



MY BRIEF LIFE ON PLANET WARHOL

by Sheldon Renan

57 years ago I met a man who would fundamentally alter the direction my life would take.

His name was Andy Warhol.

I was pointed in one direction when I landed on Planet Warhol — but by the time I exited Warhol's orbit eight months later, I found myself living in a new universe with many unexpected opportunities. Virtually everything I've done since then links back to those eight amazing months in 1965.

"Andy was himself becoming a living work of art."

Andy Warhol was himself in a state of change when I met him. He had come to New York direct from art school and became very successful in Manhattan's design community for his shoe illustrations and unusual design solutions. He struggled for years to move from commercial art to fine art. But he did it by transforming commercial art into fine art — doing paintings of Campbell Soup cans and sculptures that emulated boxes of Brillo. Eventually Warhol, along with other "pop artists" like Roy Lichtenstein, transformed how the world defined art. By 1964, however, he had become bored with painting and sculpture. He was looking for ways to rethink and redefine movies. And over time his art became performative. Andy — how he looked, how he behaved, what he said or didn't say — was himself becoming a living work of art.

In spring of 1964, I quit my job in the Art Room at the main branch of the Multnomah County Library in Portland. I took a Greyhound Bus across the U.S. to New York City where I managed to get hired as a "copy cub" writing for Ted Bates Advertising (the advertising agency that later inspired the TV series ***Mad Men***). On the side, I started writing articles for ***MONITOR***, a small magazine that literally nobody read. But it gave me an excuse to interview movie directors and writers who interested me.

I discovered a friend from college (Class Poet of Yale '63) was partying with Warhol and asked him to arrange an interview. On Tuesday, January 19, 1965 — less than a year after stepping off the Greyhound from Portland — I took the freight elevator at 231 East 47th Street to the fifth floor and stepped into The Factory, Warhol's industrial never-never land studio where everything from bathrooms to barbells had been sprayed with bright silver paint. Petula Clark's ***DOWNTOWN*** was blasting over loudspeakers, as Warhol's staff set up a movie shoot in the stairwell. In the article I wrote later, I described Andy wearing common work clothes, sunglasses and sneakers, with oat grey hair long in front and short in back, and "resembling a very intelligent albino bat."

Warhol told me he was just making the same movie over and over again, only with different people in front of the camera. In fact, for the past eight months he had been exploring what he could do with a camera — but without moving the camera or any editing whatsoever. These were the move-less movies that had already



begun to make him famous: **SLEEP** of a man sleeping, **KISS** of people kissing, **EMPIRE** with eight hours of the Empire State Building, and **BLOW JOB** of... a man's face while... well you can fill in the details. But now Warhol had purchased an Auricon sound-on-film news camera, and that afternoon I watched him shoot his third sound film — **DRUNK** — which showed his close friend Emile D'Antonio drinking a fifth of scotch and then passing out on the stairs. I described all this in detail, including D'Antonio trying to dance with me while they changed film magazines, in the one-page article I wrote for **MONITOR**. My editor titled it, "Movies, Kissies & Drunkies."

I sent Warhol a copy via my college poet friend. But I also showed it to Harold Steinberg, publisher of the Chelsea House Press (which he ran out of his apartment in the Chelsea Hotel). Steinberg asked me to find out if Andy was interested in being the subject of a book. Today there are literally hundreds of books about Warhol, but at that time, it was virgin territory. I asked my friend to pass along the interest and the contact information for Chelsea House.

A week later my world more or less exploded. My friend called, so excited he could barely tell me the news. He told me Andy thought my article was "the best thing ever written about him"! And that Andy had actually put my article in his new time capsule. That Andy wanted to do the book. And that Andy wondered if I would be interested in writing the text for the book.

"I became a frequent participant in Andy Warhol's world – not mornings, but often noon and night."

