

Thirty Years After His Death, Andy Warhol's Spirit Is Still Very Much Alive

By R.C. Baker - Wednesday, February 22, 2017 at 9:30 a.m.

I hate being odd in a small town
If they stare let them stare in New York City*

Andy Warhol, the striving son of Eastern European blue-collar immigrants, rose out of the cultural maelstrom of postwar America to the rarest of artistic heights, becoming a household name on the level of Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Picasso. Warhol's paintings of tragic celebrities and posterized flowers caught the 1960s zeitgeist by the tail, and he hung on right up until his death, thirty years ago this week, on February 22, 1987. He dazzled and/or disgusted audiences with paintings, films, installations, and happenings that delivered doses of shock, schlock, and poignance in equal measure. In retrospect, Warhol's signature blend of high culture and base passion, of glitz and humanity, has had more lives than the pet pussycats that once roamed his Upper East Side townhouse.

Two years before he died, Warhol published *America*, a small book that is more interesting for its writing than for the meandering black-and-white photographs of a one-legged street dancer cavorting on crutches, Sly Stallone's cut physique, and other sundries. There is a striking passage accompanying shots of gravestones that eventually led to a posthumous joint project — fitting for an artist whose work had long involved collaboration. "I always thought I'd like my own tombstone to be blank," Warhol had written. "No epitaph, and no name. Well, actually, I'd like it to say 'figment.'" "

This imaginative stroke was realized when Pittsburgh's Andy Warhol Museum teamed up with [EarthCam](#) to send out a live feed of Andy's grave 24/7/365. (His parents' headstone can be seen in the background.) Warhol was famous for movies that barely moved, and here the sporadic action stems mainly from visitors who come to commune with the Pope of Pop, occasionally bearing gifts of Campbell's Soup cans, sometimes having a party. Perhaps Warhol the design virtuoso might have found a better camera angle, but the ghostly night vision, varying with the weather, can turn nearby crosses as pale as Warhol himself. The sounds in the background can be surprisingly peaceful, soft bird chirping backed by soothing traffic rumbles. One midnight I heard a forlorn train whistle, like a mood-setting cliché from an old Hollywood movie. Perhaps, for a former workaholic, this is the best way to rest in peace.

And Warhol continues working in another way. Unlike the Trump Foundation, which apparently only benefits the Trump family, the Andy Warhol Foundation supports a broad spectrum of artists and writers. I know, because I'm a recipient of a Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. But before I was even aware of the writers program, I had gotten used to seeing the foundation listed as a provider of funds to museum exhibitions, regional art centers, curatorial programs, and individual artists' projects. The foundation licenses Warhol's imagery (which has appeared on everything from skateboards and Levi's to bottles of Perrier and Absolut) to fund its endowment, which pays out millions in grants and awards annually.

Warhol — who hobnobbed with both the marginal and the 1 percent — crossed paths with Donald Trump and his then wife, Ivana, in 1981 at a party for the infamous power broker Roy Cohn. Later, Andy discussed with Trump the possibility of doing paintings of Trump Tower. "I don't know why I did so many, I did eight," Andy noted in his diary on August 5. "In black and grey and silver which I thought would be so chic for the lobby. But it was a mistake to do so many, I think it confused them." He addressed another possibility further down the entry: "I think Trump's sort of cheap."

The deal fell through, but a few years later Warhol was invited to judge a cheerleading audition in the newly opened building. "I was supposed to be there at 12:00 but I took my time and went to church and finally moseyed over there around 2:00. This is because I still hate the Trumps because they never bought the paintings I did of the Trump Tower."

It's unlikely Trump has ever read the diaries, because he uncharacteristically never took offense. In fact, he quoted Warhol in two of his books (or his ghostwriters did), repeating the same aphorism in both: "Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art." What Trump will never understand is that while art was once Warhol's business, now, through his legacy, generous philanthropy has become his business.

Andy was a Catholic, the ethic ran through his bones
He lived alone with his mother, collecting gossip and toys

Andrew Warhola was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on August 6, 1928. His father was a laborer, his mother a part-time housekeeper. They had emigrated from a region in the Carpathian Mountains wedged between the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, near Transylvania, known as Ruthenia. High-strung and often bedridden, young Andy contracted rheumatic fever when he



was eight years old. He also suffered from blotchy white skin patches and, as he hit puberty, severe acne.

