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Space and Culture 2003; 6; 66

DOI: 10.1177/1206331202238963

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Andy Warhol, Capitalism, Culture, and Camp

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Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's "logic of practice," the article explores the relation of Andy Warhol's artistic production to the growth of consumer capitalism in the 1960s. It argues that through their "camp" performativity and the subversive staging of their sociosexual identities, Warhol and his queer compatriots in the New York gay underground carried the embodied reflexivity of patriarchal capitalism a stage further, especially with regard to the relation of avant-garde (elite) culture to (common) commercial culture. Warhol's open avowal of the relation of cultural production to capitalism and his social trajectory from abject provincial to major cultural producer provides a unique opportunity to gain a concrete grasp of the complexity of Bourdieu's understanding of transformations in the "field of cultural production" and the "economy of symbolic goods" in late capitalism. The class fractional parallels between Warhol and Bourdieu make the latter's work particularly apposite in this context.

Keywords: Warhol; commodity; camp; capital; categorisation; reflexivity

Warhol literally "embodied" the paradox of Modernist art: to be suspended between high art's haughty isolation (in transcendence, in resistance, in critical negativity) and the pervasive debris of corporate domination; or, as Theodor Adorno put it, "to have a history at all while under the spell of the eternal repetition of mass production." . . . Warhol has unified within his constructs the views of both the victors and the victims of the late twentieth century.

—Buchloh (1989a, pp. 39, 57)

In this article, I use Pierre Bourdieu's "logic of practice" to further the understanding of the artistic production of an American artist who is proving increasingly important for our understanding of the contradictions of late capitalism, especially its relation to the field cultural production.¹

In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu (1990b) unfolded his theoretical perspective on social action. He asserted that there are symbolic interests and investments at stake in the realm of art and culture which obey an economic logic:

The theory of strictly economic practices is a particular case of a general theory of the economy of practices. Even when they give every appearance of disinterestedness because they escape the logic of 'economic' interest (in the narrow sense) and are oriented towards non-material stakes that are not easily quantified, as in 'pre-capitalist' societies or in the cultural sphere of capitalist societies, practices never cease to comply with an economic logic. (p. 122)

For a variety of reasons to do with his social and class background, nobody in the American art world of the 1960s understood this complex truth, at the level of everyday lived practice, better than Andy Warhol. In this respect, one might recall Bourdieu's statement that "it is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 79).

Born in 1928 of first-generation immigrant parents, Warhol grew up in a deprived area of Pittsburgh in a period of economic depression (Bockris, 1989, pp. 29-48; Colacello, 1990, p. 11). However, the 1960s, the period when Warhol made his entry into the art world, were marked by rapid economic expansion resulting in part from the adoption of a Keynesian economic model in which increased consumption was thought to aid production and employment. This resulted in an exponential growth in mass consumer culture and the photographic and electronic media associated with it. It is these that became the subject of Warhol's art.

This article will argue that through their cultural production and the subversive staging of their sociosexual identities, Warhol and his queer compatriots in the New York gay underground carried the embodied reflexivity of patriarchal capitalism a stage further, especially with regard to the relation of avant-garde (elite) culture to (common) commercial culture, neatly encapsulated in Warhol's initial desire to call his painting "Commonism" and his studio "The Factory" (Jones, 1996, p. 204). This reflexivity was performed by means of a "camp" parodic engagement with sex and gender in relation to the excess, theatricality, and spectacularity of a burgeoning capitalist consumerism, thus embodying the paradox referred to in the epigraph. In the 1960s, Warhol and his denizens at the East 47th Street "Factory" were, because of their various social and sexual positionings relative to the exponential leap in consumer culture, in particularly good positions to engage reflexively and performatively with it. Other avant-garde artists positioned in the restricted avant-garde field of cultural production found this excess of performativity in relation to common culture distasteful: To them, initially at least, it was collusive with the commercialism and frivolity of fashion and advertising. There are, no doubt, some who would continue to take this view. This article argues that it was precisely the often hidden collusion between economic and symbolic capital that Warhol was exposing through his work.²

