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**Robert
Lehman
Lectures
on Contemporary Art**

**EDITED BY LYNNE COOKE AND KAREN KELLY
WITH BETTINA FUNCKE**

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Contents

- 7 Preface **MICHAEL GOVAN**
- 9 Introduction **LYNNE COOKE**
- 37 **PAMELA KORT**
Leonardo da Vinci, Marcel Duchamp, and Joseph Beuys
- 65 **JONATHAN CRARY**
Robert Irwin and the Condition of Twilight
- 87 Andy Warhol: *Shadows*
exhibition text by Lynne Cooke to preface Victor I. Stoichita
- 95 **VICTOR I. STOICHITA**
Beyond the Peter Pan Complex:
Warhol's Shadows
- 109 **ELAINE SHOWALTER**
Douglas Gordon's *left is right and right is wrong
and left is wrong and right is right*
- 121 **BÉRÉNICE REYNAUD**
Stan Douglas's *Win, Place, or Show*

Beyond the Peter Pan Complex: Warhol's Shadows

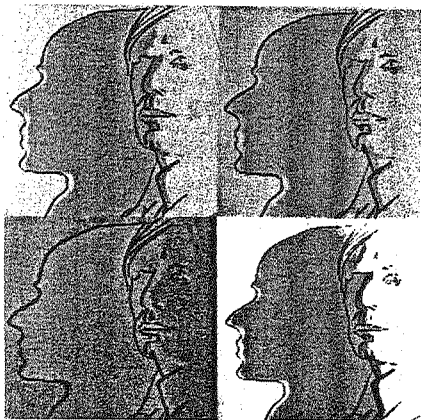
VICTOR I. STOICHITA

In J. M. Barrie's 1904 play *Peter Pan*, when Wendy sews Peter's wayward shadow to her friend's heels, the audience easily understands the symbolic meaning: with his shadow restored, Peter Pan becomes *substantial*. One might say he regains the reality he once could escape whenever he wished. This is a metaphorical constraint in which the shadow represents the principle of reality, which can vanish at any moment, leaving its owner in a state of bewilderment. It is a modern myth that has deep and—with the help of Walt Disney's 1953 cartoon film of the story—far-reaching implications.

I do not intend to explore here the complexity of the character of Peter Pan, the boy who wouldn't/didn't want to grow up; I am touching on the topic only in order to approach one of the many



Scene from Walt Disney's *Peter Pan*, 1953



Andy Warhol, *Myths: The Shadow*, 1981

key facets of the work and of the world of Andy Warhol, an American artist who left his own undeniable mark on our century.

In 1981 Warhol created one of his most impressive self-portraits, known as *The Shadow*, which he integrated into a series of ten images, together titled *Myths*.¹ Because of its position in final place in this series of ten screen prints, Warhol's double self-portrait acquires the significance

of a duplicated "signature." His visage looks at the spectator from one side, while his cast shadow contemplates the other personae in the series: the Star, Uncle Sam, Superman, the Witch, Mammy, Howdy Doody, Dracula, Mickey Mouse, Santa Claus—all leading ultimately to himself, the Shadow.

This was not, of course, the first time Warhol made a self-portrait, nor was it the first time he approached the theme of the double (indeed he explored it almost obsessively), but it was the first time he used the device of the cast shadow to express it. In his 1967 self-portraits the artist's eyes are turned to the spectator; his hand makes a gesture that conceals his lips; his head keeps a strictly frontal position, framed in the middle of the surface of the picture on an asymmetrical background. The left side of the image is dominated by a darker screen so that half of the face lies plunged in such a deep shadow that it is almost invisible. In certain later variations of this self-portrait there are no essential distinctions between the dark background and the half face, ensuring the continuity between face and background. The shadow is, so to speak, internal as well as external: it divides both the painting and the face. This is Warhol's way of inviting us to discover his double nature: the split is total.

