Orbiting Andy Warhol’s Silver Factory

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1. I met Andy Warhol in the spring of 1964 right after he moved into his Silver Factory—before he became the Pope of Pop—and appeared in a couple of his early movies. Even though he’s ubiquitous, in 1964 he was just beginning to gain notoriety. More than twenty-five years after his death in 1987, Warhol remains America’s all-time best-selling artist.

Art critic Gregory Battcock, author of the anthology *The New Art*, introduced us. I met Gregory while shooting Gregory Markopoulos’s movie *The Iliac Passion*, which also featured Andy. Battcock’s tiny, fourth-floor living room on West 15th Street was filled with books and artworks. As we waited for Andy to arrive, expectation hovered in the air—he was known to be different, special, and provocative. I was still in college, had been following the emergence of Pop Art, and had seen Warhol’s infamous exhibition of Brillo, Campbell’s, and Heinz silk-screened cartons stacked in neat rows just like a factory at the Stable Gallery on East 74th Street. Simulacra arrived with a vengeance. The show was a shocker. I saw right away why people didn’t know what to make of Andy. But that was the point, wasn’t it, to challenge every preconception you had about what was or could be art? I sensed Warhol would take off Big Time and told a friend this artist is going to become very famous.

Battcock was tuned into the moment, a character in his own right. Later the editor of *Arts Magazine* and a professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University, he comported himself like a bon vivant hipster with a witty throwaway flamboyance, who, in sometimes emphatically shrill tones, delighted in hectoring acquaintances with nervy and outrageous pronouncements. If he was talking to someone who didn’t know about art or who Andy Warhol was, he’d intimidate them with loud, imperious, campy banter: “You’re telling me you don’t know who Andy Warhol IS? Ha! Well, where have you been, don’t you read the newspapers? He’s one of the most important and famous artists alive! I bet you don’t even know that he painted Campbell soup cans! What’s wrong with you, are you culturally deprived?” He’d got off clucking to great effect, playing the clown or fool with ratcheted hyperbole.
When Andy arrived, he was dressed casually in a jacket and black jeans. He wore glasses with clear frames, but something was noticeably different about him. He had already transformed himself into an unusual persona readily apparent by his pale skin and silver hair. Andy appeared very shy, partly feigned. But he had a certain presence you couldn’t quite put your finger on or figure out, not exactly ethereal or otherworldly, but definitely other. I noticed a certain relaxed, carefree, even disaffected languor about his movements and a softness or cool detachment in how he greeted people, yet everyone was on and excited as if their radar had just been turned up full. Andy was living an unreal fantasy life. It was soon apparent that you couldn’t have a typical conversation with him—he was—what?—an iconoclast, someone you had to watch carefully. Maybe he was a Space Alien!

It was like he was standing beside or outside himself while everyone stood around with bated breath waiting and listening anxiously to whatever he would say. He had an edge, an uncanny way of grinning or smiling to deflect his shyness and unease, to mask what he was thinking, or to neutralize his celebrity. You couldn’t quite figure out what was what, or what he was doing—that’s what struck me as a first impression. So when I was introduced to him, and was at a loss as to what to say, I asked him, “What do you do?” In his dreamy, whispery, spaced-out voice, he replied, “Oh, I make a movie a day.” Wowie zowie, how would you respond to that? My mind was blown, but I managed to muffle a response by mumbling something like “gee” or “oh” as I tried to collect my thoughts. I think that’s what he enjoyed, making an unexpected impression, creating an impossible effect, pulling the rug out from under you. He wanted to put people on, on alert, stop them in their tracks, make them think, observe something they hadn’t seen before, present them with a different experience, not only of art, but who or what he was or might be. Hell, who makes or could make a movie a day? But then, this was the 1960s Underground where anything was possible!

