

DAS MINSK

KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

INTERPLAY NO. 4

ANDY WARHOL & LOUIS ARMSTRONG

16.9.2023 – 4.2.2024

"A lotta cats copy the Mona Lisa, but people still line up to see the original."— Louis Armstrong

Parallel to the exhibition *I've Seen the Wall: Louis Armstrong on Tour in the GDR 1965*, Andy Warhol, Louis Armstrong, and the *Mona Lisa* meet in DAS MINSK's cabinet for INTERPLAY NO. 4.

Andy Warhol's *Mona Lisa Four Times* (1978) from the Hasso Plattner Collection is juxtaposed with one of Louis Armstrong's original trumpets from the holdings of the Louis Armstrong House Museum in Corona, Queens, New York.

When the singer Paul Anka, who emulated Louis Armstrong,⁽¹⁾ once asked him what he thought of imitations, he received a remarkable answer: "A lotta cats copy the Mona Lisa, but people still line up to see the original." The quote first appeared in a tribute to Louis Armstrong in the *Saturday Review* on July 4, 1970, and was immediately picked up in other articles about Armstrong that appeared that same month.⁽²⁾ It has since been reproduced virally and as unattributed on the internet and has been translated into many languages—a further form of reproduction.

INTERPLAY NO. 4 addresses the significance of the original and the copy in both the visual arts and music by bringing together three world-renowned icons: the legendary icon on canvas, *Mona Lisa*, likely the best-known Pop Artist, Andy Warhol, and the most famous jazz musician in history, Louis Armstrong, or rather his trumpet. The trumpet on display is the one Armstrong played on tour in the 1960s.

Andy Warhol has reproduced pop culture celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and Madonna many times. Hollywood's cult of stardom, advertising, and mass media were central aspects of his work.

Given his level of fame, Louis Armstrong could also have been immortalized in Warhol's oeuvre. In addition to famous African Americans such as Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Warhol also captured police violence against Black protesters during riots in Alabama in his "Race Riots" paintings from the 1960s.⁽³⁾ He used excerpts from newspaper articles, which through their serial repetition express the emotionlessness and consumability of gruesome scenes in everyday media.

DAS MINSK

KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

In *Mona Lisa Four Times*, Warhol reproduced Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503–06) four times, in other version of the work up to thirty times. The motivation was that the world-famous original painting traveled from the Louvre in Paris to Washington, DC for the first time at the turn of the year 1962–63. The *Mona Lisa* was welcomed like a high-ranking state visit. The painting was transported in a limousine and accompanied by numerous security officials. Two thousand important political and cultural representatives gathered for the ceremonial opening of the exhibition—a crowd similar to those who gathered in East Berlin, Leipzig, Magdeburg, Schwerin, and Erfurt to see Armstrong on tour in the GDR in 1965. The visit of the *Mona Lisa* to Washington, DC was a highly political affair against the backdrop of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the midst of the Cold War.(4)

Thousands of people still visit the Louvre in Paris, weaving their way through barriers, much like airport check-ins, to catch a glimpse of the original. The situation is comparable to that of pilgrims who travel long distances to behold a religious relic, often elevated, out of reach, and behind glass. Likewise, fans make pilgrimages to pop concerts. There, they queue up with another 20,000 people to follow the stars, sometimes from a great distance, with the help of live broadcasts on the big screen. Armstrong's tour of the GDR also presumably sold 18,000 tickets in one day alone. In Budapest, 80,000 people gathered on a single evening to see him live in a stadium.

The magical effect of the original seems to equally persist behind armored glass or in a live broadcast next to the actual concert stage, and Armstrong continues to ring true today: people still line up to see the original.

Armstrong's statement about copy and original attests to generosity and self-confidence. He casually compares himself to the *Mona Lisa* and equates his music to a work of art, a unique specimen. Yet the fact that others appropriated his music or imitated him certainly didn't cause him any sleepless nights. The history of jazz is full of reinterpretations of old songs that have led to innovations while also ensuring the preservation of certain titles and compositions for generations. Such a tradition builds on an awareness of the past and combines this with the freedom to keep making something new from it—to imagine and chart new paths, interpretations, and versions.

