The Authentic Warhol?

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Blake Gopnik, *Warhol*. Ecco,
976 pp., $45 cloth, $25 paper.

Matt Wrbican, *A is for Archive: Warhol's World from A to Z*. Andy Warhol Museum / Yale University Press, 316 pp., $45 cloth.

Is a biography of an artist a work of art history? Should a detailed personal history of an artist inform the interpretation of their art? The two forms were inseparable in sixteenth-century Europe. What some scholars call the first art historical text—Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*, published in two volumes in 1550 and 1568, respectively—is a collection of short biographies. While later scholars have questioned the book's veracity, as well as Vasari's bias toward artists from Florence, these books (along with Karel van Mander's Northern European counterpart, published in 1604) established the field of art history in Europe. Vasari relied upon a biographical model to think about art's historical development in Renaissance Italy, connecting the works of fourteenth-century artists like Giotto to childhood (not yet having mastered linear perspective, for example) and the masterworks of Michelangelo in the sixteenth century to that of a mature adult (full mastery). Such a model might even predict the many deaths (and rebirths) of painting ever since.

Early art historians did not always have access to biographies, however. Johann Joachim Winckelmann looked at ancient Greek sculpture produced by unknown artisans (*History of the Art of Antiquity*, published in Germany in 1764). Without biography to help with interpretation, he focused instead on the ways that the "beauty" of the objects could suggest something of Greek society and its freedoms. Art history continued to evolve in the first half of the twentieth century with other methodologies that also explicitly rejected biography—notably Heinrich Wölfflin's formalism and Erwin Panofsky's iconographic approach. Wölfflin's focus on a formal elements of the work of art, especially through comparisons between the paintings from the renaissance and baroque periods in Europe, overlooked subject matter in interpretation. Whether the painted canvas exhibited "linear" or "painterly" qualities was more important to Wölfflin than narrative content. Erwin Panofsky rejected such formalism in favor of an iconology, delving into subject matter and symbols to decode meaning, relying on extensive research into Biblical stories, ancient myths, and their period reception.

Despite the vast influence of Winckelmann, Wölfflin, and Panofsky, the lives of artists—their upbringing, training, networks of friends, romantic entanglements, mental health, struggles with addiction, or legal problems—nevertheless remained important to the interpretation of artworks. This interpretive framework accompanied modernism's focus on heroic and romantic notions of the singular artist, a figure whose creative output reflects personal and social alienation. In some ways, biography is the most popular kind of art history: stories about van Gogh's amputated ear, Michelangelo's fiery temper, or Jackson Pollock urinating in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace carry much weight among casual museumgoers. Many professional art historians also incorporate

details of the artist's life, combined with other methodologies, into their interpretations. My own work on Andy Warhol, for instance, has explored the ways that his commercial art career allowed him to make unexpected connections between advertising and postwar American abstract painting. His heavily annotated calendars from the early 1960s, for example, provided evidence that he visited the studio of Frank Stella, one of the most important abstract painters in postwar New York, on numerous occasions. For me, these meetings (and his purchase of Stella's work) "prove" Warhol's serious interest in rigorous and geometric abstract painting.

The rise of intellectual Marxism, which conceived of artworks as expressions of larger cultural and social processes, rather than of an individual artist's will, put biography's use in art history on notice again. Arnold Hauser's pioneering *Social History of Art*, first published in 1951, is a key early example that ties, for example, the increased naturalism of Renaissance art to the development of mercantile capitalism. If Hauser—and the social art historians of the 1970s and early 1980s, such as T.J. Clark and John Barrell—implicitly questioned the usefulness of biography in the study of art, the French literary theorist Roland Barthes made such ideas explicit with his 1967 essay "The Death of the Author." Barthes contented that a consideration of the life of an author (or, by extension an artist) unproductively limits the reader's (or viewer's) interpretation of creative products. This understanding is predicated upon the idea that once a work enters the public domain, it enters into a new discourse, rendering the private experiences of the artist irrelevant to how a work comes to signify and function in the social world. The semiotic life of an artwork—how it engages with the public—matters the most for many art historians, especially for those who work on contemporary art.