The 1960s turned the tables on everything. President John Kennedy had been assassinated less than a year before, later silver-suited astronauts landed on the moon, and the nation’s newly emerging prosperity was eclipsed suddenly by a suspicious cloud of uncertainty. A bubble had burst in the national psyche and everything was up for grabs. Like cold sweat, uneasiness was dampening the expansiveness of the new decade because of the Vietnam War. Rock ’n’ roll was energizing the nation with new rambunctious, outrageous, and seductive rhythms, after the pelvic gyrations of Elvis and the Hula Hoop had shaken up the erotic wattage.

Suburban sprawl, standardized housing developments, and spacious shopping malls with outsized supermarkets stacked with arrays of brand-name products were popping up everywhere, generating construction, highways, and high-rises. Pop Art celebrated the sacred new monster of commodity fetishism with its fascination for surfaces, images, products, gadgets, glamour, and celebrity. Anything could be art, even Soup Cans—or Electric Chairs!
Gregory Markopoulos’s movie *The Iliac Passion* provided the meeting ground for entering Andy’s scene. We were all part of the bohemian downtowners who were featured as classical Greek gods in a transposed mythology. We showed up in whatever we could scam up that was appropriate for the day’s shoot. Both Andy and Gregory Markopoulos were thirty-six years old, slim and still boyish-looking.

The new American cinema was underground cinema. Everything downtown was underground, pre-counterculture, which was quickly emerging. The year 1964 was the early turning point in Andy’s art and ascendance. The infamous filmmaker Jack Smith was also in the movie, playing Orpheus, poet of the underworld. Jack was also wrapped up in his own myth. Hailed as one of the originators of performance art and the avant-garde cinema, he had a big influence on Andy. Jack trusted his performers to provide material simply by turning the camera on them without rehearsing or directing them; he was the first to coin the shibboleth “superstar.” Jack was into speed, Hollywood fantasia, and grade B-exoticism.

In person, Jack Smith always looked as if he had just awakened from a nap, projecting a sly, sheepish, sleepy, suspicious bemusement. He could be enigmatic, too—with a shy, mischievous, self-conscious look, or a quizzical, withdrawn, paranoid expression, yet nonetheless direct and unpretentious. I remember watching rushes of his *Normal Love* at a special screening at the Film-Makers Cooperative on 28th Street and Park Avenue South that featured raw footage of a hilarious scene of Mario Montez being carried through a New Jersey swamp as the drag-film-goddess-cum-mermaid Maria Montez. Traipsing through the foliage her wig suddenly got caught and fell off, but the camera kept rolling. The moment was startling. Though her disguise was ruined and the illusion broken, the cinematic spell was intensified. The effect was ridiculous, a purposely tacky send-up of a derelict B-movie—artifice in extremis, camp in italics.

Andy was the consummate auteur voyeur, always improvising. Andy’s passively inquisitive eye used the camera to activate a galaxy of people, images, events, and celebrities. Like a sun with orbiting planets, he was the fixed silent center who was observing everything as he set situations and people into motion. Markopoulos, on the other hand, was the neoclassical filmmaker of the downtown group, adept at shooting a perfectly composed scene in color, rewinding his camera with exact calibration to reshoot an expertly synchronized superimposition, or multiple superimpositions. He was masterful at using a single-framing technique to suggest how subliminal associations mirrored a kind of cinematic stream of consciousness. Later generations would need a high-tech editing studio, engineers, and editors to accomplish the same. Nobody could do that, and none of us on the set could figure out how he did it. He knew exactly how to calculate his footage meter with available light.

Andy, on the other hand, had different ideas. He went with the flow. He just set up his camera and aimed it at whatever fascinated him or that he wanted to watch. Enough was happening around him without his having to compose anything. His
eye was voracious and his obsession with people went with any scenario they wanted to create. He wasn’t exactly hands-off or Dada, but more like the Pied Piper on a joy ride. Andy didn’t need a context or a story, and his Silver Factory became a charmed underworld for the outrageous convergence of funk and glamour. The Factory was grungy but intriguing with its exposed silver bricks and pipes, like a secret clubhouse, laboratory, or out-of-the-way back lot studio that induced a heady, glittery euphoria.

3.

