



Fall 2013

Andy Warhol: Polaroids & Portraits

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Recommended Citation

Francisco, Emily A., "Andy Warhol: Polaroids & Portraits" (2013). *Schmucker Art Catalogs*. 11.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/artcatalogs/11>

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Andy Warhol: Polaroids & Portraits

Description

Enigmatic Andy Warhol claimed he had “no real point to make” in producing art. Yet, his silkscreens, sculptures, paintings, and photographs reveal the artist’s profound interest in the way art intersected with fields like advertising, fashion, film, mass culture, and underground music. In his experimentations with photography and portraiture, Warhol was fascinated with representations of both the individual and the masses and used the Polaroid portrait to illustrate the fine lines between art and popular culture, celebrity and anonymity. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Andy Warhol, Polaroid, portraits, photography

Disciplines

Art and Design | Photography

Publisher

Schmucker Art Gallery, Gettysburg College

Comments

Andy Warhol: Polaroids & Portraits was on exhibition at the Schmucker Art Gallery at Gettysburg College, August 30 - September 28, 2013.



ANDY WARHOL: POLAROID & PORTRAITS

ANDY WARHOL:
POLAROIDS & PORTRAITS



Mrs. Averil Haydock, 1980,
Polacolor Type 108, 4 ¼ x
3 ¾ in. Gettysburg College,
Gift of Andy Warhol
Foundation for the Visual Arts.
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ANDY WARHOL: POLAROID & PORTRAITS

Enigmatic Andy Warhol claimed he had “no real point to make” in producing art.¹ Yet, his silkscreens, sculptures, paintings, and photographs reveal the artist’s profound interest in the way art intersected with fields like advertising, fashion, film, mass culture, and underground music. In his experimentations with photography and portraiture, Warhol was fascinated with representations of both the individual and the masses and used the Polaroid portrait to illustrate the fine lines between art and popular culture, celebrity and anonymity.

Warhol took tens of thousands of Polaroid photographs throughout his career, using snapshots as preliminary sketches to complete painting commissions for wealthy socialites. It was through selling these commissioned portraits that the artist allowed his subjects to purchase their “fifteen minutes of fame,” and as a result, everyone wanted their face captured by him. Both famous and lesser-known personalities flocked to his studio, “the Factory,” hoping to share in his spotlight. At the same time, he treated photography as both a reference tool for painting and an artistic medium of its own.

Concepts of repetition, mass production, consumerism, and multiple images permeate Warhol’s entire oeuvre, and his use of multiple photographic images to record the people, places and events he encountered daily must be seen in this larger cultural context. Judith Keller, Associate Curator in the Department of Photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum, comments, “To be around Warhol was to be recorded on film for future distribution.”² He brought his Polaroid camera everywhere, documenting personalities and places wherever he went, creating instant, almost readymade art.

Warhol’s body of Polaroid photographs has been largely overshadowed by his more famous silkscreens and films, yet they capture a side of the artist in seeming contrast to how he might generally be perceived. These portraits are at once intimate and distant, both organic and mechanical. They equalize personalities both famous and unknown, immersing each subject in the “Andy glow” while simultaneously reducing each identity to a face in a single frame. In working with photographs that are accessible, immediate, and formally simplified, Warhol captured the individual in society as its own visual statement.

ARTIST, FILMMAKER, PHOTOGRAPHER

Warhol once made the famous proclamation, “I want to be a machine.”³ Likewise, in every aspect of his work, he strove for art that was instantaneous, repetitive, and mechanical in nature. From paintings, to silkscreens, to photography, and to cinema, every medium Warhol chose was deliberate in its ability to capture the individual in a passive, observational manner.

Between 1964 and 1966 Warhol produced over five hundred works he called *Screen Tests*, which were short films inspired by criminal mug shots. On average, they each ran about three minutes and consisted of an almost-motionless subject staring at the camera. He documented a wide variety of personalities in this manner, including Salvador Dali, Mary Woronov and Edie Sedgwick; the latter appeared in many later Warhol films. The procedure for each *Screen Test* was simple. When a newcomer arrived at the Factory, he would escort him or her to a stool in a small, makeshift cubicle, then he looked through the camera lens, adjusted the framing, and left. As the sitter was recorded, the only instruction he or she received was to remain still and to try not to blink.⁴

