

## The Tests of Time

### Robert Bean

“My work has no future at all. I know that. A few years.  
Of course my things will mean nothing”.<sup>i</sup>

Andy Warhol

“Andy Warhol’s *Screen Tests*’ and Honorary Degree” is curated from the film archive of Andy Warhol’s *Screen Tests* and is exhibited alongside the honorary degree that Warhol received from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1972. The degree was presented *in absentia*. In addition to the Doctor of Fine Arts degree conferred on Warhol, there is a brief letter from Andy Warhol to then-President Garry Neill Kennedy expressing his regrets for not being able to attend the convocation, and an editorial cartoon from the Halifax Chronicle Herald dated Saturday April 29, 1972, the day that the degree was awarded.

This exhibition is site specific, recalling a significant moment in NSCAD University’s history. It acknowledges the success of a small university, located on the periphery of eastern Canada, in establishing an international reputation for contemporary art, in the late twentieth century. The exhibition considers the political economy of the sign that is associated with celebrity, signature and gesture, a subject that Warhol exploited extensively during his own artistic career. Jean Baudrillard notes that “[t]he appearance of things has the key to the city, being itself the signature of an order that is given there to be recognized and not to be analyzed. ... original and copy are equivalent in a single finality, whose ‘reason’ escapes them”.<sup>ii</sup> In many respects, Warhol’s absence from the convocation in 1972 is of little consequence. What remains, the trace of an art historical moment and the aura embedded in the signifier *Warhol*, has fulfilled its inscriptive task. We can enjoy the presence of absence that the *Screen Tests* and the Honorary Degree share.

Between 1964 and 1966 Andy Warhol produced approximately 500 experimental film portraits titled *Screen Tests*. Popularly referred to as the “stillies”, each film was a silent portrait of an individual sitting in front of a stationary 16mm film camera for the duration of a 100-foot spool of film. Warhol required that the films be screened at the rate of 16 frames per second, the standard projection rate of silent movies, thereby producing a 4-minute portrait of each sitter. In 1970 Warhol removed his films from distribution. Since his death in 1987, the *Screen Tests* have gradually returned to the public domain. Subjects who sat for the *Screen Tests* include Susan Sontag, Peter Hujar, Nico, Dennis Hopper, Edie Sedgwick, Salvador Dali, Lou Reed, Paul America, Gerard Malanga, John Giorno, Marcel Duchamp, “Baby” Jane Holzer, James Rosenquist, Lucinda Childs, Bob Dylan, Kipp Stagg, Cass Elliot, John Cale, Sophronus Mundy and many others.

By 1964, Warhol had completed an extensive number of photographic silkscreen paintings and prints that explored the subjects of fame, portraiture, death and disaster.

Notoriety could be achieved through a variety of options that included celebrity, scandal, political trauma and the disasters of everyday life. Concurrent with the beginning of the *Screen Tests* are silkscreen works titled *Atomic Bomb* (1965) and a series of electric chair images completed between 1963-1965. The prints of the electric chair, generically titled *Disaster*, frequently included the colour of the monochrome ground as an added feature in the title and presentation of the work (i.e. *Lavender Disaster*, 1963 or *Silver Disaster #6*, 1963). The work associated with disaster themes also utilized appropriated imagery of car accidents, suicides, race riots and other images culled from the public domain of photographs. Although the use of monochrome colours and blank monochrome canvases in these works would suggest a disinterested irony, a stance that Warhol encouraged by implying that the blank canvases increased the exchange value of the works by expanding the physical scale, the horror and violence depicted in the photographs is explicit, a reflection on the American appetite for images of death and political crisis.

“He was attracted to the open sores in American political life ...”<sup>iii</sup>

The *Screen Tests* have an affinity with Warhol’s interest in duration, documents and archives. Evoking the instrumental uses of still photography, such as mug shots and passport pictures, the *Screen Tests* are an important precedent for contemporary media art that explores the concept of the “moving still”, a form that stages and tests the temporal attributes of still photography through time based media.<sup>iv</sup> Retaining his interest in portraiture and serial imagery, the *Screen Tests* are a conceptual archive of insightful experimentation with photography, film and the history of American media.

Works such as *The Thirteen Most Wanted Men*, 1964, a photo-silkscreen grid of 13 mug shots from the New York Police Department that was installed (and subsequently censored) on the exterior of the New York State pavilion at the New York World’s Fair, provided the incentive for the earliest Screen Test portraits titled *The Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*. These early film portraits endeavored to create a still image on film. The process required that the sitters remained as motionless as possible during the three minutes that it took for the film to travel through the camera. In some cases, when the subject stared without blinking, tears would appear as a consequence of restraining the impulse to blink. These portraits are reminiscent of other experimental films by Warhol that explore the static quality of the still image through duration. Films such as *Empire*, 1964, an eight-hour stationary shot of the top half of the Empire State Building, is an epic example of Warhol’s fascination with the temporal boundaries of photography and film. *Empire* is the investigation into the perception of duration - the duration of time, of a building, of a film, of a work of art.”<sup>v</sup>

The Warhol films that employ a stationary camera and a predetermined temporal framework recall the earliest films of the Lumière Brothers. The first films screened in 1895 by the Lumière Brothers were just under one minute in length and utilized a static camera position to record events from everyday life. The absence of sound in the *Screen Tests* allowed Warhol to alter the frame rates during projection. Slowing the motion was another abstraction of image that brought the history of film and still photography into proximity. The relationship of the Lumière Brothers films and Warhol’s *Screen Tests* is

clear in this context. Unlike the Lumière Brothers, however, an eight-hour film such as *Empire* is unlikely to ever be viewed by an audience, consigning the temporal potential and experience of the film to a spatialized and archival condition of storage. We know the work *Empire* primarily as a thing.