In his 1981 self-portrait, the artist's face is turned so as to produce a straight-nosed, firm-jawed shadow. Shadow and face together form an antinomy: the shadow reaches into the space of the representation,

whereas the face is partially cut off. This work contrasts with the 1967 self-portrait, as it proposes an external split in which the cast shadow seems to be expanding—perhaps demanding its own freedom.

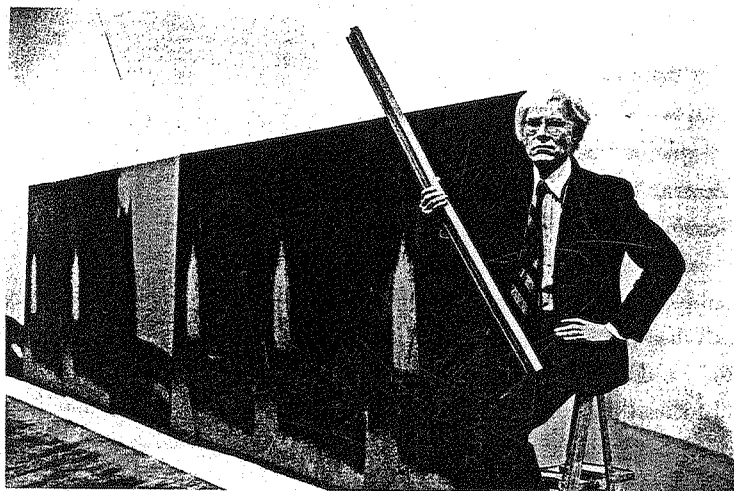
Between these two sides of the same obsession—what we might call the "clear-obscure portrait" of 1967 and the "cast-shadow portrait" of 1981—there are a number of other self-portraits. One of the most important was painted in 1978, which was unquestionably a pivotal year in Warhol's career. It was in 1978–79 that he created his *Shadows*, a series of 102 paintings exhibited for the first time, immediately following completion, at Heiner Friedrich Gallery in New York. On the white wall just above ground level (so as to accentuate their position on a baseline different from that of the spectator's), these frameless canvases are hung one after the other in a steady rhythm, following a route that ends precisely where it began. This continuous and circular frieze is, however, made up of independent units. It would be difficult to classify this group as traditional "paintings," as their shape, content, and exhibitional context defy such categorization.

A salient feature of *Shadows* is the fact that a single unit, isolated from the series—that is, a unit bought separately and exhibited on its own—is essentially invalidated. Furthermore, these are "canvases"—the vehicle bequeathed by the lofty tradition of the *tableau*—and it is significant that Warhol used synthetic polymers applied through the process of silkscreen printing to transfer the image to this particular support.

The debate around Warhol's cycle was spotlighted by a Dia exhibition in 1998–99 and was amply explored at the time (see pages 83–89 in this volume). I would here like to focus on a parallel problem: specifically, Warhol's way of dealing with duplication and multiplication in his 1978 self-portrait. Never before had the artist



Andy Warhol, *Self-Portrait*, 1967



Andy Warhol, sitting in front of *Shadows*, 1979

exploited so intensively the expressive forms of the photographic negative. *Reduction* and *reversal* were the themes on which Warhol was now discoursing. It was the same approach that he had taken for *Shadows*, in the same year. This should be remembered, not only because of the coincidence (in no way gratuitous) of this series and the self-portrait, but also because of the implications that derive from an "iconology of materials," so often overlooked by commentators.² If we were to take into account all the representational technicalities and the symbolic significance of this self-portrait, we might say that it represents both the negative and the duplicated image of Warhol, as well as its own polymerized image.

According to the *Oxford Reference Dictionary*, a *polymer* is a compound whose molecule is formed from many repeated units of one or more compounds. Polymerization is the combination of several molecules to become one larger molecule. This operation produces that ubiquitous material commonly referred to as plastic.

