

Warhol in the spotlight

"In the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes" said Warhol.

Who was Andy Warhol? Was he, as Time magazine has continued to defame him, a supreme pusher of publicity stunts? Or was he, as legions of collectors and followers insisted he was, a prophet whose vision captured the true, ephemeral fragmentation of our time? With the victory of the Second World War, the United States became in effect a political and economic beacon for the entire planet. America represented a model of development for many European countries as well as for some eastern countries like Japan. In the book *In The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B & Back Again)*, you can read the full transcript of a television interview in which he says: "If there's one great thing about America, it's that it started the tradition that the richest consumers essentially buy the same things as the poorest. You watch TV and you see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and you can think that you drink Coke. A Coke is a Coke and there is no amount of money that can guarantee that you will drink a better Coke than what some bum on the street corner is drinking. All Cokes are the same and all Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and so do you." With this statement, Warhol seems to suggest that true democracy can only be achieved in the consumer society, the only social model capable of making us all equal in the face of everyday objects. In a world where consumption is the gravitational centre of social dynamics, people end up recognising themselves in their goods, identifying with what they possess. Warhol knew how to play with the spirit of the times, and this is why a large part of the critics consider him to be the most important artist of the twentieth century: not everyone can be universal, know how to enthrall the 'insiders' and the masses, mix 'high' and 'low' culture in a single aesthetic strand... Warhol's art was born in the 1950s, at a time when consumer goods began to be mass-produced in stratospheric quantities.

This was the period in which mass media developed and advertising was born. It was at the end of the 1950s that Warhol discovered, in the Neo-Dada of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and in the first pop proposals, a brutal recovery of the most banal and everyday reality: that transmitted by the media. He recovers it in opposition to the gestural emphasis and romantic idealism of Action Painting. It was in Neo-Dada that Warhol was formed: he discovered a cold painting, rethinking the flat image transmitted by television. Immersing himself in superficiality, he rethought himself as a machine-artist who, like factories, did not invent but reproduced, did not interpret but repeated endlessly. In 1963 Andy rented a loft on 40th Street (at 281 East 47th Street in midtown). You entered a lead-grey lobby, on the right there was a freight elevator. You had to go up to the penultimate floor to get to that 30 by 15 metre space: a perfect place for an art workshop. He called it the Silver Factory, inspired by factories that did not invent, but reproduced. In 1967 Warhol gave up painting and closed the Silver Factory to establish a new location, more like an office than an underground meeting place. With the new Factory premises, the artist embarked on a new path: Business Art. He was enthusiastic about it: "Business Art is a step up from Art", he wrote. His works become a consumer product and his name a brand. Like any company committed to selling its products, it lives on advertising, trying to create consensus and interest in its image. Just like a brand, Warhol was always in the shop window, in the spotlight, to the extent that it is legitimate to wonder if there has ever been a more published artist than him. Has there ever been an artist more eager to circulate his work, to cover the Earth, to make his art as famous and recognisable as a bottle of Coca-Cola? Being famous becomes the most important aspect of his work: "The important thing is to get people talking about you", he writes, and marketing and publicity become fundamental elements for greater profit, regardless of the content of the works. But there is something that risks getting lost in his cynicism and nihilism. Perhaps art itself...

Banksy in the shadows

'Everyone in life will have 15 minutes of anonymity,' Banksy replies.

