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Blonde Nihilism. Warhol's Marilyn

Abstract: The painting cycle Warhol dedicated to Marilyn Monroe in 1962 is not only one of the highest moments of Pop Art, but one of the most complex meditations on the identity of the twentieth-century subject. Focusing exclusively on the dimension of the media mask, Warhol elaborates an aesthetic of artifice in which the "I" can only survive in its mimetic projections: constructability of beauty, affirmation of the universe of photo-reproduction, marginalization of nature, virtuality of the subject and its social expendability.

Keywords: Andy Warhol, Marilyn Monroe, aesthetics, Pop Art, beauty

I got pills coz I'm blonde

Courtney Love

Only but a few images are able of providing definitive summaries at first glance. And perhaps two apparently distant images, an almost unconceivable diptych, offer us a somewhat decisive representation of the human condition in modernity. Belonging to the two darkest cycles of art of the last two centuries, the *Black Paintings (Pinturas negras)* by Goya and *Death and Disaster* by Warhol, *The Dog (El perro)* and *Golden Marilyn Monroe* lead us directly to the heart of modern tragedy. A golden void wraps around two faces: the frightened yelp of a small dog and the plastified smile of an actress. Icons – and that of Marilyn is also so in the technical sense – of solitude and the indecipherability of existence, the two faces are minute: the only figurative elements within an abstract space. Taking the strategy of the sublime to its extreme, the nothingness against which man has no power, the two paintings lead the depiction of pain to a point of no return. The innocence of the puppy and the diva is perceptible, but with different shades. If Goya makes us partakers of a death that knows no explanation, and is probably the only moment of empathy in all *Black Paintings*, Warhol shows himself to be an aseptic media chronicler. Turning the image of the diva into an anonymous passport photograph, Warhol transforms the sacred space of the icon into a capitalist outrage and suspends Marilyn's identity forever between the myth of her future sanctity (to which the call to the Byzantine icon alludes) and her condemnation to a perpetual celluloid slut (to which the vulgar and ostentatious make-up alludes). Unlike Goya, Warhol does not seem to give rise to any participation. And if in Goya's dog we still

perceive the life in its most emotional and, perhaps, heartbreaking moment, in Warhol's Marilyn nothing seems to speak to us precisely because it is speaking about the nothingness.

The Dog, as the painter Antonio Saura said, is at the same time:

image of nocturnal terror, prophetic symbol of time, creature in the great desert of the world, reborn allegory of the ascension of the spirit, emblem of fidelity and melancholy, but also, in a plastic symbiosis, a portrait, a metaphor of a human portrait, a reflection on our condition, and, why not?, a self-portrait of Goya transformed into a dog (Saura, 2013, pp. 94-95).

That is, also a self-portrait. Is it the same for *Marilyn Monroe* too? Or is it a portrait of the void? Like a mummy, Warhol's Marilyn seems to be revealing us a very simple truth: there is nothing after death. In an interview in 1977, Warhol would answer the question "Do you believe in life after death?" with "I believe in death after death" (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 253). It is from this truth that we must begin in order to try and understand the binomial Warhol-Marilyn.

1. Pop Muse

There are always two intertwined stories in Marilyn, and this plot (*mythos*) is what makes her an unsurpassable iconic reference. No other face expresses the ultimate synthesis of the dialectic between profundity (life, the modern) and surface (image, pop/postmodern) that features the Twentieth century: an unfathomable private existence that mirrors a recognizable public image. A figure that, consumed in life (in nature), became inconsumable in photo-reproduction (in the artifice). More than Picasso's figurative odyssey, more than Duchamp's philosophical act, more than the last trench of Pollock's aesthetics of genius, it was the face of an actress or her "inanimate" variant (a can of soup), to impose itself as the definitive image, to offer itself as an unparalleled synthesis of an entire century, and in ultimate analysis, of an entire phase of the humanity. Warhol's Marilyn is the passport photo with which the Twentieth century will recognize itself and with which it will be recognized from then on.

