pay for it. Since I was doing these twenty-four-hour movies, I thought that it would have been great to photograph him for twenty-four hours.

**BUCHLOH** You knew him well enough at the time to have been able to do it?

**WARHOL** Not well enough, but it would have been something he would have done. We just were trying to get somebody to pay for it, like just for the filming, and to do it for twenty-four hours, and that would have been great.

**BUCHLOH** So it never came about?

**WARHOL** No. I didn't know him that well; I didn't know him as well as Jasper Johns or Rauschenberg did. They knew him really well.

**BUCHLOH** But you had some contact with him?

**WARHOL** Well, yeah, we saw him a lot, a little bit. He was around. I didn't know he was that famous or anything like that.

**BUCHLOH** At that time, the late fifties and early sixties, he was still a relatively secret cult figure who just lived here.

**WARHOL** Even people like Barney Newman and all those people, Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, they were not well known.

**BUCHLOH** In retrospect, it sometimes seems unbelievable that the reception process of Duchamp's work should have taken so long.

**WARHOL** But some people like Rauschenberg went to that great school called Black Mountain College, so they were aware of him.

**BUCHLOH** So you think that it was through John Cage that the Duchamp reception was really generated? One of the phenomena that has always interested me in your work is the onset of serialization. Your first paintings, such as *Popeye* or *Dick Tracy*, are still single images of readymades, and it seems that by 1961–1962 you changed into a mode of serial repetition.

**WARHOL** I guess it happened because I . . . I don't know. Everybody was finding a different thing. I had done the comic strips, and then I saw Roy Lichtenstein's little dots, and they were so perfect. So I thought I could not do the comic strips, because he did them so well. So I just started other things.

**BUCHLOH** Had you seen accumulations by Arman at that time? He had just begun his serial repetitions of similar or identical readymade objects a few years before, and that seems such a strange coincidence.

**WARHOL** No, well, I didn't think that way. I didn't. I wasn't thinking of anything. I was looking for a thing. But then I did a dollar bill, and then I cut it up by hand. But you weren't allowed to do dollar bills that looked like dollar bills, so you couldn't do a silkscreen. Then I thought, well how do you do these things? The dollar bill I did was like a silkscreen, you know; it was commercial—I did it myself. And then somebody said that you can do it photographically—you know, they can just do it, put a photograph on a screen—so that's when I did my first photograph, then from there, that's how it happened.

**BUCHLOH** But how did you start serial repetition as a formal structure?

**WARHOL** Well, I mean, I just made one screen and repeated it over and over again. But I was doing the reproduction of the thing, of the Coca-Cola bottles and the dollar bills.

**BUCHLOH** That was in 1962. So it had nothing to do with a general concern for seriality? It was not coming out of John Cage and concepts of musical seriality; those were not issues you were involved with at the time?

**WARHOL** When I was a kid, you know, John Cage came—I guess I met him when I was fifteen or something like that—but I didn't know he did serial things. You mean . . . but I didn't know about music.

**BUCHLOH** Serial form had become increasingly important in the early 1960s, and it coincided historically with the introduction of serial structures in your work. This aspect has never really been discussed.

**WARHOL** I don't know. I made a mistake. I should have just done the *Campbell's Soups* and kept on doing them. Because then, after a while, I did like some people, like, you know, the guy who just does the squares, what's his name? The German—he died a couple of years ago; he does the squares—Albers. I liked him; I like his work a lot.

**BUCHLOH** When you did the Ferus Gallery show in Los Angeles, where you showed the thirty-three almost identical *Campbell's Soup* paintings, did you know at that time about Yves Klein's 1957 show in Milan, where he had exhibited the eleven blue paintings that were all identical in size, but all different in price?

**WARHOL** No, he didn't show them in New York until much later. No, I didn't know about it. But didn't he have different-sized pictures and stuff like that? But then Rauschenberg did all-black paintings before that. And then before Albers, the person I really like, the other person who did black-on-black paintings.

