

Stephen Shore  
*Andy Warhol, Marie  
 Menken 1965-67*

## Gilda Williams on Andy Warhol's 'Sliver Factory'



# Silver Sliver

**A**ndy Warhol was not a Pop artist. At best, he was briefly – and only partially – Pop. If the movement's hallmarks are considered – giganticism, mainstream subject matter, bright colour, uncomplicated composition leaning towards symmetry, mostly painting and little sculpture – then only a handful of overfamiliar Warhol artworks (the Marilyn and Liz works, the Campbell's Soup Cans, the Brillo Boxes, possibly the Liza Minnelli works and a few others) fully qualify.

If Warhol must be filed under Pop Art, then we must stupidly turn a blind eye to his 80-odd films, 500+ 'Screen Tests', 600 'Time Capsules' and 4,000 audiotapes. We must ignore much of his best work: the majestic *Shadows* installation, 1978-79; his kinetic *Silver Clouds*, 1966; his Halston fashion shoots; his riveting black-and-white photobooks and publications *Exposures*, 1980, and *America*, 1985; his *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, 1975. We must omit his novel *A* (a verbatim, 24-hour transcript of fast-talking Factory regular Ondine – a kind of downtown *Ulysses* on speed); his late 'Sewn Photographs', 1976-86; his *Invisible Sculpture*, 1985; his 1950s graphic art; and his *Diaries*, 1991. We must overlook the 10,000 lots that comprised his far-ranging private collection, which the estate flogged at auction in 1988. And, if we feel positively compelled to resort lazily to Pop in order to embrace the whole of Warhol's stupefyingly elastic art-film-business-media enterprise, we find ourselves absurdly confronted by an art 'movement' comprising

only a single full-fledged member. What kind of movement is that?

A long 50 years ago, Pop captured the spirit of Warhol's youthful art, but that framework has been an interpretative dead horse for years. In the early 1960s, curator Henry Geldzahler introduced Warhol under the Pop banner with Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, and Tom Wesselmann as a group of comic book-loving, paint-wielding urbanites, 'rising up out of the muck and staggering forward with [their] paintings', like zombies. Warhol rapidly outgrew and outshone that early undead cohort, leaving them behind in a trail of sparkling diamond dust. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, while his fellow Pop colleagues grew reliably more boring by producing artworks whose novelty value faded quickly (hokey giant clothes pegs or colossal primary-coloured murals adorning the lobbies of midtown corporate headquarters), Warhol was staging underground plays (*Pork*, 1971, based on his tape-recorded conversations with Brigid Berlin); innovating soft-core porn in gay, mixed and straight varieties from *My Hustler*, 1965, to *Blue Movie*, 1969; adopting the Velvet Underground and designing their iconic banana album cover; pioneering new materials including Mylar and audiotape; and reinventing the celebrity magazine with *Interview*.

To release Warhol finally from Pop captivity allows us, at long last, to rethink and revitalise his legacy from scratch. Warhol himself was ambiguous about Pop, having dismissed it in 1963 ('The name sounds



**Billy Name**  
*Untitled* 1964  
 view of Andy Warhol's Factory studio

opposite

**Stephen Shore**

*Rene Ricard, Susan Bottomly, Eric Emerson, Mary Woronov, Andy Warhol, Ronnie Cutrone, Paul Morrissey, Edie Sedgwick* 1965-67

so awful') but used the label for his memoirs *Popism*, 1980. Early on he noticed the strange coincidence whereby both 'Pop' and 'Dada' mean 'father'; if we can now shrug off the Pop straitjacket like dad's old tattered coat, how might his immense body of work be reborn?

A good place to start is with a rare, direct comment Warhol once made about his work – words literally spoken, we now know, by his self-effacing interviewer, 23-year-old unknown Gretchen Berg, but which the artist stood by: '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.' In the half-century since Warhol ventriloquised those words, have we ever really examined that surface, or come to grips with that 'nothing'?

