All images in this bulletin: Andy Warhol, *Rorshach*, 1984, acrylic and silkscreen ink on linen, 50.8 × 40.6 cm. The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Founding Collection, Contribution of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

What might this be?

The question sounds simple enough, if perhaps a little menacing — with a cold stare passing through an otherwise innocent picture of twin butlers fighting over who will knot the master's bowtie. Is it "might" that throws things off, coaxing us to the outer limits of the plausible? What MIGHT this be? It might be spilled soup. It might be the shiny head and front pinchers of a beetle. It might be the savage dispassion of a clinician's stare. Or it might even be twin butlers.

– Why do they fight?
– For the honor of tying the master's bowtie.
– Who is their master?
– He's not pictured.
– But his bowtie is?
– Correct.
– Might he be a ghost?
– He MIGHT be …
– Or an absentee landlord?
– Or the impersonal power of capital, the master we all serve.
– And this impersonal power wears a bowtie?
– The bowtie is personal.

What might this BE? It's a hopeful question. Whatever this is now, it might someday be something better, truer to itself. We all might be wonderful if only we will work hard and learn to be happy. If now it's a mere inkblot, someday it might be an expensive work of art by Andy Warhol.

What might THIS be? That's the question for us. A question about things. Ten of them, actually: five black, two black and red, and one each of three, four, and eight colors — all printed on white or pale-colored 18 × 24 cm cards. This is the test that Hermann Rorschach introduced in 1921. In *Psychodiagnostik*, the accompanying book, the 37-year-old psychiatrist presented the findings for what he explained was an experiment still in its early stages — conducted at that point on 405 subjects at an Alpine hospital, ranging from "Normal, educated" to "Arteriosclerotic dements." He described the procedures for administering and scoring the test and offered some observations on the workings of human perception.

You look out at the world and you leave the door open a crack. To perceive is to divulge a flash of psyche. For this reason they would come to call the Rorschach a "projective test," though the term does not appear in *Psychodiagnostik*. It was Lawrence K. Frank, in 1939. He said the test was like an X-ray of the unconscious. "We may approach the personality and induce the individual to reveal his way of organizing experience, his way of seeing life, his meanings, significances, patterns, and especially his feelings."

But such a vision of a supine unconscious uncovered by inkblots doesn't quite accord with Rorschach's interest in a kind of perception animated by an interacting conscious and unconscious, past and present. Actually, it wasn't, strictly speaking, his. He borrowed a good deal from his mentor, Eugen Bleuler, the Swiss psychiatrist who coined the term "ambivalence." Here's Bleuler, as quoted by Rorschach:

Perceptions arise from the fact that sensations, or groups of sensations, ecphorize ["rouse from latency"] memory pictures of former groups of sensations within us. This produces in us a complex of memories of sensations, the elements of which, by virtue of their simultaneous occurrence in former experiences, have a particularly fine coherence and are differentiated from other groups of sensations. In perception, therefore, we have three processes: sensation, memory, and association. This identification of a homogeneous group of sensations with previously acquired analogous complexes, together with all their connections, we designate as "apperception."

To perceive is to remember; to abstract what is being seen or experienced and transpose it against a composite of earlier abstractions. Rorschach called these complexes of stored-up sensory experience "engrams" or "memory pictures." Naturally, new sensations and old engrams need not be "perfectly identical." Instead, each new perception adds another mark to the memory picture's ever-thickening impasto. If in the everyday, we assimilate new sensory experiences more or less unconsciously, Rorschach wanted to find the "threshold beyond which perception becomes interpretation"—elevated perception, *active* perception. Hence the blots: "the interpretation of chance forms can be called a perception in which the effort of integration is so great that it is realized consciously as an effort."

