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Andy's Inner Society: Warhol's Philosophy and Sense of Self

AmyJoy Sedberry



Andy Warhol's *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* is an intimate look at the internal world of the painter and graphic artist. The general public often assumes that Warhol's life was little more than a whirlwind of success and partying. His *Philosophy* conflicts with the general presuppositions about who Andy Warhol was. It reads like a diary and is rich with disclosures of his beliefs about love, beauty, success and underwear. Despite the intimate nature of these subjects and the apparently candid delivery of Warhol's philosophies and life experiences, he maintains a cagey and detached voice throughout. I argue that his *Philosophy*, despite appearing to be authentic and adorable in its transparency, is actually evidence of his fragmented and disconnected internal world. Warhol's humor is a thin veil between the reader and his fractured sense of self. Applying the psychotherapeutic theory of Richard Schwartz's "Internal Family Systems" to Andy Warhol will provide a language that may benefit the reader by clarifying and evaluating Warhol's unique perceptions of the world. Understanding Andy Warhol's early childhood and the trauma of being shot in adulthood will provide a more holistic perspective on his art and genius. Schwartz's therapeutic model is useful outside of the clinical world because it provides a lens with which to view any individual; a lens that encourages personal unification, internal harmony and a non-blaming attitude. This theory purports that all individuals are in possession of a Self, as well as autonomous sub-parts. The Self, along with its "parts" all work together to protect the individual. Any kind of trauma a person undergoes can cause the Self to disassociate and any of the sub-parts can inhabit the position of leadership meant only for the Self. In Andy Warhol's *Philosophy*, we see hints of the three parts actively moving in and out of dominance. Richard Schwartz refers

to the three sub groups as "exiles, managers and firefighters." The most vulnerable part is the "exile"; the fragile childlike part that often gets pushed aside in adulthood. In Warhol's case, he reveals his exiled childlike part early on in his *Philosophy* but he often minimizes and discredits it. This discrediting of his own trauma and vulnerability are a sign that his Self is disassociated. Warhol accounts, in a seemingly unaffected tone, three mental breakdowns around the age of eight. He appears underwhelmed by the struggles in his past. His lack of vulnerability is evidence of the fissure that eventually led to his completely fractured identity upon getting shot in 1968. Warhol recounts the shooting in a casual manner; he evades the reality of the devastation by the admission that, "right when [he] was being shot and ever since, [he] knew that [he] was watching television. The channels switch, but it's all television" (Warhol 91). Warhol copes by minimizing the devastating assault that compromised his life and he compares his near-death experience to the unreality of watching television. I believe this event catalyzed his disconnection from himself and others. Warhol's depiction of the interaction between A and the first B as if it transpires over a telephone call. I argue that, rather than representing two people, this dialogue betrays a fluctuating dominance between the other two theoretical parts that Schwartz calls the "manager" and the "firefighter". Both of these parts serve to protect the Self by becoming dominant any time the exile has been compromised. The manager is the performance oriented part, keeping rigid control of everything in the individual's external world to create a feeling of safety. The firefighter, what I believe is Andy's most prominent part, is the one that protects the wounded exile by acting out; this part numbs the individual through inordinate use of comforts like food, alcohol, or television.

“I realize it’s a feeling I like” and B interrupts before he finishes to say “when I slip on a chocolate-covered cherry I really hate it” (Warhol 7).

Warhol’s prominent voice, A, interacts with multiple characters as well as quite a few B’s. Some B’s are set apart as representing actual people; we know this because specific details about their lives depict Warhol’s known contemporaries. However, in my reading of the first discourse between A and (the first) B, I see the implication of shared experience and conflated identity: namely the discussion of their preferences for coping with the very singular dilemma of stepping on chocolate cherries that are “spread across the floor like landmines”. A says “I realize it’s a feeling I like” and B interrupts before he finishes to say “when I slip on a chocolate-covered cherry I really hate it” (Warhol 7). The comparison of their feelings about the peculiar trial of the chocolate covered cherries between their toes gives support to the fascinating possibility that A and B inhabit a shared life. This conversation is possibly the first manifestation of the internal voices Warhol lived with after the trauma of the shooting. “He says, ‘B is anybody and I’m nobody. B and I. I need B because I can’t be alone’” (Warhol 5). In his clinical observations, Schwartz began to see that clients with a repressed Self were characterized by “enmeshment, overprotectiveness, rigidity, and lack of conflict resolution” (Schwartz 23). This description could easily be applied to this and many other dialogues shared by A and the B’s. I argue that Warhol uses these dialogues as a device to portray his fractured

