

## Art



Sedgwick hits the wall.

Scott Rudd

**Andy Warhol: Motion Pictures**

Museum of Modern Art  
11 West 53rd Street, 212-708-9400  
Through March 21

**Framed by Andy!**

It's MOMA's Warhol film fest. Alas, no popcorn.

BY R.C. BAKER

Considering the velocity of our digital age, it can seem an eternity to hold a smile for the few seconds a friend might fiddle with iPhone settings before taking your picture. Now imagine it's the '60s, and you're staring into a 16mm Bolex for three minutes straight while 100-foot reels of silent black-and-white film clack through the shutter.

In 1963, as Andy Warhol's notoriety for painting Campbell's Soup cans grew, the former advertising illustrator began branching out into filmmaking, eventually shooting more than 470 "Screen Tests" of his expanding entourage and visitors to the Factory. Focused closely on each subject's face, 12 of these short films are projected at MOMA in heavy black frames. At up to nine feet across, they recall the scale of the artist's "Disaster" canvases as well as the mood of intrusive intimacy central to those silk-screened car crashes and suicides.

Warhol generally asked his sitters to remain as static as possible. He shot these "stillies" (as some Factory wags dubbed the films) at the usual 24 frames per second but projected them at 16 fps, further slowing down any gestures (and increasing the screen time to four minutes). Andy reveled in Gotham's flamboyant, self-destructive demimonde, and his bright studio lamps cast an already fatalistic aesthetic into even deeper shade. Cleaved by shadow and baroquely sullen, Lou Reed glares steadily at the viewer; Edie Sedgwick appears vaguely menaced by her own shadow as

she lifts saucer-size eyes above the lens, seeming to plead with the man behind the camera for the sequence to end. A practicing Catholic, Warhol understood the power of iconography to convey emotion through abstract forms, and these taut black-and-white compositions, flaring to radiant limbo as the reels run out, achieve a mesmerizing beauty. A busier, multiple-angle take on Nico presages both Warhol's humdrum society portraits of the '70s and his lame '80s music videos, in which celebrity outshone low visual wattage.

Projected at movie-house scale, the 54-minute-long *Kiss* (1963–64) features four-minute clips of nonstop canoodling by variously gendered couples, their heads cropped so tightly that arms and hands appear disembodied when they wander into the frame to caress hair or shoulders. Few moving pictures have so abstractly celebrated the curves, planes, and textures of the human head as does this roller coaster of lustrous flesh and quicksilver shadows. Similarly, a 1964 Screen Test of art collector Ethel Scull pulsates with levitating blotches, dust specks, and scratches—absent any narrative, the sheer physicality of film emulsion becomes as visceral here as the paint drips and meaty brushstrokes of a de Kooning canvas.

And then there's 1963's *Blow Job*. Always happy to bamboozle the straights, Warhol was careful to avoid the fate of onetime Screen Test subject Jack Smith, whose *Flaming Creatures* was seized that same year for violating New York's obscenity laws. Putting the "head" into "head shot," Warhol filmed multiple rolls of a leather-jacketed James Dean wannabe leaning against a brick wall as he receives oral largesse from an off-screen gentleman. Lit from above like some saint in ecstatic agony, the youth grimaces and swoons in roiling chiaroscuro, chin blanched when thrusting up, nose a luminous triangle amid depthless shadow when peering downward.

Not graphic sex, but powerful graphic design.