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Journey to nowhere

Reeve, Charles

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Journey to Nowhere

Charles Reeve

OCAD University

creeve@faculty.ocadu.ca

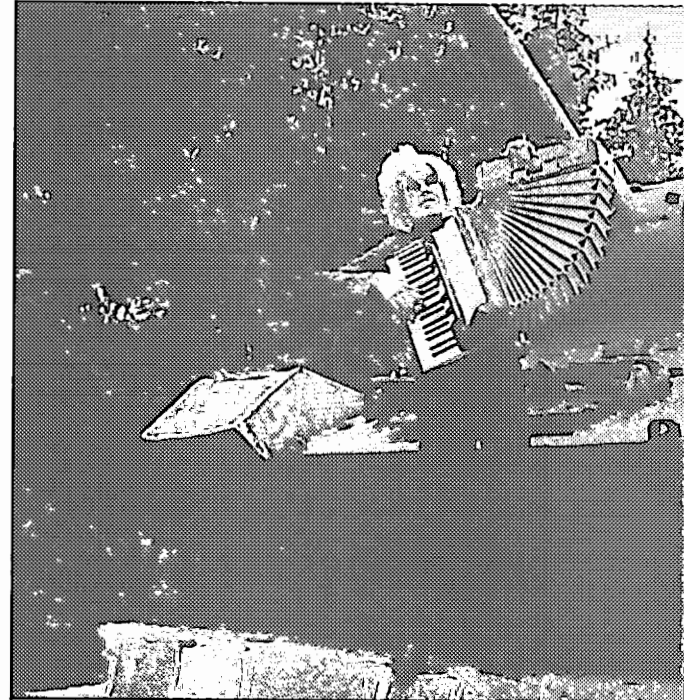
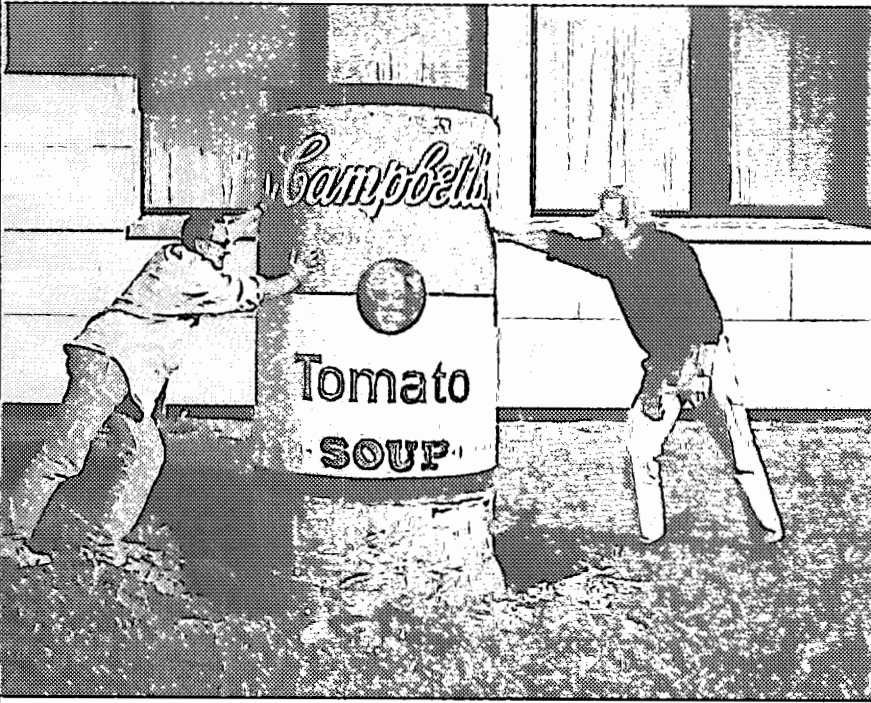
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JOURNEY TO

A new documentary about Andy Warhol visits a place



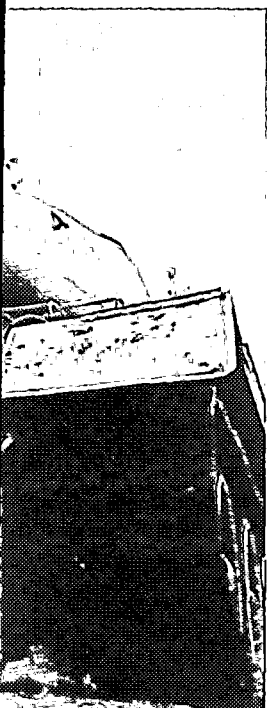
Above: Dr. Michal Bycko, curator of the Warhol Family Museum in Medzilaborce, with Stanislav Mucha (courtesy TLA Releasing).