The afternoon I met Andy Warhol at Gregory Battcock’s apartment he asked for my phone number. Shortly afterwards he called and asked if I would like to be in one of his movies. Vibrating along a thin invisible wire, Andy’s voice sounded remote and detached. He gave me the address of the Factory and we arranged a time. When I arrived at 231 East 47th Street I didn’t know what to expect. The Factory was located on the fifth floor of an old industrial building, midtown east, near the UN. Andy had found the space earlier that year, in January 1964. The freight elevator, painted silver as well, was as big as a cattle car with a sliding grille gate. When you stepped out of it into the Factory, movie magazines and tabloids were splayed prominently helter-skelter on the right side of the floor in front of the silver pay phone on the wall. Later I would watch Andy, receiver clenched intently to his ear, eagerly getting his dose of tantalizing gossip. I’m sure he depended on this phone for many close encounters, and the distance from callers probably enhanced the transmission of secrets.

Andy was already obsessed with gossip and everything Tinseltown. And anything that could be painted silver or covered with silver foil was—even the bathroom, toilet, and pull-chain. In the middle of the cavernous space there were chairs and a big red couch, but the rest was left empty except for the assembly line of silk screens being produced, or for filmmaking, or both. There was also a large mirrored disco ball lying on the floor and the lower half of a disembodied silver manikin propped up against one of the foil-wrapped pillars.

One of the two early Warhol movies I was in was Couch. Billy Linich (Billy Name) was responsible for the Factory’s far-out silver decor, and when he found a large old red couch on a midtown street he dragged it back, thinking it would make a perfect set for a movie. Whatever you can do, you can do on a couch, right? This was very early Warhol, completely Found Art, junk amplified by glitter.

Unbeknownst to everyone, Andy began making movies that decades later would set the precedent for reality TV, a future perfect realization of people’s lives exposed as they lived them, that had another 1960s forerunner—Happenings. Remember those? Everyone showed up and whatever they improvised on the spot became the show. No need for script or director, because people were already over-the-top. He loved pop music, too—rock ‘n’ roll, along with airplanes, movies, and TV, one of America’s greatest inventions. The Supremes and Dusty Springfield had big hits that year, and one night a group of us danced to “Baby Love,” “Come See About Me,” and “Walk On By.” Andy led me to the couch and told me I could do whatever I wanted. The 16mm Bolex camera was set up on the tripod and he came over to load the film.
Andy seemed very shy, tentative, passive, and self-conscious, but he had an endearing, naïve way of trying to decoy his unease. He wore his trademark black striped shirt and black jeans. He seemed suddenly nervous or unsure, brushing back his hair, like this was all new to him, as if he might not quite know what he was doing. Of course, this could be just Andy’s act, it was so unreal. It was summer, quite humid and felt kind of lazy. He fussed with the camera like it was a brand new toy, double-checking everything.

“Are you ready?” he asked me. I guess I was still waiting for some input or a clue. DIRECTION? Forget it—maybe on Mars. The heat and anticipation started making me spacey. But I kept looking at him, into his eyes, into the camera, and assumed that as he operated the camera, things would get figured out. Suddenly I heard it whirring and then, while I’m still expecting him to do something, he says, “Well, I’ve gotta go now, and paint.” And he walked away!

Holy smokes, I wasn’t ready for something this drastic! I had to think quickly, but there was nothing to think about—I was on the spot and the film was rolling. It was like having the rug being pulled out from under you, just keep smiling, and pretend everything’s what—roses? Imagine Gloria Swanson not being ready for her close-up! In a scrambled moment, I was caught between reaching for an idea and summoning an intention, but was suddenly stranded with nothing. Luckily I had had my dance class that morning and was warmed up. So I grabbed hold of my heel and did a very slow dancer’s leg extension, stretching my leg above my head while sitting on the couch staring straight at the camera. Everybody is always impressed when a dancer does that, and I just kept gazing at the lens. The body is the best revenge.