What is an original and what is a copy with regard to visual art and music? Warhol's *Mona Lisa Four Times* reproduces the *Mona Lisa*, but it is simultaneously an original Warhol with a distinctive aesthetic. Armstrong's trumpet is an original that accompanied him on his tours. It is the instrument experienced in the halls in East Berlin, Leipzig, Magdeburg, Erfurt, and Schwerin.

Jason Moran, co-curator of the exhibition *I've Seen the Wall*, and I decided to set up a

DAS MINSK

KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

listening room for our exhibition together with INTERPLAY NO. 4 in DAS MINSK's cabinet, so that Armstrong's concert in East Berlin can be heard as a vinyl recording to accompany the viewing of Warhol's work and Armstrong's trumpet.

Considering that *Schallplattenunterhalter* (record entertainers) at the former terrace restaurant "Minsk" were only permitted to play 40 percent of music from the West at the time, even at weekly dance parties, Louis Armstrong's tour with 100 hundred percent music from the West seems extraordinary and ambivalent a decade before the "Minsk" was built and only four years after the construction of the Berlin Wall.⁵

45,000 people experienced Louis Armstrong live in the GDR. They experienced what in music can be called the original, a live performance, unique and unrepeatable. Vinyl records, on the other hand, are strictly speaking the reproduction of music, but in light of today's digital distribution of music they have gained the cult character of an original. They are physical objects, but above all they are counted, like an art edition.

With INTERPLAY NO. 4, DAS MINSK celebrates reproduction and original— with an original from Andy Warhol, who created originals with reproductions of icons, with the original trumpet from Louis Armstrong, and a soundtrack on vinyl, which reproduces the irretrievable sound from the old Friedrichstadt-Palast in East Berlin and thus makes it possible to experience it again.

Paola Malavassi

The exhibition was conceived in close collaboration with the Louis Armstrong House Museum (LAHM) in Corona, Queens, New York. With special thanks to the Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation.

DAS MINSK

KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

(1) It is said that Paul Anka had a similar success with "Mack the Knife" to that of Louis Armstrong and this could have been the reason for his question to Armstrong. "Mack the Knife" is not an Armstrong composition (the original is from Kurt Weill's music for Bertold Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*), yet it is strongly associated with him because he was so successful with it. Lotte Lenya once sang this song together with Louis Armstrong in Hamburg.

(2) Ricky Riccardi, Director of Research Collections at the Louis Armstrong House Museum, explained in an email to the author: "Paul Anka did an album which included his impression of Louis Armstrong. When they finally met, Anka asked if he minded all those impressions of him by singers and comics. Armstrong shrugged and made this famous statement. It appears Louis never wrote it down and spoke it on tape, but he did say it to Anka, who related it others. It was finally included in an anthology of quotes in 1985."

(3) See Michael Luethy, *Andy Warhol: Thirty Are Better Than One*, 1995, <https://michaelluethy.de/scripts/andywarhol-leonardo-mona-lisa-kennedy-kalter-krieg/> (accessed August 2, 2023).

(4) The Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi dedicated a drawing to this fact in his April 2021 intervention at DAS MINSK *For No One And Everyone*. A figure leans against the old walls of DAS MINSK and says: "you can still hear the music, 40 percent West."

(5) On the question of the presence of Black people in Andy Warhol's work, it's recommended to read an article that analyzes the power imbalance between Warhol and the BiPoC queer and trans people from Lower Manhattan who served as models for him for a series of works. Warhol anonymized the models in this series of works by titling it simply *Ladies and Gentlemen*, rather than naming the people depicted. See: Gürsoy Doğtaş, "How Warhol Erased the Identity of His Black Trans Sitters," in: *Contemporary And*, June 19, 2021, <https://amlatina.contemporaryand.com/editorial/andy-warhol-black-trans-sitters/> (accessed August 2, 2023).