

Warhol's *Flash & Electric Chairs* for Docents - Bob Maietta

“Lament for a Dead President: Andy Warhol's Flash—November 22, 1963”

Published in 1968 as an artist's book consisting of 11 screen prints interlaced with teletype reports of the events that day, sequence of prints - not linear progression of time, teletype flash sequence - linear.

Images sourced from campaign posters, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, televised images, no repeated frames as in previous series but Kennedy's face from campaign poster is used 8 times in different ways.

Images manipulated with close-ups, cropping, reversals, superimpositions, negative photographic imagery, context removal, blurred imagery, strong blacks and whites, bold saturated color.

Cover of portfolio - front page of New York World Telegram on November 22, 1963 with headline PRESIDENT SHOT DEAD all partially obscured by dark flowers which somewhat resemble bullet holes and splattered blood, or perhaps flowers strewn across a grave, or “Flower Power” movement of 1968?

Jacqueline Kennedy III - 1966 - used photo(s) of Jackie on Nov 22nd and at JFK funeral, variably removed background context of setting, cropped in on her face, close-ups tell the story of young, happy, glamorous wife of president morphing to grieving widow as seen in the pain displayed on her universally recognizable face which captures the sorrow of the nation.

Images from *Flash* Series - 1968:

- 1.) Extreme close-up of Kennedy in black and half tones shows face fading in and out, color and fading hints at tragedy to come
- 2.) Cropped close-up of faded presidential seal superimposed with smaller versions of seal and 3 gray discs echoing the 3 gun shots fired, small image of Jack and Jackie to the left in the moments before the shots were fired, image of rifle (in book depository?)
- 3.) First Lady in Dallas limo just before shots in blue indicative of sadness to come
- 4.) Photographic negative and positive images (one reversed) of Kennedy in red echoing blood
- 5.) Image of Oswald in pink moments before he was shot by Jack Ruby with movie clapboard superimposed in front of him
- 6.) Green advertisement for similar rifle, actual murder weapon superimposed on it
- 7.) Kennedy in gray and white suggesting a ghostly transition
- 8.) Book depository depicting open window from which Oswald fired shots
- 9.) Red and green with movie clapboard superimposed over Kennedy's face with smaller and different Kennedy face further superimposed, superimposed on Oswald's profile?
- 10.) Negative image of Kennedy from televised speech in 1961 announcing NASA's plan to put a man on the moon with face sketched in purple against black background

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Flash cont'd:

11.) Polarized negative of Kennedy's face in the campaign poster with one reversed, red and blue - patriotic theme

Note that this was the first major news story to play itself out on live television. With *Flash* Warhol is commenting on media over-saturating the public and blunting the senses (see quote below*), suggesting the notion of society's collective understanding of the event is a result of media construction rather than our own personal emotional response; note how public opinion is being shaped today by exponentially larger mass media and social media which is further complicated by a rash of "fake news."

Note that *Flash* is also related to Warhol's recurring themes of death and disaster, celebrity and fame.

Done in 1968 - 5 years after the assassination - why? Perhaps because it was the most turbulent year of the 60s with political assassinations of MLK and RFK, civil unrest, racial tensions, American crimes against humanity (My Lai Massacre), fervent antiwar demonstrations, etc. Warhol himself was shot on June 3, 1968 by Valerie Solanas - feminist, actress, writer, founder of SCUM-Society for Cutting up Men, and casual hanger-on at The Factory; but work on the Kennedy *Flash* Series had started before that.

*(In 1963 Warhol said of JFK's death, "*I'd been thrilled about 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 television and radio were programming everybody to feel so sad. It seemed like no matter how hard you tried, you couldn't get away from the thing.*" But...Warhol's poet friend John Giorno who was with Warhol the day of the assassination says otherwise, "*When Walter Cronkite announced Kennedy was dead, we started hugging each other, pressing our bodies together and trembling. I started crying and Andy started crying. We wept big, fat tears. It was the symbol of catastrophe of our own lives.*" Note here Warhol's public persona vs private persona.)

Questions for Museum visitors:

1. Regarding the *Flash* cover - what do you think the purpose of the multiple flowers are? (see suggestions above)
2. What is the significance of the colors used in the prints? (see suggestions above)
3. What might the purpose be of the movie clapboards superimposed over Kennedy and Oswald be? (Both he and JFK were shot. Is it a Cinema Verité experiment where real-life events are being made into a movie, is it something else?)
- 4.) Why might the images not be in sequential order when the teletype is? (I would love to know some of the answers to this question.)

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Electric Chairs Series

Electric Chairs paintings first done in 1963 - works originate with an image from a news wire dated 1/13/53 announcing the death sentences of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg at Sing Sing Penitentiary (north of NYC on the Hudson).

Photographic image transferred onto canvas then colors applied.

40 *Electric Chair* versions, mostly black silkscreen ink on vividly colored backgrounds, beautiful colors draw you in and then content of image shocks.

Of note is that the *Electric Chairs* done in 1963 coincide with the year that Sing Sing Penitentiary performed its last execution due to NY State banning the death penalty.

Series of *Electric Chairs* prints done later in 1971.

The works reflected the growing controversy surrounding the death penalty in the US at the time, and is still a hotly debated issue today.

Questions for Museum visitors:

1. In one word, what is your emotional response to these prints?
2. Do these images take a stand for or against capital punishment? (They seem to remain impartial.)
3. Do these prints conjure up your own feelings on capital punishment?
4. How relevant are these prints today? If relevant, how so? If not relevant, why?