

ANDY WARHOL



Andy Warhol, *Self-Portrait in Fright Wig*, 1986. All images courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery © 2019 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

by Charlotte Kent

"I told them I didn't believe in art, that I believed in photography."

-Andy Warhol, Thursday August 14, 1980, *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, ed. Pat Sackett

For someone who took approximately 150,000 pictures in the last dozen years of his life, Andy Warhol is rarely remembered as a photographer. Though his iconic screenprints are clearly derived from photographs, his use of the medium seems secondary in larger conversation about his work. His childhood collection of glossy Hollywood publicity photos gets frequent mention as context for his love of celebrity, but their material nature ignored. Interest spread in 2007 and 2008 when the Warhol Foundation distributed 28,500 of his photographs to nearly two hundred universities across the United States, and yet only a few shows over the years have concentrated on his photography or tried to position it within the history of photography, most recently at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.

Warhol's ubiquitous camera and tape recorder went everywhere he went, at all times of day and night. This appears to be another example of the ways in which Warhol foreshadowed the contemporary, with the constant presence of the camera phone capturing ordinary lives in all their glory and making celebrities truly ordinary. Warhol was born in 1928, only three years after Anatol Josepho patented the Photomaton, a machine that popularized the instant photo by providing customers willing to pay a quarter with a strip of eight images delivered in eight minutes. Years later, Warhol would regularly send clients with quarters and instructions to photo booths to produce the images that would be the basis of his famous silkscreen portraits. Squished with friends in a photo booth, people become playful. The photo booth also provides the space for those who are alone to shed any self-consciousness that might arise when faced with a human photographer. Across the assorted photo booth images, sitters reveal campy silliness as much as they do tender self-reflection. The strip of images offers options, multiple strips ensure that one image will satisfy, and the immediacy eliminates any anxiety of waiting to see, hoping to find one pleasing image. It also conflates the high-class status of a commissioned self-portrait, with the cheap and trashy qualities of the automatic photo booth—a classic Warhol gesture.

As many teenagers of his generation, Warhol had a Brownie camera and even created a dark room in the basement of his family home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This photography foundation was enhanced by his older brother's employment hand coloring photographs at a photo processing business, which is where Warhol likely tinted his beloved, signed publicity shot of Shirley Temple. Warhol was not suited to the labor of developing photographs and shifted to automated and instant cameras. Beyond the celebrity film stills for his first screenprints, he embraced the photo booth, as well as a series of single-lens-reflex cameras, like the Chinon 35F-MA, the Olympus AF-1, or the Minox 35 for his production process. The Polaroid Big Shot and SX70, however, would be particularly significant.

The Polaroid Big Shot was only produced from 1971 to 1973. Working at a fixed focal length of forty-two inches, it was specifically designed for portraits. To identify the focus, photographers would do the "Big Shot Shuffle," moving back and forth until the two images in the viewfinder united. This along with the simplicity of its single-



speed mechanical shutter and the diffused light of its flash allowed absolutely anyone to procure well lit, quality images each time. It even provided a sixty second timer that guided enthusiastic users how long to wait before peeling apart the film. When Warhol took Polaroids of his sitters, he kept them all—no matter how much the commissioner might beg for one of them. He labeled them with a steel embossing stamp “©ANDY WARHOL” and catalogued them carefully in designated albums. These behaviors are not merely examples of his disposition towards accumulation, but emphasize an awareness of their relevance to his work. The Big Shot has retained its celebrity portrait status with numerous photographers using it for red carpet awards. In 2017, Rizzoli published *Big Shots: Polaroids from the World of Hip Hop and Fashion*, which consisted of moments captured by the tour manager Philip Leeds. When a representative from Polaroid introduced him to the SX70 in 1973, Warhol embraced its even greater portability and ease, eventually coming to own ten of them.

