“Except Like a Tracing”:
Defectiveness, Accuracy, and
Class in Early Warhol*

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The deliberate creation of lack as a function of market economy is the art of a dominant class.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus

Andy Warhol’s most astute interpreters have frequently been forced to acknowledge that class plays a key role in his work, and that its manifestations may be stylistic as well as iconographic, but they have typically had a difficult time describing its specific power in any detail. In his review of Warhol’s 1962 show at the Stable Gallery, Michael Fried bemoaned “the advent of a generation that will not be as moved by Warhol’s beautiful, vulgar, heart-breaking icons of Marilyn Monroe as I am” and remarked that “Warhol has a painterly competence, a sure instinct for vulgarity (as in his choice of colors) and a feeling for what is truly human and pathetic in one of the exemplary myths of our time that I for one find moving . . . .”2 The essay is only a few hundred words long, and the repeated references to vulgarity are therefore all the more striking. Vulgarity, as T. J. Clark has convincingly shown, is fundamentally a class-based pejorative: a “betrayal, on the part of those who by rights ought to be in the vanguard of good taste.”3 What Fried immediately sees in Warhol is a breach of bourgeois taste that is somehow successfully counterbalanced by the force of Warhol’s aesthetic proficiency.4

4. Strikingly, in Fried, this balance between betrayal and beauty is almost explicitly sexualized: the reason the Marilyn works succeed and the Troy Donahue works fail is “because the fact remains
“Beautiful, vulgar, heart-breaking”—in these paintings, class betrayal is the middle term, the hinge, between pleasure and tragedy, but the specific workings of this relationship are not investigated here or elsewhere in Fried’s work.

Although Arthur Danto’s initial discussion of Warhol’s Brillo Boxes described their real-world counterparts as “homely,” the works themselves were quickly reincorporated into the sublime transfiguration that marks the difference between “real world” and “art world.”

And yet, even in this rarefied context, class briefly reared its ugly head: describing a number of possible Brillo Box installations and their likely interpretations, Danto imagined a claustrophobic tunnel of boxes, which could be interpreted “as the closing in of consumer products, confining us as prisoners.” “True,” he admitted, “we don’t say these things about the stockboy. But then a stockroom is not an art gallery, and we cannot readily separate the Brillo cartons from the gallery they are in, any more than we can separate the Rauschenberg bed from the paint upon it.”

The art world, for Danto, was precisely the place where one could reflect upon modernity’s indignities without having to consider the particular class positions that suffered these indignities most directly; its relationship to its objects was as sacrosanct and inviolable as an artwork’s relationship to its materials.

In his subsequent writings on Warhol, Danto has continued to deploy the first person plural as an alternative to class analysis or specificity. A recent monograph refers to “the bare declarative aesthetic of the proletarian representations [Warhol] began to favor,” but then claims, pages later, that Warhol’s “mandate was: paint what we are.” “The breakthrough,” Danto continues, “was the insight into what we are. We are the kind of people that are looking for the kind of happiness advertisements promise us that we can have, easily and cheaply.”

The question of who “we” are and whether “our” enthusiasms may vary—or be presumed to vary—with our class, goes unaddressed.
Closer consideration demonstrates that, in the face of the increasing success of generic brands, the motifs Warhol borrowed in his early “brand image” artworks—Campbell’s Soup, Brillo, and Coca-Cola, among others—were deployed and widely understood as class-specific images, explicitly targeted at a working-class audience. 

“In contrast to white collar women,” as one advertisement put it, “(who have no qualms about private [generic] labels) the working class wife has an extraordinary emotional dependence upon national brands—her symbol of status and security (because she is basically unsure of the world outside her door).” The motifs discussed in this essay are, by contrast, more obviously class-specific—comic-book panels, pulp advertisements, tabloid headlines: the types of things Max Kozloff was thinking of in 1962 when he described Pop Art as “the pinheaded and contemptible style of gum chews, bobby soxers, and worse, delinquents.”

But an investigation of their context reveals that superheroes and hernia relievers and cheap diamond rings were not the only things being marketed specifically to working-class readers in these pages. They shared space, throughout this period, with prominent efforts to sell the possibility of what might be called amateur cultural participation: commercial art schools, photography competitions, “Magic Art Reproducers.” Advertisements for this promise were ubiquitous in low- and middlebrow publications. In the face of these offers, Warhol’s work from this period took up the cheapest and most accessible images available—images marketed to and associated with a working-class demographic—and tested the possibilities of their everyday, amateur reproduction. Could real culture, “mass” culture—Popeye, the Little King, and tabloid advertisements and headlines—be convincingly remade at home, even with the aid of these new reproductive technologies? Was participation in these powerful new myths of creative production and reproduction now actually available for the audiences to whom they were directly targeted and with whom they were most clearly associated? And could participation be as easy as it looked in the commercials, could one “create things with the least amount of effort” (as Gerard Malanga described what he called “Andy’s


10. “The Quality Revolution—New Hope for National Brands,” advertisement, *New York Times*, March 7, 1962, p. 72 (original emphasis). Warhol’s stint as an illustrator at the *Times* overlapped with the publication of five of these full-page advertisements, as well as multiple articles discussing the campaign; it seems unlikely that, as a prominent advertising professional, he would have been unaware of their claims.

aesthetic.” In early Warhol, the inability to reproduce successfully the imagery of one’s contemporary surroundings is as much a marker of class and powerlessness as the borrowed imagery itself. The task is to uncover the ways in which “the language deficits of class” that Benjamin Buchloh has remarked upon in Warhol’s style were actively being produced during this period in and through the creation of new compulsions toward cultural reproduction. At its best and most incisive, Warhol’s art was not fundamentally an art about the ontology of art; it was an art about the possibility of mass-cultural participation within capitalism.

