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How Warhol Foundation Head Joel Wachs Built a Pop Art Empire

Joel Wachs, the man in charge of distributing Andy Warhol's fortune, met the artist only once.

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It was in 1975, at Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles. Wachs was a 36-year-old city councilman and Warhol was signing copies of his newly published memoir, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*. Most Warhol devotees managed to secure only a cursory autograph that day, but the platinum-haired Pop artist inscribed Wachs's copy with a personal dedication and a sketch of a Campbell's soup can.



Joel Wachs in his New York office

Warhol never knew that the man before him would go on to become president of the Andy Warhol Foundation, devoting more than a decade to preserving the artist's legacy.

He had simply been thanking Wachs as a city councilor for pulling a few strings so that Margo Leavin Gallery could advertise his exhibition on a billboard above the Sunset Strip. (The major movie studios usually reserved such billboards years in advance.)

Wachs forgot about his brief brush with Warhol until he stumbled across the book more than 25 years later, while preparing for a move to New York to take over the artist's foundation. And he is certainly not wanting for Warhol memorabilia now. Warhol originals line the walls of the foundation's downtown headquarters; two leather armchairs facing Wachs's desk hail from the last location of the artist's fabled Factory. "I didn't want anybody to take off the duct tape or fix any tears before they brought them here," Wachs declares proudly. "So they look exactly the same as they did in the '60s."

Short, broad-shouldered, and quicker to smile than most art world power brokers, Wachs looks a decade younger than his 74 years. Since taking over the foundation in 2001, he has done more than give away Warhol's money, preserve his legacy, and sit in his chairs. As the only former politician at the helm of a major art foundation, he takes a clear-eyed, unsentimental approach. He is not so quietly redefining the way a rapidly growing sector in cultural philanthropy, comprised of single-artist organizations, functions.

In his will Warhol specified that nearly all his assets, including thousands of paintings now worth billions of dollars, should go "to a foundation to be created to support the visual arts." The barebones instructions—no strings, no elaboration—leave lots of room for interpretation. And Wachs has not been shy about seizing attendant opportunities.



Under Wachs's leadership, the foundation has expanded its licensing program at an unprecedented rate, lending Warhol's name and artwork to products as varied as Nars makeup, a banana-shaped body pillow, and real Campbell's soup cans. The capitalist move—which some commentators criticized as disrespectful to Warhol's legacy—has led to approximately \$3 million being contributed each year to the foundation's \$225 million endowment. But the most radical and influential changes have come in the last two years.

"Joel has this idea of really examining the mission in an almost philosophical way," says artist Jane Hammond, who has served on the foundation's board for eight years. Two years ago Wachs set up a subcommittee charged with considering the long-term future of the organization. The panel sought to determine "who is really benefiting most from our activities" and to have "a discussion beyond simply 'Who are we giving money to this year?'" Hammond recalls.

These conversations ultimately resulted in two of the foundation's boldest moves. First came its dissolution of the Warhol Foundation's authentication committee in October 2011, a decision that stunned the art world. The foundation had spent millions of dollars defending itself against lawsuits brought by disgruntled collectors who did not like the board's decisions, Wachs explains. "We got tired of spending grant money on lawyers for a service that really only benefited wealthy collectors." Within a year, the Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring estates followed suit.

"It would have been easy but wrong for a leader to freeze under the episodic but routine legal assault that the foundation experienced early in its existence," says Kathy Halbreich, associate director for curatorial affairs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "But Joel seemed to get braver as the risks multiplied, and I think that captured Warhol's spirit perfectly."

Last fall, when public arts funding was at a historic low point, the Warhol Foundation raised eyebrows yet again, announcing it would immediately sell off its entire art collection, including thousands of screen prints, Polaroids, and a few paintings. (The organization had previously sold a handful of artworks every year, though it gave away close to 4,000 of its best items to establish the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in 1991.) The first live sale, held at Christie's New York last November, featured 354 lots and brought in \$17 million. The auction house will hold four more online sales before the end of this year. In all, the Warhol Foundation collection is expected to yield at least \$100 million.

Wachs says the proceeds will enable the foundation to give away \$5 million to \$7 million more in grants each year, over and above the \$13 million allocation for 2012. (The move will save the organization almost \$2 million a year on art storage costs alone.) Much of that extra money will fund a new program that funnels money into small arts organizations in communities where public funding has been cut.