From the photo strip or Polaroid, Warhol would take another photograph as the basis for the silkscreen image. Subtle tonal gradations disappear with a Polaroid and produce even images that translate well to the screen printing process. The image would then be screened in ink on a silver or colored background. In the photo shoots for the portraits, he would often take an unnecessarily large number of shots, mostly done, as he admitted, to satisfy the sitter’s expectations. The consistency within the photographs allowed a uniformity that connects them as belonging to one approach. The final commissioned portraits were always 40x40 inches, with the option to purchase additional ones as gifts or to place across multiple homes. The assorted photo strips and Polaroids taken for portraits and mundane snapshots make Warhol’s photography seem less like an end of its own, and rather a means to capture and archive his life. His numerous other photographs, whether flowers or flaccid penises, friends or self-portraits, also seem to be about the mundane. From an art historical perspective, therefore, Warhol’s photography has often been dismissed in discussions of his work as an artist. After his death, for example, Christie’s identified him as a painter, and valued his black and white prints at \$5 each and the Polaroids at \$75-500; a law suit followed in which the photographs were deemed either worthless, or worth up to \$80 million.

These confusions around the role of his photography apply normative art historical values like determinations of the artist’s primary medium to an artist whose entire career has been understood as upending the hierarchical and dogmatic notions surrounding art. He collapsed the high-low distinction. He glorified the mundane. He celebrated artifice. He denied the artist’s hand by using highly mechanized and automatic processes. His use of the photo booths and Polaroids, in particular, establish constraints and automation that are typical throughout his approach to art. An artist known for his mechanical, repetitive, reiterative approach, the Polaroids have object status. They are unique and confound the notions of reproducibility associated with his practice. And yet, they are also connected to family snapshots and a low vernacular not typically provided by art objects.

The major philosopher and critic of Warhol’s work, Arthur Danto wrote in *Philosophizing Art* that the issue was no longer “attempting to define art as such, the problem, far more tractable, was to distinguish philosophically between reality and art when they resembled one another perceptually.”¹ Warhol’s photographs remain stubbornly like snapshots. They don’t celebrate the weird and quotidian into something

Andy Warhol, Previous spread: *Jean Paul Gaultier, Francesco Clemente and Tattooed Man*, 1984; Opposite: *William Burroughs and Model for French Vogue*, 1984

¹Danto, 5





cool, as Diane Arbus does. For all its beatnik status, the Factory seems benign and domestic in his photographs. Their art is their reality, and so are kin to the Brillo boxes. The art critic and theorist Laurence Alloway argues for the “expansionist aesthetics of Pop” that refused a hierarchical aesthetics but found a continuum accommodating the permanent as well as the ephemeral, the public and cultural as well as the personal and sentimental.

As Catherine Zuromskis argues in her book *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images*, Warhol’s photography cultivates the aesthetics of the familiar and familial amateur: “approaching photography with the clunky awkwardness of someone who doesn’t know or doesn’t care to make an artful photograph. The central compositions, simple frontal poses, under- and overexposures, and predominant high contrast as well as the repetitive and often banal subject matter epitomize the look of the amateur snapshot.”² In this, he establishes a set of values that have become pervasive with the rise of personal blogs and social media sites. Over the last twenty years, countless new media artists have used the washed out non-aesthetics exemplified in Warhol’s photography to produce their online verité works. As so many like to say: “Before there was Instagram, there was Warhol.”

One must therefore recognize that Warhol did not simply save his photographs in the Time Capsule boxes or keep them in albums for only friends to see. He exhibited his photography throughout his life, too. In 1966-7, Lita Hornick published *Screen Tests: A Diary* that combined his images with the poems of his friend and collaborator, Gerard Malanga. In 1972, Gotham Book Mart and Gallery presented an exhibit of his Polaroids; 36 prints of pop culture icons like Rex Reed and Mick Jagger sold for \$50-\$100 each. In 1979, *Andy Warhol: Exposures* presented his photographs alongside text by Bob Colacello, editor of *Interview* magazine. Warhol selected images of people, landscapes, buildings and more for his 1985 *America*, all of which were taken during his travels across the country for the assorted portrait commissions. A year later, in 1986, Robert Miller Gallery showed a series of machine sewn photographs, stitched together into 11x14 inches, the strings often left dangling. *Andy Warhol’s Party Book* (1988) published a year after he died, also includes photographs of his funeral in a last chapter, and so epitomized some of the objections to these later projects. Many resented and rejected their crass commercialism aimed at an audience enamored with celebrity. This is complicated by Warhol’s refusal to bow to expectations that art be removed from the market and life. If the books are commercial, the images retain the “bad picture” qualities described by Zuromskis. To appreciate Warhol’s photographs is to recognize his peculiar commitment across decades to an approach that most amateur photographers lose after a little while of using a camera, framing images, and looking at them afterwards.