Class permeated Warhol’s work during this period from two directions: it infused both its motifs (no matter how “American” or “universal” some of them may now appear) and the technique and style of their execution. The working class’s perceived fondness for popular culture—for brand names and celebrities and comic books—was a key element in Warhol’s contemporary scene, one that he constantly incorporated into his work and his persona. “Amateur cultural participation” is an apt way of describing Warhol’s style during the 1960s and after, as it incessantly tested the possibility of consumer-grade reproductive technologies like silkscreens, Polaroids, and video cameras to contribute to the “common culture.” But Warhol’s work and persona were also informed by a countertendency, less immediately apparent but nevertheless irreducible: indications of a working-class suspicion that the world of popular culture, despite its promises to the contrary, was being channeled to them unilaterally, without the possibility of consumers’ ever really participating in its production. Warhol’s reproductions of popular images constantly telegraphed their own incompleteness and impossibility—the “precisely pinpointed defectiveness that gives [Warhol’s] work its brilliant accuracy,” as David Antin put it in 1966. The manufactured imperfections in Warhol’s work should tell us something about the ways in which culture has been produced and consumed in the United States. As

12. Christoph Heinrich, “Freezing a Motion Picture: An Interview with Gerard Malanga,” in Andy Warhol: Photography (Zurich: Edition Stemmle, 1999), p. 115. Malanga emphasized that this attitude deeply informed Warhol’s approach to film: “That’s why the photobooth was an instantaneous thing; the movie camera had a motor driven attachment, where he wouldn’t have to touch the button to stop and start, the film would just run out.”


14. My approach to these ideas is informed by Kaja Silverman’s discussion of the super-ego, which “puts the ego in a vicious double bind; it says not only, ‘you cannot take your father’s place,’ but also, ‘you must take your father’s place.’ Since the ego cannot obey either of these commands without transgressing the other, it is always already ‘guilty.’” Silverman, “Untitled Response,” October 123 (Winter 2008), p. 142. The double bind described by Silverman is also active in contemporary mass culture, which is always simultaneously calling out for emulation and blocking this process from being successfully achieved; a similar dynamic is described in Hal Foster, “Test Subjects,” October 132 (Spring 2010), pp. 37–38.

recent investigations of Warhol’s identity have demonstrated, it was often Warhol’s conspicuous *inability* to reproduce ideals that made his artistic production remarkable.16

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In April 1961, the first known exhibition of Andy Warhol’s pop paintings was assembled, fittingly, in the window of the upscale Manhattan department store Bonwit Teller.17 A surviving photograph shows five overlapping paintings displayed at


various heights in front of a dark backdrop, each matched with a smartly dressed mannequin. The mannequins’ poses were simultaneously brazen and coy, with chins craning upward and hips jutting toward the window. The cherry red, ultramarine blue, and cotton canvas of the outfits matched the dominant hues of the paintings, and the mannequins and paintings were arranged so as to allow the latter a high degree of visibility. The juxtaposition is puzzling: were passersby expected to believe that these well-dressed figures read the comic books or answered the tabloid ads whose verve and punch their outfits appropriated? Their perfect silhouettes, cast in shadows on the paintings’ surfaces by the camera’s flash, seemed to exist in a separate, painless, modern world, a world set at a distance from the drips and imperfections of the canvases and their subject matter—cheap nose jobs and superheroes, hair tinting, hernias. The mannequins more closely resembled Warhol’s paintings of comics and advertisements than they did the comics and advertisements themselves. They borrowed their energy from some other arena, and were now showing it off to an audience that was as yet mostly unfamiliar with it.

All five of the paintings Warhol displayed in the Bonwit Teller window were built upon the same basic structure: a simple two-dimensional motif (or composite of motifs), seemingly amenable to reproduction, which—despite the apparent aid of mechanically reproductive technologies, including a Photostat machine—was only incompletely and somewhat anxiously reproduced. Three of the paintings were based on comics (Superman on a comic book, Little King and Saturday’s Popeye on newspaper comic strips); the other two—Advertisement and Before and After (1)—drew on newspaper advertisements. Notably, Warhol seems to have altered all five of these paintings after they left Bonwit Teller and before they entered the art market; in what follows I will investigate Superman as a representative sample, and then proceed to discuss the newsprint works more generally.

The cultural connotations of a painting of Superman in the early 1960s
would have been manifold and contradictory. On the one hand, George Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman* (1905) had been given two Manhattan productions in 1960 (one just a mile from Bonwit Teller), only months before Warhol displayed *Superman* in the department store’s window. Reviews and advertisements had appeared prominently in the *New York Times*, which also gave a headline review to a televised version of the play in February 1960. Warhol’s painting must have been seen in part as a mocking response to this high-minded fare. But, by deriving its motif from a comic-book source with close ties to television, *Superman* would also have had powerful working-class connotations; despite their immense popularity, television and comic books were explicitly associated during this period with working-class audiences. Articles about working-class children in the press often included prominent references to comic books. Reporting the rape and murder of an 18-year-old girl from Queens, the *New York Times* described her as having “last been seen at 10:15 p.m. Sunday when she bought some comic books in a candy store after leaving a moving picture theater.”

Pepito, a 14-year-old youth gang member who had allegedly killed a taxi driver, “knows almost nothing about the world beyond his neighborhood [and] ‘reads’ the pictures of comic books.” “‘Don’t the comic books always tell you at the end that you can’t win?’ a police officer asked a 15-year-old gang leader, ‘Sure,’ was the answer, ‘but we never read the end—just how.’” Dorothy Barclay, writing in *The New York Times*, summed up the overriding sentiment:

...a happy youngsters in a good home...will not be turned toward a life of crime by reading crime comics. Such youngsters, however, are least likely to read them to excess. It’s the poorly adjusted child most liable to be harmed who indulges most freely.

18. For a thorough psychoanalytic analysis of the painting, see Bradford R. Collins and David Cowart, “Through the Looking-Glass: Reading Warhol’s *Superman*,” *American Imago* 53, no. 2 (1996), pp. 107–37, which argues that “Warhol records in *Superman* a realization of the impossible gap, both moral and physical, between his deficient self and the perfect hero with whom he once identified” (p. 129). See also Michael Moon, “Screen Memories, or Pop Comes from the Outside: Warhol and Queer Childhood,” in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, p. 89.