From this point of view, the caustic way in which Warhol addresses the ontological problem risen by Marilyn will remain exemplary forever: aesthetic artifice and constructability of beauty, anchorage to the universe of photo-reproduction and dismissal from every naturalistic nostalgia. Thus Marilyn becomes the perfect canvas for a continuous questioning of what the idea of beauty is when the beauty becomes exclusively the appearance of itself. And this is the role that Pop Art will assign to her, not without contradictions and differences among its interpreters. It is not accidental that the female prototype of pop girls denies Marilyn, while, significantly, the diva embodies that one of transgender people, who

appropriate both the purely aesthetic legacy of the actress and her tragic biography. The idea of a woman, of a young woman, embodied by the pop girl, programmatically defeats the idea reflected by Marilyn: light, fickle, bored, projected on objects without any real intention of lasting possession, subtly aggressive, deeply individualistic, inevitably attractive. On the contrary, the American actress recognizes herself in an obvious romance mythography and therefore not pop. Marilyn is the final symbol of this existential absolutization, *living*, where the girls of Swinging London are already aware of their *appearing*. Where Marilyn tries to find the absolute by taking the most banal contents to the extreme (becoming a good actress, having a child, finding true love), these girls – as Antonioni in *Blow-up* suggests in pretty cynical terms – play, laugh, act as models, are the fashion of themselves. If for them living is essentially appearing, in Marilyn appearing means, as Hollywood has induced her to do, exclusively living. This is where the essence of a problematic diva was born, the essence of Marilyn's schizophrenic idol (Morin, 1972).

In her essence as a diva of the late Hollywood star system, Marilyn is therefore not “technically” pop, but she offers pop the complex language of this surface and therefore becomes the undisputed image of pop. Pop Art has taken possession of Marilyn in different ways, giving birth to a fully-fledged iconography, which actually had already begun in a very different context. In 1954, in fact, Willem de Kooning took her as a model for a painting in his *Women* cycle. But de Kooning's Marilyn seemed to be born out of a nightmare, from an obsession with misogynist idolatry: unrecognizable, at most reduced to a purely intuitive readability (blond hair, red lips), transfigured into a monstrous archetypal divinity, Marilyn became the symbol of a primitive fertility, of an uncontrollable primordiality. De Kooning's operation was an isolated one, possible only in the strictly prehistoric framework that the *Women* series was: to question the woman before the superstructure of history, culture, and, in some way, of the same idea of woman could come. With *Women* de Kooning left a dilemma behind only to find it again in front of himself: it was the price for separating the idea of the feminine from its traditional mimetic mirror: beauty. Then Marilyn reappeared as the queen of the massified eros of the Fifties, a newspaper cut out, target of elementary voyeurism, and she was demoted to her initial pin-up status: *Hand Marilyn Monroe* by Ray Johnson (1958), *Girlie Door* by Peter Blake (1959), *For Men Only – Starring MM and BB* by Peter Phillips (1961). These are programmatically trivial works mixing sexual desire and the cult of physical beauty with the consumption of the erotic image, a vector that innervates the industry of capitalism's communication. They are the direct filiation of an aesthetic that began with the first issue of «Playboy» in December 1953, portraying, of course, Marilyn Monroe on its cover. But the actress's death in August 1962, substantially changes the basic attitude. In a sense of widespread guilt, in a collective grieving process, Pop Art engages in one of the most intense iconological efforts of the

second half of the Twentieth century. Allan D’Arcangelo explained this by describing his work *Marilyn* (1962):

I was sad and angry. Sad because part of my boyhood was gone, and angry because she was so manipulated by Hollywood, the public and herself. Her death, either suicide or murder, was a desperate end of life. This painting, unmistakably her in the little hunch of her shoulder, describes how she had been used. Her smiling or pouting face is not presented nor her voluptuous body, but her two-dimensional figure, the residue of image-making. You are offered your turn to reconstruct the image in the same way. It’s a paper doll: tab A into slot A and so forth, with a scissors inviting participation, making us all culpable (D’Arcangelo, 2005, pp. 136-138).

So Marilyn became the symbol of the bad conscience of that culture from which pop drew its daily food. It was hypocrisy that found its easy solution in the *appeal* of beauty. To testify to this process of falsification of identities, in the same year D’Arcangelo created a twin image to *Marilyn*, the painting *The Bride*. The two works, side by side, thus went to compose a diptych strongly critical of the conformist machismo of American society in which the woman – whether she was the blonde actress, the star, or the chestnut brown bride, the future anonymous housewife of the middle class – turns out to be the victim.