Warhol was seldom interested in “authorial control” over his films, preferring to shift the responsibility from himself to his staff, actors, and crew, among which included film director Paul Morrissey. In his *Screen Tests*, a subject might unexpectedly begin to cry, like Ann Buchanan (*Screen Test*, 1965). In his later films, he had no concern for plot, but rather wanted to instigate authentic, improvisational behavior. This meant that he would use a variety of different approaches to create the dramatic “transformation” in his actors that he wanted to capture on film. For the *Screen Tests*, he used time duration as a way of delving into the sitter’s psyche, whereas other films like *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1965) and *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) featured actors getting high on drugs during filming. Often he would even make last minute changes to his films before shooting, forcing actors to lose their preconceived security in what they thought they would be doing. Always, Warhol was interested in the notions of indeterminacy and unpredictability.⁵

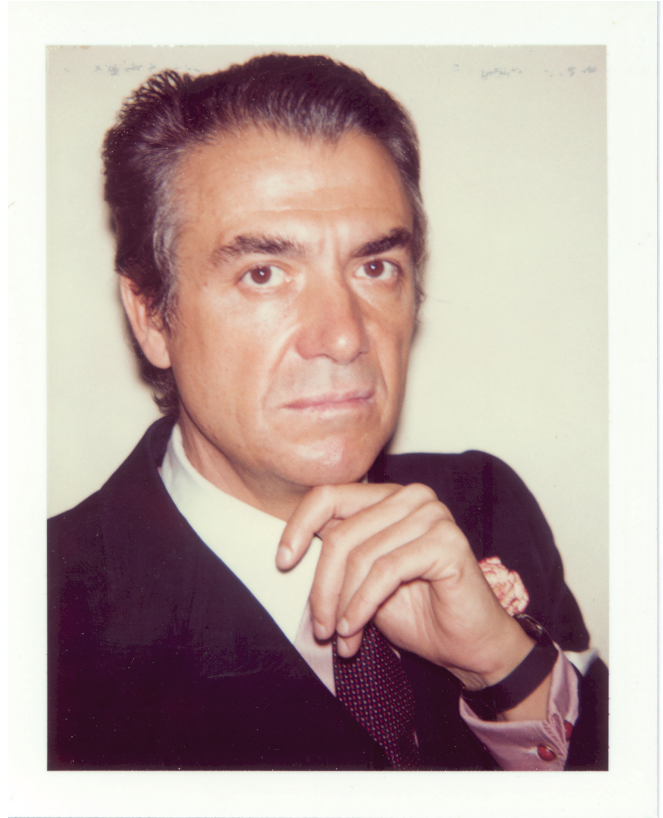
“Why do people think artists are special? It’s just another job.”

— Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*
(*From A to B and Back Again*), Published 1975

Instant photography, with its ability to capture an image in a single moment with little to no control over the final product, was surely an attractive medium to Warhol, particularly with its “quick and easy” methods newly available to the public during his time. The Photomaton became available in the United States around the time when Warhol was born, 1928, which may have later been the artist’s first introduction to automatic photography. As a child, he received a snapshot camera as a gift from a relative, and by the time he began college had established a working darkroom in the family basement. He was also a fervent collector of magazine photographs, admiring the work of fashion and portrait photographers Edward Steichen, Cecil Beaton, and Irving Penn, who would all later have a major influence on his work and lifestyle.⁶



Marion Bloch, 1974, Polacolor
Type 108, 4 1/4 x 3 3/8 in.
Gettysburg College, Gift of
Andy Warhol Foundation for
the Visual Arts.
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Fernando Vijande, 1982,
Polacolor ER, 4 1/4 x 3 3/8 in.
Gettysburg College, Gift of
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the Visual Arts.
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Last Supper, 1985, Polacolor
ER, 4 1/4 x 3 3/8 in. Gettysburg
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Warhol carried a Polaroid camera with him at all times, photographing events in a participatory, yet passive, manner; he wanted to be the machine-like observer to capture every moment. Additionally, he experimented with a number of different photographic methods, including both photobooths and Polaroids. The Polaroid Corporation encouraged his use of their products; regularly supplying him with cameras and film, they hoped to solicit his and other photographers' feedback about their new developments.⁷

Most of his Polaroid photographs were intended as preliminary sketches for commissioned paintings. For *The Last Supper* series, which featured a number of silkscreens and large-scale paintings inspired by Leonardo Da Vinci's famous mural, Warhol collected as many reproductions of the original painting as possible, including an enameled porcelain sculpture of the scene. He and his assistants photographed the sculpture extensively, looking for new perspectives on the material, which they found through taking birds-eye views in addition to close ups.

