

Manuscript of the introduction by Prof. Klaus Honnef

Andy Warhol – Photographs

Duration of the exhibition

16 May – 16 August 2013

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

A quarter of a century after his avoidable death, Andy Warhol counts as one of a handful of artists, who in their long history, have pointed (western) art into a new direction. The further that time passes, the more obvious become the consequences of his actions. Ever since, there is nothing in art that used to be. What not only sounds pathetic but also hackneyed, can be proven with a few simple self-tests. One only has to remember: what was then worthy to be considered art before Warhol's appearance, what now; by which aesthetic principles the museums led, by which goals the art trade had, and how it now conducts itself; which impulses the influential collectors followed then and follow now, and which purposes the art critics of yore served. Only American museums had curators. They took on the functions of European custodians and conservators; and left the creation of art to the artists. Money was not the central object of art. Warhol was the first one who, through the wonderful money replication of the art trade, turned a handful of sloppily reproduced dollar bills into millions of real bills. To be exact, only the circumstance that pictures as a rule have a rectangular format is nearly the only thing that has not changed.

Already an exhibition like this one, with a significant selection of Warhol's photographic pictures that are to a great extent unknown, would have at best been imaginable in a museum specialized in the visual production of the technical medium – if there had been a museum with such an aesthetic standard. Maybe only in downtown Manhattan does something of this nature stir in the framework of a bookstore. Absolutely: photography. This was an anathema for most of the museums in Europe. That there had been photographic pictures in the countries that had lost the First World War, in the Germany of the Weimarer Republic and in the Soviet Union, that had once graduated to art – forgotten. Buried under the rubble, which was the remnant of criminal regimes. The Swiss art world is not an exception to ignorance in the matter of photography. In doing so it has generated a whole squad of photographers of exalted rank. Many of whom are world famous. One of them, Robert Frank, of whom we shall soon speak of here, has even given photography decisive impulses that have greased the rails to the upper sphere of art.

Not enough of this. Even more inconceivable than a photographic exhibition in the territory of art would be an exhibition with photographic pictures, like these, Ladies and Gentlemen, which surround us on these walls. A storm of indignation would have swirled in the art community. In the most favorable case, those responsible would have only been scolded. Wherefore actually? What do the pictures show that they could trigger such massive protest, but at least head-shaking in the art world? Nothing that could hurt moral feelings. In any case a so-called „normal person“ would presumably have shrugged a shoulder after a furtive glance at the pictures and would have gone on with business. Then what is so special about these pictures? What would the reasons be for such an uproar?

The answer is unexpectedly simple: in actuality, the pictures do not offer anything special. Yet especially therein lays its thorn. How is that possible? One reason is quite apparent. The pictures unabatedly violate expectations that predominate in the face of art works: for example, that they display the extraordinary. And the ordinary at least in an elaborate *gesamt*. Like all of the other advanced artists of the second half of the last century, Warhol learned his lesson from Marcel Duchamp, to ascertain specific attention daily, namely: to change the coordinates of perception. In a public convenience, a urinal is only a piece of equipment that fulfills its purpose. In the art gallery it represents a provocation. At least when it makes its appearance for the first time. Then habit takes over. In the meantime the art sciences categorize it as a pilot project, and the painter, Robert Rauschenberg, celebrates it as one of the most beautiful sculptures per se.

Yet Warhol's photographic pictures do not even harbor comparable flammable matter. Also a photograph of a toilet does not deliver him. Its provocative level is lower. Nevertheless it reaches further. The pictures in actuality do not seek to provoke. With the exception of one. To make the things that is shows visible. They are so mundane, so extremely trite, that even though we perceive them, we do not see them. So to speak, they glide right through us. In and of themselves they do not demand attention. Almost everywhere. The skyscrapers. We look at them from below just like Warhol's camera. The restaurants, the frayed tables, the posters, shop windows, the joggers on the streets, the antiques, and maybe a subtle greeting of a possible guru, the toilet mentioned. The motifs bristle with the humdrum. They belong to the ordinary exterior fixtures of New York and all big cities. Even the circus pictures are not attuned to the song of triumph of the spectacle that allegedly governs our world. Most of the photographs were apparently taken in passing. They only draw our attention in that they appear in a surrounding and in a form that is reserved for art: in a gallery.

Still, the photographed objects and impressions have another consistency than they exhibit in the connection from which they originate. They have turned into pictures. Their character has not been less transformed than their original colorfulness. Color turned into gray. Or black-white as it is mostly called. Before the foil of art they obtain a new, an aesthetic connection. Whoever views these pictures more closely nevertheless cannot recognize the slightest ambition to wrest a few formal effects from them. No spectacular photo angles, no dramatic close-ups, no dramatic light-shadow arrangements and also no accentuated absenteeism of all this. The conventional features of an artistic creative drive are missing. It appears that there is no intention to even satisfy the sparsest aesthetic expectations. In retrospective comparison, how artificial and laughable the vivid efforts of erstwhile, reputable professional photographers were, to convey an artistic veneer on photographs. In brief, the conclusion is comprehensible: I can do that, too.

Right! That gets to the core of the matter. Yet it is strange that nobody does it. Nobody photographs cutlery trays. Except when considerably more attractive and for advertising. Nobody photographs paper cups, vents, nobody photographs worn jackets off the rack...Stop! I have to correct myself. Meanwhile it is happening. But only after somebody like Andy Warhol opened our eyes. Literally. Because we did not regard it before. If one brings prevailing trends of contemporary photo art to mind, meanwhile the Warhol motifs are parading around in quite a clutter. They are often photographed with greater chic and sophistication. Whereas the formal chin-ups of art photography of the past are lost in the foray.

