



The Films of Andy Warhol
Stillness, Repetition,
and the Surface of Things

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**If you wish for reputation and fame in the world...
take every opportunity of advertising yourself.**

—Oscar Wilde

**In the future everyone will be world-famous for
15 minutes.**

—attributed to Andy Warhol

Andy Warhol's interest and involvement in film extends back to his childhood days in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Warhol was sickly and frail as a youngster. Illness often kept him bedridden for long periods of time, during which he read movie magazines and followed the lives of Hollywood celebrities. He was an avid moviegoer and amassed a large collection of publicity stills of stars given out by local theaters. He also created a movie scrapbook that included a studio portrait of Shirley Temple with the handwritten inscription: "To Andrew Worhola [*sic*] from Shirley Temple." By the age of nine, Warhol had received his first camera. Warhol's interests in cameras, movie projectors, films, the mystery of fame, and the allure of celebrity thus began in his formative years.

Many labels attach themselves to Warhol's work as a filmmaker: documentary, underground, conceptual, experimental, improvisational, sexploitation, to name only a few. His film and video output consists of approximately 650 films and 4,000 videos. He made most of his films in the five-year period from 1963 through 1968. These include *Sleep* (1963), a five-hour-and-twenty-one minute look at a man sleeping; *Empire* (1964), an eight-hour film of the Empire State Building; *Outer and Inner Space* (1965), starring Warhol's muse Edie Sedgwick; and *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) (codirected by Paul Morrissey), a double-screen film that brought Warhol his greatest commercial distribution and success. Warhol's Screen Tests, made between 1964 and 1966, comprise nearly five hundred three-minute black-and-white portraits (mostly in close-up) of the many famous and not-so-famous people who crossed his path.

As we might expect, there are dialogues between Warhol's work as a painter/printmaker and his approach to the language of film. At times, the relationships seem antithetical. Much of the subversion and originality of Warhol's film work

results from tensions and conflicts between and among these various media. He often produced screenprints based on enlarged frames of his films, for example. His curiosity about new media and an unrestricted (and at times uninformed) attitude about the possibilities of film and video give his work a formal rawness and thematic complexity. One does not “view” a film by Andy Warhol as much as one “experiences” it.

Portraiture resides at the heart of Warhol’s work as an artist in all media. Portraits as investigations of celebrity and personal identity play a large role in his films and videos, most notably in the Screen Tests. Inherent in the filmed portraits as well as in such nonnarrative films as *Sleep, Empire*, and *Kiss* (1963) is the concept of stillness, something one normally does not expect when viewing “moving images.”

In Warhol’s painted and printed portraits of movie stars, we see the image close-up, frontal, and static. Yet often there are indications of poor registration and overlapping edges and colors. It is as if the model moved suddenly. In other cases, Warhol repeats the image across an entire surface. Our eyes track like a movie camera, make jump-cut edits, and establish sequential narrative. The identity of the subject, the authenticity of the image, and the technical means of reproduction exist in a complex amalgam of interdependencies and alternate realities. The painted portrait implies movement, while the filmed portrait strives for an unblinking (literally) stasis within which the slightest twitch qualifies as drama and in which real time equates with film time.

The still frame and exaggerated length of many Warhol films force the viewer to engage both the idea and the image of the film in a direct and visceral way. During such a protracted visual experience, however, one’s mind inevitably strays. It has been said that verbal discussions of Warhol’s films are just as

effective (or maybe more so) as the visual experience. This debate between films as text or image breaks down in Warhol’s case. A full appreciation, experience, and understanding of the visual physicality of Warhol’s films — especially his early endeavors stressing stillness, slow motion, silence, repetition, and duration — is not possible through a textual or conceptual reading alone.

Warhol’s immediate artistic influences include Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Jonas Mekas, and La Monte Young. His ideas also relate to an earlier generation of avant-garde composers who experimented with repetition, duration, and silence, ranging from Erik Satie to Arnold Schoenberg.

Warhol’s use of repetition, seriality, and multiple images as a painter and printmaker often situates him within the context of minimalism. But unlike the objectivity of minimalism, Warhol’s films are social, political, and, above all, personal.

The actors in Warhol’s films were the people from his world: friends, family, lovers, admirers, hangers-on, the famous, and those on the fringe of society. His role was that of a grand impresario: organizing, goading, and controlling. This social milieu was his laboratory for the endless reinvention of himself and the relentless scrutiny of those around him. Although he rarely appears in his films, he nonetheless seems omnipresent; his fixed gaze never far off screen.

From 1965 to 1966 the woman at the heart of Warhol’s films was Edie Sedgwick (1943–1971). She was his muse and in many ways his surrogate Marilyn Monroe. Her first appearance in a Warhol film was in *Horse* (1965) in a nonspeaking role. She ended her association with Warhol early in 1966 but made a last appearance in **** (*Four Stars*) in 1967.

Sedgwick is featured in four films presented in the Warhol series at the National Gallery: *Afternoon* (1965), *Space* (1965), *Outer and Inner Space* (1965), and *Lupe* (1965). The filmed life of Sedgwick as portrayed by Warhol runs the gamut from the banal to the authentic, from the poignant to the painful. The real relationship between Warhol and Sedgwick was a complicated affair fed by mutual ambition, mistrust, and dependency. Sedgwick died in 1971, at the age of twenty-eight, from an accidental overdose of barbiturates.

Andy Warhol conferred star status upon Edie Sedgwick. But the list of bona fide stars and celebrities who make appearances (however briefly) in Warhol's films, screen tests, and videos is long and includes Giorgio Armani, Truman Capote, Salvador Dalí, Vittorio De Sica, Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg, Keith Haring, Dennis Hopper, Angelica Huston, Eric Idle, Jack Kerouac, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, Paloma Picasso, Roman Polanski, Lou Reed, Cindy Sherman, John Waters, and Frank Zappa.

Warhol's films display a strange mixture of the famous and the not so famous. In yet another parallel to his works as a painter/printmaker, Warhol constantly challenges the distinctions between high and low art, high and low life, and high and low value systems. This leveling effect, applied to art, life, sex, fame, celebrity, and consumer society, contributes to the shape-shifting identity of Warhol's personality and art.

Even before the age of the Internet (a technology Warhol would have loved), the artist reveled in the banality of profundity and the profundity of banality: "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it." Such a statement returns us to the relationship between Warhol and Oscar Wilde that began this essay. In *The Picture of Dorian*

Gray, Wilde writes, "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances."

On the surface, the differences between media superstar and "philosophical genius," as Arthur Danto once described Warhol, seem irreconcilable. But the relationship between the surface of things and their deeper meanings (a kind of Ockham's razor) is the very principle by which we continue to engage and evaluate the achievements of Andy Warhol.

In 1970 Andy Warhol withdrew his films from distribution. Since the 1980s the Andy Warhol Film Project has been underway—a collaborative effort between the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA). The goal of the project is to catalogue the entire Warhol film collection, investigate its history, and preserve and rerelease all of the films. Warhol presented all of his original films to MoMA in 1984 for cataloguing and storage. The first of a two-volume catalogue raisonné, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests*, appeared in 2006. The second volume is forthcoming.

The National Gallery's program is dedicated to the memory of Callie Angell (1948–2010), whose curatorial and scholarly achievements were instrumental in the preservation of Andy Warhol's film legacy.

For more information, please visit our website at www.nga.gov/programs/film

Cover: Beautiful Darling: The Life and Times of Candy Darling (George Haimsohn)

