

## Endangered Species

Andy Warhol is a very misunderstood artist. When he first created pop art in the early 1960's, it was regarded as a highly controversial, satirical take on the emerging consumerism in the United States. However, Warhol's fascination with consumer culture is undoubted, as he states:

What's great about this country is America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too (Warhol).

Many people interpreted this pop art to display his negative opinion of American culture, but in reality his views were far more complex than simply saying consumerism is good or bad. Art critic Christopher Knight observes that Warhol has consistently been "mutilated into a pessimistic critic" when he really just wanted people to understand the inevitable reality that originality is dying and it has to be accepted rather than fought. Mass production was becoming a reality, and Warhol understood that resistance to this new era would be a fruitless endeavor.

Warhol himself said that these materialistic things, such as the Coke bottles or Campbell's soup, are what "sustain us", so he evidently realized the necessity of consumerism in corporate America. Despite this realization that commercialism is essential, he also recognized the damage it places on the environment, which is evident in his 1983 *Endangered Species* exhibit. Andy Warhol's *Endangered Species* exhibit illuminates the way society's appreciation for animals is vanishing and how it relates to mass production and the American consumerism culture.

While drowned out among the controversy of pop art, Warhol was an active environmentalist as well. He often spoke out about preserving the environment, saying “land is the best art.” He owned a significant chunk of land near Carbondale, Colorado and never did anything with it to avoid damaging the natural beauty. His 1983 *Endangered Species* exhibit features ten silkscreen prints, each of them portraying an animal on the brink of extinction, such as the Siberian Tiger, African Elephant and Bighorn Ram. The prints he sold were donated to conservation groups and were intended to create awareness of these endangered animals (publicdelivery.org).

Despite accepting the foundation of American culture that is consumerism, Warhol also recognized that when nature stops being identified as a vital aspect of society, consumerism has gone too far. This message is evident in his *Endangered Species* exhibit. The exhibit stays true to his pop art style and the screen prints are lined up to seem like an assembly line. Warhol himself stated that they look “like mechanically reproduced photos in cheap tabloid newspapers.” The format itself is very standardized with all of them printed in the same size and bright color scheme. However, the animals themselves each have their own unique details and each of the animals was intended to get “star treatment” (publicdelivery.org). By putting the animals in the same style of art that he put celebrities like Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy, he is elevating them to an almost celebrity status, emphasizing the treatment they deserve.

In the same way that Ralph Waldo Emerson regarded nature as a “high and divine beauty” (Emerson 4), Andy Warhol is glamorizing the animals with bright colors and intricate details to show their unique qualities and give them this image of divinity. The uniformity of the format allows the differences and specialty of each animal as an individual to be illuminated

glaringly. With the emergence of mass production where uniqueness is subdued and uniformity is normalized, animals tend to get caught up in the mix too. Species are no longer seen as individuals with beauty and significance, but get diminished to just another resource to be exploited. By elevating them to “star treatment”, Andy Warhol reminds society that animals are not just a mass produced piece of plastic.

Another Emerson ideology that Warhol seems to reflect in this work is that nature works for the profit of man (Emerson 3). Andy Warhol clearly had interest in commodities and profit, considering much of his work was centered around a capitalist culture. Emerson was similarly interested in commodities and the way in which the profit of man is a continuous cycle fueled solely by the irreplaceable power of nature. Warhol accepted consumerism as a now essential aspect of modern American culture, but also embraced nature and advocated for the preservation of it, such as these endangered animals. This displays that Warhol recognized the way nature fuels the industry society profits from. Without natural resources, such as wood or iron, mass production cannot continue to grow at an exponential rate. Humans can create new technology and new techniques for faster, more accurate assembly of products, but the accompanying natural commodities cannot be replaced and should be cherished. In this new capitalist society, the deep-rooted cycle of nature and profit that Emerson identified, is still relevant. Warhol recognized this interdependence, which is why he can advocate for both consumerism and conservation without contradicting himself.

To further highlight the importance of each species individually, Warhol refers to the exhibit as “animals in makeup.” This goes along with the whole concept of equating them with celebrities and really emphasizing their importance and influence they should have. By giving

them these human traits, it makes it easier for humans to relate to them and see them as equals, rather than inferiors.

