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I’ve never met a person I couldn’t call a beauty.—Andy Warhol

From 1970 to 1987 Andy Warhol took thousands of Polaroid pictures, the vast majority of which were never seen by the public. These images often served as the basis for his commissioned portraits, silkscreen paintings, drawings, and prints. Warhol captured a wide range of individuals with his Polaroid Big Shot camera. The royalty, rock stars, industrialists, artists, patrons of the arts, and athletes who epitomized 1970s and 1980s high society, as well as unknown sitters, are represented with a sense of dignity and verve. Warhol was interested in a new definition of “Society” that emerged in this period. In the introduction to the 1979 publication *Andy Warhol’s Exposures*, the artist wrote:

Now it doesn’t matter if you came over on the Mayflower, so long as you can get into Studio 54. Anyone rich, powerful, beautiful, or famous can get into Society. If you’re a few of those things you can really get to the top.¹

Warhol’s images not only documented, but participated in, the creation of this new social world, satisfying both the need of his subjects to be seen and the desire of the viewer to gain access to this milieu through the act of looking.

Warhol worked in advertising and commercial art before turning to fine art, experiences that informed his approach to portraiture. In 1962, he debuted his first silkscreen paintings of celebrities, serializing pictures appropriated from magazines or press photos of the time. In addition to employing found images, Warhol eventually incorporated photography into his practice and, in 1969, started a magazine

(originally called *inter/VIEW*) that often featured his own photographs of celebrities. By the 1970s and 1980s, portrait commissions became a main source of his income.

Warhol’s Polaroids are strikingly intimate, an effect achieved in part by his personal relationship with the sitters and in part by formal aspects of the images. The artist often provided a luncheon in advance of the photo session, establishing a bond with his subject and a tone for the shoot. In the resulting Polaroids, the sitter is in direct eye contact with Warhol and the camera. The strong sense of immediacy created by the sitter’s open gaze is enhanced by the tight compositions in which the subject, pressed up close to the picture plane, is isolated from any context. A feeling of vulnerability appears in some of the portraits (as suggested by the bared shoulders of *Unidentified woman (blond with bangs)*, for example), indicating a willingness to be exposed as well as the seductive nature of the artist and the photo shoot itself. The closeness forged between photographer and sitter and captured by the camera offers an illusion of sharing these private moments and of entering into Warhol’s circle of beautiful people and their glamorous lives.

While each image is unique, the consistency of composition, poses, and plain white backdrop equalizes the celebrities and the unknown subjects of Warhol’s Polaroids. After all, to Warhol, they were all beautiful people. Polaroids of individuals who are not immediately recognizable pique our curiosity. Who is the enigmatic Frau Buch? Like many of Warhol’s subjects, she is photographed with a prop. The small dog that she hugs may not identify her, but it suggests a dimension of her personality. In other Polaroids, Warhol used props as identifying elements like the attributes in Renaissance portraiture—major-league baseball pitcher Tom Seaver is shown with his mitt and NFL legend O.J. Simpson clutches a football. The teddy bear in the arms of the subject of *Unidentified girl (blue t-shirt with teddy bear)* represents an aspect childhood that everyone can relate to, although the girl is actually a scion of the new high society: Jade, the daughter of Mick and Bianca Jagger.

Warhol’s Polaroids were designed to be source material for his canvases. He would direct the sitter in a series of poses, which gave the artist ample material from which to create the subsequent silkscreen portraits. Subjects such as fashion designer Diane Von Furstenberg and patron of the arts Daryl Lillie are photographed wearing thick white makeup, black eyeliner, and bright red lipstick that evoke the stage or a high-fashion photo shoot; however, the makeup also served to flatten the images for a smooth effect in the screen-print transfer. The Polaroid Big Shot’s strong flash overexposes many images and increases the contrast, an effect Warhol deployed in the subsequent silkscreens; the flash also seems to catch each sitter—celebrities and unknowns alike—in the sudden glare of a paparazzo’s camera.

Warhol’s Polaroids borrow from paparazzi and high-fashion photography and at the same time elevate an inexpensive, everyday medium to the realm of high art. Warhol embossed his name in capital letters in the lower right-hand border of most of the Polaroids, marking them as a painter would sign a canvas. For Warhol, coming from the world of advertising, this was also a kind of branding. He wrote of Jade Jagger: “She never calls me Andy always Andywarhol, as if it were one word—or a brand name, which I wish it were.”² Warhol’s portraits confuse the boundaries of advertising and art, high and low, celebrity portraiture and the depiction of everyday people, and even photography and painting. His subjects are perpetually illuminated by the afterimage of a flashbulb, their faces immortalized by Warhol’s style.

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¹ Andy Warhol and Bob Colacello, *Andy Warhol’s Exposures* (New York: Andy Warhol Books / Grosset & Dunlop, Inc., 1979), 19.

² *Ibid.*, 28–29.

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ALL WORKS: Andy Warhol; gifts of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

FRONT *Unidentified girl (blue t-shirt with teddy bear)*, 9/1979; Polacolor Type 108; 4 ¼ × 3 ¾ in. 2008.2.90.

2 *Daryl Lillie*, 11/1978; Polacolor 2; 4 ¼ × 3 ¾ in. 2008.2.31.

3 *Heather Watts*, after June 1986; Polacolor ER; 4 ¼ × 3 ¾ in. 2008.2.28.

4 *Frau Buch*, 12/1980; Polacolor 2; 4 ¼ × 3 ¾ in. 2008.2.51.

5 *O.J. Simpson*, 8/1977; Polacolor Type 108; 4 ¼ × 3 ¾ in. 2008.2.59.

6 *Tom Seaver*, 1977; Polacolor Type 108; 4 ¼ × 3 ¾ in. 2008.2.56.

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In 2007, to commemorate its twentieth anniversary, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts launched the Andy Warhol Photographic Legacy Program. Designed to give a broad public greater access to Warhol's photographs, the program donated over 28,500 of Warhol's original Polaroids and gelatin silver prints to more than 180 college and university museums and galleries across the country. Each institution received a curated selection of over one hundred Polaroids and fifty black-and-white prints. BAM/PFA is proud to present selected Polaroids drawn from this extraordinary gift of the Warhol Foundation to the museum, and looks forward to sharing more in years to come.

