

GALERIE BRUNO BISCHOFBERGER

Founded 1963

ANDY WARHOL'S VISUAL MEMORY (extended version)

by Bruno Bischofberger, 2001

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In this text I will write about the black and white photographs that Andy Warhol took in the last eleven years of his life, between 1976 and 1987. The body of work consists of a large number of 8" x 10" [20.3 x 25.4 cm] vintage prints. The selection I have chosen to reproduce is a representative cross-section of 68 photographs and I have given the title *Andy Warhol's Visual Memory* to the entire group¹.

Photography always played a big part in Warhol's life. In his diaries he went as far as saying «I told them I didn't believe in art, that I believed in photography»². As a boy he had collected pictures of movie stars from publications and publicity shots. In the 1950s, as a commercial artist in New York, Warhol saw the transition from handmade graphic concepts to ones where photography played the main role. In the last interview that Warhol gave³ he comments that photography was one reason why he switched from commercial to fine art: illustrators of advertisements and magazine covers were being put out of business by photographers. During this period Warhol collected photographs by Man Ray, and was also interested in the fashion and portrait photography of Edward Steichen, Cecil Beaton and Irving Penn.

Warhol's early Pop Art, from 1960 to early 1962, consisted of hand-painted canvases and drawings. He would project a photograph onto canvas or paper and then trace the image. In the first part of 1962 he switched to an almost exclusive use of silk-screening in his painting and with this innovative process he could mechanically reproduce photographs on canvas. After the important and large group of handmade projection drawings of 1962 he only used this technique for drawings, starting with the Mao drawings in 1972. 22 years later the artist returned to projection in painting in a group of collaborations with Jean-Michel Basquiat, when the younger artist convinced the older to start painting by hand again.

In the silkscreen paintings from the 1960s the artist used photographic images he found in magazines or newspapers and prints from photo-archives. For me his most important works are

¹ I first heard the term «visual memory» in a conversation with Birgit Filzmaier in 2001.

² August 14, 1980

³ Paul Taylor, *Andy Warhol 1928 - 87*, Prestel, Munich, 1993, p. 138

the silkscreens of stars like Elvis and Marilyn and the 1963 *Disaster* paintings, which I always regarded as Warhol's absolute artistic culmination, in particular the *Electric Chairs*, *Suicides* and *Car Crashes*. Also important are the 1964 *Flowers*, *Most Wanted Men*, *Self Portraits* and *Jackies*.

In 1963 Warhol started to make highly experimental films, a continuation of photography and of the radical serial concept he used in his paintings. In some of the first films the camera was stationary and the image remains practically unchanged. The first film was *Sleep*, 1963 (6 hours). It consists of 10 minute parts which are always repeated twice. The camera shows a different shot of a sleeping man in each part. The result of this and similar early films like *Kiss*, 1963 (50 minutes) or *Empire*, 1964 (8 hours) are projected images which are repeated thousands of times instead of a few times as in his paintings. Two stills from the films *Sleep* and *Kiss* were silkscreened in double repetition by Warhol on a sheet of plexiglass. It is interesting to note that the Screen Tests, hundreds of three-minute film portraits made in the early and mid-1960s were known within the Factory as «stillies». In 1965, at the opening of his European show of the *Flower* paintings at the Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in Paris, Warhol announced that he would retire as a painter in order to concentrate on his filmmaking. By 1968 Warhol had made approximately 75 films⁴, but his retirement from painting did not actually happen. Most paintings of the late 1960s are variations and permutations of works done between 1962 and 1964. Such as the coloured *Campbell's Soup Cans* of 1964, more small *Electric Chairs* in the mid-1960s and in 1967, for his first large retrospective exhibition, starting at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in February 1968, Warhol produced three substantial groups of «enlargements» of images, *Flowers*, *Electric Chairs* and *Self Portraits*.

As early as 1963 Warhol made a handful of commissioned silkscreen portraits for private collectors such as Ethel Scull and Judith Green, as well as a few others in the mid-1960s. For these silkscreens and for a series of *Self Portraits* Warhol used photographs made in photoboosts.

In 1966 I met the artist personally for the first time after I had exhibited some of his paintings in 1965 in Zurich. In 1968 I tried to buy new paintings from him, but he declared to me that he would not make paintings any more. Warhol agreed however, to sell me some of his few early paintings which he had kept. He let me choose from about twenty works and I bought eleven of them, several early hand painted ones like *Superman*, *Batman* and a colourful *Coca Cola* painting and several large *Disaster* paintings and some multiple portraits. I had to pay what seemed a very high price at the time to convince the artist to part with his works. At the same time he granted me a «first right of refusal», which started a long relationship between us and he honoured it until he died.