If Warhol was the most photographed artist in the world, under endless spotlights, Banksy is a shadow that is everywhere, but you never see it. He is there and he is not there. When he is in front of you, you don't recognise him. It is futile, more than impossible, to attempt to retrace his career through dates and turning points. Telling the story of an evanescent artist is almost impossible: all we have of him are a few anecdotes, a few statements and images recorded by surveillance circuits. How can we historicise an artist who wishes to remain anonymous? In writing this essay, we have tried to balance an imbalance of visibility: by recounting Warhol, the superstar whose face is known the world over, we will try to make him disappear behind what he has done. By telling the story of Banksy, we will try to show him where he wanted to remain hidden. Like a private investigator, we will follow some passages of his artistic journey to show you what you cannot see: Banksy at work... It's a sunny day in May 2019, Venice is packed with tourists and enthusiasts. The biennial exhibition is unfolding with placid calm amid the gondolas plying the canals and the exhibition stalls of dozens of painters. Among them, on the Grand Canal, a man with one hair and a long scarf covering his face sits on a chair holding an open newspaper in front of him. Behind him stand nine framed oils on canvas of varying sizes. The frames join together to form a single work: a mosaic of paintings that awkwardly enclose an oversized cruise ship. It is so bulky that a single frame could not hold it, it is like a giant whale devouring space. Only after a few moments do you realise that this liner is penetrating the Venetian lagoon, making the bridges and bell towers of Venice look like miniatures. Under one of the frames, the title of the work is written: Venice in Oil. A play on words that can mean either "Venice in oil on canvas" or "Venice immersed in oil". The mosaic of paintings is a magnet that draws the attention of passers-by, but hardly anyone pays any attention to the artist. Only two policemen approach him at one point. They explain to him in broken English that if he doesn't have permission, he has to leave. The artist picks up his paintings and walks away just as a pachydermic cruise ship is casting its shadow over the roofs of Venice, swinging like a rhinoceros in a glass house, near one of the most beautiful and delicate squares in the world.

To this day, those two policemen probably still talk about the time they chased one of the world's most famous artists out of one of the most important art events on the planet. Banksy, silent and thunderous at the same time, was thrown off the ship that is in danger of sinking, invisible and mistreated like the rats he paints.



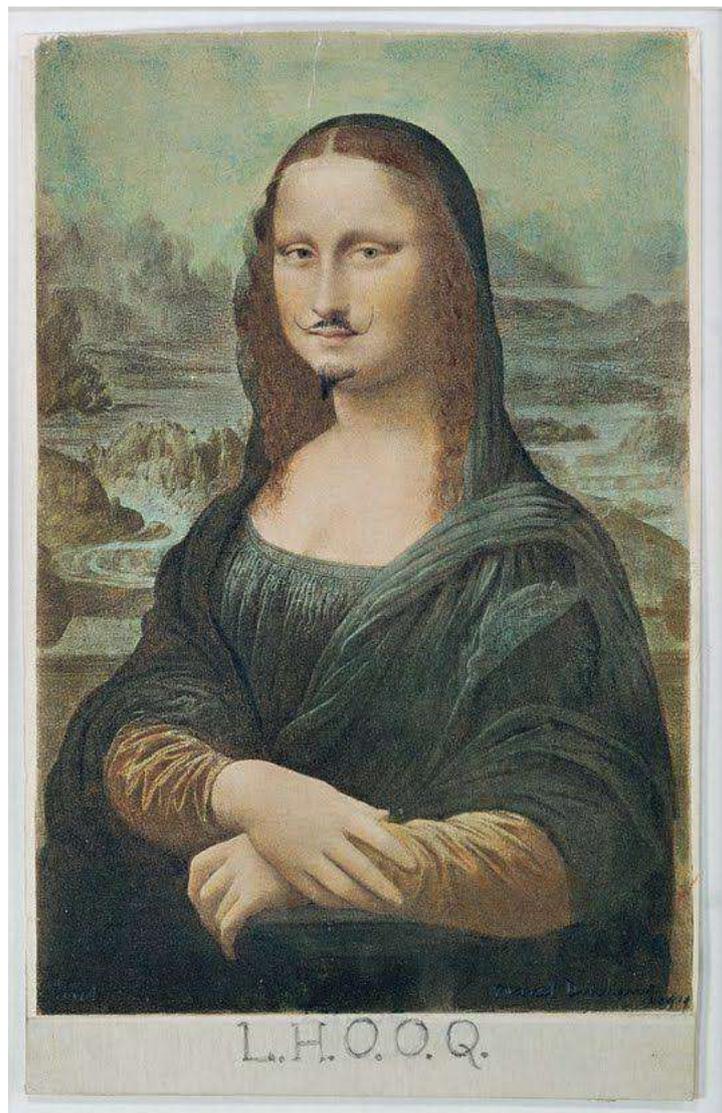
Banksy is elusive. He is pursued by fame but pretends to escape it. He disguises himself, pretends to hide, but every hiding place is an overly-lit stage. And yet, when you look where the spotlight is, you realise there is nothing there. Just a shadow that disappears as soon as it is illuminated...