Though not spelled out as such by Rorschach, the conditions for crossing that threshold between perception and interpretation include, firstly, a formal enclosure from normal life. It's not the inkblot per se, but the context of its presentation — the abnormality of the task, the cards, one after the other. What might this be? And what might THIS be? It's the same, we know, with a museum or a picture frame. They, too, signal borders between the merely perceptible and the actively interpretable. Here is a thing apart, abstracted from life. The second, perhaps obvious, condition of interpretation is articulation. Perception will be elevated only when you stop to say what the thing is. Interpretation is necessarily a linguistic act. If perception entails (passively) reconciling the new with what has come before, interpretation redirects the process, (consciously) casting the abstraction of the engram onto the present particularity of the novel stimulus.

While the Rorschach-Bleuler account of human perception may not enjoy wide acceptance among today's cognitive scientists or neurologists, it still persuades as a means of modeling the fraught convergence of these three elements: pictures, language, the past. The blots mark not only the story of the development and application of a very strange psychodiagnostic tool, but also of the equally inky territory around the habits of looking at and talking about art. Because: 1. If memory is a picture and language the means of interpretation, it is by the translation of picture into words that memory actively contains the new; and 2. Not all memories are personal.

Nor am I alone in catching historical memory at work here. Bleuler adopted the notion of the engram from biologist Richard Semon, who, in his 1904 book, *Die Mneme*, offered in place of Darwinian heredity a notion of organic memory, preserved and transmitted through living matter. Semon's ideas were operative as well in the *Mnemosyne Atlas* — that "ghost story for adults" to which Aby Warburg devoted the final years of his life, mapping the symbolic pathways and cultural memory traces that constituted "the afterlife of antiquity." Bleuler's trio of processes — sensation-memory-association — adapted by Rorschach for conscious effort as sensation-memory-interpretation might be further adjusted for our purposes as vision-history-language. The past as mediator between subject and object.

How do things remember? How does history assert itself as one tries to interpret a picture, a thing, a blot of any kind? While historical memory can project onto objects in many different ways, we'd do well to look at few:

HAUNTING

You don't know it, but the picture you're looking at has been dead a hundred years. Warburg's "ghost story for adults" calls for continual retelling —all eras have their afterlives. And sometimes they haunt the margins of subsequent social and cultural patterns, whispering in the ears of objects and those who interpret them.

An example of this is found in the prehistory of psychiatry, along a line of succession extending from Franz Mesmer (who could conduct the body's magnetic fluids through gesture, touch, music and eye contact, provoking fits in order cure physical or mental ailments in the salons of Vienna and Paris in the 1770s and 80s) down to the founders of the science of the self. Between these, more than a century of magnetists, mesmerists and spiritualists experimented with states of somnambulant lucidity, séance and mind control, out of which emerged a conception of the human mind bifurcated into conscious and unconscious. The Marquis de Puységur induced magnetic sleep in Paris in the early years of the 19th century. In 1823, Alexandre Bertrand published his *Traité du somnambulisme et des différentes modifications qu'il présente*. Among German Romantics, magnetic states were explored with an eye to communing with the World Soul. In 1841, Scottish surgeon James Braid redubbed magnetism "hypnotism," and it was, of course, under that name that it came to be used in psychotherapeutic practice. Charcot, for example. While he probed the abysses of the human mind behind the walls of the Salpêtrière, rumors titillated Paris of great hypnotic balls and strange things happening to the hysterical young women under his control, though no such reports came back from his well-known students: Janet, Freud, Adler, Jung, Bleuler.

The magic show of mesmerism was smuggled into the science of psychiatry. And even if hypnosis has long been banished from mainstream, post-psychoanalytic American clinical psychology, we can still catch sight

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of a magnetic past which continues to haunt some of the prized objects of psychotherapy in its current positivist-behaviorist mode — namely in the Rorschach inkblot.

