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Andy Warhol and Political Ambiguity

'...you should be President! If you were President, you would have somebody else be president for you, ... you would video tape everything. You would have a nightly talk show - your own talk show as president' *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*¹

As the Andy Warhol exhibition at Tate Modern prepares to reopen with a number of overtly political works by him, it seems timely to re-examine Warhol's political engagement and iconic image making.

Warhol always strove to remain energised and current, he scoured the newspapers and watched TV for source material at the same time as fostering collaborations and networks that circumnavigated race and class. Throughout his artistic career he drew, screened and filmed many works that could be considered provocatively political in their subject matter.

¹ *Band I: How Andy Put His Warhol On, From The Philosophy of Andy Warhol From A to B and Back Again*, Harcourt Brace, New York 1973 p13

Screen-prints series of *Race Riot* (1963), *Electric Chair* (1965), *Mao* (1973), *Still Life (Hammer and Sickle)* (1976), *Vote McGovern* (1972) and his *Ladies and Gentlemen* series (1975) are all loaded subject matter. In films such as *The Life of Juanita Castro* (1965) and *Women in Revolt* (1971) there is a compelling marriage of ironic role-playing and social commentary.

Warhol's images embraced Cold War politics, turbulent social upheavals and spanned several American presidential premierships, yet he often publicly denied any critical engagement with his seemingly political work. His book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* with its redacted conversations and his entries in his Diaries are seemingly banal and gossipy about world affairs, yet provide memorable soundbites as he cross-fertilizes media stories, people's fears, politics and celebrity culture.

Biographers such as Victor Bockris suggested that Warhol would not take a political stand because he wanted the freedom to be able to document anything and everything. 'Basically, he was a Democrat; he was really for the people. He loved to go into the world of the rich and wealthy...He wanted to be in every place and see everything and the only way to do that was to set up a very passive front in his political viewpoints.'² However this is in contrast to the Art historian Thomas Crow, who writing in 1987 believed that Warhol was ultimately attracted to 'the open sores of American political

life and the issues that were most problematic for liberal Democratic politicians such as Kennedy and Edmund Brown'. Warhol's *Race Riots* of 1963 capture the most violent phase of civil-rights demonstrations in the South; he sometimes used lurid colours for added effect for example *Red (Pink) Race Riot* (1963) with its source material from a photograph by Charles Moore taken on the 17th May 1963. Counter to this though is Warhol's own professed ambivalence to political parties; writing in his diary on September 26th 1983 he quips 'I'd been hating the Republicans so much since the other night at Drue Heinz's, but I'll really change my mind today if we find out that Ron [Reagan] Jr was able to get an interview with his father for *Interview* For the January cover. I mean, wouldn't that just put *Interview* on the map? I'd even vote Republican. I know I don't vote but I'm thinking of registering again...'³

So, where do Warhol's politics reside? In 1966, while interviewing him, Gretchen Berg asked 'if we want to know about Andy Warhol [do] we just have to look at your paintings and your films...?' Whilst he responded with a laconic 'Yes', it is nevertheless in his childhood that we find many clues. Born in 1928 into a poor working class immigrant family (the Warhol's were from the Eastern Europe) it was his illness at the age of eight, and the experience of immigrant families as well as poverty that left a deep impression on him. He was also, as David Bailey suggested to me in 2001, 'like a sponge' and it was this trait that enabled him to

² Victor Bockris (1988) *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol*. London: Frederick Muller pp. 339-400.

³ Pat Hackett, *and The Andy Warhol Diaries*. (New York: Simon and Schuster 1983, 1985) p738 Diary entry of Monday Sept 26th 1983.

⁴ Gretchen Berg, *Andy Warhol: My True Story* East Village Other, November 1st Vol 1 1966.

⁵ Jean Wainwright in conversation with Glenn O'Brien 2002.

⁶ Anthony Grudin *Warhol's Working Class Pop Art and Egalitarianism*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017 p8.

⁷ Jean Wainwright in conversation with John Warhola in the *The Warhol Museum* Pittsburgh 2000.

⁸ Pippin, *The Warhol Sisters: Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett*. Princeton: Princeton House 1982, P60.

draw together the ordinary and the extraordinary, the soup can, the dollar bill, *The Last Supper*, Liz Taylor, Jackie Kennedy and Mao's, the glamorous and the political. Glenn O'Brien one of Warhol's editors at *Interview* in conversation with me explained the anomaly was that he was the film maker who made the film *Blow Job* (1964) that was investigated by the FBI but was invited to dinner at the White House.⁵

As Anthony Grudin in 2018 has stated, Warhol although having had early exposure to Brecht and Ben Shau at Carnegie Institute of Technology in the 1940's as well as political discussions, he was 'never a confident... or unambivalent leftist'⁶ but it is clear the US Cold War propaganda had clearly affected him, Warhol always had a powerful sense of class, his Factory spaces mixed uptown with downtown, the upper class people at the factory, the Edie Sedgwick's and Brigid Berlin's as well as the working class Gerard Malanga from the Bronx. When Bob Dylan described Warhol as a 'Napoleon in rags' in 1965, he underscored the importance of class in Warhol's work, not as a stable identity but as complex and calculated. Yet Warhol was not one for marches or demonstrations and indeed in his own family there were political divides. When I spoke to his brother John Warhola he would often talk about how he and his brother Paul, when coming to New York with their young families to stay with him were kept away from the 'Silver' Factory where he was making his art. John explained that 'Andy

knew that we were so so different, and in the 1960's the students were rebelling against their families, and financially they had enough money to go to college, and yet they were still searching for something. Andy figured I would probably say "jeez, if I had what they had...they don't know what they want, and that was the time when so much going on as well, with so many riots"⁷

