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ESSAY

How Do Soup Cans Multiply?

Radu Jude's *Sleep #2* (2024)

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A monochrome night-vision image shows a few white objects against a dark background. In the next shot, dim twilight reveals that we are, in fact, observing headstones. Daylight arrives, and the name "WARHOLA" becomes legible on one of them: the resting place of Andy Warhol and his parents. Since 2013, a direct feed from a static, low-resolution EarthCam looking at the artist's grave has been accessible to anyone with an internet connection. The project is called "Figment."[1] A click suffices to see Warhol's grave in 'live action.' A patient viewer with time to spare could watch the feed for hours, days perhaps, to see some kind of 'event' occur, such as the shifting light at sunset, visitors' interaction with the tombstone, or the sudden entrance of animals (the graveyard, it seems, is also visited by deer). Of course, most of the time, 'nothing' happens. Experts unanimously agree: Warhol would have liked his death to become a video project, and *Figment* feels "Warholian" indeed.[2]

For Radu Jude, a filmmaker known for his interest in digital culture and contemporary modes of media production and consumption, *Figment*'s direct feed is arguably a goldmine that comes at a cheap price. His *Sleep #2*, presented both as a film and an audiovisual installation,[3] consists of an hour-long montage of shots from the live stream. Made entirely remotely, from screen recordings in the filmmaker's home in Romania, the film records changes in the fauna and flora surrounding the graveside, the passing of the seasons, and, inevitably, tombstone tourists posing beside Warhol's grave to take their pictures. Like many projects born during the COVID pandemic, this is a "desktop film."[4]

Discussing his future legacy in 1966, Warhol seemed aware of the rapidly changing trends in art, declaring: "there is no future at all …. Of course, my things will mean nothing".[5] His *oeuvre* was born from a postwar shift in art, when the categories of high art, commercial design, and mass culture started to converge. As a commercial fashion artist, Warhol's advertisement designs

proudly decorated shopping centers, and, just a few years later, his 'fine art' prints of commodities entered the most prestigious galleries. Yet this move from shop windows to museums was the very core of Pop Art. By exhibiting beloved prints of daily life commodities and objects from popular culture in cold, colorful, and diagrammatic designs, such as a Coca-Cola bottle (1960) or a soup can ("Campbell's Soup Cans," 1961–1962), Warhol turned consumerism into art. At the same time, Pop Art's aesthetic codes addressed "everyone" rather than the "select few," democratizing access to art consumption.[6] If art, like anything else, becomes an object of mass consumption, why not death? Warhol himself, after all, was fascinated by death and by audiences' relationship to celebrity. His "Death and Disaster" series includes images of deadly car crashes, suicides, skulls, and electric chairs, while he also made multiple works on James Dean after his death.

Jude's *Sleep #2* condenses the consumerist side of death. Warhol's grave has become whatever people want it to be. Visitors take pictures in front of it, perhaps to share the experience of 'meeting' Warhol with their friends. They leave soup cans on the headstone (whose number varies from a couple of cans to a collection of dozens according to the shot), transforming the site into a shrine. They arrange picnics, drink beers with "Andy," play the guitar. They present all sorts of gestures, both the expected and the unusual. On one occasion, for instance, a man steals a soup can, slipping it into his plastic bag, possibly to eat it, but more likely to carry some of Warhol's aura back home. The grave becomes the locus of an art project in which everyone is invited to take part.

Adoration is, of course, the post-death future of many celebrities. François Truffaut's grave in Paris is continuously covered with metro tickets, both an homage to his films and a tourist ritual. Intuitively, one might think of cemeteries as peaceful places for contemplation about life and the beyond, or as sites of mourning for loved ones. Yet a visit to any famous cemetery, such as Père Lachaise, shows that they are organized for tourists, not families. Maps distributed at the entrance promise to lead visitors to Edith Piaf, lying not far from Jim Morrison, and then to sculpted tombstones for Holocaust victims beside a monument to French soldiers who died in the Algerian War of Independence. All are equal in death, and all are equal before tombstone enthusiasts.

Beyond corporate art and consumerism, Warhol, like his contemporaries, was occupied with the idea of (almost identical) repetition, largely enabled by postwar technological advances. In 1963, John Cage staged his 18-hour-long performance of Erik Satie's "Vexations," consisting of 840 repetitions of a single piano phrase that itself contained internal repetitions, a project he had previously considered to be a torture for audiences.[7] A year later, Warhol screened *Sleep*, a silent black-and-white film lasting over five hours, showing the poet John Giorno, Warhol's lover at the time, asleep. Both the press and

viewers were surprised, yet ecstatic, to discover that the film was a long repetition of bodily rhythms, such as breathing, where seemingly nothing happens though the “slightest variation” is transformed into a spectatorial event.[8] Warhol’s next film project, *Empire* (1965), offered an even more difficult viewing experience. This time, audiences could watch a single static shot of the top of the Empire State Building for over eight hours, in which the most memorable events occur when the sun sets, the city lights turn on, and, hours later, switch off again, leaving a nearly black screen. In other words, the film shows time passing in real time.