"Swish"

As for the "swish" thing, I'd always had a lot of fun with that—just watching the expressions on people's faces. You'd have to have seen the way all the Abstract Expressionist

painters carried themselves and the kinds of images they cultivated, to understand how shocked people were to see a painter coming on swish. I certainly wasn't a butch kind of guy by nature, but I must admit, I went out of my way to play up the other extreme. (Warhol & Hackett, 1980, pp. 11-13)

It is not difficult to imagine how camp performativity and what was perceived as the kitsch of popular culture were experienced as a very real threat to the sociopolitical seriousness of heteronormative masculinity: Even gay artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg found it hard to take. In today's seemingly more liberal climate it is easy to forget just how entrenched the normative performance of masculinity and its androcentric views were, even in the apparently progressive art world (especially the New York art world), in the period prior to feminism. Robert Rauschenberg himself discussed this in interview concerning the ending of his homosexual relationship with Jasper Johns because of the social pressure of the fact, as he put it, that "it was sort of new to the art world that the two most well-known, up and coming studs were affectionately involved" (Taylor, 1990, pp. 146-148; Katz, 1993, p. 190). Warhol did an enormous amount to change all that. In *POPism* (Warhol & Hackett, 1980), his memoir of the 1960s, he described the gay scene in the Village and recorded the gay poet Ondine's horror at being asked if he wanted to go to a "gay bar" that for him represented, at that time, the inception of an identitarian deradicalization of an underground of gay life and its commercial assimilation into bourgeois normative values that has now become ubiquitous in urban gay culture. The ambivalence felt toward all these terms relating to homosexuality (*camp*, *queer*, *gay*, etc.) by those who undergo them is understandable in relation to the problem of *categorisation*, a term stemming from the Greek *kathegoresthai*, which, Bourdieu informed us, originally meant to accuse someone in public (1993, p. 262; 1990a, p. 27). This helps to explain the ambivalence minority groups such as gays and lesbians feel in relation to all forms of classification, such as that of camp, which, more often than not, is seen as pejorative, as so many such nominations are. In *Masculine Domination* (2001), Bourdieu drew attention to this issue in relation to what he sees as "one of the most tragic antinomies of symbolic domination":

How can people revolt against a socially imposed categorisation except by organising themselves as a category constructed according to that categorisation, and so implementing the classifications and restrictions that it seeks to resist. (p. 120)

In recent years, as a result of the rise of what has become known as "queer theory," there has been a positive reassessment of camp by some of those of whom it has been used as a term of opprobrium. This specifically entailed a reaction to what is perceived as its depoliticisation and normalisation, an assertion of its significance as a performative excess that was once politically active. This depoliticisation is thought to have been set in motion by Susan Sontag in her widely disseminated 1964 essay, "Notes on Camp" (Meyer, 1994). It is hardly surprising that the notion of camp as a positive sociopolitical mode of performativity is viewed with scepticism because it is often seen as an identification with a fundamentally oppressive stereotype (Britton, 1978). Nevertheless, the camp cultural production of the gay underground from the late 1950s through the 1960s played a major role in bringing about a political shift in the cultural field in relation to attitudes as to what bodies were socially and legally permitted to do in pursuit of their own experiential pleasures. This shift is by no means complete, as

the periodic backlash—Clause 28 in Britain and the American National Endowment culture wars in the 1980s (Bourdieu & Haacke, 1995)—has shown, which is why it is important to recognise the historical and cultural imperatives and initiatives of camp, about which theorists, gay or otherwise, are by no means in agreement. Although recognising the ambivalence of camp as a cultural category and believing definitional ambivalence to be one of its most valuable assets, I cannot agree with those theorists, gay or otherwise, who find it, for practical purposes, a useless category. I agree with the position taken by Moe Meyer (the editor of *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*) and his authors, who demonstrate the historical significance of camp performativity in relation to the continuing history of a specifically homosexual behaviour. Meyer (1994) defined camp as “the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility” (p. 5).

