Art critic and dealer Ivan Karp remembers Andy Warhol. Take his recollections, for instance, of the four-story townhouse on Lexington and 87th, which the young artist shared with his mother:

It was very dark; the whole house was dark. But . . . furnished with great taste—all kinds of Victorian trappings, fine couches and all kinds of ornamental devices. . . . And it was the living room that I was ushered into. . . . It was not something that I knew or understood. It was a little bit exotic. And in the corner of this room, as I was led to it by this extremely shy man who was very odd-looking, with a very peculiar complexion and strange, gray hair, dwelled a body of paintings, maybe about 25 or 30 paintings. And there was a record playing on the record player at an incredible volume! I remember the song that was being played. It was by Dickie Lee, called “I Saw Linda Yesterday.” And during the entire time that I was there, he did not take off the record, and it played over and over again. Well, I was much caught up in the great, fresh thrust of the rock-'n'-roll music of that time, which was at its ripest: 1961. . . . The fact that he played it over and over again, I asked him why did he not change the record since there were other nice things to listen to, and I recommended other groups that might be interesting. He said that he really didn’t understand these records until he heard them at least a hundred times. (Karp qtd. in Smith 211)

Andy Warhol, it seems, was always in the Factory, always in a room made strange, a product of exotic, “scrumptiously bizarre” taste (Karp qtd. in Stein 195). Many summers as a child growing up in Pennsylvania, he’d become ill with a nervous condition, and so he’d spend hours in a bed littered with comic books, paper dolls, coloring books, a camera, cap gun, and his Charlie McCarthy doll. As the radio played, he’d show cartoons on his tiny toy projector (Ratcliff, Fate 188). In 1961, Walter Hopps, another art dealer, visits the Lexington Ave. townhouse and has an impression of its owner similar to Karp’s—that of an odd, offbeat sensibility surrounded by pop detritus:

I saw peculiar stashes of a kind of chi-chi gay taste . . . crannies full of gumball machines and merry-go-round horses and barber poles . . . The townhouse, gloomy and large, was peculiarly unfurnished. It was more of a collecting depot, a warehouse of things. I said, “Gee, it looks like you collect a lot of gumball machines here.” He was some strange, isolated figure in his laboratory of taste experiments. (qtd. in Stein 192)
But what really stuns Hopps is Warhol's library. No books, no pictures, no furniture, nothing . . . except on the floor, seemingly a foot deep, "covered wall to wall with every sort of pulp movie magazine, fan magazine, and trade sheet, having to do with popular stars from the movies or rock 'n' roll. Warhol wallowed in it. Pulp just littering the place edge to edge" (Stein 192). What seems like an anti-intellectual stash of pop junk, though, becomes a fitting library for a young artist who would become such an uncanny scholar of the media. Warhol offers, I want to argue, with his outré, alternative pleasure-spaces, featuring a mix of media, a soundtrack of incessant loud music, and an over-stuffed repository of cultural fascination, possibilities for thinking about the space in which we do composition today, as well as the actual work itself.

Warhol was the only Pop artist who was not a professionally, academically trained painter (Coplans 47). His skills were drawing and commercial design, with an especial interest in the technology of illustration. Other technologies, though, grew to obsess him; he was famously never without his tape recorder or camera. Rather than tools for displacement, he used technology to aesthetically mediate, intensify, and structure his environment. His novel, a, for example, resulted when Philips Norelco gave Warhol an early version of a cassette recorder to try out. As his assistant Gerard Malanga put it, "we thought, let's write a novel on tape. But the only way to write a novel on tape was just to tape somebody and then to transcribe the tapes and that would be the text" (Smith 173). Interestingly, for Warhol, technology had to be transparent, easy to operate, or it was worthless. He gave away SLR cameras because he couldn't figure them out, much preferring the point and click ease of a Polaroid. He settled on photographic silk-screening, rather than painting or serigraphy, Malanga recalls, because “[i]t would be less time involved and a lot less work . . . It was always Andy's philosophy that things should be easy” (qtd. in Smith 164). And he loved the old Auricon movie camera for the same reason: you simply set it up, loaded film, and instant movie. Naiveté pays off: his films became legendary for their static camera-work (critical renown, then, as an artifact of aversion to complexity). And rather than bothering to learn the complex craft of film-editing, he simply took reel after reel of 100-foot film and spliced them together, using simple paratactic seriality to achieve compelling coherence.