In the same year I asked Warhol to do my portrait and asked him also whether he would do portrait commissions which I could offer to clients. Warhol liked the idea and we worked out a

⁴ The film I produced with Andy was *L'amour*. It was filmed almost entirely in Paris in 1970 and edited in 1972. It was his first film, which had a substantial budget.

standard size together, 40" x 40" [101.6 x 101.6 cm], and a fixed price for each panel. I remember that Warhol, when I asked him, mentioned that he would love to do a «Galerie Contemporaine» of his time, a title which was used in the nineteenth-century France for collections of photographic portraits of famous people such as writers, artists, philosophers, politicians and actors, in book form. In the years to come, the making of this «Galerie Contemporaine» became a large undertaking and the main source of income for the artist. To make the portraits Warhol took colour Polaroids. During most sittings the artist produced dozens of them. He chose, sometimes together with the sitter, three or four Polaroids from which to pick the one that would be used for the silkscreen, but he carefully kept all the others. [In 1971, after having brought him a number of portrait commissions, I asked him to make for me a number of portrait paintings in a larger size to offer for sale to the public. I wanted him to use Albert Einstein, but Warhol offered to do Mao Tse Tung as he had read in the newspaper that Mao was the most well-known person on earth. I accepted, and Warhol did his big Mao paintings in 1972.

Interview Magazine, which started in 1969, allowed Warhol to pursue his interest in photography. It focused on famous people and the documentation of events, initially by recording verbal exchanges. The magazine became a showcase for young photographers. People like Robert Mapplethorpe, Bruce Weber and Herb Ritts published their work for the first, or almost first, time there. The name *Interview* was related to one of Warhol's main activities in those days. In *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* Warhol wrote that after his «love affair» which he had with his television in the late 1950s, he got «married» to his first tape recorder in 1964. Warhol not only taped interviews for the magazine but for a number of years carried a tape recorder with him, and every word he spoke or which was spoken to him was recorded from morning to evening. I remember many times the strange feeling I had talking with Andy, knowing every word was somehow being «immortalised». This created an atmosphere of artificiality and vibrancy. A similar sensation is created for the sitter when he is being photographed.

In 1976 Warhol «divorced» his tape recorder and «married» his camera. The shrinking of the camera allowed Warhol to carry around and use a simple but effective 35mm model. Bob Colacello describes⁵ Warhol's first contact with the camera: «On our way to St. Moritz, where the Bruno Bischofberger Gallery was showing a small selection of paintings ... we stopped in Zurich for a night. Thomas Ammann, who was working for Bischofberger then, came by Andy's suite at the Dolder Grand and immediately sent Andy into a paroxysm of envy when he pulled a sleek little black camera from his pocket and snapped a picture. It was the new Minox 35EL, then the smallest camera available that took full-frame 35mm photographs. «Where did you get that!» Andy wanted to know. «It's so great. It looks like a James Bond camera. Aren't you going to give it to me?» Ammann said he would try to buy one for Andy, but they were completely sold out in Zurich and St. Moritz. As soon as we got to our next stop, Bonn ... we went to a camera shop and bought two Minoxes: one for Andy and one for me». With the purchase of this camera, Warhol started a major new activity which led to the production of a vast, complex and independent body of work of the highest concentration. Bob Colacello writes in *Social Disease*

⁵ *Social Disease, Photographs '76 - '79*, Karl Steinorth, Tübingen, 1992, p. 16

that the Polaroids were not conceived by Warhol as artworks on their own, but rather served as raw material for his portrait paintings and that the black and white 8" x 10" [20,3 x 25,4 cm] photographs were Warhol's first «photographs as photographs».

1976 was a year of important changes in Warhol's activity. He gave up his constant daily tape recordings and started dictating his diaries to Pat Hackett. The tape recordings and the diaries could be referred to as Warhol's verbal memory. The photographs became his pictorial or visual memory. From 1976 onwards Warhol was constantly shot several rolls of film per week. From the contact sheets he chose an average of five photographs which he had printed by Christopher Makos and later by Terry Miriello. Makos printed the pictures in a stark contrast and with blurred margins, a style of blunt directness which Warhol liked. If you look at the selection of the photographs in this book a lot of parallels with the whole artistic concept of Warhol become apparent. The form and structure of all his art creates a radical new look and represents an outstanding achievement in late modernist art. Warhol's philosophical outlook and his understanding of life is reflected in all his activities. For me Warhol's approach is quintessentially «cool», a popular expression today, but which I find to be the most desirable state of being, at least since the days of Warhol. In all his works and in his thinking about life the artist shows the most direct and blunt approach. He never tries to give interpretations. He only reproduces what is there. Far distant seem the days of Abstract Expressionism where the lonely artist starts an existential battle between the canvas and himself. Here is Warhol who says he wants to be a machine, that everything has the same importance for him, that he has no memory, that the ugly is beautiful and the beautiful ugly, that the mundane is heroic and vice versa, and that birth is as much a disaster as death⁶. This way of thinking enables him to concentrate on the form and not on the meaning of a photograph or a painting. He explained this himself: «Just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, there I am. There is nothing behind it.» Because of this outlook on life and on his own work Warhol was often called a voyeur, but I think this is too trivial an expression. Although it is true that Warhol was an acute observer and recorder, his work stays serene, never becoming compulsive or obsessive. His person and his work are rich in «complexity and contradiction»⁷. Warhol was highly intelligent but acted as a «holy fool» at the same time. His indifference to subject matters seems to me similar to Socrates' goal of having no desires. Warhol often said «silly» things while being interviewed because journalists, in their professional search for interpretations of Warhol's work, failed to realise that the artist's new style could not be interpreted. To ridicule stupid questions would give the most absurd answers.