Throughout the 1960s, Warhol implemented the "polymerization of the image." He did this in two ways: first, by literally plasticizing likenesses and, also symbolically, by rendering a shiny, artificial, indestructible unity to the multiplicity of life. In his 1978 self-portrait he pushed this combination of representational form and

technique to its limit. It is an image based on a double interaction of the photographic negative. As always, the negative represents the object in its phantom state.³ Warhol had used this method toward the end of the 1960s, and he reused it in the 1970s and 1980s in his "reversal" series of eighteen multicolored Marilys and in his twelve white Mona Lisas. Warhol's message is clear and owes much to Marcel Duchamp, as we can see by glancing at the French artist's 1917 *Autour d'une table* (*Around a Table*).

Although Warhol was notoriously secretive about his age and went to great lengths to mislead the world about the year of his birth, it is now known that he turned fifty in 1978. In his "two-times-three self-portraits" of that year, he was expressing, in a modern way, the old theme of the Three Ages of Man. It is difficult to trace the origins of his interest in this traditional theme, which is perhaps best represented in Titian's painting, now at London's National Gallery, which was studied and analyzed at length by Erwin Panofsky in his much-read *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955).⁴ Panofsky—himself a myth in the world of art, before and especially after his death in 1968—demonstrates that the three-headed sign (*signum triciput*) is used to create a complex allegory of wisdom (*prudential*) and also of the inexorable passage of time. Warhol must have been familiar with this tradition. In a drawing he made the same year, both the idea and the form of the three-headed portrait are even clearer than in the silkscreen.

We can be sure, however, that Warhol had no intention of giving his audience a scholarly lesson on the Three Ages of Man and the virtues of human wisdom. On the contrary, he proposed a new and original formulation of this



Marcel Duchamp, *Autour d'une table* (*Around a Table*), 1917



Titian, *Allegory of Prudence*, 1565-70

time-honored topic, in complete accord with his own philosophy. While written documentation on the subject is scarce and insufficient, Warhol's work would seem to speak for itself. The most striking characteristic of this 1978 self-portrait is the two groups of three-headed beings. The motif makes explicit the relation with the traditional representation of the three-headed being, as depicted in Titian's painting, and of which Panofsky gives us such an incisive reading.

The notable absence of evidence of Warhol's consciousness of the *signum triciput* tradition is, however, made up for in his *Myths* portfolio. Here we discover a secret dialogue between Mickey Mouse—the fetish animal of American imagery—and Warhol's own split self-portrait. In the large canvases that follow Warhol's *Myths* cycle, Mickey Mouse holds a central place, while Warhol gives himself only a marginal position. Both cycles, Mickey Mouse and the

self-portrait, follow a similar process of "de-realization"; that is, if we examine the two columns of images from top to bottom, we can see that at the lower part of each column the characters have lost their reality and, by a negative-positive reversal, are turning into their own "ghosts." On the self-portrait column the cast shadow changes from dark to light, and the face changes from light to dark (a true "shadow of a shadow") before fading out completely into an undifferentiated darkness. On the Mickey Mouse column there is a similar

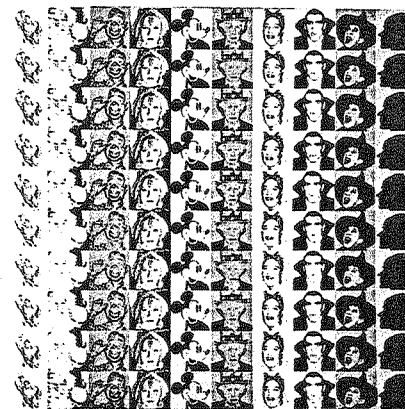


Andy Warhol, *Self-Portrait*, 1978

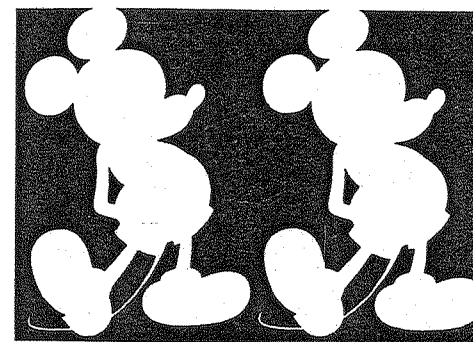
phenomenon, but here the last Mickey appears to be as "unrealized" as the first one. Thus, on the self-portrait column, the shadow is a substitute for the face (and vice versa), whereas on the Mickey column the end echoes the beginning.