Andy was going everywhere—to art events, galleries, shopping, the movies, making every scene possible including Judson Church, Ellen Stewart’s Cafe LaMaMa, and beginning to collect what would soon become his entourage of flamboyant and decadent superstars like Edie Sedgwick, Viva, Joe Dallesandro, and Ultra Violet. The New American Cinema promised an alternative for those who could not afford to make Hollywood movies. Filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, Shirley Clarke, Alfred Leslie, Stan VanDerBeek, Storm de Hirsch, and Adolphus Mekas were setting a new precedent, and Andy’s films were in even more radical contradistinction. Andy offered a quick peep of secret fantasy, downtown glamour, forbidden escape, the lure of connections, friends, fun, and drugs.

Andy turned being a tabula rasa into an all-reflecting surface production. His grace came from being non-judgmental—the anything-goes liberation ethos of the 1960s needed a trigger like him to release people’s inhibitions, trespass conventions, and make unusual things happen. He knew how to draw people out and get them to perform by doing nothing or appearing to do nothing. No matter how outrageously they performed, everything was fabulous. Purposely short on words, he provoked situations by a sort of feigned absence, creating a self-effacing vortex that caused others to act out, or space out. Andy could outdo the sphinx. He picked up everything
by osmosis, and when he was interrogated by journalists about his past, he replied, famously, to make it up. He knew they would invent whatever they wanted. Besides, often what we read in newspapers isn’t the real story anyway. Andy relished the mask of anonymity and could upstage it at the same time. Andy’s famous claim, almost a polemic, was that he wanted to be a machine. I guess that’s why people thought he was putting them on—but that’s what the Factory was about, turning out a run of identically reproduced silk screens, or movies. Volume and simulation were becoming values.

Andy was turning reality into a cultural feedback loop, and feeding back the hidden cues that the media were projecting, so he began playing off the projecting of projections, by emptying them out at the same time, making fame, power, wealth, and advertising transparent, reducing everything to banality and trivia. Though his silk screens, movies, bon mots, and performance didn’t appear to be social commentary, they upstaged the status quo and deflected public expectation through the clever ruse of celebrity, tinsel mania, and glamor.

Andy was always performing. His mute persona was the perfect decoy. He was enigmatic with a quizzically whimsical glint around the corners of his eyes and a provocative half-smile. He started taking Obotrol, pharmaceutical speed, in 1963, to lose weight, and the high probably induced a cool euphoria that made him highly attentive, focused, and able to turn out a lot of work. Unlike pot, it wasn’t hallucinatory or introspective, but aroused feelings of power. Andy was his own unique creation. His impassivity was a foil. His slightly mischievous expression created a reflecting surface so he could be anything you wanted him to be. The silver preoccupation was both a fascination with astronauts, mirrors, and narcotic fixations. Due to a childhood illness, his pale complexion, whimsical eyes, wispy Santa Claus eyebrows, and a prominent W.C. Fields nose gave him an odd but charmed look—his silver hair gave him the mysterious air of a trendsetter or ringmaster. And he was more verbal than he let on, as his later writings and famous sayings would reveal. In 1964 he seemed to be taking everything in.

5.

The experience of being in a Warhol movie with no operator or one far away was so novel that all I could do was go with the uncertainty of the moment, and that was the surprise. Movies are a disembodied experience, for those watching or making them. Suddenly finding yourself in one when you have no idea why or where you are only increases the disconnect, like being lost in a dream. But that’s what was actually liberating and informing—caught between being here and there, you and the screen, the camera and the eye, now and then. Moments of passage are comprised of tiny interstices and that’s where the information is—that is where the eye sees or discovers the unexpected. Liberation requires a limbo.

Everyone has a strange sensation when they see themselves on screen for the first time. The palpable discrepancy between who you think you are or what you think you look like, or what you think you’re doing, as well as trying to figure out the
director’s intent, contrasts with the actual experience. Like hearing your voice for the first time, or seeing a photograph of yourself, there’s that unexpected discrepancy. Film is a way to get inside and outside of yourself at the same time, which creates an unsettling déjá vu experience.