With *Marilyn Monroe I* (1962), James Rosenquist reiterated this process of ego-erasing by atomizing the degrees of perception of the actress’s own recognizability. By positioning in the opposite direction the face which, at the moment of her false iconic celebration, evoked other ghosts, Rosenquist sharpened Marilyn’s advertising essence by crossing the letters of her name with those of Coca-Cola. A mythologizing of the aesthetics of *billboards* finds itself once again in *Marilyn. The most beautiful woman* (1962) by Mimmo Rotella. Rosenquist’s fragmentation is replaced in Rotella by the shattering gesture, the absolute transience and at the same time the emancipation from this condition that stardom records, where the equivalence between mythical image and waste paper is absolute. In a continuous redemption of the existential instant in the mythographic temporality – the heart of Rotella’s aesthetics indissolubly links the cinematographic imaginary (the mythical time) to the figurative art (the iconic space) –, the artist tributes to the American actress a private gallery in which in the flowing of Marilyn’s visual clichés the same enigma of beauty arises spontaneously. And still, in this necessarily incomplete review (De Paoli, McDaris, 1994), we might remember *Marilyn Monroe (Marilyn Idolo)* (1962) by Wolf Vostell, the female portraits *The Only Blonde in the World* (1963) by Pauline Boty and *Marilyn Pursued by Death* (1967) by Rosalyn Drexler, the lithography *Test Stone #1* (1967) by Robert Rauschenberg, the spectral sculpture by Claes Oldenburg *Ghost Wardrobe (for M.M.)* (1967). And, conclusively, the readings by Indiana, Hamilton and, obviously, Warhol. *The Metamorphosis of Norma Jean Mortenson* (1967)

by Robert Indiana is a cryptic biographical overlapping between the artist and the actress (Ryan, 2000, pp. 178-179). Recalling the real name of Marilyn, Indiana transversally evokes his own name, Robert Clark. A clear reference to the alteration of the biographical self, a strategy inherent to the dynamics of communication and pop culture. The Marilyn taken as a model by Indiana is the Marilyn of the famous 1949 calendar «Golden Dreams». And at the origin of the painting there was the discovery by Indiana that the calendar was printed in his native state, that is Indiana. The artist saw a further connection between himself and Marilyn in their common destiny as adopted children. In addition, while studying Marilyn's life in depth, Indiana noticed a fatal numerology that was expressed in the recurrence of numbers 2 and 6, the artist's symbolism of love and evil:

'26 the year of her birth; '62 the year of her death. At two baby Norma Jean was almost suffocated by a hysterical neighbor; at six a member of one of her 12 (6 x 2) foster families tried to rape her. In '52 (26 + 26) when she was 26, her most cherished ambition of all was realized when she starred in a dramatic role and, in the first week at the Manhattan box office, the film grossed \$26,000. Death came by her hand on the sixth day of August, the eighth month (6 + 2 for the last time) (Indiana, 1968, p. 267).

Richard Hamilton's option with *My Marilyn* (1965) is different. The tribute to the actress was now transformed into a question on the very status of the image that the use of photography did nothing but dilate. The *My Marilyn* silkscreen print was based on an article that appeared in November 1962 in the English magazine «Town», in which some proof prints of a photo shoot of the actress were reproduced. It was the famous George Barris session that portrayed Marilyn in June and July of that same year on the beach of Santa Monica and in a Hollywood mansion. The English magazine reported the prints of the pictures on the beach with the erasures of Marilyn, some "X", on the images. Hamilton was intrigued by the way Marilyn herself constructed her own image: no longer a passive object of her own appearance, but an active, unexpectedly manipulative subject. *My Marilyn* thus became a posthumous homage, a technically complex mosaic in the re-elaboration of those original frames: veiling meant exhibiting, in the same way as showing meant hiding. Marilyn's censorship of her images was transformed, in Hamilton's work, into a perceptual requiem of unbelievable intensity: "the violent obliteration of her own image has a self-destructive implication that made her death all the more poignant. *My Marilyn* starts with her signs and elaborates the possibilities these suggest" (Hamilton, 1982, p. 65). Focusing on the double process of constructing and deconstructing the mediatic image, Hamilton had arrived at that conflict, of which Marilyn was the paradigm, between existence and surface, the real reason why Pop Art was attracted by that character who, consumed in

life, had become unconsumable in the reality of photo-reproduction. *My Marilyn* just did nothing else but to display “an outrageous interference, the handmade mark in savage conflict with the photograph” (*ib.*).