This may be the reason why, in 1981, Warhol decided to add to his *Myths* cycle a huge screen print next to his Mickey Mouse, titled *Double Mickey Mouse*. The chronological coincidences once again transcend the boundaries of a merely metaphorical link, or offer the latter a foundation: Warhol (we now know after much research) was born on August 6, 1928,⁵ and Mickey Mouse, according to the historians of the cinema and comic strip, was born on November 18 of the same year. Warhol and Mickey are therefore products of the same "generation," and it is entirely probable that the artist capitalized on the coincidence of this well-kept secret.⁶

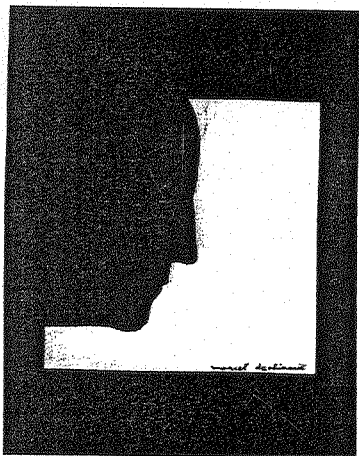
Double Mickey Mouse is not only double, he is also a giant—especially if you compare him with a normal mouse. He measures 30½ by 43 inches (77.5 by 109.2 cm). But then Mickey was, of course, never a "normal" mouse. He is a mascot, a semblance. And it is in this capacity that he is naturally split. The "double" in *Double Mickey Mouse* does not imply the original-versus-copy dialectic—and this is troublesome: the two are both original and copy alike. Identical and different, each is both the same and the other, interchangeable and monumental. Warhol portrays the Mickey/Mickeys against a background of



Andy Warhol, *Myths*, 1981



Andy Warhol, *Double Mickey Mouse*, 1981



Marcel Duchamp, frontispiece for Robert Lebel's *Sur Marcel Duchamp*, Editions Trianon, Paris, 1959

diamond dust, a technical (and symbolic) process he often used in his pseudoicons. This procedure takes the image to the dizzying heights of postmodernism, the school of thought that elicited the rise and triumph of the "Semblance."⁷

Unlike *Double Mickey Mouse*, the 1981 self-portrait, *The Shadow*, addresses the problematic of duplication that is the result of a split. The shadow shows the profile of a person (Warhol) whom we can also view from a quasi-frontal position. We should bear in mind that a whole dialectic of Western representation has taught us that frontality—and the mirror—constitute the symbolic form of

the relationship between self and same, whereas the profile—and the shadow—constitute the symbolic form of the relationship between self and other.⁸

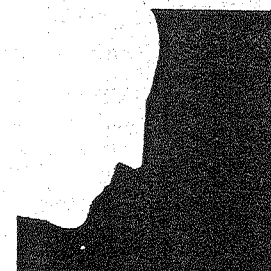
The process is not unfamiliar. Duchamp had an abiding interest in both the shadow and the technique of *reversal*. There is a hint of this interaction in the majority of Duchamp's self-portraits, but here we will examine only a few examples. His use of the profile as a "signature" is found in his early photographic self-portraits as well as in some of his later experiments. For example, for Robert Lebel's monograph *Sur Marcel Duchamp*,⁹ the artist designed a frontispiece in which he appears as an outlined profile against the green background of his famous "boxes" (*The Green Box*, 1934). The composition was also used for the poster advertising the exhibition organized to launch the book in Paris's Latin Quarter bookshop La Hune. It is not difficult to recognize in this composition the tradition of Johann Caspar Lavater's physiognomic silhouettes. Why did Duchamp not use this technique earlier? The La Hune poster offers us one possible explanation: both the book and the exhibition challenge a mysterious, indeed more often than not *indecipherable*, "Duchamp."

