WARHOL'S QUEERNESS: OMITTED AND REVEALED

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You can get so much more meaning from his paintings when you think of Andy as a queer figure, who is looking for his place in the world. In the end, his artistic practice is a form of validation and searching.[1]

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For some reason it has become an accepted and widespread claim that Warhol was largely asexual, a person seemingly "above sex." In his words: "Fantasy love is much better than reality love. Never doing it is very exciting."[2]

This quote comes from a 1979 magazine article, entitled "Asexuality—Is Everybody Not Doing It?", which surely contributed to this myth. Interestingly, in a famous 1968 interview, in which Warhol declared "I want to be a machine,"[3] he also said, "I think that the whole interview on me should be just on homosexuality." However, this statement was omitted by the editor of *ARTnews* in the 1960s and vanished until 2018, when the original tapes were found and published.[4]

Still, Warhol's queerness was "known" in one way or another: by the gay audiences who watched his films, by the police who censored them, by his boyfriends, by his Factory community, and by the gallery owners who excluded his works of explicit or flamboyant male nudes from exhibitions[5] (including Neue Nationalgalerie in its 2001 retrospective). Considering that many people knew enough about Warhol's sexuality and that Warhol has become a central figure in the discourse around postmodernism, Pop art, mass culture, film studies, high art / low art, one might therefore expect there to be a rich body of criticism and exhibitions exploring, appreciating, or at least mentioning the role of Warhol's queerness in the production and reception of his art. However, most considerations of Warhol have "degayed"[6] him. Normally Warhol's critics decisively sidestepped issues around sexuality, or else kept his queerness to the realm of the biographical or private to relegate his work to the world of high art. When they did allude to Warhol's sexuality, they usually didn't mention that he was gay.

While his sexuality was frequently suppressed or debated for cultural reasons, Warhol was a gay man who had several partners throughout his life, such as Edward Wallowitch, Jed Johnson, Jon Gould, and John Giorno.[7] Warhol's boyfriends were also his colleagues and collaborators and helped to shape and define his career as an artist. He created hundreds of works that depicted and expressed queerness, desire, and intimacy.

In their 1996 publication *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz were among the first critics to explore, analyze, appreciate, and celebrate the role of Warhol's queerness in the making and reception of his films and art. In 2001, Wayne Koestenbaum followed with his *Andy Warhol* biography, asking, "How gay was Warhol? As gay as you can get."[8] Seventeen years later, encouraged by the new political climate and a revival of identity politics, Jessica Beck focused her catalogue essay for the artist's 2018 Whitney Museum retrospective on Warhol as a queer artist in the age of AIDS.[9] Here, Donna de Salvo, curator of this exhibition, also stated that Warhol was openly gay.[10] Next, in 2020, Blake Gopnik published his essay "Warhol's Defiant Hopes for Queer Art"[11] and the *Netflix* docuseries *The Andy Warhol Diaries* by

Andrew Rossi launched in 2022 to bring his relationships and love life, as drawn from his diaries, which had been published in 1989, to a wider audience.[12]

In this lineage of shared efforts to acknowledge and honor the role of Warhol's queerness in the making of his art, Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin is the first museum to organize a landmark survey that seriously focuses on these works—spanning from major series of paintings, films, photographs, prints, and drawing through to research material, such as sketches and Polaroid photos—with an emphasis on pieces that suggest intimacy, vulnerability, sensitivity, longing, and sexuality.

Warhol drew much of his inspiration from libidinous desire and his erotic attraction to the male body, and often expressed this in highly explicit pieces. From early on in his career, when his queer longing found a dreamier expression in the late 1940s, until the end of his life in 1987, Warhol sketched, and later photographed or filmed, innumerable images of male nudity, ranging from models in classic poses to men masturbating and having sexual intercourse. "During this period [1969] I took thousands of Polaroids of genitals. Whenever somebody came up to the Factory, no matter how straight-looking he was, I'd ask him to take his pants off so I could photograph his cock and balls."[13]

Warhol's penchant for sketching and photographing other men's bodies, and especially their genitals, is one of the constants in his career as an artist from his early days as an advertising artist and magazine illustrator until late in his lifetime. Warhol produced an enormous amount of hard- and soft-core images, mostly photographic, of male nudes, or "landscapes" as he secretly coded them in diaries.[14]

Given the legal constraints and puritanical climate of postwar America, it was a time of structural oppression. Warhol nevertheless publicly displayed some of his early 1950s drawings of men at the Bodley Gallery in 1956, depicting a spectrum of intimacy.[15] John Giorno, artist, poet, and Warhol's former lover, says about this early exhibition, "In the homophobic 1950s, this was daring and heroic. A great risk."[16] These sketched impressions convey a distinctly sexual sensibility because of their emotional vulnerability, a vulnerability which few of his later works reveal. These early works also showcase Warhol's own hand and show an artist who carefully crafted an impenetrable public image for himself.