Forms of Capital and Their Exchange

Camp can be seen as a species of social capital, and in this section I want to consider Warhol’s practical relation to Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of capital’s different forms and their rates of exchange value or conversion.³ For Bourdieu,

capital presents itself under three fundamental species (each with its own subtypes), namely, economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. To these we must add symbolic capital, which is the form that one or another of these species takes when it is grasped through categories of perception that *recognize* its possession and accumulation. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119)

It is my contention that Warhol and the confederates he described in *POPism* were practically engaged, whether they understood it this way, in the performative subversion of forms of capital (economic, social, and symbolic) associated with heteronormativity and patriarchal capitalism in the sociopolitical and cultural field.

By virtue of his marginalized ethnic and class origins in the social field, Andy Warhol was, like many on the margins, hypersensitively aware of his lack of these forms of monetary, cultural, and social capital. Although on one hand publicly affecting blank indifference and projecting a laid-back self-assurance, privately he learned very early on to value them and entertain the game of facilitating their exchange.⁴ Throughout his life, Warhol was driven by an intense desire for social legitimation (symbolic capital), and no matter how rich and famous he became he never felt quite sure he had attained it. This is not to be wondered at considering his background and the fact that however much he was accepted, he still felt the social stigma of his origins as an ethnic outsider, experiencing himself as a freakishly unattractive homosexual. This obsession with legitimation can explain a great deal about his fascinated phantasmatic social relationships at the Factory, which were more often than not with those whose “talents” he coveted as much as admired. This applies most especially to the aristocratic heiress Edie Sedgwick, with whom at one time Warhol made a significant identification. Edie represented everything that Warhol wished to be: As well as rich and androgynously beautiful, above all she came from a family that could be traced back to 1774 (Stein & Plimpton, 1982, pp. 182-183).⁵ They entered into an exchange conversion of their respective capital, her social class for his vanguardism and vice versa. Edie was one of a number of young persons from eminent families in the dom-

inant classes, known at the Factory as the “Cambridge set,” who were drawn to the particular “hip” type of social legitimation it gave them.

As the American art critic Peter Schjeldahl (1980) noted, “Warhol is one of the very few modern artists from an authentically working-class background.” This holds a key to a true understanding of his artistic production. Schjeldahl argued that it was his social origins in a very dominated class fraction that gave him the edge over the other pop artists, whose work by comparison can seem relatively “distanced, even debilitated, by middle class irony” in relation to Warhol’s powerful iconicization of consumer commodities and celebrity culture. What was simply “material” for them was for him invested with meaning emanating from intense longing, the product of social deprivation. This makes the accusations of his naivete or cynicism toward capitalist consumer culture a product of the lack of social imagination on the part of middle-class culture, the failure to see that it “presents a radically different face when seen from its periphery” (pp. 47-48). Warhol did, of course, overcome his marginality and occupy a place at the centre, first as a highly successful illustrator, then as an artist. Nevertheless, the residue of his originally peripheral social positioning always remained at the core of his being.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) empirically demonstrated the link between class reproduction and culture in his magnum opus on taste, basing his survey on patterns of cultural consumption he had surveyed in 1963 among a sample of 692 inhabitants of Paris, Lille, and an unnamed provincial town. This is the period of the rise of the Pop art movement in America and Europe, and Bourdieu’s research and the work of the Pop artists reflected the new relationship of the working classes to the expansion of postwar education and consumer culture. As Jeremy Lane (2000) indicated, Bourdieu’s early work on class, culture, and consumption was researched or published during a “period of demographic renewal, reconstruction, modernisation, and economic growth that marked France’s emergence from the Second World War.” He pointed out that this period of economic reconstruction and growth coincided with French decolonisation and can be read as symptomatic of the shift from imperialism to late-capitalism that Ernest Mandel (1975) argued “is accompanied at the ideological level by a proliferation of discourses proclaiming the ability of technological progress and planned economic growth to end class conflict and ensure the progressive satisfaction of all material and spiritual needs” (Lane, 2000, p. 35). Lane argued that although Bourdieu never explicitly theorised this shift, his early work on class and culture can be best understood as an intervention into the “debates surrounding the extent to which France’s postwar economic expansion was heralding the advent of a mass consumer culture, an era of cultural ‘democratisation’ and ‘homogenisation’ in which older class divisions were either disappearing or being significantly redrawn” (p. 36). There is no need here to go into the details of Bourdieu’s critique of the left-wing utopianism associated with Lefebvre, Touraine, Morin, and Barthes in relation to these issues; suffice it to say that these debates are not unconnected to those that arose around Pop art, such as to whether it was celebrating, critiquing, or merely reflecting consumer culture. Bourdieu’s research into the relation of taste to class was intended to demonstrate empirically the differences in education and culture that constitute “*the struggles of classification*” and “*principles of differentiation*” that constitute the persistence of the social hierarchy of class to those utopian thinkers who imagined that greater access to education and culture would automatically collapse them. Bourdieu’s studies of education and taste demonstrated the opposite, that rather than homogenising difference they further entrench them. Bourdieu remained sceptical of the

