

Izzy Coopersmith

Dr. Alvarez

International Pop

November 15, 2024

### Individualism Reduced through Repetition

When commenting on mass media and viral propagation, repetition is an effective compositional tool. Due to manufacturing standards and consumerist ideals, repeating the same motif or 'product' over and over can emulate the feeling of advertisements and the language of marketing. Both Andy Warhol and Tomio Miki use this tool of repetition in their works *Campbell's Soup Cans* and *Untitled (Ears)*, respectively, which emphasizes the idea of a consumer culture through mass media but also removes aspects of individuality. Besides this compositional approach, other visual choices, like color and scale, differ from each other creating different levels of approachability and experiences. While Warhol's appropriation emphasizes recognizability and desire, Miki focuses on abstraction that leaves the viewer feeling uncomfortable, yet they are linked through the message of a lost individuality.

When a visitor arrives at the gallery space in the Museum of Modern Art that holds Warhol's cans, they may be surprised to see the scale of the collection. Overwhelming the wall, Warhol created a four by eight grid of individual panels that house a total 32 different Campbell's soup can flavors. Opposed from the flavor, the proportions of each can are exactly uniform. On the other side of the same gallery space live 42 left ears which is really one ear that Miki casted and repeatedly inlaid into boxes of six rows by eight columns. The entirety of the work is a bit larger than one of Warhol's panels. Each ear looks the same with only slight differences which likely resulted from variations in the castings. The relationship the viewer has

to the works differs as they are a product compared to a body part and Warhol scaled his object up while Miki stayed true to life-size.

Although ears as a subject matter are very identifiable, they are typically seen attached to a person. Here, the grid structure and repetition removes any comprehensible structure and the 1:1 scale leaves the viewer searching for another recognizable element. As the work itself is not very big, the viewer is compelled to lean in towards the wall to conduct the search. Due to the fact it is the same ear shown again and again, it must belong to someone, somewhere, but there is no full person attached to it. At the base of each column, numbers line the bottom of the grid, assigning numerical association. These numbers are backwards, mimicking how one would see something in a mirror, which in turn alludes to the ears looking out at the viewer, potentially as a reflection of themselves. Alternatively, Warhol uses a subject matter that may not be as common as the viewer's own ear, but is recognizable in its given context. He raises the cans to an iconic status through enlargement, highlighting them to be more than just a soup can but a symbol of consumerist culture. The viewer is inclined to move away from the wall, to see all of the cans in their massive glory.

The level of approachability is also determined by the color. Miki's *Ears* have a metallic quality as the piece is entirely made up of a silver material, which could be tin or aluminum. This color/material was not topically added but is the medium that each ear was casted in, ultimately lacking any real element of color. As this is a 3-D object, the shadows are created by the form itself, giving the work a hyper-realistic depth. Without any skin-tone or facial feature for the viewer to ground themselves in reality, they are left looking at a complete abstraction of an anatomical part. On the other hand, Warhol uses local color and a limited palette of red, white, gold, silver, and black, staying true to what one might see if they come across a Campbell's soup

can in their grocery store. Each can has a silver lid, a red and white body, and a hand painted gold circle that sits directly in the middle, between the red portion and the white. The “Campbell’s” logo is placed in the red section above the gold circle in white lettering, while below lies the particular flavor name in red lettering. Each can has the word “soup” at the bottom in gold and black with gold star stamps lining the bottom of the image. These metallic qualities throughout the cans add to this icon status through association with medals and expensive materials. Each of the colors is flat and solid as all of the depth and sense of space comes from the linework in the lid at the top of the cans. The identifiable qualities give the work a sense of comfortability, a safe feeling, as the viewer knows exactly what they are looking at. Miki’s *Ears* have the opposite effect, thus, the abstract soup can with local color is more comprehensible than a body part that people see everyday when they look in the mirror. For the individual, the consumer product becomes the approachable one.

Whether the artist is looking closely or from afar, they will likely immediately notice that both artist’s break the repetition in the composition, creating a false sense of change. In the second row, third column of Warhol’s series, the Cheddar Cheese soup has two bright yellow banners across the middle of the can that read “NEW!” and “GREAT AS A SAUCE, TOO!” Eyes are immediately drawn to it as it is the only use of this color in the composition and is the only change in the uniformity. Miki breaks the pattern not with a color change but contrasting the very form of the piece. On the left side of the grid as a section from the third to fifth row, and the first to third column, there are no inlaid ears or squares, it is completely flat. The negative space created doesn’t make a perfect square, but an irregular shape that mimics that of an ear. In this sense, it just adds one more ear to the collection. The soup cans exist in a similar context. Each soup is a part of the larger brand “Campbell” and although they are all different “flavors” the

brand name removes any sense of individuality. No longer is it about the new soup but rather Campbell's new flavor. The addition of cheddar cheese within this collection may seem like a "change" but as soon it is placed in this can, it is reduced to the brand name. These breaks allow the viewer to step outside of the monotony and further abstracts the context of what one would typically expect this form to exist in.

Both works show how objects can be removed of their individuality when they are uniform and repeated yet because one is a product and the other is anatomical, they have the opposite effects on the viewer's experience. Warhol highlights the individual persona of a brand rather than its consumers, and Miki's ears show the subsequent reduction of those buyers to a single number. In Warhol's use of local color and employing a larger scale, he elevates the can to a higher status, something the consumer can be in awe of. Miki's life-size ears are placed in a repetitive fashion with a metallic quality that abstracts and reduces the objects to a number rather than connected to an individual. Through the repetition and the stark break in it, individualism under capitalism is highlighted to be at risk.