When approaching the world of art, there are those who may be intimidated. It is a result of a number of aspects – perhaps it is the difficulty in understanding a piece of art and its numerous contextual readings. Or maybe it is the critique and commentary that has built up around the industry, or even just the sheer overwhelming mass of resources and knowledge available in the field. For whatever reason, art seems to have been raised up on a pedestal, balancing precariously close to the mainstream culture but still careful not to dip its toes into the consumerist culture. It is a world that has evolved into what appears to the general public as an elitist and intellectual group, one that most can never hope to infiltrate. Andy Warhol, however, seems to have successfully crashed the party.

These days, Warhol is seen as one of the most prominent figures of America’s 1960’s scenery, an icon of a counter-culture that has given birth to today’s concept of multimedia. But how many are familiar with Warhol beyond his Campbell’s soup can? Outside of the infamous Factory, there are countless philosophical takes on Warhol’s encounter with the art world. Throughout his rise to popularity and even after his death, the public has attempted to define and stereotype Warhol’s life and work—but often without success. He is a character who has both successfully courted and eluded the spotlight of fame, leaving millions to wonder about his mysterious allure and grip on the art world.
It is this curious attraction between Warhol and the public media that I hope to explore. By looking at some of the commentary being imposed on Warhol’s philosophy and comparing that to the actual words and work of Warhol himself, I will look at the ways in which Warhol may or may not have been misinterpreted. We begin by familiarizing ourselves with two articles: *Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol* by Thomas Crow and the other, an interview with Warhol by G.R. Swenson. Swenson’s interview is printed in a straightforward Q & A format, with much of the interview consisting of Warhol speaking on his ideas and opinions with the occasional prompt from Swenson. Crow’s article, on the other hand, is a drawn out analysis of Warhol’s treatment of female figures, consumerism, death and destruction through the method of silk-screening. Much of Crow’s article draws on Warhol’s thoughts, revealed in the Swenson interview.

The first thing of note in Crow’s article is his proposal that Warhol exuded three different personalities. Each of his personalities catered to a different aspect and social circle of his life but all three are equally revealed in his work. Whether these personalities were truly of Warhol’s own creation or if they were simply designed by the media is questionable—regardless, Warhol gleefully reveled in these roles.

According to Crow, the “most prominent” of Warhol’s personalities “was the self-created one: the product of his famous pronouncements and of the allowed representation of his life and milieu.” ¹ In his interview with Swenson, Warhol boldly declared, “I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should be like everybody.” ² Warhol firmly encouraged the appreciation of commercial luxuries and promoted a passive approach to artistic creation. He

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publicly rebuffed the assertive pursuit of originality and declared that “if an artist can’t do any more, then he should just quit; and an artist ought to be able to change his style without feeling bad.” ³ Crow says that it is these public statements that enabled Warhol to successfully “[control] the interpretation of his work.” ⁴ He suggests, however, that Warhol’s commentary, while calm on the surface, may have hidden a more calculated agenda. He comments on Swenson’s interview with Warhol, noting that Warhol seemed to possess a “barely suppressed anger present throughout his responses.” ⁵ Crow seems to believe that Warhol was serious and adamant in all that he said. Although there is a certain hint of truth to much of Warhol’s comments on his own work, I would suggest instead that Warhol was not attempting to qualify himself or his art as being serious. Warhol’s carefree comments baited the public into believing a certain philosophy that did not exist. His comments are contradictory and ironic, meant to leave the media in disarray, scratching their heads in confusion. Warhol himself expresses his own wonder that people would read so far into his work: “It confuses me that people expect Pop Art to make a comment or say that its adherents merely accept their environment.” ⁶ That is not to say that his work did not hold a deeper meaning. The difficulty is that there is only a deeper meaning for those who understand his work naturally. If it did not seem obvious immediately, then the deeper meaning was lost and not meant to be understood by those individuals.

