

**Arthur C. Danto**

*Andy Warhol.*

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This study, like Danto's earlier writings on Warhol, is neither biography nor art history. Dedicated to 'Barack and Michelle Obama, and the future of American art,' it aims to show 'what makes Warhol so fascinating an artist from a philosophical perspective' (xiii), an artist who 'in effect brought modernism to an end by showing how the philosophical question of What is art? is to be answered' (52). Danto says he became a philosopher of art in 1964 after viewing an exhibition of Warhol's art at the Stable Gallery in New York and thinks 'most aestheticians and philosophers of art would agree that [work of his pivoting on Warhol] must be given substantial credit for redirecting the philosophy of art to take account of the immense artistic revolution that took place in the early to mid-1960s' (x).

'[T]he transformative experience' of seeing stacks of what looked like grocery boxes looms large in Danto's story—he has described it more than once before (xiii). Unlike many people in the art world back then, who 'were quite prepared to say that *Brillo Box* was not art,' Danto tells us, he 'really loved [it]' (xiv). What seems to have primarily excited him, however, was that Warhol's work 'necessitated ... an entirely new approach to the philosophy of art' (x). Judging *Brillo Box* to be indistinguishable from the real thing, he wanted to know 'not what made it so good but what made it art' (xiv). For Danto 'the nice thing about it was that it is so simple a work' and it 'helped [him] solve a problem as old as philosophy itself, namely how to define art.' '[F]rom my perspective', he writes, 'art (like Warhol's) showed the way to bring to the muddles of aesthetics the clarities of high analytic philosophy' (xv).

The seven chapters of *Warhol* circle around the what-is-art question, a question that Danto imagines Warhol to have redefined as: 'What is the difference between two things, exactly alike, one of which is art and one of which is not?' (23). Chapter 1 deals with Warhol's shift from commercial designer to avant-garde artist, Chapter 2 with his breakthrough in 1962, Chapter 3 with the *Brillo Box* itself, Chapter 4 with the film work, Chapter 5 with the 1968 attempt on Warhol's life, Chapter 6 with the years of celebrity, Chapter 7 with the religion in Warhol's art. Time and again Danto broaches 'the great philosophical question the grocery boxes raise' (61) but does not spell out how *Brillo Box* enabled him to crack the nut. He merely directs us to his 'collected writings on the philosophy of art' (65).

It is a tricky question how Warhol 'became an icon' (1). If 'the art world was ...

prepared for Andy Warhol' (4), why was he the last of the major Pop artists to have a solo gallery show in New York? And if his makeover was due to the fact that 'collectively [his early paintings] project an image of the human condition' (23), how was it that he became an artist to be reckoned with by producing paintings of soup cans and Coca Cola bottles? Nor does it seem that '[t]here had to have been, in 1959 or 1960, some kind of internal change in Warhol' (8) and the transformation was 'perhaps the most mysterious ... in the history of artistic creation' (17). A more plausible hypothesis, I fancy, is that talent, ambition, capacity for hard work and familiarity with 'the scene' made all the difference (along with Warhol's hitting on the technique of silk-screening multiple images).

After portraying Warhol as redefining the traditional philosophical question and observing that the new question resembles 'in its own way' the religious question of how 'Jesus is at once both a man and God' (23), Danto changes the subject. He sketches the development of advanced art in the 20th Century, noting in passing that Rauschenberg and Johns were 'the artists Warhol admired most' (25)—surely a significant factor in his 'mysterious transformation'. Then, following a brief examination of *Campbell's Soup Cans* (and the controversy it triggered), there is a relatively lengthy discussion of Warhol's first major gallery exhibition, an exhibition which included *Red Elvis* and *Marilyn Diptych* in addition to paintings of soup cans, Coca Cola bottles and dollar bills. Danto points out that the show was hugely successful but he does not explain why, just mentions that Michael Fried 'captured the great truths of the Stable shows' when he pointed out, among other things, that 'Warhol has a sure instinct for vulgarity (as in his choice of colors)' (45). While debatable, this is more illuminating than airy pronouncements about Warhol 'giving us our world transfigured into art' and '[a]rt before Andy [being] radically different from art that came after him, and through him' (45-6).

