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**Article:**

Schirripa, Giulia (2020) *Review: A COVID-19 Case Study: Digitising Andy Warhol at the Tate Modern*. *Aspectus* (2).

10.15124/gtp7-cr11

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# ASPECTUS

A Journal of Visual Culture

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*Review: A COVID-19 Case Study: Digitising Andy Warhol at the  
Tate Modern*

Issue 2 - 2020

ISSN 2732-561X

pp. 1-3

DOI: [10.15124/gtp7-cr11](https://doi.org/10.15124/gtp7-cr11)

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Published: 14 October 2020



# A COVID-19 Case Study: Digitising Andy Warhol at the Tate Modern

27 July 2020 – 15 November 2020

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Andy Warhol is the first Warhol exhibition held at Tate Modern in almost twenty years. A major retrospective, the exhibition was meant to open on the 12th of March and run until the 6th of September. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this schedule was severely disrupted: the show only ran for five days before Tate Modern had to close its doors entirely, and the gallery was only able to reopen to limited number of visitors on the 27th of July. In response to this disruption, the exhibition dates were extended to the 15th of November. However, museumgoers did not have to wait for Tate Modern to reopen to be able to appreciate the exhibition: an interesting outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it pushed the institution to dedicate significant time and resources to making the exhibition digitally accessible through a series of online content, including video essays by the exhibition curators and two room-by-room guides for the public at home.

The exhibition presents an opportunity to dive into the man behind the myth of Andy Warhol (1928 – 1987), as the curators worked to present a personal narrative of his life. Some of the most prominent themes include his immigrant and queer identities, his relationship with death and religion, and his innovative approach to introducing the technological innovations of the time into his work.

This exhibition presents an interesting case study of the translation of physical shows into the digital realm. While the online spectator is offered the opportunity to experience and learn about the themes of the show, they are not given a visual understanding of the physical structure of the show. It is now common for museums to present digital content as a means to both promote and complement a physical exhibition. The case of the Andy Warhol exhibition at the Tate is particularly interesting as the exhibition was digitised in its own right and now lives as both a physical show and an online one.

This dual nature of the exhibition is clear from the Tate webpage, which offers both a link to buy a ticket for the physical show and also the option to explore the show digitally “room by room”. The online exhibition page starts with a small introduction of the show, which reminds the viewer of the rarity of this retrospective, mostly due to the presence of artworks never or rarely shown in the United Kingdom. The viewer is then virtually guided towards a video featuring the two curators, Gregor Muir and Fiontán Moran; this video provides a thorough overview of the intentions of the exhibition and offers some details about the most important pieces in the show.

Moving from his early life as an immigrant in Pittsburg to his glamorous life in New York, the curators present a snapshot of the life of Warhol, intertwining it with footage from some of the artworks from the show. The selected artworks are often shown in quick reels throughout the video, with some exceptions. The two curators focus in particular detail on the Ladies and Gentlemen series and the Sixty Last Supper, offering a visual analysis and a contextualisation of both within the narrative of the show. The video also includes lesser-known artworks, like Warhol's early series of drawn portraits of young men, which the video presents as displayed in the Tate gallery.



*Andy Warhol, Ladies and Gentlemen (Lurdes Wilhelmina Ross), 1975, acrylic paint on canvas, Italian private collection. © 2020 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by DACS, London.*

Right after this introductory video, the viewer is given the option to download a “large print guide” of the exhibition. The 142-page file contains no images, but instead features some tombstone information about the displayed artwork, a map of the gallery rooms, and some more detailed explanations for key works. The booklet might be helpful for someone with prior knowledge and/or a scholar undertaking an art-historical investigation, but it turns out to be a rather unhelpful source for a “normal” viewer, who might be overwhelmed by the written information and lack of visual sources.

The download is quickly followed by the promised “room by room” exploration of the exhibition. In a blog-like manner, the exhibition rooms are translated into “chapters” or

“sections” of the webpage, each of which contains the room title, at least one art piece from the room, and an overall introduction of the room themes. This summary of the twelve rooms is complementary to the curatorial video introduction, as it gives more structure to the narrative of the exhibition by offering a glimpse into the physical structure and layout of the exhibition throughout the Tate galleries. The rooms follow the development of Warhol’s art, from his early exploration of his sexuality (the series of line drawings of young men) to his interest in more experimental art practices (*Exploding Plastic Inevitable* and *Silver Clouds*) to the post-gunshot return to Pop Art and the effect of the AIDS epidemic. Once again, the spotlight is primarily given to the *Ladies and Gentlemen* series and to *Sixty Last Suppers*.

Room 9, which houses *Ladies and Gentlemen*, is the only section which is given two images instead of one, still a small representation of the twenty-five pieces featured in the room.<sup>1</sup> In this section, there is an attempt to contextualise this series within the broader lack of representation of trans people, especially Black and Latinx, in art. The ethics behind Warhol’s choice of depicting this community he was not part of, and behind the intentions of the art dealer that commissioned the series, Luciano Anselmino, are also explored. Just as in the video, *Sixty Last Suppers* is discussed in-depth, as the only piece mentioned, and then present, in Room 12. The piece closes the exhibition both by encapsulating all the key themes of the show, like queerness, religion, and death, but also as one of the last works produced by Warhol, who died in 1987, just a year after the completion of this work.

Overall, this exhibition is adequately digitised, especially considering how this material is freely available to the public while the in-person exhibition ticket costs £22. At the same time, the viewer is never given a full visual understanding of what the exhibition structure looks like. Consequently, the online exhibition takes more the form of complementary content to the physical show, more than a show in its own right.

The physical show has been open again to the public since the 27<sup>th</sup> of July, even though early booking is necessary to access the space. At the time of writing, the waiting time for a non-members ticket is over two weeks. The online exhibition can be found at this link: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/andy-warhol/exhibition-guide>

**Andy Warhol is on display at the Tate Modern from 27 July 2020 to 15 November 2020.  
Curated by Gregor Muir, Director of Collection, International Art, and Fionán Moran, Assistant Curator, Tate Modern; and Yilmaz Dziewior, Director, and Stephan Diederich, Curator, Collection of Twentieth-Century Art, Museum Ludwig Cologne.**

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<sup>1</sup> The Tate offers a spotlight on the series, in which some of the most important sitters are more thoroughly introduced. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/andy-warhol-2121/ladies-and-gentlemen>