

Robert & Ethel Scull

Portrait of a Collection

Acquavella Gallery, New York
12 April – 27 May

I think it's safe to say that, among most of us who attend to these things, Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966–7) is widely acknowledged as one of the first pieces to have made explicit the affinity between the look and logic of minimalism, then very much in vogue, and the look and logic of the US's commercial expansion in the decades following the Second World War. That is to say, between something like Donald Judd's wall-mounted serial progressions and all of those ticky-tacky tract homes that began to multiply in the suburban hills around cities such as New York and Los Angeles. Though *Homes* is important for this fact, it is not exactly revelatory. Malvina Reynolds wrote *Little Boxes* in 1962, after all (and the *Oxford English Dictionary* now lists 'ticky tacky' and credits her with its coinage). Whatever 'America' might have been at the time, its art was increasingly reductionist and its aesthetic increasingly banal.

As evidence, we need look no further than the collection that Robert and Ethel Scull amassed, and parts of which they then infamously auctioned, over the two decades prior to 1973. From their de Koonings to their impressive array of Johnses to their quintessential Stellas, the portions of the Scull collection on view at Acquavella show — among many other things — painting as a fugitive, dropping all its baggage and escaping into the anonymity of prepackaged emblems — Johns's *Map* (1961), Warhol's *Red Airmail Stamps* (1962) — and the promise of armchair comforts in such self-satisfied tautologies as Stella's 'what you see is what you see' (only a subtle variation on Yahweh's slightly earlier and a bit more spiritual 'I am that I am', and really the best modernist credo to date).

None of which is to suggest that banality wasn't big time at the time. Warhol made a lifetime of — and as — art out of it. Robert Scull, much to his credit, made money out of it: both out of Pop Art's flat stylings — Rosenquist is king here with *Above the Square* (1963), and Scull helped crown him — which Scull capitalised upon in that 1973 sale, and out of the taxicab business Ethel's father gave young Robert to ensure his daughter could live the way she deserved. As they say, it takes money to make money, and family money makes it easy; there's a reason Ethel, or 'Spike', as she was familiarly known, looks so pleased, self-possessed and entitled in Warhol's *Ethel Scull 36 Times* (1963). And what could be more banal than a New York City taxi?

Divorce. And a protracted one at that, which ended with the remainder of the collection going on the block in 1986, following Robert Scull's death. For all of the posturing nowadays about the 'real' America (where is it? who lives there? how can I find it?), I don't think too much gets more American than the Sculls' story and their 30-year stint as collectors of perhaps the most distinctively American art that this country has ever produced. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*



Andy Warhol, *Ethel Scull 36 Times*, 1963, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 254 x 366 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (jointly owned by Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Ethel Redner Scull, 2001). Photo: © 2001 Metropolitan Museum of Art / © 2010 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York