Not much is known about the life of Rorschach. Born in Zurich in 1897, raised in Schaffhausen, the oldest of three, he studied medicine in Neuenbürg, Zurich, Berne, completing his training in Berlin in 1910, where Bleuler directed his thesis on hallucinations. Professional stints at several asylums and sanatoria followed, before an appointment as assistant director of the asylum in Herisau in 1915, a position he held until his death in 1922, at age 37. (The writer Robert Walser, arriving a decade later, would spend more than 20 years there.) Historian Henri Ellenberger insists that the source of Rorschach's experiment was Justinus Kerner's *Klecksographien*, an 1857 volume of occult poetry and little inkblot monsters, "creatures of chance." Kerner was a physician, poet, and leading German magnetist of the mid-1800s. His book helped popularize the spiritualist parlor game of reading inkblots to communicate with ghosts and remained in print until the end of the century. According to some accounts, decades after Kerner's death, young Rorschach was so taken with the inkblot parlor game, that the children of Schaffhausen nicknamed him "Klex," from *Klecksen*, meaning "to blot."

The perception of a monster or a ghost by a subject should be scored as a negative response. It may indicate repressed frustration, anger or aggression.

FETISH

Here's the procedure laid out in *Psychodiagnostik*:

The subject is given one plate after the other and asked, "What might this be?" He holds the plate in his hand and may turn it about as much as he likes. The subject is free to hold the plate near his eyes or far away as he chooses; however, it should not be viewed from a distance. The length of the extended arm is the maximum permissible distance.

In scoring the test, the content of interpretations, for Rorschach,

was the least important of four factors, including number of responses; concentration on details versus the entire blot; and, most important of all, the relative attention paid by the subject to form, color and movement. He laid out a method for scoring these responses. For example, a subject who saw "two carnival clowns" in Plate II was scored WM+H (Whole blot, Movement + Human figure). A response of "modernistic butterfly tie" to Plate III was scored DFC+obj (A normal Detail, determined primarily by Form and only secondarily by Color + interpretation of an inanimate object). The answers to all ten would be added up, the final results offering an assessment of personality type or pathology.

Not insignificant changes have occurred since Rorschach's day in the implementation and scoring of the test. The subject now responds to the cards twice, the first time in what is called the Association Phase, and then again in an Inquiry phase, where the examiner asks the subject to explain where and how s/he saw what s/he saw. Scoring encompasses additional factors like shading and blending; vast new content categories and a greater emphasis on content; something called "form-level," or how reasonable an interpretation is for a given form; and the popularity of a given response.

This increasing complexity is the story of the Americanization of the Rorschach. It came here early: David Levy, a young American psychiatrist studying in Switzerland, brought back a set of blots in 1921. Devotees were forthcoming. "The mainstream of academic psychology looked askance at the Rorschach movement," according to one study of the reception of the Swiss import, "criticizing its cultist character and lack of scientific discipline." World War II brought with it a sudden demand for psychodiagnostic tools, and that was the foot in the door. By the 1960s there was fierce competition between competing schools of Rorschachers, mainly overcome with the advent, in 1974, of John Exner's Comprehensive System, which standardized the test into an elaborate scheme of psychometrics. Meanwhile, Rorschach indices of various diseases have been correlated to the checklists of symptoms laid down in the DSM.

With all this innovation, it's perhaps unsurprising that *Psychodiagnostik* has long been out of print. By contrast, the blots remain unchanged.

They are the exact same ten "accidental forms." This makes them not only among the most persistent of images, but also perhaps the most interpreted. Millions of people over the past century have cast eyes on precisely the same inkblots and had their say as to what they might be. And while (to the irritation of Roschachers) reproductions of the blots can be found online, the printing of the cards remains the closely guarded intellectual property of Rorschach's original Bern publisher, Verlag Hans Huber. To ensure consistency, the cards — incredibly — are printed on the very same presses that produced the first run. This complete fidelity to the preliminary, indeed arbitrary, instruments of a young provincial Swiss psychiatrist, the certainty that they have not and cannot change — such is the stronghold of the Rorschach fetish. The cards assume a kind of preciousness: they must be kept in a state of purity, guarded as one would an heirloom or a talisman. The cards! We speak of them as the acolytes of the tarot speak of theirs — in the hushed voice of ancient wisdom; only with this deck, we'll read your past rather than your future. However complex the interpretive and psychometric apparatus grows, we are reassured that these humble objects possess a perfect persistence, in an unbroken chain of testing back to the hysterics and morons in Herisau. Fetishized by the Rorschachers, the cards are, in turn, made a fetish for the subjects, who are told to see these objects as possessing qualities beyond the concrete. Invest them with meaning. Project onto them memory pictures. The blots forget nothing.

