

THE SAME: REFLECTIONS ON ANDY WARHOL AND RONALD REAGAN

peggy phelan

I had a good friend who loved to reply, "Same ol', same ol'" whenever I asked how she was. After she delivered this assessment, she'd laugh conspiratorially and say, "Thank God." To her, a barometer tuned to sameness was the truest indicator of her emotional climate. After a tumultuous childhood, a steady life was an ideal life. This aspiration is common enough, but my friend was exceptional in the theatricality of her pronouncement: the repetition of "same ol'" had to be exact. She concentrated completely on producing the same flat affect and the same amount of breath in each of the four words. It was as if the ability to say the words was the guarantee that she had arrived in a landscape of The Same. And then, having arrived once more, her bubbling laughter — effusive, emotional, relieved — seemed to give it all away. She could afford to laugh because she had accomplished the same difficult speech act one more time.

Her mini-performance, repeated often, helped me see the appeal of sameness. I had thought that an ideal life required adventure, a hazard of countries, languages, currencies, experiences. I was part of the generation that began by speaking the mantra of sexual and racial difference and ended up mouthing the mantra of diversity in the workplace, while witnessing the hollowing out of the political force of everything in between. Here, I have been invited to reflect on the transformation of our fixation on difference into our contemporary preoccupation with the same. It's easy enough to see the trap in this invitation — let's really be different and write about the same. But I hope that the discussion will do something more than celebrate difference's adaptive capacities. I think the best way to ensure the more radical possibility at the heart of the romance with the same is indeed to see it as romance, as a melody that makes us move toward one another.

In recent years I have argued that Andy Warhol and Ronald Reagan are the same in that they both fell in love with the same and made the rest of us want to fall too. Warhol, the supreme copyist of our age,

understood the appeal of the same in part because he grew up in a lower-class immigrant household and recognized early on that he would have to perfect a kind of mimicry in order to deflect attention from the things he disliked (his nose, for example) toward the things he did like (his art, especially his drawings on paper). Perceiving himself as permanently barred from feeling at home with the glamorous and powerful (even when he was at the height of his fame), Warhol tried to make each act, each artwork, each dinner party, a variation on the same. His explanation for why he painted Campbell's soup cans — “because I ate soup every day for lunch for twenty years” — was his first foray into fame; before long, he had created his own factory dedicated to the production of Andy Warhols. Believing that if he had a model he'd know what to do, Warhol took sex classes to learn how to do it; he silk-screened dance diagrams and placed them on the floor of the Sable gallery to teach himself and others where to put their feet; and he studiously read fashion magazines, first to learn how to dress and act, and then to learn how to make a better magazine himself. Learning to make a better life took a little longer.

Enthralled by the effects of the copy, Warhol dedicated himself to the complex labor of loving the same. Part of such love involves a high tolerance for boredom, and Warhol surely was the champion of endurance. Films such as *Sleep*, a five-hour-and-twenty-one-minute film of John Giorno sleeping, and *Empire*, an eight-hour single shot of the Empire State Building as the light on its façade changes, confirmed that. Taping the conversations of Ondine for twenty-four hours to create the 451-page *a: a novel*, Warhol also recorded his own seemingly infinite tolerance for the mundane. Absolutely radical in his acceptance of the dull, Warhol made his art from that which we look at over and over and therefore overlook. Like his brothers who owned a scrap shop, Andy was good at recycling and reusing what would otherwise be discarded or remaindered as everyday junk. For him, newspapers, photobooth portraits, and old shoes became objects with which to create an immense archive of the same.