20. Philip Pearlstein’s *Superman* painting, produced in 1952, and now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, is another potential reference.


In this context, “poorly adjusted” is clearly a euphemism for “poor,” someone lacking a “good home.” It could be admitted that all children read comic books, as long as one emphasized that only poor children were influenced by them.

The ubiquity of the comic book notwithstanding, Superman’s most prominent cultural appearance in the New York of the early 1960s must have been the Superman television program, which aired on Saturday and Monday evenings on channel 11, just before dinner-time. The lead-ins on Mondays were Amos ‘n’ Andy (4 p.m.), Abbott and Costello (4:30 p.m.), Bozo the Clown (5 p.m.), The Three Stooges (5:30 p.m.), and Popeye the Sailor (6 p.m.), a murderer’s row of after-school temptations. The close proximity of the Popeye and Superman shows on television may have been a factor in Warhol’s decision to exhibit these two paintings together at Bonwit Teller.

Television and comic books were both characterized by a complex set of class dynamics during the 1950s. Functionally ubiquitous, these media were nevertheless powerfully associated with working-class audiences who were assumed to be less educated and therefore more susceptible to their vulgar charms. A 1959 article in the American Journal of Sociology opened with the claim that “research has shown an inverse relationship between enthusiasm for television-watching and social class” and concluded that “liking TV has become symbolic of low social status.” The authors asked their survey group, “Which of the following groups would you say most enjoy watching TV?” Almost half of the respondents (48%) checked the box for “People who can just barely afford to buy a TV set,” while only 1% checked the box for “Persons very well off economically.”

But even as television viewing remained closely associated with low social status during this period, it also became a crucial medium for the dissemination of “American” norms and ideals. In her fascinating study of television’s influence on working-class children in the late 1950s, Adeline Gomberg drew a comparison between these children and their predecessors: “The working-class child of the thirties shared a common experience but only with children of his own class. His play activities reflected what he understood best—his home and his parents. The working-class child of the fifties, because of television, shares an experience with children of all classes. The context of his play activities, and his behavior at play, are similar to the activities and behavior of children of all classes.” Along these lines, Gomberg described a striking new game developed by working-class children to while away their time at preschool:

The children called it “watching television.” This was unlike any other play either in structure or content. . . . Here they lined up chairs and stared fixedly ahead at some imaginary screen.

26. 25% answered “Persons in comfortable circumstances,” and 25% answered “Don’t know.”
Occasionally one child would twist a “dial” and the viewers would sigh. Infrequently some viewer would express annoyance: “Why did you change that? I wanted ‘Lassie’”; or “No, ‘Little Rascals’! Boy—leave that channel alone. . . .”

Teacher: Whatever are you doing?

Dawn: Gee whiz, don’t you know nothing, watching television.

The intense passivity of the television experience is revealed in this game as a learned activity, requiring practice and repetition to be accepted by its practitioners, who can then grudgingly enlighten their teacher. Even as these children were being trained to emulate television’s stars—as Gomberg puts it, “Today all working-class children want to be like or marry television performers”—they were simultaneously being taught to consume this emulation passively.

As was the case with the discourse surrounding Vance Packard’s *Hidden Persuaders*, contemporary attitudes toward these media allowed Americans to take their guilty pleasures—advertising, comics, television—while simultaneously disavowing their cultural legitimacy. The working-class connotations carried by comics and television therefore need to be recognized as at least partially ideological rather than factual. And yet, as Gomberg’s study so powerfully illustrates, television also played a key role in the interpellation of lower-class viewers into middle-class norms and ideals. Chief among these were the ideals of consumerism, which promised that social status could be attained not only through wealth or achievement but also through possession of the proper commodities. Commercials for Kellogg’s cereal, a primary sponsor of the *Superman* program, epitomized this idea; one from the mid-1950s featured Clark Kent and his boss, Perry White, awaiting the arrival of the copy boy, Jimmy Olsen, who is late in delivering a box of “Sugar Smacks” cereal for the group’s breakfast. “Mild-mannered” Kent remains calm, but the chief becomes irate over the delay. Jimmy trips as he walks through the door, nearly fumbling his precious cargo. The chief: “Young man, if you spill those new Sugar Smacks, you’re fired!” The scene cuts to the three men eating together; taking a bite of cereal, Kent announces, “Well, I guess we all agree on Sugar Smacks!” Here the sweetened cereal is represented as pacifying the tension that characterizes the relationship between boss and the assistant. Strikingly, although it is the chief who demands the cereal and Jimmy who provides it, it is Clark Kent who, with his secret otherworldly powers as Superman, speaks for the cereal and its uncanny ability to transcend boundaries of taste and class. Like Sugar Smacks, Superman/Kent has the wondrous ability to overcome class difference, to leave the world of the ordinary and the subordinate and attain

28. Ibid., p. 434.
29. Ibid., p. 436.
superiority when necessary, but also to escape from the burdens and responsibilities of superiority when they become too great.

By the time Warhol painted *Superman*, however, this wondrous figure would also have taken on tragic connotations. Less than two years before Warhol’s *Superman* appeared in the window at the Bonwit Teller department store, George Reeves, the actor who played the title role on *Superman*, was reported as having shot himself in his Hollywood home. The Associated Press article was predictably sensational: “George Reeves, television’s Superman, killed himself early today. Seconds earlier his fiancée had predicted his death.” The *Daily News* took its headline one step further: “Superman Kills Himself; Fiancée [sic] Called the Shot.”

Why did he do it?

“Because he was known as Superman to 9 million children, but he couldn’t get a job,” Miss Lemmon said.