6.

I was also in Andy’s Boys of The Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys series, part of his early screen test series, portraits that pushed the limits of cinéma vérité and paved the way for superstars and reality TV, because no one would attempt to make a movie without a scenario or would dare to just film the empty unplanned present, which would make people’s lives unusually transparent. The idea that a film didn’t need a script was a little like chance music, it just happened. His movies captured an edge of improbability and unreality even when you were supposed to look real as all get-out.

Even though each subject in Andy’s Screen Tests just sat and looked at the camera, a still celluloid portrait is very different from a photograph or a silk screen, because a moving image is nuanced by tics and tiny shifts, imperceptible but revealing movements, character transparency, and granulation. We usually think of a portrait as a fixed immobile picture, without a temporal dimension unable to record the little changes of expression happening moment-to-moment as a kinetic score. Andy’s cinematic portraits ventured the idea of a suspended present that became readily apparent when they were later shown in museums mounted in individual video windows. Painting captures a static moment, but an open-ended succession of moments unreeling in time presented a phenomenon, like Nam June Paik’s famous sculpture of a Buddha sitting in front of a TV watching himself watch himself. Who’s watching what, and whom? Reportedly, Andy got the idea for the screen test series in 1962 from a NYC Police Department pamphlet called “The Thirteen Most Wanted,” and he photographed many more than thirteen people. Couch, too, may have been part of the screen test series. His films paved the way by zeroing in relentlessly on a raw disembodied subject that created the context of a context.

7.

One summer afternoon in 1964 I arrived at the Factory at around 2:30 p.m. No one was there. Andy was now painting cows, perhaps inspired by Elsie, Borden’s famous milk icon used in TV commercials and on billboards—he was designing wallpaper. He said, “I hope the artworld is ready for cows.” He said this like a bemused elf, as if maybe he were really saying something else. Andy had a deadpan, wryly understated, but actually riotous wit. With his shy, tentative but inquiring voice, he asked me if I took a lot of drugs!

Later that afternoon an assortment of people started drifting in, including some art dealers, readily identifiable by their tweed business jackets, natty ties, and reserved entrepreneurial demeanor. Soon a social scene materialized. That seemed to be the daily pattern. Andy walked the art dealers over to a far wall at the front end of a darkened corner, and from behind some old plywood boards pulled out several of
his early rolled up *Disaster* paintings—silk screen multiples of the famous electric chair and car crash series that he started making in 1963. The images were sensational and awe-inspiring.

It’s one thing to see them hung on a gallery wall—sure to produce consternation or provocation—or reproduced in an art magazine, but seeing them in their raw state lying casually on the Factory floor before they’ve even been mounted or framed was like being backstage at a performance and seeing the scenery and performers close-up, before the lights are turned on and the curtain goes up. Thomas Alva Edison got embroiled in a huge public relations firestorm when the electric chair was invented in 1890. All the baggage of capital punishment is embodied in Andy’s electric chair silk screens. The cold facticity of a death machine is underscored by its cool industrial transformation. The car crashes seize the moment when tabloid mania and sensationalism came to flank the highway of the American imagination.

Andy silk screened popular images that he clipped from newspapers and sent off to a lab to have transformed into an acetate plate and then into a mesh stencil over which he or his assistants could brush paint to affix the image onto a canvas. This mechanically enhanced process gave the reproduced photos a pictorial remove but increased their shock value. Their flat single color presentation in various hues—red, green, and black—heightened the tacit compression of foreboding and visual violence. The mangled car and macabre twisted wreckage fascinate because they reduce a killing machine to a chilling, morbidly compressed sight. They became their own comment.

The great irony of Warhol’s work is irony itself. Some people have thought his work nihilistic, meaningless, or Dada, but it rides a finer line than social commentary and becomes rather a reflection of the popular imagination that the culture and media were beginning to embody. Death, destruction, and danger are recurrent themes and obsessions of his work, and their incongruity abounds in the ways we’re forced to confront the world head-on every day, put the pieces together, or take them apart. Images can be as piercing as a dagger.