Ruby Lerner, who is the president of Creative Capital, a foundation that supports artists with grants and professional development programs and shares an office with the Warhol Foundation, says Wachs "is accustomed to unconventional solutions. People who are in local politics don't have the luxury of BS-ing their way through a problem."

Wachs acknowledges that his journey to the Warhol Foundation was circuitous. "I wouldn't suggest that anyone who wants to be the head of an arts foundation prepare for it by being a politician," he says. But it is precisely that experience, his friends say, that makes him so good at his job. As one of the Los Angeles council's youngest and longest-serving members, Wachs was instrumental in passing one of the strongest gay rights ordinances in the United States, in establishing the city's first dog parks, and in creating affordable housing for artists. "Some visionaries don't know how to deal with the day-to-day," Hammond says. "He can."

Before he ran the Los Angeles city council or became president of the Warhol Foundation, Joel Wachs was a frail boy growing up in Scranton, Pennsylvania. His father, a Jewish immigrant from Poland, ran a grocery and butcher shop. Wachs often had hay fever so severe his parents would send him to the



walk-in refrigerator—wearing a fur coat—so he would find it easier to breathe. When Joel was 10, his family moved to L.A. in the hope that the climate would improve his health.

After graduating from ucla, where he was president of the student body, Wachs graduated from Harvard Law School and earned a master's degree in tax law from New York University. For five years he worked as a tax attorney in Los Angeles, but eventually quit and ran for public office because, as he told a reporter in 1991, he did not find satisfaction doing little more than coming up with ways for rich people to save money.

"He was our guy in city hall," says Sherri Geldin, a former deputy director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and now director of the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio. "Over the years he has been a real activist in his political life for all manner of causes."

A fiscal conservative who started out as a Republican and became an independent while serving on the city council, Wachs often butted heads with other members of the council as well as powerful private interests. He opposed so many proposals—including taxpayer financing of the Staples Center and the 2000 Democratic National Convention—that some in the mayor's office took to calling him Dr. No. Others accused him of grandstanding.

In 1999, during the last of three unsuccessful mayoral campaigns, Wachs decided to come out publicly on a local cable television show. Asked if he was gay, he answered simply, "I am."

"Most people just assumed I was gay," Wachs says now. "But I felt it was critical for both me and the movement to be clear about it." (Since leaving government, he's become a registered Democrat in part, he says, because the far right began "interfering with peoples' right to live their lives in whatever way they choose.")

Wachs was, without a doubt, a canny politician. In 1981 he became president of the Los Angeles city council after an 8–7 vote described by former council member Greig Smith in his 2010 book, *If City Hall's Walls Could Talk*, as "the most politically intriguing moment of city council history." Before the election, Wachs had promised in writing to cast his ballot for Pat Russell, a colleague on the council and the favorite in the race. Behind the scenes, however, her political opponent, the council's departing president, John Ferraro, was engineering a coup: He wanted Wachs to succeed him instead. With the council divided, Wachs held the tiebreaking vote. And he used it. "It's hard for me to imagine anyone not voting for himself," Wachs says now.

Wachs's relationship with the art community was a constant throughout his city council tenure. In 1993 a group of artists including David Hockney and Roy Lichtenstein made limited-edition prints to support his second mayoral campaign. (Opponents complained at the time that the prints violated campaign finance laws, but the council never censured Wachs.) On the East Coast, Christopher Wool produced black-and-white campaign buttons.

One reason that artists liked Wachs so much is that he got them work. In the mid 1980s, he drafted Los Angeles's "percent for art" law, expanding a practice common in only a handful of U.S. cities that government construction projects allocate a percentage of their budget toward public art. "We took the idea a bit further, extending it to private development in Los Angeles and not just new buildings but improvements to existing buildings that cost more than a certain amount of money," Wachs says.

When a developer sought permission to build a \$23 million row of high-rises on Los Angeles's Grand Avenue, that law helped change the course of the city's cultural history. "Instead of spending money on sculptures or artworks in these buildings, we said to the developers, 'Why don't you build a 50,000-square-foot stand-alone museum?'" Wachs recalls. It became the flagship location for moca.

"He saw everything," says L.A. gallerist Margo Leavin of Wachs's insatiable appetite for exhibitions. "He used to come to the gallery after work and stay until 7 or 8 at night just talking about art."



