

## The machine that makes gossip: Andy Warhol's 'Screen Test' of Marcel Duchamp

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### Abstract

This essay positions Andy Warhol's Screen Tests alongside a range of rumors about their production. Drawing on interviews, memoirs, and photographic documentation, I reconstruct the proliferation of gossip surrounding the 1966 shoot of Marcel Duchamp. The rumors that circulated about this event – namely, that Warhol persuaded a young woman to caress Duchamp flirtatiously just out of frame – eventually made it into the 'official' historical record, appearing in popular biography and museum exhibition texts. Rather than asserting what truly happened during the making of this film, my analysis instead focuses on the reasons this rumor seemed credible. The minimal form of the Screen Tests, along with the casual terms of production and exhibition in Warhol's Factory studio, encouraged the proliferation of unverifiable discourse about them. Using the Duchamp film as an example, I argue that we can view the Screen Tests as a body of work that generates and sustains gossip.

**Keywords:** close-up, queer avant-garde, art history, experimental film, production history

### Introduction

When Andy called me up and told me he wanted me to take photographs of this Duchamp thing, I saw myself as a representative of where I came from, breaching the citadel. ...Fixed in my mind was: 'Hey, bastards: a long time after you're dead, people are going to know you only through me. When all is said and done, when everything is gone, the photograph is what's going to remain. The photographer is the producer of history.'<sup>[1]</sup>

History is hysterical: it is only constituted if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it.[2]

In February of 1966, Andy Warhol filmed a Screen Test of Marcel Duchamp. Unlike most of the Screen Tests, which Warhol filmed in his Factory studio space, this one was shot at the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery on New York's Upper East Side during Duchamp's group show *Homage à Caïssa*.<sup>[3]</sup> Months earlier, Duchamp invited Warhol and a few dozen other artists to participate in the exhibit, a benefit for his American Chess Foundation; he requested that each artist contribute an original work about the game of chess.<sup>[4]</sup> Warhol failed to RSVP to the event, much less send an artwork. But on the night in question, he arrived at the gallery, camera in hand, and asked Duchamp to pose for a Screen Test.<sup>[5]</sup> In a transposition of ends and means easily read as a tribute to the older artist, Warhol turned the production of a well-known Warhol product into an event in itself. He also threw a gambit: he challenged the avant-garde's elder statesman to play a game on his own terms.

Like most of Warhol's Screen Tests, the film at first appears deceptively simple. It is a silent, four-minute, medium close-up of a man sitting in front of the camera, projected in slow motion. In this sense, it resembles the other estimated 472 Screen Tests that Warhol shot between January 1964 and December 1966.<sup>[6]</sup> Dozens of people observed the film's production, including several photographers; several sources attempt to describe precisely what happened during the making of the film. Yet these accounts ultimately fail to form a coherent historical narrative.

In his biography of Duchamp, Calvin Tomkins writes that the artist sat for his film portrait next to a 'cuddly little actress' who flirted with him from off-screen throughout the entire shoot, yet one would 'never know it from seeing the film – his expression is imperturbable'.<sup>[7]</sup> The exhibition text that accompanied the Duchamp film at the 2010 show *Twisted Pair: Marcel Duchamp / Andy Warhol* at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh elaborated on this tale. According to the exhibition text, Duchamp looks down towards his lap in reaction to a beautiful young woman 'touching his thigh, which apparently was encouraged by Warhol'.<sup>[8]</sup> Both accounts suggest that Warhol conceived the film shoot as an overt challenge, one with sexual overtones: remain still, the rules of this game dictate, and do your best to ensure that the beautiful woman caressing you off-screen remains our little secret. Like the title of another Warhol film, the infamous *Blow Job* (1964), the rumors surrounding the Duchamp Screen Test reference illicit events that occurred below the frame, in the invisible space off-screen.

This story, attached to this particular film, may well be false. What I have called 'the' Duchamp Screen Test was only one of three such films Warhol shot that evening, and Tompkins probably attributed the right story to the wrong film.[9] But Tompkins's story has staying power. The institution charged with maintaining Warhol's legacy enthusiastically absorbed it into the legitimising context of a museum show. Moreover, even contesting this rumor means repeating it. It requires we give it a fair hearing and, in the process, risk falling for its charms. The story survives as much gossip does: by the fact that one cannot prove a negative – and the suspicion that gossip, as Gavin Butt puts it, always 'contains some kernel of truth'.[10] Like the most delicious sort of rumor, it persists in a realm of pure possibility, always ready to revive the engines of discourse. Duchamp's Screen Test thus reveals the vital relationship between Warhol's cinema and extratextual narrative – that is, between his movies and the gossip that circulates around them.

The Duchamp Screen Test is what Marc Siegel calls a 'gossip-image': a wealth of unverifiable details 'enhance, embellish, and expand' a picture onscreen 'so as to generate unique images that are gossip's own'.[11] In Siegel's formulation, gossip-images have allowed many queer communities throughout the twentieth century to envision new sexual and social possibilities.[12] Gossip's speculative and experimental mode makes it especially useful for queer imaginaries, according to Eve Sedgwick, because gossip's 'nonce taxonomies' offer subtler modes of description than the binary 'epistemology of the closet'.[13] Accordingly, it is possible to read the Duchamp Screen Test and the rumors surrounding it as 'queering' Duchamp, and aggressively so: the old-world, heterosexual artist subjects himself to Warhol's domineering gaze, to the latter's pleasure and benefit. Though several scholars have suggested that Duchamp's life and work are due for queer rereading – and although I find the film's perverse resonance one of its great pleasures – this is not, for the purposes of this essay, my main point.[14]

Instead, the Duchamp Screen Test demonstrates how Warhol constructed his films in order to attract gossip – that is, he created images that actively seek expansion and embellishment in discourse. I focus on the Duchamp Screen Test in particular because, representing a meeting of two of the twentieth century's most significant artists, its circumstances of production have drawn an unusual amount of written commentary. The gossip about it has thus become part of the 'official' written record, making it easier to examine the precise mechanics through which rumors attach to the film image. The Duchamp Screen Test attracted gossip from without and within: its production circumstances encouraged the proliferation of unverifiable rumors about its making, and its

formal characteristics encouraged viewers to speculate about what lies immediately beyond the cinematic frame.

