Pyne, Lydia. "Warhols Without Warhol." *Genuine Fakes*: . London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016. 9–18. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472961938.0004>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 09:13 UTC.

Copyright © Lydia Pyne 2019. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Warhols Without Warhol

No one wants to be bamboozled by a fake, but everyone loves hearing about those who are.

Frauds, forgeries and fakes all make for fantastic stories and have for millennia. In ancient Rome, for example, shrewd art collectors were wary of cheap knock-offs of valuable Greek vases and sculptures. The famous philosopher Cicero was thought to have had rather discerning taste, collecting only the most authentic of Greek art; statesmen like the general Sulla and emperor Nero, art-savvy Roman patricians sniffed with disdain, did not. The Middle Ages saw a rise in the dubious – yet lucrative – economy of selling ‘genuine’ religious relics to gullible wayfarers on religious pilgrimages. (‘As for bones of St. Denis,’ Mark Twain quipped after touring medieval reliquaries of Europe centuries later, in the 1860s, ‘I feel certain we have seen enough of them to duplicate him, if necessary.’) Talented forgers have hoodwinked collectors for centuries, lining their pockets and revelling in having pulled the wool over the world’s eyes. Running the gambit from clever hoaxes to embarrassing swindles, the history of fakery is certainly never dull.

But fakery isn’t a phenomenon that only inhabits the worlds of art and antiquities. Nothing, it would seem, is safe from a faker’s clutches, and all manner of things – from paintings to fossils, rare books to flavourings, gems to artefacts in museums, and even nature itself – have at one time or another been faked, and faked spectacularly.

It’s easy to treat ‘real’ and ‘fake’ as discrete, distinct categories, because finding examples of each appears to be rather straightforward. Designer handbags sold in Saks?

Real. Knock-off purses hawked from a corner, where Gucci is spelled with one ‘c’? Fake. The *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre? Real. Da Vincis you can buy on eBay? Fake. Living history museums? Real. Renaissance Faires? Fun, but fake. A raclette wheel? A block of Wisconsin cheddar? Real. Cheez Whiz? Fake. Definitely fake.

But what happens when it becomes trickier to sort out what is real and what is not? Do the same things that make something real also make it authentic? What are we to think when a fake becomes even more famous than its original? Could a fake object meet our expectations for authenticity better and more directly than the genuine one ever could? Or could artificial objects be more desirable – more ethical perhaps – than natural ones? How do older standards for authenticity translate into the twenty-first century?

It turns out that the world is full of things that defy a neat, superficial categorisation – it’s full of in-between objects that are real and not-real at the same time. They’re what we might call ‘genuine fakes’. Sometimes we think that they’re authentic, sometimes not. They’re provocative and fascinating and challenging. And they’re everywhere.

The American artist Andy Warhol died on 22 February 1987. But the small technicality of his death doesn’t necessarily mean that there aren’t new Warhol paintings to be made, sold and collected.

In 2010, the artist Paul Stephenson came across 10 original Warhol acetates from the mid-twentieth century. (Acetates are the ‘negatives’ used in silk screening.) Stephenson purchased them, although at the time he wasn’t sure what exactly he would use them for. The acetates included several iconic Warhol motifs – *Jackie*

Kennedy, *Mao* and even Warhol's own self-portrait – and were quickly authenticated by the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, by Alexander Heinrici, Warhol's own master printer, and by art expert Rainer Crone. Warhol himself, Stephenson was told, had left the paint on the acetates.

After extensively researching Warhol's painting methods, Stephenson decided to use the acetates and, working with Heinrici, created a new set of prints from the negatives by employing the same methods that Warhol had used to create his originals. As the BBC reported, Stephenson used the 'same silkscreen inks, stretcher bars, canvas, everything the original artist would have used'. To some, Stephenson was essentially creating new Warhols – although Stephenson is quick to say that he doesn't consider his prints to be originals. The series of paintings was called *After Warhol*, a collection Stephenson describes as a 'forced collaboration' because the original artist couldn't possibly be aware of it.

Historically, Warhol had a lot of assistance in making his prints. Not for nothing was Warhol's studio dubbed The Factory, as many assistants and workers did most of the physical work of painting and printing – Warhol simply added the finishing touches. On some occasions, Warhol's assistant and even his mother signed his paintings on his behalf.

Rainer Crone (who passed away in 2016) suggested that these Stephenson-made Warhol prints could be considered authentic, and that at some point in the future they might even be catalogued as such. According to an October 2017 interview with the BBC, when Crone saw Stephenson's prints he proclaimed, 'paintings made with these film positives under described circumstances and executed posthumously by professionals (scholars as well as printers) are authentic Andy Warhol paintings'. The Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh pointed out in the same BBC interview that, yes, Stephenson's Warhol prints were in keeping with the spirit

of Warhol's work, but that Warhol himself always had some touch to add in every print and that obviously couldn't happen with the *After Warhol* prints; the museum also described the concept of this forced collaboration as 'problematic'.