ACCRETION

They soak it all up. Just look at the vast records of answers, tables of response ratios and clusters, and test transcriptions — the unwieldy published indices of Rorschach responses, 1,000-page volumes with tens of thousands of answers catalogued according to several variables, which have, for many Rorschachers, finally given way to the automation of assessment software. All of this is why the Rorschach works. There's just so much of it. Every test is both an affirmation of — and contribution to — that which has come before. The Rorschach lives by accretion.

Many psychologists see it as a baseless bit of hocus pocus, lacking in validity and reliability. It's not at all unlikely that two examiners will get

different results out of the same subject. These critics look in befuddlement and frustration upon the persistence of the test and the blind devotion of its practitioners. But Rorscachers will not be cowed. As a case in point, consider this fragment of dialog from the *Handbook of Forensic Rorschach Assessment*, a model interaction for the expert-witness-Rorshacher questioned in a cross-examination:

Attorney:
Using the Rorschach is pretty controversial, isn't it, Doctor?

Witness:
Although there are some people who criticize use of the Rorschach, just as there are some critics of almost every procedure used in delivering health care [sic] services, the Rorschach is very widely used and taught, and the evidence supporting its use for appropriate purposes is very strong.

Attorney:
As I understand it, the *Buros Mental Measurement Yearbook* is a highly regarded reference source, and Arthur Jensen is a distinguished psychologist, and what he had to say about the inkblot test in that yearbook was, and I quote, "The rate of scientific progress in clinical psychology might well be measured by the speed and thoroughness with which it gets over the Rorschach." So how can you come into this courtroom and ask us to base an important decision, even in small part on a discredited test?

Witness:
With all due respect to Dr. Jensen, he said that back in 1965, and he was wrong then, because there has been a lot of scientific progress in clinical psychology over the last 40 years, and during that same time, the number of Rorschach tests being given around the world has increased substantially. And if Jensen were to say the same thing now, he would be wrong again.

How can it be wrong when it keeps going on? Can't stop, won't stop.

The force of accretion is not the same as the force of tradition, whose authority is rooted in the past, at some originary moment. Nor is it the

force of habit, which makes no claim at all to authority. The Rorschach, by contrast, is right because we have amassed so many results, because it has gone on and because it carries on. It is justified by amassment, by forward movement. By no means nostalgic, the logic of accretion regards the past only insofar as it is here congealed in the present. It glances back to frame an active process and demands to be spoken of in the present perfect continuous: we have been Rorschaching.