The Warholas practiced a collage of Catholicism: “Half Roman Catholic, half Russian Orthodox, it was originally called the Uniate Catholic Church, but was also known as the Greek Catholic Church. They recognized the Pope, but retained the Easter Rite mass, which was said in Slavonic,” is how Bob Colacello describes it in his Warhol biography, *Holy Terror*. The geometries of floor-to-ceiling icons behind the altar of the church the Warhola family attended provided a motif for the artist’s mature work that would set it apart from his contemporaries’.

During his teenage years, Andy was obsessed with the then burgeoning genre of celebrity magazines, writing letters to his favorite stars, undoubtedly thrilled on one occasion to receive in return an eight-by-ten-inch glossy from Shirley Temple, signed, “To Andy Warhola.” He loved the Sunday funnies, too, and after he had become world famous, Warhol told one of his stable of “superstars,” Ultra Violet, that as a boy he’d been sexually attracted to Popeye and Dick Tracy.

On Warhol’s seventeenth birthday, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, heralding the end of World War II. A few days later, Warhol enrolled at Carnegie Tech. He was an atrocious speller, most likely dyslexic, and almost flunked out his freshman year, foundering in a humanities class called “Thought and Expression.” Over the summer he helped his brother Paul sell vegetables from a flatbed truck, all the while making lightning-fast sketches, including one of female customers with pendulous breasts as a visual pun for their squeezing of tomatoes to test their freshness. These well-wrought, witty drawings won an award and got him reinstated.

In his senior year, Warhol entered a painting of a doughy visage with a finger jammed up one nostril in a citywide art contest. Despite kudos from the German painter George Grosz, who was one of the judges, *The Broad Gave Me My Face, But I Can Pick My Own Nose* was rejected. The notoriety paid off, however: Andrew Warhola was the only graduate to sell out his portfolio.

I drew 550 different shoes today
It almost made me faint

After graduation, Warhol lit out for the Big Apple. Pounding the pavement between fashion publications and ad agencies, he got his first break drawing shoes for *Glamour* magazine. A typo in the illustration credit dropped the a from his surname, and a future global brand was born.

The commercial jobs came fast and furious. Warhol was also visiting art galleries almost as religiously as he did daily Mass. In these white cubes, he gazed at large canvases by the dominant Abstract Expressionist movement and, later in the 1950s, at Robert Rauschenberg’s exuberant Combine paintings and Jasper Johns’s deadpan flag canvases. Unlike Warhol, these two up-and-comers hid behind a shared pseudonym when doing commercial work, and although they themselves were lovers, in an era still lorded over by the macho, hard-drinking New York School painters, they disdained Warhol as “too swish.” Warhol heard this gossip from Emile de Antonio, a freelance artists’ agent who would soon help get his work exhibited. “De was the first person I knew of to see commercial art as real art and real art as commercial art, and he made the whole New York art world see it that way, too,” Warhol later recalled.

It was de Antonio, studying two canvases by Warhol in 1960 — one of a Coke bottle done with crosshatching and Ab-Ex drips, another painted as flat as an ad — who launched a thousand (and then some) silkscreens. As Warhol remembered almost two decades later, de Antonio advised him, “One of these is a piece of shit, simply a little bit of everything. The other is remarkable — it’s our society, it’s who we are, it’s absolutely beautiful and naked, and you ought to destroy the first one and show the other.”

Warhol followed de Antonio’s counsel, observing sometime further on, “What’s great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the president drinks Coca-Cola, Liz Taylor drinks Coca-Cola, and just think, you can drink Coca-Cola, too.”

This is ersatz egalitarianism, of course, because although the sentiment is initially stirring, anyone paying attention knew from the jump that the average consumer would never be able to afford a “Warhol Coca-Cola” — that’s the point of the high-grade scarcity that defines the “real art” market this commercial artist so desperately wanted to break into. But what to paint next? He needed ideas, and Warhol biographers Tony Sherman and David Dalton write of his paying the gallerist Muriel Latow fifty bucks for suggesting a Campbell’s Soup can. In later years Warhol would obscure Latow’s role — he loved Campbell’s Soup, his mother gave it to him every day; he hated Campbell’s Soup, his mother gave it to him every day — but this set a pattern of the artist’s pumping those around him for subject matter.