**BUCHLOH** You are thinking of Ad Reinhardt's paintings?

**WARHOL** Right. Was he working before Albers?

**BUCHLOH** Well, they were working more or less simultaneously and independently of each other, even though Albers started earlier. There is another question concerning the reception process that I'm trying to clarify. People have speculated about the origins of your early linear drawing style, whether it comes more out of Matisse, or had been influenced by Cocteau, or came right out of Ben Shahn. I was always surprised that they never really looked at Man Ray, for example, or Picabia. Were they a factor in your drawings of the late 1950s, or did you think of your work at that time as totally commercial?

**WARHOL** Yeah, it was just commercial art.

**BUCHLOH** So your introduction to the work of Francis Picabia through Philip Pearlstein took place much later?

**WARHOL** I didn't even know who that person was.

**BUCHLOH** And you would not have been aware of Man Ray's drawings until the sixties?

**WARHOL** Well, when I did know Man Ray, he was just a photographer, I guess. I still don't know the drawings, really.

**BUCHLOH** His is a very linear, elegant, bland drawing style. The whole New York Dada tradition has had a very peculiar drawing style, and I think your drawings from the late fifties are much closer to New York Dada than to Matisse.

**WARHOL** Well, I worked that way because I like to trace, and that was the reason, just tracing outlines of photographs.

**BUCHLOH** That is, of course, very similar to the approach to drawing that Picabia took in his engineering drawings of the mechanical phase around 1916. I wasn't quite sure to what degree that kind of information would have been communicated to you through your friend Philip Pearlstein, who had, after all, written a thesis on Picabia.

**WARHOL** When I came to New York, I went directly into commercial art, and Philip wanted to, too. But he had a really hard time with it, so he kept up with his paintings. And then, I didn't know much about galleries, and Philip did take me to some galleries, and then he went into some more serious art. I guess if I had thought art was that simple, I probably would have gone into gallery art rather than commercial, but I like commercial. Commercial art at that time was so hard because photography had really taken over, and all of the illustrators were going out of business really fast.

**BUCHLOH** What has really struck me in the last few years is that whenever I see new works of yours, they seem to be extremely topical. For example, the paintings that you sent to the Zeitgeist show in Berlin depicted the fascist light architecture of Rudolf Speer. When—at the height of neo-expressionism—you sent paintings to Documenta in Germany, they were the *Oxidation* paintings. Then, slightly later, I saw the *Rorschach* diptych at Castelli's. All of these paintings have a very specific topicality in that they

relate very precisely to current issues in art-making, but they're not participating in any of them.

In the same way, to give another example, your series of de Chirico paintings is not really part of the contemporary movement that borrows from de Chirico; it seems to be part of that, and yet it distances itself at the same time. Nevertheless the paintings are perceived as though they were part of the same celebration and rediscovery of late de Chirico. Is this critical distance an essential feature that you emphasize, or does the misunderstanding of the work as being part of the same attitude bother you? Or is the ambiguity precisely the desired result?

**WARHOL** No, well, I don't know. Each idea was just something to do. I was just trying to do newer ideas and stuff like that. I never actually had a show in New York with any of those ideas. No, well, I don't know. I've become a commercial artist again, so I just have to do portraits and stuff like that. You know, you start a new business, and to keep the business going, you have to keep getting involved.

**BUCHLOH** Vincent Fremont just mentioned that you got a number of commissions going for corporate paintings. That's very interesting because, in a way, it leads back to the commercial origins of your work.

**WARHOL** Well, I don't mean that, I mean doing portraits, that sort of thing. Because, I don't know, now I see the kids just paint whatever they paint, and then they sell it like the way I used to do it. Everything is sort of easier now, but you have to do it on and on. So those other things were just things that I started doing and doing on my own.

**BUCHLOH** So do you still make a distinction between commercial commissions and what you call the "other things"?

**WARHOL** Yes. The next idea for a show I have here is going to be called "The Worst of Warhol"—if I ever have my way with Paige [Powell], this girl in our advertising department at *Interview*. So it would just be all of those things, you know, the little paintings. Except most of those things were supposed to be in that show, but then they got a little bit bigger, and then everybody always . . . I sort of like the idea. The Rorschach is a good idea, and doing it just means that I have to spend some time writing down what I see in the Rorschach. That would make it more interesting, if I could write down everything I read.