Middle: Fero Lakata, Absolut Warhola's unofficial guide and "Ruthenian Andy Warhol Doppelgänger" (courtesy TLA Releasing).

Right: Michael Warhola and Eva Prextová (courtesy TLA Releasing).

NOWHERE

he never went, to interview people he never met.

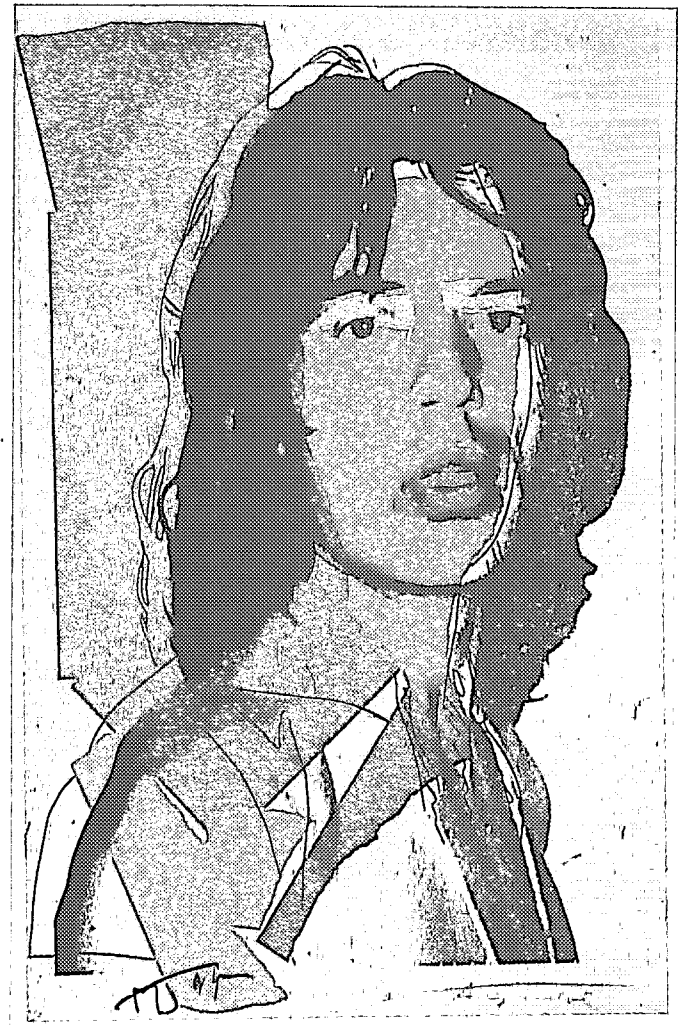
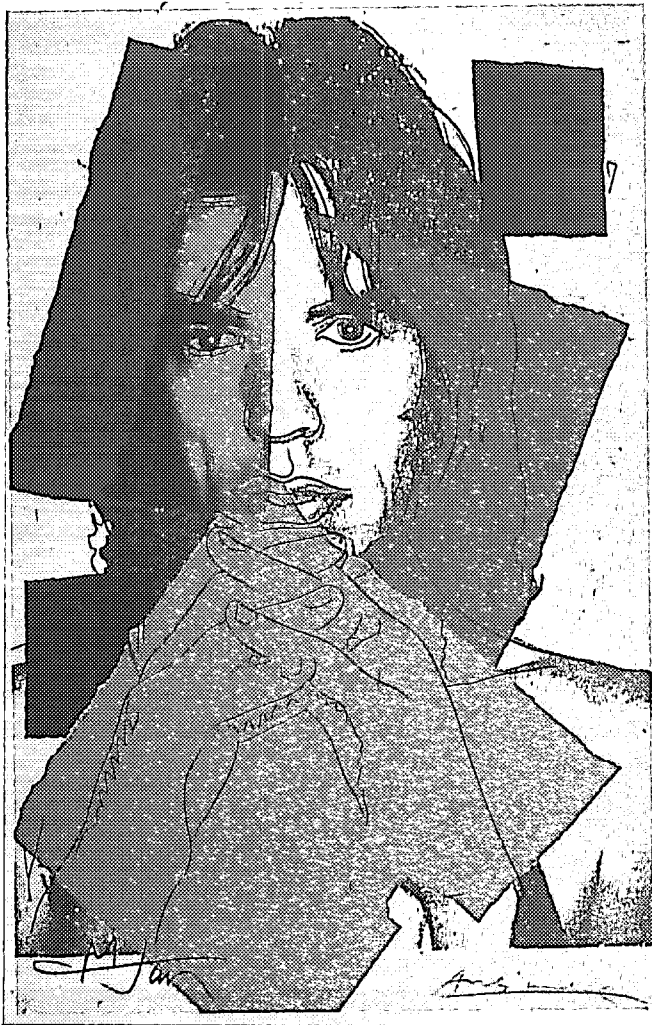


