

17 Andy Warhol (1930–1987) Interview with Gene Swenson

Born in Pittsburgh, Warhol had moved to New York in 1949. For most of the 1950s he was a successful graphic designer, particularly in the field of shoe illustration. In the later 1950s he began to exhibit his own drawings, and in 1960 produced his first canvases depicting comic strip characters. The canonical repeated Soup Cans, Disasters, Elvises and Marilyn's followed in 1962. Throughout this period of his transition from graphic designer to full-blown avant-garde artist Warhol was able to purchase works by contemporaries such as Jasper Johns and Frank Stella, as well as by Marcel Duchamp. 'Pop Art' became established as the latest vanguard movement in New York in 1962. The present interview was initially published as 'What Is Pop Art? Interviews with Eight Painters (Part 1)', *Art News*, New York, November 1963. Reprinted in John Russell and Suzi Gablik (eds.), *Pop Art Redefined*, London, 1969, pp. 116–19, from which the present text is taken.

AW: Someone said that Brecht wanted everybody to think alike. I want everybody to think alike. But Brecht wanted to do it through Communism, in a way. Russia is doing it under government. It's happening here all by itself without being under a strict government; so if it's working without trying, why can't it work without being Communist? Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and we're getting more and more that way.

I think everybody should be a machine.

I think everybody should like everybody.

Is that what Pop Art is all about?

AW: Yes. It's liking things.

And liking things is like being a machine?

AW: Yes, because you do the same thing every time. You do it over and over again.

And you approve of that?

AW: Yes, because it's all fantasy. It's hard to be creative and it's also hard not to think what you do is creative or hard not to be called creative because everybody is always talking about that and individuality. Everybody's always being creative. And it's so funny when you say things aren't, like the shoe I would draw for an advertisement was called a 'creation' but the drawing of it was not. But I guess I believe in both ways. All these people who aren't very good should be really good. Everybody is too good now, really. Like, how many actors are there? There are millions of actors. They're all pretty good. And how many painters are there? Millions of painters and all pretty good. 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. I think the artists who aren't very good should become like everybody else so that people would like things that aren't very good. It's already happening. All you have to do is read the magazines and the catalogues. It's this style or that style, this or that image of man – but that really doesn't make any difference. Some artists get left out that way, and why should they?

Is Pop Art a fad?

AW: Yes, it's a fad, but I don't see what difference it makes. I just heard a rumor that G. quit working, that she's given up art altogether. And everyone is saying how awful it is that A. gave up his style and is doing it in a different way. I don't think so at all. If an artist can't do any more, then he should just quit; and an artist ought to be able to change his style without feeling bad. I heard that Lichtenstein said he might not be painting comic strips a year or two from now – I think that would be so great, to be able to change styles. And I think that's what's going to happen, that's going to be the whole new scene. That's probably one reason I'm using silk screens now. I think somebody should be able to do all my paintings for me. I haven't been able to make every image clear and simple and the same as the first one. I think it would be so great if more people took up silk screens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or somebody else's.

It would turn art history upside down?

AW: Yes.

Is that your aim?

AW: No. The reason I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine, and I feel that whatever I do and do machine-like is what I want to do.

Was commercial art more machine-like?

AW: No, it wasn't. I was getting paid for it, and did anything they told me to do. If they told me to draw a shoe, I'd do it, and if they told me to correct it, I would – I'd do anything they told me to do, correct it and do it right. I'd have to invent and now I don't; after all that 'correction', those commercial drawings would have feelings, they would have a style. The attitude of those who hired me had feeling or something to it; they knew what they wanted, they insisted; sometimes they got very emotional. The process of doing work in commercial art was machine-like, but the attitude had feeling to it.

Why did you start painting soup cans?

AW: Because I used to drink it. I used to have the same lunch every day, for twenty years, I guess, the same thing over and over again. Someone said my life has dominated me; I liked that idea. I used to want to live at the Waldorf Towers and have soup and a sandwich, like that scene in the restaurant in *Naked Lunch*...

We went to see *Dr No* at Forty-second Street. It's a fantastic movie, so cool. We walked outside and somebody threw a cherry bomb right in front of us, in this big crowd. And there was blood. I saw blood on people and all over. I felt like I was bleeding all over. I saw in the paper last week that there are more people throwing them -- it's just part of the scene – and hurting people. My show in Paris is going to be called 'Death in America'. I'll show the electric-chair pictures and the dogs in Birmingham and car wrecks and some suicide pictures.

Why did you start these 'Death' pictures?

AW: I believe in it. Did you see the *Enquirer* this week? It had ‘The Wreck that Made Cops Cry’ – a head cut in half, the arms and hands just lying there. It’s sick, but I’m sure it happens all the time. I’ve met a lot of cops recently. They take pictures of everything, only it’s almost impossible to get pictures from them.

When did you start with the ‘Death’ series?

AW: I guess it was the big plane crash picture, the front page of a newspaper: 129 DIE. I was also painting the *Marilyns*. I realized that everything I was doing must have been Death. It was Christmas or Labor Day – a holiday – and every time you turned on the radio they said something like, ‘4 million are going to die’. That started it. But when you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn’t really have any effect.

But you’re still doing ‘Elizabeth Taylor’ pictures.

AW: I started those a long time ago, when she was so sick and everybody said she was going to die. Now I’m doing them all over, putting bright colors on her lips and eyes.

My next series will be pornographic pictures. They will look blank; when you turn on the black lights, then you see them – big breasts and... If a cop came in, you could just flick out the lights or turn to the regular lights – how could you say that was pornography? But I’m still just practising with these yet. Segal did a sculpture of two people making love, but he cut it all up, I guess because he thought it was too pornographic to be art. Actually it was very beautiful, perhaps a little too good, or he may feel a little protective about art. When you read Genet you get all hot, and that makes some people say this is not art. The thing I like about it is that it makes you forget about style and that sort of thing; style isn’t really important.

Is ‘Pop’ a bad name?

AW: The name sounds so awful. Dada must have something to do with Pop – it’s so funny, the names are really synonyms. Does anyone know what they’re supposed to mean or have to do with, those names? Johns and Rauschenberg – Neo-Dada for all these years, and everyone calling them derivative and unable to transform the things they use – are now called progenitors of Pop. It’s funny the way things change. I think John Cage has been very influential, and Merce Cunningham, too, maybe. Did you see that article in the *Hudson Review* [‘The End of the Renaissance?’, Summer, 1963]? It was about Cage and that whole crowd, but with a lot of big words like radical empiricism and teleology. Who knows? Maybe Jap and Bob were Neo-Dada and aren’t any more. History books are being rewritten all the time. It doesn’t matter what you do. Everybody just goes on thinking the same thing, and every year it gets more and more alike. Those who talk about individuality the most are the ones who most object to deviation, and in a few years it may be the other way around. Some day everybody will think just what they want to think, and then everybody will probably be thinking alike; that seems to be what is happening.