Is it then the evident artlessness that would have provoked in earlier days, and some still relentlessly do? Or is it the selected objects that we still do not allow having the status of art? There is no clear answer to these two questions. In the end I would have to say: both. That Warhol's photographic pictures are artless, is notwithstanding an allegation that does not bear scrutiny. The opposite is true. His pictures have high style although the artist evidently avoids formal tricks. Can a higher style then be imaginable than viewing the Empire State Building with a fixed setting for 24 hours, as is the case in the movie with the same name, or a man asleep like in Warhol's movie entitled „Sleep“? What the camera is to his movies, in the face of his photographs, are we, the spectators. We determine how long we will loiter. In his photographic pictures the artist seemingly grabs his motifs arbitrarily from daily events, captures them in picture, isolates them. With their *gestalt*, he also changes the manner of their perception. The physical law of fuzziness goes into effect, whereby each form of observation changes the object under observation. "Spectator is whoever perceives the other through a theory window and removes himself from being observed, in turn", writes Peter Sloterdijk. The photography also makes that visible.

Warhol transfers the seeming arbitration in selecting his motif into an aesthetic necessity. Where is it written that only guitars, geometric forms, people in certain poses, odalisques and nude models or flower bouquets are legitimate motifs of art? Before photography was invented, people without any status in society were also not a topic. Or they were depicted dismissively, just like in the Dutch pictures of farmers. Not pretty, but necessary, pictures are the essential demand made of art, wrote the great Robert Bresson. More ahead of the times than most artists, Andy Warhol recognized the controversial phenomenon, to which the philosopher, Hermann Lübbe, referred to as „museumization“ of the real. Disseminated in photography, enhanced in movies, driven to perfection in the electronic picture media of television and the internet – reality has become a showcase, in which we can observe ourselves thanks to omnipresent camera surveillance. In front of this ghostly background the pictures of daily life by the American artist already seem to be foreign, a little bit bizarre and exotic, at least the majority of the views, which he fixates with the aid of his camera, have long since sunken into the fogs of the past.

Andy Warhol has displaced the aesthetic parameters of pictorial art. He was not the only one, but he has long since become the most influential. And thereby also the parameter of aesthetic judgment. He has shifted the focus of appreciation from single pictures to series, from the virtual arrangement of the individual picture to the artistic posture, from craftsmanship to technique. The impact is enormous for the artistic self-image. With him the artists bid farewell to their omnipotent role as creators of the world, which unfolds in their pictures, and from here on out is limited to the function of the critical spectator and commentator. The individual mindset is essential for art. The „well painted or done“ forfeits its significance as an aesthetic criterion. Simultaneously Andy Warhol has also ultimately freed the figurative pictorial art from the presentation scheme, which forces everything that is shown into the line of escape of a single determining point of view. Instead of a certain focus, which develops the total pictorial world, there appear various perspectives that put each other into perspective. The New York city scenery shatters Warhol's pictorial series with a wealth of graphic facets. Beside this, none of the pictures are in principle aesthetically superior or inferior to any other. The pictorial series offers the greatest possible approach to the mechanics of optical perception. There is, to expand the vision of the photographs to a dedicated subject of his „paintings“, not only a Marilyn Monroe – in fact not even her, since her name was Norma Jean Baker, or not at all -, rather many. Monroe was, more than her own being, a figure of commercial motion pictures. As a projection she existed because of the multitudinous emotions and of the manifold figments of imagination that erupted in the heads of the spectators of her movies.

And since the portrait that Warhol produced from a PR photograph and duplicated a thousandfold, the virtual Marilyns have multiplied explosively. From the picture of an actress, who was branded as a "sex bomb", there has evolved an icon through Warhol's artistic initiative. From a mask to a myth. It is a paradox that by bestowing her with a certain aura, he gave her a bit of her individual, sorrowful life back – at the price of her death.

It is the expression of a stranger, which governs his pictures. To be more precise: the expression of the stranger with hat and coat, who just like with Marcel Proust, after having been gone for many years, visits the grandmother he had so very much loved and only sees an old woman, who is remote. Using the expression as an example, Siegfried Kracauer defined the photographic expression. The origin in an immigrant family and the circumstances of him growing up sharpened his seismic sense of the specific American in his American surroundings. "Nothing that he created was unknown; except for the star, Andy Warhol, he did not invent anything", I sum up in my monolog of the artist, which was published for the first time in 1989 and after many reprints and in many translations is still available in bookstores.

One of the statements of the artist is legendary, who has long since risen to the collective formula of longing: To be world famous for 15 minutes. At a superficial glance there is no connection with the pictures of the mundane commonplaceness in this exhibition. Really? His more famous photographs of New York celebrities were taken with the same process. There is only the formal, most prominent difference in the continuous use of the flashbulb. They correspond despite external differences. Both side of a medal, which is called photography. Since photography not only provides them the same half-life of factual existence, but rather also lends them the same temporality: at that moment already yesteryear, when the shutter release of the camera is put into use. Nobody has ever before visually addressed the brittleness of fame in the media more plausibly and more radically than Andy Warhol. I thank you very much for your patience and your attention.

The spoken word is decisive.

contact:
Oliver T. Roehl, Director
roehl@focus21