Catalogue Essay for "THE CHARADE OF MASTERY. DECIPHERING MODERNISM IN CONTEMPORARY ART." at the Whitney Museum of American Art Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza
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CARY S. LEIBOWITZ/CANDYASS

style may be read as a criticism of the modernist aesthetic, in the end Tansey only replaces one set of elitist, masterful assumptions with another.

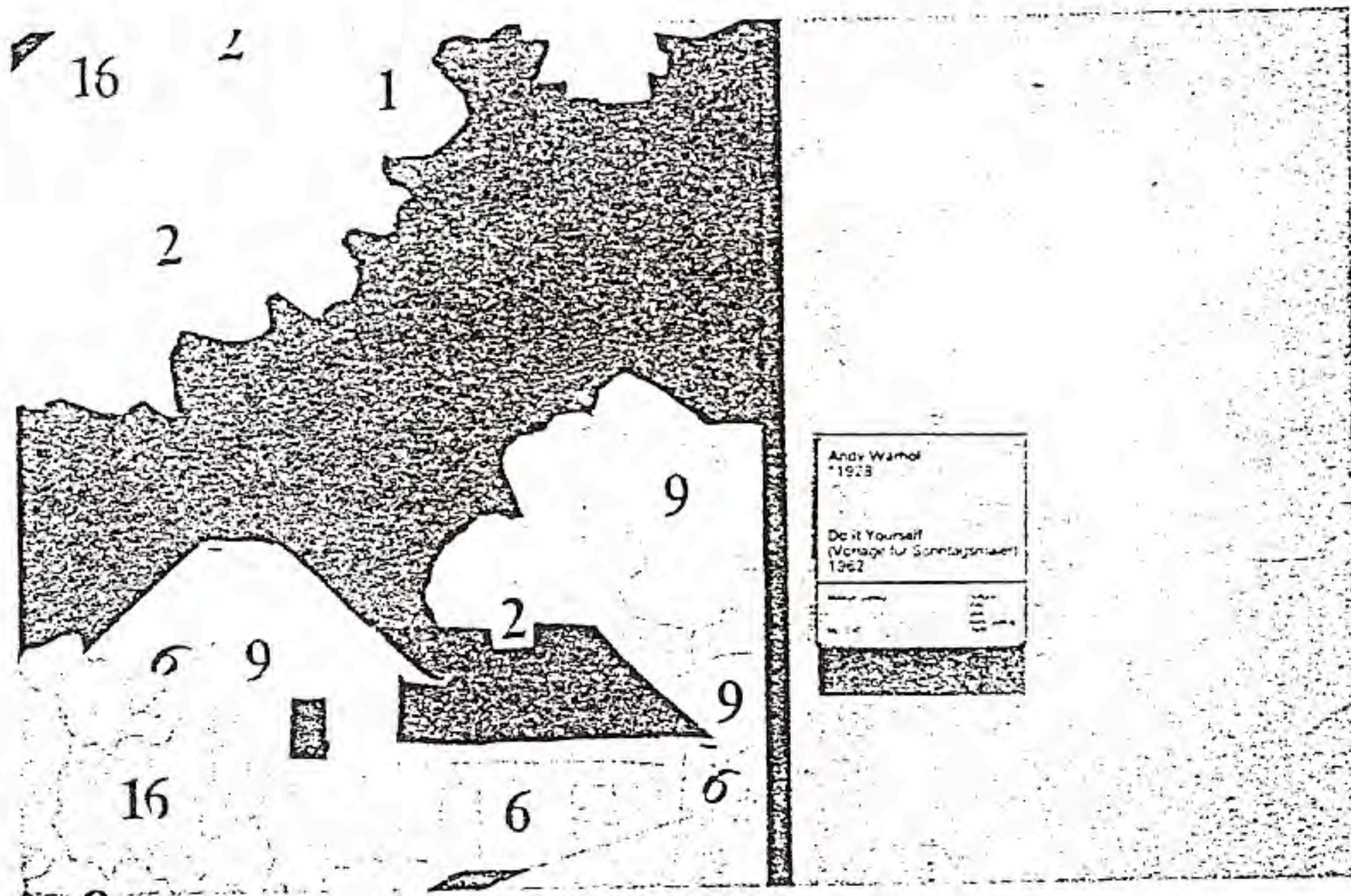
The project of postmodernism—to revise or reject the basic tenets of modernism—has always involved ambivalence since it cannot stake out a position entirely free of the rhetoric of its target. Criticism thus serves as a validating, self-sustaining agent. This does not mean that the critical process is useless. It simply suggests that critique and investment should never be seen as mutually exclusive.

Sarah Morris

The Aura of the Artist

The famous artist holds a privileged position in society both economically and culturally, a status derived from the supposed ability of art and the artist to transcend social conditions, to possess an intrinsic power. For Walter Benjamin, in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the aura of the art object depended on its originality, uniqueness, and distance, qualities which have been eroded by techniques of reproduction. In many ways, the inflated status of the contemporary artist compensates for the art object's loss of aura. In effect, the aura, that is, the celebrity, of the artist replaces the art object; the artist has become the medium. The museum, the gallery, the critic, the spectator, and, of course, the artist collaborate in this translation. As a result, artistic mastery has become a charade. Recently, however, artists have begun to expose this hypostatization of the artistic personality in the work of art.