I will also propose that these same conditions hold for the Screen Tests generally – that Warhol's mode of production all but guaranteed his films would generate gossip. Despite the Duchamp film's notoriety, many aspects of its production were somewhat typical of the Screen Tests. The shoot took place during a party, before an ambiguously defined, and partly distracted, audience; Warhol shot multiple reels of the same subject, with small variations; he exhibited the film within his own social circle, before an audience that likely included some who were present at the time of filming. Warhol's prodigious output, his penchant for sloppy repetition, and his blurring of production and consumption meant that his filmmaking practice virtually guaranteed that off-screen talk would enrich on-screen images. Gossip, then, was a structurally inevitable outcome of the situations Warhol staged for his Screen Tests. The Factory's film production apparatus churned it out automatically – effortlessly, like a byproduct.

But was it a byproduct? Or was gossip indeed the very point of the Screen Tests, the main event for which the films themselves set the stage? Steven Koch has described the 'brush fire of word-of-mouth' that accompanied the initial release of Warhol's early, silent films like *Sleep* (1963), *Blow Job* (1964), and *Empire* (1964). 'They seemed plainly films to be talked about', Koch wrote, so much so that some New Yorkers believed the films' achievement was purely conceptual and sensational – that, having heard the rumors, 'nobody had to go'.<sup>[15]</sup> Wrongheaded as this presumption was, it may have contained some kernel of truth. Many of Warhol's most insightful commentators have suggested his artistic achievement in the 1960s consisted of something more than his literal artworks: the silver Factory was also a space for exploring new forms of living and working, and for testing how those forms might achieve representation.<sup>[16]</sup> As David Joselit has argued, Warhol's achievement extends beyond the art objects he produced and includes the artist's manipulations of the apparatus of publicity.<sup>[17]</sup> Newspapers and magazines could reproduce his Jackies and Marilyns just as well as the machinery of silkscreen; word of mouth could create varying imagined iterations of a film like *Sleep* (1963), shrinking its run time to a single hour or expanding it to eight. Media sensation and gossip alike both served to reproduce Warhol's work and subjected it to endless variations.

Warhol famously claimed he wanted 'to be a machine'. For Thierry de Duve, this statement reveals the true meaning of the artist's silkscreens and studio assistants, his tape recorders and film cameras: Warhol wanted to find a means of full artistic automation. He sought to

create dynamics that generated aesthetic value automatically, without any further investment of his own manual labor-time.[18] Perhaps the reason Warhol loved gossip, then, is that it so often appears to be self-perpetuating. In Siegel's theorisation, gossip is endlessly generative, leveraging the image's 'indiscernible' 'truth-value' in order to solicit the viewer's 'speculative power':[19]

Gossip seizes upon details of interest and subjects them to a series of speculations. These speculations produce further details, which generate further speculations, and further gossip. That each revelation of hearsay is subjected to a similar process of speculation ensures that gossip will connect disparate details and create unpredictable and unexpected linkages.[20]

In his study of the queer art world of the 1960s, Gavin Butt argues that gossip does not serve to confirm or expose an artist's sexuality – it does not resolve the 'truth or falsity' of any particular claim – but rather keeps identity in continuous 'discursive play'. [21] Gossip, here, is a kind of perpetual motion machine for the endless proliferation of meanings, and each of these meanings has the potential to enrich the image without cancelling out its rivals.

In the case of the Duchamp Screen Test, a thorough examination of its production context serves not to clarify the 'true' story of the film, but instead opens onto an infinite regress of speculation. In what follows, I will consider this regress as integral to Warhol's 'message' – as integral to the Duchamp Screen Test as the visible flaws are to Warhol's silkscreen paintings.[22] Moving outwards, I will then speculate as to the ways in which other Screen Tests may have produced similar gossip. Gossip extended Warhol's artistic productivity and his field of influence beyond his putative acts of artistic creation. To paraphrase Sol LeWitt's oft-repeated claim about his iterative conceptual works – 'the idea becomes the machine that makes the art' – Warhol's films become the machine that makes gossip.[23] Warhol, who told the world he wanted to be a machine, created a body of work that generated its own discourse as though mechanically. This talk, too, was part of his art.

## **Marcel Duchamp: Weird things go on off-camera**

In his 1996 biography of Marcel Duchamp, Calvin Tomkins gives the following account of the artist's appearance in a Warhol Screen Test:

He agreed to let Andy Warhol film him in 1966. The result was a twenty-minute film called Screen Test for Marcel Duchamp, in which he simply sat in a chair and smoked a cigar. During the filming, according to Duchamp, 'a cuddly little actress came and sat by me, practically lying on top of me,

rubbing herself up against me,' but no one would know it from seeing the film – his expression throughout is imperturbable.[24]

While Tomkins is careful to qualify his source material – the actress only appeared 'according to Duchamp' – he paints a vivid picture of the film's off-screen space. This, in turn, changes what we see when we watch the film that Tomkins most likely watched: a Duchamp Screen Test shot in February 1966 and preserved by the Andy Warhol Foundation in 1993.[25]

It begins as all the Screen Tests do, with a gradual fade in from shocking white. Duchamp's expression is neutral. Yet he cannot hold still, and repeatedly directs his gaze towards at least three distinct points off screen. The first point appears at a medium distance, towards Duchamp's left: some person or group must be speaking to Duchamp from a space behind the camera, and slightly to its right. Duchamp is almost verbal in his interactions with this figure: he shrugs, seemingly in response to a question, then puts a finger to his lips, indicating that he is not allowed to speak. His second focal point appears to be immediately left of the camera lens. Duchamp looks here when he strikes his neutral, 'portrait' pose. Third, he casts frequent, quick glances to his immediate right – to someone or something just beyond the left edge of the film frame.