Warhol's surfaces were nearly always infinitesimally thin, whether gold leaf, ribbons of film and tape, ultra-thin silver Mylar, cheap newsprint for *Interview*, or a whisper of diamond dust. Warhol's gallery art took off when, around 1962, he discovered silkscreening, a technique which squeegees the tiniest dosage of black acrylic onto a primed canvas to imprint a photographic image. Silkscreen technology permitted the artist to produce the slightest micro-layer of painted surfaces – a frugality also appealing, no doubt, to Warhol's cheap side. Even that bare veil of silkscreened ink was dispensed with in the blank portions of his paintings, or on the adjacent empty canvas in the diptychs. The subjects he painted were themselves paper-thin: dollar bills, soup labels, newspaper headlines, magazine ads, green stamps, wanted posters, glossy headshots, negative strips, dance diagrams. The *Cow Wallpaper* is literally paper-thin. On his giant portraits he applied washes of blue eyeshadow and berry-red lipstick – like a child colouring outside the lines – to drive home that these canvases are flat 2D pictures, not 3D life-drawings.

Consider the transparent acetate on which he transferred his Polaroid portraits, from which he snipped out with scissors any wrinkles, bags or double chins from his high-paying sitters' faces, smoothing chins and brows to resemble the empty blanks of colouring books. Skin itself represents a tenuous membrane that persistently obsessed Warhol. In *The Philosophy* he details his branded multi-step skin-care regime ('I dunk a Johnson&Johnson cotton ball into Johnson&Johnson rubbing alcohol...') and at various points during his lifetime he had his complexion peeled by a plastic surgeon, gold leafed and plastered into a living death mask. It was punctured and stitched – as documented in Richard Avedon's 1969 portraits – smoothed with facials, powdered and primped, and disguised on canvas behind

camouflage print. For Warhol everything was skin-deep: beauty, youth, desirability. Gender itself could be created with the right foundation and make-up, as attested in Christopher Makos's transgendered portraits from 1981.

Warhol's barely-there surfaces could be attenuated literally to nothing: into a sheer projection, like his 'Shadows', or the 'Screen Tests' projected on the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. His eeriest self-portrait, *Myths (The Shadow)*, 1981, is a depthless self-image consumed mostly by the blue-grey expanse of his shadowy profile, vanishing into powdery translucent diamond dust. Warhol's paintings and photographs look ghastly if heavily framed or placed under glass – a sacrilege I once endured at a private collector's home – because they were never meant to be turned into freight, loaded down with unwanted weight and depth.

Just as Warholian space is the thinnest, sparsest possible, so too is the time he occupies: a sliver of time, an ever-shifting edge between 'now' and 'then'. Consider the astonishing decisions behind *Empire*, 1964, whereby not only does Warhol perversely commit to film an unmoving, 103-storey megalith for some 6 hours straight, but then actually slows it down so that *Empire* lasts an interminable 8 hours' running-time. This hyper-extended 'now', I believe, was Warhol's true obsession: the desire to trip time up and slow it down, to witness consciously the finite moment when 'now' becomes 'then'. This is the slow-mo, cloud-drift pace of the floating pillows, the extended 'now' of the photobooth strip and the endless flicker of the double portraits or the 'Sewn Photographs': a single image forever caught, like a glitch, in the infra-thin moment between consecutive film stills.

How else can his OCD need to stop the present, to preserve it forever – confirmed by his relentless taping, filming and photographing – be explained? (Actually, 'preservation' is another underexplored Warholian theme, from the 'Time Capsules' and the 'Endangered Species', to the MTV archive conserving the young and the beautiful of his day. And, of course, the soup cans – non-perishable survival food which, at the time, was being bought in bulk to fill newly built fallout shelters, preserving the US beneath suburban lawns.) Warhol wasn't just the first artist to use a portable tape-recorder, in mid 1965 he was among the first people in history to experiment with this pioneering technology; even before it was available commercially, he had been loaned some of the first-ever consumer videotape recorders and cameras by the Philips Norelco company.

How long was 'now' for Andy? At its longest, Warhol-time lasts a month: the newsstand shelf life of a sexy new *Interview* cover. It might be *The Week that Was*, 1963, the painted portrait/collage immortalising Jacqueline Kennedy's overnight transformation from radiantly smiling First Lady, one sunny day in Dallas, to unrecognisable stony-faced widow in an Arlington cemetery, just three days later. Warhol-time might be a single day, forever preserved in his headline paintings, such as 129 *Die in Jet!*, 1962, or the hyperactive 24 hours of the novel *A* or one summer afternoon when four short-lived hibiscus burst into bloom (*Flowers*, 1964). It might be the three minutes of a 'Screen Test' (the length of a single roll in his Bolex camera) or the 60 seconds required to develop a Polaroid – an image we can watch emerge from



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the emulsion as if actually witnessing the 'present' turn to the 'past'. It may be instantaneous: the lens staring back at his screen-tested Factory guests or their real-time reflection in a spray of silver paint.