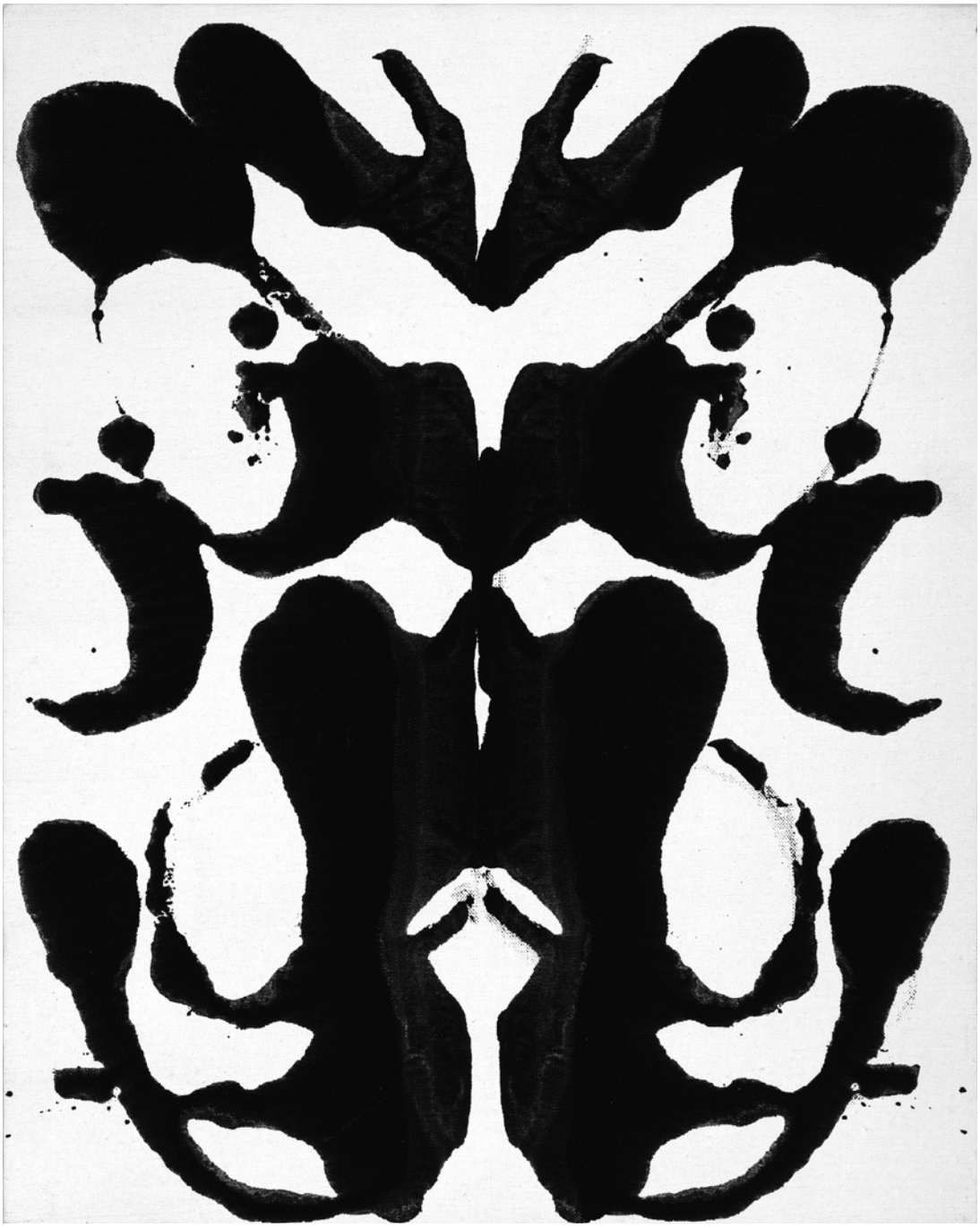
ACCRETION

And isn't it the same with painting? Against the claims of exhaustion or historical irrelevance that one used to hear, painting, too, carries on.

Interviewing Andy Warhol in 1985, Benjamin Buchloh pressed the artist about his Rorschach series. As always, Warhol played the naïf. Buchloh offered a reading of the Rorschachs and the earlier Oxidation paintings as a sendup of Neo-Expressionism — of the gesture reborn — "the general return to painterly expressivity and technique." Warhol: "Oh, I like all paintings; it's just amazing that it keeps, you know, going on."

And on into our own moment, in which painting remains, in the words of Roberta Smith writing in the *New York Times* in 2010, "very lively," our markets just ravenous for the stuff. If those obituaries, then, were premature, they still form the backdrop against which we watch painting persevere. Smith: "Few modern myths about art have been as persistent or as annoying as the so-called death of painting." Thus she launches her state of the medium: I will celebrate the vitality of painting today, but first let me assure you that it is not dead. What's dead is not very lively — and vice versa. The question therefore is not why isn't painting dead? But rather how does it stay so lively?

Smith tells us that many people are making fine paintings and that they are unburdened by any sense of restriction or rules. "They feel freer to paint what they want than at any time since the 1930s, or maybe even the 1890s." So, it's a feeling. A feeling that was lost, evidently, in the 20th century. A feeling of freedom. From grand narratives? Formal conventions? The obligation to innovate? The delusion of novelty?



