

Andy Warhol's *Celebrities* Series: From the Reading of Celebrities Phenomena to Icons of Contemporary Heroes

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Summary

This paper hopes, with a case study, to advance the connection between art study, art education study and visual cultural study. The object of study here is the *Celebrities* Series of Andy Warhol.

The *Celebrities* Series form the most famous series of Andy Warhol. We may distinguish three series in these works. Firstly, the pop style portraits in the years of 1960s, in which, *Marilyn*, *Elvis*, *Liz*, *Jackie* are the most representative. Secondly, the portraits, in the years of 1970s, started with *Mao*. Finally, the portraits of historical personalities appeared in the years of 1980s.

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (1989) has analyzed the basic operations of Warhol in the first series as isolation, putting forward the singularity and centralization. Thomas Crow (1996), on the contrary, raised the issue of his choice of subject matters, which, he noted, are often under the shadow of death. For Robert Rosenblum (1979), Warhol in the years of 70s acted like a court painter.

Chris Rojek (2001, 10-13) puts forward four core characteristics of the contemporary phenomenon of celebrities:

- 1.It is dispersed between the glamour and the notoriety and produces cultural impact.
- 2.It is considered as a cultural fabrication and relies on a group of mediators.

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3. The personal self and the public self of the celebrities are always split and this brings disturbance to the celebrities.

4. The social distance is necessary to it but that means a non-reciprocal social relation and creates problems in the personal relationship for the celebrities.

If all the studies agree on the importance the mass media in the contemporary phenomenon of celebrities, then we should observe the close relationship between the choice of Warhol's subject matters and the media events. Another evident feature of Warhol's portraits of the celebrities is its use of the photography, which is considered as the most important message-support of this phenomenon. Some marginal phenomena of celebrities, like the "celetoid" and the "celeactor", also help us to understand his choice of subject matters. This kind of celebrities may clarify his preference about certain subjects like disaster, death and divided personalities. Warhol himself may be looked as a critique of cultural texts when he comments the relationship between the celebrities and the transgression. Last but not the least, the celebrities are spectacular merchandises themselves and the merchandise is certainly one of the social aspects highly studied by Warhol's art.

Warhol, in the end of analysis, knows well the cultural logics of the phenomenon of the celebrities and explores it as an expert. He works like a chronicler of American media events but is not confined to this role. Even there is no evident subversion but if we look closely how he chooses his subject matters and how works on his picture, we may perceive a critical intention. This intention is close to the shadow of death put forward by Crow but is closer to some split state of everyday life, less tragic. After his gun shot in 1968, Warhol himself becomes a celebrity. He has even run a people magazine. Nevertheless, the relationship between the logic of merchandise and the phenomenon of celebrities may be already observed in his early works.

A new question would be the following: if we may consider the celebrities' portraits so important in Warhol's art as icons of contemporary heroes?

The celebrities in the popular culture today have the statue of the heroes, which are situated between gods and mortals (Detweiler & Taylor, 2003, 110-117). They all occupy the key place of role model (Klapp, 1962, 142-156), which is indispensable to the functioning of culture. It is observed in the studies of the phenomenon of the contemporary celebrities, besides the cult and the quest of the role model, there are the complex relations of projection,

narcissism, voyeurism, and sacrifice between the celebrities and their fans. These may be the common characteristics of the contemporary heroes under high media visibility. All these aspects are observable in Warhol's works.

The debate on the icon in the Byzantine history turns around the image as the presence of absence (Mondzain, 1996, 117). The power of the image resides thus in this absence of existence (Marin, 1993, 12). Warhol's *Celebrities* series are secular. His works of the 60s reveal the force of this absence by the void, repetition, disappearance, the darkness of the death and emptiness of life. His works of the 70s hide this force by their glamorous color but in the 80s they transpire this camouflage and seem to point it out directly. In his use of the photography as presentation of absence and deep penetration of an important contemporary cultural context, Warhol's *Celebrities* series certainly confirm his important role in the making of icons of the contemporary heroes.

This paper tries to read the celebrities' portraits of Warhol in the cultural context of the phenomenon of contemporary celebrities. Its underpinning hypothesis is that it is not possible to fully understand the meaning of these series and the relations between their variations without questioning all the aspects the phenomenon of celebrities. With a contrast reading between his art and the concerned cultural phenomenon, we may not only better understand the cultural implication of his art but also the diversity of his roles as chronicler, manipulator and critic. Some questions left by Warhol's commentators may also be clarified.

As the case of Warhol's art shows, the art studies today could not be limited to the questionings inside the field of art but should negotiate different fields, especially that of art and culture. As for the art education, the cultural context, the media and the reading of image have certainly similar importance.

Keywords: Andy Warhol, celebrities, hero, portrait, visual culture, art education