It's worth dwelling for a while on his film-work. It was in 1963 that he got his first movie camera and began a series of silent films, most with one-word titles like Kiss, Haircut, Eat, Sleep, Blow Job, titles in which life is captured in the quick short-hand of a to-do list. He'd done some experimenting with film in college, and then more in 1956, taking travel films of a round-the-world trip he took—Warhol would watch every moment of those films, even the leader tape, with the same degree of interest (Smith 292).

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In his films, Warhol’s lens stares, and time passes. Take *Sleep*, a six-hour silent of the nude, sleeping body of the poet John Giorno. Warhol simply put in film, aimed, and shot; each time he reloaded, he’d set up a new camera angle—so some footage of a rhythmically breathing stomach, a long close-up of the face, the view up the body taken from the knee. The critic Stephen Koch describes the film as “a serial meditation on stillness” (38). To emphasize that obsessive focus, Warhol shot his films at 24 frames per second (fps), but projected them at 16. The rhythm of his films has been termed “drug time” (Gidal 89).

*Sleep* was first shown at the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque, it was a sell-out, but at any given moment in its six-hour running time, the seats were at most half-full. People clustered in the lobby to smoke and chat, some stood and watched for a while at the door to the screening room, others left for a hamburger and returned a while later. One of the cardinal errors in our pedagogy, then: we teach as if the reader is attending closely to every single word in a writer’s work, pretending we ourselves don’t slip in and out of so much that we read. Warhol’s early work in film provides, then, one of those ways of reading we don’t talk about much in Composition, the distracted reading (which proves a perfect text-processing strategy for the disjointed attention pattern involved in internet reading).

Ronald Tavel, who worked on some of the scripts for Warhol’s films, describes the routine: all Warhol would do was give Tavel a title—say, *Kitchen*. “Do you want a plot?” Tavel asked. Warhol “paused and thought a bit and said, ‘No, a situation. I do, though, want a situation’” (Smith 295). There was no extrinsic logic, then, no enforced hierarchy of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis—rather the accidental text-formation of self-determining systems, prompted simply by a situation. *Chelsea Girls*, for example, was a patchwork anthology, a chance to use up previous reels of film. A huge pile of reels was given to the projectionist, who had no idea of the intended order. Each time it was screened, it was a different film.

Warhol’s art was seriously mischaracterized as being either a blank or cynical simulacrum of consumerist culture. He brought it on himself, perhaps, with all his carefully controlled, *faux-naïf* statements to the media. But the glimpses behind his so-called “affectless gaze” and “bored languor” (Warhol 10) are striking. In ICU, recovering from gunshot wounds that should have killed him, he decides “coming so close to death was really like coming so close to life, because life is nothing” (Warhol 12). The classic works—the Brillo boxes and soup cans and celebrity silk-screens—seem much more typically Andy than the works with less “fun” content—the race riots, the skulls, the hammer and sickles, and the *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* series. Or, the *Death and Disaster* paintings of 1962 and 1963, grim studies of electric chairs, car crashes, and suicides that found few buyers at the time. His most famous iconic portraits, his Marilyns, began, in fact, as part of the *Death...
series, with the first canvas made soon after the star's suicide. Glamour is his theme, of course, but along with the stark reality glamour can mask.

Life made him cautious, rueful, even cynical. And so his personal interactions with the world were often lies. "During an interview, a reporter once asked Warhol about his background. 'Why don't you make it up?' he suggested" (Rublowsky 112). Shy and scared, he hated speaking engagements, so he brought superstars and hangers-on with him to perform while he sat back. But even that was too much, and so, for a series of college lectures in 1967, he gets a brainstorm: he sends a dancer friend, Allen Midgette out, with sprayed silver hair, to impersonate him. Midgette stands around looking Andyesque, fooling everyone, until finally, four months later, someone compares a photo of Andy in the Voice with one taken of Midgette-as-Warhol. The fraud leads to outrage. Warhol recalls:

I was on the phone with an official from one of the other colleges on that tour, telling him how really sorry I was when suddenly he turned paranoid and said:

"How can I even be sure this is really you on the phone now?"

