

Warhol—Image And Substance

Andy Warhol is often thought of as a quintessential 60s figure. Through his films and his even more widely available existence as a media personality, he presided over the 60s swinging brew of sex and drugs. He put cocaine and pot, queens, hustlers and transvestites onto the cultural map. And he was the figure in whom was articulated the arrival of rock as *the* characteristic form of contemporary bourgeois culture.

His art works - the silk-screens of Coca-Cola bottles, Campbell's soup tins, Brillo pad boxes and endlessly repeated abstractions of the face of Monroe or Elizabeth Taylor - drew from the reservoir of absolutely ordinary American mass culture. But they were bought and hung by rock stars; Warhol and Co went to rock venues and eventually he went into rock promotion himself. Because he was 'an artist', all this associated rock with art, with modernism in the arts even. One interpretation of the 60s argues that the period was one long swinging rock party, with Andy at the helm, whilst the more ungenerous version says it was a middle-class white boys' party, with Andy at the helm.

There are other versions of the 60s that Warhol has little to do with: the growth of militant black political action, the hippies and the anti-imperialist struggles and protest. You'd have to work hard to see Warhol as emblematic of these. Left critics have sometimes tried to make out that Warhol's work was in some broad sense progressive. Some have seen his art as a critique of society - by taking the most familiar images of US society, they argue that he is making us aware of how empty US society is; by focusing on blatantly commercial images, he tells us that we live in a crass commercial society; by the repetition of images he highlights the banality of the cul-

ture. If you take such a reading then Warhol does relate to the rejection and critique of mass, consumer society characteristic of much 60s' politics. But this is a long way indeed from the fierce recognition of specific oppressions or from the searching for transcendence and an alternative way of being.

Much of the fire, militancy and vision of 60s' politics in the West were themselves rooted in the 50s, in the gradual reorientation of black



King of the swingers: Warhol

politics away from accommodationism, and in the renewal in various of the arts (from bebop and abstract expressionism to beat poetry) of a yearning for spiritual transcendence. The black movement, however, combined both these tendencies.

There was something of that too in the student movement, but there is also a critique of contemporary society in terms of image, falsity, manipulation, emptiness - 'the society of the spectacle' as the Situationists dubbed it. From this developed the characteristic 70s' stress on

the centrality of the media to political action. Much of this work has been of the greatest importance, when it has been rooted in specific struggles. But at a broader level, the focus on the media also has dangers that are implicit in Warhol.

Warhol's image of the media does have roots in popular gay culture. Like camp, which emerged openly into mainstream culture around the same time, Warhol's work makes mass culture strange and unnatural because for gay people, so consistently excluded from it, that is what it is. Camp



Warhol: Liz no2, 1962

however is unruly and disrespectful; it never ceases to signal its gayness; it enjoys and resists the blandishments of mainstream culture. Instead of giggling subversively from the margins - the appeal and limitation of camp - Warhol simply got into the strangeness and unnaturalness of the mainstream and milked it for all it was worth.

Nonetheless something came out of this that makes a more convincing case for a left reading of Warhol's work than that sketched above. Warhol highlights the business of representation in the society of the spectacle. His paintings and silkscreen are indistinguishable from the mass artefacts that they refer to - apart from size and market value, you might just as well have a box of Brillo pads as Warhol's version of it.

This means that Warhol's versions reproduce very well and so they are part of a

never ending circuit - a postcard of his Campbell's tomato soup tin is a reproduction of an image that is itself a hand reproduction of an image that has itself been reproduced on a mass scale. Now you could see this is as progressive partly in that it makes one look, really look, at the visual noise of ads and spectacle that surround us, and partly in that it highlights the circuit of reproduction that we are all caught up in at this late stage of capitalist development. The question is, what follows from it or indeed, what followed?

With Warhol, nothing *political* follows from it, it is just the way things are, and if anything, he wishes they were even more that way. In his widely recorded and repeated *Bon Mots*, he asks that society be more artificial. He blatantly promoted himself and his 'stars' as hype. From here it is only a step to saying that after all society - life - is nothing but image and hype. This is a problem with much of the media criticism of the 70s, that it seems to wind up saying that there is only spectacle, or in our more sober jargon, 'discourse'. Warhol is thus the first gasp of what has come to be called post-modernism.

This intellectual version is only an inflection of a wider tendency that even reaches into mainstream party politics, Kinnock's Labour Party has got the message - image is important, you have to make an impact if you want to get elected. And of course this is true. But maybe they've got the message in a too Warholian way.

For Warhol, there is only image. He himself is only image - 'there is nothing behind me'. Isn't this the danger of the red roses, *Homes and Gardens* pretty as they are? Concern with image is fine if it is a concern with accurate and effective communication. But to be concerned only with effectiveness, only with whether people go for the image, is to embrace the society of the spectacle, as Warhol did, not to attack it. •

Richard Dyer