Warhol took pictures every day of friends, strangers, objects, anything and everything, everywhere. For many, his arrival at a party with his camera ensured that it was, in fact, a party worth attending. Though the many works produced at the Factory and his celebrity and socialite commissions are the most prevalent reference points for his oeuvre, Warhol was not as apolitical as some might suggest. A liberal Democrat who never voted, he nevertheless contributed his work to a number of political campaigns. In 1972,

Andy Warhol, *Jon Gould in Montauk*, 1981.

²Zuromskis, 195

he produced a Vote McGovern poster. In 1976, Jimmy Carter raised funds by selling prints derived from the Polaroids. In 1982, Jane Fonda had him produce 100 screen prints of her portrait for a Tom Hayden fundraiser. He included Nancy Reagan in *Interview* magazine. He was a complicated figure that never fit easily into one box, one medium, or one way of thinking.

He once said that “A picture means I know where I was every minute. That’s why I take pictures. It’s a visual diary.” It is easy to consider the photographs a chronicle of his daily life, much like the published diaries edited by Pat Sackett. On some level, they were certainly that. On another, however, the photographs represent a chronicling that is now incredibly ordinary. Instagram is remarkably similar to the Polaroid, with their square shape and white space for writing a caption. Everything is made automatic and the image is not only immediately available, it is immediately present for anyone you know around the world.

Looking at Warhol’s photographic impulse across its various forms may not glorify the medium, but therein lies its subsequent power. Now, everyone takes pictures—all the time. They pick one or two or a handful to share with the world, and the rest are forgotten in digital time capsules. Like Warhol, they may never return to look at those countless photographs from that random weekend with friends, but many feel the comfort of knowing they are there. To observe his images is to see a playfulness that could only arise once photography became ordinary, cheap, and pervasive. His works foreshadow what we see all around us. The question is not whether his photographs are art, or valuable, or relevant, but what are the stakes that insist they are not?