But it was also icons that interested Warhol such as Jackie Kennedy Onassis combining both politics and stardom. He claimed to have carried on working and not 'miss[ed] a stroke' on hearing the news that President Kennedy had been assassinated on the 22nd November 1963. Despite his love of the 'glamour' of the First Family; he had, he contended, wanted to know 'what was going on 'out there' but that was the extent of his reaction'.⁸ The day of Kennedy's funeral found him filming the dancer Jill Johnson running around in circles with a gun while the assassination is repeatedly played on a TV the background. Yet repeated juxtaposed images of a smiling and grieving Jackie Kennedy such as *The Week That Was II* (1964) taken from press source imagery are a 'sustained act of remembrance' as Thomas Crow states or as Hal Foster expresses, 'a traumatic encounter with the real' in an endless before and after scenario.

However, despite the claims to purporting to be indifferent to politics, at times his work was unequivocally so. In 1972 he was commissioned to create a print for the

Vote McGovern (1972) campaign as his contribution to the presidential race against Nixon. It raised a great deal of money although McGovern with his bright yellow eyes and bright green face are almost demonic and the decision to do a print of Nixon in this way and feature Senator McGovern reveal Warhol's antipathy towards Nixon. Bob Colacello stated in his biography of Warhol that he was on Nixon's notorious 'enemy of the state' list. Warhol stated in retrospect that he wished he had not been 'persuaded to do it', as not only did Nixon win by a substantial majority but he also blamed the investigation of his affairs by the IRS on this particular work.

One political figure that Warhol did not regret making the object of his screen-prints was Jimmy Carter, when he was running for President, having within the Democratic party from 1963 to 1967 supported the growing Civil Rights movement, albeit Warhol claimed his motive was that he thought he would be invited to the 'White House a lot'. Commissioned by the New York Sunday Times magazine in 1976, the portrait caused tension with Bob Colacello (editor of Warhol's interview magazine), who was a staunch Republican. When the Carter administration was installed in 1977 Warhol (who was indeed invited to the White House) quipped 'Gee he's [Carter's] so great and it's all so glamorous. But here's this secretary eating one of those sandwiches you can really smell a mile away'. Warhol although in thrall of the rich and the powerful was always keen to point out the very human aspect

of any situation and bring it down to the ordinary while experiencing what few people from his background would ever have access to. At the end of Carter's term Warhol ventured opinions in his diary such as 'the presidential election is too stupid to watch' (Aug 31st 1980) 'and you see Ronald Reagan in these poor neighbourhoods with the poor people and you can just hear him saying "Oh my God, what am I doing here?" But his hair looks really good. On my TV it really looks like good hair not dyed'.⁸ A diary entry of 5th Nov 1980 when Warhol is in Stuttgart expresses a rare political pathos: 'I woke at 3.00 in the morning and I heard the sad news of Carter losing so desperately to Reagan. It was the first time a president conceded so early. He had tears in his eyes. I couldn't sleep so I took a Valium'.⁹

Warhol made incredibly powerful and impressive works such as Mao (Giant size) (1972) made in a rapid and dramatic response to President Nixon's 'ground-breaking' visit to China in Feb 1972. Warhol's friend and confidant David Bourdon cites Warhol in a telephone conversation on the subject: 'I've been reading so much about China... The only picture they ever have is of Mao Zedong. It's great. It looks like a silk screen'.¹⁰ In musing on creating Mao portraits he commented that 'since fashion is art now, and Chinese is in fashion, I could make a lot of money. Not to believe in it – it would just be fashion'.¹¹ It appealed to him that *Life* magazine cited Mao as the most powerful person on the world. For Warhol it was not just the fact that he could

⁸ Pat Hackett, *ed* *The Andy Warhol Diaries, 1962-1980*, p. 442.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 475.

¹⁰ David Bourdon (1991) *Warhol*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, p. 117.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 117.

create his own Mao imagery from an official photograph, but that he could also subvert the flatness of the images with an expressionist background and painterly squiggles in a colourful defacing of the powerfully symbolic image.

So, we are left with a Warhol full of political contradictions: he was the artist who screen-printed *Still life (Hammer and Sickle)* because as a symbol it had become so 'pop' as a popular graffiti symbol. He liked to fantasize about how he would use his TV time if he were President. He was the man who claimed to have only voted once in the 1950s and then to have voted for the wrong person because he 'pulled the wrong lever'. Ultimately this was the artist who was thrilled to go to the White House whoever the President, who would report back on the décor or food served, yet who conversely has left us enduring political images from the decades of the sixties, seventies and eighties.