

ANDY WARHOL

SERIAL IDENTITY

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Exhibition guide

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ANDY WARHOL

SERIAL IDENTITY

Andy Warhol. Serial Identity is a major retrospective exhibition featuring more than 200 works of the celebrated contemporary American artist, ranging from his early drawings to more recent works made using expressive media like film, TV, performance, and publishing.

The exhibition opens with *Andy Warhol's Index book*, the 1967 artist's book featuring only black-and-white photographs and a variety of objects illustrating life at the Factory. Media have always been the subjects and concrete objects of Warhol's works, shaping the multiple identities and both the hidden and manifest philosophies of the lifetime of work.

Following this concept, the attention is drawn to a characteristic feature of all of Warhol's work and poetics - serial production - which was already used in his early works and drawings of the mid-1950s, displayed in the initial section of the exhibition. Subsequent sections track the explosion of Warhol's amazing career through the world-famous images and colour inventions - from the iconic "Campbell Soup" Cans series to "Flowers", or mythical figures of the West such as Superman, Uncle Sam, and Mickey Mouse, and celebrities the likes of Marilyn Monroe, Mao Tse-tung, and other key artists of the time.

A substantial part of the exhibition is devoted to a side but equally important universe of Warhol's poetics, namely his relationship with cinema, TV and music. Warhol's

best-known images, like the one of Marilyn Monroe taken from the poster of the film *Niagara* originate from different media. This practice, combined with Warhol's multidisciplinary attitude, the pressures of the everyday, the economic boom, and his interest in wanting to go on stage in one of the most electrifying cities - New York - of the time, led him to connect with music and film as a director, producer, and even actor in the Factory experience, as visitors will see in the final sections of this unique and original exhibition. The exhibition project is made even more special by Margherita Palli's installation, inspired by the underground atmosphere of 1960s New York.

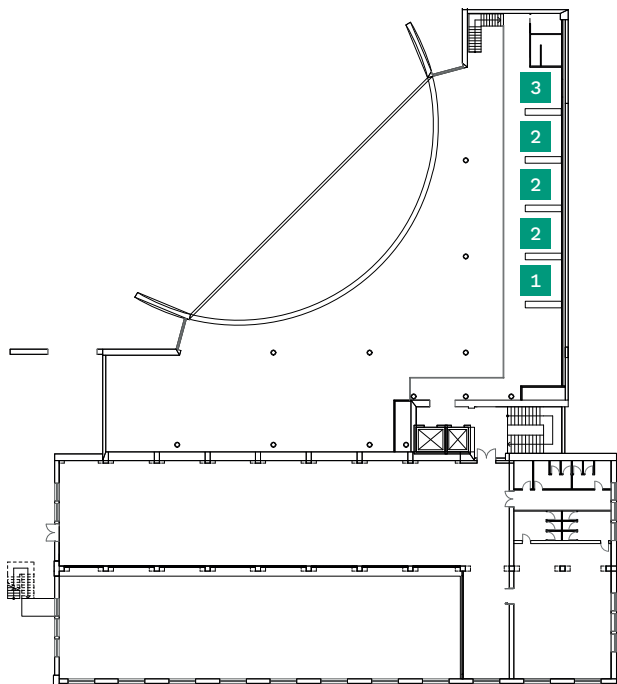
**«My idea of a
good picture is
one that's
in focus and
of a famous
person.»**

