

Trouble in Flushing

Censorship: The Sequel, starring Andy, Rocky, Philip, and Moses

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Courtesy Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main/Photographer: Axel Schneider

'13 Most Wanted Men: Andy Warhol and the 1964 World's Fair'

The Queens Museum
Flushing Meadows Corona Park
718-592-9700, queensmuseum.org
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Here in New York We Are Having A Lot Of Trouble With The World's Fair," wrote Frank O'Hara in the opening to a 1964 poem.

In a letter to fellow poet John Ashbery, O'Hara explained the personal anger behind his verse: "In preparation for the World Fair, New York has been undergoing a horrible cleanup... All the queer bars except one are already closed, four movie theaters have been closed (small ones) for showing unlicensed films like Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*. . . . The fair itself, or its preparations, are too ridiculous and boring to go into, except for the amusing fact that Moses flies over it in a helicopter every day to inspect progress."

The gay poet was referring to Robert Moses, who had spent the previous four decades building highways, bridges, tunnels, parks, housing projects, and other structures that define, for good and ill, much of New York City's landscape to this day. But overseeing the World's Fair would be Moses's swan song: The 76-year-old power broker had been marginalized by New York's Republican governor (and 1964 presidential hopeful), Nelson A. Rockefeller, who disliked Moses for both professional and personal reasons. But "Rocky" loved abstract art, and had asked architect Philip Johnson to include cutting-edge murals in his design for New York state's circu-

lar pavilion (which is now a theater next to the "Tent of Tomorrow," that rusty ring of suspended cables and steel towers that you can still circumambulate today).

Into this triumvirate of egos bustled a fourth, Andy Warhol, the central player in the Queens Museum's engrossing historical survey of a dramatic, if little known, instance of artistic censorship in the Big Apple. When the up-and-coming Pop maestro was invited to contribute an artwork to the fair, he characteristically asked around for ideas; at a dinner party, the host, a painter friend of Andy's, reportedly suggested, "The Ten Most Wanted Men! You know, the mug shots the police issue."

Although he loved the concept, Warhol hesitated at first, worrying "But Robert Moses has to approve it or something," before concluding, "I don't care, I'm going to do it!" Shortly afterward, he obtained a 1962 NYPD pamphlet entitled "The Thirteen Most Wanted," one of the many artifacts on view at the Queens exhibition. (How such an odd number — redolent of bad luck — was chosen over the more obvious 10 or a dozen is lost to history.) Rap sheets note that these were hardcore bad guys, wanted for murder, grand larceny, assault, and other crimes.

Warhol's proposal, surprisingly, was approved, but when the coarse black-and-white mug shots, each roughly four feet tall, were actually arrayed across the pavil-

ion's exterior wall, reality proved unpalatable to his powerful patrons. As art historian Richard Meyer points out in the current exhibition's catalog, the mural can be seen as "a transgressive image of desire. Certainly, various forms of outlaw masculinity, and of rough trade in particular, appealed to some gay men, including Warhol... there were laws against homosexuality, sodomy, and so literally your desires, once actualized, were criminalized."

Meyer adds that the mural, through its daisy chain of faces and profiles, creates "a circuit of gazes; you could imagine men looking at each other," in effect creating a 20-by-20-foot mural of gay cruising in a very public space. But even if the fair's organizers didn't tumble to such coded imagery, they had other concerns: Seven of the pictured felons were of Italian descent, and Rocky was not about to alienate one of New York's largest voting blocs. Additionally, labor groups were preparing protests because the work force at the fair was, for the most part, all white. Poet Martin Espada captured the mood of many minorities who felt shut out of the economic boom promised by the event's boosters: "The beer company/did not hire Blacks or Puerto Ricans,/so my father joined the picket line/at the Schaefer Beer Pavilion, New York World's Fair,/amid

the crowds glaring with canine hostility."

If the governor couldn't easily halt civic protests, he could take down an artwork he had bought and paid for (and didn't particularly like aesthetically, being no fan of what he viewed as the simplistic themes of Pop art). He ordered Johnson to tell Warhol the mural had to go. Rocky was no philistine precursor to the Tea Party ("Rockefeller Republican" — socially liberal, fiscally conservative — was not always a pejorative in the GOP), but he did suffer from the arrogance of inherited wealth. His attack on artistic freedom continued a family tradition: His father, John D. Rockefeller Jr., ordered Diego Rivera's fresco chopped off the walls of Rockefeller Center in 1934. According to historian Richard Norton Smith, one of the primary reasons was the Mexican muralist's depiction "of syphilitic microbes, symbolic of diseased capitalism. The old man thought the picture was obscene. That's the word he used."

Unlike that notorious case, the wrangle over the Warhol mural went almost completely unnoticed in press coverage of the fair's attractions, which included Michelangelo's *Pietà*, on loan from the Vatican; Walt Disney's "It's a Small World" ride; and the IBM pavilion, described by the *New Yorker* as "The most beautiful building at the fair, containing a variety of demonstrations of the mechanics of computers."

Warhol at first offered to replace the mug shots with 23 identical portraits of Robert Moses; Johnson did not appreciate the irony. Instead, it was agreed that

the mural would be covered in silver paint, a minimalist void submerging outlaw desire amid the family-friendly entertainment. The Queens exhibition includes terrific Billy Name photos documenting the aluminum-foil-covered walls of Warhol's Silver Factory; years later, Warhol looked back on that era of his career. "It was a perfect time to think silver. Silver was the future. It was spacey. Astronauts wore silver suits... And silver was also the past — the silver screen. Hollywood actresses photographed on silver sets. And maybe more than anything else, silver was narcissism. Mirrors were backed with silver."

Warhol ultimately silkscreened his "13 Most Wanted" onto individual 4-foot-high canvases; they now glower defiantly from the walls at the Queens Museum, a short walk away from their original setting. Despite pompadoors and wide lapels, these images feel startlingly fresh. Perhaps, in their multiplied, mechanical realism, they signaled the end of the postwar era, of the metaphysical abstractions that Rocky loved, and helped inaugurate the America we live in now, where computers simulate reality and the limitless cruising ground of the Internet represents the full flowering of the sexual revolution. As O'Hara says at the close of his prescient poem: "We are happy here/facing the multiscreens of the IBM Pavilion. We pay a lot for our entertainment. All right/roll over."

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Most Wanted Men No. 11, John Joseph H., Jr. (1964)