Tomkins is careful to note that the film itself does not contain any direct trace of his version of events. The tale is more titillating for the fact that 'no one would know it from seeing the film'. For those of us who know the 'true' story – that is, for Tomkins and his readers – the film grows subsequently richer and more interesting. Duchamp's close-up becomes a reaction shot. Our understanding of off-screen space suffuses each of his gestures and glances with possible meaning. It is easy to imagine that the 'cuddly actress' is to his right, but who is standing in the other two positions? Is Warhol the active, verbal interlocutor standing on Duchamp's far left? Or is he, truer to form, the near-invisible voyeur behind the camera? Is Warhol or one of his entourage poking fun at the artist? Encouraging him? We can imagine Duchamp put on the spot, forced to decide immediately whether to reveal shock, pleasure, or amusement. He chooses, instead, to hide these things. Nothing explicitly flirtatious or sexual is apparent in Duchamp's expression. Yet this is precisely what, in Tomkins's account, sexually charges off-screen space: the informed viewer is, like Duchamp, Warhol, and the 'cuddly' actress, in on a secret.

The Andy Warhol Museum used the same evidence to provide a slightly different reading of the Duchamp Screen Test, which played on loop in the museum's gallery during the 2010

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show *Twisted Pair*. The accompanying wall text and exhibit brochure established a causal link between Duchamp's on-screen expression and Tomkins's story.

At one point during the film, Duchamp's gaze drifts downward, and he smiles; this might be in reaction to a beautiful young Italian woman (Benedetta Barzini) touching his thigh, which apparently was encouraged by Warhol.[26]

The Warhol Museum's version of the story identifies the actress as Benadetta Barzini, a young woman who appears in numerous photographs taken at the American Chess Foundation show. The Warhol Museum also makes the case that the film does in fact betray something of what happens off-screen – though qualifies its account with the word 'might'.

While Tomkins and the Warhol Museum interpret the film and its context differently, both appear to draw on the same source: a 1966 interview with Duchamp in the journal *Art and Artists*.

DUCHAMP. ...Recently I met Andy Warhol, at Cordier-Ekstrom, during the American Chess Foundation sale. It was at the end of the exhibition... Warhol had brought his camera and he asked me to pose, on the single condition that I keep my mouth shut for twenty minutes.

OTTO HAHN. In some of Warhol's films, where one sees the face only, weird things go on off-camera, calculated to disturb the subject...

DUCHAMP. It's very odd: in my case I had a girl on my knees, at least nearly: a very cuddly little actress came and sat by me, practically lying on top of me, rubbing herself up against me. I like Warhol's spirit. He's not just some painter or movie-maker. He's a *filmeur*, and I like that very much.[27]

Duchamp's version of events is perhaps even more suggestive than Tomkins' or the Warhol Museum's: he casts Warhol as the motivating and dominant force in a sexual game. First, Warhol enforces Duchamp's silence through the ordeal ('that I keep my mouth shut'). And once Duchamp really starts to describe the action ('rubbing herself against me') he abruptly moves on to generalities ('I like Warhol's spirit'). It seems that Duchamp has skipped over or elided something: something illicit. The two silences in this passage (the first enforced by Warhol, the second performed by Duchamp) match the invisible space outside the cinematic frame. In short, we are still missing part of the story.

Indeed, both Tomkins and the Warhol Museum leave an important fact out of their descriptions of the Duchamp Screen Test: the film they describe is only one of three that Warhol made that evening at the Cordier-Ekstrom Gallery.[28] As was the case with many

Screen Test shoots, Warhol shot multiple reels in a single sitting. The Warhol Museum and Tomkins both claim to narrate events that took place off-screen during the making of 'the' Duchamp Screen Test. Yet a closer look at the evidence suggests that Duchamp's recollections do not refer to the film here described, but rather to one of the other films Warhol made that evening.

Each of the three Duchamp Screen Tests was of the standard 100' length, and each took Warhol three minutes to record. Under Callie Angell's cataloging system, the three reels are numbered ST79, ST80, and ST81, respectively.[29] Of these, only the second (ST80) has been available for members of the public to view. It was part of Warhol's compilation film, *50 Fantastics and 50 Personalities*, and was restored in 1993, when Tomkins was conducting research for his Duchamp book.[30] MoMA distributes ST80 through its Circulating Film Library as part of Screen Tests: Reel 24, where Duchamp's image sits alongside those of Lou Reed, Lucinda Childs, and Niki de St. Phalle. This was the Screen Test that exhibited at the Warhol Museum's show *Twisted Pair*, and which I have described in detail above.

The other two films have been screened, documented, and described by Angell for the Screen Tests catalog. According to Angell, ST79 is also a tightly framed shot of Duchamp's head and shoulders; in it, Duchamp lights a cigar and begins to smoke, then towards the end of the reel makes a 'cut' motion with his fingers. The third film in the trio is quite unusual for a Warhol Screen Test in that it features two people on-screen: Duchamp and the Italian actress Benadetta Barzini.[31] A frame enlargement from the film (Figure 1) shows Barzini sitting close to Duchamp and looking at him affectionately; he ignores her, staring impassively at the camera. The existence of this third Duchamp Screen Test calls into question our previous construction, based on Tomkins' and Duchamp's accounts, of a sexually charged off-screen space. Duchamp's memory of having a girl nearly in his lap could easily be a memory of the filming of ST81.