I quit my copywriting job at Ted Bates Advertising, and became a frequent participant in Andy Warhol's world — not mornings, but often noon and night. Andy more or less assigned me to learn as much as possible about him, talking to his friends, agents and gallery owners. I attended business meetings, gallery openings, dinners, parties and field trips. Walking to the Chelsea Hotel one day, Andy told me with great wonder that someday everybody in the world would be famous for 15 minutes. He told it as if he had just thought it up. And I was writing it all down.

Andy introduced me to David Dalton, who had worked as Andy's studio assistant when Dalton was in high school. Dalton would be doing the book design. He was a long time member of Andy's circus and knew Andy much better than I did. Meanwhile a smart young English fashion photographer named David McCabe was assigned to do the photographs. And he took a year's worth of photographs, many of which became famous. Eventually the book was given a working title of **WARHOL WARHOL**. Dalton did a concept rough, without words. The Chelsea Hose Press was not involved.

Over time, David Dalton explained that Andy was not comfortable with words. The previous week, he told me, Andy had worried what to put in the book shelf in his new townhouse. He didn't own books. He didn't read books. Finally, at Dalton's suggestion, they filled the shelves with Campbell Soup cans.

Andy invited me to attend the premiere of the James Coburn movie, **OUR MAN FLINT**, in a Manhattan theater. I sat next to Andy in the first row. Andy talked during the film, amazed at how beautiful the artificial fruit bowls looked in the movie.

All this time, however, there was never any mention of payment for my writing services. As far as I could tell, nobody who worked on Andy's projects got paid. The payment was being recognized as a member of this art community — which was often exciting all by itself — and I got to hang with a whole new group of remarkable people, like Henry Geldzahlor, curator of contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum. Ray Johnson, an artist, began sending me little works, some reposted from other correspondents. (This was his style.)

"Salvador Dali... Andy Warhol."

One of the photo shoots Andy set up for David McCabe was of Andy meeting, for the first time, with Salvador Dali. Unlike most of the book-related activities, this was a morning appointment. Dali was living in a hotel suite, whose walls the artist had covered with his drawings. I got there before anybody else, and so was making small talk with Dali until Andy arrived. One of the things I had done to make money when I was at Yale was to work as "social announcer" for Yale President Alfred Whitney Griswold. When there was a reception line, my job was to stand to the left of President Griswold, then bend over so the next person in line could whisper their name into my ear. Then I would straighten and say in a formal tone, "President Griswold, this is Mr. Soandso. Mr. Soandso, President Griswold." So that morning when Andy finally arrived, I automatically introduced him to Salvador Dali, "Salvador Dali... Andy Warhol." Sometimes it's hard to believe things like this really happened. But they did.

Andy was trying to understand how to make his movies more mainstream. And part of that was using a writer named Ronnie Tavel to write real scripts, but these were very loosely plotted. They were more like improvised Theater of the Ridiculous. Soon I was invited to come to the next filming: his most elaborate film so far, called **VINYL**. I didn't know it at the time, but Andy had paid to buy the rights to Anthony Burgess's book **A CLOCKWORK ORANGE**. It was in no way competitive with Stanley Kubrick's version. It did, however, include the first appearance of Edie Sedgwick, who was quickly becoming Andy's next "superstar." I was sitting next to the camera as the film went on, but I was unable to follow the story. Finally I stood up and said, "I have to go now." I believe you can still hear that on the film's soundtrack, followed by the door lightly slamming. I was *really* naive. But I think, in retrospect, that Andy would think of that as a sort of natural content. (Jean-Luc Godard has evolved to the same perspective in his later films, like **KING LEAR**.)



"The Circus"

After that I was told that Andy was going to shoot a remake of **WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF**. But his version would star the actual people who the characters, George and Martha, were based on. This couple were the film-makers Willard Maas and Marie Menken, who had been the mentors of playwright Edward Albee when he was in college. Willard and Marie were close to both Andy and to Warhol's chief assistant Gerard Malanga. It was Marie, in fact, who first encouraged Andy to make movies — and taught him how to use a movie camera, a 16mm Bolex. Willard and Marie were one of the great love stories of New York's avant-garde community. But they were also alcoholics who would fight when they drank. So Andy's

plan was to have them drink and fight on camera. The resulting film was titled **BITCH**. I believe it has never been released. But I enjoyed watching Andy film it.