The second personality that Crow sees in Warhol is one created from “the complex of interests, sentiments, skills, ambitions, and passions actually figured in paint on canvas.” ⁷ In this description, Crow is referring to Warhol’s identity portrayed through his most well-known

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³ Warhol, 117.
⁴ Crow, 312.
⁵ Crow, 313.
⁶ Warhol, 119.
⁷ Crow, 311.
paintings such as *Campbell’s Soup Cans* and the *Marilyn Monroe* series. In Crow’s article, he attempts to explain Warhol’s motivation behind these works—specifically, the *Marilyn* series—as “a lengthy act of mourning” due to its timely creation only a few weeks after Monroe’s death.\(^8\) Crow acknowledges that although Warhol “had little stake in the erotic fascination felt for [Monroe] by the male intellectuals of the fifties generation,” his paintings show a sense of attachment and reverence to the classic icon.\(^9\) According to Crow’s analysis, the *Marilyn* series makes it a point to magnify the discrepancies between the actual, living figure of Monroe and the silk-screened, slightly imperfect print. Although Crow sees this detail as a pained tribute to Monroe, the painting may not have been created for the purposes of mourning. It is true that Warhol dealt with Monroe’s death, but I would argue that he did not suffer as seriously as Crow may think—Monroe is an unforgettable icon whose death struck an equal chord in everyone who was caught in the popular culture of the 60’s. I would, however, suggest that Warhol created the *Marilyn* paintings as a way to make the media aware of its own obsessions and how this “curiously intimate knowledge of an unknown figure” leads beyond the reach of life itself.\(^10\) With no disrespect meant towards Monroe, Warhol employed her as a way to draw attention to the way in which we perceive “superstars”—a term coined by Warhol himself. The cropping of Monroe’s image so that it reveals only her face functions to remind the media of the woman who was so often reduced to a simple sex symbol. The repetition of her face bombards its audience with a view of what life must have been like for Monroe herself, constantly exposed to observation in all corners of her life. Crow seems to believe that Warhol created the *Marilyn* series as an offering of respect to the world of popular culture, but it seems to me that Warhol intended this series as an accusatory finger towards those who killed Monroe: the media itself.

\(^8\) Crow, 313.
\(^9\) Crow, 313.
\(^10\) Crow, 313.
Finally, what Crow considers to be the most “largely ignored” personality is Warhol’s “persona as it sanctioned experiments in nonelite culture far beyond the world of art.” Although this version of the artist helps to further explain his effect on the world of art and perhaps would contribute to an understanding of his true intentions, it is often overlooked, “overshadowed” by other, more prominent aspects of Warhol’s public identity, notes Crow. He is, of course, referring to Warhol’s later experimental work and the philosophies that carried him across the threshold of the art world and into the annals of popular culture.

His piece entitled Tunafish Disaster reached past the media’s love affair with celebrity and touched on issues that were closer to home. Tunafish Disaster depicted “an analogous object, a can of A&P-brand tuna” layered on top of “newspaper photographs of the victims” who had died from food poisoning. In a way, it demonstrates the media’s ability to expose almost anyone and anything, celebrity or not. Tunafish showed how normal, everything day processes and routines could suddenly be landed in the spotlight, right next to Monroe on the newsstand. Crow suggests that Tunafish “[commemorated] a moment when the supermarket promise of safe and abundant packaged food was disastrously broken.” He describes the way in which Warhol’s “repetition of these crude images [forces] attention to the awful banality […] of the tawdry exploitation by which we come to know the misfortune of strangers,” implying a sort of guilt that should be felt by viewers of the painting. Warhol himself, however, denies this, stating that “when you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn’t really have any

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11 Crow, 311.
12 Crow, 311.
13 Crow, 320.
14 Crow, 320.
15 Crow, 320.
effect.” Warhol’s intention was perhaps not to shock or to empathize, but simply to reveal the way in which our media has claimed everything as its own, the shock factor being lost.

An analysis of Andy Warhol and his work is always difficult. Although Thomas Crow has attempted a worthwhile interpretation of Warhol’s life, philosophy, and motivation, Warhol continues to be a character that thrives on abrupt understanding and immediate inspiration. His explanation of his work is that there is no explanation, something that the art world is still coming to terms with, years later. We could continue to propose theory after theory about Warhol’s art and what he is trying to say but that in itself would completely miss the point. As Crow has illustrated, Warhol continues to mystify the media and the art world with an ever-revolving barrage of personalities, unsolved motivations, and carefree passions. Warhol truly embraced the culture for the sake of it and never questioned whether there needed to be an ulterior motive. It would bode well for the media and the world of high art to understand, as Warhol so plainly put it, that “all painting is fact, and that is enough.”

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16 Warhol, 118.
17 Warhol, 119.
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