BY CHARLES REEVE

When it came to attracting attention by shunning the spotlight, Andy Warhol surpassed everyone. Fashioning a publicity strategy from his shyness, he created a multiplier effect: our curiosity is doubly piqued when someone catches our interest by deflecting it. We know this deflection was strategic because, at least partly, Warhol put on the shyness—as the early interviews demonstrate when they show him smirking fleetingly, apparently amused by how long he could limit his responses to an affectless “Uh, yes” or “Uh, no” without exasperating the interviewer. Consciously or not, his interlocutors were in on the joke, incredulous at how infinitely boring Warhol could be. So what began as an act turned into a balancing act: edging out of the spotlight but not leaving it; revealing the trick’s machinery without giving away its secret; and—Warhol’s innovation—being sufficiently inane to hold our attention but not insipid enough to lose it.

Strangely, this contrivance soon became reality. To be sure, Warhol’s relation to publicity seems conflicted. He appeared to be borderline agoraphobic and hid his private life, yet he craved attention and, with phenomenal success, turned his shyness into a publicity strategy. But so relentlessly did he attract attention by asking us to turn away, so persistently did he hew to the side of the stage, that in the end we only could see him out of the corners of our eyes.

This bizarre effect is most visible—or, better, most evident—in *Absolut Warhola*, a recent documentary by German director Stanisław Mucha. Newly available on DVD after a modestly successful festival run, this movie comes with the assurance (contained in its title) that it, finally, will present Warhol’s essence, resolve his contradictions, expose his secrets, track the source of his genius.



The stream of images of celebrities produced by Warhol reflected his fascination with fame. Clockwise from top left: Mick Jagger (143), 1975, screenprint on Arches Aquarelle paper, 44 by 29 inches; Mick Jagger (147), 1975, screenprint on Arches Aquarelle paper, 44 by 29 inches; John Wayne, 1986, serigraph on paper, 36 by 36 inches (all images this page courtesy Skot Foreman Fine Art).

To emphasize this last point, the tagline reads, "Sometimes greatness comes from the strangest places." Despite this promise, the movie only obliquely concerns Warhol: instead, it focuses on the rural Slovakian community of Miková, where Warhol's parents Julia and Andrej Warhola grew up but which Warhol never visited, and comprises interviews with relatives whom Warhol never met. Thus, like many movies in which Warhol figures, *Absolut Warhola* inadvertently plays out the double-reverse by which he pointed our gaze elsewhere in order to attract our attention to himself.

"I am from nowhere," the artist reportedly said when asked about his roots. Uttered by anyone else, this statement would seem notably bizarre. Coming from Warhol, however, it passes without comment as a prop for his façade of disaffection. Yet, as *Absolut Warhola* shows, this claim is close to reality: Warhol's heritage is Ruthenian, a Slavic people who, though ancestors of the present-day Ukrainians, do not have a country. ("For once, he wasn't lying," observes Bob Colacello in *Holy Terror*, the best of the biographies and memoirs that various Factory members penned after Warhol's death.)

