A Note on the Andy Warhol Retrospective
by Stephen Berens

The Andy Warhol Retrospective, recently on view at MOCA in Los Angeles, is poised to become the pivotal survey of the artist's work. Surprisingly little critical dialogue has been recorded in response to the exhibit. (Exceptions include Robert Summer's review at Advocate.com and Holland Carter's in The New York Times.)

Unfortunately, this exhibition may be remembered as the moment when the Warhol that many of us grew up admiring—the artist who gave up the singular artwork and traditional studio to have his work produced serially in a factory (“The Factory”); the person whose early interviews rivaled Bob Dylan's for both opacity and interest; the one who provided support and a theatrical context for the Velvet Underground; an artist who, by working in a variety of disciplines, helped rewrite the definition of artistic practice; the only late 20th century American who can match Yogi Berra when it comes to coining aphorisms; one of the few famous Americans in the mid-1960’s who appeared to be gay; the artist who aspired to be a doorman and kept opening the door to let the world back into the art world—morphed into Andy Warhol, Master Painter.

I'm not surprised at this transformation, but I am surprised at how soon it occurred and how little resistance was raised. Somehow I always imagined this revision of history taking place somewhere in the distant future, when the complexity of Warhol's project would have fallen victim to the conservative collection habits of most museums, which mainly value singular objects that fit within a conventional idea of art. In that future, given the limited range of Warhol's output held by museums, Warhol would be a prime candidate to be born again as a painter. That future is now, and it makes me sad.

Warhol at MoCA
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, May 27–August 15, 2002
Brian Tucker

Andy Warhol made some great paintings, but it is disheartening to see his legacy reduced to that alone. As my colleague Stephen Berens notes, the Museum of Contemporary Art's Warhol retrospective offered a remarkably pinched view of an artist who devoted much of his career to unsettling the art-world's boundaries and hierarchies.

I don't know how much control the people at MOCA had over the content of this “incredible exhibition” (as their web site describes it), since the show was organized in Berlin before the LA museum got involved. Yet the Warhol retrospective stands as the most-touted exhibit that MOCA's ever done, so it seems fair to hold MOCA at least somewhat accountable for the show. In any case, Warhol figures prominently in the post-1960 art history that is MOCA's specialty.

Aside from some introductory paragraphs of museum boilerplate (informing us that the artist _______ subtly explored the important themes of ________ and _________, and ________), the Warhol display provided few hints that the pieces on view—mostly paintings—are parts of a complicated artistic enterprise that exceeds the bounds of traditional painting and sculpture.

The idea that artwork can exist between and beyond conventional art objects reached its zenith in Warhol's period, the 1960s through the 1980s. It has become an increasingly unfashionable model of art in recent years.

This shift in fashion is reflected in museum displays of historical art that present works in a manner more associated with commercial galleries than educational institutions, wherein discrete art objects are allowed, through their sensually-lit formal properties, to “speak for themselves,” without reliance on didactic text, documentary materials, or reference to anything extraneous to the featured object (other than the name of its owner). In some cases, such as MOCA's Ad Reinhardt show a decade ago, a presentation of paintings virtually without caption, which invites the viewer to experience the visual properties of singular works, can seem just right.

The Warhol retrospective is another story. Evidently we have reached the point where a museum is reluctant to present texts, documentary photos, and related ephemera, even when those are explicitly part of the artist's work.

Despite the claim to comprehensiveness that “retrospective” implies, huge swaths of Warhol's art activity are ignored by the MOCA show. There's nothing of Warhol's many artist's books, his hundreds of Polaroids and photobooth photos, or his six hundred “Time Capsules,” cardboard boxes in which he preserved gifts, mail and other ephemera. There's no mention of the thousands of hours of audiotapes of social encounters that Warhol made, and sometimes had transcribed for the pages of his Interview magazine. (He referred to his tape recorder, a constant companion, as “my wife.”) Nor is attention paid to his record cover designs, his television program, or the multi-media Exploding Plastic Inevitable. Nor is there any attempt to grapple with Warhol's open-to-the-public “Factory” of the mid-60s, or (unless you count some drawn and painted self-portraits) the many iterations of his public persona, one of the most salient aspects of Warhol's work.
Warhol’s films were not omitted from the retrospective, but they were effectively separated from the “art.” Some of his short portrait films—“Screen Tests”—were shown downstairs from the rest of the exhibit. Otherwise, a program of Warhol’s feature-length films (each screened once) was presented miles from the museum. I think it’s fair to presume that most visitors to the retrospective came away with little sense that film was a significant part of Warhol’s art. Many MOCA visitors bypass the downstairs theatre, the lobby of which was the only place where the museum presented a bit of historical information, including a “timeline,” a few source photos for the paintings, and copies of Interview. (I did not hear the audio tour of the show, narrated by Dennis Hopper, which the museum made available for an additional charge.)