To achieve his hybrid high-low vision, Warhol used all of his graphic design skills to scale up his process, first employing rubber stamps for the fleur-de-lis patterns of the 32 otherwise individually painted Campbell’s Soup Cans (1962), then turning to silkscreening for the images of dollar bills, first printed on small sheets of paper and then — two hundred of them — on an eight-foot-high canvas.

In a 2010 *New Yorker* essay, Louis Menand wrote, “Marcel Duchamp loved the Campbell’s soup can paintings because, he said, they freed art from the tyranny of the retinal image. You don’t need to stare at the paintings to get them.” Yet Warhol, who avidly collected art by everyone from Braque to Magritte to Johns, obviously loved “retinal” art, that combination of vibrant color and lush texture that has characterized painting from the cave walls onward.

A black-and-white painting such as *Daily News*, from 1962, reveals Warhol wedged between two worlds. The headlines read “Eddie

Fisher Breaks Down” on the right, “Met Rally Edges L.A., 4-3” to the left. Warhol, who had then been at the height of the graphics profession for a decade, understood that this serendipitous collage of image and narrative — Liz Taylor and Eddie Fisher are heading for divorce on page one, a horse screams, like a refugee from Picasso’s Guernica, on the back sports page — was, in graphic-art terms, a “marriage” of first page to last, which is how newspapers are printed, adding a conceptual formal union to the real-life dissolving one.

Surrealist memories are too amorphous and proud
While those downtown macho painters are just alcoholic

Next came the disasters and celebrity paintings, in which Warhol mingled the Catholic Mass with mass media, the aura of the silver screen with the nimbus of sainthood.

Gold Marilyn Monroe, painted in August 1962, shortly after the Hollywood megastar had committed suicide, can easily be read as a Byzantine icon — but is she the saintly mother or the redeemed whore? Here, and in his portraits of Taylor and other celebrities, the clotted screen prints bristle with imperfections that reveal a humanity the hagiographic studio shots, which Warhol used as source materials, erased through soft lighting and smooth makeup.

Warhol further upped the ante with Orange Car Crash Fourteen Times (1963). On the left-hand section of two panels, each roughly nine by seven feet, he enlarged and screen-printed a newspaper photo of an auto accident, stacking it like an altarpiece with fourteen overlapping panels, some fading, some flooded with ink. The metal is as twisted as an Ab-Ex brushstroke; a slumping, overexposed figure glows like a ghost. The right-hand panel — a flat orange expanse — seems a luminous resting place. Warhol, however, claimed a more mercantile reason for the extra 63 square feet of canvas: “The two are designed to hang together however the owner wants.... It just makes them bigger and mainly makes them cost more.” He later said, “The death series I did was divided into two parts: the first on famous deaths and the second on people nobody ever heard of....I thought it would be nice for these unknown people to be remembered by those who, ordinarily, wouldn’t think of them.” That sentiment echoes the roll call of remembrances Warhol would have heard countless times at Mass.

Perhaps more than any of the rising Pop artists, Warhol was attuned to changes beyond the art world. In the summer of 1964 he began preparing for his first show at the Leo Castelli gallery, creating a series of flower canvases inspired by a magazine spread shown to him by the curator Henry Geldzahler, who’d said, “Andy, maybe it’s enough death now.” With a trademark diffidence that masked the confidence Warhol had in his own abilities to work with a vast range of graphic materials, the artist sent the color picture of blossoms to his silkscreen fabricator, accompanied by a note (with his usual scattershot punctuation and capitalization) reading, “Make a Black + White line. sort-of.” Although Warhol used garish colors for the petals, the stark black graphics tinge the flowers with a sense of foreboding. The blooms were also, as it turned out, metaphorically colored by one of the most famous political attack ads in U.S. history, President Johnson’s “Daisy” television commercial, in which a little girl counts petals before a voiceover begins counting down to a nuclear explosion. The ad, implicitly accusing Johnson’s opponent, Barry Goldwater, of having an itchy missile-launch finger, was shown only once, on September 7, right in the middle of Warhol’s preparations for the show. Warhol was coy when, shortly before the November 21 opening of the show, he told Newsweek magazine, “I was going to make the show all Goldwater if he won, because then everything would go, art would go.”