In this context we should point out that during the same period Duchamp did another self-portrait in which his profile is delineated in the positive, a copy of which he sent to a few friends. To anyone vaguely familiar with the rhetoric of Duchamp's gestures and of Lavater's tradition, the door is open to an interpretation of these two images: as with Lavater's works, positive and negative are counterparts, but in the case of Duchamp it is the black profile that, although it

remains virtually illegible, is consigned to the public domain. As to the white profile, although it is nothing more than an illusion, it is destined only for friends, as its "original" no longer exists.

In the case of the Warhol works, while the permanent cheery profile of Mickey Mouse is the estranged image of the "other," Warhol's self-portrait creates an unwavering tension between the two views. The focus is exclusively on the face. This enormous visage (nearly one square meter) demands a heightened rhetoric and a format that is not that of the Western pictorial portrait, but that of the cinematographic close-up.

As has been said time and again, Warhol considered the image to be more real than the real. Enlargement is just one method of hyperrealization; others are splitting and multiplying. This last method, widely used in Warhol's postmodernist icons, is in this instance addressed in a particular way: through the device of the cast shadow. Again, shadow and face together form an antinomy: the shadow reaches into the space of the representation, whereas the frontal face is cut off by its boundaries. Where are we? The blue background is reminiscent of the sky, the unusual color of the face is more like the reflections in a photographer's darkroom. Can these two areas be reconciled? Perhaps, but only on one condition: that the link be made in a symbolic way. In the



Marcel Duchamp, *Profile Self-Portrait*, 1958

darkroom of his studio, Warhol *develops* himself. In so doing, he *unmakes* himself. What we see is both a self-portrait and a scenario of production that could only have been created in the photographic age.

Let us examine the shadow: it is flat, one-dimensional, and its actual shape is unstable. It is the result of the face having been developed—not just as a photogram, but also more tangibly, from solid body to surface. As Warhol himself said: “I see everything that way, the surface of things, a kind of mental Braille, I just pass my hands over the surface of things.”¹⁰ And: “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it.”¹¹

Because the surface *is* the self, because it *is* the person, the extraordinary unfolding of the face in the cast shadow is no longer a process that confirms “real presence,” as the tradition of Western art had dictated. It is a process that focuses on the final stage of the hyperrealization of the person: its ultimate realization in its own nothingness. Great ectoplasm projected onto a blue background sprinkled with diamond dust; the depthless, shapeless face of one who examines himself, signifying the paradox of a representation of the self—a monumental and cosmic disappearance.

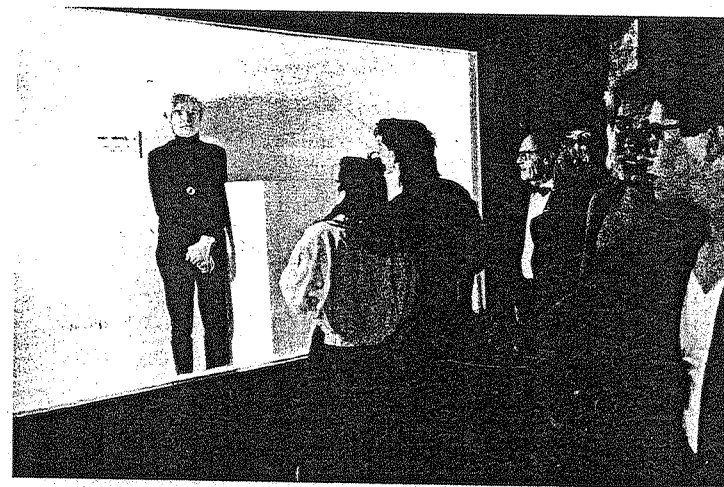
This discussion might end here if it weren’t for the title, which I feel it is my duty to explain. At this point, we can admire the complexity of Warhol’s treatment of the great myths. It isn’t really necessary to spend more time explaining the link between Mickey and the shadows. With Peter Pan, however, things get more complicated.