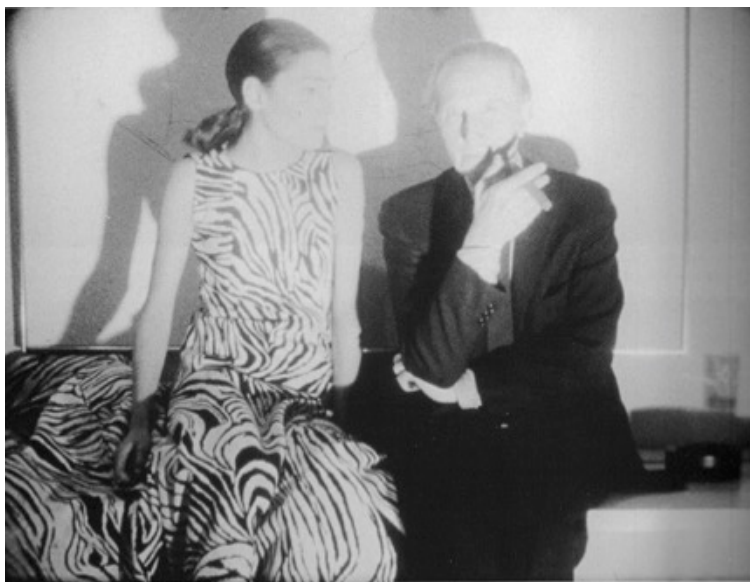


Fig. 1: Frame enlargement, Marcel Duchamp and Benedetta Barzini Screen Test (Andy Warhol, 1966).



Fig. 2: Nat Finkelstein, Warhol Filming Duchamp, 1966. Photograph courtesy of the Nat Finkelstein Estate.

A series of photographs documenting the evening strengthen this hypothesis. Warhol attended the American Chess Foundation event with Nat Finkelstein, a photojournalist who documented many scenes of Factory life between 1964 and 1967.[32] In one photograph (Figure 2) Warhol films Duchamp. The older artist faces Warhol's camera and a crowd of onlookers while several gallery guests talk amongst themselves in the background. Visible

in the upper left of the image is the zebra-striped pattern of Barzini's dress. The photograph reveals that the young actress was standing clear across the room when Warhol's camera was fixed on Duchamp.

Tomkins, it seems, pinned the right story on the wrong film. At least this is the conclusion art historian Mark Pohlad reaches in the only academic article that touches on this event.[33] Together, the evidence strongly suggests that Duchamp's memories regarding Barzini are from the filming of ST81, the film in which both artist and actress appear on-screen. The flirtations the artist described were simply from the filming of another movie – not from the Screen Test that Tomkins saw, nor the one that exhibited at Twisted Pair.

So how was this particular narrative pinned on the wrong Duchamp Screen Test? In the *Art and Artists* interview, Duchamp merely mentions Barzini's presence during the screening; he does not specify whether she was on- or off-screen while she flirted with him. Tomkins' account of the events is more consistent with interviewer Otto Hahn's suggestion that, 'in some of Warhol's films, where one sees the face only, weird things go on off-camera, calculated to disturb the subject'. While Duchamp does nothing to contradict Hahn's remark, it is possible that he did not intend to suggest that Barzini's flirtations were part of Warhol's plan. Or perhaps, wanting to tell an interesting story, Duchamp allowed Hahn to believe what he wanted.

It seems simple. But can we really be so certain that 'weird things' did not happen off-screen in either of Duchamp's earlier Screen Tests? The only thing that Finkelstein's photograph proves is that Barzini was not constantly by Duchamp's side throughout the filming of the first two Screen Tests. It does not rule out the possibility that Barzini was sitting 'practically' in Duchamp's lap, 'rubbing herself' against him for the majority of the shoot, but that at the moment Finkelstein took his photo she had decided to walk away for a minute and – who knows? – take a break. Indeed, another of Finkelstein's photographs (Figure 3) from that evening shows Barzini leaning over Duchamp, laughing. We understand Finkelstein's photograph as indexically linked to historical reality and thus able to provide historical testimony. Yet the documentary weight of the photograph simply throws into sharper focus our inability to know what really happened before, after, or outside of it.



Fig. 3: Nat Finkelstein, Benedetta Barzini, and Marcel Duchamp, 1966. Photograph courtesy of the Nat Finkelstein Estate.

Something strange has happened here: were Tomkins' story not in circulation, we would never look at the Screen Tests and at Finkelstein's photographs and then conclude that an Italian actress was throwing herself on Marcel Duchamp's lap throughout the filming of the first two Screen Tests. The evidence alone does not suggest any such thing. But, having heard this shred of gossip, we must acknowledge that it is possible. As Gavin Butt has argued, treating gossip as an object of historical inquiry reveals the extent to which all historical claims are – 'like gossip's narratives' – 'projections of interpretive desire and curiosity'.<sup>[34]</sup> Whether it was Tomkins, or Hahn, or Duchamp himself, someone's desire conjured this tale into being and brought it into the field of historical possibility. The responsible historian must admit that, while the tale cannot be proved, it also cannot be disproved. In treating this shred of information seriously enough to try to verify it, I have made it possible by participating further in this gossip's circulation. In the spaces between the frames of Finkelstein's photographs and the frames of Warhol's Screen Tests, there is enough room for Barzini to wander back across the gallery and into Duchamp's lap. If we grant her passage, her way in is clear.