interiority. Considering Schwartz’s theoretical parts being an “autonomous mental system” the difference in gender and disposition does not exclude this from possibility.

Before they discuss the shooting, B brings up a nightmare. She describes a dream in which she tries desperately to get home but her only option is a man with a couch. B says, “I left with a man in a gray suit and briefcase...but his car wasn’t a car, it was a couch, so I knew he couldn’t get me anywhere” (Warhol 8). B realizes she “made and canceled [her plane reservation] four times...so [she] went to a shingled house near the beach and picked up sea-shells. I wanted to see if I could get inside this broken sea-shell. I tried, A, I really tried...I went back to the meeting and I said could you please put a propeller on this man’s couch, so I can get to the airport” (Warhol 8). The idea that a couch is the only means of getting home is a reference to Warhol’s failed therapeutic efforts, back in a time when clients commonly sat on couches. B says that after seeing the couch, “that’s when [she] tried to stop an ambulance” (Warhol 8). The ambulance enforces the emergency of Warhol’s subconscious predicament and B’s failed attempt to “get inside” a “broken sea-shell” reinforces Warhol’s failed attempts to retrieve his “Self” and bring it back into his currently fragmented internal world. Warhol is “everything [his] scrapbook says [he] is (Warhol 10).

The dismemberment of his personality did not happen suddenly, nor did it come without warning signs. On his Philosophy of beauty, Warhol confides, “I lost all my pigment when I was eight years old” (Warhol 64). After many digressions, he returns to this and says, “Children are always beautiful. Every kid, up to, say, eight years old always looks good” (Warhol 67). His passive voice distracts from the acute vulnerability of this revelation. Earlier in

his account, A tells B, “‘day after day I look in the mirror and I still see something—a new pimple.’ I was telling the truth. If someone asked me, ‘What’s your problem?’ I’d have to say, ‘Skin.’” (Warhol 7). Warhol’s preoccupation with his physical appearance is a result of the polarization of his internal parts. Polarized individuals are usually “highly isolated...acutely conscious of appearances, and attribute special meaning to food and eating” (Schwartz 23). During Warhol’s eighth year he also experienced his first nervous breakdown, a symptom of St. Vitus Dance. After he states that he experienced “three nervous breakdowns” he then minimizes them by stating, “I do not know what this meant” (Warhol 21). His statement implies ignorance about the nature of his breakdowns and alludes to the fact that Warhol has sought out neither the source of nor the remedy for his childhood wounds.

The shooting exacerbated Warhol’s already existing proclivity to fragility and his tendency to minimize trauma. He does mention pursuing psychiatric treatment before the shooting, his motivation was to “define some of [his] own problems” (Warhol 21). Andy says “I went to a psychiatrist in Greenwich village and told him all about myself. I told him my life story” (Warhol 24). His experience with an unprofessional psychiatrist who “said he would call [Andy] to make another appointment” but who “never called” was a fledgling attempt at pursuing mental health (Warhol, 24). Warhol was rejected after exposing himself to a therapist