In a particularly trenchant essay from 1985 on the cubist collages of Pablo Picasso, Rosalind Krauss bemoaned the prevalent use of biography (particularly his relationships with women) to interpret his works. For her, Picasso's collages from around 1912, which incorporated pasted bits of newspaper, have nothing to do with the daily rhythms of the artist's life but instead are responding to other works and questioning the very nature of traditional representation in art. If works of art foreground, to quote Krauss, "impersonal operations," why should the artist's life factor into its meaning? The popularity of French critical theory in the art world in the late 1970s and early 1980s called the very nature of originality into question—whether the ideas of Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida or others. In response, some artists began to obscure their own biographies, symbolically enacting their own death. This became one of the key tenets of "postmodernism" which dominated discussions of art in the early 1980s and beyond. In her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80), for example, Cindy Sherman did not want viewers to consider her life experiences when looking at the work, but rather the ways that this series of self-portraits demonstrates the power and misogyny of female stereotypes in films. Sherman's work implies that film—and, by extension, the mass media more broadly—shapes us as subjects more so than any personal agency or abstract "essence."
If social forces like capitalism structure individuality, then what is the role of

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biography in art history today?

With his recent biography of Andy Warhol, Blake Gopnik engages with these issues. Gopnik's book is the first comprehensive biography since Warhol insider Victor Bockris published one in 1989, soon after the artist's death in 1987. Since then, Warhol's stature in both the art world and the culture at large has ballooned into gigantic proportions, with a host of licensed products, blockbuster museum exhibitions, and astronomical prices at auction. Perhaps, the enormity of this subject—Warhol is as much a cultural touchstone as he is a specific person—has led to smaller and more focused volumes. The stakes seem more manageable when an author does not have to make sense of Warhol's entire life and artistic output. The poet Wayne Koestenbaum and philosopher Arthur Danto each published slim biographies in 2001 and 2010, respectively. Additionally, biographies have focused on the decade of the 1960s (Tony Scherman and David Dalton's *Pop: The Genius of Andy Warhol* from 2009) as well as the 1970s and 1980s at Warhol's *Interview* magazine (Bob Colacello's *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* from 1990). Clocking in at 912 pages of text, with endnotes available only online, Gopnik's book, in addition to discussing the full sweep of Warhol's life and work, also could serve as a proverbial doorstop or a useful prop to raise a laptop's camera during Zoom meetings. The book's imposing physical presence suggests its attempt to acquire that all-important descriptor of "definitive."

What does it mean to write the definitive account of a complex figure like Warhol? I want to use Gopnik's book to return to my opening question, but with a Warholian turn: how should one write a biography about an artist who intentionally resists the very idea of biography? Can one write an effective biography when its subject eradicated himself from much of his artwork (even, ironically, in his self-portraits), intentionally misled friends and reporters, and left behind an archive that is as vast as it is confounding? In other words, is the traditional "big biography" possible, or indeed desirable, if the author/artist has agreed to die in order to secure the openness of the artwork? If biography is still tenable under such circumstances, then might it actually do a disservice to artworks that explicitly attempt to dismantle subjectivity?

To his credit, Gopnik does deflate many myths about the artist and corrects the historical record on some important points. To list just a few, he reveals that a college-aged Warhol saw many important artists, like Marcel Duchamp, in a Pittsburgh gallery called Outlines, and that he began his silkscreen series of Marilyn Monroe *before* she died (not afterwards). With its richness of anecdotal detail and some new information, the book will certainly find its way into future scholarly bibliographies.

Gopnik is at his best when subtly discussing the very difficulties of his project, writing the following when discussing the mid-1960s: "Was he himself a joke or a genius, or a radical or social climber? As Warhol would have answered: Yes." To think that Warhol merits a biography of this length is also to acknowledge his greatest artistic feat: there is no authentic Warhol to discover. In a sense, Gopnik's biographical efforts in *Warhol* can be viewed alongside Edward Casaubon's unending writing project in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* (1871-72). Casaubon's *The Key to All Mythologies*, which purported to unlock the ultimate meaning and origin of "all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world," is an impossible project. There is no key to unlock or explain either human mythologies or Warhol's artistic practices. Warhol designed his artworks precisely to confound some notion of singular meaning. One could say the same about his life. As such, there is no way that a traditional biography (birth, maturity, death) can capture the singular achievement of Warhol's subjective

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erasure and social ubiquity.

A quick look at Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans, begun in 1962, can demonstrate the ways his art eludes secure interpretation and biographical treatment. Warhol himself stated that he painted this subject because at some point he ate the same lunch every day, a can of Campbell's Soup. By using a biographical detail of the most literal and mundane sort to explain his work (a story that Gopnik debunks as false), Warhol allowed these painted cans to take on an interpretative life of their own. Gopnik discusses an "origin" story for the series, sharing how Warhol paid an art dealer fifty dollars for an idea for his next work, and she told the artist that he should paint "something you see every day that everybody would recognize. Something like Campbell's Soup." Gopnik then mentions a few interpretations that work with and against biography: Warhol's quip to a friend of their Dada-like nothingness that rejected the individualist cult of Abstract Expressionism, the camp aesthetic of the cans themselves appealed to Warhol's gay sensibility, and brands like Campbell's Soup began to market themselves to the working class at precisely this moment, perhaps reminding Warhol of his childhood poverty.