One fact that was inescapable was the degree of Andy's social ambitiousness. He desperately wanted to be famous. And in that he succeeded. Certainly he may have become one of... if not the most... famous artists in the world. And he wanted The Factory to become famous, too. One of his methods of accomplishing this was staging events at The Factory. During my time on Planet Warhol, the best of these events was when Andy lent The Factory to Tennessee Williams to throw a party honoring the great ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev. But first Andy threw a Sunday afternoon party to publicize the Nureyev party. Then the Nureyev party itself. Though it's been over 50 years ago, I still remember two scenes. The first was when the doors of the freight elevator opened to reveal Montgomery Cliff holding Judy Garland in his arms. (She was too drunk to stand.) The second was Rudolf Nureyev attempting to dance the Frug in a tightly tailored double-breasted suit. Believe it or not, Nureyev appeared too muscle-bound to move. But that party has gone down in history.

As summer of 1965 approached, I was asked to house-sit a 150 year-old four-story townhouse in Greenwich Village. I don't remember why, but I invited Andy Warhol to come for dinner. Andy loved old houses, and he loved this one. But I learned that when Andy comes to dinner, he does not come alone. He brought Edie Sedgwick, Gerard Malanga, two long-time women friends of Andy, a professor from Harvard and book designer David Dalton. He also invited a well-known photographer, Bob Adelman, who shot both the dinner party in the basement kitchen... and a kind of after-party when Andy, me, and his two women friends went up to my bedroom to lounge around on the bunk beds. Adelman focused the dinner party photos on Andy and Edie. But, as I recently discovered, the second set of photos in the bedroom are primarily focused on me, at age 24, looking pretty uncertain as to what I'm doing there.



(L to R) Sheldon, Warhol's friend Carol, and Andy hang out in Sheldon's bedroom after he hosted a dinner for Warhol and his entourage.
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At the end of the evening, I got into a friendly shoe kicking fight with Andy, who was wearing Spanish dancer boots with high heels. Andy really got into it, chanting "Oh, he likes it." I assumed Adelman shot this, but I never saw any of these photos surface... but warned my kids that somewhere there were photos of me on a bed with Andy Warhol. I remember my son giving me a long look and finally asking, "Dad, is there something you haven't told us?"



Andy, Edie Sedgwick, Gerard Malanga at a NYC party. 1965
© Bob Adelman

Two years ago I heard that Bob Adelman had died, leaving all his negatives to the Library of Congress. His estate kept the copyright, but posted the contact sheets on his web site. You can see them there at http://www.bobadelman.net/galleries/warhol/parties/index_5.html .

Andy liked the house on Grove Street so much that he asked if he could use it in July of 1965 to host the New York Times interview of his newest superstar Edie Sedgwick. A week later an article appeared in the New York Times crowning her the next "Woman of the Year."

Early on I was having a difficult time navigating the sexual politics of The Factory. Warhol was gay. Virtually everybody around him was gay. But I was straight. Since then, many of my best creative partners have been gay. But back then I didn't know how to handle it. In the end, I decided to write another book instead. This was **AN INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN UNDERGROUND FILM**, the first history of experimental media — which included a section on Andy Warhol's film-making. I thought it would be of marginal interest, but it sold 100,000 copies in the U.S., and excerpt rights were sold in 21 languages. Just this year, a new translation in Portuguese was published in Brazil.



Writing that book led to my founding the Pacific Film Archive at the University of California in Berkeley. And to proposing a network of regional film centers, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, that helped start, among others, the Northwest Film Center in Portland. None of this would have happened without my experience of time spent with Andy Warhol.

WARHOL WARHOL was never published. But the photographs David McCabe shot for the project were later published in a 2003 book titled **A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF ANDY WARHOL**. David Dalton did the text.

In 1969, Andy Warhol, in partnership with John Wilcock (who co-founded The Village Voice) started **ANDY WARHOL'S INTERVIEW**. And I actually provided an article for the first Issue.

