

The Lives of the Artists

Beyond the Cult of Personality: The Emergence of Public Persona as an Artistic Medium

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Flamboyant. Extravagant. Extroverted. Eccentric. Megalomaniac. Alcoholic. Sexually obsessed. Manic-depressive. Bohemian—there are as many stereotypes as there are anecdotes about famous artists. The inevitable entwinement of an artist's colorful biography and aesthetic genius has provided fodder for scholarly speculation, populist fascination as well as plain, old-fashioned entertainment. Beyond the mere sensationalism, how important is persona in understanding an artist's practice? It's a question that has troubled art historians for a long time. For many, the artist's persona is like the pesky shrew that is best chased away so as not to impede the historians or critics "serious" quest for facts and objective interpretation.

Yet this antagonistic shrew has been an integral part of art history. Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* the sixteenth century classic, and required reading for all students of art history, densely interweaves detailed descriptions of the achievements of the great Renaissance artists (from Cimabue and Giotto to Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo) with biographical anecdotes intended to reveal their inner character and better illuminate their art. To say that Vasari was a good storyteller is like saying Frank Sinatra could carry a tune. He was, as one critic put it, a "profoundly inventive fabulist" who not only embellished tales about dead artists, but also incorporated the self-propagated myths told to him by his contemporaries. His collection of biographies freely blended aesthetic theory, sociological description, fact, and fiction. Five hundred years after Vasari's death, art history has become a much more stringent practice. By dismissing Vasari's factual errors and exaggerations, the current academic consensus continues to discredit one of his main contributions to the field - the idea that legend and myth, as generated by the artists themselves, are inseparable from understanding their art.

It is not only art historians that are to blame. Artists have always been granted a different status than the rest of the populace, and were, consequently, treated differently. They could speak to the gods. They were granted privileged positions, disregarding traditional class divisions. As an inverted barometer for societal values, artists could act out safely fantasies, break the taboos, and enjoy the indulgences that are shunned by the moral consensus. The figure of the artist possessed a unique duality, eliciting equal doses of fascination and contempt, envy and disdain.

The invention of bohemianism in nineteenth-century France provided an efficient means to prevent artists from 'contaminating' everyone else. Derived from the name of a region in the Czech Republic known as Romany, an area inhabited by nomadic gypsies, the modern notion of Bohemia designated a place where artists and disillusioned members of the bourgeoisie could intermingle with the poverty stricken, foreigners, racial minorities, homosexuals, and anyone else on the margins of society. As the historical epicenter of *la vie de bohème*, mid-nineteenth-century Montmartre provided the basis of most of the populist notions about how artists should live, behave, and look. From the image of the young struggling artist in an unheated Williamsburg loft to the dj-cum-painter spinning in an Electroclash club in former East Berlin, the bohemian imaginary persists in shaping the contemporary expectations of what role artists should play in society.

Not all artists continue to take refuge in bohemian or counter cultural ideals. Western society has changed this, epitomized by the obsession with celebrity. The result has been that avant-garde strategies have been absorbed into mainstream culture, sucked into the allure of the 'culture industry'. So, what is left at the artist's disposal? How, then, can artists resist the culture industry? Should they resist? Are they passive victims or active proponents of this industry? What position should artists occupy in this kind of society?

Many artists have consciously cultivated their public personas as a strategic, often antagonistic element in their art practice. While there is no single moment of origin when artists began to elevate their own personas into something more significant than simple biographical interest, there are those who have contributed to the transformation of persona into an autonomous field of artistic activity, as equal as any traditional artistic practice.

This use of persona, however, should not be confused with a type of art practice that emerged in the course of the 1970s in which artists used their own life as their primary subject matter. Such figures as Sophie Calle, Christian Boltanski, Hanna Wilke, or Eleanor Antin used art as a poetic-sociological vehicle for the documentation of their everyday lives or activities. Unlike these "Life Artists", the artists herein are uninterested in the documentary or narrative framing of their lives nor are they invested in the veracity of the tales or reliquary they used in their artworks. Instead they harness Western culture's attraction and repulsion for the cult of personality in order to intensify the antagonistic power of their self-generated myths.

Andy Warhol: The Wrong Person for the Right Part

"If I ever have to cast an acting role, I want the wrong person for the part (...) it's more satisfying to get someone who's perfectly wrong. Then you know you've really got something." Andy Warhol, "Fame," *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, 1975

Andy Warhol wasn't merely famous, he changed the nature of fame, and his impact was not limited to the world of art and artists. Warhol founded his art practice on the careful choreography of his public persona. He harnessed the power of celebrity—his own, the celebrities he created, the culture's growing thirst for celebrity as such—elevating it to a different status. For Warhol, his persona was an artistic medium, no different from the more conventional forms (film, painting, sculpture, photography) he used in his art.

