



Big Shots: Andy Warhol, Celebrity Culture, and the 1980s

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LAWRENCE—Joan Collins and Wayne Gretzky. Jean-Michel Basquiat and Liz Taylor. Chris Lawford and William S. Burroughs. What do these seemingly dissimilar individuals have to do with each other? The answer is simple: They were among the many celebrities whose images were captured by Andy Warhol with either his Big Shot Polaroid or a pocket-sized 35mm camera. And now, those photographs are coming together at the Spencer along with a host of others in a big, bold celebration of Warhol, celebrity, and the 1980s.

Opening Saturday, August 15, *Big Shots: Andy Warhol, Celebrity Culture, and the 1980s* highlights a recent gift to the Spencer from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., of rarely seen Polaroid and gelatin silver print photographs by Warhol, dating from 1970 to 1986. Presented within the context of the dynamic period of art and cultural production during which they were made, the photographs include “celebrity” portraits shot as black-and-white prints or as unique color Polaroids using the eccentric Big Shot camera that Warhol made famous.

In light of Warhol’s near iconic status and his views on the topic of fame, the exhibition features artists and other celebrities in New York City during the late 1970s and early 1980s, looking at the interconnections between The Factory (Warhol’s studio), performance art, the underground music club scene, punk and new wave, and the cult of celebrity.

True to the spirit of this intermingling of art forms and social interactions, the exhibition encompasses a variety of media. There will be photographs, prints, posters, music, and music videos. The exhibition also includes a vintage photobooth to allow visitors to shoot self-portraits and enjoy their own “15 minutes of fame.”

Artists in addition to Warhol include Diane Arbus, Robert Mapplethorpe, Laurie Anderson, Keith Haring, Martha Rosler, Larry Fink, and Bud Lee, among others. Celebrities and culture-producers portrayed include Mick Jagger, Patti Smith, William Burroughs, Joseph Kosuth, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Calvin Klein, Brooke Shields, Iris Love, Victor Hugo, Cherry Vanilla, Carmen d'Alessio, and David Yarritu, among others.

“Photography was central to Warhol’s art and life, an integral part of his art-making and identity construction,” Earle writes in her introduction to the exhibition. “Its significance allowed Warhol (born Andrew Warhola) to become one of the most famous and influential American artists of the 20th century. Photography provided a method through which Warhol could navigate the complex, star-studded social milieu that was his existence. It helped him to be the machine that he said he wanted to be.”

Warhol’s interest in photography began in 1963 with his use of commercial photoboosts, to which he would haul any friend or celebrity who was willing to go with him. The photobooth provided a wonderful device for creativity in portraits and self-portraits. With his discovery of Polaroid cameras around 1970, Warhol could create instant pictures in his own studio, a development that greatly facilitated his career as portraitist to the stars. He made famous the large portrait-camera Polaroid, the Big Shot, buying up as many of these as he could during the years that they were made in the early 1970s.

Commencing with lunch with the sitter and others (at which the same meal was always served), Warhol’s elaborate and ritualized Polaroid portrait sessions became the raw material for the commissioned portraits—photo silkscreens on canvas—that furnished his livelihood for many years.

In a further evolution from the photobooth and Big Shot camera, in 1976 Warhol started using a pocket-sized 35mm camera that a friend had given him, and from then on he was hooked, never leaving home without it. This new practice resulted in Warhol’s many offbeat society portraits, examples of which are displayed in this exhibition, taken on the sly at unplanned moments.

“Making photographs also enabled Warhol to produce the very image of celebrityhood that to this day dominates our image pantheon: democratic, deadpan, and glittery all at once,” Earle notes. “Many of the world’s celebrities sought out Warhol for his fame and notoriety, and Warhol in turn went to them for their fame and beauty (and money). His snapshot approach was critical, as was his own ability to straddle the bohemian and celebrity realms.

“Warhol put it this way: „A good picture is one that’s in focus and of a famous person doing something unfamous.”

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