



ANDY WARHOL

AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

An urban milieu — New York in the 1970s and 1980s, and today.

October 26 – December 9, 2012

Opening Reception, Friday, October 26, 7-9 p.m.
(Comments by Christopher Tradowsky, 7:30 p.m.)



Linda Hutton, Flaten Art Museum, gift of Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

In 2007, the Flaten Art Museum at St. Olaf College was invited to apply to the Andy Warhol Photographic Legacy Program to receive a donation of a number of Polaroids and black and white photographs shot by Andy Warhol in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2008, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts selected the Flaten Art Museum to be one of 80 institutions across the country awarded these works, and one of only two in Minnesota — the other being the Tweed Museum of Art at the University of Minnesota–Duluth.

In keeping with my intent to use the gallery as a laboratory for visual ideas, each of our exhibits revolve around a broad theme or concept. Similarly, I wanted our Warhol exhibit to encompass more than Mr. Warhol's photography. With that in mind, I invited Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History Christopher Tradowsky, who teaches contemporary art history at St. Olaf and is himself a visual artist, to curate the show. Professor Tradowsky immediately agreed and began developing an exhibit that would show Warhol's work in the context of the New York urban milieu of the 1970s and 1980s. It includes some of Warhol's contemporaries, as well as an artist currently working in the same "snapshot" manner. We invite you to explore this milieu through the eyes of these artists.

I wish to thank the following people and organizations for their contributions to this exhibit: Christopher Tradowsky; David Little and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; Phillip Earenfight and the Trout Gallery at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania; photographer Amy Elkins; Walker Waugh and the Yancey Richardson Gallery in New York City; and the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Jill Ewald
Director, Flaten Art Museum

COVER PHOTOGRAPHS FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:

Flowers, Flaten Art Museum, gift of Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

Lorna Luft, courtesy of The Trout Gallery, Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pa.

Joe MacDonald, Flaten Art Museum, gift of Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

Big Shot: Andy Warhol and the Aesthetics of the Snapshot

BY CHRISTOPHER TRADOWSKY

Before Flickr and Facebook, there was Andy Warhol's studio, the Factory in New York, whose primary industry was the production of social imagery — pumping out everything from throwaway snaps to spectacular mural-sized silkscreens of socialites, social climbers, social misfits, and even social outcasts. Since Andy Warhol insisted that pop art was all about “liking things,” it's an easy bet that he would have liked, celebrated, and immediately understood the power of what we now call “social media.” Indeed, in this sense Facebook is a pop utopia, the global forum of “liking things.” We talk about social media rather obsessively, as if it were entirely the invention of the digital age; yet Warhol was preternaturally in tune with all manner of “analog” social mediums: the dinner party, the discotheque, the studio, the museum, the production line, the city itself — and flashing through all these *mise-en-scènes*: the camera.

Since its very invention, the mechanical nature of photography has incited debates over its essential nature and, by extension, its proper use. Well into the 20th century, eminent theorists such as André Bazin and Roland Barthes argued that the essential property of the photographic method is that it always presents us with some measure of objective truth. “No matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be,” Bazin wrote in 1945, “it shares...the being of the model of which it is the reproduction, it is the model.” Bazin argued that the photograph is an evidentiary document, closer to a fingerprint or death mask than a painting.

Yet assertions of this sort were polemically positioned against what both 19th century pictorialist photographers and the early magician of the cinema, George Méliès, knew very well: the camera is prodigiously adept at fibbing. Does photography excel at revealing reality or obscuring it? Is its essence found within the bright lens or the obscure chamber? Or is its essence found, perhaps, in all the subsequent manipulations of film development? By the postwar decades that are the focus of this exhibition, this dialectic was hardly settled. But the mode of photography that Warhol and his contemporaries took up tipped the balance toward the fib and the fabrication, toward what we can now call, anachronistically, the performative aspect of the photograph.