In *Little Self-Portrait* (1988), Ashley Bickerton creates a boxlike construction made of seductive high-tech materials, including aluminum and neoprene. On the surface, he incorporates the style of commercial logos, which suggests the commodity aesthetics of packaging. In addition, he implicitly compares the role of the white, male avant-gardist to a celebrity centerfold by listing such trivia as his own bodily measurements, hobbies, and turn-ons as part of the art work. The art object and the artist become conflated as a product of consumption. Our voyeuristic fascination with the private biography of the artist (through interviews, photographs, personal data), which is usually kept distinct from an art work, is here directly displayed. Bickerton draws an analogy between the relationship of viewer and artist and that of fan and celebrity. Indeed, the parallel between the cultural construction of the artist and that of a media star is further emphasized by his use of the Sonnabend Gallery



logo, which underscores the position of the commercial art gallery as the promotional support for his personality and work. However, even as Bickerton criticizes this economy of prestige, he also occupies a position in it. While he explicitly parodies his own personality, he also implicitly satisfies our desire for it.

Like sports or movie fans, we identify with art figures, but this identification levels out differences among them. In the *I Love. . . .* series (1989–90), Cary Leibowitz/Candyass repeatedly paints the phrase "I Love . . . ," each time completing it with the name of a well-known artist. Each colorful panel is a small, awkward, childlike rendering of this phrase, paying homage to artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Jackson Pollock, Pablo Picasso, and Andy Warhol. This mimicry of the fan renders the artist and the celebrity equally banal. Moreover, the repetition of the fill-in-the-blank sentence suggests the arbitrariness of its object of adoration. Art history becomes simply a series of personalities to embrace. Leibowitz functions as a social critic of this phenomenon, but he also positions himself as the "I," as devout fan and admirer, thus revealing his own complicity in the mystification of the artist. With *I Love Marcel Duchamp*, Leibowitz shows how even the most critical aesthetic may be reinscribed as "masterful."

The aura of the artist and the art object depends on the signature, the supposed guarantee of authenticity. The signifier of authenticity may also be the signature style of the artist's oeuvre. The singularity or uniqueness of the gesture, however, is refuted in such works as Sturtevant's *Johns' Target With Four Faces* (1986). Unlike most other appropriation artists, Sturtevant recreates Jasper Johns' 1955 masterpiece *Target with Plaster Casts* by hand. Her exact replication of an encaustic painting with boxed plaster reliefs throws into question the claims of Johns' originality. However, the work depends on the viewer's recognition of the resemblance, and the repetition of Johns' signature style artificially reconstitutes his aura even as it undermines it.

The denial of the signature or of the authority of the artist's name has in turn become a signature style itself. Louise Lawler in her audio and text piece *Bird Calls* (1972) makes her own melody of individual bird calls, naming well-known male artists and displaying a list of their names. *Bird Calls* functions as a parody of the exclusive individuality and camaraderie upheld by male artists. The choice of names is based on recognizability, and each voice exaggerates the given artist's persona. A roll call of male names demonstrates how the domain of the signature or authorship is a patriarchal system and how institutions such as art museums reinforce it. However, Lawler's calls do not problematize *her* authorship of the art work, her name in relation to other names, her critical signature among other signatures.

Cary Leibowitz/Candyass, from the series I Love . . . , 1989–90

The reconfiguration of the aura of the artist through the signature is further explored by Gretchen Bender in *Untitled* (1981-82) from the series *The Pleasure Is Back*. Bender juxtaposes appropriated images—a black monochrome, women's faces from advertisements, Expressionist renderings of a male figure, and Roy Lichtenstein's comic book-style brushstroke paintings—to conflate the idea of artistic mastery in the historical narrative of Expressionism, abstract painting, and Pop. These art movements, which began to be appropriated in the early 1980s, were central to the recreation of aura through personality. Bender comments on how this personality is a male privilege, a site of high culture, whereas the representation of women remains in such low culture domains as advertising.

A pedigree of names and a fetishization of signatures are among the constitutive elements of art history. In *16* (1985), Louise Lawler photographs a fragment of an Andy Warhol painting depicting an enlarged paint-by-numbers image of a landscape. The wall label, which includes the artist's name, year of birth, title of work, and date of creation, is given greater prominence in order to focus our attention on the context and reception of the art work. Lawler underscores the irony that a work such as Warhol's, which sought to challenge the artistic with the mundane, is now regarded as a masterpiece. Warhol's paint-by-numbers series suggested not only that authorship is open to anyone, but also that the genres of art history, such as landscape, are now readymade conventions without any authenticity. Lawler raises the issue of how even critical contemporary works are reinscribed as masterful and original.

The continual formation of masterpieces within a network of institutions is met by the perpetual need to dismantle the same works. The quotation or the criticism of the avant-garde is itself a means to continue its lineage. For example, the repetition of the paradigm of the readymade points to and fetishizes its origin. In *Saint Jack* (1990), J. St. Bernard pokes fun at the whole tradition of the pseudonym and the readymade, even while using its conventions. Here the artist plays on the allure of the fictitious name by simply presenting a panel that reads "Saint Jack." The artist's name and the mystery of the persona become the art work; the panel can even be concealed, like the artist's identity, through a canvas cover that reads "Don't Mean Jack. Don't Mean Dog, Jack." The precedent here is both Marcel Duchamp's "R. Mutt," his pseudonymous signature for the readymade urinal *Fountain* of 1917, and "John Dogg," St. Bernard's previous pseudonym. The words announce the work's vapid intent, signaling the well-accepted distinction conferred upon the artist since the advent of the readymade: simply the naming of everyday objects as works of art endows them with aesthetic importance and economic value. The reference to Duchamp at once parodies his legacy and maintains it.

Mastery takes on form in the personality, the signature, and the pedigree of the artist, whose aura is now necessary to maintain the aura of the art object. For the spectator, the art object is often simply a surrogate of the artist, whose prestige guarantees its value. In this way, the artist becomes the object of our gaze, as much on exhibition as the art work.