3. A constructible beauty

Marilyn had shown, and this was the simplest legacy she gave to pop, that in the extreme artifice it was precisely the human in its most acute contradiction that was revealed. There were, in pop, both a tragic root and a logic. But this tension had to be exposed in a pop way. It was Andy Warhol who found the key. As early as 1962, *Marilyn* entered what had become his darkest cycle, and *a posteriori* the most critically acclaimed, *Death and Disaster* (1963): “The Monroe picture was part of a death series I was doing, of people who had died by different ways. There was no profound reason for doing a death series, no ‘victim of their time’: there was no reason of for doing it at all, just a surface reason” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 88). Avoiding any comment on the woman Marilyn, Warhol created an amazing portrait that summarized a whole anthropology. It was enough for Warhol to exhibit in a single face (infinitely repeatable) the cult of the image, the obliteration of the ego, the exasperation of mimicry, stardom fetishism, building it in the most rigorous pop procedure: taking an already existing image (a promotional photograph of *Niagara* by Frank Powolny), absolute seriality, synthetic chromatisms. The actress’s face was outraged with make-up by composing a mask of pure cosmetics. Mummified in her incommunicability, in the drift of her own image, probably in the delight of self-destruction, Warhol’s *Marilyn* pointed to the truth, so banal, almost discouraging in her evidence, of that blond nihilism so much lamented and as such always misunderstood: in the impossibility of knowing Norma Jean, we can do no more than idolize Marilyn Monroe. A perfect visual commentary on Baudelaire’s words from a century earlier.

She is rather a divinity, a star, that presides over all the conceptions of the male brain; she is like the shimmer of all graces of nature, condensed into one being; she is the object of the most intense admiration and interest that the spectacle of life can offer to man’s contemplation. She is a kind of idol, empty-headed perhaps, but dazzling, enchanting, an idol that holds men’s destinies and wills in thrall to her glances (Baudelaire, 2010, p. 41).

Marilyn, however, remained a merely iconic paradigm. It was a grammar, an empty aesthetics. It did not activate any real logic of collective projection. It was the final appendix of an imploded star system. Marilyn offered Pop Art a syntax and Pop Art returned it with a posthumous survival, which would swing between the absoluteness of the Warholian gesture and the kitsch calligraphy of “Candle in the

Wind” by Elton John and Bernie Taupin. As a defunct she resurrected everywhere, dismembering herself (after all, Warhol had only shown her face, never her body) ubiquitously in an extreme denial of her physical essence to find herself an object again: t-shirts, lighters, posters, gadgets of all kinds. Inimitable, she generated, like Elvis Presley, a genie of lookalikes, an anthropology fed by the aesthetics of the photocopy, caged in a representation that their blond idol did not really create, but only conveyed. It is within this framework that Warhol’s work shows the new status of Marilyn’s artificial beauty and her encounter with the horizon of the industrial culture. In fact the industrial aesthetics could not record anything but the absolute validation of artificial parameters of the beautiful. Baudelaire’s insights, if we follow Baudrillard’s line of interpretation (Baudrillard, 1988), find their fulfillment in Warhol: the natural beautiful does not exist. Nature threatens the idea of iconicity pop is looking for. The natural brings with itself a temporality that does not integrate with the pop expendability, because it has different laws from those of the market. The temporality of nature is not the temporality of consumption. What is, then, a pop beauty? First it is a beauty that may be built. In fact Warhol’s great aesthetic exercise takes place on Marilyn Monroe, on the constant disavowal of the natural and the planned affirmation of artifice and its construction, the *make-up*: “I believe in low lights and trick mirrors. I believe in plastic surgery” (Warhol, 1977, p. 63). If the make-up corrects the natural defects, it should be understood that this operation is an operation that mainly leads from the mimetic to the iconic. The make-up fixes an image that from that point on becomes repeatable, reproducible, an easy object of optical fetishism. The pop beautiful declines always in a fetishistic way because it is always mediated by a representative virtuality that coincides with the media universe in general and with that of photocopying in particular. If nature expresses a beauty that satisfies physically, pop modulates the beautiful through strategies of erotic sublimation. How Warhol will sentence “Marilyn’s lips weren’t kissable, but they were very photographable” (p. 54). The aesthetic constructability of pop is the same constructability of an identity problematically conflicting with parameters that, although cultural, one wishes to interpret as natural: sexuality by nature of constituted morality collided with the artificial one of pop, the artifice denying nature. In this sense, the pop beauty is the complementary capitalist ideology of work and fatigue: the beauty is always work. The effort to look like the opposite of how you were made by Mother Nature: becoming the imitation of own imagination, as Warhol noted about trans people.