In the Polaroid study, Warhol examines the table rather than the figures, allowing the hand of Christ to blur in contrast with the crisp detail of the plates, fish, bread, and chalices. The perspective of the shot is interesting in that parallel diagonals make up the composition, implying the length of the table and drawing further attention to the objects and food rather than the people. Warhol would later make several drawings from reference Polaroids like this, finally settling on his final compositions based off of the varying strengths of his photographs.⁸

Polaroid photographs were even more essential in Warhol's portrait commissions. Although the artist also used the popular photobooth as a compositional tool, Polaroids were employed most often. New clients hiring Warhol to paint them would arrive at the Factory expecting a glamorous, one-on-one photo-shoot with Warhol and his famous Big Shot camera, which they of course received, for a hefty price. The sitter would be treated to lunch and then had their two-to-three-hour photo shoot, during which they would be immersed in the stylish atmosphere of Warhol's social circle.⁹ In this way, with every commission, Warhol sold people their figurative "fifteen minutes of fame."



Gerard Basquiat (Jean-Michel's Father),
1984, Polacolor ER, 4 ¼ x 3 ⅞ in.
Gettysburg College, Gift of Andy
Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.
©The Andy Warhol Foundation for
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*Pia Zadora, 1983, Polacolor ER, 4 ¼
x 3 ⅞ in. Gettysburg College, Gift
of Andy Warhol Foundation for the
Visual Arts.
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the Visual Arts, Inc.*



Wayne Gretzky, 1983 or 1984,
Polacolor ER, 4 1/4 x 3 3/8 in.
Gettysburg College, Gift of Andy
Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.
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the Visual Arts, Inc.

Joan Sonnabend, 1977, Polacolor
Type 108, 4 1/4 x 3 3/8 in. Gettysburg
College, Gift of Andy Warhol
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the Visual Arts, Inc.



Neil Sedaka, 1979, Polacolor
Type 108, 4 1/4 x 3 3/8 in.
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Martha Graham, 1979,
Polacolor Type 108, 4 1/4 x
3 3/8 in. Gettysburg College,
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“A good reason to be famous... is so you can read all the big magazines and know everybody in all the stories.”

— Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*
(*From A to B and Back Again*), Published 1975

CELEBRITY AND FAME

As a child, Andy Warhol was fascinated with Shirley Temple. As an adult, this obsession with celebrity was replaced by a fixation on fame. The glamorous world of movie stars, singers, artists, and athletes became the dominating subject of his art, and additionally became the social scene in which he immersed himself.¹⁰ Warhol would later make the widely celebrated statement, “In the future, everybody in the world will be famous for fifteen minutes,” an idea that permeated his artistic oeuvre.¹¹

He photographed a massive number of celebrities, including Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mick Jagger, Liza Minnelli, Jane Fonda, Neil Sedaka, and Martha Graham. Many were close friends with whom he frequented parties throughout the city, and others were more distant acquaintances in the New York scene. Of course, “fame” requires a great degree of image propagation; by commissioning a Warhol painting or photograph, a star could reserve his or her place in the glamorous network that frequented the Factory.¹²

Mimicking a fashion magazine style, Warhol aimed to simplify the face of all his sitters. Before any photo shoot, he instructed them to put on a pale face make-up. For the female sitters, he asked them to wear bright red lipstick to create a geisha-like effect. In the Polaroid produced during the photo shoot of actress Pia Zadora, we see the sitter’s face and upper body as pale as the white backdrop behind her; to a modern photographer, she might appear “washed out.” Yet, for Warhol, this approach simplified the shapes of the face, allowing him to easily transfer the contours to a final silkscreen or painting.¹³ Her pose is also simplified, like a mug shot, confronting the viewer head-on with her heavily outlined eyes and red lips, which imitate fashion photography trends during the period.

During the photo shoot, Warhol would take at least five rolls of Polaroids in order to ensure the sitter’s satisfaction with their appearance. Taking five rolls also gave his client more camera time, providing them with the ultimate celebrity treatment.¹⁴ The experience of being photographed by Andy Warhol was just as desirable as the end results.

WARHOL AND THE NEW YORK SCENE

Warhol and his Factory existed during a period when New York City underwent tremendous cultural change. In addition to art and painting, the music industry was in the midst of radical transformation. Warhol was very interested in unconventional, experimental musicians, many of whom became the subjects of his photographs, such as the band Curiosity Killed the Cat.