Despite our current facility to merge the figure of Warhol with today's entertainment-obsessed society, there is little interpretation of the relationship between Warhol's construction of his persona and its direct impact on his art. The campaign to isolate and dismiss the importance of Warhol's persona in terms of his overall artistic contribution is much more systematic in recent academic writing. Scholarly publications such as *October* attempt to "fix" the persona problem by historicizing Warhol into two distinct periods: the Early Factory Years (1960–68) years and the Business Art Years (1969-1987). Art historian and film theorist Annette Michelson has chosen the term "prelapsarian" to characterize the first period. This biblical allusion perfectly sums up the "evil" that caused Warhol's expulsion from the Garden

of Eden. “After 1968”, she writes, “Warhol assumed the role of grand couturier, whose signature sells or licenses perfumes... Warhol’s ‘Business art’ found its apogee in the creation of a label that could be affixed.” While the pre-1968 Factory certainly flirted with celebrity and the mainstream vehicles of fame, it did so under critical auspices. For Michelson, the prelapsarian Warhol reflected the ills of mainstream culture through irony-soaked parody.

The shot fired from Valerie Solanis’s gun in 1968 signaled the beginning of Warhol’s supposed “decline.” It is a commonly held truth that this traumatic event soured Warhol, driving him toward more cynical modes of art making. This event also marked a dramatic shift in the way Warhol consciously “used” his celebrity, marking perhaps the emergence of public persona as a legitimate and autonomous artistic medium.

At least on the surface, Warhol’s life and art in the “new” Factory carried on as before: he continued to make films, paintings, and sculptures as well as having a hand in various cultural enterprises. Yet as the delegation of Warhol’s artistic production slightly increased, Warhol made even more time for public appearances. During the 1970s and 1980s, he continued to travel around the world, documenting his globetrotting through his *Time Capsules*. In New York, his social life epitomized the fashion of the time, and peaked with the decadence of such mythical clubs as Studio 54. Warhol behaved like any other star. His overactive social life was relentlessly photographed by the paparazzi, and he appeared regularly in the society and gossip pages. Michael Jackson, Bianca Jagger, Joan Collins, as well as countless other stars, royalty, and society women—the list of Warhol’s companions on film was not only a barometer for who was hot in the 1970s and 1980s, but also reflected his rolodex of celebrity clients for his booming portrait business.

Working for the Zoli modeling agency (available for “special bookings only”), Warhol sold his celebrity to various companies for product endorsements in television and print, giving a sense of inevitability to his early Pop appropriations of such banal products as *Brillo* scrubbing pads and Campbell’s soup. Whether he was modeling Levi’s blue jeans, advertising TDK videotapes, I.a.Eyeworks, or the ill-fated Drexel Burnham Lambert junk bond trading firm, or guest starring on an episode of *The Love Boat*, these vulgar commercial activities were part of the logical culmination of Warhol’s trajectory. “Business art is the step that comes after Art. I started as a commercial artist, and I want to finish as a business artist. After I did the thing called ‘art’ or whatever it’s called, I wanted to be an art businessman or a Business Artist.”

Warhol refused to differentiate between “right” and “wrong” appearances in this Business-Art phase of his life. What counted was translating his persona into its most extreme commercial potential. Yet while Warhol was trying to maximize the impact of his public persona in the spheres of art, popular culture, and the market, he insisted on highlighting his imperfections, his personal neuroses, and the claim to be “Nothingness Himself.” While this paradoxical coupling of extreme public exposure and sense of invisibility might be chalked up to some manifestation of false modesty, as morally bankrupt as his indiscriminate activities, it could also be attributed to the fulfillment of one of his crypto-critical philosophic maxims. When he describes himself as “putting his Warhol on,” he enumerates what he sees in the mirror:

“Nothing is missing. It’s all there. The affectless gaze. The diffracted grace... The bored languor, the wasted pallor... the chic freakiness, the basically passive astonishment... The glamour rooted in despair, the self-admiring carelessness, the perfected otherness, the shadowy, voyeuristic, vaguely sinister aura... Nothing is missing. I’m everything my scrapbook says I am.”

Warhol worked very hard at being the wrong person for the right part. His “wrongness” was documented in his obsessive archival activities: the publication of his *Diary* and his *Philosophy (From A to B and Back Again)*; his scrapbooks and *Time Capsules*. More than any “artwork” or film he ever made, Warhol’s public persona became the most effective device to record and reflect on contemporary life. If the role of the artist today is search for “aura” in a world of vacuity, Warhol was definitely the wrong person for the right part.