“They stopped shooting the series a year and a half ago. They had 105 chapters finished, and they can show them for the rest of their lives…”

Six days later, the *News* led with a huge headline: “Doubts Suicide of Superman—His Mother Demands Probe.” The prominence of this story, and the *News*’ decision to conflate “Superman” and the actor who portrayed him on TV, are deeply relevant to Warhol’s painting. Although Reeves’s death predates the painting by almost two years, his posthumous image was still appearing on New York television sets twice a week throughout 1960 and 1961. The suicide was framed from the outset as a cautionary tale regarding the perils of celebrity: Reeves had achieved fame, but only at the cost of his own individuality and the respect of his peers. His personality had been consumed by his fictional role; as his fiancée pointed out, at the time of his death he was simultaneously a hero to millions and utterly unemployable in Hollywood. Likewise, his actual human presence had become irrelevant to the show’s success—all the shows were prerecorded and available for perpetual syndication. Reeves’s story doubly demystifies the Superman myth, first by declassing it from the world of Shaw and Broadway to the pulp world of television and comics, and second by pulling away the veil of glamour from that pulp world and exposing its disappointments and disasters. Reeves’s death should be understood as inflecting the painting, and thereby establishing it as a precedent to Warhol’s more direct focus on the problem of celebrity and death in the silkscreened paintings of the coming years.

Superman was thus neither a straightforward celebration of an American myth nor a painting about an artist’s inability to live up to his childhood ideals; instead, taken in its cultural context, the painting can be understood as a first step in Warhol’s examination of the internal inadequacy of those mythic ideals, their terminal failure to live up to themselves. All of this is efficiently summarized on the cover of the December 1961 edition of Life with Millie, where the eponymous cartoon celebrity herself is shown as failing to live up to her own spectacular image. As Warhol would later put it, “It must be hard to be a model, because you’d want to be like the photograph of you, and you can’t ever look that way.”

The possibility of absolute social mobility—figured both by Superman and by the actor who played him—was spectacularly revealed by Reeves’s death as an unsustainable and yet irresistible fiction.

All of these various dimensions of Superman’s context are germane to its meaning, but they leave unexamined what may be the painting’s most striking formal feature, namely its pronounced imperfections, the areas of the canvas that seem to have been left unfinished. These areas are particularly noteworthy because they did not appear in the Bonwit Teller photograph; they were late additions to the canvas, added only after the painting had been shown in the department-store window. Why would Warhol have gone back to this painting after displaying it, to scrawl in wax crayon across the top margin and to obscure, partially, the words in Superman’s “thought bubble”? Is it cogent to conclude, with Marco Livingstone, that the scrawl—

37. The alterations are mentioned without further comment in Pop: Themes and Movements, ed. Mark Francis (New York: Phaidon, 2005), p. 85.
“activated the sky area with a rhythmic linear pattern” or with Benjamin Buchloh, that it reinforced “the laconic mechanical nature of the enterprise”? 38 This messy new scrawling traverses the surface, seeming at first to resist and reject all logic, signifying precisely the absence of sense or signification: a completely de-skilled and merely space-filling mark.

As it turns out, this wax-crayon scrawling cannot be described accurately either as decorative or arbitrary. In each of the five areas where this scrawling appears, it follows, or attempts to follow, one basic rule: never cross a contour line. It colors between the lines—behind Superman’s cape, along the top margin, across the cold blue background. The scrawling seems to struggle against its own incompleteness: the marks were apparently drawn from left to right, filling in the space between their origins and the proximate edges and contour lines. Thus the scrawling begins midway across the upper margin and is initially divided into two registers, which alternately lose and gain distinction as they proceed toward the right edge. It seems that the upper marks were begun first, since they continue, in various permuta-

tions, across the margin to the right-hand side. The lower register of marks was then brought in to fill some of the space left blank by the first round of scrawling. This doubling of the scrawl reaffirms the ruling prescript: “only between the lines”—it is willful and rapid, but willful and rapid only within a controlled framework. The same tension animates the blue scrawling in the upper right-hand quadrant of the painting. Again, the marks begin arbitrarily, but they are quickly brought under control by the surrounding margins, and their rhythm becomes increasingly regular as they proceed. Where spaces are left vacant by one scrawl, auxiliaries are deployed to fill the gaps. Directly above Superman’s head, a small area of blue sky is colored in almost neatly, from edge to edge. All of these overtly handmade marks stand in stark contrast to the rest of the painting, which so clearly declares its dependence on mechanical reproduction: the image was originally created from a comic-strip panel that had been projected onto a canvas and traced.39

How did these late additions change the painting? The pertinence of this question exceeds Superman, for similar scrawls appeared in a number of other works produced during 1961: Advertisement, Batman, Dick Tracy, Dick Tracy and Sam Ketchum, Strong Arms and Broads, Wigs, Make Him Want You, $199 Television, Icebox, Telephone [1], Dr. Scholl’s Corns, Coca-Cola [1] and [2], A Boy for Meg [1], and the very first Campbell’s Soup Can (Tomato Rice), as well as numerous drawings. If

they were meant to convey reckless willfulness, or “the laconic mechanical nature of the enterprise,” as Livingstone and Buchloh have argued, why were they pushed across the blocked-out surfaces with such careful attention to the rule of the contour line? This attentiveness suggests that the scrawled marks constituted a determinate reassertion of handmade visual reproduction over and against the industrially depersonalized tone that otherwise characterizes the image. The scrawls inscribed the artist’s emulative intention across the inhuman blue of the sky and the arbitrary and mechanical upper margin. More than anything else, these crayoned additions resemble a printed panel half-converted by its young reader into a coloring book—a common and revealing mass-cultural scenario replayed in bedroom after bedroom on comic books, comic strips, children’s books, newspapers, and advertisements, as a result of an apparently acute and insatiable childhood desire to reproduce the culture with which one is confronted. Beginning early on, in works like Superman, Warhol’s artworks found ways to visualize the suspicion that the possibility of reproduction is at least partially foreclosed by the mass-cultural object. The partial erasure of the “thought-bubble” text reiterates the same suspicion: letters and words, the image’s most legible and presumably most replicable elements, are rendered, in the painting’s final version, irreproducible. The painting’s final additions, its scrawls and counter-scrawls, were in fact concerted efforts to qualify—rather than to finalize—its claim to cultural reproducibility.