After Warhol has, needless to say, prompted a flurry of questions about realness, authorship and authenticity, and the prints are perfect examples of genuine fakes. 'If the world-leading Warhol scholar says it's a Warhol, and you do everything in the mechanical process that the original artist did, and the original artist said "I want other people to make my paintings," which he did – what is it?' Stephenson offered to the BBC. 'I don't know the answer to that question.'

Incidentally, in 2011 the Andy Warhol Foundation surprised the art world by dissolving its authentication board and stating that it would no longer subject itself to the ongoing hassle and legal headache of authenticating any piece of art that wasn't already in Warhol's recognised catalogue raisonné. (An estate or foundation's authentication boards serve as the 'official' arbiters over which pieces of art can be certified as those of a particular artist and belong in the collectively agreed upon catalogue of known works and which pieces cannot.) Between 1995 and 2011, the Warhol Foundation had its board examine some 6,000 purported works of Warhol's – some real, some not – and finally folded up shop, due to the inexorable financial toll of legal lawsuits filed by disgruntled collectors. 'One year our legal bill ran up \$7 million,' said Joel Wachs, the foundation's director, in a 2015 interview with *Authentication in Art*. 'The cost to defend them became so great, we got tired of giving money to lawyers. We'd rather be giving it to artists.'

As a result of disbanding the board, any future Warhol paintings that go up for auction will do so without the board's

appraisal. Pieces that have already been authenticated – that is, accepted as legitimate Warhols and grouped in his catalogue raisonné – have proven to be particularly valuable in the collecting world. For example, Warhol's *Triple Elvis* (1963) sold for \$82 million at Christie's in 2014, three years after the authentication board had disbanded. Arguably, the success of the sale leaned heavily on the fact that *Triple Elvis* had already been authenticated.

Works of art that are generally considered rare objects themselves have been made all the more scarce when their authentication is treated as fixed and an artist's catalogue raisonné as non-changing. There are contemporary art experts, like Richard Polsky, who will authenticate Warhol works, but that authentication is independent of the Warhol board. When the BBC asked Polsky about the *After Warhol* prints, he stated, 'I like the fact that he [Stephenson] is honest – he's not claiming Andy made these, he's claiming he made them.' Polsky applauded the 'modest' price attached to the Stephenson prints, but expressed some of the same concerns voiced by the Warhol Museum, 'It sounds like he's trying to extend Warhol's career, so to speak, even though he's dead. There's a charm to that, but it just seems so shallow.'

Since the Warhol Foundation's decision to disband its authentication board, a number of other artists' estates and foundations – including those that represent Jean-Michel Basquiat, Roy Lichtenstein, Keith Haring and Jackson Pollock – have also opted to retire their boards, rather than deal with the legal repercussions of mistakenly authenticating some work of art that later proves to be fraudulent. Within the last decade, scholarly conferences that focus on the authenticity of an artist's work have been cancelled, as even the merest whisper of doubt about a painting could have ramifications for its value. 'In the high-stakes art world,' art journalist Stacy Perman

concluded after her 2015 reporting on the disbanding of the Warhol authentication board, ‘a fear of lawsuits is putting a muzzle on authenticators.’

★ ★ ★

The ‘Could Paul Stephenson’s prints be new Warhols?’ story is particularly provocative because it encourages viewers to really think about where a ‘real’ object ends and where a ‘fake’ (or less than real) object begins.

On the surface, this seems hilariously simplistic. *Of course*, most people would agree, rolling their eyes, if a painting is going to count as a ‘Warhol’, then Warhol would have had to have painted it himself while he, technically, was alive. (This stands in contrast to work that is simply published posthumously; *Jurassic Park* author, Michael Crichton, for example, has had three sci-fi novels from beyond the grave.) Stephenson’s art asks what it takes to make something Real and something Not.

The concern about authenticity – and what to make of Stephenson’s ‘genuine fakes’ – isn’t a conundrum that is unique to the art world’s authentication boards. The problems, costs and curiosity of authentication spill over into other markets, such as antiquities, rare books and manuscripts, the flavour of food and even fossils. Again, it’s easy to treat ‘real’ and ‘fake’ as discrete, distinct categories, but more often than not, concerns about whether something is real or not are actually concerns about authenticity – specifically, how authenticity is translated into cultural and financial value. Authenticity shapes how we evaluate the material world around us, as well as how we think about intellectual property, representation and even history. Amid worries about ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’, the question of authenticity has taken on particular urgency in the twenty-first century.