**BUCHLOH** Yes, but aren't they also commenting in a way on the current state of painting, in the same manner that the *Oxidation* paintings are extremely funny, poignant statements on what is currently going on in the general return to painterly expressivity and technique?

**WARHOL** Oh, I like all paintings; it's just amazing that it keeps, you know, going on. And the way new things happen and stuff.

**BUCHLOH** But don't you think that there is a different attitude toward technique in the *Oxidation* paintings or in the *Rorschach* paintings? They don't celebrate technique; if anything, they celebrate the opposite.

**WARHOL** No, I know, but they had technique too. If I had asked someone to do an *Oxidation* painting, and they just wouldn't think about it, it would just be a mess. Then I did it myself—and it's just too much work—and you try to figure out a good design. And sometimes they would turn green, and sometimes they wouldn't; they would just turn black or something. And then I realized why they dripped—there were just too many puddles, and there should have been less. In the hot light, the crystals just dripped and ran down.

**BUCHLOH** That's a different definition of technique.

**WARHOL** Doing the *Rorschach* paintings was the same way. Throwing paint on, it could just be a blob. So maybe they're better because I was trying to do them and then look at them and see what I could read into them.

**BUCHLOH** So the shift that has occurred in the last five years has not at all bothered you? The return to figuration, the return to manual painting procedures—that's nothing that you see in conflict with your own work and its history?

**WARHOL** No, because I'm doing the same . . . If only I had stayed with doing the *Campbell's Soup* well, because everybody only does one painting anyway. Doing it whenever you need money is a really good idea, just that one painting over and over again, which is what everybody remembers you for anyway.

**BUCHLOH** The fact that people are now pretending again that painting is something that is very creative and skillfully executed and depends on an artist's competence—I mean the reversal of all the sixties' ideas that has taken place—you do not consider that to be a problem at all? Because the statements I see in your recent paintings seem to distance themselves from

all that. In fact, the *Oxidation* paintings or the *Rorschach* paintings seem very polemical.

**WARHOL** No, but at that time they would have fit in with the conceptual paintings or something like that.

**BUCHLOH** It's too bad that the *Oxidation* paintings weren't shown in New York.

**WARHOL** Well, when I showed them in Paris, the hot lights made them melt again; it's very weird when they drip down. They looked like real drippy paintings; they never stopped dripping because the lights were so hot. Then you can understand why those holy pictures cry all the time—it must have something to do with the material that they were painted on, or something like that. They look sort of interesting. I guess I have to go back to them. But the thing I was really trying to work on was the invisible painting, the invisible sculpture that I was working on. Did you go see the show at Area?

**BUCHLOH** No, not yet.

**WARHOL** Disco art? You haven't done disco art yet? Really good art—you should see it. It's going to be over soon. A lot of work by about thirty artists; it's really interesting.

**BUCHLOH** What did you do at Area?

**WARHOL** The invisible sculpture, but it's not really the way I had planned it. I've been working on it with the electronic things that make noises go off when you go into an area. But this one down here, it's just something or nothing on a pedestal. But Arman has a beautiful bicycle piece down there at Area. It filled one whole window, one whole window filled with bicycles. It's really beautiful. I think he's such a great artist.

**BUCHLOH** So you are aware of his work later on, just not in that early moment of the early 1960s accumulations. And you think that the early work is interesting as well, the work from the late fifties and the repetition of the readymade objects?

**WARHOL** Yes, well, that's what he always does.

**BUCHLOH** The earlier ones are more direct and poignant than the later work, which is kind of aestheticized.

**WARHOL** The earlier ones I saw were like a car. What was that, a cop car or something?

**BUCHLOH** He put a package of dynamite under a car, a white MG, and blew it up. There was a collector in Düsseldorf, an advertising man who gave him a commission to do a work. So Arman said, “OK, Charles Wilp, give me your white MG car,” and blew it up. It’s called *White Orchid*—it’s a wonderful piece.