In addition to lacking a nation, Warhol seemed not to have a family. The interviews with his aunts, uncles and cousins suggest they know little or nothing of his stature in the North American and Western European art community. "We always knew that Andy Warhol was a painter, but we didn't know if he painted rooms or houses or maybe pictures," says Warhol's cousin Janko Zavacky, adding that only in 1987 did they learn he was a world-famous artist. "He had a girlfriend who shot him," offers Helena Bezeková, another cousin. "And just imagine," she continues, "she did it because she wanted to get married but he didn't." From there, the discussion flows into repudiations of Warhol's gayness. "No homosexuals have ever come from Miková," asserts Michal Warhola, another cousin.

Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere: notes towards a (cultural) history of Andrew Warhola

Literally and figuratively, this village couldn't be further from Warhol's hyper-urban setting. The grandly named (but poorly financed) Warhol Family Museum of Modern Art that was rather desperately set up in nearby Medzilaborce houses the pencil with which Julia Warhola signed some of her son's works and other items of similarly marginal interest—which is good, because its roof leaks like a sieve. The museum's curator, Dr. Michal Bycko, keeps what valuable items he has in the back, away from the rain. By the movie's end, Warhol's claim to have come from "nowhere" seems neither part of his publicity strategy of strenuously feigned indifference nor an elliptical anthro-political commentary. Rather, it reads as embarrassment, thrown up by the adolescent component that Warhol's personality retained throughout his life. We can imagine him saying that he comes from "nowhere" not with his usual smirk and carefully awkward delivery, but with a teenager's petulance, kicking nervously at the ground. His relatives' assertions that when he died he was planning a trip to Miková defy credulity and strengthen the impression that these people have only the scantest idea of who Warhol was or how he lived. Completely inappropriate for anyone else, however, structuring a documentary around interviews with strangers seems bizarrely logical when applied to Warhol: more than just befitting, it seems like the inevitable destination of the direction taken by previous movies about him.

One illustrative example of this tendency is Chuck Workman's documentary *Superstar: the life and times of Andy Warhol* (1990). Made after Warhol's death, Workman's film obviously couldn't contain fresh material: no new interviews, no amusing outtakes. Nonetheless, in it Warhol speaks from beyond the grave in several ways. The collusion between this insatiable publicity hound and the media that couldn't get enough of him meant that Workman had plenty of footage from which to draw. Yet so flat was Warhol's persona, on camera as in life, that his appearances in *Superstar* fade as quickly as they appear, displaced by the infinitely more flamboyant reminiscing of the Metropolitan Museum's longtime curator of modern art, Henry Geldzahler, and the ghoulish fascination of watching the parade of stars (Grace Jones, Don Johnson) whose careers have long since tanked and whose appearances in this documentary seem to have been their swan songs. However, if the miles of footage that Warhol left behind enabled him to put plenty of deliberately forgettable face time into a movie made after his demise, everything that he did while alive to construct a public persona of vacancy gave him an unmistakable directorial say and determined that this documentary would portray him as an incidental character in the story of his life—a contrast to the usual genius of the star, who by mere presence reduces everyone else to supporting roles.

Shortly after Warhol died, art historian Thomas Crow wrote, "The public Andy Warhol was not one

Ruthenia, not quite the same thing as Carpatho-Ukraine, which is not quite the same thing as Subcarpathian Rus', is an oddly hip topic. The Carpatho-Rusyns (to use yet another term floating out there) have an elaborate cyberpresence that ranks, perhaps because of the Warhol connection, in the top five percent of all websites. The Warhol Family Museum on the Slovak side of the Slovakia-Ukraine border promotes itself on its English-language website with Warhol's quote, "I am from nowhere." (Kate Brown's 2004 Harvard University Press book on the adjacent borderland region is titled *A Biography of No Place*.) The Ruthenia on the Ukrainian side of the border was independent for one day, the Ides of March 1939, appropriately enough. It issued one postage stamp, printed by Czechoslovakia for the inauguration of the Carpatho-Ukraine parliament that declared independence in a foredoomed effort to forestall Hitler's hand-off of the territory to the Hungarians.