As Andy Warhol called his art “animals in makeup”, most would assume John Ruskin was rolling in his grave. However, when examining Warhol’s intentions, it is clear he serves the purpose Ruskin intended art to have. In his work “Landscape, Mimesis and Mortality”, Ruskin makes it clear art needs to be protected from the pathetic fallacy and subjectivity. He claims that when humans allow their emotions and passions to influence them, it creates a “falseness in [their] impressions of external things” (Ruskin 26). This then ultimately leads to the personification and anthropomorphism of nature, which is the pathetic fallacy. While this is common in art especially in a style that is not meant to be completely realistic, such as Warhol’s, Ruskin finds that good art is art that presents the truth. He states that the “spirit of truth must guide us” (Ruskin 28) rather than allowing the image of nature to become distorted.

Andy Warhol’s approach to art is a stark contrast to this realist way of thinking, but it essentially serves the same purpose. Warhol may not depict a zebra in its natural environment with natural colors and shapes, but he also portrays a truth to society. While creating this exhibit, Warhol realized society was fully immersed in a consumerist culture and was losing sight of nature. In order to engage people with nature again, he depicts the animals as something appealing and captivating to the values of modern society, which is celebrity and glamor. His truth is that the animals are deserving of attention and a high status. Despite not creating lifelike prints, he is led by the “spirit of truth” (Ruskin 28) just as Ruskin would have wanted.

This shows that environmentalism comes in many forms and Warhol’s fascination with consumerism can actually complement his conservation efforts, not just contradict them. In fact,

there are several similarities between Warhol's earlier pop art and the *Endangered Species* exhibit. Warhol has often made art depicting elements of mortality. Art critic Christopher Knight describes

The Campbell's soup can labels, portraits of Marilyn Monroe, pictures of an electric chair, images of gruesome accidents splashed across the tabloid press--many of the great early '60s silk-screen paintings are here. So is the emphasis on modern mortality often prominent in Warhol's art, whether it's post-suicide Marilyn or a horrid execution device (Knight).

However, these death-related graphics are consistently shown with bright, vivid colors and aesthetically pleasing details, such as the "Electric Chair" (Warhol). They almost glamorize mortality, rather than generating fear of it in order to catch the viewer's attention and to help them understand the deeper message. The overarching message of his *Death and Disasters* series was to show a darker reality of American life and to serve as a reminder that new technology does not equal immortality. Essentially, the *Endangered Species* exhibit does the same thing. It is a snapshot of impending death for these species. Despite displaying them in a flashing and colorful way, this is just to garner attention and then illustrate the real message that something needs to be done before they vanish.

According to Greg Garrard's "Ecocriticism" categories, Andy Warhol's exhibit would put him in the category of Environmentalism. By looking at the exhibit through the lense of this Environmentalism category, Warhol's main points are further emphasized. According to Gerard:

The very broad range of people who are concerned about environmental issues such as global warming and pollution, but who wish to maintain or improve their standard of

living as conventionally defined, and who would not welcome radical social change, will be described hereinafter as ‘environmentalists’ (Gerard 21).

Essentially, environmentalists want to live in a balance between a consumerist culture as well as being concerned for the environment. Andy Warhol displays this stance through the exhibit. By giving the animals a celebrity status he highlights their importance and the preservation efforts they deserve. However, by involving celebrity and glamor in his exhibit, he is also feeding into a culture becoming increasingly materialistic and hyperfocused on material goods, which obviously does not benefit the environment. Warhol himself is a self-proclaimed “deeply superficial person” (Warhol), so it would be unrealistic to imagine him living in complete solitude to fully embrace nature. Just as other environmentalists, he accepts consumerism and does not attempt to isolate himself from it, but also has a deep concern for nature, such as the ten animals he portrays in the *Endangered Species* exhibit.

Despite his fascination with capitalism and consumerism, this does not automatically place him in the Cornucopian category. These people do not acknowledge the dangers of scarcity and believe capitalism fuels environmental improvements (Gerard 19). By putting the endangered animals in an assembly line formation, Warhol is not endorsing consumerism, but rather criticizing the effect it has on nature. He understood the limitations of capitalism and cherished the value of the natural, unlike Cornucopians.

After his *Endangered Species* exhibit, Warhol went on to do the visuals for the book *Vanishing Animals*. Written by pathologist Kurt Benirschke, the book is comprised of 15 chapters with each focusing on an endangered species. Especially lesser known species are brought up, such as the Mouse Armadillo or La Plata River Dolphin. Benirschke did all the

writing and Warhol created prints for each chapter with the goal of raising awareness and inspiring others to take action as well. Andy Warhol was undoubtedly a conservationist and his art, such as *Endangered Species*, shows the way consumerism and environmentalism can coexist.