

ETHAN COHEN

From Warhol to Wahlstrom
From 60s Celebrity to Today's Social Media



*An exhibition of works by Andy Warhol in dialogue
with Swedish artist Johan Wahlstrom*

*Conceived by **Paco Barragán**
for Ethan Cohen Gallery
New York*

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From Warhol to Wahlstrom *From 60s Celebrity to Today's Social Media*

Participating Artists: *Andy Warhol and Johan Wahlstrom*

Curator: *Paco Barragán*

Venue: *Ethan Cohen KuBe, Beacon*

Dates: *October 20th – December 1, 2018*

Opening Reception: *October 20, 3 p.m.*

Gallery Address:

211 Fishkill Ave, Beacon, NY 12508

Opening Hours:

12 PM – 7 PM Thursday to Sunday

Or by Appointment

From Warhol to Wahlstrom *From 60s Celebrity to Today's Social Media*

Ethan Cohen KuBe is proud to announce the exhibit *From Warhol to Wahlstrom: From 60s Celebrity to Today's Social Media*, in which select works by Andy Warhol conduct a trenchant dialogue with recent works by the New York based Swedish artist, Johan Wahlstrom, from his celebrated series *Social Life*. Wahlstrom has sufficient personal experience of celebrity to have that dialogue: he was a rock and roll keyboardist renowned in Sweden from age 20 and toured for years with major Western rock stars. Among other things, he also represented Sweden internationally as a champion horse dressage competitor.

The show's theme therefore chronicles the arc of fame-driven selfhood from Warhol to the present. It explores the false-real media forces that generate individual identity and its dreams of becoming. Warhol birthed an idea of the hypothetical self midwived by fame, the sense of elevation into being by the implied applause of pop culture. He prophesied a future where all would share that fame briefly. That future has arrived. In stark, dramatic images, Wahlstrom's work shows us the impoverished outcome, the multiplied isolation of illusory validation via the Internet: everyone is famous in a vacuum bubble on social media.

In the era of a notorious twitter presidency, Wahlstrom's work also offers a strong political dimension. Having lived the historic last two years in New York, Johan Wahlstrom has manifestly absorbed America's current critical moment. He has already achieved recognition among collectors and art critics alike with his *Existential and Distorted Happiness* series. His distorted faces among Pollock-like compositions depicting today's political landscape with irony.

From Warhol to Wahlstrom: From 60s Celebrity to Today's Social Media, conceived and curated by respected international curator Paco Barragán, constitutes a thought-provoking punctum to the Whitney retrospective *Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*, "the largest monographic exhibition to date," according to the Whitney's press release. "We constantly see large

retrospective exhibitions of Andy Warhol, just like the coming one of the Whitney”—states curator Paco Barragán—“but although they may include new material, they tell the same story all over again about experimentation and the power of the image in contemporary society. Warhol’s work and philosophy”—argues Barragán—“comes out much stronger when juxtaposed in dialogue with the work of an artist like Johan Wahlstrom, whose series *Social Life* is not only an answer to Warhol’s, but they fascinatingly convey the road from 60s exclusive celebrity to today’s massive social media, one of the most democratic developments in 21st century society. In Warhol’s time only a small group of celebrities could “star in a movie”. Today we can all star in our own movies. It is precisely Johan Wahlstrom who after having a very personal experience of celebrity has been able in his series *Social Life* to interpret and analyze the new social landscape like no other contemporary artist.”

In his recent ironic series *Social Life*, Swedish artist Johan Wahlstrom portrays today’s society like a neurophysiologist. His dark paintings convey what we all thought we wanted: our own celebrity. “You can turn into a celebrity with no reason or effort, wanted or unwanted”—claims Johan Wahlstrom—“and have an instant social life. Like instant coffee! Even Marx would admit it’s the biggest revolution ever in mankind! Now the question is: what kind of social life has brought this democratization of celebrity that works like Big Brother where people don’t communicate with each other any more?”

Warhol’s joy, coolness and flashy colors have given way to Wahlstrom’s estrangement, self-absorption, and dull colors. Is this the fate of the ride from the cheerful 60s to the depressing 2010s? From capitalism to neo-capitalism?

“We have thousands of friends”—continues Wahlstrom—“we are globally interconnected, but the truth is that our social life is an illusion. This all-time-availability is turning us into zombies. Just look at the subway, the restaurants, in the elevator: everyone is possessed looking at their smart-phones and their likes!”

From the ‘warholian’ promising utopia of celebrity we have moved into a

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‘wahlstromian’ dystopia of ‘hyperflexibility’, ‘mobility’ and ‘lack of communication’. The strong and garish colors that characterized the glow of celebrity have given way to the black and grey ones of our solitary social lives.

And this challenging transformation at the core of today’s society is what the exhibit *From Warhol to Wahlstrom: From 60s Celebrity to Today’s Social Media* at Ethan Cohen Gallery brilliantly shows us while engaging with the figure of iconic Warhol from Wahlstrom’s challenging and updated perspective. After all, today’s social media actors are the rightful heirs of the members of the Factory: both are literally exploited and never paid, the former by multinationals like Facebook and the latter by Warhol himself!

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ARTIST JOHAN WAHLSTROM

Johan Wahlstrom, born in 1959 in Stockholm, Sweden is one of today's artists who is making a conscious effort to describe the social political landscape of our contemporary world. He is a fifth-generation artist on his mother's side. Though art was in his blood, his first creative direction was rock and roll, where he had a successful and long career as a keyboardist and singer, touring with Ian Hunter, Graham Parker, Mick Ronson and many Scandinavian artists. After 18 years, the rock and roll life caught up with him. Wahlstrom moved to a small village in France where he did nothing but paint for seven years, part of that time under the tutelage of Swedish artist, Lennart Nystrom. Wahlstrom lives and works in Jersey City, NJ, USA. His works has been exhibited since 1998 across Europe and USA in solo shows and group shows with artists like Gerhard Richter, Santiago Sierra, Erwin Olaf, Picasso, Salvador Dali, Jake & Dinos Chapman, and David Salle. Johan Wahlstrom had recently a very successful exhibition at the Georges Bergés Gallery in New York titled *Life is Good* (March-April, 2018).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE CURATOR PACO BARRAGÁN

Paco Barragán is a Spanish arts writer and curator. He is Contributing Editor of the American magazine *Artpulse* and a PhD candidate at the University of Salamanca, Spain. He has curated around 60 international exhibitions between 2002 and 2018. From 2015 to 2017 he was responsible for the Visual Arts Department of the Cultural Arts Centre Matucana 100 in Santiago de Chile. Some of the exhibitions he has curated are *This is What Life is About. Narratives of Progress, Freedom, and Self-Fulfillment in Today's Capitalism* at Domus Artium (DA2), Salamanca, Spain; *¡Patria o Libertad! On Patriotism, Nationalism and Populism* at the Cobra Museum in Amsterdam, The Netherlands and at the MoCCA in Toronto, Canada, and *Don't Call it Performance* at the Museum Reina Sofia (MNCARS) in Madrid, Spain and at the Museo del Barrio in New York, United States. Paco Barragán is author of *The Art to Come* (2002), published by Subastas Siglo XXI, Madrid and *The Art Fair Age* (2008) published by CHARTA, Milan.