The emigration to America of a peasant family from the eastern parts of what Neville Chamberlain so memorably termed "a far-away country of which we know little" allowed the emergence of Andrew Warhola as "Andy Warhol." An ancestry in one of the most obscure stateless peoples of Europe was perfect ground for his project of total re-invention.

Later, Warhol's status as self-created personality was paralleled by Jean-Michel Basquiat, famed as a street-tough graffiti artist but actually the middle-class son of a Haitian accountant. It seemed well-nigh foreordained that the descendant of the Warhol style should collaborate with and surpass his spiritual forebear, and that both should have their story told by an artist almost as self-invented, Julian Schnabel. (The screenplay for *Basquiat* was written by Basquiat's fellow band member, African-American artist Michael Thomas Holman, whose elegantly transgressive paintings of deconstructed Confederate flags remain largely unknown. But that is another, differently ironic story.)

Warhol remains the ultimate icon of historyless hipness. Reactions to him depend on one's feelings about his style of strategically unserious skepticism.

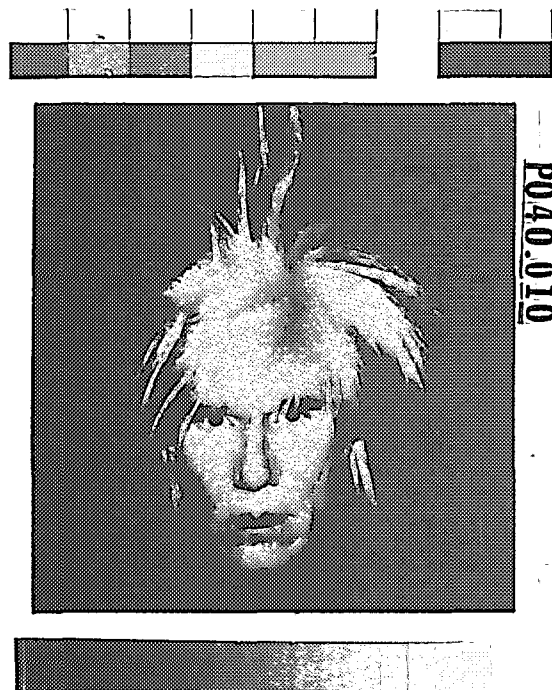
The Anti-Warhol Museum, a 1993 Nexus Press artist's book by Bonnie O'Connell, for example, proposes that institutions de-accession their Warhols to free up money for socially useful purposes. Unsurprisingly, Warhol has eluded such critiques posthumously: the foundation distributing his legacy has become synonymous with deeply thoughtful philanthropy.

Art dealer Richard Polsky's witty 2003 Abrams book *I Bought Andy Warhol* revolves around his overpowering wish to own a quintessential Warhol. He ultimately acquires one of the late self-portraits, but not before he has bought one ideal Warhol piece for himself, then sold it in order to get ready for the onrushing recession. Warhol thus becomes the perfect metaphor for the actually existing art market: Polsky describes artworks in terms of a passion usually reserved for human or divine loves, but when the chips are down, art transmutes to commodity.

Polsky's passion and commodification and O'Connell's socially concerned outrage are equally genuine and appropriate responses. Warhol was a totally sincere purveyor of affectlessness, on which others' emotions were and are projected. Like Ruthenia, he maintains enduring fascination by never succumbing to easy definition.

JERRY CULLUM is Senior Editor at ART PAPERS.

I BOUGHT ANDY WARHOL



by Richard Polsky

The cover of Richard Polsky's book *I Bought Andy Warhol* features a late Warhol self-portrait.

but, at a minimum, three persons. The first, and by far the most prominent, was the self-created one: the product of his famous pronouncements and of the allowed representations of his life and milieu. The second was the complex of interests, sentiments, skills, ambitions, and passions actually figured in paint on canvas. The third was his persona as it sanctioned experiments in nonelite culture far beyond the world of art.² This inventory seems accurate: Warhol playing himself; Warhol relentlessly productive; Warhol supporting the Velvet Underground, Paul Morrissey's early movies and the fly-by-night film 'zine turned gossip rag *Interview*. By ascribing these personae to the "public" Warhol, Crow also rightly suggests that the artist had in addition one or more "private" Warhols, which he kept hidden.