In the Sixties, Warhol directed movies like *Blow Job* (1964), *Couch* (1964), *Sleep* (1964), *The Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys* (1965), and *Empire* (1965). There is a compelling and influential critical view that the value of Warhol's films lies in their concern with time, death and process; but rarely with sex, let alone queer sex.[17] The Seventies meanwhile were marked by the production of painting series, such as the *Torso* series, an exploration of both classical nude studies and queer sexuality, the *Sex Parts* series as well as his *Ladies and Gentleman* series. In the Eighties he photographed a series of self-portraits in drag. Warhol had a longstanding interest in drag queens and, more broadly, in artifice, role-playing, and the construction of identity. He admired "boys who spend their lives trying to be complete girls."[18] These cross-dressing performances for the camera recall Man Ray's photographs of Marcel Duchamp disguised as his female alter ego, Rrose Sélavy. Similarly, Warhol was given the alter ego "Drella"[19]: a fusion of Dracula and Cinderella that stood for his fluid personality, which oscillated backward and forth between genders, desires, identities.

The drawings of men from the 1950s, the films from the 1960s and onwards, the paintings of male body parts from the 1970s, as well as his photographs from all periods remain widely seductive decades after their creation. They hold the thrill of love, sex, and desire for all people, irrespective of their gender or identity. This is not an exhibition about the "gay" Warhol for a "gay" audience. The show lights a fire in each viewer through its powerful sensuality, creating desire, or longing through his explicit and fragmented depictions of beautiful naked bodies.

The exhibition at Neue Nationalgalerie, together with the following conversations with the Andy Warhol experts Donna de Salvo, Jessica Beck, Blake Gopnik, and Wayne Koestenbaum aims to peel away the layers of the artist's public persona to examine how his personal life and queer sexual orientation influenced his art that changed American culture forever.

1 Andrew Rossi, director, writer, and executive producer of *The Andy Warhol Diaries*. See Tyler Coates, "How 'The Andy Warhol Diaries' Depicts the Queer Side of the Pop Icon," *The Hollywood Reporter* (May 10, 2022). https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-features/the-andy-warhol-diaries-andrew-rossi-netflix-1235143416/ Accessed on March 5, 2024.

2 "I don't know about the rest of America, but I'd rather laugh in bed than do it. I like to get under the covers and crack jokes. I find that sex is much more exciting on the screen and between the pages than between the sheets anyway. More and more people are also realizing that fantasy love is much better than reality love. Never doing it is very exciting." *Forum: The International Journal of Human Relations* (Jan. 1979), p. 14. https://www.tumblr.com/redbeardace/179234617725/asexuality-mick-jagger-erica-jong-andy-warhol. Accessed on March 5, 2024.

3 "The reason I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine, and I feel that whatever I do, and do machine-like is what I want to do." Gene R. Swenson, "What Is Pop Art? Answers from with 8 Painters," *Artnews* 62 (Nov. 1963), p. 26.

4 Jennifer Sichel, "'Do you think Pop Art's queer?' Gene Swenson and Andy Warhol," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1 (March 2018), pp. 59–83.

5 See Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 1.

6 We owe this formulation to Simon Watney. During the course of the conference "Rereading Warhol: The Politics of Pop," where versions of these essays were presented, Watney made the suggestion that what many of the essays shared was a concern with the "degaying" of Warhol.

7 As Mandy Merck notes, "Out as Warhol may have been, gay as *My Hustler, Lonesome Cowboys, Blow Job* may seem, his assumption to the postmodern pantheon has been a surprisingly straight ascent, if only in its stern detachment from any form of commentary that could be construed as remotely sexy." Merck, "Figuring Out Andy Warhol," *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, p. 225.

8 Wayne Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Lipper/Viking, 2001), p. 7.

9 Jessica Beck, "Warhol's Confession: Love, Faith, and AIDS," in *Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2018), p. 84.

10 Donna de Salvo, "Andy Warhol: I Work Seven Days a Week," in *Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again*, p. 23.

11 Blake Gopnik, "Warhol's Defiant Hopes for Queer Art," in *Andy Warhol, Love, Sex & Desire: Drawings 1950–1962* (London/Los Angeles: Taschen, 2020), pp. 13–24.

12 The six-part docuseries is based on and takes its name from Warhol's dictated memoirs, which were published posthumously in 1989. From the mid-1970s until his death in 1987, Warhol relayed the diary entries over the phone to the journalist Pat Hackett, detailing everything from his expenses to his love affairs and the guest lists of exclusive parties.

13 Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism: The Warhol Sixties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 294.

14 Michael Moon, "Screen Memories, or, Pop Comes from the Outside: Warhol and Queer Childhood," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, p. 78.

15 Michael Dayton Hermann mentions this exhibition, "Studies for [sic] a Boy Book" in his "Foreword: Love is Love," in *Andy Warhol, Love, Sex & Desire, Drawings 1950–1962*, p. 8.

16 Michael Dayton Hermann, p. 8.

17 Simon Watney, "Queer Andy," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, p. 20.

18 Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (*From A to B and Back Again*) (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1975), p. 54.

19 Drella, a contraction of Dracula and Cinderella was a nickname for Warhol coined by Warhol Superstar Ondine.