

Warhol's Faded Memory of Nov. 22

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'Flash' Proves That Nobody's Always Right

By HENRY ALLEN
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Andy Warhol didn't make a lot of wrong moves in the 1960s, his glory years. He played the media and the New York art world like a banjo, and left America agog.

The pictures of Marilyn Monroe, the electric chair, the Campbell's soup can, all of them in slick, vacuous and ironic rebellion against the Freudian eruptions of the aging abstractionists—wow, how could he hit so many right notes so fast?

By showing a 14-print portfolio titled "**Flash—November 22, 1963**," which runs through Nov. 29, the **National Portrait Gallery** demonstrates that sometimes he didn't.

The subject is the assassination of John F. Kennedy. It should have gone right. In 1963, Warhol had done a silk-screen of 16 Jackie Kennedy news photographs from the week of the assassination. The irony was deft. Removed to the realm of art, those faces looked like icons for sale outside a cathedral. They were commodities. Warhol wasn't talking about Jackie or the assassination, he was talking about American ideas of them, about media commodities. Why not do the same for Jack?

Indifference was the dynamo of Warhol's vast mischief back in the '60s. He seemed indifferent enough to the assassination.

Andy Warhol superimposed images from that fateful day in Dallas for the prints that make up "**Flash—November 22, 1963**."

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

See WARHOL, *G13*, Col. 1

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The sixth
floor window
from which
Lee Harvey
Oswald shot
John F.
Kennedy,
from Andy
Warhol's
"Flash—Nov-
ember 22,
1963."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Andy Warhol's Art of the Kill

WARHOL, From G1

He said: "I'd been thrilled having Kennedy as president; he was handsome, young, smart—but it didn't bother me that much that he was dead. What bothered me was the way the television and radio were programming everybody to feel so sad."

In 1968, a little publisher called Racolin Press brought out 200 copies of 11 murky prints, 21 by 21. In black, silver and hues of wasted Day-Glo, they mix and repeat the Presidential Seal, a campaign photograph of Kennedy, an ad for the rifle Lee Harvey Oswald used to kill him, a filmmaker's clapper superimposed on both Oswald and Kennedy, and other media memorabilia accompanied, in the original portfolio, by wire service text wrapped around each picture: FLASH/DALLAS—KENNEDY WOUNDED/KT1240PCS/BULLETINS 2ND LEAD KENNEDY/DALLAS, NOV. 22—PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY AND TEXAS/GOVERNOR JOHN B. CONNALLY, JR. WERE WOUNDED TODAY ... THE PRESIDENT WAS PRONOUNCED DEAD AT PARKLAND XXX HOSPITAL AT 1. P.M. (CST). The gallery supplies the text in a portfolio mock-up.

Later, three more prints were added to the portfolio—the campaign portrait in orange and blue, orange and red, and orange and green. Compared with his pictures of Elvis and Marilyn, they are weak stuff, but without them the show would look like a depressed grad student's over-worked imitation of Robert Rauschenberg.

What was Andy thinking? Was he competing with Rauschenberg? Was he apologizing for his indifference to Kennedy's death? Was he trying to get points for profundity?

The first picture in the show might as well be titled "Homage to Ad Reinhardt." It's a black square, just a black square until you notice there's a campaign portrait in glossy black, on a background of flat black. You feel you're looking at the Shroud of Turin under a 40-watt bulb.

The second picture shows a dull silver Presidential Seal with two smaller seals that move in and out of view as you change your angle of view. (A touch of op art there?) Are those little circles supposed to be bullet holes?

The third, in cheesy plastic-toy blues, shows Jackie smiling from the death car. I was told by the curator that Kennedy is behind her but I couldn't see him.

Superimposed is a piece of the ad for the rifle.

On and on, in tired colors and mystifying collage.

The great thing about the Warhol of the '60s was his obviousness, the aesthetic of what-you-see-is-what-you-get. A car crash. Elizabeth Taylor. No more dank palimpsests scraped and impastoed, no more Rothko shrines. After decades of gloom and soul-grinding, suddenly there was—boing!—a Brillo box! Warhol worked the joke both ways. He was both a vandal and a scavenger. The reality of a car crash became a commodity when Warhol reproduced the news photos. The commodity of the Coke bottle became a reality when he made it art. Reality and commodity were the same. That was the message for media-crazed America.

When he looked at Jack Kennedy, he flinched. The man who had no nerves lost one or two. He couldn't vandalize. He couldn't scavenge from the actual death pictures, which he leaves out of this portfolio.

Arguably, he's trying to commodify death itself, here. One picture of Kennedy is taken from television, and reversed into a negative, so he looks like the guy on Halloween who opens the door with a flashlight under his chin, odd pink light on his upper lip, nostrils and eyelids while the rest of him vanishes into black—it looks like a passport photo for the Land of the Dead.

The portfolio cover features a newspaper front page decorated with silver flowers of a paper cutout sort. Joke? Irony? Grief?

We didn't think Andy could miss because his art was the infallible byproduct of a set of perceptions about art and reality that were irrefutable. How do you argue with a man who says he likes "being bored"? And that the Kennedy assassination was "just something that happened"?

Well, you can always say it's crap, a put-on.

A Warhol friend named John Giorno has recalled hearing about the assassination and rushing to Warhol's house: "We sat on the couch watching the live TV coverage from Dallas. Then we started hugging, pressing our bodies together and trembling. I started crying and Andy started crying. Hugging each other, weeping big fat tears and kissing. It was exhilarating, like when you get kicked in the head and see stars. Andy kept saying, 'I don't know what it means!'"

Five years later he tried to recapture that day. With so much grief, indifference, morbidity, dread, irony, celebrity, charisma and media savvy at his command, he failed. The failure is heartening. Reality 1, Commodity 0.



With their tired colors and mystifying collage, the works in "Flash" hardly live up to the name.