Andy was a shrewd observer with original insights and hilarious retorts. “Fantasy love is much better than reality love. Never doing it is very exciting. The most exciting attractions are between two opposites that never meet.” Even death is ambiguous and the car crashes remind us that danger is omnipresent, residing in the lacunae and reiteration of the circulation of instant news and media hype that daily invade everyone’s psyche. Andy may have looked benign, but he was charismatic, funny, and dangerous. He was a magician.

8.

Andy wasn’t wearing black leather yet, but soon would be. I’m sure he got the idea from Kenneth Anger’s celebrated movie *Scorpio Rising*. Made in 1963 in California, it was timely and sensational. Anger was able to intimate a narrative by collaging sequences of biker beefcake, pulp, and pop that had a big impact on the downtown art scene. He said he was trying to do on the West Coast what Jack Smith was doing
on the East Coast with *Flaming Creatures*. This was six years before the Stonewall riots when drag queens and their antics were still taboo, and illegal. Kenneth Anger was inflating macho stereotypes to hypersexualize them and give them a double innuendo, whereas Jack Smith was subverting and sabotaging gender hegemony.

With improvisatory flair and hardcore edge, Anger mixed black leather, the cult of James Dean, takes or outtakes from a grade-B Jesus movie with whiffs of the occult, Nazis, and homoeroticism to conflate the sacred and profane in a heady exhilarating cinematic overlay against a soundtrack of throbbing vintage rock ’n roll. The allure of bikers tooling up and racing around daredevil curves going for the kill to the pulsing thrill of The Crystals’ unforgettable “He’s a Rebel” to Elvis Presley singing “Devil in Disguise” and Bobby Vinton’s “Blue Velvet” created a new American outlaw aesthetic.

Andy was far from bikers, but the black leather outsider costume and silver hair worked. He costumed himself like a disaffected hipster—glasses with transparent frames that intensified his gaze when he wasn’t wearing shades, black and tan striped shirt, black jeans with or without leather jacket, and the omnipresent tinsel hair—hair lends a costume its final touch. And since identity, like gender, is a construction, his resonated with a peculiar attitude and charismatic presence. He was a sorcerer, a pun to point up his idol-like role of Leader of The Pack, from The Shangri-Las’s famous 1964 rock song—VARRROOOMM.

Jacqueline Kennedy’s famous 1962 televised White House tour set a new cultural precedent—fifty-six million Americans watched it. She was campy, cool, and utterly stylish as she introduced each room with a shy breathy but regal innuendo. She sounded like a charmed little girl who just happened to be the *ne plus ultra* sophisticated Queen of Camelot. And like her husband, she was reportedly going to Dr. Feelgood (Dr. Max Jacobson), for special shots—a combo of uppers, vitamins, and steroids.

The big turning point happened in November 1964 at the Castelli Gallery when Andy showed his *Flotations* installation—large silver Mylar “clouds” that looked like big suspended floating pillows—and his Blue Jackies. Leo Castelli’s Gallery was the preeminent cutting-edge New York avant-garde gallery, and at that time resided in the art mogul’s third story townhouse at 18 East 77th Street, just off Fifth Avenue. The day of the opening I arrived during the final setup before anyone else and slowly padded up the thickly carpeted staircase in this stately and elegant residence. Andy walked in from the back room in black leather, and in dim dramatic baby spots the famous silver pillows hovered spectrally, filled with various mixtures of helium. Bell Labs engineering whiz Billy Klüver helped design them.

You were left speechless—this electric spectacle was made more potent by being contained in a darkened gallery. Here the unexpected floated right before your eyes! Flabbergasted like everyone during the spaced-out sixties, I muttered—WOW! It was the hermetic ambient and unreal suspended animation, just like Andy, who replied
dreamily, “Yeah, they’re just like death.” The idea of the silver clouds was quickly exploited commercially—you see them everywhere now. Merce Cunningham used them later in his 1968 dance *RainForest* to great effect. The clouds though were just the setup, the prologue.