### **Screen Test as reaction shot**

Formally, the Screen Tests encourage us to imagine the space outside the film frame and to populate it with potential stories. Return to the Duchamp Screen Test itself – that is, to ST80, the most available of the three reels Warhol produced that evening. In the film,

Duchamp attempts an impassive pose, but his subtle gestures and glances draw our attention to the space around and outside the cinematic frame. Each of Duchamp's movements is magnified by the film's high-contrast lighting and slow-motion projection. Such simple formal constraints can – and did, according to many of Warhol's contemporary viewers – give the tiniest gestures an epic, narrative quality. Writing of the six-hour *Sleep* in 1964, Henry Geldzahler argued that 'the slightest shift in the body of the sleeper [...] becomes an event'. [35] David Bourdon recalled his first viewing of the *Screen Tests*: 'Suddenly, the performer blinks or swallows, and the involuntary action becomes in this context a highly dramatic event, as climactic as the burning of Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind*.' [36] Both critics refer to the smallest gestures as events, but neither suggests these events have clear narrative motivation.

Mary Ann Doane has argued that the cinematic close-up simultaneously encourages and resists narrative incorporation. Its affective power urges the viewer to ask questions. As she writes:

It is barely possible to see a close-up of a face without asking: what is he/she thinking, feeling, suffering? What is happening beyond what I can see? [37]

The shot-reverse shot structure of classical narrative cinema tends to answer these questions before they even achieve full voice. But the sustained close-ups of the *Screen Tests* let these questions hang.

Take, for instance, one of Warhol's best-known *Screen Tests*, of Ann Buchanan (1964, alternate title *The Girl Who Cries a Tear*). Throughout the reel, Buchanan sits motionless – so still, in fact, that she seems to emulate a photograph. Eventually her unblinking eyes cloud with tears; eventually these tears roll down her face. Buchanan continues to sit still, in seeming defiance of her own physiological reaction. Critics typically explain this film by citing other *Screen Test* subjects, who remember Warhol telling them to sit as still as possible. Buchanan evidently understood this literally, refusing to blink. [38] For Noa Steimatsky, Buchanan's *Screen Test* has an affective power that exceeds this straightforward explanation. 'What right have we', she asks, 'to dismiss her tears under the pretense of mechanical or physiological causes?' [39] Steimatsky's point is that the face-to-face encounter of spectator and screen freights the film with meanings that exceed its immediate historical context. But her observation also forces us to acknowledge that Buchanan herself has never commented on the film, and that none of her contemporaries claim to have directly witnessed its production. [40] No one can confirm whether or how Warhol directed Buchanan, nor even if he was present in the room while the camera rolled.

Buchanan's film is remarkable. But many of Warhol's contemporaries and critics treat it as representative of the Screen Tests generally. In 1974, Danny Fields – Warhol's former lover and lighting designer, who collaborated on many Screen Test shoots – reported that Warhol made subjects keep their eyes open 'so they would start to cry': 'So, you had these close-ups of these very beautiful people, and you're just looking at their faces, and little by little they start to twitch, and then, their eyes would fill with tears.'<sup>[41]</sup> Fields does not mention Buchanan, even obliquely, but rather presents this scenario as a general approach to making Screen Tests. While Fields is well positioned to provide eyewitness testimony, Angell's exhaustive catalog of all 472 Screen Tests does not directly identify any films apart from Buchanan's that match his description. Billy Name holds stock-still in his Screen Test (1964), but dark glasses hide his eyes; Richard Rheem (1966) allows a few strategic blinks to punctuate his stillness; Amy Taubin (1964) and others hold very still, but not completely so. Still other Screen Tests show subjects who are obviously taking direction, though of a different sort: Lou Reed (1966) suggestively drinks a bottle of Coca Cola; Baby Jane Holzer (1964) languidly brushes her teeth. Many Screen Test subjects, like Ingrid Superstar (1966) and Paul America (1965), chat casually with some off-screen presence. Such gestures and glances direct our attention beyond the cinematic frame, yet we almost always lack precise details as to who or what stands there.

Buchanan reacts. But to what? Did Warhol indeed instruct Buchanan to sit as still as possible? Did someone else – one of Warhol's collaborators, such as Fields – issue this instruction? Had Buchanan seen Billy Name sit motionless before the camera and decide she could outdo him? Did anyone cheer her on during her performance? Or attempt to distract her? Was anyone watching at all? What was she thinking or feeling during her performance? Are her tears a defiant expression of suffering? Or do we see pride flicker across her face when her tears finally start to flow? Watching Buchanan's Screen Test, it seems her tears have to encompass all of these possibilities: they are signs of success and failure, of strength and frailty, individual performative genius and social collaboration.

This is the kind of 'speculation' that Warhol's Screen Tests invite – an imaginative process that, I believe, generates the sort of thinking that Siegel calls the 'gossip image'.<sup>[42]</sup> Siegel's theorisation draws heavily on the work of Patricia Meyer Spacks, for whom gossip is a mode of 'inquiry' rather than an assertion of authority. 'Have you heard...?' 'Don't you think...?' 'Do you suppose...?': the answers to these questions are always provisional and experimental, and open onto further questions.<sup>[43]</sup> For Spacks, gossip provides intellectual and emotional sustenance to the extent that it allows us to reflect on the nuance and complexity of human

desire and action – and refuses easy answers. Warhol's early portrait films, according to their most passionate defenders, similarly refuse to offer definitive knowledge of their subjects – what Douglas Crimp calls the 'presumptive, knowing' knowledge 'of the other for the self'.<sup>[44]</sup>

In a moving essay on *Blow Job* (1964), Crimp argues that the film derives its aesthetic and ethical power from its refusal to situate the film's titular sex act in a situation. Is the man onscreen the hustler, or the innocent naïf? While some writers, like Stephen Koch, sought to knowingly describe the man onscreen as a social type, Crimp reminds viewers that all we really know about the man in *Blow Job* is he is 'willing to stand in front of a movie camera (and a film crew) while somebody sucks his cock', and in the context of the Factory this could mean almost anything.<sup>[45]</sup> Warhol was evidently aware of the kind of pleasures a lack of narrative context affords. In 1966, he told an interviewer:

People go to the movies to look at people. Hollywood goes wrong in treating them like objects. They put them in beautiful countries, Rolls Royces, fly them to Egypt. You don't need all that. People are so fantastic. You can't take a bad picture.<sup>[46]</sup>

Warhol felt he could do Hollywood one better in helping people look at people; according to Crimp, *Blow Job* is primarily 'a lesson in how to stage a truly beautiful portrait'.<sup>[47]</sup>

With far less erotic charge than *Blow Job* (though not much more in the way of definitive knowledge), Buchanan's Screen Test likewise holds complex and contradictory meanings. Its richness derives partly from our lack of certainty as to the circumstances of its production. It is easy to claim that the film depicts a failure of composure or a mere physiological response if one imagines Buchanan in naïve pursuit of an impossible directive issued by Warhol. But if we look more broadly at the discourse surrounding the making of the Screen Tests, we will see a range of possible motivations driving onscreen events. As in the Duchamp Screen Test, a strange, Schrödinger's-cat-like space emerges around the film frame, one that just might be able to hold conflicting truths simultaneously.

## Factory gossip

As a case study, the Duchamp Screen Test might initially sound exceptional. Its contradictory possibilities result from the fact that Warhol shot three films, each under slightly different conditions, in a single sitting; historians then attached to the most widely available of these films the most widely circulated rumor about the film shoot. But Warhol was fond of the

mistakes that repetition yields. His silkscreen paintings, produced in multiples, were riddled with visible flaws; his personal archive was so chaotic and voluminous that it is still being cataloged. His filmmaking practice developed according to similar principles. He almost always shot Screen Tests in multiples, often filming the same person several times over a period of hours, days, or even months.[48] He rarely dated his films, forcing Angell and other catalogers to rely on the year codes printed onto the edges of his 16mm film stock.[49] The repetitive format of the Screen Tests, combined with the disorganised and public nature of his film shoots, ensures that at some points viewers inevitably conflate or confuse some of the Screen Tests with others.

Despite an incredible stylistic consistency of format across all 472 films, there is no 'typical' account of the making of a Screen Test. Period journalism, oral history, and memoir all illustrate that Warhol employed a range of approaches to these films. Some narrators position Warhol always 'a few feet away' from the camera, 'watching silently with an enigmatic expression'.[50] Yet others remember Warhol leaving the room entirely: Ronald Tavel, Dennis Hopper, Ron Padgett, Mary Woronov, and several others recall sitting for their Screen Tests alone.[51] In 1994, Amy Taubin wrote:

Like all newcomers to the Factory, I was screen-tested. Escorted into a makeshift cubicle, I was positioned on a chair. Warhol looked through the lens, adjusted the framing, instructed me to sit still and try not to blink, turned on the camera, and walked away.[52]

These Screen Tests thus appear as overt challenges to the sitter: 'Next to the muzzle of a gun,' Mary Woronov wrote recalling her Screen Test shoot, 'the black hole of the camera is one of the coldest things in the world.'[53]

Yet the idea that Warhol typically left subjects alone with the camera is one of the most 'enduring myths' about his filmmaking practice, according to Glyn Davis and Gary Needham: it is 'an exaggerated anecdote used to imply that Warhol did nothing or quite simply didn't direct'.[54] Indeed, some Screen Test subjects remember Warhol's active, even enthusiastic direction. Rather than a lonely confrontation with the camera, Robert Pincus-Witten remembers a shower of praise.

Gerry Malanga and Andy were there, and Andy would say things like, 'Isn't this wonderful! Isn't he terrific! He's doing it!' As if one is really doing something wonderful by simply remaining static and unmoving before the lens, but the hype was very, very exciting. It's a tremendous kind of adrenaline-hype, and, of course, an extraordinary group of people in the studio at the time.[55]

Some shoots were neither black hole nor adrenaline hype. A BBC Monitor episode from 1965 documents a Screen Test shoot with Susan Sontag; in Mandy Merck's telling, Warhol offers some loose direction ('you can move, but not too much') before wandering away from the camera to use the Factory telephone. He then interrupts his own phone call to shout encouragement back to a laughing Sontag: 'Oh, this is so glamorous!'[56]

Many critics are eager to cast the Screen Tests as overt 'tests': Hal Foster calls them 'drills' that were 'corrosive' to the ego and impossible to pass; he asserts that subjects were 'frequently teased, prompted, or otherwise provoked'.[57] Still others characterise the films in dramatically different terms: as honorific portraits, or as ethical encounters that reveal sitters in their fullness.[58] Eager to theorise the project as a whole, and to give it an ethical valence, few critics directly theorise what may be the most common production scenario: Screen Test as casual hangout. Angell's catalog descriptions point in this very direction: Dan Cassidy (1965), in Angell's words, 'smiles often, laughing and responding to what seems to be a crowd of people standing around the camera watching him'.[59] In her second Screen Test, Ingrid Superstar (1966) makes 'a series of rapid hand signals... which seem to be a kind of private joke between her and Warhol the cameraman'.[60] The impulse to ask questions of the Screen Test, to wonder what is happening beyond our gaze, leads the viewer to construct an off-screen space almost effortlessly. At the same time, Angell is careful to remind readers just how much the films leave open to the imagination. What was the joke? Who was the crowd? There seems to be a crowd there – but was there one? Together, film text and historical context invite fantasy – perhaps they guarantee fantasy – without granting closure.