The late-twentieth-century American philosopher Denis Dutton offered a distinction about authenticity that feels apropos to this very slippery continuum of Real and Not Real. Dutton suggested that authenticity could be couched as ‘nominal’ when a thing is correctly attributed to its author (and not a forger), and that ‘expressive authenticity’ could be conveyed through a work to an audience by alluding to values, feelings and beliefs – what Dutton called ‘inherent authority’. In other words, there are many ways in which a work of art – or any object – can and ought to be considered authentic, and its authenticity can change over time and keep pace with history.

If Stephenson’s Warhols were made of, say, painted vinyl instead of canvas, it would be clear that, materially, they’re not in the spirit of a genuine Warhol. Likewise, if Stephenson had tried to pass off his paintings without the story – the provenance – of how and why he made them, they would no longer be interesting originals, but would cross over into forgeries. Consequently, intent, provenance, material and history all matter if we’re to sort out what fakes matter, how they matter and why. Picking through the complicated stories of genuine fakes ensures that questions of authenticity and authorship are asked and answered, and asked again.

One of the hardest parts of writing this book was deciding which genuine fakes and their stories to include. For every object discussed here, there are three, or four, or five equally interesting things that I ended up cutting. As the book came to life, friends and colleagues sent me articles and suggestions for quirky, eclectic, bizarre objects that were all brilliant examples of genuine fakes. ‘I can’t believe

this is really a thing!’ became a popular refrain from those forwarding articles to my inbox.

What to include? And, much harder, what to cut? In the end, I chose objects to write about that piqued questions about authenticity and that I felt didn’t have straightforward answers. What happens when forged paintings, like those of the Spanish Forger, become collectable in their own right? Should we still think of them as fakes? But authentic fakes? How can faux fossils from 1725, created as a prank, help us understand what people thought about the natural world almost three centuries ago? Can artefacts like the ancient Maya Grolier Codex ever really be accepted as authentic when their discoveries and provenances are so problematically unreliable?

Pushing these questions even further: as the twenty-first century hones technology that is better at copying objects from nature, these replicas take on their own questions of ethics. If laboratory-grown diamonds are, on a material level, identical to natural diamonds, what’s to separate the two gems? Consumer pressure? Is it possible, then, for the ‘fake’ to be more ethical than its natural counterpart? The same goes for synthetic flavours – what parts of nature can be authentically replicated, and what parts can’t? When does a model – or replica or copy – sufficiently stand in for the ‘real thing’ in museum collections and at tourist sites, and when does it come across as an obviously faux? With all of the ways to watch the wilderness – livestream, documentaries and so on – what is the most real, most authentic way to see the natural world if you can’t visit it in person? And what are the trade-offs with each of these alternatives?

Although the topic of ‘fake news’ is overwhelmingly omnipresent in today’s media, I have not included it here; I think historians of propaganda can better offer the subject the context and nuance that it deserves. (I would heartily recommend Kevin Young’s *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes*,

Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News.) The genuine fakes described in this book are fundamentally rooted in the material world – they are tangible, physical things that have been made, unmade and remade any number of ways throughout history. They are things that have challenged how I think about authenticity.

To put this all another way: when Mark Twain was travelling through Europe and the Holy Land in 1867 he encountered a plethora of ways in which depicted history – particularly history that was presented to tourists – was less than genuine. When he wrote up his experiences in *The Innocents Abroad*, he was pretty darn sure that there were enough ‘authentic pieces of St. Denis to assemble the saint’s skeleton multiple times over’. The idea that parts of St Denis could be in so many places at once simply strained credibility. ‘Isn’t this relic matter a little overdone? We find a piece of the true cross in every old church we go into, and some of the nails that held it together. I would not like to be positive, but I think we have seen as much as a keg of these nails,’ Mark Twain remarked while considering the European relics that he and his travelling companions encountered during their tour. ‘Then there is the crown of thorns; they have part of one in Sainte Chapelle, in Paris, and part of one, also, in Notre Dame.’

There wasn’t any way that all of those bones could be ‘real’ bones of St Denis, or all of the nails could have come from the Cross. But Twain also hints at the desire for authenticity that these relics inspired – and how, after centuries of being less than genuine, the relics offered a sort of realness in the fakery. What mattered was whether people wanted the bones to be real. Twain suggests that

this desire for realness works like a cultural placebo. If the bones are real enough to resonate with audiences, then they're good enough to be considered the genuine thing. 'We did not feel desire to disbelieve these statements,' Twain mused. 'Yet we could not feel certain that they were correct.'

The world is full of genuine fakes, and the line between real and not isn't a sharply drawn boundary. Genuine fakes live along a continuum of authenticity – a gradient that unfolds narrative after narrative, story after story. Fakery has an uncanny ability to unsettle the cultural status quo as it challenges how things are made Real.

The ancient Roman satirist Petronius reminds us that, 'The world wishes to be deceived. So let it be deceived.' In a twist of beautiful historical irony, it is unclear whether or not Petronius actually ever, technically, uttered that particular adage. But its sentiment stands.