After a pause while I gave that some thought, I had to admit, "I don't know." (Warhol and Hackett 248)

The sad thing, Andy realizes, was that Midgette was "more like what people expect than I could ever be" (Tomkins 14). No wonder, then, students plagiarize. What they steal is more like what we want than they could ever write. Realizing "that Allen made a much better Andy Warhol than I did," Warhol acknowledges, "Who wants the truth?" (248).

Ah, we who teach writing know who wants the truth. The field of writing instruction has never, since its inception, wanted anything but the truth, and so Composition today persists in a dynamic at least as old as, say, 1918, when Mervin James Curl helped lead the move to banish description and narration from our curriculum and focus solely on exposition as a by-god, no-nonsense tool for representing objective reality. Sure the world's confusing, Curl admits, but we can get to the bottom of it:

In a world which man even as yet only slightly understands, surrounded as he is by his fellows who constantly baffle his intelligence, and shut up within the riddle of himself, Exposition attempts to explain, to make clear, to tear away the clouds of mystery and ignorance.

Exposition attempts to answer the endless curiosity of man. "What is this?" man asks, of things and of ideas. "Who are you?" he addresses to his fellows. "How did this originate, what caused it, where is it going, what will it do, how is it operated?" he repeats from birth to grave. (1)

Repetition, right to the grave—that's a nice way of summing up Andy Warhol's career.

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The writer I find most useful in reading Warhol is Charles Baudelaire, the poet who ushered in modernity, the theorist of the dandy and the aesthetic imagination, the pioneer of modern art criticism. He provides an interesting counterpoint for reading Composition, as well. Curl, for example, sees exposition as "garbed in the sack suit of business, ... roll[ing] up its sleeves," working the day-shift, as it tries to "explain the workings of a machine, the wonders of a printing press, ... the organization of a department store, or even ... how to bake a lemon pie" (1). Baudelaire's concern, though, is with the businessman when he's left work, "when the seventh or the eighth hour strikes and you bend your tired head towards the embers of your hearth or the cushions of your arm-chair ... the time when a keener desire and a more active reverie would refresh you after your labors" (Mirror 39). A time, Baudelaire knows, when art provides comfort and enjoyment. But the bourgeoisie's sensibility has been sabotaged by those in charge: "the monopolists have forbidden you even to enjoy, because you do not understand the technique of the arts, as you do those of ... business" (39). So Baudelaire advises an entirely different focus than Curl, urging the reverie-desiring, sack-suited businessman to forget about department stores and lemon pies for a while: "if two thirds of your time are devoted to knowledge, then the remaining third should be occupied by feeling—and it is by feeling alone that art is to be understood; and it is in this way that the equilibrium of your soul's forces will be established" (39). Want to tear away the clouds of ambivalence from a Warhol painting, Mr. Curl, and make it mean something? Then don't use exposition, for "the best criticism is that which is both amusing and poetic: not a cold, mathematical criticism which, on the pretext of explaining everything, has neither love nor hate. ... Thus the best account of a picture may well be a sonnet or an elegy" (41).

One of Composition's other early boosters for expository writing, Maurice Garland Fulton, has no qualms about low-keying description and narration, which "simply show the appearance of some object or the details of an event with little or no regard to their significance" (xiv); their purpose is mere "entertainment," not "instruction" (xvii). Warhol eschewed the prosaicness of instruction, preferring instead the poetics of entertainment, a silkscreen method that simply represented the glossy symbolic of the popular, in order to explore the significance of modern culture as scrupulously as possible. Rather than shrink from the trivial, he insists on it, over and over again, loving and hating the glamour that's designed to fascinate and preoccupy thoughts that otherwise might turn to time and morbidity. Marilyn's tragedy, Jackie Kennedy's, the reality of suffering and death permeates the canvases almost to the point of ridiculousness. As Baudelaire titled his autobiographical commonplace book, Mon coeur mis à nu, that book in which he swears an allegiance quite similar to Warhol's: "Glorifier le culte des images (ma grande, Writing Classroom as Factory 33
mon unique, ma primitive passion)” (198). Garland’s is a false dichotomy: it’s not either entertainment or instruction, it’s entertainment as instruction.