And Wachs did more than talk. As a city councilman, Wachs spent a quarter of his salary on art. Now, as director of the Warhol Foundation, he expends about half. “I get two pay-checks a month—one goes to live on and one to buy art,” he says. Herbert and Dorothy Vogel, who famously amassed a world-class collection of Minimalist art on civil servants’ salaries, are Wachs’s role models.

“Since Joel looked at everything, he often was an early collector of artists’ work and he collected with unusual intelligence within a relatively constrained budget,” Halbreich says. “I am still coveting several armloads of work” owned by Wachs.

Wachs’s collection is heavy on photography and appropriation art—fitting for a president of the Andy Warhol Foundation. His holdings include work by Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Louise Lawler, Christopher Williams, Laurie Simmons, and Andrew Lord. Because of a promise he made to himself when he started to buy art, many of his purchases are now in the collection of moca.

“I began donating art from my collection in an amount equal to what I purchased each year,” Wachs says. moca now has more than 100 of his pieces, including John Baldessari’s famous silkscreen of a 1968 Artforum magazine cover, titled *This Is Not to Be Looked At*.

In 2002 a stretch of Grand Avenue between moca and the Walt Disney Concert Hall was renamed Joel Wachs Square by the city. The Los Angeles Times reported that Wachs spent most of the dedication “wiping tears from his eyes.” Of his devotion to the arts, Wachs says, “It’s not politically the smartest thing to do. But it’s where I was able to leave my mark.”

If Wachs had been more successful as a politician, he would never have taken over the Andy Warhol Foundation. In 1999 the organization began looking for a replacement for its founding director, Arch Gilles, who was nearing retirement age. Wachs, who had landed on the foundation’s radar thanks to his local arts advocacy, had already served four years on its board.

Serendipitously, Wachs was unable to assist in the search because he was making his third and final bid for the Los Angeles mayor’s seat. After receiving only 11 percent of the vote, he was crushed.

As was the case during his sudden election as city council president, however, Wachs’s colleagues had other plans for him. After interviewing a series of uninspiring candidates, the search committee—which included Geldin, Gilles, and Halbreich—suggested Wachs. “I knew running the Warhol Foundation required ample amounts of diplomacy and, when that failed, a brilliant legal mind,” Halbreich recalls.

It didn’t take long for the rest of the board to agree. “It was two days after the election; I was home licking my wounds,” Wachs says. “And I got a phone call from Arch asking if I’d be interested in the job.” Almost without taking a breath, Wachs said yes. “I resigned from the council on Friday, got on a plane Saturday, and started working here on Monday,” Wachs says from his New York office. “I don’t normally make decisions that quickly. I lived in the same house for 30 years. I had the same job for 30 years.”

Wachs says he’s always felt great admiration for Warhol; perhaps that’s why the decision came so easily. “I lived through the ’60s, which I think was probably the most liberating period,” he says. “For better or for worse—and I think for better—most people’s lives are somewhat influenced by what happened in the ’60s. And Andy Warhol played a major role in that.”

Warhol “believed that being different, for example, was not something to be afraid of,” Wachs says. “He was really the one person in the visual arts field who had a remarkable impact on our culture and who affected my life.”



In interviews, Wachs often says the best thing about his job is being able to give away money instead of always having to ask for it, as he did during his politician days. Two weeks after superstorm Sandy hit, Wachs convened the foundation's board for a vote on whether to allocate \$2 million to a special fund to help artists and arts organizations recover from the storm. Still, his fiscal conservatism—a rarity in the art world—remains on display in the way he allocates grants and operates the foundation.

To mark the 10th anniversary of Creative Capital in 2009, Ruby Lerner requested a \$1 million gift from the Warhol Foundation to help shore up its endowment. "It took Joel a while to get back, and when he finally did he looked at me and said, 'You don't want an endowment gift from us,'" she recalls. "I was really upset."

What Wachs offered instead was a long-term commitment. If Creative Capital could raise \$800,000 every year, the Warhol Foundation would donate \$1 million each year for as long as nine years. For wiggle room, "he gave us an extra \$1 million in a cash reserve fund, so if there were ever a year we didn't get the \$800,000 to qualify, we could draw on it," Lerner says. Later on Wachs raised the stakes, offering to donate \$1.5 million to Creative Capital for 10 years as long as the foundation raised \$1.5 million annually on its own. Lerner agreed. "I was a little taken aback when he first made the suggestion, but ultimately I was so moved by how creative the financing was. It's given us so much more freedom," Lerner says. "It's rare in the funding world to find that kind of partner."