I never said stick a needle in your arm and die
It wasn’t me it wasn’t me it wasn’t me, I know he’s dead but it wasn’t me

But Warhol soon began to get bored with painting. The culture at large was fracturing over the Vietnam War; the civil rights and women’s rights movements were in full swing. Warhol’s Factory loft teemed with assistants buzzing on speed, the record player blasted Top 40 hits and opera at all hours, and movie cameras were starting to clack away. Andy’s movies at first seemed to negate the medium, because, well, nothing much moved: a man sleeping, the Empire State Building framed for eight hours, a gaggle of the beautiful people — actors, artists, musicians — struggling to sit still and not even blink for the three-minute duration of a “Screen Test.” Warhol’s new insight was to ally his rigorous graphic sense with the self-consciousness people exhibit while being filmed (something professional actors get paid to hide), an agitated frisson familiar to generations who have perhaps never seen a Warhol film but have watched too much reality TV.

One fall day in 1964, a sometime gallerist and performance artist named Dorothy Podber arrived at the Factory expecting to star in a movie. She became irritated when Warhol told her he was too busy shooting a picture, and asked if she could shoot one, too. Assuming she meant to use a camera, Warhol was shocked when she pulled out a small pistol and fired a bullet through the foreheads of four Marilyn canvases stacked against a wall. She was banned from the premises for life, but with this serendipitous layer of added violence the “Shot Marilyns” linger as another collaboration encouraged by Warhol’s open-door policy — not just for people but also for ideas and actions.

In October of that same year, Freddie Herko, who had appeared in such Warhol films as Kiss and The Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys, was living in a friend’s closet, gobbling amphetamines. A gifted dancer, Herko despaired at what the drugs were doing to his body, saying: “I have destroyed my house.” At another friend’s apartment, listening to a beloved piece of music, Mozart’s Coronation Mass, he danced madly and then leaped through an open window to his death five stories below, on Cornelia Street. “The people I loved were the ones like Freddie, the leftovers of show business, turned down at auditions all over town,” Warhol wrote in his book POPism.

“They couldn’t do something more than once, but their one time was better than anyone else’s. They had star quality but no star ego.” Warhol the impresario had created an arena for the marginal to become superstars — briefly in public and more expansively in their own minds — until they crashed. Not for nothing did he include, four years later in a museum brochure, one of the most prescient observations of the twentieth century: “In the future, everyone will be world famous for 15 minutes.” Warhol had come to the realization that his celebrity was becoming an artistic entity all its own.

This is a rock group called the Velvet Underground. I show movies on them
Do you like their sound? ‘Cause they have a style that grates and I have art to make

On February 10, 1966, Warhol took out a classified ad in the Village Voice — rife with the non sequiturs that come from dictating over the phone to a live ad-taker — proclaiming, “I’ll endorse with my name any of the following: clothing AC-DC, cigarettes small, tapes, sound equipment, ROCK N’ ROLL RECORDS, anything, film, and film equipment, Food, Helium, Whips, MONEY!! love and kisses ANDY WARHOL, EL 5-9941.” This gloss of high-art branding partially explains why one of rock ‘n’ roll’s most crucial albums, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (1967), features only a banana and Warhol’s signature on the cover. Although Warhol was credited as producer, his main contribution beyond the cover graphic was paying for the recording sessions. Yet Lou Reed’s songs about drugs, degeneracy, and sexual and emotional violence bear the stamp of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, the music, dance, film, and psychedelic light show the Velvets toured around the country with Warhol. One unused suggestion from Warhol was to add a scratch to the vinyl where the song “I’ll Be Your Mirror” ends, causing the phrase “I’ll be your mirror” to repeat until the listener arose from his or her beanbag chair to move the needle. The idea gained no traction with the band, though in 1975 Reed did label the fourth side of his breathtakingly abrasive *Metal Machine Music* as “?”, since the groove was locked and, absent human intervention, would play unto infinity.