“I went to a psychiatrist in Greenwich village and told him all about myself. I told him my life story” (Warhol 24)

and putting himself in a very vulnerable position. It is no coincidence that “on [his] way back from the psychiatrist’s [he] stopped in Macy’s and out of the blue [he] bought [his] first television set” (Warhol 23). He is already beginning to push aside his childhood wounds, and by doing so, exiles the part of him that needed emotional and spiritual healing. The firefighter part of Andy learns to sooth him with a false sense of connection through television. B says, “I watch television from the minute I wake up” (Warhol 5). While this habit undeniably plays into his talent and skill as a producer, the extremity in which Warhol purports connection to his TV and tape recorder is indicative of disconnection with himself and others. Both TV and tape recorder serve as Warhol’s substitution for real connection and vulnerability; his feeble attempt at pseudo-connection only distracts him from his isolation and internal dissonance. Andy says, “I kept the TV on all the time, especially while people were telling me their problems, and the television I found to be just diverting enough so the problems people told me didn’t really affect me anymore” (Warhol 23). We see that, rather than his own struggles, it is the pain and suffering of others that serves as the catalyst to him seeking out a psychotherapist. Warhol attracted fragile and histrionic friends; this fact weighed heavy on a man whose younger years were characterized by intense empathy. One revelatory moment is when Warhol is sharing a bed with Taxi; the girl he describes as having “more problems than anyone [he]’d ever seen” (Warhol 34). Warhol admits to watching Taxi as she slept and says: “I just couldn’t stop looking at her because I was so fascinated-but-horrified” (Warhol 36). The terror he experiences is evidence that in the eclipse of his affection for Taxi, he has essentially absorbed the precariousness of her personhood. He is experiencing fear on her behalf, and becoming enmeshed with her. The ability to empathize to this extent is often unsustainable. Warhol says, “when I got my first TV set, I stopped caring so much about having close relationships

with other people. I'd been hurt a lot to the degree you can only be hurt if you care a lot" (Warhol 26). His sensitivity to the pain of others and the need for their approval eventually proved to be too much; he turned away from his and everyone else's problems and thus his new "philosophy" was born.

A, after looking in the mirror, says to the first B, "nudity is a threat to my existence" (Warhol 11). This brief admission could easily be looked over but it does a lot of work to capture Warhol's vulnerabilities. Nudity, the entire body uncovered for the world to see, is the most vulnerable state a person can be in. In his mind nudity threatens Warhol's life. He fears the shame of being known and vulnerability as much as he fears death. He constantly looks at himself in the mirror but is deeply afraid to see his real Self. Warhol's lack of Self is further reinforced with A's admission that he is "sure [he is] going to look in the mirror and see nothing" (Warhol 7). A says, "people are always calling me a mirror and if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see?" (Warhol 7). Warhol has anxiety over his lack of identity, "some critic called me the Nothingness Himself and that didn't help my sense of existence any" and discloses that he is "obsessed with the idea of looking into the mirror and seeing no one, nothing" (Warhol 7). Warhol relies on the philosophy of "nothing" to cope with his reality and avoid any type of vulnerability. A says, "nothing is exciting, nothing is sexy, nothing is not embarrassing" (Warhol 9). After a long look at his own body, A sees his scars and is disturbed by the realization that he doesn't know what they represent or how he came by them. B says, "You got shot. You had the biggest orgasm of your life" (Warhol 11). His repression of trauma indicates the extent to which the shooting has fragmented him. Schwartz says that "people are frequently amnesic to traumatic or

highly intense events" (Schwartz 39). Like most individuals, Andy is "inclined to try to forget about painful events as soon as possible...which means pushing...out of awareness" (Schwartz 47). B recounts the event for him, "you were talking on the telephone...she just walked in off the elevator and started shooting" (Warhol 12). In true form, Warhol deflects the memory of the shooting and muses on "the idea of B and [him] needlepointing" (Warhol 12). After the shooting, Warhol was in such a vulnerable state of mind that the childlike exiled part briefly re-surfaces. B tells him, "remember how embarrassed you were in the hospital when the nuns saw you without your wings? And you started to collect things again...like you did when you were a kid or something (Warhol 11). In this fragile time, the world, like the therapist, lets him down again; "the worst, most cruel review of me that I ever read was the Time magazine review of me getting shot" (Warhol 78). This statement should be considered alongside the many seething reviews of his art, his films, and even his personhood, that Warhol would have read over the years. In that light, this statement carries a great deal of weight.

