

AT ANDY WARHOL'S GRAVE

(A bits-and-pieces piece)

By Frank Gagliano

The cemetery where Andy Warhol is buried is less than two miles from our house. In the adjoining town of Castle Shannon, Pennsylvania. Sandy and I had never been to Andy's grave, though we'd often pass the cemetery on our way to BruSters, one of the great ice cream hangouts in the area. Last night, Sandy and I decided to visit Andy's grave.

Ever since we've been going to the Warhol Museum here in Pittsburgh, Sandy and I have come to admire Andy Warhol's work and to understand that, along with the celebrity madness he had nourished and which has contributed to the star-fucking corruption of our times, he was truly a genius who had been an important influence in the art movements of the last century.

The Castle Shannon cemetery is small; all of it on a steep hill, with one narrow road snaking up through the hill, then snaking around and down to the entrance point again. The small, unadorned gravestones spread up and out on the great hill, with long intervals between each gravestone. One would have thought there'd be huge,

mock-up, papier-machè Campbell Soup cans pointing the way to Andy's gravestone. There were none. No markers at all.

We spotted a man and a woman in the distance tending to a grave site. We drove up and stopped parallel to their parked car and, through our open window, Sandy asked them if they knew where Andy Warhol's grave was located. The man said, that's the famous celebrity. Right? Yes, I've been there in the past. It's a black gravestone, I think. Park here. Follow me; I'll try to find it for you. Typical nice behavior of Pittsburghers; they not only point the way, they offer to take you there.

It was about 6:30 PM. Cool, dry, a bit of a wind on the hill. We walked on the bias seeking out black gravestones. The man said, they don't keep the grounds the way they should. True; nothing was manicured. Lots of blowing weeds. We spotted a black gravestone and walked to it. Not Andy's. We spotted another black one up ahead. Bingo. ANDY WARHOLA/ 1928-1987. The black stone had a neat bed of flowers planted in front of it. Yellow and orange marigolds, mostly. Directly behind it, a yard or two up the hill, were the side-by-side headstones of Andy's father and mother. With more marigolds, neatly planted. Sitting on top of Andy's gravestone were two soup cans (not Campbell's), a lot of pennies and nickels (?) and a small white statue of the Virgin Mary.

The man said, I thought I remembered where it was. Sandy said, it's ironic; all Andy Warhol wanted in his life was to get away from

Pittsburgh and here he is, back again. Forever. The man said, I was once here and there was a couple from Germany visiting the grave. Isn't it something, the way he died like that? Went into the hospital for gall bladder, I think, and didn't come out. That isn't right. You never die from that. My wife had that operation. I think something went wrong in the hospital. That isn't right. We're here tending my son's grave. He would have been forty two years old today. He died ten years ago. Sandy said, Oh, I'm sorry. The man said, Yeah, he was shot to death. A friend of his. A former marine. The friend was found to have a high percent of alcohol in him and the rifle went off. He claimed it was an accident. They agreed. I didn't. We wanted an inquest because we didn't believe it was an accident, but we never got one. I hired a lawyer, but he was a corporate lawyer, I think. I thought lawyers were lawyers. But they specialize. I should have got a criminal lawyer. I didn't know. I asked more questions at the trial than the lawyer did. My son had only a small percent of alcohol in him. We had an autopsy, that's how we knew. We think he was sleeping when he was shot. You never get over a thing like that. When we got the phone call and they mentioned my son's name and asked if I was the father, the first thing I thought was, oh God, he's been in a car accident, and they said he had expired; that he was shot by an acquaintance with a rifle. We were in shock. Walked the floor all night, Back and forth because that's all we could do.

The man was short, with a pot belly. He wore a white T-shirt. He had sharp features and red blotched skin. We walked back to our car and the man kept talking: You're never the same, he said. I tried to get

back to work. I used to set type. Everyone said you got to get over it. But I'd say, how do you get over a thing like that? I retired from work. I couldn't concentrate. Every time I pass the cemetery I have to stop off here.

At the son's grave site there was a rake and other garden tools and some sacks of earth and when we got to the wife the husband told her that we had found it, that he had remembered the German couple from Germany who had visited it, Andy Warhol's black gravestone, and it wasn't right that a celebrity like that should die from a gall bladder operation. I told the wife how sorry we were about her son and she said, yeah, he would have been forty-two years old and you never get over a thing like that. We said we had one son and what happened to their son was unthinkable to us. Yeah, said the husband, there's nothing worse than a child going before you. The wife said they had one other son, four years younger, who never got over his brother being shot to death. He's depressed all the time. And the man who shot my son still lives in the neighborhood. In the back of us. It's hard. The man said, his son, the one who died, had never been sick in his life. Really took after himself. Worked out. Ate all the right foods. And then he gets shot like that. The wife was a chubby woman with a pretty round face and had on a light coat which she kept keeping closed and close to her and she said, just the week before it happened I told my son to stay away from that man, I never butt into your business, I said, but I feel that that man is not good to be with and I said I have to say something because you may find yourself dead if you

stay around with him. I swear I said that. And a week later he was dead. And I feel guilty about that. And the husband said, he was a former Marine, the man who shot my son. Was supposed to know all about rifles. It was the drink. He had a high percent in his blood. But that's how it is today. If it isn't the drink, it's drugs. Look at Columbine. Those kids were made fun of and shot everyone down to get even. Just like that. And Sandy said, it's too easy to get guns. And the man said he blamed it on the parents. The wife said, well, what can you do? You put yourself in God's hands. The man said that it was a big story at the time. Made the papers.

The writer in me thought, there's the connection: Unwittingly, they had all taken part in an Andy Warhol moment; had had their fifteen minutes of celebrity. Now Andy and the dead son were neighbors.

We offered our sympathy again and we went home.