In other words, Gopnik provides insight into the Campbell's Soup cans for the non-specialist, but he also curtails and shuts down their interpretative potential. What about Warhol's background in advertising? His interest in *Life* magazine where soup advertisements appeared weekly? His awareness of the connections between graphic design and contemporary abstract painting? Or even the ways that soup cans were a staple found in nuclear fallout shelters? In talking about Warhol's photo booth portraits from just after the first Campbell's Soup cans, Gopnik writes, "But, for once, biography might *not* be the key to unlocking the roots of Warhol's creations" (emphasis his). I would contend that biography never provides a key to Warhol's practice. Biography can be evidence—sometimes compelling, other times not—that factors into a constellation of interpretations. By leaving the meaning of his works (and life) open, Warhol enabled the construction of constellations of potential and sometimes contradictory meanings. This intentional rejection of prescribed interpretation is part of what makes him one of the most important artists of the twentieth century.

Along these lines, Gopnik tries too hard to make sense out of (and defend) Warhol's disparate ventures of the 1970s and 1980s, especially the portrait commissions, *Interview* magazine, publicity gambits, and television ventures. He classifies them all under the rubric of "business art," which the artist described as "the step that comes after art." Gopnik then compares this "business art" to the work of Marcel Duchamp, with Warhol explicitly and radically blurring the divides between capitalist enterprises and art making. Of vital importance to Duchamp's practice, however, was *negation*—something Warhol's work largely lacked, especially after his 1968 shooting. In Duchamp's canonical readymades from the

1910s— everyday objects that are recontextualized as “art”—it was crucial that the chosen objects were rendered useless when they went on display as art. It is not desirable to urinate in an unplumbed, upside-down urinal (his *Fountain* from 1917), for instance. Can one say the same about a Warhol-designed ad for Absolut Vodka in 1985? Warhol was paid handsomely and presumably, many bottles of Swedish Vodka sold as a result. Some projects from this period—like Warhol’s abstract *Shadow* paintings (1978-79) or his *Oxidation* series (1977-78) that produced large-scale, Pollock-esque abstract paintings by means of the artist’s urinating on a ground of copper paint—deserve more attention. But other works are woefully substandard and desperate, with some, like his *Cowboys and Indians* series (1986) and his active seeking of commissions for portraits of Imelda Marcos and the Shah of Iran in the mid-1970s, even morally suspect. Lumping all Warhol projects together as part of a larger “business art” strategy is not only

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disingenuous but also dangerously amoral.

In demonstrating the increasing notoriety of the artist by the mid-1960s, Gopnik quotes Warhol-insider Paul Morrissey on what would make for an effective Warhol biography: “Andy’s biography should really be written just from his press clippings [...] That’s closer to the truth.” Such a pop mode of biography seems appropriate for an artist who tried to erase any subjective traces from his work. Morrissey’s hypothetical book would be written by many and encompass a frustrating diversity of opinions on the artists and his work, not just the single voice of Blake Gopnik attempting to present a coherent version of “Warhol.”

Morrissey’s approach to biography reminds me of literary theorist Hayden White’s discussion of the ways that narrating history (and by extension, biography) cannot escape the subjective “impulse to moralize reality.” In a contrast, White explores older modes of historical writing from the medieval period that escape the implicit bias that a narrative framework provides. He looks to the bare-bones styles of *annals*, which list years and events with neither priority nor connection, and the *chronicle*, which lacks a tidy narrative and any larger interpretation of events. While White is not advocating a return to these medieval frameworks, his essay can compel historians and biographers to think carefully about how they deploy artificial narratives in their work and to be more honest and upfront with their intentions and biases. While a Warhol biography written solely from press clippings would lack a narrative thrust and interpretation (and be thousands of pages long), it would also refrain from packaging the artist in a way that works against the very thrust of his artistic projects.

Gopnik acknowledges that Warhol himself tried to thwart neat and packaged narratives in his work and life. For instance, when Warhol was charged with curating an exhibition with objects from storage at the museum of Rhode Island School of Design, the resulting *Raid the Icebox* (1969) featured objects that had never been on display, including paintings with holes, empty frames, fifteen examples of an identical Windsor chair, and masses of kitschy objects. Even more radical was the way that Warhol’s display mimicked the museum storage room—showing objects stuffed on modular shelves and resting on the floor, sometimes with paintings even partially blocked. If museums usually try to tell a clear narrative in their

curatorial selections and display, then in *Raid the Icebox*, Warhol's choice of objects (too many to consider) and his manner in presenting them (akin to museum storage) exposed the arbitrariness of established aesthetic categories. Curators choose what objects are on view in museums and thus what stories to tell; Is a biographer any different? If not, what would a *Raid the Icebox* approach to biography look like?