Warhol capitalizes on the multiplicity of his personality, he says "my right hand is jealous if my left hand is painting a pretty picture, my left leg is dancing a good step, my right leg gets jealous" (Warhol 49). In his writing of the Philosophy Warhol is consciously and intentionally giving his internal parts agency; he allows his fractured Self to serve him in the development of his art and craft. Andy Warhol displays a compromised sense of Self pervasively throughout his Philosophy. His revelations throughout the autobiography are sprinkled with poignant admissions of emptiness. His passivity in regards to his personal trauma and communal connection evidence how deeply wounded he is. According

to Schwartz, in the case of “physically or emotionally traumatized clients...before or during a trauma, for protective reasons [their] Self is separated” (Schwartz 45). Because the shooting placed Warhol in the “face of trauma [and] intense emotion” I argue that his “parts separate[d] from [his] Self...they dissociate[d] (Schwartz 38). Per Warhol’s Philosophy, “space is all one space and thought is all one thought, but my mind divides its spaces into spaces into spaces and thoughts into thoughts into thoughts. Like a large condominium” (Warhol 143). This image of a condominium compliments nicely Warhol’s portrayal of his split self. His internal parts may be inhabiting a shared space much like the space his younger self

“at one point I lived with seventeen different people in a basement apartment” (Warhol 22).

shared with so many roommates, “at one point I lived with seventeen different people in a basement apartment” (Warhol 22). By the end of his Philosophy I believe his amnesic, fractured identity is left unresolved, and his Self still buried deep. Warhol says: “I have no memory. Every day is a new day because I don’t remember the day before. Every minute is like the first minute of my life. I try to remember but I can’t” (Warhol 199). Along with adulthood and the settling of his neural pathways: Warhol seems to resign himself to being irredeemably broken. His way of coping is living in and for the present; he survives off of the sensual comfort any given moment may provide. The illusory moment he inhabits does not demand vulnerability or shame.

He cognitively omits his past, and he avoids admitting to the reality of his impending future.

Viewing Warhol in this way should produce empathy for the man and even more appreciation for his craft. The goal of viewing him in terms of parts is not to shame or discredit any of them. A part “is not just a temporary emotional state...it is a discrete and autonomous mental system that has an idiosyncratic range of emotion, style of expression, set of abilities, desires, and view of the world” (Schwartz 34). This description implies that a part has dignity, agency, and purpose, even if trauma has de-throned the Self and forced the protective part out of its proper role. “All parts are welcome” is the philosophy that Richard Schwartz founded his therapeutic model on. Warhol’s internal family reveals the range of his creativity, his ability to empathize with others, and his sensitivity to the human experience. The only grief to be had is over his loss of identity because of the violence and neglect of others. The goal for every individual is that their Self have “the clarity of perspective and other qualities needed to lead [the parts] effectively...[being] fully differentiated...” (Schwartz 37). If Warhol had the awareness of his internal resources, or the realization of his external resources to protect his Self than he very could have had the chance to be “free and open-hearted... [to lose] his sense of separateness (Schwartz 37).

"That's one of my favorite things to say. "So what."

"My mother didn't love me." So what.

"My husband won't ball me." So what.

"I'm a success but I'm still alone." So what. (Warhol 112).

The great tragedy of Warhol's life was his loneliness and I cannot take him at his word when he says "so what". So what, if a beautiful brilliant man spent his entire life alone and possibly devoid of any real connection to his Self and the rest of the world? So what. His life is evidence of his community's failure; a testament to the world's neglect of the wounded, sensitive and vulnerable. It is evidence of an epidemic; the belief in the myth that we do not have control over our parts, that we can repress them, and that they can't be resources for our balance and healing. Warhol's humor distracts the reader from the overwhelming gulf of pain he perpetually kept at bay. Even in reading Warhol's Philosophy as a haunting cry for help, his brilliance triumphs. Despite the imbalance and isolation that characterized Andy Warhol's "internal family," he used this vulnerability to

strengthen the art he produced. His giftedness as an artist is a testament to the redemptive power of art. **Warhol's art has long outlasted him, and continues to offer a wealth of insight and beauty to anyone who seeks exposure to it.**

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