Moreover, the transient, permissive, and often crowded space of the Factory provided Warhol's typical shooting grounds. As Fields remembered it,

the Factory was totally open; anybody could walk in. At one point they put up a sign, DO NOT ENTER UNLESS YOU ARE EXPECTED, which everyone ignored.[61]

Finkelstein's and Name's Factory photographs repeatedly show subjects sitting for Screen Tests while people engage in other, unrelated activities nearby. Yet the comings-and-goings of people inside the Factory ensured that almost anyone could lay claim to having witnessed a film shoot; the diversity of activities inside, as well as the near-certainty that everyone there was using drugs of some kind, ensured that most people witnessed the production of these films in a distracted state.



That distraction has not prevented dozens of production stories to emerge in memoirs by, and interviews with, Factory regulars. Some of these stories read as delightfully embellished: Ondine repeatedly claimed that 'Bob Dylan sat for sixteen hours in the middle of the Factory hoping to get a Screen Test, and every time one of his records went on we would take it off and put Maria Callas on instead.'<sup>[62]</sup> But according to Finkelstein – who photographed Dylan's Screen Test shoot, just as he had Duchamp's – the Factory welcomed Dylan not with scorn, but with a nervous anticipation. 'The joint was atwitter', Finkelstein recalled, with people shouting, 'Bobby's coming'; the 'most obviously blatant of the weirdos', including Ondine, had been 'banned' from the event.<sup>[63]</sup> Dylan's Screen Tests read richer when we consider that his reception in the Factory was possibly hostile, possibly simpering, and most likely both. In another possible embellishment, Woronov recalls:

I saw Salvador Dalí strike too flamboyant a pose for his test and when the arm holding his cane collapsed, the upper lip holding his mustache twitched and drooped. I liked him better that way.<sup>[64]</sup>

The action that Woronov describes does not appear in either of the Dalí Screen Tests (1966), nor in the four-reel *Original Salvador Dalí* (1966), nor in any of Angell's catalog descriptions.<sup>[65]</sup> And yet Woronov's story is, strictly speaking, possible. One Dalí Screen Test (ST67) is closely framed, enough so that Dalí's stumble may have taken place just below the frame – though I myself see no evidence of it. And the other (ST68) is the only Screen Test that features editing: Warhol uses a jump cut to make Dalí disappear, Georges Méliès-style, towards the end of the reel. Though unlikely for an artist who disliked editing his films, Warhol could have cut Dalí's stumble out of the final film. What would this say about Warhol's attitude towards the older artist, or his avowed love of outtakes and failed performances?<sup>[66]</sup>

Woronov's phrase, 'I saw Salvador Dalí', implies she saw the artist in person. But it is also possible that Woronov watched the artist 'pose' onscreen, during one of Warhol's informal Factory screenings. The most frequent and typical exhibition scenario for the Screen Tests was the Factory itself.<sup>[67]</sup> While watching the films and imagining the circumstances of their production, viewers sat in the space the films were produced, and often with people who had been present at the film shoot. It is easy to imagine some viewers trading their memories of a film shoot for their memories of attending a film screening – or vice versa – or gossip about a film shoot, during a film screening. When Factory regulars like Woronov describe the Screen Tests, they rarely situate their memories firmly on- or off-screen, in the space of production or in the act of reception. In Warhol's Factory, the spaces of film production and film reception overlapped ambiguously. Thus, the spectators – and the gossips – in Warhol's Factory had an enormous influence over the screen image. They were able to 'create unique

images that are gossip's own' (to use Siegel's phrase) at the very site of production, in ways that could inflect and even retroactively change the 'truth' of the image.[68]

## **Conclusion: The endless frame**

Most individual Screen Tests have not attracted the same intense scrutiny as Duchamp's – at least not when it comes to the circumstances of their making. But I believe that much more of this sort of gossip existed surrounding the Screen Tests than we, from our present historical position, are able to access. It does not stretch the imagination to imagine members of the Factory audience watching a Screen Test of a friend or acquaintance and telling stories about what Warhol and his collaborators did, or did not do, to inspire their performance. While much of this talk is now inaccessible to historians like me (I have no personal connection, even distant, to the world of the Factory), I believe that the gossip about the Factory's regular members – gossip about other queer artists in Warhol's milieu – was probably the locus of the Screen Tests' deepest and most profound meanings. As James Stoller observed in 1966, most of the people viewing the Screen Tests were familiar with the people depicted on-screen. Viewing a Screen Test of the recently deceased dancer Freddy Herko, Stoller wondered

what the segment would have meant to me if I had not recognized him and not recalled admiring his art and reading something about the circumstances of his death. As it is the footage became excruciatingly moving as I uncontrollably invested Herko's glowering expression with meanings brought from outside the film.[69]

This, according to Stoller, is where Warhol's art 'speaks in its own voice', and most profoundly: 'where film and gossip, which for so long have bolstered and helped sustain each other in secret, mingle openly and for the first time without shame'.[70] Ironical that Warhol's 'own voice' sounds clearest when it draws on information Stoller read and heard 'outside the film' – just as, in Gavin Butt's terms, Warhol's persona was 'founded upon getting others to do the talking for him'.[71]

The public chatter surrounding the Duchamp Screen Test generated its own series of 'uncontrollable investments' – projections of imagination and desire that endow the film with more exciting and erotic meanings than it would have had otherwise. This tale is suggestive enough to encourage viewers to imagine other off-screen possibilities for other of Warhol's films. Recall, in his interview with Duchamp, Otto Hahn's confident assertion that, in many of Warhol's portrait films, 'weird things go on off-camera, calculated to disturb the subject'.[72] The suggestion, in this context, is that all of Warhol's portrait films are

erotic, since all refer to the frame line, where illicit acts are so often hidden.[73] 'Cinema that deals directly with erotic subject matter deliberately plays on the edges of the frame', Christian Metz tells us. 'The point is to gamble simultaneously on the excitation of desire and its non-fulfillment.'[74] All narrative cinema instigates such play, but most films hide the unseen in the manner of the fetish. The Screen Tests instead reveal the frame line as cinema's erogenous zone.[75]