In his 1981 self-portrait, Warhol, the perennial child in spite of his fifty-three years, declared that his shadow was more powerful, more important, and more real than his own person. One step further and the “sewn-on” reality will ask for its own independence. The self-portrait was only a metaphor, and we had to wait a few years to learn the truth from the artist himself. In 1985 Warhol created an installation at the Area nightclub in New York City, a work he referred to as the *Invisible Sculpture*.¹² On a little platform close to a pedestal at the club was Warhol himself, dressed (as usual)

in black, one of his silver wigs on his head. Like a photographic negative, this “installation” turned Warhol into an image of himself, into his own ghost. Witnesses who were present remember the artist leaving his place on the platform from time to time. The inscription on the wall—*Andy Warhol: “The invisible sculpture”*—remains ambiguous.

There is no way to explain the link between the subject and the object of the representation, except in the silence suggested by Warhol himself. If Peter Pan needed to have his shadow sewn to him in order to become “real,” Warhol saw himself as the ghost of his invisible self. The truth is that on that pedestal there was *nothing*, and, more importantly, near the empty pedestal on the platform, there was *nobody*.

June 3, 1999



Andy Warhol, *Invisible Sculpture*, 1985, installation at Area nightclub, New York

Notes

- 1 Frayda Feldman and Jörg Schellmann, *Andy Warhol Prints: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1962–1987*, 3rd ed. (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1997), pp. 118–19.
- 2 On the notion of “iconology of materials,” see Günter Bandman, “Bemerkungen zu einer Ikonologie des Materials,” *Städel Jahrbuch*, no. 2 (1969), pp. 75–100. See also Thomas Raff, *Die Sprache der Materialien. Anleitung zu einer Ikonologie der Werkstoffe*, Kunstwissenschaftliche Studien, vol. 61, Munich (1994). For Warhol’s case, see Marco Livingstone, “Do It Yourself: Notes on Warhol’s Techniques,” in *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective*, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), pp. 63–80.
- 3 Regarding this problem, see Charles F. Stuckey, “Andy Warhol’s Painted Faces,” *Art in America* 68, no. 5 (May 1980), pp. 102–11, and particularly Reinhard A. Steiner, “Die Frage nach der Person. Zum Realitätscharakter von Andy Warhols Bildern,” *Pantheon*, no. 42 (1984), pp. 151–57. See, also, Nicholas Baume, Douglas Crimp, and Richard Meyer, *About Face: Andy Warhol Portraits* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).
- 4 See Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), pp. 146–67.
- 5 Date discovered by Andreas Brown, and revealed in *Andy Warhol: His Early Works, 1947–1959* (New York: Gotham Book Mart, 1971).
- 6 For details, see Victor I. Stoichita, “Les Ombres de Warhol,” *Les Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne*, no. 66 (Winter 1998), pp. 78–93 (especially p. 87); and Stoichita, “Mickey Mao. Glanz und Misere der virtuellen Ikone,” in *Homo Pictor*, ed. Gottfried Boehm (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2001).
- 7 See Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1968), pp. 164–68; and Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1982), pp. 292–307.
- 8 Details in Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion, 1997), pp. 22–41.
- 9 Robert Lebel, *Sur Marcel Duchamp* (Paris: Editions Trianon, 1959). Published in English as *Marcel Duchamp*, trans. George Heard Hamilton (New York: Grove Press, 1959).
- 10 Warhol, quoted in Gretchen Berg, “Andy: My True Story,” *Los Angeles Free Press*, March 17, 1967, p. 3. See, also, Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, “Braille mental,” *Critique*, no. 522 (1990), pp. 875–90.

- 11 Warhol, quoted in Berg, “Andy: My True Story,” p. 3. See also Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Andy Warhol’s One-Dimensional Art: 1956–1966,” in *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective*, pp. 39–61.
- 12 See the chronology prepared by Majorie Frankel Nathanson, in *Andy Warhol: A Retrospective*, p. 419.