idealism of (postmodern) intellectuals, especially those who distinguish themselves by their mutual admiration for each other's recognition of "popular" and minoritized cultural forms, as with praise for the cultural authenticity of "rap."⁶ He reminded them of the fact that their recognition is hardly going to change the actual social conditions of the oppressed and give them access to that which is most universal in culture. Such short-sighted idealism is, as he sees it, a typical product of the scholastic disposition. No wonder that he has made himself unpopular and it is considered even among some of his admirers that his statements on popular culture are mistaken.⁷

Obviously, the development of Pop art in the 1960s was never the expression of a genuinely popular culture, although the nostalgia of British Pop artists like Peter Blake for the remnants of what is seen as popular culture might cause some to think otherwise. However, it is true that it was the dominated classes that were most affected by the expansion of education and the intrusion of mass cultural forms into everyday life because this new phase of consumerism mostly involved relatively cheap commodities. Pop art was a cultural response to and reflection on this. Warhol, because of his dominated social position in what Bourdieu called the "space of positions and dispositions," was able to invest these consumer images with more energy than others because he was more practically immersed than any of his contemporaries in these transformations of class and culture in the 1960s. It should, however, be pointed out that although Warhol's origins lay in a dominated position in the space of positions and dispositions that is the social space of class and culture, he did not remain there long. Very early on he started to acquire culture through education, being enrolled in Saturday morning classes at the Carnegie Museum at the age of 9. This set him on the course of cultural attainment from which he never looked back. As far as culture was concerned, Warhol was a very fast learner. He eventually acquired a sophisticated and ironic distance from the overeager aspiration and pretension to culture of the petit-bourgeoisie who have only recently and superficially acquired it, dissembling the depth of his own investment by feigning a lack of interest, even stupidity, especially regarding any kind of book learning. But one only has to look at the four volumes of the sale of the contents of his home to gauge the breadth of his cultural interests and acquisitions in material terms. It is all this that makes him such an exemplary artist for the late 20th century, and that includes the media celebrity status he embraced that has led and continues to lead some commentators to dismiss him (Hughes, 1987; Lawson, 1982).⁸

In my view, his importance lies in the fact that he experienced and made work that reflected the full spectrum of the late 20th-century field of cultural production, from the most sophisticated yet dominated forms of avant-garde and underground culture in which he was immersed in the early 1960s to his lifetime fascination with the minutiae of popular quotidian culture as reflected, besides his artwork and filmmaking, in his enterprises as a collector, a publisher (of *Interview* magazine), a music producer (with the *Velvet Underground*), and video and television productions (*Andy Warhol's TV*). As the child of first-generation working-class European immigrant parents, from early childhood on he practically and painfully internalised the myth of the American Dream; that utopian dream enshrined in the Hollywood of the 1950s and the institution that is American culture. Warhol understood the unspoken "open secret" of "gift exchange": The conversion of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic exchange between the dominant and the dominated and successfully exploited it, as clearly exemplified by his relationship with Edie Sedgwick. Others before him, in particular the performer and filmmaker Jack Smith (without whose example Warhol would not have