Even the paintings included in the retrospective suffered from an incomplete presentation. Just as many of Warhol’s paintings feature a single photographic image screened repeatedly on one canvas, his gallery installations often featured whole rooms chock-a-block with paintings of only one motif—Elvis, Flowers, Mao—over and over again. Factory denizens other than Warhol himself were permitted active roles in fabricating the paintings. Both of these facts raise questions about artistic originality, arguably one of Warhol’s overarching themes. But instead of asking viewers to consider these issues, the isolated paintings were presented at MOCA unproblematically, as unique masterpieces by an individual genius.

A gust of civic boosterism blew through most of the press reaction to the show—the city government decided that a Warhol retrospective might assuage post-9/11 economic doldrums, and the papers did their bit for the war effort. There were cover stories that featured appreciations of Warhol, often insightful but usually prepared before the show opened, presuming that the retrospective would fairly represent the artist under discussion. The show was not without critics, though the question of how much of Warhol’s history was erased from this survey provoked surprisingly little comment.

The most complete coverage I saw was the cluster of articles in the LA Weekly. Doug Harvey’s review there noted some shortcomings of the retrospective’s “emphasis on traditional fine-art objects,” as well as describing the reviewer’s own queasiness about abetting the “altogether creepy” Warhol marketing blitz. The Weekly also included specifics about Warhol’s experiences in Los Angeles, and short interviews with a number of Andy’s contemporaries, some of which broke rank with the affirmative chorus—Bruce Conner dismisses Warhol as “a pathetic creature and a jerk.”

Otherwise, criticism of the show fell mostly into two camps. The first group was disappointed that certain key paintings, particularly the 1962 suite of “Campbell’s Soup Cans,” were absent from the show. The second complained that Warhol’s “queer” identity had been suppressed. Both arguments raise valid points, but both also strike me as somewhat blinkered in the face of the narrow version of Warhol’s career MOCA was offering. (There was a third strand of criticism, from outside the usual art precincts: letters-to-the editor by Asian immigrants who were angered to see banners featuring the giant face of Chairman Mao adorning the boulevards of their adopted hometown.)

The 32 famous Campbell’s Soup paintings would have been nice to see, and the pain of their absence was especially keen because they were first shown in Los Angeles. However, this line of criticism largely accepts the underlying premise of the MOCA show, i.e., affirmation of the most traditionally marketable forms of fine art and the accompanying model of a fine artist. There was no clamor for the inclusion of any number of more challenging pieces, such as “Silver Clouds,” an installation of shiny helium-filled pillows that Warhol showed in both New York and LA in 1965, and which he described at the time as his “goodbye to art.”

The highest-profile critique of the retrospective came from Holland Cotter in The New York Times. His article, and Robert Summers’ earlier piece at Advocate.com, focused on the way Warhol’s sexual-political identity had been minimized in the MOCA show. While some of Warhol’s early drawings of nude men appear in the show, and it included a number of the “coded” works he produced (the pink “Cow,” as Christopher Knight points out, is a reply to Picasso’s macho self-portraits as a priapic bull; the “Most Wanted Men” series was an obvious enough double-entendre to have been quickly removed by its nervous sponsors at the 1964 New York World’s Fair), more overtly gay-themed works—such as the “Torsos” series of nudes from the seventies, Warhol’s photographic “Self-Portrait in Drag,” and films like “Lonesome Cowboys” and “Bike Boy”—were not in the museum. Those two critical articles rightly point out one aspect of Warhol’s legacy that was truncated in the retrospective, and both writers are nuanced enough to recognize that the dear artist’s “swish” didn’t necessarily conform to the political standards of the present.

Still, it’s disappointing that the range of critical response was so limited—on one hand seeing the work in terms that confirm museum collecting habits and the values assigned by the art market, on the other hand seeing the artist primarily as the political representative of an established constituency. It seems to me that the discussion of Warhol’s career should begin with the larger picture of what Warhol actually did; what was the scope of his uneven and contradictory output, and how does one convey that to generations being introduced to his work for the first time? When MOCA’s director, Jeremy Strick, was quoted in the LA Times describing the show as “a remarkably complete presentation of Warhol’s work,” I’d like to have heard more dissenting opinions.

Not to say that Warhol’s art is doomed because of his canonization at MOCA. The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh seems committed to preserving a multifaceted version of Warhol’s legacy, and the artist is famous enough that we can count on more Warhol retrospectives in future decades, when the institutions doing the retrospection can be counted upon in turn to condense a version of Warhol that suits their interests. Here’s hoping that they recognize that any consideration of Warhol—or much of the art of his time—will be profoundly enervated if it fails to acknowledge the far-flung, popularly-priced and ephemeral activities that were big parts of Warhol’s effect, for better or worse, on art and on culture-at-large. Here’s hoping that those future retrospectives will reflect more favorably on the ideas about art that hold sway in their moment than the MOCA show did in our time.