The specific areas that were retouched in this final version were literally marginal, displaced from the painting’s ostensible subject: Superman’s body and its action. This displacement underscores the painting’s key shift: away from an emphasis on the physical irreproducibility of the mass-produced masculine ideal, and toward an emphasis on the cultural irreproducibility of mass-produced visual ideals in general. This is a crucial transition in Warhol’s practice, and, for better or worse, it moved the focus of the works’ attention from sexual and physical reproducibility to cultural and visual reproducibility. Instead of the problem being how to emulate Superman, the problem became how to emulate—a mass-produced cultural image, anything from a frame in a comic to a newspaper page to an advertisement.

The stakes of this shift from physical to cultural emulation can be better understood by examining the context in which Warhol found his borrowed imagery by, for example, turning our attention to the printed advertising that accompanied and subsidized the comic book from which Superman was sourced: the April 1961 edition of Superman’s Girl Friend: Lois Lane. This thirty-six-page issue contained just over six pages of advertising, pages that provide insight into

41. The source is identified in Francis, Pop: Themes and Movements, p. 85.
the book’s readers and their priorities, as well as the publisher’s. One and a third of these pages were dedicated to announcements for other comic books. Three pages advertised employment opportunities: selling seeds for the American Seed Company, “popular Patriotic and Religious Mottoes” for Stephens Credit Sales, and “White CLOVERINE BRAND SALVE” for Wilson Chemical Company. In these cases, the merchandise was sent out on credit, and the amateur salesperson was expected to mail the collected monies, minus a small profit, back to the company. This business model presupposed a relatively impoverished clientele, lured into the scheme with the promise of goods on credit and willing to trade a significant portion of labor for a meager return.

The two other full-page advertisements were, at least superficially, more conventional, in that they attempted to sell merchandise rather than to recruit salespeople. The comic’s most obviously pertinent ad appeared on its penultimate page, and stood out among all the pages in its complete lack of color. This page’s antiquated black-and-white design implied either obsolescence or the absence of a need to impress; unlike the rest of the comic, this advertisement was not embellished with bright hues. Instead, it was jam-packed with text and black-and-white photographs of male bodies in various states of exhibition. The uppermost line read:

I don’t care what your age is! Whether you’re a teenager, in your 20’s, 30’s, 40’s, or 50’s. Just RUSH me your LAST CHANCE COUPON below checking the KIND of HE-MAN BODY YOU DESIRE FAST and I’LL SEND YOU absolutely FREE 6 AMAZING PICTURE-PACKED COURSES LISTED BELOW . . . SKINNY OR FAT, I’LL BUILD YOU INTO A NEW ATHLETIC STREAM-LINED MIGHTY-MUSCLED HE-MAN as I have for 35 years re-built MILLIONS like you!

The accompanying illustrations drove the point home: the teacher and his pupils had achieved the masculine ideal, and the reader was only one postcard away from joining them. The Jowett Institute of Body Building would take care of the rest. Unsurprisingly, the ideal celebrated in this advertisement shared much in common with the figure of Superman as he appeared in the comic. The ad’s motif of a man carrying a woman in his arms, for instance, appeared twice in this comic alone, on pages 7 and 9 of the final story.

The issue’s cover also turned on the image of the male ideal, integrating it into broader issues of cultural participation. In this image, Lois Lane stands on a television set as a host with a microphone informs her that his computer has selected her “ideal husband.” There, behind a dividing wall, is Clark Kent, anonymous in his single-button suit and rep tie. But Lois has a different image in mind, which is visible to the reader as a thought-bubble above her head: Superman, his muscles rippling. The four figures’ heads form a pyramid, with Superman at its apex; the masculine ideal presides over the entire scene, and the studio audience in the foreground consumes the resulting comedy and melodrama. The promise
of a few minutes of television airtime would apparently be enough to persuade these otherwise extraordinary figures to forfeit their dignity and privacy, while the spectacle of failure that attended this promise was sufficiently entertaining to fuel an entire TV genre. The image must have immediately appealed to Warhol when he saw it on the newsstand.

This same promise of cultural engagement was brilliantly marketed by this comic book’s first advertisement, printed inside its front cover, for a correspondence art school called Art Instruction, Inc. Three rough sketches—the heads of a sad clown, a woman, and a dog—took up the bulk of the page, and the reader was invited to copy them:

*Draw your choice* of any of these heads—clown, girl or boxer. Draw it any size except like a tracing. Use pencil. Everyone who enters the contest gets a professional estimate of his talent. Winner receives the complete art course taught by world’s largest home study art school. Professional artists give individual instruction in advertising art, illustrating, cartooning, or painting. Contest sponsored to uncover hidden talent.

The winner was promised a $495 scholarship.

This ad, which appeared again and again with varying illustrations in comics, magazines, and newspapers throughout the 1950s and 60s, did not need to rely on the masculine ideal that figured so prominently throughout the rest of the issue. Instead of espousing any single cultural ideal, it sold the possibility of profitably participating in the production and reproduction of visual-cultural ideals. This possibility was clearly a false promise for most of the comic’s readers, but it was a false promise that carried great allure. Like the multiple ads in this issue for amateur business schemes, this one was selling productivity rather than consumption, but unlike those advertisements, it was specifically predicated upon the idea of *artistic* productivity and re-productivity: the promise of creating and re-creating contemporary visual culture. By the early 1960s, Warhol was already a poster child for this promise; his facility as a draftsman had provided him with an escape from poverty and admission to the center of social prestige. In a 1977 interview he even claimed that his childhood teachers had submitted his drawings to a correspondence-art-school contest:

Warhol: . . . if you showed any talent or anything in grade school, they used to give us these things: “If you can draw this,” where you’d copy the picture and send it away. . . .

O’Brien: Famous Artist’s School?

42. See, for example, the inside back cover of *Life with Millie*, December 1961, and *Amazing Adult Fantasy*, November 1961, p. 33.
Warhol: Uh, yeah.