Still, Crow's article comes up short, in ways that are easier to see now than they were when he wrote it. For one thing, as Richard Meyer shows in *Outlaw Representation*, evidence of the private Warhol could be seen freely spilling over into the public one, especially early on, by those who understood the code. More than hinting at his

homosexuality, for example, Warhol hid evidence of it in plain sight from the early 1950s until well into the 1960s, in everything from his shoe illustrations to his ill-fated *13 Most Wanted Men* project at the 1964 New York World's Fair.³ Moreover, and more germanely, characterizing the public Warhol as "self-created," while correct, misses the true innovation in Warhol's public image.

Warhol was born in 1928, around the time that Hollywood's star system emerged. By the 1950s, as Warhol started to climb the twin ladders of success in the worlds of commercial illustration and fine art, people like Greta Garbo, Elizabeth Taylor and, most importantly, Marilyn Monroe had perfected the art of creating a flawless public image. No doubt Monroe had moments when she lounged around in baggy old sweaters and trousers, her hair a mess. But since her persona was the bombshell, every step outside her home was a movie take, every snapshot a publicity picture, not to be ventured without perfect make up, flawless, form-revealing clothes and gravity-defying bust. Thus Warhol likely generated his myriad pictures of Marilyn as

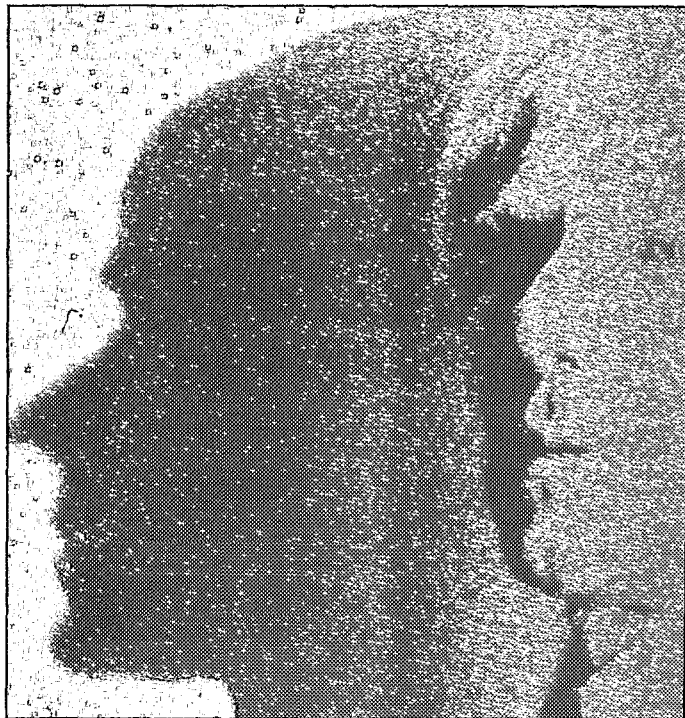
much to study how she created her persona as to memorialize or celebrate that she did so—which explains the “tact, even reverence” that Crow argues distinguishes Warhol’s Marilyn paintings from much of the rest of his oeuvre.⁴ Either way, stars hiding their private selves behind public images were old news by the time Warhol entered the picture. His contribution was to learn to create a persona that controlled not just what we saw, but also how we saw it. That’s why, no matter how hard we try, we never do better than steal a sidelong glance at him.

Nor does this oblique perspective constrain only documentaries like *Superstar* and *Absolut Warhola*. Oddly, it also affects posthumous docu-dramas about Warhol’s milieu, even though their makers start with a clean slate—unlike documentarians, who work largely with what they are given. Thus, Julian Schnabel’s *Basquiat* (1996) claims to be about Jean-Michel Basquiat, the young graffiti artist turned Soho darling whose meteoric rise during the mid-1980s carried him from one toney gallery to the next and from a cardboard box in Tompkins Square to regular dinners at Manhattan’s priciest restaurants, before he succumbed to a heroin overdose at the age of twenty-seven. However, the movie focuses less on Basquiat’s career than on his relationship with Warhol—which, the film argues, was Basquiat’s one deep friendship at the end of his life, rather than yet another Warholian publicity stunt—and thus less on Jeffrey Wright’s personification of Basquiat than on David Bowie’s dramatization of Warhol.

