

Grave Sight

Posted by Peter Schjeldahl
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The Andy Warhol Museum has instituted a [twenty-four / seven Webcam feed of the artist's grave](#), near his home town of Pittsburgh. The idea occurred a year ago to the museum's director, Eric Shiner, in conversation with the C.E.O. of [EarthCam](#), Brian Cury. Cury cites his encounters with Warhol during the artist's last year, 1987, as an inspiration for his business, founded in 1996, of maintaining sleepless camera eyes around the world. Shiner consulted Warhol's surviving relatives and the St. John Chrysostom Byzantine Catholic Church, which owns the cemetery. No one objected.

The other day, in soft sunshine, a wind rustled flowers and bobbed Mylar helium balloons around the small gravestone, upon which eight cans of Campbell's Soup sat. (The Web site allows you to order further offerings; you would be given a time-of-day to observe their delivery.) Twenty-four other stones were visible. Little American flags waved at two, surely veterans'. Legible names included Jaczsko and Mascenik. A large marker just behind Andy's, that of his mother and father, bore his birth name, Warhola.

He was from immigrant-Slovak, working-class stock. His alien mien is simply explained. Once having revealed his talent, at Carnegie Tech in the late nineteen-forties, he rocketed from being marginal, at the bottom of society, to being marginal, at the top. He spent no time among the majority of us, in the middle. His vision of things as a rich artist was identical to the one he had had as a poor boy, only beamed from an opposite direction.

I have angled for reasons to snoot the webcam stunt. I can't think of any. Along with more or less everybody else, I find it Warholian to the, well, life: watching the present habitation of a man who liked to watch. Warhol pioneered motion pictures of motionless subjects; and we have him to thank, or not, for prophesying reality television. His strictly beholding bent became, as it remains, a default setting of artistic and popular culture absolutely everywhere.

Moreover, death suited him. His early images sing of it: fatal car crashes, suicide leaps, the electric chair, J.F.K.'s funeral, a plane crash, the atom bomb, victims of accidental botulism poisoning, and, of course, fame's sacrificial lamb and hovering angel, Marilyn Monroe. Warhol conferred on defunct subjects the immortality of art, understood as permanent publicity. Beyond iconic, the pictures are icons in the Byzantine mode—direct links to eternity—which came to Warhol naturally from his upbringing and his never discontinued observance as an Eastern Orthodox Catholic.

You didn't have to die to benefit from the Warhol effect, as his many commissioned portraits testify, but only to be brushed by the wing of fame. He made clear that celebrity and glamour amount to accelerated embalming. It's not an attribute; it's a condition. Its subjects are all the same, fixed in a hungry, icy gaze. Fame does privilege the dead, who are immune from the pain of outliving it.

"Famous for fifteen minutes" implies: in the sixteenth minute, fuck off.

By general agreement, Warhol would have liked the grave cam, though it exposes the violation of a written wish of his: "I always thought I'd like my own tombstone to be blank. No epitaph and no name. Well, actually, I'd like it to say 'figment.'" Does that elegant drollery sound fishy, from the monosyllabic Andy? I suspect it was hatched by someone in his circle—he routinely seized on others' ideas—and perhaps edited down by him from "figment of the imagination." While plenty inventive, Warhol was preëminently a genius of selection.

When you say "figment" to yourself a few times, it starts to sound like the name of a food.

There's an artistic precedent for the aspect of the project that is morbid: Bruce Nauman's "Audio-Video Underground Chamber" (1974-75). A coffin-like concrete box, buried outside an art space, contains a light, a video camera, and a microphone. On a monitor, you see and hear in real time what's going on in there, which is what you would expect: nothing.

Then there's Marcel Duchamp's sneaky parting shot of an epitaph, on his gravestone in Rouen: "D'ailleurs, c'est toujours les autres qui meurent" ("By the way, it's always the others who die"). Think too long about that, and a wisp of doubt arises about who is or isn't



dead. The speaker beneath the stone remains a whole lot smarter and funnier than you and I, for certain.

In words prefacing his “figment” quote, Warhol wondered why, upon dying, “you didn’t just vanish, and everything could just keep going on the way it was—only you wouldn’t be there.” That’s illuminating and scary. It is the self-assessment of a pure spectator, entirely without connection to what he happened to witness. His demise merely removed one set of eyes and ears from among the world’s billions. That may smack of false modesty; but I think it distills a secret of Warhol’s desolate, desolating power.

The best joke of 1975 involved Generalissimo Francisco Franco, whose protracted dying had made for monotonous headlines about his condition. Every Saturday night for weeks, after the unloved Spaniard at last succumbed, Chevy Chase would report some variation of the news flash, “Francisco Franco is still dead.” Partly, the laugh was on the unctuous solemnity of TV anchors. But it tickled, too, by riffing lightly on a fine point about death: the dead are always up-to-date.

It stands to reason that no one can be better than anyone else at being dead. But it’s hard to remember that when checking in on Warhol’s grave. (There are two more soup cans today, and one more, perhaps opportunistic American flag nearby.) Here lies a man who had an unusual amount of practice in deadness, with extraordinary consequences, while officially alive.

Say what you like about him.

He’s there for us.