The real theatrical knockouts were the Blue Jackies in the back gallery. On the rear wall lined up in vertically repetitive rows of drop-dead symmetry stood forty-two (of forty-nine) silk screened canvases in three rows of fourteen—framed close-ups of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy’s grim downcast face, mute and vacant, displaying her shaken gaze. The effect was electric. I was instantly transported back to the day President Kennedy was assassinated, November 22, 1963. Who couldn’t help get a sinking feeling in the pit of their stomach, and feel panic and awe? Jackie’s image forever reverberates and resurrects the day she accompanied her husband’s casket from Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas back to Washington, D.C., when she stepped off Air Force One wearing the same blood-stained dress she wore in the motorcade. Aside from her dramatic allure, her image remains powerful as an echo of the nation’s golden years, and frames the unresolved mystery behind JFK’s assassination that continues to haunt us fifty years later.

The Blue Jackies were awesome. Like an ethereal billboard, flanking an entire wall, they were visual dynamite. Larger than life, the multiplication of her image created a singularity that acted like a huge magnifying glass reiterating the unresolved past and present by immortalizing her magical persona. They remain a visceral presence, telescope an unmistakable, historical catastrophe, and are truly icons—unnerving, riveting, and highly affecting—and far more effective and moving than Andy’s Marilyn, Elvis, or Liz Taylor silk screens. The Blue Jackies define a national crisis by a single cipher. Here was death punctuated by absence, framing a collective loss that grabbed you by their stately, pictorial impact. No wonder Andy was spellbound by her. The assassination was the only time we saw her somber, defeated, and forlorn. He might be incredulous to find out that, nearly twenty-five years after his death, his 1964 Sixteen Jackies was auctioned for $18 million and that he remains the top all-time best-selling modern artist.

10.

Entourage in tow, Andy was becoming as entrepreneurially minded as P.T. Barnum, surrounded by outrageously eccentric personalities with cool blasé imperviousness. Superstars or freaks, was there a difference? His Silver Factory was becoming a crossroads where the most unlikely people’s paths intersected—socialites, artists, drug addicts, critics, art dealers, movie stars, lowlifes—all extremes of character and society mixed homogeneously. Andy had some J. Edgar Hoover mixed in, too—spying on everyone and finding out everyone’s dark secrets, even asking wives how big their husband’s cocks were! Looking back, Andy’s theatricality is what fascinated me most, and precisely because it occurred outside the theatre per se. Like Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Kennedy, or Susan Sontag, Andy’s persona was created, staged, and perfectly synchronized to the tempi of the zeitgeist. As the era’s avenging vérité
voyeur, he captured and reflected all the rays inhabiting the perfect prism of this strange cultural synergy.

Gregory Markopoulos shot his big scene with Andy for *The Iliac Passion* at the Factory in the middle of a big party with a photographer from *Life* magazine shooting color stills. Klieg lights were set up and Andy was posed atop an Exercycle in black leather jacket and shades, in front of his large generic multi-colored Flower silk-screen paintings peddling nonchalantly while mindlessly chewing gum. Andy was supposed to be Poseidon, god of the sea, the earth-shaker, pedaling nonstop while riding over an “ocean” of plastic sheeting. But more astonishing, reclining on the floor in front of him provocatively posed and stark naked, was the star of the movie, dark stud hunk Richard Beauvais as Prometheus, lounging back with his legs extended invitingly like a sex god. The cinematic setup was a visual *non sequitur*. Peddling furiously, Poseidon appeared to be trying to reach Prometheus while at the same time being so coolly detached as to be oblivious! Magic requires—distance.

The tacit erotic ambiguity enhanced the cool spatial disconnect between the two figures—one dark, clothed and active, the other nude, solicitous, and passive, while people were milling around nonchalantly, eating, drinking, and talking while this was being filmed! It was sensational—Andy was demonstrating the epitone of non-acting, and the nude body in the midst of an all-out party with people trying not to stare overtly was more than a social *non sequitur*! If you pry the word Poseidon apart, there’s “pose” and “eidon,” which is close to *eidos* or *eidolon*, the Greek words for image and apparition. And Andy’s name, too, is apt—war hole, blown-out trench, damaged fistula, void ravaged by an exploding inevitable. Markopoulos was interested in sacral images, Warhol with exploding them.