Mere exposition disgusts Baudelaire; he scoffs at the idea of “a poet or a novelist who took away the command of his faculties from the imagination to give it, for example, to his knowledge of language or to his observation of facts” (235). “The exclusive taste for the True,” Baudelaire felt, “oppresses and stifles the taste for the Beautiful. Where one should see nothing but Beauty . . ., our public looks only for Truth” (Mirror 229). Composition, though, remains dogged in its penetrating resolve to explain, to make clear, to tear away the clouds of mystery and ignorance. Warhol was absolutely uncanny in cultivating the kind of blank stare that utterly evades our belabored search for Truth: “The world fascinates me. It’s so nice, whatever it is. I approve of what everybody does: it must be right because somebody said it was right. . . . The interviewer should just tell me the words he wants me to say and I’ll repeat them after him. I think that would be so great because I’m so empty I just can’t think of anything to say” (Berg 60, 61). So, Exposition vs. Andy:

Interviewer: Andy, do you feel that the public has insulted your art?
AW: Uh, no.
Interviewer: Why not?
AW: Uh, well, I hadn’t thought about it.
Interviewer: It doesn’t bother you at all then?
AW: Uh, no.
Interviewer: Well, do you think that they’ve shown a lack of appreciation for what Pop Art means?
AW: Uh, no.
Interviewer: Andy, do you think that Pop Art has sort of reached the point where it’s becoming repetitious now?
AW: Uh, yes.
Interviewer: Do you think it should break away from being Pop Art?
AW: Uh, no.
Interviewer: Are you just going to carry on?
AW: Uh, yes. (“Andy Warhol”)“

“A Dandy does nothing,” Baudelaire claimed. “Can you imagine a Dandy speaking to the people unless to scoff at it?” (My Heart 182-83).

Is our pedagogy ever a lure? Does it dazzle? fascinate? Warhol’s first job after Carnegie Tech was doing window displays at Joseph Horne’s. He was paid one summer to look through fashion magazines in order to get ideas. Will we ever swallow the fact that this might be some of the best compositional instruction students can get? Fashion, Baudelaire tells us, is “a symptom of the taste for the ideal” (Painter 33). We complain about our students’ narcissism, but maybe we should help them nurture and intensify it instead. That was Baudelaire’s technique: “The Dandy,” he felt,
“should aspire to be sublime, continually. He should live and sleep in front of a mirror” (My Heart 177). His “solitary profession is elegance” (Painter 26). So students as superstars, having “no other calling but to cultivate the idea of beauty in their persons, to satisfy their passions, to feel and to think” (27). The ultimate effect of dandies, for Baudelaire, was “opposition and revolt; they are all representatives of what is finest in human pride, of that compelling need, alas only too rare today, of combating and destroying triviality” (28).

In 1963, Warhol moved his studio to a former hat factory on E. 47th St., where it would come to be known as “The Factory,” a kind of clubhouse for the demimonde. As John Cale described it, a place where “while one person was making a silkscreen, somebody else would be filming a screen test. Every day something new.” All the time people were coming in to hang out, to see who was there. A production center crossed with a social space, with the work created there taking as its subject matter our repetitive, mediasaturated culture; work in which errors were prized—the smudges, uneven paint surfaces, off-kilter images “ruining” the perfection of his serial grid became a way to personalize the heavy technological mediation of the work. As superstar Tally Brown describes it, it sounds like the greatest classroom ever: “seductive. It was that feeling of being really where the action was and of constant activity. . . . First there was one camera that couldn’t move, then there were more and more. Projectors. Projectors. People. Lovely old furniture, couches, places to be comfortable. Lots of floor. But sometimes the floor, you had to pick your way around the Flowers or Jackies or Marilyns. It was a trip” (Smith 256-57). It’s pleasure dome, then, as kunsthalle (or kunsthalle as pleasure dome).