Warhol's introduction of photography into painting and film is probably his most important legacy. His radical and pioneering use of photography helped pave the way for its broader acceptance as an art which we see everywhere today.

⁶ In a conversation with the author ca. 1980 I asked him why he included the birth scene of a black baby in a hospital (*Hospital*, 1963, Crone No. 422) in the *Disaster* series. He replied with a smile on his face «Isn't this the first disaster?»

⁷ *Complexity and Contradiction in Modern Architecture*, Robert Venturi, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1990

The black and white photographs that Warhol took between 1976 and 1987 are practically all vintage and are virtually all unique. There are several thousands of them in the archives. It was a great experience and pleasure for me to see them all and select them for this publication and for some more volumes I want to publish this fall. I knew some photographs which belong to this group, which were published in *Andy Warhol's Exposures* in 1979 with a wonderful text by Andy Warhol with Bob Colacello⁸. When the book came out, I asked Andy to sell me all the photographs in it. He proposed making a series of large prints but I asked for the original 8" x 10" [20.3 x 25.4 cm] works, which were used for the book. Andy agreed, and sold me the set which is annotated with captions and in which each photograph is signed on the reverse. Back in Zurich I wrote to eight European museums and asked them whether they would like to show some of these photographs. All eight responded positively. When I told Warhol about it he again proposed making large prints to show in the museums. This led to the printing of the only portfolios of photography that Warhol did. I published two portfolios of selected works from the *Exposures* series. The first portfolio contains 11 photos from *Exposures* and one that Andy had taken shortly before of Pope Paul II, which he wanted to go with the others. The photographs which are all signed by Warhol, were printed by Christopher Makos and are in the large size of 20" x 16" [50,8 x 40,6cm]. It is an edition of 250 copies, the same number of copies I printed for the *Electric Chair*-portfolio, which I published in 1971. Because we needed more than 12 large prints for the planned museum shows, Warhol and I decided to publish a second portfolio in two boxes with 40 further selected prints from *Exposures*, this time in an edition of only 15 copies. When I asked the Museum Ludwig in Cologne and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam to show the 52 works they both preferred to exhibit the original 8" x 10" photographs. All 52 large photographs were later shown under the title of *Social Disease* between 1992 and 1994 in 11 German museums.

In 1985 Warhol published his second and last photographic book, *America*⁹. Unlike in *Andy Warhol's Exposures*, which almost entirely shows Warhol's friends, the stars of art, rock, film, literature, sports, politics, fashion and society, *America* includes a mixture: «Exposures»-type celebrities, anonymous people, the poor and homeless, buildings, billboards, town and country landscapes, monuments and shots from cars and aeroplanes. In this publication and in *Andy Warhol Photography*, published in 1999, to accompany an exhibition which started in the Hamburger Kunsthalle, curated by Christoph Heinrich, I saw reproductions of 8" x 10" black and white photos which were very different from the celebrity photographs that I knew. There were pictures of objects, architecture, still lifes, billboards, details of Warhol's hotel rooms or bathrooms, structures, consumer products, Mona Lisas in shop windows, details of department stores and supermarkets, cutlery or refrigerators. Warhol uses similar images to those in his paintings and films to create works reflecting his unmistakable strong sensibility. Like in his paintings, Warhol shows us things in a new way, direct, blunt, uncritical, never trivial and capturing reality with his great sense for structure and form. He stays on the surface, which enables him to focus all his efforts on artistic appearance and form, rather than concentrating on the meaning of the work. Looking at this selection of photographs we can see how all this varied subject matter has the same importance for the artist. It is from this extraordinary image

⁸ Grosset & Dunlop, New York

bank, that Andy made his selection for his *Stitched Photographs* [four to twelve prints of the same image stitched together with thread].

In these photographs we find a lot of iconography which is related to Warhol's early Pop Art images. Warhol's consummate talent as a commercial artist and as a painter and filmmaker allows him to choose what might appear to be random, almost automatic choices of strong formal compositions. Everything is in his unmistakable, unique language is said without irony, sarcasm or glorification. Nothing seems hot—everything is «cool». In his structured images Warhol selects a part of a larger structure in the frame of the photograph and gets solutions of strength and beauty, comparable to his important silkscreen paintings with repeated images.

Looking at these works we might think of a long list of «ancestors»: Atget, Walker Evans, Renger-Patsch, Cartier-Bresson or Weegee, to name just a few. Only Warhol's works reflect his unmistakable philosophy. Perhaps the most radical works of Andy Warhol's last ten years, these black and white photographs, are the artist's visual legacy, and serve as his «visual memory».