It is clear that Warhol loved the mechanical apparatus of photography. For his first

commissioned silk-screened portraits, he used as source material instant passport pictures shot in automatic photo booths, poking and provoking his subjects from behind the curtain to get them to act out. “I want to be a machine,” is one of his many famous claims, and the camera allowed him to get halfway there. By 1970, he had found his favorite camera, the Polaroid “Big Shot,” a clunky, non-professional camera with a fixed focus, which produced strongly flash-lit snapshots in exactly one minute. The many limitations of this device seem to be what appealed to him, and what drove him to collect them, travel with them, and keep them on hand many years after Polaroid discontinued the product.

The small, individual portraits in this exhibition are all products of the Big Shot. Instant photographs are paradoxes within the medium: having no negative, they are each unique originals, through Warhol's travel in crowds, in entourages of clones. In technical terms, they are as unforgiving as watercolor. The sitter is seen through the machine's tetchy temperament: overexposed, crowded by the shallow focal length, never quite ready for the flash, caught unaware as the machine goes off half-cocked. The whole process is anti-contemplative, disposable. With no possibility of darkroom finesse, there is no reworking, only retaking. You get one shot. Until the next.

Yet this is what Warhol shows us: the photograph is gregarious, and more so the more it embraces instantaneity and disarray. The snapshot is a photograph so contingent upon the passing instant that it bars aesthetic seriousness in advance; it is not to be contemplated, but shared, laughed at or with, liked or disliked, passed over or passed on. Yet, as with all social media, the frivolity of the medium does not mean that nothing is solidified or at stake. The performativity of the photograph means both performing for the camera and being performed

by the photographic apparatus, in just the way that Roland Barthes described the “mortifying” act of self-consciously posing before a camera, a feeling that we all know so intimately: “I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.” One feels the thrill and pressure of social expectation emanating from the lens, the prickling, subcutaneous knowledge that this shoddy work of an instant might just outlive you. There is barely time to “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet,” (as T.S. Eliot intoned in a different context entirely). But that is what the photograph calls for.

The Polaroids displayed here are playful fragments, many of them created as possible references for works in other mediums. That these images were always more means than ends undermines any pretense to formal seriousness, increasing their playfulness. You can see indications of the performative aspect of these snapshots in the way Warhol's “glamor” shots of women were regulated. Warhol asked each sitter to bare her shoulders and thickly applied white make-up around the face and shoulders. The snapshot of Lorna Luft (second child of Judy Garland) provides the most extreme example, as the freckles about her shoulders betray the impasto of foundation on her face. The caked-on make-up, along with the brilliant flash, washed out the sitter in just the way Warhol wanted. The heightened contrast prepared the face of the sitter for the silkscreen treatment, providing a blank canvas for the play of fanciful, even arbitrary, colors within the final portrait.

Warhol himself warned us that we should not look beneath the surface of his pictures for some enduring truth of what was being portrayed. Much of the best critical writing on Warhol has taken him at his word, while arguing that the primary significance of the pop artists' pictures plays out upon their surfaces and between images. The simulationist properties of Warhol's pieces

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Tom Cashin and Unidentified Man
Flaten Art Museum, gift of Andy Warhol Foundation
for the Visual Arts



Sylvester Stallone
Courtesy of The Trout Gallery, Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pa.

(Martha Graham, Sylvester Stallone) to hopeful starlets and socialites (Lorna Luft, Linda Hutton) to business colleagues known for their social panache (Fred Hughes) to fellow artists and collaborators (photographer Christopher Makos, painter Jean-Michel Basquiat). As a corollary to the goddesses and wannabes, Warhol also captured the figures of his own desire, the male muses, from passing crushes to more serious and long-term relationships. (Jon Gould, pictured twice in this exhibition, was Warhol's love interest and companion, and lived with Warhol in the early 1980s.)

Move to a city the size of New York and you will very quickly meet a class of urban nomads eager to take advantage of the city as a machine of sociability and opportunity. In order to give a sense of the urban milieu well beyond Warhol's Factory set, Andy Warhol and His Contemporaries displays a broad scope of photographic practices in New York in the 1970s and 1980s. All of the photographers included here were, at least for a time, transplants to New York. One theme that ties their work together is the longing to capture the vibrancy of that city as a social medium.