I’m fascinated by boys who spend their lives trying to be complete girls, because they have to work so hard. [...] It’s hard work to look like the complete opposite of what nature made you and then to be an imitation woman of what was only a fantasy woman in the first place. When they took the movie stars and stuck them in the

kitchen, they weren't stars any more – they were just like you and me. Drag queen are reminders that some stars still aren't just like you and me (pp. 54-55).

The whole “Marilyn Monroe” mythology is an example of a strategy of artifice that changes in uncritical dimension, shared consumption, and instant recognition. Marilyn Monroe has determined the greatest repertoire of iconic pop culture that remodulates itself, almost genetically, in what are its filiations, Madonna in the first place. Marilyn transmitted an image of culture, the pop one, in which the representation is no longer the medium, but the end, the representative tautology. This *mimesis* brought to excess is what in the pop becomes myth, sign as Barthes already showed. With Marilyn and Elvis the anthropology becomes sign, sign among signs, and finds house not by chance in those pop and postmodern semiotic systems which are Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Pop beauty can be built: it can be *made-up*. The mimetic thus flows into the iconic. The artifice fixates an image that, from that moment onwards, becomes reproducible, repeatable, prey to optical fetishism, fed – broadly speaking – by the universe of media and, in particular, by the world of photo-reproduction. Marilyn is this immense aesthetic arrangement. Pop cannot live without her, just as the classical period cannot exist without Aphrodite – as it is obvious. Instead, Marilyn Monroe expresses a very different scenario. Her double charm expresses itself as an innocent beauty that the world blames nonetheless. Marilyn – like a new Helen of Troy – triggers a war that, in this case, is the psychological conflict of a dysfunctional self that recognizes itself in nothing other than its image. Warhol documented its stasis, its inability to escape from this passivity. This is why Marilyn's face never changes. Her innocence is the kitsch myth that Warhol avoided and on which many still linger, as the anthologies of studies devoted to Marilyn often demonstrate (McDonough, 2002). By transforming a woman's pain into a single sequence of iconic expendability. Warhol denied the rhetoric of easy identification and rejected the consolation of hypocritical tears.

4. Mythologizing

Why does one image impose itself on other ones and continue to live while the others fall into oblivion? Warhol's first great pop works (*Marilyn* and *Campbell's Soup Cans*) unequivocally answer this question as well. Warhol's strategy was simple in its implementation, but unsurpassed in its efficiency: adding and isolating, serializing and individualizing. And in order to do so, a single image was all that was needed. Nothing else. All the variants of the cycle must always have been based on that single image of the Marilyn from *Niagara*. The ideology of capitalism was taken up to the letter: mass production always has the fetishistic cult by its side. The infinite reproducible Marilyn (or the infinite

cans) had always to be accompanied by a unique Marilyn (or a single can). And this was also true on the contrary: the uniqueness of the media idol or of the commercial fetish was always answered by its mass production, the possibility of its possession and diffusion, to feed the desire by saturating it, but never definitively. Thus, Marilyn had to be “deified and multiplied” (Bourdon, 1989, p. 124).