**WARHOL** But his work now is really great.

**BUCHLOH** I would be interested in discussing how you saw the subsequent development in the 1960s with the rise of minimal and conceptual art, before the rather rapid inversion of all of these ideas in the early 1980s. Do you have any particular relation to those artists that came out of conceptual art? Did you follow up on these issues? Do the nonpainterly artists who are now working interest you as much as the painters do?

**WARHOL** Yes, but there are not many. There are [fewer] conceptual artists around now for some reason.

**BUCHLOH** But at the time when conceptual art was done—people like Lawrence Weiner, for example—does that kind of work interest you?

**WARHOL** Yeah, that was great. But are they still working? Are they doing the same thing?

**BUCHLOH** Yes, they’re still working; they’ve continued to develop these approaches. In public, you seem to support painting more than anything else.

**WARHOL** Oh no, I love that work. They’re all great.

**BUCHLOH** So you don’t see painting now as contrary to your own work.

**WARHOL** Nowadays, with so many galleries and stuff, you can just be anything. It doesn’t matter anymore; everybody has taste or something like that. There are so many galleries. Every day a new one opens up, so there’s room for everybody. It’s amazing that you can go in every category and it’s just as good, and just as expensive.

**BUCHLOH** So you don’t attach any particular importance to one principle any longer? In the sixties, there was a strong belief system attached to the art.

**WARHOL** In the sixties everything changed so fast. First it was pop, and then



they gave it different names, like conceptual art. They made it sound like it was modern art or something because it changed so fast, so I don't know whether pop art was part of that, or whether it was something else, because it happened so fast.

**BUCHLOH** But the question of the original, for example—the artist as an author, as an inventor, or as somebody who manufactures precious objects—was a question that was really criticized in the sixties. You were always the central figure in these debates, or at least you were perceived as the central figure who had criticized that notion in the same way that Duchamp had criticized it. And now things have turned around, and now it seems that this is no longer an issue at all.

**WARHOL** Certainly I would like to think that I could only work that way. But then you can think one way, but you don't really do it; you can think about not drinking, but you drink, or something like that. And then I hear about this kind of painting machine a kid just did, and then I fantasize that it would be such a great machine. But, you know, Tinguely did one sort of like that.

**BUCHLOH** Yes, in the late 1950s, at the height of tachism, when it became too absurd.

**WARHOL** I still think there is another way of doing that painting machine. This kid has done it, but it falls apart. But I really think you could have a machine that paints all day long for you and do it really well, and you could do something else instead, and you could turn out really wonderful canvases. But it's like . . . I don't know, this morning I went to the handbag district, and there were people that spend all day just putting in rhinestones with their hands, which is just amazing, that they do everything by hand. It would be different if some machine did it . . . Have you been going to galleries and seeing all the new things?

**BUCHLOH** Yes, I go fairly consistently, and I have never really quite understood why everything has been turned around in that way, why all of a sudden people start looking at paintings again as if certain things never happened.

**WARHOL** It's like in the sixties when we met our first drag queens, and they thought they were the first to do it. Now I go to a party and these little kids have become drag queens. They think they are the only people who

ever thought of being a drag queen, which is sort of weird. It's like they invented it, and it's all new again, so it makes it really interesting.

**BUCHLOH** Are your TV program and your paintings, then, in a sense the extreme opposite poles of your activities as an artist?

**WARHOL** Yes, we are trying to do two things, but the painting is really exciting. I don't know, I'm just really excited about all the kids coming up, like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel [Basquiat] and Kenny Scharf. The Italians and Germans are pretty good, but the French aren't as good. But like you were saying about Yves Klein and stuff being . . . But the French do really have one good painter, I mean, my favorite artist would be the last big artist in Paris. What's his name?

**BUCHLOH** A painter?

**WARHOL** Yes, the last famous painter. Buffet.

**BUCHLOH** Many of the new painters seem to imitate him anyway.

**WARHOL** Well, I don't know, I don't see any difference between that and Giacometti. Somewhere along the line, people decided that it was commercial or whatever it was. But he's still painting, and I still see the things; the prices are still \$20,000 to \$30,000. He could still be there. His work is good; his technique is really good; he's as good as the other French guy who just died a couple of days ago, Dubuffet. What do you think has happened? Do you think it is not that good?



Installation view, Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris, 1965.



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