Gopnik suggests an answer by connecting *Raid the Icebox* with Warhol's own arbitrary archival system, known as his *Time Capsules*, housed at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. Warhol did not throw away much in the way of paper during his time in New York, whether receipts, drawings, books, or newspapers. In the mid-1970s, he began a process of storing his vast collection of miscellany for posterity, placing materials from the whole range of his life in what eventually amounted to 610 standard-sized cardboard boxes. While the exterior appearance is order and rationality, with boxes displayed, grid-like, on modular shelves, the contents of each box defies any organizational logic. For example, Gopnik references *Time Capsule* number 212, that holds 538 items, including McDonald's French fry sleeves and paper salt packages, among other things more directly related to Warhol. But what are researchers supposed to do with this evidence? Did Warhol eat McDonald's fries often or was this just a singular instance that Warhol wanted to remember? We can't know; this is the joy and frustration of the *Time Capsules*. *Time Capsule* 61 (not discussed by Gopnik) is significant for holding some very significant biographical objects: Warhol's autographed photograph of Shirley Temple from his childhood and his hospital bracelet that he wore in the aftermath of his 1968 shooting. Rubbing up alongside those is a pair of embroidered Capri pants, lots of mail from publishers and galleries, pictures he borrowed from the New York Public library in 1954 (and never returned), a playbill from a dance performance, a book about the chemistry of aluminum, and scores of other objects. Does one even dare to attempt to connect the disparate dots? Or is the whole system of *Time Capsule* a taunting joke aimed at potential biographers and scholars?

Gopnik is aware of this condition: "The hundreds of thousands of items in the *Time Capsules* seem to reveal everything you could ever want to know about the man and artist names Andy Warhol. They also could do more to confound, overwhelm and even foil his biographers than the most direct of his lies ever did." This passage is remarkable in that Gopnik acknowledges the limitations of his book and indeed any Warhol biography: Warhol has stacked the deck against coherence, whether in the *Time Capsules*, or in the reams of conflicting accounts of events given by those in Warhol's orbit. Despite this, Gopnik has done a remarkable job under the circumstances, offering readers a conflicted view of an artist desperate to have both massive fame and impeccable avant-garde creditability. However, the book is also a disservice to the artist, trying to provide an artificial sense of coherence to an artist who knowingly wanted to confound biography by constructing an infrastructure of allegorical possibility into his legacy.

Gopnik also alludes to the interpretative chaos of the *Time Capsules* in his preface to another recent book about Warhol, Matt Wrbican's *A is for Archive: Warhol's World from A to Z*. Wrbican, who was the chief archivist of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh before his premature death of cancer in 2019, seemed to subscribe to the idea that to know about Andy Warhol was to know about all his stuff. *A is for Archive* is a remarkable book in that it discusses and illustrates the range of materials found in Warhol archives. Wrbican used the alphabet as a guiding principle. "A is for Autograph" and "B is for Box" start the book, and "Z is for Zombie" conclude it. Such a structure seems to follow Hayden White's cautions against historical narratives

that simplify and sanitize messy material. Wrbican's structure allows readers to grasp the range of Warhol's collected objects, ephemera, and trash, while also demonstrating how any "coherent" idea of Warhol is a fiction. While Wrbican offers perspective on the contents and biographic details, he is more of a chronicler—reporting rather than interpreting the existence of material evidence. This approach allows the enigma of the artist to take center stage.

Warhol slyly commented on his relation to biography in a famous 1967 interview with Gretchen Berg, "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it." By downplaying his own multi-dimensionality as an individual, as well as his capricious intellect and complexity as a subject appropriate for a biography, Warhol implies that viewers should consider his works relative to the larger visual world, whether archives of fine art or mass media. As such, to silkscreen an image of Marilyn Monroe fifty times in a modular grid is more concerned with celebrity and the public lives of images than with the private life of Warhol as an individual creator. It is clear that artists like Cindy Sherman, discussed above, learned much from Warhol's example of directing attention away from romantic notions of self-expression. These two new books on Warhol both illuminate how the artist was "postmodern" long before this term became common parlance. Blake Gopnik does this through his meticulously organized content, building up intentional patterns of self-erasure in his carefully plotted narrative. Its legible form of a traditional biography, in a sense, undermines the very untraditional content. Matt Wrbican's volume perhaps reveals more about Warhol, in that its organization demonstrates the chaos and interpretative openness of the artist's life and artworks. The author is not dead, as Roland Barthes argued, but just dispersed and fragmented in the archives. *A*

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