Warhol was born and raised in Pittsburgh; of his younger contemporaries, Tod Papageorge hailed from New Hampshire, and two artists included here, Toby Old and Ramon Muxter, sought out New York from their homes in Minnesota. This younger generation of documentary photographers expanded upon the

(particularly in the famous silkscreens) match the synthetic nature of the society they reflect, even as they provide portraits of many strata within an urban milieu enamored of commodities, enthralled with celebrity, and in hot pursuit of the hedonistic pleasures of the moment. Warhol's photographs and films are no more "truthful" than his silkscreens in terms of the depth of portrayal of any particular subject or sitter; however, in their unselfconscious, even indifferent (machine-like) reflection of an urban milieu, they manage to capture without judgment peculiarly urban forms of intimacy: the nomadism of middle Americans trying on city life for size, the vulnerability of also-rans in a society of agile climbers, the young artists bidding for recognition, and, of course, the queers and gender outlaws forging community in the crucial, transformative years just before and after the Stonewall riots.

The myopic view of the Polaroid Big Shot could barely frame more than a single sitter, or two very cozy sitters at most. So Warhol's subjects in the Polaroid portraits seem starkly isolated. However, taken as a group, and in conjunction with his casual diaristic use of the 35mm camera, Warhol's subjects are legion — a flash-lit throng merging into a highly populated photographic oeuvre. The snapshots teem with recurring characters, from bona fide stars of every stripe



Ramon J. Muxter, American, 1945 - 2007
Tom Waits and Madonna, 1982
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, gift of James and Deidre Szalapski, 89.100.29, © Ramon J. Muxter

logic of the snapshot, working within a tradition of American documentary realism but increasing the shutter speed and willingly sacrificing compositional carefulness for the fleeting drama of the moment. Old and Muxter, in particular, demonstrated an interest in the louche glamor of New York nightlife — Old documenting nightclubs at the height of disco's popularity and Weimar-inspired decadence, Muxter gleefully and amateurishly inserting himself into photographs with celebrities like Mae West and William S. Burroughs. From 1977 to 1993, Papageorge repeatedly photographed Central Park as part of an extensive series, providing a decade and a half of images of New Yorkers at leisure, from every background and walk of society, each seeking momentary respite from the fast pace of city life. Beyond the varied levels of formal and technical polish on display, two concerns — the recognition of the city as a social medium and the recognition of the camera as the perfect machine to respond to and enhance that medium — bind together the photographers in this exhibition. The city is a stage and the camera is an actor, and each calls to the other to play and perform.

Of course, New York continues to draw young nomads, many of them artists, and some of them still devoted to analog photographic methods that are now obsolete or nearly extinct. Included in the exhibition are three photographic portraits by the young photographer Amy Elkins. In her "Wallflower" series of the last decade, Elkins photographed young New Yorkers, all of them men, in evocative portraits that are both clearly staged and still capture the immediacy of the snapshot. The series, part of the photographer's larger exploration of male gender identity, has important precedents in the work of other women photographers (particularly Nan Goldin and Collier Schorr). The link to Warhol's photographic aesthetic comes in registering the performativity of the snapshot. As did Warhol, Elkins stages and regulates her portraits, baring the men's chests and placing them before floral print wallpapers, contrasting their lack of adornment, even ordinariness, to



Kyle, Brooklyn, 2007
© Amy Elkins, Courtesy of the Artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York

the chintzy voluptuousness of the backdrop. In the resulting images, the vulnerability of the sitter in the moment of posing is almost palpable. The "mortifying" impulse to "make another body" for oneself, when the bared torso is one's only defense from the photographic eye, can be psychosomatically felt in these photographs.

The aesthetic poles that are mapped out in this exhibition bear witness to the many capacities of the camera as a social medium — equally powerful as a machine for truth-telling and a machine for confabulating, a machine for isolating and a machine for community, a machine for indifferent recording and a machine for surprising moments of intimacy.

Christopher Tradowsky is a visiting assistant professor of art history at St. Olaf College.

- i Warhol quotes taken from: Gene Swenson, "What is Pop Art: Answers from 8 Painters, Part I," *Artnews* 62:7 (November 1963) 61.
- ii Emphasis added. André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) : 14.
- iii Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980) 10.