Andy Warhol

The exhibition

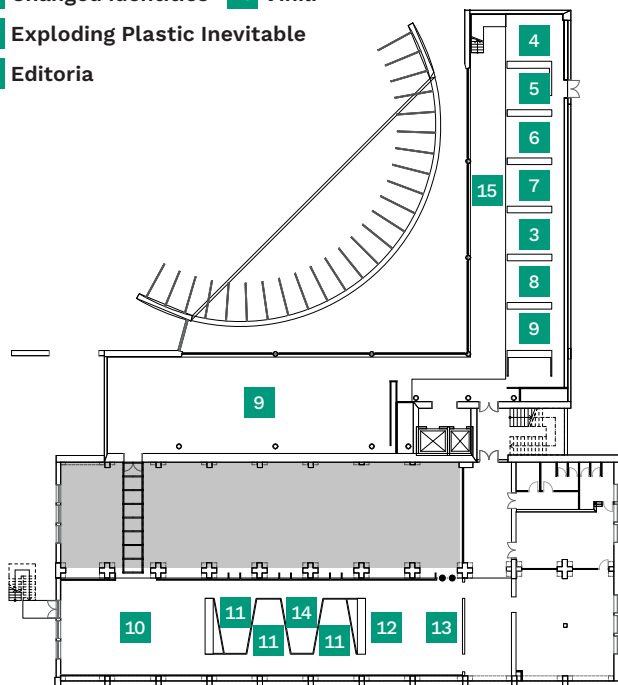
SECOND FLOOR

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1 GENESIS IDENTITY

The beginnings of Andy Warhol

The early life of Andy Warhol, born Andrew Warhola, is partly bound up with events concerning his family. Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1928 to Slovak parents of Ruthenian ethnicity who immigrated to America, he very quickly developed a talent for drawing, thanks also to his mother's encouragement. This led him to enrol at the Carnegie Institute of Technology. There, the young Warhol discovered the "blotted line" technique which featured heavily in his work in the 1950s. A broken (blotted) line was obtained from making a drawing on paper then pressing blotting paper onto it. The resulting tracing looked delicate and haphazard although always very much under the artist's control, just like the mechanical process of silkscreen printing which Warhol used widely from the late 1950s, and which we still associate with the world's best-known Pop artist. In 1949, Warhol moved to a small apartment on New York's Lower East Side where he began making a name for himself in the publishing world by producing illustrations for the advertisements of leading magazines like "Glamour", "Vogue" and "Harper's Bazaar". This section of the exhibition shows many of the drawings from that period (also collected in the artist's publication titled *A Gold Book*) which feature the characteristically light and seemingly innocent style that made him the most sought-after illustrator of women's accessories at the time.

2 COMMERCIAL IDENTITIES

Consumer icons

This section shows some of the most famous commercial images of Warhol's journey such as *Campbell Soup*, *Perrier* but also the emblematic image of the U.S. dollar, represented as if it were a contemporary idol. Warhol's career made another change of direction in the early 1960s when he produced his

first silkscreen works on canvas, representing emblems of current consumer culture. His interest in key brands and the screen printing technique that had garnered him worldwide fame were both extended to the "Campbell's Soup Cans" series which he presented on canvases, cards and bags.

The name of the Campbell company, which is still inextricably linked with Warhol's, invites reflection on how the artist was able to celebrate the everyday whilst also denouncing its ordinariness. A change in style and technique can be seen when comparing the Campbell series to the later Perrier water bottle collection: the compositional linearity of the soups gives way to an aesthetic more akin to the 1980s, with more dynamic and colourful subjects.

3 COLORFUL IDENTITIES

Nature according to Andy Warhol

Colourful Identities is the section of the exhibition devoted to colour in relation to nature. The "Flowers" series, which first appeared in 1964 at an exhibition in New York at the Leo Castelli Gallery, is well-known. The series originated from a photograph by Patricia Caulfield, again not drawing on the primary but a secondary image and appeared, on the surface, to contradict the approach used with the Campbell Soups. Warhol actually put the flowers into serial production at the Factory, which became an assembly line from June-July 1964, turning a natural element like the hibiscus flower into a mass-produced object in multiple colour variations.

Paradoxically, considering the artist had been painting major brands with no issues, the "Flowers" series earned Warhol a lawsuit which the author of the original photograph filed in 1966. Other series featuring subject matter from the natural world include "Kiku" in which Warhol screen prints chrysanthemums in a way that displays the image more than the mass of colour, "Space fruit" featuring coloured mushrooms which cleverly captures and accentuates how unusual nature

can be; and "Cantaloupes," presenting whole and half melons. This nature-related Warholian production is as a kind of break from the pursuit of more everyday and commercial subjects; this classicism of themes again surprised critics of the time.

All these latter series were made in a style more typical of the 1980s, with an emphasis on compositional movement and a more unprejudiced use of colour.

4 INTERVIEW

The magazine

"Interview" is the magazine founded in 1969 by Andy Warhol, John Wilcox and Gerard Malanga, which in some ways revolutionized the image of publishing internationally. The history of the magazine was undoubtedly made by the covers, a stage on which everyone wanted to appear in order to be classed as among the most influential of the moment. Warhol edited the magazine until his death in 1987 although it continued to publish interviews with personalities from the world of film and the arts and advertisements for events and products until 2018. The original aesthetic was the contrast between the cover and the interior: while the former was very colourful, the inside pages were black and white. The exhibition contrasts some of the older issues with the more contemporary ones.

5 PLAYFUL IDENTITIES

Playful images

Playful Identities is one of the most playful sections of the exhibition: a cow, a classic pastoral subject in Art History, is given a pop identity by Warhol. The series was made from 1966 to 1977 in different colour variations, a dialogue between figure and background involving two contrasting, anti-naturalistic colours, as is typical of Warhol's style in those years. The "Cow" series was exhibited as a wallpaper in 1966 at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York.

6 INFLUENCING IDENTITIES

The "Flash" portfolio

This section focuses mainly on the "Flash" series, a portfolio of eleven silkscreens drawing on mass media images of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Warhol assembled the prints into a book along with text from newspapers of the time describing the tragic assassination in 1963. Warhol had a great interest in the Kennedys; in fact, he had already portrayed wife Jackie and brother Edward because of what they represented in terms of worldwide fame and celebrity.