A *modus operandi*, however, to which Warhol did not stick in the series of portraits of Elizabeth Taylor. In this other series, the artist used multiple images: *National Velvet's* Taylor diva bambina, *Cleopatra's* Taylor superstar and even evoked her *ex negativo* portraying her husbands Mike Todd and Eddie Fisher (*The Men in Her Life*) but not her. And it is not accidental that the most famous image of the series is that one adopting the same strategy, almost to the letter in its technical and chromatic solutions, of those of Marilyn series: a photo by MGM, this time again a promotional one, of Elizabeth Taylor in 1957. It is a weaker cycle precisely because the process of myth-creation is not centered on a single, indefinitely repeatable picture, but is weakened in too many faces, in too many moments of the actress's life almost reinforcing Warhol's idea that myth knows no biography.

Just as an idol cannot be the object of biography, so the beauty it must project has to be, as we have seen, constructible, that is, immune to the threats of time and nature. Warhol's most incisive comment we have – we are in the summer of 1966 – on the *Marilyn* cycle is, as always, rather evanescent and misleading: “I just see Monroe as just another person. As for whether it's symbolical to paint Monroe in such violent colors: it's beauty, and she's beautiful and if something's beautiful, it's pretty colors, and that's all” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 88). The insistence on beauty, however, points us in the right direction towards the aestheticization and the carrying out of this process. Obviously, it is the universe of photo-reproduction. This is the essential starting point. It is the distance between reality and image that makes beauty precarious and it is this gap that one photography heals. Warhol explains it with three statements strangely punctual, with respect to his standards of argumentation. First, the mimetic hiatus between real (natural) beauty and reproduced (artificial) beauty, the latter embodied by movie stars.

Someone once asked me to state once and for all the most beautiful person I'd ever met. Well, the only people I can ever pick out as unequivocal beauties are from the movies, and then when you meet them, they're not really beauties either, so your standards don't even exist. In life, the movie stars can't even come up to the standards they set on film (Warhol, 1977, p. 68).

Having assessed the disappointment of reality, photography intervenes by taking the artifice to the extreme. The construction of the image (and here Warhol also speaks of himself) is the attempt to erase

any natural interference, a tension that tends to the idealization by removing the defect that nature always carries with it, to eliminate once and for all the burden of the perceptible.

When I did my self-portrait, I left all the pimples out because you always should. Pimples are a temporary condition and they don't have anything to do with what you really look like. Always omit the blemishes – they're not part of the good picture you want (p. 62).

Having removed nature, and, in some way, life as well, one cannot but notice the new status of beauty: inexpressive and purified, but unavoidably expendable. It is an aesthetic exorcism of a culture that increasingly finds itself prisoner of an idea of surgical beauty in which the being of artificial cosmetics clashes with the incessant becoming of nature. It is an ontological struggle that Warhol has helped to make decisive for the understanding of Twentieth-century beauty. It is the idea of the always identical against the reality of the ever-changing. As a matter of fact, the conflict that substantiates every classicism: from the gods of Olympus to the stars of Hollywood. And this is the third step.

Beauties in photographs are different from beauties in person. 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. And so you start to copy the photograph. Photographs usually bring in another half-dimension. Movies bring in another whole dimension. That screen magnetism is something secret (p. 63).

Photography allows Warhol to achieve in the same act an aesthetic model (beauty), a symbolic model (the iconic status) and also a mimetic model (reproduction). The use of Powolny's 1953 photograph allows Warhol's portrait to be both a copy and an original. This is the operation of the Sixties that digs into the three canonical levels of *mimesis*, updating Plato: reality (the real Marilyn), the media universe of photo-reproduction (Powolny's Marilyn), Warhol's art (*Marilyn's* series). A pattern that will find in the 1979 cycle, *Reversals*, a fourth degree of reality, when Warhol will resume the original series of Marilyn, turned to the negative, entering the dimension of the simulacrum, "the identical copy for which no original has ever existed" (Jameson, 1991, p. 17). Moving from the aesthetics of pop to postmodernism, Warhol reinforces a founding contradiction of contemporaneity: moving away from reality means adhering to a reality that only lives in the system of its own signs. This is one of the points on which influential interpretations of Warhol's work (Jameson, Baudrillard) have focused, making Marilyn the verification of these processes of transition from modern to postmodern. Jameson underlined this passage in the almost oppositional juxtaposition of Munch's *The Scream* and Warhol's portraits of Marilyn, exemplary symptoms of a "cultural pathology" of their respective times, when "alienation of

the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation" (p. 13). While Baudrillard saw, in Warhol's Marilyn, the definitive checkmate of the mimetic and, *de facto*, the entry into the age of the hyperreality of simulation:

For the sign to remain pure it must become its own double: this doubling of the sign really put an end to what it designated. Every Andy Warhol does this: the multiple replicas of Marilyn Monroe's face are of course at the same time the death of the original and the end of representation (Baudrillard, 2000, pp. 69-70).