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The myth of progress? Historical agency? Smith delineates some of the current tendencies in painting:

Freaky Figuration: Egged on by various amalgams of psychedelic and outsider art, Surrealism and Neo-Expressionism — not to mention Philip Guston, Dana Schutz, Martin Kippenberger and Thomas Trosch and Katherine Bernhardt — many painters are veering from the hallucinatory to the naïve and back again.

Then there's:

Early Modernism Redux: With George Condo and Sean Landers among the precedents, some artists are revisiting European painting of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but less in the spirit of ironic slumming, à la the 1980s, and more in search of new, style-reviving vitality and saturated color, sometimes mixed with hints of late 20th century cartooning and attention to saturated color.

And her thumbnail descriptions of some of the most exciting young painters:

Christoph Ruckhäberle looks back to early Miró through the lens of Balthus … Nina Chanel Abney rephrases some of the starchy simplicity of Marie Laurencin by way of "South Park."

No question about it: looking back and rephrasing can indeed be very lively, but painting differs from other dinners at the all-you-can-eat post-historical buffet of simultaneous styles. When, say, novelists or sculptors or filmmakers look back and rephrase, they do so typically with an eye to cleverness, naughtiness, nostalgia. Not so painters. Looking back and rephrasing is simply what painting now is. Every painting is a readymade, a memory picture. Notwithstanding the sometimes anxious rhetoric about revisiting — and revisiting earlier revisits — of reconsidering, interrogating, or working through the legacies of this or that chapter from the history of the medium, painting works for the same reason the Rorschach does: because there's been so much of it, because people have already made so many paintings. We have been painting: a field of vision that takes in both the horizon behind us and the ground on which we stand. It requires no

justification other than the continual process of the amassing of paint. Put otherwise, "it keeps, you know, going on."

FETISH

After more than a decade's hiatus, Warhol returned to painting. He had signaled his renunciation of the medium, in 1965, with the release of a silver helium-filled balloon from the roof of the Factory, and said he just wanted "to do the movies." He inaugurated his return by pissing on canvases primed with metallic paint. The Oxidation Paintings (or Piss Paintings as they're sometimes fondly known) mark the start of a period that has come to be seen as a rebirth for the artist, after a stretch of the 1970s devoted principally to the growth of Warhol Enterprises, *Interview* magazine, *Andy Warhol's TV*, and lots of portrait commissions. The Piss Paintings also open a sequence of abstract works, which, though by no means predominant in that productive final decade, are the late Warhols that draw the most attention. Including Shadows, the Yarn Paintings, our Rorschach series, these were, apart from the color-coordinated monochrome "blanks" of the 1960s, the artist's first abstract paintings.

Maybe there's something tantalizing about the slayer of AbEx toying, catlike, with his lifeless prey. Or it could be the delight of watching a loss of composure, Pop's cool giving way to impulse—though that's not exactly how Warhol's fellow Rorshacher Jay Shriver remembered it:

***Interview* moved from 860 Broadway to a new building on 33rd Street in 1984. By then 860 was basically just an empty 14,000-square-foot loft, left for Andy to paint in. That's when the paintings get really huge. And nobody was there to bother him. That's what enabled the Rorschachs. Andy said, "We need a new idea." And, by that time, it had been made very clear to me that abstraction was an important element that he wanted to pursue and abstractions weren't being commissioned. So I thought of the Rorschachs because it was primitive printmaking.**

Primitive printmaking. Back to basics. Warhol or Shriver would prepare half a canvas with a half-painted Rorschach. Shriver:

We had these huge canvases that we had to fold over and press together so that the paint was evenly distributed on both halves of the canvas. We took some of the huge dowels, on which canvas was shipped, and Andy, Augusto [Bugarin], Benjamin [Liu], and myself would get on our hands and knees, rolling the dowels and patting the canvas to get an even pressure across the entire surface.