O’Brien: Did you send them away?

Warhol: No, the teachers used to.

O’Brien: Did they say you had natural talent?

Warhol: Something like that. Unnatural talent.\(^3\)

“Unnatural talent”: the promises made by these schools were distinctly anti-Kantian; they tied artistic productivity directly and unapologetically to economic success. And the schools communicated, even in their advertising, a basic paradox of mass-cultural production and reproduction: skill could only be reliably gauged by copying preexisting visual-cultural icons, but this copying could never be allowed actually to duplicate the original: “Draw it any size except like a tracing.”\(^4\)

These promises and challenges were extended into newspapers as well, and they sometimes blurred the lines between various forms of advertising. An unusual example appeared on facing pages of the comics in the January 31, 1960, Chicago Daily Tribune.\(^5\) Half of the right-hand page was taken up with a comic-style ad for Betty Crocker called “The Case of the Teen-Age Problem,” in which two matronly ladies proposed frozen pizza dough and sauce as the key ingredients in the ideal high-school party meal. Half of the left-hand page was

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44. Warhol’s own art education at Carnegie Tech emphasized similar benefits. As Nan Rosenthal has pointed out, “To go to art school at Carnegie Tech in those post-Depression GI Bill years was to attend a quasi-professional school, in the sense that a law school is a professional school. It was not exactly an institution drawing upon the European art academy or conservatory model and not an institution focusing on developing the individual expressive talents of young painters willing to starve to create high art.” Rosenthal, “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Warhol as Art Director,” in The Work of Andy Warhol, ed. Gary Garrels (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), p. 38.

45. The paired advertisements also appeared in the Cleveland Plain Dealer and the Pittsburgh Press; see “Art and Food,” New York Times, February 25, 1960, p. 47. The advertisements discussed in this essay were found through intensive searches of newspaper, comic-book, and magazine archives and databases and are not, to my knowledge, discussed elsewhere in the scholarship on Warhol.
occupied by an ad for Art Instruction, Inc., labeled “How a commercial artist works.” In this second ad, also illustrated in comic-strip style, an agent and an illustrator collaborated on the facing page’s pizza ad: “Thanks to the artists, this Betty Crocker ad is an eye-catcher in the comic section of Sunday’s newspapers.” The initial Betty Crocker ad was disguised as a comic strip in order to sell pizza, while the Art Instruction ad borrowed the same style in order to sell the promise of a career producing these very ads. The line between art and business in comics was presented as porous, as was the distinction between artist and reader. In this respect, the Art Instruction advertisements were a false correction of the cultural world into which they were introduced. This world was founded on the passivity of the consumer, which might eventually be seen as a limiting factor in that consumer’s satisfaction and pleasure. The commoditized spectacle of the consumer’s own cultural participation promised to correct this constitutive passivity.

Comics targeting a female audience frequently included opportunities for readers to mail in drawings of outfits and hairstyles, some of which were then to be included, with credit to their creators, in future issues. In a very few cases these promises yielded real opportunities: the consumer of images aced the correspondence school, landed a job on Madison Avenue, and became a producer of images—Lois Lane ceased to be her ideal and became instead her product. But even this rare scenario did not fully correct the problem, because to the degree that the consumer became the successful manipulator of images, she was unlikely to believe in them fully.

Art Instruction, Inc.’s invitations to cultural production were targeted at television viewers as well, appearing regularly on the television-schedule pages of major newspapers. The ads’ finished and unfinished faces shared space on these pages with glamour shots of television and film celebrities. It was a logical conjunction: television viewers could be expected to be more interested in these iconic faces, and therefore in the possibility of reproducing them, if only on paper. In one such instance, a 1953 issue of the Los Angeles Times paired these two interests with a “Before and After” ad for plastic surgery, bringing three of the key Warholian cultural concerns together on one page.

The class-based marketing of these fantasies of cultural productivity was made directly apparent in numerous advertisements for both Art Instruction, Inc., and its

46. Most such comics had one or two such pages per issue as well as multiple “reader-created” and credited outfits and/or hairstyles. The November 1961 issue of Linda Carter, Student Nurse devoted four of its thirty-six pages to these competitions.

47. Anne Wagner has pointed out to me that both Sylvia Plath and Eva Hesse entered and won fashion-magazine talent contests (at Mademoiselle and Seventeen, respectively), which helped to launch their careers. Matt Wrbican directed my attention to a “Coloring Contest” in Warhol’s Interview magazine in 1972, with the winner promised Warhol’s signature on the winning entry. The source image was a cartoon line drawing of Tarzan, Jane, Cheetah, and Boy. The editors ultimately selected a childishly slapdash entry.
rivals. During the late 1940s Art Instruction’s small advertisements were dominated by a simple tag line: “ARTISTS MAKE MONEY.”48 The Washington School of Art’s contemporary headline was “DRAW for MONEY / BE AN ARTIST!”49 A Famous Artists Schools advertisement printed in the Los Angeles Times in 1959 was headlined “What went wrong for the kid who loved to draw?” These words were superimposed over a layered image. In a faded tone, a boy surrounded by inks and paints was shown drawing a brush across a large piece of paper. To the right a standing man was superimposed over the right half of the boy’s body and the table. The man was clad in recognizably working-class clothing, including a work coat, and carried a black lunch box, the contemporary Madison Avenue emblem of the laborer. The creative boy was meant to be understood as the working man’s past self, less real than his adult self, but more vital and free. The ad’s text drove the point home:

With our training, Wanda Pichulski gave up her typing job to become fashion artist for a local department store.

Stanley Bowen, father of three, was trapped in a low-paying job. By studying with us, he was able to throw over his job to become an illustrator with a fast-growing art studio, at a fat increase in pay!