As a cumulative archive of friends, personalities, writers, artists and celebrities, the *Screen Tests* did not receive widespread distribution or public exposure during Warhol's life. Warhol compiled a large number of the *Screen Tests* using conceptual typologies that he titled *The Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*, *The Thirteen Most Beautiful Women*, *Fifty Fantastics* and *Fifty Personalities*. These projects were never finished or defined by a specific selection of films. The edit was variable. The exotic titles were used to entice more people to pose for the *Screen Tests* or as *ad hoc* banners for intermittent screenings of the films. By 1966, the *Screen Tests* had strayed from the static posing of the earlier films to accommodate a variety of interactive and performative sittings by the subjects and they were being used as background projections for multi-media performances by the Velvet Underground. Branded as the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (EPI), the rock music performances and screenings were the only significant public exposure that the *Screen Tests* received before Warhol withdrew his films from circulation.

### **Passing the Test**

Testing implies success and failure, measurable in varying increments. In the University, the conferring of a degree is recognition for completing a program of study. It signifies accomplishment and contribution in learning and may also impart a level of status. In short, you have passed the test.

The *Screen Tests* were never intended to determine the suitability of the subject's image for subsequent film projects. They did, however, function as a form of testing on another order. In some of the early films, the test explored the subject's ability to remain still for the duration of the shot, a feature that recalls the exposure time of the first Daguerreotype photographs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The screening of these film works may also test the interest, patience or attention span of an audience. In a culture where cinema and spectacle have become synonymous, the Warhol *Screen Tests* are predisposed to fail. In the case of Warhol's longer projects such as *Empire*, the expectations of the audience, the test of time, exceeds comprehension.

The use of testing strategies in contemporary and conceptual artworks frequently perform the appearance of empirical evidence as a means of revealing categories of knowledge acquisition and truth, subjective and objective assumptions as well as the methods for constructing a perception of truth through a calculated presentation of documents. Artists such as Bruce Nauman, Sophie Calle, John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, Douglas Huebler, Martha Rosler, and Komar & Melamid are some notable examples. The test, in this context, is a parody of scientific and research methodology as well as a critique of the social impact of technology upon the body. In many of these works, the use of photography and film are prevalent as documentation techniques, verifying the indisputable appearance of empirical data.

The *Screen Tests* were produced against the historical backdrop of the Cold War - an era formed by social, technological and political testing. The apocalyptic spectacle of nuclear testing and armament throughout the world was a signal of how science and ideology had joined forces to threaten all existence. Also prevalent during this time was the use of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) testing in the public school systems in North America. Systems of assessment that were culturally situated and often structurally biased by categories of race, gender and class.

As noted, the subjects of failure and disaster are common in the works by Warhol that precede the *Screen Tests*. In a recent review of Warhol's work, Blake Gopnik, noted that "[e]ven Warhol's most famous celebrity images aren't so much celebrations of Hollywood values as records of their failure. Warhol's first Marilyn's were painted right after her breakdown and suicide. His Liz Taylor's were made after her very public illness and many scandalous affairs, and they don't exactly show her at her best. Every one of the Warhol Jackie pictures that render the first lady in her stylish heyday, when she was a symbol of American optimism and energy, was painted after her husband had been gunned down".<sup>vi</sup>

Warhol was continuously testing and being tested. Amidst the attempts to pin him down to some absolute or definitive context, Warhol remained elusive, often reflecting the inquest back on to his examiners. It has become the job of the critic and art historian to locate and articulate the failure in Warhol's work – his failure to address the AIDS crisis, his failure to address questions of identity and race, his perceived failure to consummate his homosexuality, his failure to comprehend his own relevance to art history and so on. Warhol would frequently welcome these critiques by asking his interrogators what they thought was wrong with his work.

Warhol apparently passed the test at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts in 1972. I believe Warhol would have appreciated the fact that the other recipient of the Honorary Doctorate at that convocation was Peter M. Nicholson, the Provincial Minister of Finance and Education in the Nova Scotia Legislature. This moment is recorded in two notable documents. The first is the letter of regret sent to Garry Neill Kennedy that simply states "Sorry I can't come, Andy". The other document is the editorial cartoon that appeared in the Chronicle Herald Newspaper on the day of convocation that reveals the political wit of an historical presentation that never occurred.

"He who does not answer the questions has passed the test"<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Andy Warhol, quoted in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art: 1956-1966" in *Andy Warhol: October Files 2*, ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* translated by Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), p. 103.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Crow, "Saturday Disasters: Traces and References in Early Warhol" in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 324.

<sup>iv</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the *moving still* see Robert Bean, "Future Perfect: Genealogies of the Film-still". Catalogue Essay for the exhibition "Future Perfect", curated by Robert Bean. The Centre for Art Tapes, Halifax, Nova Scotia. September 2004

<sup>v</sup> Callie Angell, "Empire" in *Andy Warhol: Motion Pictures*, ed. Klaus Biesenbach (Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2004), p. 28.

<sup>vi</sup> Blake Gopnik, *The Downside of Pop* (The Washington Post, September 24, 2005).

<sup>vii</sup> Franz Kafka, "The Test" in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 442.

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