made films) and others associated with *The Theatre of the Ridiculous*, some of whom (like the playwright and scriptwriter Ronnie Tavel) he employed, were revelling in the performative excess of the gay underground, but only Warhol understood and exploited the mutual fascination between the dominant and dominated classes and facilitated their exchange. Unlike Smith, Warhol had no investment in the romantic bohemianism of failure. This was because he was schooled in the world of fashion and advertising, the world of commodity fetishism—his early art school training originally facilitated this. Warhol worked as an illustrator in that world for 11 years before he became an artist on the advice of his left-wing intellectual mentor, Emile de Antonio (“The person I got my art training from”). Familiarly known as “De,” de Antonio was a hero of the American left in the McCarthy era, a filmmaker who struggled to make films about Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon, and J. Edgar Hoover, under whom the FBI compiled a 10,000-page file on de Antonio (Lewis, 2000).

One of Warhol’s greatest skills was knowing how to make use of other people’s capital; he was keenly aware of the capital he lacked, and had the sense to utilise the specific capital of everyone around him.

I was never embarrassed about asking someone, literally, “What should I paint?” because Pop comes from the outside. . . . One lady friend of mine asked me the right question: “Well, what do you love most?” That’s how I started painting money. (Warhol & Hackett, 1980, pp. 16, 18)

The question of authenticity, the nature of the normative and, above all, the “real” in relation to the performative, was destined to become of paramount importance in late-capitalist art and theory. It is therefore important to understand its social origin in the political practices of the 1960s. In his own inimical way, Warhol was a “sexual politician.”⁹ In *POPism*, Warhol discussed his conversation with Emile de Antonio (“De”), who was a sort of artist’s agent. (“He connected artists with everything from neighbourhood movie houses to department stores and huge corporations. De was the first person I know of to see commercial art as real art and real art as commercial art, and he made the whole New York art world see it that way too.”) He fixed up Johns and Rauschenberg with window dressing jobs, which they did under the rather butch pseudonym of “Maston Jones” (Warhol & Hackett, 1980, p. 4). He went on to recount the answer De Antonio gave him when he asked why Johns and Rauschenberg appeared to dislike him; that it was because he honestly avowed the commercial aspect of his cultural production, that he had the temerity to collect other artists’ work, and that he made no secret of his homosexuality by coming on “swish” (Warhol & Hackett, 1980, pp. 11-13).

Warhol was transgressing several boundaries in relation to the kinds of capital it was considered you had to be invested in to be a seriously considered male artist at this time. Warhol’s refusal to conform to these conditions is a measure of his honesty and sense of the truth of the social conditions under which he laboured. In the end, this honesty enabled him to appropriate more radical forms of social energy than others, finally enabling him, in David Sylvester’s (1996) words, to “change the rules of the game” (p. 49).

Capitalism Avowed

Through his open acknowledgement of the commercial nature of art, Warhol broke with the avant-garde's long-standing need to defend itself against the bourgeoisie by disavowing economic capital in favour of symbolic capital. He saw, admitted, ruthlessly exposed, and, some would say, exploited the true nature of symbolic and economic capital's involvement with each other. As Bourdieu (1993) wrote,

The art business, a trade in things that have no price, belongs to the class of practices in which the logic of the pre-capitalist economy lives on (as it does, in another sphere in the economy of exchanges between the generations). These practices, functioning as practical *negations*, can only work by pretending not to be doing what they are doing. Defying ordinary logic, they lend themselves to two opposed readings, both equally false, which each undo their essential duality and duplicity by reducing them either to the disavowal or to what is disavowed—to disinterestedness or self-interest. (p. 74)¹⁰

Warhol (1975) came to understand practically what Bourdieu here spelled out theoretically. This enabled him to make shockingly witty and honest statements about art, money, and business.