Unlike *Empire*, *Sleep* is not static but carefully constructed from looped material, giving only the impression of continuity, for viewers may watch the same reel on repeat several times without realizing it. Biological repetition, the movement of a breathing belly or chest, merges with the mechanical repetition of the editing, confusing the senses. Originally conceived for Brigitte Bardot, *Sleep* aimed to present a celebrity in their most intimate moment, preying on a voyeuristic desire that allowed audiences to eat up a star “all you want to.”[9] On the other hand, *Sleep* has been described as a film about death,[10] with some shots of Giorno resembling a corpse or a severed head.[11] The film thus contains both love and death, (erotic) voyeurism coupled with a fascination for the eternal presence that images promise. In this sense, *Figment* becomes the ultimate materialization of this ambition: the beloved celebrity sleeps (this time eternally), and viewers can watch (and project) for as long as they want.

Sleep #2 adds another layer to the game of who-is-watching-whom, as the film also draws attention to the filmmaker behind the scenes. Occasional digital zoom-ins, and a single moment when the feed is paused, remind viewers that someone is actively observing and recording these images. The filmmaker’s restlessness and fatigue during the painstaking and somewhat obsessive task of gathering images and moments from several hours of live feed is also audible, as Jude’s breathing occasionally becomes part of the film’s score. The network of gazes thus acquires another dimension: the celebrity sleeps, visitors look at the grave, anyone can watch the visitors, and now (new) viewers can watch a reconstruction of the filmmaker’s observation of the tourists who visit the dead.

The motif of repetition in *Sleep #2* is primarily seen in the natural passage from day to night and the passing of the seasons. But the film also conveys another idea of repetition, which is linked to the tourist industry. While some actions at Warhol’s grave stand out to viewers for their theatricality, such as the picnic gathering or the soup-stealing man, most visits are interchangeable. They are like near-identical copies of each other in that they can be reduced to a simple formula: one person poses, while another takes a picture. Yet these are arguably the most interesting visiting gestures, carefully curated by Jude over months of observation. *Sleep #2* is thus also a sociological observation of behavioral patterns in front of a celebrity’s ‘aura’ – ritualized, repetitive

gestures of tourism. Several discussion threads and online articles ask, “Why do we all take the same travel photos?”[12] There is some variation, certainly, but in essence tourism is about experiencing for oneself what others have already done, yet tourist guides describe as “unique.” What does it mean to take nearly identical photographs of the same themes, from almost identical angles, in an endless repetition? Like Pop Art, tourism is an activity to be consumed by the masses, and its result is a series of repeated images and gestures with only slight variations.

Sleep #2 does not lean heavily on this aspect. There is no overt moral judgment or grand statement. On the contrary, the film presents itself as a peaceful, poetic gaze at nature, observing the passage of time and the seasons, a mood emphasized by the nature-themed haikus that appear on-screen. People, animals, plants, and even the weather coexist on the same non-hierarchical level. Life unfolds, and humans are one of its elements. At the same time, watching the film, it is impossible not to think how strange this natural passage of time is. We have enabled the constant surveillance of graves, similar to our 24/7 policing of cities; we visit galleries, museums, graves, landscapes, anything any celebrity touched; we take millions of nearly identical photographs and pour enormous energy into storing them in costly data centers located underwater just to post them on our Instagram accounts. We consume information, art, and death alike, and mostly online. This is life, now.

1. In 2013, the Andy Warhol Museum partnered up with EarthCam to install a 24/7 direct feed of the artist’s grave. See: The Andy Warhol Museum. (2013). Figment [Webpage]. https://www.warhol.org/andy-warhols-life/figment ↩
2. As art critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote, “I have angled for reasons to snoot the webcam stunt. I can’t think of any.” In: Schjeldahl, P. (2013, August 9). Grave sight. The New Yorker. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/08/12/grave-sight ↩
3. *Sleep #2* is presented as a four-screen installation at The Film Gallery in Paris. See: e-flux. (n.d.). Radu Jude: Sleep 2 [Announcement]. e-flux. https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/6784171/radu-judesleep-2 ↩
4. The term refers to films constructed from screen recordings of live feeds captured by automated cameras. Such works were multiplied during the COVID pandemic. ↩
5. Buchloh, B. H. D. (2000). Neo-avantgarde and culture industry. MIT Press; p. 461. ↩
6. Buchloh, 2000, p. 467. ↩
7. Joseph, B. W. (2005). The play of repetition: Andy Warhol’s Sleep. Grey Room, 19, 22–53. ↩
8. Joseph, 2005, p. 26. ↩

9. Berg, G. (1989). Nothing to lose: An interview with Andy Warhol. In M. O'Pray (Ed.), *Andy Warhol: Film factory*. British Film Institute; pp. 56–57. ↩
10. The most recent adition to artworks addressing this idea is David Cronenberg's *The Shrouds* (2024), in which a digital installation allows the live viewing of decomposing bodies inside the grave. ↩
11. Joseph, B. W. (2005). The play of repetition: Andy Warhol's *Sleep*. *Grey Room, 19*, 22–53. ↩
12. See, for instance: Reddit. (2018, January 1). Why we all take the same travel photos [Online forum post]. Reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/photography/comments/a59e57/why_we_all_take_the_same_travel_photos/; Sachs, S. (2018, January 18). *Why all travel photos are the same*. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/story/why-all-travel-photos-are-the-same/ ↩