

Meeting Andy Warhol

By John Fries



Photo of Andy Warhol at the Factory, New York City in 1985, by John Fries

It was about noon on that unseasonably cold Thanksgiving Day in 1985 when Mark Warhola and I boarded the plane that would take us from Pittsburgh to New York. Close friends since childhood, we were both in our 20s, grew up within three blocks of each other and had spent a ton of time together over the years. We were about as inseparable as friends could be, and were always planning new adventures.

One day, the phone rang and it was Mark. He asked if I'd be interested in going to New York for a few days. He needed to help his uncle with a new computer system that had been installed in his Manhattan studio, and suggest we make a weekend of it. Of course, I said yes. So we bought our tickets and made hotel reservations. And sometime time during the early afternoon, our plane left Pittsburgh and, about 50 minutes later, touched down at La Guardia. By mid-afternoon we were in Manhattan and knocking at the door of the Factory, the studio owned by Mark's uncle, legendary pop artist Andy Warhol.

When I was a child, drawing was one of my favorite pastimes and Andy Warhol was one of my art heroes. Although he'd left Pittsburgh with a degree from Carnegie Tech and started his career in New York as an advertising illustrator, he had been instrumental, along with a handful of his contemporaries during the 1950s, in establishing the Pop Art movement, which sought to create art that emphasized the objects of everyday life. These works ranged from Roy Lichtenstein's huge acrylic paintings of comic panels, complete with Benday dots, to Andy's silkscreened images, including the famous Campbell's soup can. Eventually, brilliantly colored Pop Art paintings and installations would share gallery space alongside oil paintings made by the masters. Mark's Uncle Andy was a Pop Art pioneer, but he was also more than that; he was an influencer of popular culture, a role he would play for three decades until his untimely death following gallbladder surgery in 1987.

Mark only had to knock once. The door opened and there Andy stood, his white hair and red, round plastic eyeglass frames in stark contrast to his outfit of black shirt, black Levi's 501s and black Reeboks. He looked like a New York artist. He smiled, shook our hands and welcomed us into his studio. I expected he'd be shy and diffident, but he didn't come across that way at all. He was soft-spoken, which was consistent with my expectations, but also very articulate and friendly. Several of his large silkscreen paintings, maybe six or seven feet tall, leaned against the right wall. He led us to a small sofa that was directly across from his business office. One side of the office was a huge window. Mark went into the office to talk with Vincent Fremont, one of Andy's business associates. I sat on the sofa next to Andy, where we had a delightful chat.

I asked Andy about the evolution of his aesthetic style. In the earliest days of his career, he worked as an illustrator, drawing in ink and sometimes using washes or other media to embellish or accent his illustrations. As a pop artist, he was a prolific silkscreen painter. Later, he hand-drew outlines, often in contrasting colors, over his silkscreened canvases. He said he wanted to keep changing how he created art. Considering that he was active as a filmmaker, television producer, magazine publisher, author and, for a time, digital artist, it is clear that he continually sought new ways to engage in creative expression.

Pointing to a statue of a dog in one corner of the studio, I asked Andy if the familiar squiggly figures painted on it were the work of (the now-late) Keith Haring. He said that Haring had in fact painted the statue there at the studio. What I didn't know in 1985 was that Haring, prior to becoming a well-know pop artist himself, had studied commercial art at the former Ivy School of Art on Pittsburgh's North Side.

For quite some time, Andy and I continued our conversation. He was a genuinely nice man. Although he didn't visit Pittsburgh often, he was up to speed on what was happening here and mentioned his close relationship with Carnegie Mellon. In fact, he would welcome students to visit the Factory. He also had an impressive knowledge of the business landscape. "What do you do?" he asked me. I told him that I worked in a marketing in a creative capacity, and that his career had been inspirational to me. "You should consider moving to New York," he said, adding that Manhattan offered myriad opportunities. Although I was happy in my current position and loved living in Pittsburgh, New York was one of my favorite vacation destinations. I didn't pursue a career there, but have visited many times over the years, both on fun excursions and business trips.

After Mark finished his computer conversation with Vincent, we said goodbye to Andy and thanked him for letting us drop by. I asked if it would be okay to photograph him and Mark. He said he'd be glad to do that. I shot a photo of Andy and Mark standing in front of one of Andy's paintings. Then, Mark took a photo and Andy and me. Andy then said he was going to go out as well, then told us to have a fun evening—his treat. Mark and I went to dinner, then took a cab to a comedy club, where we laughed at a series of stand-up comics well into the night.

A few days later, on Sunday morning, Mark and I attended Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in Midtown. Mark and his family are Byzantine Catholics, a faith that informed much of Andy's art. Although I was Roman Catholic, I went to Mark's church a few times to experience the beauty of the Divine Liturgy. I learned later on that Andy was a regular churchgoer as well.

After Mass, Mark suggested we stop by Uncle Andy's house before going to the airport for our return flight. We packed our bags packed and left them at the hotel, then took a cab to Andy's townhouse and rang the doorbell. Andy answered and asked us to have a seat. He was in the middle of a phone conversation he had every Sunday with his brother and Mark's father, John Warhola. After Andy hung up the phone, he spent time chatting with us. At one point he excused himself, then returned with a couple catalogues from exhibitions of his art, signed them and gave them to me.

This had been a weekend like no other. I had the opportunity to interact with one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. I got to see where he worked and where he lived. And I'd learned that, behind the enigmatic public persona and prolific output, was a nice guy from my hometown. A short time later, Mark and I went to the airport, boarded our flight and returned home to Pittsburgh.