Whatever it was, it was the absolute opposite of the Academy. Ronnie Cutrone, one of Warhol’s assistants, compares the Factory to The School of Visual Arts, where he was a student at the time:

I was studying art, which wasn’t getting me anywhere because I never got to see anybody during the week actually working. Everybody would theorize and talk about art and ways of doing it, and it all seemed like bullshit to me, because nobody was really doing it.

A friend of mine brought me up [to the Factory] one day, and I just saw that they were actually working up there and doing things. . . . I would go after school, and I would learn there more about art than I had all day. (Smith 343)

It’s “the work, the actual involvement. . . . It’s actually doing the work that is more important than thinking about it sometimes” (Smith 354). For Composition, the classroom-as-Factory means the traditional space of writing instruction refigured as a laboratory of taste experiments, a studio course allowing the naive exploration of forms and technologies: photogra-
phy, film, performance, music, drawing and painting (in a host of media), and writing (but in Warholian genres like screenplays, tongue-in-cheek interviews, philosophical reflections, vérité novels, diary entries). New assignments consist simply of a title—say Bar or Video Game or Sex at College—and a set length (500 words or 3½ minutes or 16 images). And just as Warhol did series of variations on his ready-made topics—first, a grid of each of the 32 varieties of Campbell’s soup cans, then several cans stacked or with labels ripped or in garish colors—so students might take a commercial topic and work through a set of changes on it: say, “13 Ways of Looking at the Big Bell Value Menu.” It’s writing classroom as collection depot, with genres better described as storage than text; Composition as Virtual Gumball Machine Collection. “Facebook” even sounds like the name of a Warhol work.

Britney Spears can never be instructor in our pedagogy, only object of study, because when Composition does offer students an encounter with the spectacular, it’s subsumed in that Curlian search for Truth, as in:

Collect a variety of celebrity tabloids to analyze in small groups. . . . What images appear regularly on the covers? . . . What messages are being sent about how we should measure up to the celebrity in question based on the cover? How would the feel of the magazine change if the cover photo were of an anonymous model? (Atwan 597)

Instead of a chance to wittily re-package packaging, re-display display (Wol- len 19, 21), as Warhol did, students get curricular buzz-kill. Rather than intensifying the shimmer (Ratcliff, Andy 8), it’s eviscerated, explicated. I’d rather think about movie stars as Edgar Morin did, as “star-goddesses [who] humanize themselves and become new mediators between the fantastic world of dreams and man’s daily life on earth” (25). My assignment on celebrity is a reliquary, in which students find as many cool artifacts as they can about their topic and lovingly preserve them in a digital box. Robert Atwan, whose assignment from the second edition of Convergences I sampled above, revised his textbook because “teachers wanted a wider representation of traditional compositions—essays—to serve as examples for their students” (vii). Ah . . . “The world has taken on a thickness of vulgarity that raises a spiritual man’s contempt to the violence of a passion. But there are those happy hides so thick that poison itself could not penetrate them. . . . To know nothing, to teach nothing, to will nothing, to feel nothing, to sleep and still to sleep, this today is my only wish” (Baude- laire, “Three Drafts” xii-xiii, xvi). Hey, you don’t have to convince Warhol: “I think it’s horrible to live,” he once confessed (Ratcliff, Fate 214).

Why do we buy it, I wonder, this accession to the notion of the composition classroom as a place to do the so-called business of the Academy? Give me glamour (or Glamour) any day. Yes, Ivan Karp remembers: “It was not
the fine arts society or press that reacted to the Warhol show [at the Stable Gallery in 1962] to begin with. It was the fashion press." Warhol’s imagery in that first major show of his—cartoons, consumer goods, and movies—was, Karp felt, “the world that was familiar to the fashion press and ... which it so much admired” (Smith 214). The aesthetically bland quality of the form and content of so much of contemporary college composition means we’re living out our own disaster series: “To allow oneself to be outstripped in art,” Baudelaire declared, “is to commit suicide” (Mirror 39-40).

Works Cited


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