7 THE SPECTACLE OF DEATH IDENTITY

Consumismo della morte

The theme of death, already evident in "Flash," is very much present in Warhol's work. *The spectacle of death* section openly and literally denounces it. Emma Zanella writes in her catalogue essay: "His entire oeuvre is a grand memento mori, neither embellished nor dramatized: Warhol draws unscrupulously on cases of suicide and instruments of death, such as the electric chair or guns." The image of the electric chair becomes the embodiment of a death project but clothed in the artist's typical Pop aesthetic. In the same way as other human and commercial subjects, the chair is presented as just another commodity to be consumed. The 1971 silkscreens included in the exhibition present multiple colour versions of the electric chair image, located off-centre to the left in a desolate room. Other works on the theme are the *Tunafish disaster* which makes reference to news episodes about food poisoning caused by canned food, and the "Guns" series featuring simple 1980s photographs of guns, seen as objects of desire in the American imagination.

8 MYTHICAL IDENTITIES

New myths of the West

Warhol chooses characters like Uncle Sam, Mammy, Superman and Mickey Mouse to portray the key characteristics of 1980s American pop culture icons.

These characters are not actual famous people, they are literary legends who embody ideals like patriotism and America's supposed benevolence toward African Americans, the myth of the ordinary man who is also secretly a superhero, and the quintessential Disney character who has made America famous throughout the world.

The silkscreen style in this section is typical of this period of Warhol's work and features multiple colours (unlike the earlier silkscreens with only two or very few colours), more realistic, comic book-like details - we can see the colour of the characters' faces - and multi-coloured contour lines out of sync with the image, as if to reiterate that mass production has its own typical inaccuracy, which is also serial.

9 MASKS IDENTITIES

The masks of celebrity

This section, the largest in the exhibition, presents some of the most famous faces from Warhol's entire oeuvre. Curator Maurizio Vanni highlights the "mask" character of some very famous figures such as Marilyn Monroe - the true Warholian icon.

The mask concept, Vanni writes in the exhibition catalogue, "made it difficult to understand where the real physiognomy of the face ended and appearances began." Warhol's Marilyn Monroe pieces are based on the photo taken by Gene Korman for the film reel *Niagara*. The first Marilyn silkscreens, made soon after the actress's tragic death, coincided with a technical breakthrough: in '62 Warhol began silk-screening to create a work that had more of the appear-

rance of an assembly-line type process.

Warhol wrote: "in silk-screen printing you take a photograph, enlarge it, transfer it to silk, covering it with adhesive then lay ink over it so that the ink pierces the silk but not the glue.

In this way you get the same image, but slightly different each time." Another later icon, from the 1970s, is Chairman Mao Tse-tung of China, portrayed in an institutional photographic cut to appear like an ID card alongside other marks like notes, typical of Warhol's later style. The gallery of celebrities completing this section, including the likes of Liza Minnelli, Miguel Bosè, Nico Williams, Man Ray, Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol himself, shows how mainstream it had become to be a subject of Warholian silkscreens which returned an ideal and glittering image of the self.

10 FILM

The medium is the message

Warhol's fascination with image also has ties to the impersonal aesthetics of film and television. The "serial" nature of his production can be seen in the "frame" that composes the hypothetical feature film of all his artistic works.

His output as a filmmaker went through three phases, the first collating his work from 1963 to 1965, the so-called "Silent Movies" including *Sleep*, *Empire* and *Kiss* (featured in the exhibition), *Eat* and the "Screen Tests". The camera is used here as a seemingly neutral recording medium.

In the second phase, between 1965 and 1968, Warhol expanded his collaborations and began to produce more articulate films, like *Chelsea Girls* or *Lonesome Cowboys*, in which he employed colour, sound, editing, and narrative structure. Finally, between the fatal 1968 bombing and the mid-1970s, Warhol worked with Paul Morrissey to make fully-fledged films, like the *Flesh*, *Trash*, and *Heat* trilogy and *Women in Revolt*, or the last two which were *Flesh for Fran-*

kenstein and *Blood for Dracula*, between 1973–74.

The two films in the *Kiss* and *Empire* exhibition are a reflection on the media of cinema, in alignment with the rest of Warhol's research; *Kiss* presents a series of kisses taken throughout the history of film, highlighting one of the narrative elements that punctuate the filmic sequences, while *Empire* is an impressionistic vision obtained by turning a camera on the Empire State Building for eight consecutive hours. As Marco Senaldi writes about *Empire*, "Even if, at first glance, you think there is nothing to see in this film, if you look carefully, you will see that Warhol does not eliminate the imperfections of the film, the traces of the end of the reel, the flashes of light: these elements, together with the minimal signs of life in the building and in the outside world are a product of the fact that we are looking not at the building but at the instrument through which we see the building: cinema itself."