Andy was also a great magician. “I believe in low lights and trick mirrors.” Unlike Houdini or David Copperfield, he didn’t do stage tricks, but he created enigmas, beginning with himself. He didn’t make the elephant in your living room disappear, he made it appear. Instead of sawing a woman in half, he filmed her on speed performing her own demise. Instead of prestidigitation or pulling coins out of the air, he was adept at lucrative quick-change celebrity materializations. Magic ultimately depends upon playing with perception, either by juggling appearances, images, or illusions. Andy had the deadpan trickster down pat. His enigmatically impassive expression was capped by an *Alice in Wonderland* Cheshire cat-like smirk. Being in his presence was fascinating—you saw the lights, the flash, and the afterimage, but never the switch or wires. He was becoming surrounded by sycophants, caught up in the narcotized haze of Silver Screen ecstasy.

Andy turned himself into a public relations phantom that appeared haunting and affective, and one able to subvert everything. His was a thaumaturgy of sabotage, undermining reality by reinforcing surfaces and objects. Celebrities were idolized but rendered empty, reduced to superficial images like foiled cardboard cutouts, no matter how alluring. Their adoration was a con or shell game—tinsel subterfuge.
rendered culturally hypnotic. How did he produce so much, know what to latch onto next, garner so much publicity, and get away with it?

The Factory was also a crypt, an underworld. Andy appeared to be passive, laid back, detached and remote, also very secretive, hiding behind an empty surface while engineering other people’s moves and manipulating the scenes happening around him. His magic was a reminder that your own best character creation is yourself, following Oscar Wilde’s credo to invent yourself. Andy created high-octane fetishes out of images and people, while turning himself into a formidable icon at the same time. Banality was the magic juice or enzyme, potent and riveting, as was the deadpan drama of wow or Anything Goes. He made you ask questions you never thought to ask, and he challenged your opinions not only about soup cans and pop images, but also about how everything that appeared in your world appeared. He made every moment indelible by snapping Polaroids to capture the forever vanishing moment. Because Polaroids were instantaneous, the stopgap between the action and the production of the image was virtually erased, making their immediacy more potent. Making the time between releasing the shutter and developing the image evaporate broke the time barrier — perception was the moment, and appearing could be synonymous with disappearing.

Andy was a shrewd provocateur and eccentric genius, a combination of a fragile ego with a wide-ranging antennae and the steel armor of a surreptitiously ruthless nonetheless charismatic con man. He operated behind a cool, carefully calculated, seemingly neutral but ironically ambiguous persona. His infatuation with celebrity was like a narcotic, yet at the same time his work held a mirror up to America’s eight-hundred-pound gorilla — the culture’s decadence, indulgence, superficiality, nihilism, and narcissism. He played with the ultimate stakes of the forbidden — glamour, beauty, power, fame, sex, death, and destruction.

A closing clincher anecdote appeared in Kitty Kelley’s biography Jackie Oh! Carolyn Kennedy’s hamster for a school project was smelling up their Fifth Avenue apartment, so Jackie called her teacher to come pick up the pet. When the woman arrived, a man with white hair was sitting prominently on the couch — Andy! Once the teacher had the hamster and cage in hand, Jackie and Andy walked her to the elevator, and when she got in, she was astonished to find both of them grinning and waving goodbye to the little critter. Probably Andy thought everybody was a hamster!

KENNETH KING is the author of Writing in Motion: Body — Language — Technology, and the novel Bring on the Phantoms. His writings have appeared in many publications, including The Paris Review, Antioch Review, Hotel Amerika, and in the anthology Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time. This is an excerpt of a longer Warhol essay — with thanks to Dina von Zweck for her critical and editorial assistance.