Unfortunately—though perhaps fittingly, even inevitably—Bowie’s execrable performance isn’t so much Bowie playing Warhol as it is Bowie playing himself playing Warhol. At one level, the result is ridiculous, creating the unnerving impression that Warhol spent the 1980s perpetually on the verge of breaking into “Let’s Dance.” At another level, a set piece late in the film suggests that the lack of fit between Bowie and Warhol is deliberate, a quirky homage to the brilliance with which the latter orchestrated his life. Mingling real and faux archival footage, this scene shows Basquiat returning to his studio after hearing of Warhol’s death, and becoming lost in home movies of Warhol shopping, on holiday and at the Factory. Suddenly, we see a close up of a face, which holds just long enough to confirm that the visage belongs to Warhol before cutting to a similar shot of Bowie. The difference is unmistakable and the message is clear: no one plays Warhol like Warhol.


Similarly, *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996) ostensibly recounts the story of Valerie Solanas, the deeply troubled and probably brilliant author of the *SCUM Manifesto* (“SCUM” being the Society for Cutting Up Men). After a brief association with Warhol, Solanas became obsessed with the idea that Warhol should underwrite her anti-male play *Up Your Ass*, and then with the paranoid delusion that her authorial failure resulted from a Warhol-directed conspiracy against her. This pathology reached its unfortunate conclusion on June 3, 1968 when, determined to break the bonds with which she believed Warhol enslaved her, Solanas fired three bullets into him in a nearly successful murder attempt.⁵ (Hence the Ruthenian belief that his girlfriend shot him.) Even more so than *Basquiat*, *I Shot Andy Warhol* puts a subsidiary character at the center of a story that depends on Warhol for its existence. The movie’s title says it all. Not *The Valerie Solanas Story*, because, let’s face it: who was Valerie Solanas, aside from the woman who shot Andy Warhol?

So convincing are Warhol’s publicity machinations that we tend to forget that’s what they are. “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol” said this super-slick image-maker, “just look at the surface of



Andy Warhol, *The Shadow*, 1986, screenprint with diamond dust on Lenox Museum Board, 38 inches by 38 inches (courtesy Trinity Gallery).

my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it.”⁶ Forgetting that such statements were merely more image-making, we believed him, collapsing the public Warhol into the private one. Hence our disbelief when, in *Absolut Warhola*, the artist’s aunt Eva Prextová says that, just before he died, he started arranging a trip to Miková. That this jet-setting art star would travel to a snow-covered farming village seems no more likely than that he would bring his mother from Pittsburgh to live with him in New York. And yet, improbably enough, he shared his Manhattan home with Julia Warhola for years, a fact that re-opens the gap between public Andy and private Andy, making us wonder if the two connect at all. Maybe he really was planning to visit his Ruthenian roots.

Like much that gets said about Warhol in this new documentary, this proposition seems incredible. However, as the gap yawns between the Warhol we knew and the Warhol we didn’t know, the distance separating his New York home from his Ruthenian homeland shrinks. How far, I wonder, is Manhattan from nowhere? 

NOTES 1. Bob Colacello, *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* (Harper Collins, 1990): 11. 2. Thomas Crow, “Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol,” 1987, revised and reprinted in Annette Michelson, ed. *Andy Warhol* (MIT, 2001): 49. 3. Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: censorship and homosexuality in Twentieth Century American Art* (Oxford, 2002): 95–156. 4. Crow, *op. cit.*: 52. 5. These details have been recounted in many places in the last 35 years, most recently in the introduction to Verso Press’s new edition of the *SCUM Manifesto*, written by Avital Ronell (reprinted as “Cutting Remarks,” *Bookforum* vol. 11 no. 1 [Spring 2004]: 30–33). 6. Gretchen Berg, “Andy: My True Story,” *Los Angeles Free Press*, March 17, 1967: n.p.

CHARLES REEVE is Editor-in-Chief at ART PAPERS.