Another question of fundamentals — something akin to asset fundamentals — is suggested in Shriver's account, with his emphasis on size and that line about abstractions not then "being commissioned." Novelty is rarely commissioned — not when one has such a familiar, branded product in the first place. The great rhapsodist of American capitalism in its Golden Age woke up, a few years into the Long Downturn, to find he had adopted, to a large extent, the economic model of the artisan. As to the truism of bigger price tags for bigger art, we might recall Warhol's claims about the purpose of his blanks from a 1965 interview: "You see, for every large painting I do, I paint a blank canvas, the same background color. The two are designed to hang together however the owner wants. It just makes them bigger and mainly makes them cost more." The statement should be taken with a grain of salt, of course, but Warhol had a knack for being, at once, flippant and dead serious.

His work often hinged on the facts — and mysteries — of commodity valuation, nowhere more so than in the Campbell's cans, Coke bottles, and Brillo boxes. By repeatedly abstracting these products from supermarket shelves and projecting them, in simply aestheticized translation, onto the gilded screen of art, Warhol illustrated — or just reproduced — the capitalist mystifications of the commodity. We are in that world of fetishes that Marx spoke of: "an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things." Our perception of social reality is mediated by all these things bought and sold — including, of course, our own labor. From a bird's-eye view, buying and selling is simply what we do. And still these things appear to us not for how they fit in to — and come out of — a world of lives of buying and selling, but instead in the abstract form of value.

Warhol's translation of consumer commodities into luxury commodities

plays on these misperceptions. "A Coke is a Coke," he wrote, "and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it." It's a classic Warhol formulation: a joke that leaves you to deliver the punch line. Never mind that Liz Taylor could buy more Cokes; she could also buy the Cokes unmentioned in Warhol's "democratic" reverie, i.e. those that he painted, which of course ARE "better" than the others. Here's Warhol the shrewd business artist: the more rarified the commodity, the simpler it is. The work of art, the supreme luxury commodity, is the simplest of all. It's luxuriousness depends merely on the fact that neither you nor the bum on the corner can have it. The formulation is not: "there are few rich people and art is expensive therefore only rich people have art." Instead: "there are only a few rich people therefore art is art."

It's a sober account of the place of art under capitalism, un-muddied by the mystic convulsions of, say, Abstract Expressionism. What else would we expect? "Good business is the best art." Hence: "It just makes them bigger and mainly makes them cost more." But it only MAINLY makes them cost more; room enough remains for them to do the other stuff we like. And it is in that remainder—just past the profit margin, where the brute facts of commodification meet the imprecisions of perceiving and talking about art—where Warhol's work most fully operates.

HAUNTING

Those supermarket staples again: they posed a pointed challenge to like or hate, to respond somehow, to interpret—yes, in the way that perhaps art is expected to do. But in their exuberant simplicity, deadpan renderings and repetitions, they seem to phrase the question with Rorschachian directness: what MIGHT this be?

Warhol was fascinated by the passions and conventions of the language around art. Again and again he seemed to delight in the possibility of provoking a conversation on which he could eavesdrop. That he so often did this through seemingly dumb or distant works of art is echoed in the

mannered and aloof Warhol persona, in the simplicities and elisions in his pronouncements. The reticent Warhol: his diaries consist of the transcriptions of brief phone conversations, whose purpose was to account for expenditures in the event of an audit. He purged himself of all but the idlest of language, creating in the process a pointed silence, an echo chamber in which to amplify the comedy of interpretation, those awkward responses to the great Rorschach of Warhol's personae, provocations, and art.

For instance, Keith Hartley has written: "Throughout his career, Warhol seems to have revered the purity and raw energy of Abstract Expressionism, and again and again he came up with strategies to allow him to compete with it." The Rorschachs and other late abstractions constitute both "straight homage" and "attempts at collapsing the heroics and sublime individualism of Abstract Expressionist painting."