11 ANDY WARHOL TV

15 minutes of fame

Although critics don't consider it a work of art proper, Warhol's television activity is the cornerstone of his poetics and artistic practice.

Warhol initially approached TV in an amateurish way but by 1980, with the founding of "Andy Warhol's TV", an interest had been built that would morph into the better-known series "Andy Warhol's Fifteen Minutes" which aired from 1985 to 1987. The exhibition presents three segments of *Andy Warhol's TV on Saturday Night Live* in which he performed ordinary or paradoxical actions, and five episodes of "Andy Warhol's Fifteen Minutes" in which he hosts the likes of Bryan Adams, Grace Jones, William Burroughs, Chris Stein, Robert Longo, Debbie Harry, Yoko Ono, etc. A variety of topics are covered although never openly artistic, with the half hour of conversation ranging from neo-drag to art, fashion

and music. In this way, television became a critique of itself. Guests had their moment of fame while literature teaches us that success comes with a price: that of our identity.

12 ALTERED IDENTITIES

Transformers in the night

Warhol was clearly identified as a high society portraitist, but in addition to celebrities, in the 1970s he initiated a series of portraits of unknown people with a freer style and using different techniques. Most of the subjects were transvestites found by his assistants on the sidewalks of New York City at night. This was the starting point for the "Ladies and Gentlemen" series, which began as a photographic project that came to fruition in 1975, when Warhol decided to portray New York drag queens posing as Hollywood stars. This resulted in two types of work: acetates, the negative of the photograph transferred to a transparent support, and silkscreens, printed in two hundred and fifty copies in which the images of the drag queens were given unnatural colour fields or portrayed in simple frontal or three-quarter shots. "Drag queens are living testimony to the way women used to be, the way some people still want them to be, and the way some women will actually want to be.

Transvestites are walking archives of the ideal of a woman impersonated by movie stars.

13 VINYL

Andy and the music

The packaging of the records constitutes what Luciano Bolzoni in his catalogue essay calls "the first point of encounter with the potential listener, the thing which makes the music visible."

Warhol's graphic work for vinyl covers from the late 1940s to the 1980s inevitably follows the evolution of the artist's

style, with a few interesting features and playful elements added in. Between 1949 and 1978, he designed more than fifty covers for jazz, pop, rock, and classical music records. There are many examples in the exhibition of this long and varied career, from the classic "A Program of Mexican Music" to all-out pop productions. The projects become more elaborate moving into the 1950s and Warhol introduced colour and the blotted line technique (take a look at the cover art for "Kenny Burrell Volume 2" for an example). The real turning point came in the 1960s: between the '60s and '70s the Factory designed the best-known covers ever, starting with the renowned "The Velvet Underground&Nico" (1967) to "Sticky Fingers" by the Rolling Stones (1971), and several more sophisticated productions along the way, including John Cale's "The Academy in Peril," on which thirty Kodachrome slides with details of the musician's face appear.

14 EXPLODING PLASTIC INEVITABLE

The performance

Exploding Plastic Inevitable is one of the most important and representative performance-shows of the 1960s, a combination of Pop art, psychedelia and underground culture, curated by Andy Warhol. The aesthetics of the show were created gradually, and it was through his meeting with the Velvet Underground in late 1965 that Warhol decided to try his hand at the music scene and create a multimedia performance. The debut came between March and April 1966 in some of America's most fashionable venues, including New York and Los Angeles. Strobe lights, slides and coloured jellies are used to recreate the distorted visual effects of LSD while erotic dances and the psychedelic rock of the Velvet Underground make the performance a work in which multimedia meets the real presence of the spectator. As Luca Palermo writes in his catalogue essay, the title of the performance "for Warhol should have immediately communicated a sense of spatial-temporal

expansion (exploding), making him a spokesman for the artificiality of the show (plastic) and the inevitability with which things would happen and involve the viewers (inevitable)."

15 EDITORIA

Warhol's Words and Images

Warhol's graphic and editorial production is extensive and diverse. As early as 1951 he made his first book covers and soon after began producing books in small print runs. In 1957, *A Gold Book* presented drawings made by tracing photographs. Textual content produced by Warhol is also of particular interest, as evidenced by the large body of aphorisms and quotations that populate exhibitions, critical texts and initiatives dedicated to Warhol. In the early 1960s, Warhol began to rethink the concept of having a catalogue for his exhibitions: instead of producing conventional publishing content, he linked the idea of the catalogue to the artist's book in which he united the concepts behind the exhibitions while exploiting his considerable skills as a graphic designer. In this respect, the most important books in the exhibition are *The philosophy of Andy Warhol (from A to B and Back Again)*, *America and Popism: The Warhol Sixties*.

Kiss, 1963-64, 16 mm, b/n, silent.