

Andy Warhol's Serial Photography

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Warhol and Photography



When Andy Warhol made a brief guest appearance on *The Love Boat* in 1985, prime-time-television-watching America learned that Warhol was a photographer. One subplot of that episode was that Warhol would select a lucky passenger to sit for one of his famous portraits. The artist was shown photographing bathing beauties with his Polaroid camera. In the opening titles for his 1979–80 Manhattan Cable Television series, Andy Warhol said the title of the program, “*Fashion*.” Camera in hand, he then seemingly proceeded to take a Polaroid of us television viewers. In October of 1985, Warhol was even featured on the cover of *American Photographer*, where he was depicted flashing one of his small automatic cameras, an Olympus/Zuiko AF. This issue contained a six-page interview with Warhol about his photographic pursuits.¹

Andy Warhol was a photographer; this is common knowledge. In his obsessive documentation of the world around him, he used various means: audiocassette tape recording, phoning his tax and gossip diaries to Pat Hackett,² videotaping the goings on at the studio,³ and saving the minutiae of everyday life in his infamous time capsules.⁴ The documentary medium for which Warhol was most well known, however, was photography. Throughout the late seventies and the eighties, the camera (or multiple cameras), along with the wig and glasses, became another attribute of “Saint Andy” as he shot photographs wherever he

went. Warhol said of this consummate mediation, “A picture means I know where I was every minute. That’s why I take pictures. It’s a visual diary.”⁵ Indeed, Warhol played up his photographer persona as part of his public appearance.

Other artists have recognized Warhol’s photographer identity. A posthumous sculpture by Arman encloses in Lucite actual Warhol relics acquired from Warhol’s estate, including a silver wig, black-rimmed glasses, a tape recorder, and small automatic cameras. A sculpture by Nam June Paik, *Andy Warhol Robot* (1994), in the collection of the Wolfsburg Kunstmuseum is composed of sixteen-millimeter film, film reels, an authentic Warhol *Brillo Box* encased in Lucite, and televisions that play looped video of Warhol. Of course, this robot also has the requisite cameras sculpted into its “I want to be a machine” body as part of the celebratory iconography.

The painting team of David McDermott and Peter McGough created another posthumous tribute. Titled *Andy Warhol: In Memoriam – 1887*, the work was made in 1987, shortly after Warhol’s death. The 1887 titular designation is part of the team’s fascination for all things from the nineteenth century. The painting is modeled after Victorian funerary monuments and contains such appropriate icons as a sobbing putto and text-bearing banners. The putto sits among stars on a crescent moon, which is contained by an architectural oculus. Eight voussoirs surround the aperture, and each is inscribed with a field of the liberal arts – Warhol’s spheres of influence and participation. Among the broad categories, “philosophy,” “literature,” “art,” “music,” “journalism,” “theatre,” and “society”; “photography” stands out as a specific practice. Why is it not included in “art”? “Photography” may include “cinema,” which does not fit McDermott and McGough’s willful anachronism,⁶ but, as fellow appropriators and photographers themselves, McDermott and McGough had studied and recognized Warhol’s photographic accomplishments.⁷

In his 1996 motion picture *Basquiat*,⁸ director Julian Schnabel showed Warhol snapping Polaroids in the Annina Nosei gallery-opening scene and juxtaposed faux footage of David Bowie as Warhol shooting

with a thirty-five-millimeter camera with real footage of Warhol wielding a Polaroid Big Shot from Jonas Mekas's *Scenes from the Life of Andy Warhol*.⁹

Perhaps it is because of his early and most famous successes with hand-executed and appropriated works that Warhol is generally accepted as a painter and a colorist. Certainly Warhol's canvases are the most highly valued and sought-after commodities among this artist's work in diverse media. One of Warhol's achievements is the elevation of photography to the grand tradition of painting, or as John Baldessari stated eloquently, "he helped to bring photo-imagery under the umbrella of art, to 'deghettoize' it."¹⁰ When Warhol's works are included in history of photography surveys, such as those of Naomi Rosenblum¹¹ and Michel Frizot,¹² the objects considered milestones in the history of photography are invariably canvases, respectively, *Red Elvis* (1962) and *Orange Car Crash* (1964). Even then, Warhol's cross-fertilization of photography and painting is mentioned, but only briefly does Frizot acknowledge Warhol's photography as a pursuit.¹³ Because of the associations with Warhol and painted soup cans, Marilyns, and Elvises on canvas, Warhol's extremely rich participations in photographic pursuits that were not translated to the canvas have been relegated to secondary status. No matter how much his silkscreen endeavors were grounded in photography, there has been little examination of the process, even in the previously mentioned survey texts, as photographic rather than painterly. This prejudice comes from paradigmatic prejudices and professional distinctions, that is, the divisions within auction houses, museums, and restoration studios. No matter how photographic the process, the final perception was still a canvas that included synthetic polymer paint. Andy Grundberg writes of this dilemma:

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s a clear distinction between what was art and what was "merely" photography remained in force, much to the detriment of photography. Rauschenberg and Warhol, whose medium by this time was essentially a kind of photo-derived printmaking, continued to be known as painters. This was not due to any motive on their part but is simply evidence that the art world remained entrenched in the traditional notion of

painting's superiority. In terms of the popular and critical mainstream of the 1960s, painting remained in the central position.¹⁴