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 went into business art. I wanted to be an Art Businessman or Business Artist because making money is art and working is art, and good business is the best art. . . . Business art. Art business. The Business Art Business. (p. 92)

Surely no other contemporary artist had previously practiced the “economy of practices” in relation to capitalism, linked with “queer identification,” as smartly as he did, playing the art world at its own game by transgressively identifying art and business, thus gaining in symbolic capital by doing so without losing the ability of representing those who continue to lose and gain from it, and not just with regard to class but also with regard to issues of sexuality. As Peter Wollen (1989) pointed out, the subject of his work is the conspicuous consummation of the society of the spectacle revealed through the theatricality of display. For, as the art historian Benjamin Buchloh (1989b) wrote,

If it was Duchamp's achievement to have defined the work of art within the framework of the commodity fetish, then it is Warhol's achievement to have defined artistic production in terms of the fetishization of the sign and pure sign exchange value. (pp. 64-65)

Warhol has proved to be a major cultural producer in relation to the “logic” and “economy of practices” of capitalism and camp and, as a result, he came to possess enviable amounts of economic, social, cultural, and, although he probably never quite believed in it, symbolic capital in the form of social legitimation. His extraordinary social trajectory from abject provincial to international celebrity, “camp icon,” and major cultural producer provides a unique opportunity to gain a concrete and exemplary grasp of the complexity of Bourdieu's understanding of transformations in the “field of cultural production,” the “logic of practice,” and the “economy of symbolic goods” in late-capitalism.

Finally, it is worth noting the class fractional parallels between Warhol and Bourdieu. For is it not the latter's own class status that gives his work such a critical edge and makes its arguments and framework so particularly relevant to Warhol?¹¹

Notes

1. In tracing Warhol's social trajectory in this article, I hope that I have not overindulged "the biographical illusion" (Bourdieu, 1986) that is attached to the name of the artist. Warhol's trajectory is the product of the "logic of practice"—" {(habitus)(capital)} + field = practice" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101) which constructs a "life history":

Trying to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events (sufficient unto itself), and without ties other than the association to a "subject" whose constancy is just that of a proper name, is nearly as absurd as trying to make sense out of a subway route without taking into account the network structure, that is the matrix of objective relations between the different stations. The biographical events are defined as just so many *investments* and *moves* in social space, or more precisely, in the different successive states of the distribution structure of the different types of capital which are in play in the field considered. (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 301-302)

2. One of the best expositions of the ambiguities of Warhol's cultural production is Buchloh (1989b, pp. 52-69).

3. Bourdieu (1983) defined capital thus:

Capital is accumulated labour (in its materialised form or its "incorporated," embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour. (p. 241)

4. As Bourdieu said:

A general science of the economy of practices that does not artificially limit itself to those practices that are socially recognized as economic must endeavor to grasp capital, that "energy of social physics" in all of its different forms, and to uncover the laws that regulate their conversion from one into another. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 118)

5. For comments by Truman Capote, René Ricard, and Isabel Eberstadt on Warhol's relationship to Edie.

6. On the globalization of the American model of cultural studies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999, pp. 41-58).

7. The question of Bourdieu and popular culture has been raised by Shusterman (1992) and Fowler (1997). Besides *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu has raised these issues in Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and in Bourdieu (1990a, 1991). In relation to this issue, Bourdieu said:

I knew what I was exposing myself to at the very moment when I was writing the paragraph in *Distinction* devoted to "popular culture" as a properly intellectual myth, but I did so in spite of everything, because I felt that one day someone had to risk facing the disgrace incurred by those who violate the unwritten laws of their group in order to shed some truth on a very essential point. (Calhoun, LiPuma, & Postone, 1990, p. 269)

8. See also Hilton Kramer's (1986) invective against camp in his introduction.

9. The title of a chapter, "The Sexual Politician," in Koch (1973) republished in O'Pray (1989).
10. Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods" (1977). There is an excellent discussion of Warhol's work in relation to capital and consumption in Suárez (1996, p. 123).
11. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of *Space and Culture* for bringing this to my attention.

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