In sum, Warhol was preternaturally focused on the absolute present. Many of his associates attest to his unearthly capacity to concentrate: for filmographer Stephen Koch, time seemed magically to halt when he directed his attention towards you. If we consider the chaos that must have been Factory life – with its open-door policy and roving cast of loud 20-somethings all desperately vying for Warhol's attention, ceaselessly gossiping, bitching and teasing; arguing over the music; shooting up; making out; ignoring the telephone – we marvel at how Warhol and a few assistants could have toiled away there undistracted, churning out not far off the '1,000 masterpieces a day' that he dreamed of, especially in those outrageously inspired years from 1963 to 1965.

Famously, when Warhol set up a 'Screen Test' (a job sometimes assumed by another high-ranking Factory male) he would focus the shot and walk away, leaving the sitter to succumb to the lonely remaining spool-time of the roll. Critical attention usually turns to the latter half of that two-step process: Warhol's 'walking away', actively renouncing authorship. My interest here turns to step one: Warhol's extraordinary capacity to focus, to give himself over entirely to this very moment before instantly losing interest and walking away, already immersed in the next thing. The late Warhol scholar Callie Angell noted the value of films such as *Bike Boy*, 1967-68, when his camera drifts from the main drama (usually the leather-clad star Joe Spencer, failing to get laid) and strays towards some insignificant corner of the room, lingering there while the dialogue rambles off-screen. These distracted moments, Angell suggests, are glimpses into Warhol's singular vision, his undying interest in whatever was happening right before him – in this very instant – large or small.

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death, the once-in-a-lifetime mortal leap into the unknown that Warhol feared since those sleepless nights when he kept Geldzahler awake with interminable phone calls, postponing his overwhelming terror of death. In Peggy Phelan's 1999 analysis of the 1963 painting *Suicide* – with its straight hard line cutting across the canvas, marking the stark edge of a skyscraper from which a man has just jumped – she asserts that Warhol was perpetually preoccupied with that vital life/death boundary: 'Ink-blotted, traced, silkscreened and drawn ... [his was a] shakily screened and endlessly projected attempt to draw a line between life and death ... the final moments of a life attempting to become still.'

Consider his *Fate presto* newspaper headline – screaming 'Hurry up!' soon after the 1980 Italian earthquake: the clock is ticking while more victims die beneath the rubble. Or *5 Deaths*, 1963, in which an overturned Chevrolet pins to the road five unmoving teenagers (actually two died and three survived), capturing that awful hinge between life and death which Warhol dutifully preserves on silkscreen for all time. Despite the Pop subject matter of the American open road and their origins as press photos, to file the grim 'Death and Disasters' violent anonymous deaths under the Pop heading has always felt heartless if not even grotesque. ('Anonymous'? The crushed teens staring back at us in *5 Deaths* sure aren't anonymous to those kids' families, who must have spent their lives repeatedly confronted by the enlarged photo of their bleeding children, splashed all over museum brochures and auction catalogues in pretty Easter-egg colours, today functioning as a sign of 'serious money'.)

Warhol would have settled right into the 21st century, with its ubiquitous CCTV cameras – perpetually pointed and rolling, just like Andy's – and time and space collapsing across razor-thin computer screens and skinny iPhones. We can imagine his monosyllabic Twitter feeds of 'Wow', 'Gee' and 'Great' #nothingspecial; his all-night binges on YouTube and Instagram; or his open-invitation Facebook page with streams of 'friends' ranging from A-listers to misfits, rich kids, street kids, hipsters, distant cousins still named Warhola, fading royals, has-been TV personalities, wannabe pornstars and world-class tyrants. 'In the future everyone will be invisible for 15 minutes', is how Hito Steyerl has updated his over-quoted line. But Warhol may have always been heading towards invisibility. Engraved on his tombstone Warhol wanted a single word: 'figment'. In death he would slip into a barely there, shadowy fold within time and space, where he could hover forever.