In the sixties art world still upholding the large abstract canvas as the quintessential esthetic expression, Warhol's silkscreens were not perceived as photographic works, despite the process dealing with emulsions, acetates, gelatins, negatives, and photographic originals. In addition to using these (photo)graphic processes Warhol was a prolific photographer as such, leaving at his death tens of thousands of photographic prints and Polaroids, almost all of which are vintage and unique. How can one reconcile Warhol as both a photographer and a painter, working in photography sometimes in the service of other works, but just as often experimenting in photography for its own sake? Warhol's photography, despite its fecundity, depth of subject treatment, and formal accomplishment, has achieved little critical or public recognition compared with the overwhelming international fascination with his painting, printmaking, and cinema.¹⁵ Moreover, Warhol's forays into photography are often construed, as in the case of his Polaroids, as archival investigations leading to serigraph prints and canvases, not as works that stand on their own.

In the early nineties, the question of whether Warhol was a photographer was even debated in the courts. As part of the petition brought against the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts by the former Warhol estate lawyer Edward Hayes, the photographs' values were contested in the Surrogate's Court of the County of New York. The hotly disputed center of the case was the valuation of the Warhol estate. Hayes claimed that he was owed 2 percent of the value of the estate for legal services performed and was motivated to seek higher valuations of the estate's, and later the Warhol Foundation's, assets, consisting mostly of Warhol artworks. In determining the valuation of the photographs, experts testified whether Warhol was a fine art photographer. In self-defense, Warhol's own foundation ironically called witnesses who maintained that the photographs were valued as archival materials rather than as fine art.¹⁶ This strategy was the rhetoric not of art historians but of

lawyers – necessary to keep the valuations low and, in turn, not to have to pay exorbitant lawyer’s fees based on the estate’s valuation.¹⁷ The vastness of Warhol’s photographic production seems to indicate accomplishment in photography. Still, many of the images possessed a snapshot quality and seemed more like family photos and studies for prints and paintings than fine art photography (a distinction in constant flux). In the court proceedings, valuations of 19,879 black-and-white photographic prints in the collection of the foundation were as low as “worthless” archival material and Christie’s appraisals of one dollar and then five dollars apiece.¹⁸ Dale Stultz, the Christie’s photography department founder (not working for Christie’s at the time of the trial), testified for Hayes, valuing these black-and-white photographs at \$11.6 million and all of Warhol’s 66,000 photographs (including thousands of Polaroids) at \$80 million.¹⁹ This appraisal, minus a 20 percent blockage discount, was upheld in the surrogate’s 1994 decision.²⁰ These valuations are cited not to endorse one argument or the other, but as examples of the problems in the reception of Warhol’s photography. At present, and with the Hayes vs. Foundation case over for several years, Warhol’s photographs are undergoing marked semiotic slippage through which they are slowly acquiring “artwork” status in exhibitions such as *Nadar Warhol: Paris New York*, at the Getty and *Andy Warhol’s Visual Memory* at Galerie Bruno Bischofberger. This monograph demonstrates how Warhol used his antiesthetic style within larger conceptual and formal frameworks that challenge the traditional reception of photography in the marketplace.

Despite its relative lack of critical and historical treatment, Warhol’s photography has been openly presented in many exhibitions and books. At least sixteen shows, some with multiple venues, have taken place, with accompanying catalogs that were widely distributed. Usually shows including Warhol’s photography included only a few images, for example, the few stitched works in the 1989 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) retrospective. Unfortunately, with the exceptions of the Getty’s *Nadar Warhol* exhibition, the irresolute survey of Warhol’s photography curated by the Hamburg Kunsthalle and The Andy Warhol Museum,²¹ the Warhol Museum’s permanent-collection installations, and the MoMA

retrospective, curators of nearly all other large-scale Warhol shows, including the 2001–2 retrospective, have neglected to include his photography. It is surprising that until the Getty and Hamburg Kunsthalle exhibitions, Warhol's photography had been so widely ignored, considering that at least a few hundred works have been available through galleries, museums, and private collections.

The photographic collection of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts is so voluminous that, since Warhol's death in 1987, it has only slowly been cataloged, organized, and archived. The former curator of The Andy Warhol Museum, Mark Francis, wrote of this collection,

Warhol patiently stockpiled his most revolutionary work throughout his last decade. As contact sheets they take their purest form. Each frame no larger than their 35mm negative, the consecutive frames laid side-by-side to make an intermittently coherent narrative, no image lays claim to any more or less importance than any other. There are no rejects. Though Warhol never exhibited his contact sheets as art during his lifetime they remain his most potent and unexplored legacy.²²

Because of the sheer size of this task, the works became available to the public only after a massive organization process. In the late nineties the foundation began to lend these works for exhibition, for example, *The Warhol Look* tour. In 2001 and 2002, the foundation granted, Galerie Bruno Bischofberger exclusive rights to sell Warhol's photography. *Andy Warhol's Visual Memory* (2001), featuring the black-and-white photographs, and *Andy Warhol: Stitched Photographs* (2002) were exhibitions resulting from this agreement.