Unlike those hooked on exact repetition and replication, however, Warhol was interested in the invariable errors and mistakes that made the pursuit of the same an always-failed enterprise. He said he preferred transmutations to transmissions, and not only in the realm of the transfer from source to copy: he celebrated errors in the performance of subjectivity itself. “I can never visualize the right person in a part,” Warhol writes in his *Philosophy*. “The right person for the right part would be too much. Besides, no person is ever completely right for any part, because a part in a role is never real, so if you can't get someone who's perfectly right, it's more satisfying to get someone who's perfectly wrong. Then you know you've really got something.” And if Warhol was obsessed with anything, it was with getting something. Thinking like a young starlet but powerful enough to do something with such thoughts, Warhol transformed the tradition of the casting couch. In his film *Couch*, Warhol frames the place where the young starlet performed privately in order to gain a job as a public performer and makes it the setting for

sexual trysts involving combinations of partners that make the Hollywood couch appear tame indeed. Warhol's interest in casting "someone who's perfectly wrong" opened up performance opportunities for a wide and often wild assortment of Superstars.

Like Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, Warhol was a copyist who outwitted the masters of modern capital. He "preferred not" to celebrate the cult of artistic originality; rather, he forged a career based on reversing and exposing the values that both sustain and corrupt high art. These values are linked to the values of the erotic market as well. Taking the grade school art class as his inspiration, Warhol hosted "coloring parties" as an alternative to the gay cruising scene, on the one hand, and as a more erotic adult education class, on the other. He'd invite handsome young men over to his apartment to color in his round outlines of cherubs, cats, and shoes. A group of men would sit around the table, passing work back and forth while Julia Warhola, the artist's mother, would encourage them. After finishing their work, the men would be taken out to a party. Warhol understood artistic inspiration as a measure of erotic desire: those who inspired him to go to work, rather than to go to bed, were often his most revered objects of desire. Truman Capote turned him into a secretary — no small feat given Warhol's casual regard for written English. And then, having failed to receive a response to one year's worth of daily love letters, Warhol turned to drawing covers for Capote's books. These drawings are remarkable for their sameness: fey cupids darting about looking for a place to land their arrows. But these frolicking cherubs should not obscure the aggressivity involved in Warhol's use of them. Warhol covered Capote's books in images of the same figures because he sought a way to withstand the erotic distraction to which Truman, the fiction writer, drove him. In so doing, Warhol made it seem as if every book Capote wrote contained only two words: *love me*. Covering pages written by Truman with his drawings of naked angels and naked boys wielding arrows and pens, Warhol also was drawing out his attraction to the author. Because Warhol was simultaneously drawn to Truman and withdrawn from him, he covered and smothered Capote's creativity with his own. Erotic drive transformed Warhol's blotted line into a quivering arrow tracing the imprint of someone else's earlier touch. Warhol's art returns repeatedly to a previous line in order to realign it within the groove of his own erotic drive.

Ronald Reagan, like Warhol, was devoted to the fine arts of transmutation, transmission, and transference. He understood that such arts rely on repetition, recitation, and the ability to please a diverse audience with the same jokes, the same political allegories, and the same dark fears. But he also learned — the hard way — that while he enjoyed repeating the same stories, his audience did not necessarily like to hear them again and again. Reagan's first wife, Jane Wyman, cited Reagan's "boring conversation" as one of the contributing factors in her decision to seek a divorce. Among the many results of the divorce was Reagan's ambition to keep enlarging his audience. He also seems to have tried to turn his fondness for repetition into something with

which he could charm his next wife, Nancy Davis. Together, the Reagans made their lives resemble a film. When confronted with his tendency to confuse real life with films, Reagan readily admitted that he “probably watched too many war movies, the heroics of which [he] sometimes confused with real life.”²

His love letters to Nancy, written over a period of forty years throughout dramatically different economic and political circumstances, all convey the same theme: *I can't wait to get home to Mommie*. While Warhol was able to reduce or to concentrate Capote's fictional output to the words *love me* through his covers, Nancy Reagan was able to encourage Reagan's attraction to the same by turning herself into a kind of still center, a constant version of the same for him. Able to laugh repeatedly at the same joke she had heard hundreds of times, her tolerance for boredom was much greater than Jane Wyman's. Had it been focused on more than one man, it might have rivaled Warhol's own. Warhol recognized his affinity with Nancy and worked hard to get her to allow him to use her image on the December 1981 cover of *Interview*. His magazine was among the first to be more fascinated by Nancy than by the president.