In the late sixties Warhol took on the role as a producer for the band The Velvet Underground, a rock group known for their gritty and edgy sound. He thought of the Underground as the musical version of his own work, seeing in them his own desire to blur the lines between high art and course subject matter. In 1967 the band released its first album, *The Velvet Underground & Nico* (referring to their vocalist collaborator Nico), and their raw lyrics swept New York as they sang about junkies, sex encounters, and “slumming socialites.”¹⁵ The music was a key feature in Warhol’s inter-media show series from 1966 to 1967, “Exploding Plastic Inevitable,” which bombarded its audiences with film projectors playing Factory films, variable strobe lights, loudspeakers blasting different pop records at once, and live performances.¹⁶

In 1968 Warhol moved the Factory from its East 47th Street location to 33 Union Square, taking over the entire sixth floor (although it would later expand to include the eighth and tenth floors). Warhol’s evenings during this time were filled with cocktail parties, dinners, gallery openings, and visits to his circle’s favorite club, Studio 54. Referred to as a club “of the moment,” it was a hot spot for fashionable people and celebrities. Warhol, in his case, frequented Studio 54 as a means of inspiration; there he took photographs, taped conversations, and found clients, all while keeping himself up-to-date with the latest gossip. All of the Studio 54 regulars considered the artist as an equal and insider; they loved his camera, and his presence at events was perceived as a sign that the party had really begun.¹⁷

**“In the 60s everybody got
interested in everybody.
In the 70s everybody
started dropping
everybody.
The 60s were Clutter.
The 70s [were] very
empty.”**

– Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*
(*From A to B and Back Again*), Published 1975



Curiosity Killed the Cat,
Undated, Black and
white print, 9 3/4 x
7 13/16 in. Gettysburg
College, Gift of Andy
Warhol Foundation for
the Visual Arts.
©The Andy Warhol
Foundation for the
Visual Arts, Inc.



Unidentified Man,
Undated, Black and
white print, 7 $\frac{13}{16}$ x
5 $\frac{2}{1}$ in. Gettysburg
College, Gift of Andy
Warhol Foundation for
the Visual Arts.
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Visual Arts, Inc.

Although Warhol's business with celebrities, both with his Polaroids and social outing snapshots, was a huge success, over time he became more interested in documenting people on the street.¹⁸ Unknown personalities remained just as important to him as the famous ones, but his growing reputation made him more of an insider with the stars at Studio 54 than someone who fit in with average New Yorkers. In fact, his own fame made street photography difficult, as pedestrians constantly wanted autographs, and his attempts at spontaneous pictures failed.

Once a distant admirer of celebrity and fame, Warhol finally acquired what he most desired: celebrity status. He had absorbed the renown of the stars he photographed, just as many of his clients (unknown and known) had hoped they would appropriate his fame. His own fifteen minutes of fame stretched into a lifetime of legacy and continues to captivate and resonate with contemporary viewers.

In 2007 the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts announced its 20th anniversary Photographic Legacy Program, which aimed to provide greater access to Warhol's work and process across the country in a wide range of communities. It gifted a total of 28,543 original Warhol photographs (valued in excess of \$28 million) to college and university museums across the United States, enriching the holdings of institutions that would not otherwise have the means of acquiring Warhol's works. Through this outreach, Gettysburg College was one of 183 institutions to receive a donation of original Polaroid photographs and gelatin silver prints. Schmucker Art Gallery is extremely grateful to the Andy Warhol Foundation for its donations that inspired this exhibition.

Curator's Note: I would like to extend an immense thank you to Shannon Egan, Director of the Schmucker Art Gallery, for her constant support and encouragement throughout this project; without her, the success of *Andy Warhol: Polaroids & Portraits* would not be possible. I would also like to thank the Department of Art and Art History, the Schmucker Art Gallery, and Musselman Library's Exhibits & Programs Committee for sparking and nurturing my interest in Art History and curatorial work. Lastly, I must thank Professor Stefanie Sobelle in the English Department for recommending the book *From A to B and Back Again: The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, which played an integral role in my research towards understanding the enigma that is Andy Warhol.

— Emily Francisco '14

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Design by Ayumi Yasuda

This exhibition is supported in part by Special Collections and
College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College.

ANDY WARHOL: POLAROIDS & PORTRAITS

August 30 – September 28, 2013

Curated by Emily Francisco '14

CURATOR'S TALK August 30, 2013, 4:00 p.m.

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