'From time to time, when other people weren't around, Andy and I would have theoretical artsy-discussions,' Nat Finkelstein wrote in 2000. Their shared concern was the frame: 'What does one do with the frame, doesn't the frame tyrannize you, how do you get rid of the frame?'[76] Finkelstein, whose words opened this essay as an epigraph – 'the photographer is the producer of history' – understood that the historical record derives from photography's capacity to show and hide as well. Warhol, for his part, could never 'get rid of the frame'. Instead, he extended it: serially, through repetition; temporally, through endless duration; metaphysically, through the total coincidence of artistic production and everyday life. Each version of the off-screen space animating the Duchamp Screen Test is, in a sense, its own frame. And the endless gossip surrounding the Screen Tests as a whole might multiply each of its frames, endlessly.

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## Notes

- [1] Finkelstein 2000, no pagination.
- [2] Barthes 2010, p. 65.
- [3] Gough-Cooper & Caumont & Hulten 1993, no pagination.
- [4] The poster for the event depicted the RSVP cards of artists who had accepted Duchamp's invitation. The group included Man Ray, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Alexander Calder, and Jean Tinguely. Warhol's card does not appear on this poster; instead, it remains unfilled in one of the artist's Time Capsules. 'Homage a Caissa' 1966; Duchamp to Warhol 1965.
- [5] *Twisted Pair* 2010.
- [6] Angell 2006, p. 12.
- [7] Tomkins 1996, p. 429.
- [8] *the Warhol* 2010, p. 17.
- [9] Pohlád 2007, p. 234.
- [10] Butt 2005, p. 7.
- [11] Siegel 2010, p. ix.
- [12] Ibid, tk.
- [13] Sedgwick 2008, p. 22.
- [14] See Katz 1999; Franklin 2000; Harvey 2006. For speculations on Duchamp's sexuality, see Seigel 1997, pp. 185-213.
- [15] Koch 1991, p. 34.

- [16] See Michelson 1991; Wolf 1997; Siegel 2003; Graw 2010; Crimp 2012.
- [17] Joselit 2007, pp. 109-123.
- [18] De Duve 1989, p. 10.
- [19] Siegel 2010, p. 54.
- [20] Ibid., p. 42.
- [21] Butt 2005, p. 5.
- [22] On flaws in Warhol's silkscreens see Crow 2001.
- [23] LeWitt 1967, p. 80.
- [24] Tomkins 1996, p. 429.
- [25] The film cataloged by Angell as ST80 was preserved by the Andy Warhol Foundation in 1993. After the films were moved to MoMA in 2001, ST80 was included in 'Screen Tests Reel 24', which is a part of MoMA's Circulating Film and Video Library.
- [26] *Twisted Pair* 2010; the warhol 2010, p. 17.
- [27] Hahn 1966, p. 7.
- [28] In 1963, Warhol also shot Duchamp Opening, 'a short "newsreel" of the opening of Duchamp's retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum'. Angell 2006, p. 66.
- [29] This accounts for the fact that Duchamp recalls posing for Warhol for twenty minutes.
- [30] Angell 2006, p. 260.
- [31] Smith 1986, p. 410; Angell 2006, p. 65.
- [32] Finkelstein 2000.
- [33] Pohlád 2010, p. 235.
- [34] Butt 2005, p. 7.
- [35] Geldzahler 1964, p. 30.
- [36] Bourdon 1989, p. 178.
- [37] Doane 2003, p. 96.
- [38] Smith 1979, p. 154.
- [39] Steimatsky 2017, p. 55.
- [40] Angell 2006, p. 45.
- [41] Smith 1979, p. 154.
- [42] Siegel 2010, p. 18.
- [43] Spacks 1982, p. 34.
- [44] Crimp 2010, p. 15.
- [45] Crimp 2010, p. 12. See also Grundman 1993.

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- [46] Lester 1966, p. 81.
- [47] Crimp 1999, p. 124.
- [48] For instance, Warhol shot a movie a day of his then-boyfriend Philip Fagan over a six-month period spanning 1964 and 1965. Angell 2006, p. 218.
- [49] Merck 2017, p. 97
- [50] Wilcock 1965, p. 23.
- [51] Angell 2006, pp. 198-201; Workman 1990; Woronov 2002.
- [52] Taubin 1994, p. 62.
- [53] Woronov 2002.
- [54] Davis & Needham 2017, p. 19.
- [55] Smith 1986, p. 475.
- [56] Merck 2017, p. 100.
- [57] Foster 2010, p. 35.
- [58] Sokolowski 2004; Raviv 2016.
- [59] Angell 2006, p. 53.
- [60] Angell 2006, p. 197.
- [61] Stein 1982, p. 200.
- [62] Smith 1986, p. 447; Angell 2006, p. 69.
- [63] Finkelstein 2000, np; Factory people interview archive 2011.
- [64] Woronov 2002.
- [65] Angell 2006, p. 58.
- [66] Warhol 1975, p. 93.
- [67] Angell 2006, p. 19.
- [68] Siegel 2010, p. ix.
- [69] Stoller 1966, p. 38.
- [70] Ibid.
- [71] Butt 2005, p. 108.
- [72] Hahn 1966, p. 7.
- [73] See Waugh 1996.
- [74] Metz 1982, p. 77.
- [75] In Damon Young' s terms, Warhol' s films reveal erotic looking to be an intrinsic feature of film technology. Young 2014.
- [76] Finkelstein 2000, np.