Ronnie's interest in Nancy was abiding, but it was an interest that began well before he knew her. In his usual disarmingly candid way (he often seems to be the only public figure bereft of any awareness of his own unconscious), he addressed her as Mommie in his most intimate letters. She has recently published excerpts from this astonishing correspondence. Her decision to make these letters public can perhaps be explained as an expression of a long-repressed aggressivity, not unlike Warhol's response to Capote's lack of reply to his demonstrations of love. Having been off-stage now for some eleven years, and caring full time for Ronnie, who may no longer remember that she remains his still center and still the center of his life, perhaps Nancy decided to publish this private correspondence because of her own drive to be recognized in the external world now. In 1967, while governor of California, he wrote:

Dear Mommie,

The Gov. slept here — but not well. We have to stop this silly business. In fact I may buy a tent, load the jeep, take you away from all your friends & go live on our mountain. Then we'll only talk to each other [*sic?*].

I love you & I'll see you Sunday.

The Traveling, Non Sleeping
Guv.³

But of course they never did go live on a mountain. Instead he dedicated himself to revealing what he liked repeatedly to call the “shining city on a hill,” and shortly after they left the White House, he became too ill. But they did hold fast to their repetitions. Actors trained in mouthing others' words, Nancy and Ronnie might be seen as avatars of postmodern theories of intimacy

as a series of iterations and replays. From the White House, on a small piece of White House stationery, he wrote “I love you” ten times, like a schoolboy at the blackboard. Between the ninth and tenth repetition he inserted the phrase “And besides that,” as if to demonstrate that he would brook no objection and that he knew she would never need to make any. (It’s also a good hint of Reagan’s style of argument: repeat the same point without variation.) Nancy has reprinted it along with some of the many cards and letters he sent her throughout their long marriage. Her caption reads: “I had this note framed and keep it on my desk today.”⁴ Another letter written from The White House reads:

Welcome Home Little “Poopchin.”

I’ve missed you and can’t wait to get home tonight.

...

I miss you, I love you, I miss you, I love you etc. etc. etc. Well, I’ll be with you soon and if I haven’t made it clear I really do love you.

Your Husband⁵

The repeating et ceteras here are affectionately exhausted. The erotics of exhaustion are among the same’s most fascinating fruits. To repeat “I miss you, I love you etc.” is to revel in the freedom of not needing to be new. And perhaps the liberation from reflection, the exemption from anything as strenuous as originality, encourages a kind of lightness and laughter that offset the difficult drama of trying to be The Same Reagans in public.

One morning not long ago I spent hours pouring over photographs of Ronnie and Nancy at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Museum and Library in Simi Valley, California. I took a break for lunch and while seated outside on the small terrace, I saw Nancy walk by in the very same clothes she had been wearing in photographs taken twenty years before. Her hair, shoes, and earrings were the same. I was startled. I thought that perhaps I had spent too much time staring at pictures and that my psyche, in a state of rebellion against all that stillness, had created this animated hallucination. Unsure, I decided to test the veracity of the walking doll I saw in front of me. I smiled and asked, “How are you?” Two security guards came forward and formed a kind of human shield around her. I realized I desperately wanted her to reply, “Same ol’, same ol’.” But of course she did not. She smiled and asked instead, “Are you enjoying the library?” Before I could reply, the security men had whisked her into the back seat of a black car. As they drove away, I turned back to the acres of papers, prints, and photographs that comprise the Reagan archive, and realized the whole project was dedicated to keeping everything about the fortieth president exactly the same. Thus, when the forty-second president, George W. Bush, tries, as he often does, to be like Reagan, I know it is redundant. It’s all already The Same.

1. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 83.
2. Qtd. in Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 60.
3. Nancy Reagan, *I Love You, Ronnie: The Letters of Ronald Reagan to Nancy Reagan* (New York: Random House, 2000), 97.
4. *Ibid.*, 142.
5. *Ibid.*, 139.