The Velvets went through the usual rock-band dramas, with Warhol and Nico ousted first and the band itself splintering over the following few years. In 1989, after Warhol’s death, Reed and Velvets co-founder John Cale, despite little love lost between them, got together to write and perform *Songs for Drella*, a suite of fifteen tunes by turns caustic, rollicking, and sweet. *Drella* (a nickname for Warhol conflating Dracula and Cinderella) memorialized their old mentor through personal reminiscences, and by quoting or reworking some of Warhol’s aphorisms in the lyrics to its songs (which provide the section breaks in this article).

From inside her idiot madness spoke and bang
Andy fell onto the floor

On June 3, 1968, Valerie Solanas, the founder and sole member of SCUM (the Society for Cutting Up Men), angered that Warhol had lost the script for her play *Up Your Ass*, came to the Factory and shot him, the bullet piercing his lungs, gall bladder, spleen, intestines, liver, and esophagus.

Mario Amaya, an art critic who had also been wounded by Solanas, was traveling in the ambulance with Warhol. The driver told Amaya, “If we sound the siren, it’ll cost five dollars extra.” Mario replied, “Go ahead and sound it. Leo Castelli will pay!” Perhaps, or perhaps not. Castelli’s first public comment upon hearing the news was a thinly veiled celebration that an open-ended commodity looked to have suddenly become a finite — and therefore more valuable — luxury item: “I’m afraid there are not that many paintings left.”

Warhol was declared dead on the operating table, ready to join Dr. Martin Luther King — shot to death two months earlier — on 1968’s roll call of loss. Time magazine blamed the artist’s shooting on the victim: “Americans who deplore crime and disorder might consider the case of Andy Warhol, who for years has celebrated every form of licentiousness....He surrounded himself with freakily named people — Viva, Ultra Violet, International Velvet, Ingrid Superstar — playing games of lust, perversion, drug addiction and brutality before his crotchety cameras.” But as a surgeon cut open Warhol’s chest and massaged his heart back to life, an even greater madness was stirring that would knock him out of the headlines.

On June 4, 1968, director Jean-Luc Godard captured Mick Jagger singing, “I shouted out, ‘Who killed Kennedy? When after all, it was you and me.’” Godard — through a capricious alignment of the stars — happened to be in the recording studio when the Rolling Stones were reworking “Sympathy for the Devil” from a rambling folk tune to a sinisterly undulating, samba-inflected sensation. As the sessions in London stretched out over the week, the world found out that Bobby Kennedy had been gunned down in Los Angeles on June 6, during the presidential primaries. When the song plays over the final scene of the movie, we hear that Jagger has changed the lyric to “I shouted out, ‘Who killed the Kennedys? When after all, it was you and me.’”

The art-historical cliché is that Warhol’s work suffered greatly after he was shot. Whose wouldn’t? Warhol, though, continued making films, farming directing chores out to Factory colleague Paul Morrissey, who later said, “Andy an auteur? You must be joking. Andy’s idea of making a movie is going to the premiere.”

In 1969 Warhol launched *Interview* magazine, allying his childhood love of celebrity publications to his adult enthrallment with gossip. The culture called for nudity, the economics demanded newsprint. On the first cover, Viva lolled nude, star of a non-Warhol film that was supposed to break her into true fame. It wasn’t to be. Bob Colacello, eventually the magazine’s editor, remembers Viva at the film’s premiere “throwing grandiose kisses” to the audience and then “doubling over in laughter at her own stardom.” He notes that while it was obvious she loved receiving the attention of a true film star, she was also “hip enough to know it’s all a joke.”

In 1976, Colacello accompanied Warhol on a trip to Iran, where Warhol hoped to get portrait commissions. “I was criticized for running an interview with the empress in Interview magazine,” Colacello later related. “I was Republican and Andy was a Democrat — we would kind of tease each other about it.” The portraits of the shah and his wife are emblematic of Warhol’s most decadent period: washed-out Polaroid prints enlarged over bland colors, with none of the verve of earlier work, in which fast and furious paint handling had added emotional resonance to the subject’s features. Perhaps, post-shooting, the tragic icons Warhol had worked with in the Sixties hit too close to the bone. Instead we get wealthy socialites paying for the cachet of having their portraits done in a style dimly related to the compelling masterpieces already ensconced in museums. Thus the brand was elevated over the sacred.