Conventional wisdom regularly claims an alleged Pop lineage from Warhol to Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, mostly because they, too, operate large-scale money-spinning art enterprises. This seems awfully generous towards both supposed heirs; certainly neither Koons nor Hirst can also be credited with, among other things, succeeding as a rock impresario, fashion model, influential film director, TV presenter and magazine publisher. Practically before he even started, Warhol was New York's top graphic artist. In his spare time, he virtually invented such contemporary staples as reality TV, the rock-gig light-show and the celebrity-on-celebrity interview. Frankly, compared with the driving force of Warhol's indefatigable creative energies, even full-throttle art impresarios like Hirst and Koons look asleep at the wheel.





Andy Warhol  
Dissection Class 1986  
from the 'Sewn Photographs' series

Andy Warhol  
Time Capsule 232 November 1979

Basically, Warholian Pop today is reduced to the relentless pursuit of cash-for-art – but this mono-mission reflects above all current priorities. No doubt Warhol was wholeheartedly in love with money, always praying in church for more. (A firm believer, Warhol received monthly written proof of God's existence: the huge balance printed on his bank statements.) Even so, Warhol's love for riches could be temporarily set aside in pursuit of his art. He accepted a massive pay cut when he moved from advertising to 'gallery' art, diverted considerable funds in the 1960s from his thriving painting business to his failing filmmaking career and, in the early 1970s, scared off potential commissioned portraits by spending hours photographing naked beautiful boys for the 'Torsos' or shirking work on his pricey 'Mick Jagers' to devote himself to the seriously unpopular *Ladies and Gentlemen* portfolio of mixed-race transnians. Today, a 'good Warhol' is probably the most risk-free investment for your contemporary art-dollar, with vintage paintings now trading like pure currency. Turns out he really was printing money – as Warhol would have been ecstatic to learn, providing he

received his cut. Sadly, however, his most enduring economic legacy may be the Factory full of mostly unpaid superstars, an unfortunate Warhol prophecy institutionalised today in the unsalaried art intern.

In his final interview from 1986, the late Paul Taylor referred to Warhol's non-judgemental indifference as 'Zennish':

*Warhol:* 'Zennish'? What's that?

*Taylor:* Like Zen.

*Warhol:* 'Zennish'. That's a good word.

'Zennish' is a good word for Warhol: Eastern philosophy-lite and suggesting a fixation on the 'now', not so much monk-like as fashion-crazy. Any word is preferable to the tiresome 'Pop' – unless 'Pop' functions as an onomatopoeia for time passing in an instant. 'Pop' serves as the split-second soundtrack for the 'rupture' that in 1996 Hal Foster suggested was central to Warhol's art: the bang of a tyre blowing out from a speeding car, a shining helium pillow bursting like a balloon or a gun fired from a paper bag.

Of the Pop-affiliates, the artist who best approaches Warhol's complexity is Yayoi Kusama, with her expanse of nets and dots wrapped across every surface, her near-naked troupe prophetically occupying Wall Street back in 1968, her silver-coated everything and her success with high-commodity culture as witnessed in her surprisingly interesting Louis Vuitton collaboration. Warhol's work had less in common with Lichtenstein's Ben-Day hetero-romances than the ethereal and existentialist art of On Kawara, with its depthless liquid paint, obsessively preserving the current place and time (the 'Date Paintings', the 'Location Paintings') while he can still declare 'I am still alive'.

Superhumanly prolific – thanks, in good part, to his hardworking entourage – Warhol seemed supernaturally to stretch time, pursuing multiple careers during his short 58 years, never missing a deadline or a party. No artist in history has ever documented himself so fully, conjuring so exhaustive a self-portrait – a posthumous figment now available for viewing on UbuWeb and Vimeo. Andy Warhol must hold the world record for Most Photographed Artist Ever, always trailing another dedicated photographer (Stephen Shore, David McCabe, Robert Levin, Billy Name, David Siqueiros et al) to fuel the Big Warhol Picture. Today, like it or not, with every shred of Warholiana sold at auction or price-tagged in the gift-shop, reconstructed in Hollywood features or printed on a T-shirt, hanging in a newly minted museum or archived in a temperature-controlled vault in Pittsburgh, we are forever destined to revisit everything Warhol ever saw, listen to everything he ever heard, admire everything he ever idolised, meet everyone he ever knew. What better way to conceive of his art than as the spectacularly comprehensive record of one particular 'here and now', a perfectly preserved sliver of time and space comprising Warhol's artistic lifetime: forever busy, forever focused, forever camera-ready. ■

'13 Most Wanted Men' is at Queen's Museum, New York until 7 September and 'Transmitting Andy Warhol' is at Tate Liverpool 7 November to 8 February.

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