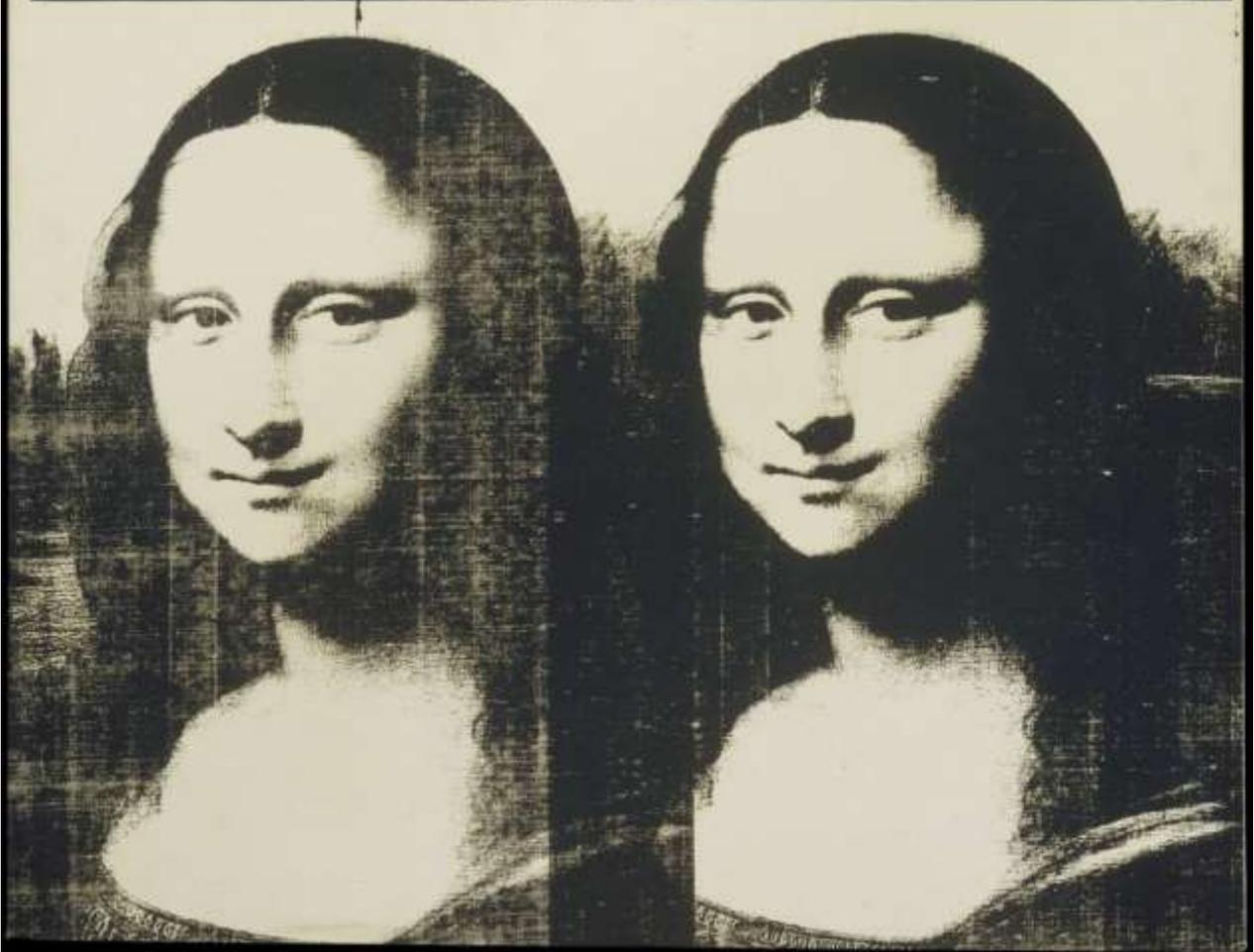
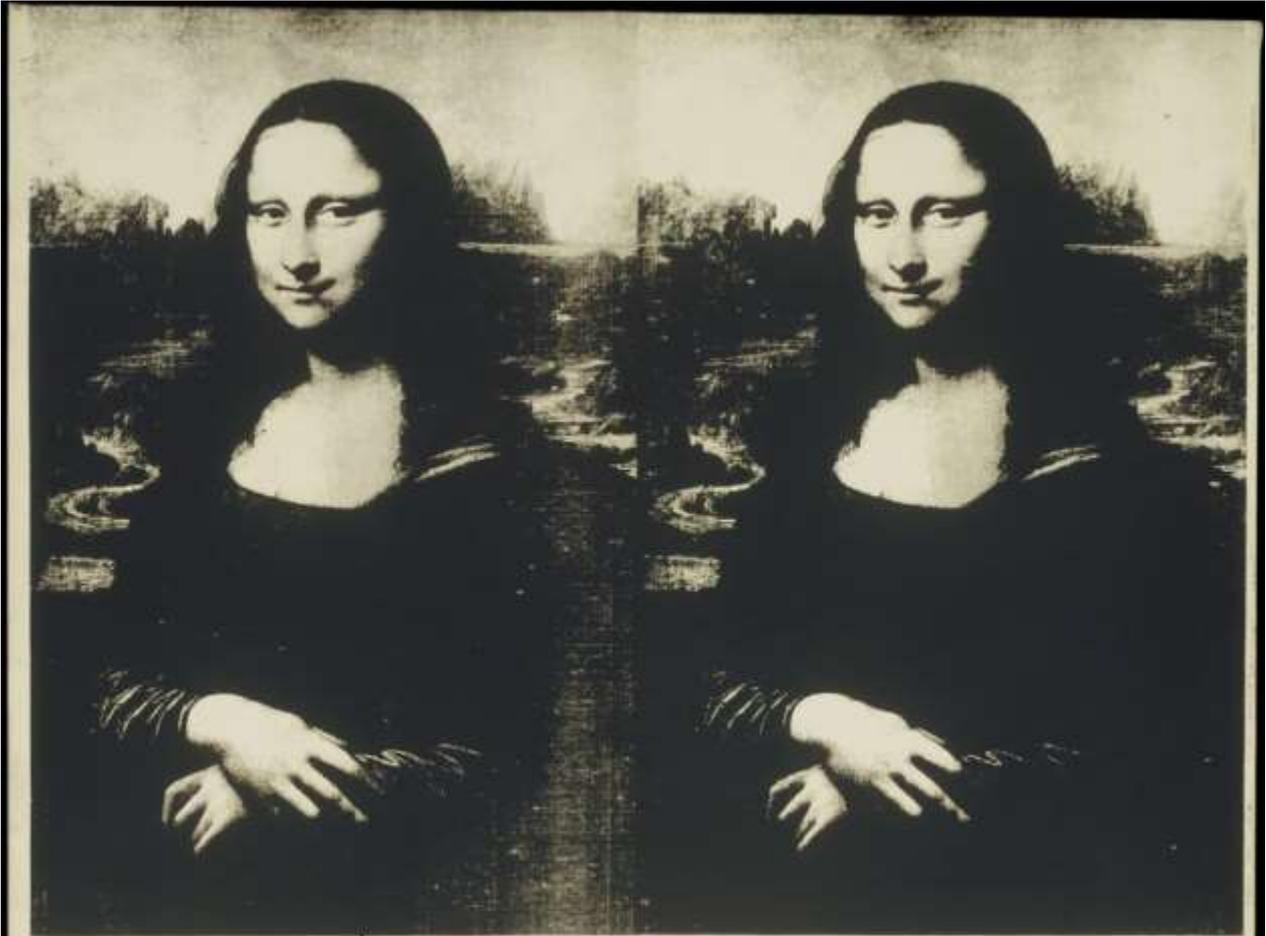
Talking to each other across decades of distance and Dada influences

