

ANDY WARHOL SCREEN TESTS

An essay by Nelson Henricks

Andy Warhol (1928-1987) is best known for his pop art paintings of soup cans and movie stars, but he wasn't just a painter. He also created sculptures and immersive installations, published books, produced a rock band, and made movies. Between 1963 and 1968 Warhol and his associates at the *Silver Factory* in New York made literally hundreds of films. Some of these—like *Kiss* (1963-64) or *Blow Job* (1964)—are legendary due to their minimalistic simplicity or erotic content. Others—like *Sleep* (1963), *Empire* (1964), or **** *[Four Stars]* (1967)—are notorious for their extreme duration, with running times of up to five, eight, and 25 hours respectively.

Warhol also made short films. The 362 *Screen Tests* (1964-66), whose average duration is four minutes, are portraits of 189 people in Warhol's orbit, many of whom were documented on multiple occasions. A small selection of them is presented here. If the 107 films made for the unfinished project *Six Months* (1964-65) are counted (in which Warhol proposed to document his lover Philip Fagan daily), the total number of *Tests* rises to 471. It would take about 24 hours to project all the authenticated screen tests one after another: an opus that would rival Warhol's other durational works. Warhol's films upended underground filmmaking, anticipated early experiments with video art, and have been scrupulously documented in three recent publications: *Andy Warhol's The Chelsea Girls* (edited by Geralyn Huxley and Gregory Pierce, 2017), *The Films of Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné 1963-1965* (edited by John Hanhardt, 2021) and *Andy Warhol Screen Tests* (edited by Callie Angell, 2006).

What is a screen test? In the Hollywood system, screen tests were used to determine how photogenic an actor was, or how suitable they might be for a given role. Like his work in other media, Warhol's film practice both echoed and subverted pop culture forms. Beyond this functional conceit, the *Screen Tests* are also a filmic diary and a series of portraits documenting people who passed through Warhol's world. Warhol himself proposed to package them in different ways—*Thirteen Most Beautiful Women*, *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*, *Fifty Personalities and Fifty Fantastics*—though ultimately none of these compilations were realized. In their adherence to notions of process, seriality, and repetition, the *Screen Tests* are minimal and conceptual: they are modular and can be arranged into new configurations.

When I began working on this program, I suggested showing the films as if they were sculpture. Imagine you are in a museum of Greek or Roman artefacts: you might see heads, hands, arms, torsos, and legs. Like this, the *Screen Tests* are a collection of figurative fragments. But I was also thinking of a sculptural presentation of time: solid four-minute blocks shown as objects to be looked at, to be engaged with, to be paid attention to, or not. The materiality of time, and time as material. Warhol Museum Director of Film and Video Gregory Pierce also advised me to understand Warhol's films via their materiality. Imagine you are holding a 100' reel of 16mm film (equivalent to roughly three minutes) in your hand. The 3.5-inch reel is about the width of your palm and is made from solid black metal to protect the fragile material inside. Unexposed film is a thin strip of plastic coated with an emulsion of light-sensitive chemicals. You should move into a dark room before putting the reel in the camera. Any bright light will ruin your film forever. There are times when you won't be careful when loading and unloading your camera. The heads and tail ends of your reel will be burned transparent from exposure to light, and your test subjects will fade in and out of a milky, spectral whiteness. Be careful with your film. It will get dusty. It will get scratched. Film is like a skin. It ages, it blemishes, it gets dirty, it scars.

The basic recipe for a *Screen Test* was simple: people were asked to sit in front of the camera and remain motionless until the film ran out. Imagine you are sitting for

what I think of as a classic screen test. You must sit perfectly still for three minutes and stare at the camera. The lights are hot and blinding. Try not to blink. The more you hold your eyes open, the more the tears well up in your eyes. One might assume that most of these screen tests look like a photograph in motion. Far from it. Some have camera movement. Some have multiple in-camera edits, camera angle changes, and frame-by-frame animations. Some people move more than others and have a hard time sitting still. Some behave badly and break the rules. Some—like Bob Dylan—stand up in the middle in the middle of their test and leave, only to return later to complete the task. Some people look nervous, bored, self-conscious, or distracted. Some are animated by unheard music and nod their heads rhythmically. Some look smart, funny, serious, or serene. Conclusion: some people pass or fail the screen test.

What would it mean for an artwork to take as much time to make as it does to look at? A Warhol screen test took three minutes to create and should therefore take three minutes to watch, but this is not the case. A piece of 16mm employs 24 frames—24 moving images—to reproduce one second of lived time. But Warhol asked that his films be projected at 16 or 18 frames per second, at silent film speed. His movies take slightly *longer* to view than they did to make. Warhol asks us to give more than he did. This slowness transposes the onscreen subjects to a place outside of lived time, somewhere that is dreamier, more aesthetic, more sublime. Sometimes the onscreen faces break up into abstract patterns. A simple gesture—a blink, a lip lick, or a smirk—and the subject reassembles. Watching a screen test, I find myself wondering: when was the last time I sat and watched someone's face for four minutes? I savour the pleasure of looking at faces after months of masking, and sometimes I think the face itself is a mask, hiding unknowable thoughts, an unknowable authentic self.

Presenting a program of Warhol films comes with the baggage of the Warhol myth. To my mind, the films are the most effaced version of the artist. Did Warhol operate the camera or did one of his assistants? Or did he turn on the camera and walk away, as he is rumoured to have done? Either way, the artist steps back and we are overwhelmed by the onscreen subject. I am not watching a Warhol film. I am watching Dennis

Hopper, Nico, Lou Reed, or whoever appears onscreen. I am spending time with them. The question of authorship falls away or becomes fluid enough that the test subjects begin to co-author the work. In this way, the *Screen Tests* nod toward intersubjective acknowledgment. What does it mean to look and be looked at? What can we learn from looking at someone's face? What do we become when assembling ourselves for the eye of another?