From this standpoint, the Warholian option of insisting on the mask (the signifier) and the marginalization of the face (the meaning) is fully understandable. And if in Marilyn we are allowed to see an evident act of self-projection of the artist (Straumann 2002) – and Warhol will do so also with his other blonde clones, Edie Sedgwick, the transsexual Candy Darling down to the photographic portraits that Christopher Makos will dedicate to a cross-dressed and androgynous Warhol in 1983 (*Altered Images*) – as apparently suggested by a photograph by John D. Schiff of 1963 in which the faces of Warhol and Marilyn are superimposed, camouflaged with each other, the weight of the mythographic operation remains ever stronger. The mask, of which the make-up is the most immediate expression, is the way in which Warhol opens the myth to mythology, or rather to the almost unmentionable possibility of narrating what lies behind that insuperable wall made of cosmetics and virtuality. As Barthes (1981, p. 34) stated, in fact, photography becomes universal, meaningful, only by taking on a mask, that is, a medium able of emancipating it from the contingent. Warhol is a faithful interpreter of this strategy and this makes him, in Barthes' lexicon, not only a portrait photographer, but a mythologist.

In 1962 alone Warhol produced twenty-three works on Marilyn (including *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, *Marilyn Monroe's Lips* and *Marilyn Diptych*), he will return to the theme in 1964 and 1967 exasperating the chromatic artificiality and, finally, as a definitive quotation of himself, in the 1979 *Reversals* cycle. In each of these operations, the same idea that we have repeatedly reiterated seems at work: turning into myth by seriality through the enchantment of the photo-reproduction and the mystification of the "I", the make-up that makes the face, the very soul of the actress matter. Yet in this immense harvest of images, one painting seems to make an exception: *Marilyn Diptych*. It's just a moment, but it's the moment when Warhol seems to reveal us something about the actress. And not only. Speaking of Marilyn, Warhol is probably talking about himself too. The operative idea of serial repetition keeps persisting, but this time, as Danto suggested, "there is repetition, but it is a transformative repetition" (Danto, 2009, p. 41). What is transforming? The painting is clear: to the left of the viewer, twenty-five

colored Marilyn arranged in five rows of five, the same on the right with twenty-five Marilyn in black and white. The opposition could not be more explicit, “sun and rain”, Camille Paglia defined it in her analysis of the painting (Paglia, 2012, p. 152). The colored Marilyn, the public and immortal diva, is replaced by the black and white Marilyn, the private and mortal woman, a woman who slowly fades into the erosion of her own image. But this schizophrenia of the contemporary subject that Warhol portrays in one of his greatest works, insisting on the transformative identity of the image (the fifty Marilyn are all different, though recognizable as the same image) brings us back to the background that fueled our reflections. Is not the final white to which the fading of Marilyn’s face alludes, perhaps the same golden yellow of *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, or the blackened ochre of Goya’s *The Dog*, the same nothing? Legend has it that Warhol was once asked what his origins were and his answer was: “I come from nowhere”. But this nowhere can take on many masks. A village in northeastern Slovakia, Miková, where Warhol’s parents lived before emigrating to the United States, the working-class neighborhood of Oakland in the suburbs of Pittsburgh where an albino child was born and lived cutting out pictures of movie stars, but also the suburbs of an anonymous Los Angeles where a blond girl grew up changing her family every year from a foster care to the other. Warhol’s art has cultivated this void, making it its own center, and out of all this the image of Marilyn remains the most complete portrait, leaving the feeling that those who have tried to seek a final image of this blond nihilism, of this nothing, will surely have found it also in their own heart.

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