According to Joseph D. Ketner II:

Given that he matured during the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism, "serious" painting for Warhol meant abstraction, Warhol's parody of Pollock and Color Field painting is obvious [but] it could be argued that Warhol simultaneously demonstrated deference to his peers and predecessors among the Abstract Expressionists and Color Field artists.

In the words of an anonymous author of lot notes for Christie's New York Sale 2597, Postwar & Contemporary Art, Lot 57 (November 14, 2012, Evening Sale) *Rorschach* (Price realized $2,770,500):

In a Warholian mechanization of Jackson Pollock's drip dance, Warhol poured black paint in abstract compositions onto one half of an unrolled canvas that had been laid out over the studio floor.

And Rosalind Krauss?

The optical webs of Jackson Pollock's drip pictures became Warhol's model and target in the mid 1970s ... [part of his] consistent, relentless, and articulate critique of the high art assumptions of his time ... the notion that the body could be left behind in one or another version of

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transcendence: spiritual, metaphysical, optical … the sloughing off of the temporal embeddedness of existence in the assumption of a spatiality that would speak of nothing but its own autonomous self-evidence.

Were these the high art assumptions of 1984? Are the Rorschachs (always spoken of in the same breath as the Piss Paintings and the other late abstractions) really about American abstract painting from three decades before? That seems to be the consensus: the late abstractions are haunted by the style of painting dominant when Warhol was a commercial artist, in his 20s. He was fixated on the Abstract Expressionists—either suddenly in the 1970s or consistently throughout his life. Hartley, again: "Put bluntly, he wanted on one level to like (and be liked by) Pollock and other macho artists, but because he was rejected by them he adopted a contrary stance." Blunt indeed.

Yet this insistent chorus confirms that, whatever the differences, the Rorschach test subject and the art critic share at least one procedure. It is articulated variously by the latter, but occurs among the former so frequently in a single formulation that the phrase has earned an abbreviation in the standard Rorschach shorthand: LL. Looks like. As in looks like spilled soup. Looks like a Pollock. Looks like a memory picture.

Warhol's own explanation of the abstract dimension of these works centered not on fixation but misunderstanding: "I thought that when you went to places like hospitals, they tell you to draw and make the Rorschach Tests. I wish I'd known there was a set." Again, a grain of salt. And again, it's a great comment that—true or not—says a lot more than it lets on. As implausible as it sounds—that over the course of the year that Warhol and his studio hands worked on these, folding over 14-foot long canvases, no one ever realized that there existed "a set" that might be easily silkscreened—the story gave Warhol cover to produce some of his only works that did not incorporate pre-existing images and play with the vagaries of looking like. The paintings resemble a Rorschach inkblot just enough and dissolve into ornate filigreed patterning.

"I thought that when you went to places like hospitals, they tell you to draw and make the Rorschach Tests." Places like hospitals.

– Museums?
– Yes.

That's where they'll tell you what these drawings mean. And here's Warhol from that interview with Buchloh: "The Rorschach is a good idea, and doing it just means I have to spend some time writing down what I see in the Rorschach. That would make it more interesting, if I could write down everything I read." Everything he read! Pat Hackett commented that Warhol frequently had a pen in his hand—though he only ever wrote his own name, signing checks and autographs.

A year later, speaking with Robert Nickas, Warhol echoed and elaborated:

I was trying to do these to actually read into them and write about them, but I never really had the time to do that. So I was going to hire somebody to read into them, to pretend it was me, so that they'd be a little more interesting. But because all I would see would be a dog's face or something like a tree or a bird or a flower. Somebody else could see a lot more. But maybe they shouldn't have any reading into them at all. None at all.

There's that silence again. The Rorschachs are not so much satires of—or "straight homage" to—Abstract Expressionism as they are to criticism, to talking about art. And therefore we'll let Warhol, who was actually really good at talking about art, have the last word.

Nothing can always be the subject of something. I mean, what's nice about those paintings is you could do them every five years … anytime you wanted to, when you had the time … because there's nothing to read into them … Because even if the paints stayed the same, everything else — and everyone else — would have changed.

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