The aim of this exhibition is to bring together the two most important business artists in the history of art: two artists who have never known each other, have never spoken to each other, and who, despite being the opposite of each other, end up converging in those points of suture that make the anonymous famous and the famous anonymous. It is in the ambiguity of their messages that one builds a bridge to the other. It is in the difference between their personalities that a profound similarity lurks. One embodies deism, the other anonymity. Yet for both of them, this statement is true: their greatest works of art are the characters they play. These are two artists at odds with each other. Even Warhol's name (because of its assonance with "war all") seems to challenge, from a bygone era, Banksy's hatred of war, which has become, along with his famous rats, one of the recurring themes of his works. The focus of the essay is precisely this: to investigate in parallel the aims and intentions of the two artists who have worked most on their public image. The fabulous world of Andy Warhol, famous and ubiquitous, versus the anonymous Banksy, who has never allowed himself to be immortalised and who risks arrest from Disneyland to Palestine, but achieves the same result as Warhol: to make his art a worldwide media event. The aim of this exhibition and this essay is therefore to present the two most important business artists in the history of art, to highlight the characteristics they have in common

and the abysses that separate them. Dada and Neo-Dada influences are, for both of them, a good starting point to begin this reflection. Warhol's works are effective because the viewer's attention is diverted from the art object, as a connotation, to the artist himself, transforming him into a connotator: from the object to the subject. Thus the work-object becomes a consumer good. In the same way, Banksy transfers the attention of the art world and the entire planet to the artist's action, which thus becomes a work perfectly in line with the precursors Dada and Neo-Dada. The provocation to the art market is explicit. Art itself becomes action. In 1918, Tristan Tzara wrote in the Dada manifesto: "Our provocations, our demonstrations, are only a means to make the petit-bourgeois angry, thus awakening in him the consciousness of his own shame". It is hard not to relate this statement to the artistic intentions of Warhol and Banksy as well, both are provocative and irreverent, and perhaps it is worth taking a quick look at the Dadaist roots of these two artists. To do so, let us look at Marcel Duchamp, who best embodies the image of Dada.

In his early works, Duchamp had the happy idea of mounting a bicycle wheel on a kitchen stool. A couple of months later he bought a cheap reproduction of a landscape. After painting two small dots on its horizon, one red and one yellow, he entitled it Pharmacy. In 1919, he took a photograph of the Mona Lisa and drew a moustache on her face. All the typical elements of Dadaism are evident in many of his works: desecration of the concept of art, indifference to good and bad taste, disorientation and shifting of context, slippage of content from the aesthetic to the verbal sphere, irony. All these features are present in the works and performances of Banksy and Warhol. A common point in a constellation of differences.







In the first Mona Lisa, Duchamp does not want to deface a masterpiece, but to contest the veneration that is passively attributed to it by common opinion. In the second, Warhol wants to transform a unique piece into a multipliable product. In the third Mona Lisa, Banksy wants to decontextualise the Mona Lisa: he removes it from its frame and imprints it on the wall separating Palestine from the West Bank, recontextualising and repositioning it as Duchamp and Warhol did.