Next comes the chapter on *Brillo Box*, Warhol's 'masterpiece' (xiv), a sample of which, Danto tell us, he has 'lived with ... for years' (66). Leaving aside the cockeyed comparison of Warhol calling out 'box' with Wittgenstein's builders calling out 'slab', which Danto 'could not resist including' (60-1), I balked at his argument that since 'the Brillo box and Andy's *Brillo Boxes* ... look—or could look—absolutely alike, [w]hat makes something art must accordingly be invisible to the eye' (65). Moreover, I was unpersuaded by his claim that 'Warhol ended the history of art as art had been understood before' (66). Even granting Danto's (Hegelian) 'End of Art' thesis, I see no reason to think it was Warhol, not Duchamp, who finished off the business. Why is it relevant that Warhol's boxes were handmade whereas Duchamp's readymades could not, 'in principle', have been? And why should it matter that Warhol's boxes are 'beautiful' while Duchamp's readymades are 'aesthetically undistinguished'? (Danto accepts Duchamp's view of the readymades and ignores the contrary view that *Bottle Rack*, *Comb*, *Trap* and the rest are pretty fine looking.)

In the rest of the book, leaving aside the last chapter, Danto expands on his

theory, floated at the beginning of the *Brillo Box* chapter, that Warhol ‘invented ... an entirely new kind of life for an artist to lead, involving music, style, sex, language, film, and drugs, as well as art’ (47-8). He hazards the opinion that Warhol’s film *Empire* (1964) is ‘a philosophical masterpiece, nearly as profound as *Brillo Box*’ (77), a ‘screen showing *Empire*’ being as close to ‘a still of *Empire*’ as ‘*Brillo Box* (is to) a box of Brillo’ (78). But mainly he focuses on Warhol’s life and art after he ‘had made most of the works on which his fame as an artist rests’ (81). The forays into film and television, the Factory goings-on, the 1968-shooting, the art done for commerce and the ‘writings’ are all touched on—albeit with scant attention to recent scholarship and concern for historical accuracy. (For one thing the Factory was not quite as Rabelaisian as Danto represents it [48-9]. As has often been noted and as I saw for myself in 1967, it was also, even primarily, a place of serious work.)

The final chapter is one of the stranger contributions to a critical literature not known for restrained reporting and balanced comment. It opens with the remarkable declaration that many of Warhol’s central works ‘are like answers to philosophical questions, or solutions to philosophical puzzles’, a point ‘lost on many viewers of his work, since philosophy itself is not widely cultivated outside universities’ (135). This has to be a stretch. The legions of Warhol admirers with no philosophical background cannot all have got it wrong, and it beggars belief that ‘most of the philosophical knowledge needed to appreciate Warhol’s stunning contributions did not exist until he made the art in question.’ Warhol was an enigma even to his closest associates, but how likely is it that ‘Andy had, by nature, a philosophical mind’ and ‘was doing philosophy by doing the art that made him famous’?

Danto gives the visual aspect of Warhol’s art short shrift. In earlier discussions he portrays Warhol as demonstrating that what makes a work of art art is not its appearance but the surrounding ‘discourse of reasons’, and here he winds up likening *Brillo Box* to the Holy Grail, a dish easily mistaken for an ordinary salad bowl but for the accompanying religious story (144). (Danto believes it telling that among Warhol’s final works is a series of *Last Suppers* and conjectures that ‘the religious turn, if there was one, happened ... at some moment between 1959 and 1961’ [145].) There is, in any case, no recognition in *Warhol* of the possibility that—as one of the Factory people put it to me—the great thing about Warhol’s art is ‘the look’. I am hardly alone in thinking the importance of *Brillo Box* lies in how it appears in and of itself and in relation to other art of the period. The thrill of coming across Warhol’s work in the 1960s may be irretrievable but it should not be too difficult to convey, or at least to acknowledge, his visual genius. With friends like this, who needs enemies?

**Andrew Lugg**  
Montreal