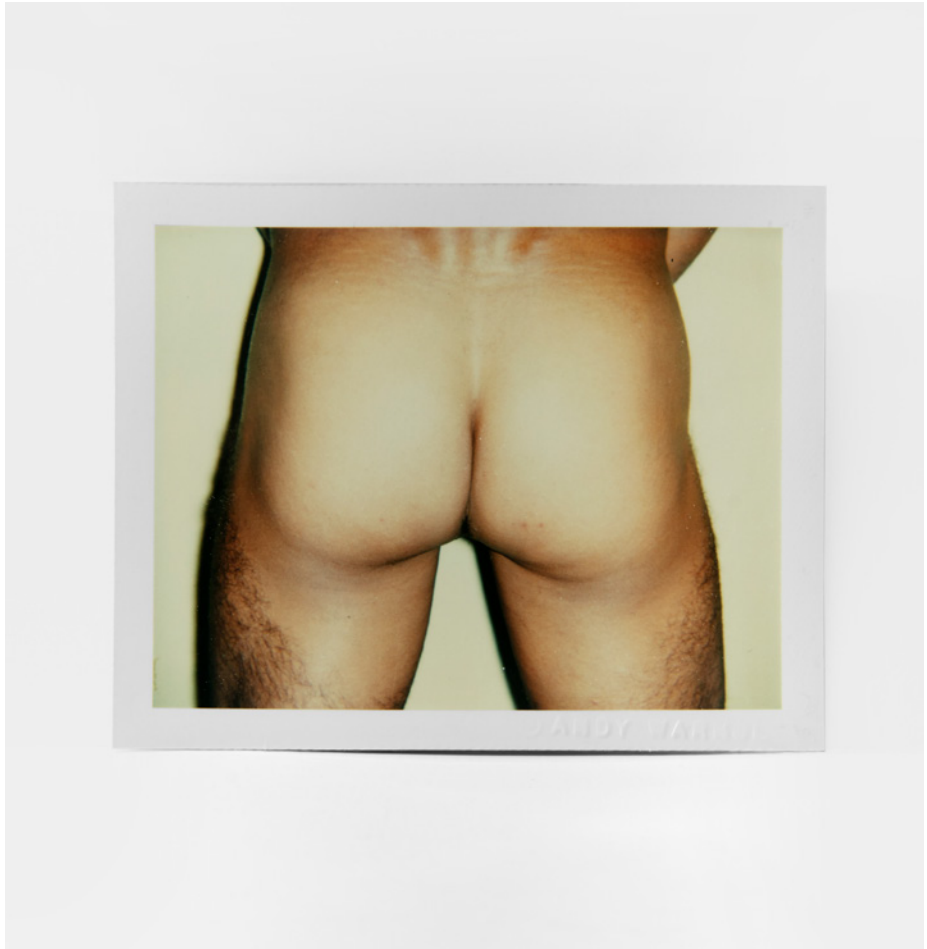
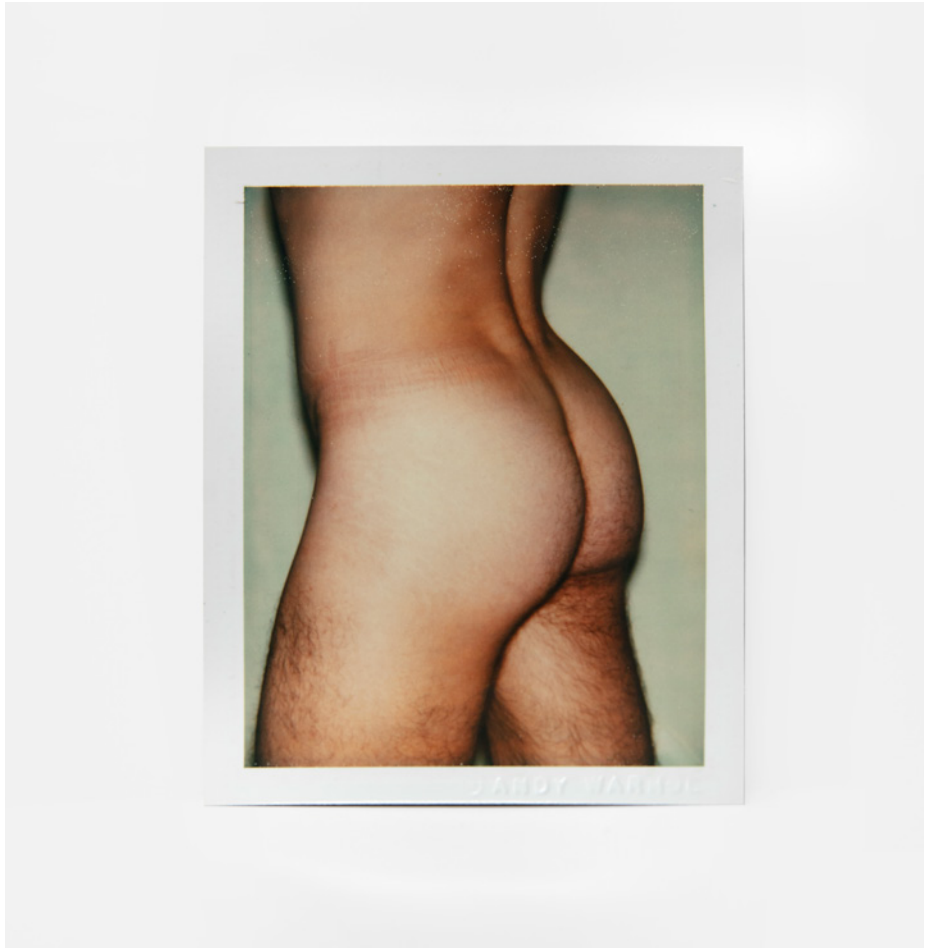


Andy Warhol, Above: *Table Setting*, 1979; Opposite: Top: *Bananas*, 1978; Bottom: *Shoes*, c. 1980.





Andy Warhol, Above: Top: *Seaplane at Dock*, 1976-1986; Bottom: *Construction Workers*, c. 1980; Opposite: *Nude Male*, c. 1977.



Andy Warhol, Opposite: *Torso*, 1977; Above: Top: *Torso*, 1977; Bottom: *Torso*, 1976.