48. See Popular Science, May 1943, p. 26; March 1944, p. 28; and December 1947, p. 45.
John Busketta was a pipefitter’s helper in a gas company. He still works for the same company but now he’s an artist in the advertising department at a big increase in pay.50

Another Famous Artists Schools ad distributed during the late 1950s and early ’60s delivered a similar message: “They DREW their way from ‘Rags to Riches’—Now they’re helping others do the same.”51 The opening line: “Albert Dorne was a kid of the slums who loved to draw. He never got past the seventh grade. Before he was 13, he had to quit school to support his family. But he never gave up his dream of becoming an artist.”52

The correspondence art school was not the only promised route to cultural participation and remuneration during this period. Interspersed with the art-school ads, sometimes sharing the same pages, were ads for a number of mechanical shortcuts: cheap cameras, oil-painting services, recording devices, and the “Magic Art Reproducer.” This last was a small optical device that employed a mirror to transfer an image onto the horizontal surface beneath it, a smaller and cheaper version of the device Warhol had used to produce many of his early Pop paintings.53 The “de luxe” model (the only model) was marketed for $1.98 in comic books, magazines, tabloids, and the back pages of newspapers. The pitch was familiar: “Have fun! Be popular! Everyone will ask you to draw them. You’ll be in demand! After a short time, you may find you can draw well without the ‘Magic Art Reproducer’ because you have developed a ‘knack’ and feeling artists have—which may lead to a good paying art career.”54 Warhol would spend the rest of his life testing mechanical reproductive devices against their promises of mass-cultural participation. The opaque projector was soon replaced by screen-presses, tape recorders, Polaroids, video cameras, early PCs. Each machine promised amateur cultural participation freed from the burden of training. Even when the gestural seemed to disappear from Warhol’s work later in 1961, imperfect reproduction remained a prominent element

50. Los Angeles Times, September 13, 1959, p. 17.
51. New York Times Magazine, August 4, 1957, p. 5. This ad was widely and prominently disseminated; see also Los Angeles Times, June 16, 1957, p. G3, and Life, August 5, 1957, p. 9. Ads with similar text appeared in comic books that were contemporary with Warhol’s sources. See, for example, the back cover of Amazing Adult Fantasy, December 1961.
53. Matt Wrbican informs me that the Warhol Museum has two of Warhol’s projectors, a Beseler Vu-Lyte and a Vu-Lyte III, in its collection.
of his style. When Warhol claimed that he wanted to be a machine, his words emphasized his distance from this ideal of reproduction and reproducibility as much as his proximity; he never claimed to be a machine, only to want to be one. As Claes Oldenburg pointed out in 1964, “Andy keep{s} saying he is a machine, and yet looking at him, I can say that I never saw anybody look less like a machine in my life.”

Superman was not alone among the Bonwit Teller paintings in its emphasis on the vicissitudes of visual reproduction. At first glance, Before and After [1] is a painting

55. As Roger Cook has put it, “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.” Cook, “Andy Warhol, Capitalism, Culture, and Camp,” p. 69.

56. Bruce Glaser, “Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Warhol: A Discussion,” Artforum 4, no. 6 (February 1966), p. 22. Compare Malanga, who claimed that “Andy was not mechanically inclined. He was just an utter fright if he had to deal with something mechanical, so he never really pursued it.” Heinrich, “Freezing a Motion Picture,” p. 115.
about cosmetic surgery and the unbearable pressures of normative cultural ideals. But as in *Superman*, these pressures—toward perfection and the aesthetic ideal—are displaced in the paintings onto the brushwork itself, which constantly makes a show of its losing battle to reproduce flat, two-tone images borrowed from down-market media. And this losing battle seems to have been the thing Warhol most wanted to emphasize. The final additions of white paint seem intended to hide the mole beneath the left-hand figure’s eye, to widen and adjust the white of her eye, and to soften the contours of her lashes. But the white paint is a poor match for the neutral background and only partly covers the dark paint it is meant to correct. It is the paintbrush here, not the surgeon’s scalpel, which struggles to reproduce the ideal form.\(^{57}\)

This same drama is perhaps best summarized in *Advertisement*, a pithy catalogue of the marketing of physical improvement. The “before and after” faces reappear, in miniature, alongside an offer of “strong arms” from Anthony Barker, a George Jowett contemporary and competitor. Above these are ads for Pepsi-Cola and for a “Rupture Easer,” which promised to treat hernias. In the upper left is an ad for hair coloring; Warhol has the dye dripping down the figure’s neck like blood or errant contour lines. None of these ads has been reproduced completely, and most are less than half finished. Words and even hand-drawn letters are left incomplete, as are the borders of boxes and the oval of the Pepsi logo. And yet the copied elements evidence a fairly high degree of exactitude and purpose; furthermore, the neat regularity of their contours suggests the use of a mechanical aid, in this case probably a Photostatic copy and an opaque projector. Script is visualized in these works; the reproduction of letters and words is treated like drawing and tracing, rather than like writing. It is as though the painting is suspended between a desire to reproduce the motifs accurately and a recognition that this task is ultimately impossible. The painting’s motifs are similarly suspended—between the promises of physical perfection somehow attained through a 25-cent pamphlet and the realization of the emptiness of that promise. And, crucially, these twin suspensions are staged with what have to be recognized as distinctly working-class props. Warhol borrowed these images from contemporary tabloid magazines; three have been identified as deriving from the late March and early April issues of the *National Enquirer* in 1961. The “rupture” ad, which has proved irresistible to poststructuralist readings of Warhol, should also be understood more literally as a promise to treat hernias, a quintessentially working-class affliction. The stereotypically ethnic, working-class profile in the before-and-after image is unmistakable, though Pepsi’s contemporary image as “oversweet belly-wash for kids and poor people” is now less legible.\(^{58}\) It is the Pepsi logo that stands out among these otherwise adamantly anthropomorphic images, foreshadowing Warhol’s turn toward the brand image.

57. *Catalogue Raisonné*, p. 20. Malanga has stated that many of Warhol’s key Pop images were provided to him by John Rublowsky, who “was working for one of these sleazy tabloids like the *New York Enquirer* or the *National Enquirer*.“ Heinrich, “Freezing a Motion Picture,” p. 121.