Warhol did manage to recoup some of his mojo in 1971, when he updated the phallic hijinks of the Velvet Underground’s banana cover with his iconic crotch-shot packaging for the Stones’ Sticky Fingers album. He followed this with a witty poster for the 1972 presidential campaign, which pictured Richard Nixon’s jowly visage in Wicked Witch green against a flaming orange background above the hand-scrawled exhortation, “Vote McGovern.” Nixon won in a landslide, but Warhol’s bilious contrasts captured the character of a man who, two years later and to no one’s real surprise, resigned his office on the brink of impeachment.

Near the end of that decade, Warhol flirted with the sublime once again in his massive series of “Shadow” paintings, the craggy blacks over riotous colors owing no small debt to Abstract Expressionist pathos. His captivating “Oxidation” series from around the same time, created by having assistants urinate on copper pigments, made the New York School connection formally explicit and conceptually snarky: Nothing like pissing on the ideals of your elders.

Into the Eighties Warhol continued to hunger after Hollywood-level stardom, despite his sui generis fame. He was not just an artist who was more bizarre and outrageous than Salvador Dalí, but also an impresario, publisher, promoter, shill, and flat-out celebrity. He was perfectly in tune with the Reagan era.

So in 1985 he settled for playing himself on The Love Boat. True to form, he let his executive assistant, “Ramon,” do most of his talking. When one of the boat’s crew asks, “I was wondering — how does an artist know when a painting is truly successful?” Ramon sunnily replies, “When the check’s cleared.” Later, the ship’s photographer, having given Warhol some photos to evaluate, finds out from Ramon that Warhol has concluded, “Your photography was the essence of crass commercialism.” When the photographer begins to despair, Ramon admonishes him: “On the contrary, dear boy. He loves crass commercialism. As a matter of fact he said, ‘That’s what makes America great.’ “

But if I have to live in fear, where will I get my ideas
With all those crazy people gone, will I slowly slip away?

Warhol’s death, on February 22, 1987, came after a fairly routine gall bladder operation. The cause was heart failure brought on by avoidable complications during his recovery; his family received an undisclosed sum of money as compensation.

In the late Seventies Warhol had done a series of paintings of human skulls, as well as a photo self-portrait with a skull on his head. The juxtaposition of his pale flesh and dark eyes against smooth bone and empty sockets gets at the bleak abyss a skull actually represents. Although the volumetric space is quite small, the loss of knowledge, emotions, memories — all that thought and expression — can seem unfathomable.

When Warhol was shot, the New York Post front page from 1968 reveals an earnest paper covering the story of the surprise shooting of a flamboyant artist, but also delivering meat-and-potato reporting on local government corruption and no-drama coverage of the presidential primaries. Nineteen years later, the tabloid, now owned by Rupert Murdoch, reveled in the spectacle of a dead Pop artist, top of the page, and below, a live rock star, Jagger, “Jubilant” over his impending marriage to the leggy Texas beauty Jerry Hall (who would eventually marry Murdoch himself). How much responsibility does Warhol bear for our culture’s shift from substance to flash, human interest to spectacle?

How much responsibility does a mirror bear for whatever beauty or ugliness it beholds? Warhol loved both the heights and depths of American culture, and reflected it back at us through his work, which remains resonant to this day. Here is the spin he put on the concept of American exceptionalism in the 1985 America book: “Maybe you think it’s so special that certain people shouldn’t be allowed to live [here], or if they do live [here] that they shouldn’t say certain things or have certain ideas.

“But this kind of thinking is exactly the opposite of what America means,” he continues, before closing with an observation that sums up his life as a gay, Catholic, first-generation, blue-collar striver: “We all came here from somewhere else, and everybody who wants to live in America and obey the law should be able to come too, and there’s no such thing as being more or less American, just American.”