The Bonwit Teller photograph thus offers an unusual perspective on Warhol’s early production and proves that imperfection in these works was neither an accidental by-product of the reproductive process nor an Abstract Expressionist holdover; it was an intentional and calculated addition to the works’ style. Again and again, it is the defective capstone that simultaneously completes and undoes these paintings. Their final additions, their scrawls and counter-scrawls, were in fact concerted efforts to qualify rather than finalize their claims to cultural reproducibility.

A painting like *Carat*, 1961, effectively summarizes these concerns. The script along the inside of the painted ring is emblematic. It is as though the entire possibility of mass-cultural replication rests on Warhol’s ability to paint an “S” that

![Image of Warhol's Carat painting](https://example.com/carat.png)
looks mechanically engraved, as though the forever postponed duplication of this feat, the second “S” in “HAPPINESS,” might truly bring about emotionally the word it would complete materially. And yet even here, in a seemingly universal or even bourgeois symbol like the diamond ring, closer attention to Warhol’s source material reveals another story. The ring advertisements that Warhol copied were printed on a regular basis in working-class tabloids like the New York Daily News. One example from July 1, 1959, occupied a tiny corner of the page. Beneath it was an ad for mineral oil with the headline: “Woman Screams As Feet Burn!” To the right was a Macy’s ad: “YOU CAN’T GO TO HAWAII THIS SUMMER? NEVER MIND, MACY’S BRINGS HAWAII TO YOU.” The ring itself was part of “New York’s Largest Discount Display.” It was available on credit for $2.75 down, $2 weekly.

This was what Warhol found in American myths: not merely the “universal” appeal of superheroes or of bodily perfection, or the personal pathos of his own distance from these ideals, but the power these myths held for the disadvantaged and the ways in which cultural participation was marketed to them alongside consumption. The smudged and unfinished pearls in the second—cleaner—version of A Boy for Meg tell this same story. They are the painting’s pivot point: the objects that both signify status and reveal its irreproducibility. Of course, these small disasters can be entertaining. In a paradoxical reversal, amateurishness is recouped in Warhol as entertainment value; it is the work’s rhetorical inability to reproduce the spectacle that gives it its spectacular appeal. No wonder that Warhol was invited, in the seventies, to be a judge on The Gong Show, nor that the interviewer who later asked him about it wrongly assumed that he would have been competing against—rather than evaluating—the contestants.59

Contestant and judge, all in one: through their aestheticization and canonization of the pathos of working-class cultural reproduction, Warhol’s paint-

ings modeled the ironization of working-class consumer desire. The commercial fictions aimed at these subjects had already been spiced with irony (see the Lois Lane and Life with Millie covers discussed above). What Warhol added was a visualization of the possibility of the working-class subject’s ironic understanding of herself as a consumer, a splitting of the consumer’s consciousness into dupe and cynic, someone who can be expected to snicker at her own manipulation even as she succumbs to it.60 By the late 1950s, advertisers were beginning to sense a growing skepticism regarding their techniques (a skepticism fueled by books like The Hidden Persuaders). They turned to working-class consumers as a supposed last bastion of credulity. But, as Guy Debord reminds us, advertising is fundamentally self-defeating: “Each new lie of the advertising industry is an admission of its previous lie.”61 Advertisers were well aware of this vulnerability; in his 1958 book The Story of Advertising, James Playsted Wood described a “fear that sometimes grips advertising men”:

Some day, the sated customer, surfeited to lazy discomfort with all the goodies he has been able to swallow and all the shiny objects he has been able to cover with down payments, may be able to take no more. It is not that he will be unwilling or stubbornly refuse to cooperate, but there may be just no more of him to respond. Soggy with repletion, he may want only to lie down and sleep it off. He’ll rise and try manfully again, but his first vigor will be gone.62

Ironization is advertising’s desperate gamble that cynicism can be defused homeopathically, by having it integrated into the advertisement itself. This is a world of marketing, and a subject-position, which is very much still operative. Burger King’s “King” mascot revels in its own faux-nobility; customers are meant to laugh at the commercial’s awkwardness even as it wheedles them toward a purchase.63 Toyota advertises its low-budget model with the tag line

60. See Paul de Man: “the ironist invents a form of himself that is ‘mad’ but that does not know its own madness; he then proceeds to reflect on his madness thus objectified. . . . [The] ironic subject at once has to ironize its own predicament and observe in turn, with the detachment and disinterestedness that Baudelaire demands of this kind of spectator, the temptation to which it is about to succumb.” De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in Blindness and Insight (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 216–17. Or, as Emile de Antonio described Warhol’s attitude to mass culture in 1982, “You think he’s making fun of it all, and at the same time you know that he’s serious. He means both. He knows how dreary and shallow it is.” David Segal, “De Antonio and the Plowshares Eight” (1982), in Emile de Antonio: A Reader, ed. Douglas Kellner and Dan Streible (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 317. Cited in Branden Joseph, “1962,” October 132 (Spring 2010), p. 129.
63. The company touts its recently redesigned European packaging as “draw[ing] inspiration from the Andy Warhol ‘Pop Art’ movement of the 1950s [sic] . . .” “Press Releases—Burger King®
“YARIS/it’s a CAR!” (framed by a jagged Warholian bubble), while bragging that “STANDARD FEATURES COME STANDARD.” If, as Clark has warned us, capitalism involves “a systematic ironizing of subject-positions . . . which produces the conditions for effective, that is, controllable citizenship,” then Warhol’s “beautiful, vulgar, heart-breaking” efforts of the early 1960s ought to be recognized as a crucial moment in the construction of the American consumer.64 Despite the pathos of its origins, Warhol’s vulgarity pointed in a sinister dimension: toward a truly post–Abstract Expressionist world in which an appetite for vulgarity and an ironic condescension to it are forcibly internalized in every subject, even those presumed to be the least sophisticated. In the early 1960s, Warhol’s work was at the forefront of this project.

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