

ANDY WARHOL'S LIFE AND DEATH

Miková, a slowly dying-out Rusyn village in Eastern Slovakia, is a birthplace of Andrej Warchola and Julia Zavacka. The man and the woman who gave life to the most characteristic personage of the world of art of the second half of the 20th century – Andy Warhol.

Why do we mention Miková? As a matter of fact, we're talking about a place which doesn't stand out among other Rusyn or Slovak villages of the Prešov region of Slovakia, slowly dying out due to lack of workplaces. The original old Greek Catholic church there is a silent witness to the events and the history of Miková.

Julia Warchola went to America with her husband after their wedding in the Greek Catholic church in Miková in 1909. Her trip to America led through Poland, towards the Baltic sea; she covered most of the trip with her best friend on foot, and then, from Gdansk, by ship, to New York. They settled down in Pittsburgh, in the city of miners and industry. They were driven away by poverty, only to find the same, poverty, in the foreign land. Hard work of the father weakened his health so much that he died (1942). Sickly little Andy spent whole days in the company of his mother. His older brothers, John and Paul had to go to work to fill their father's role so that the family could survive. John recalled: 'We were very poor. Mum made extra money cleaning, at home, at night she sewed and made various souvenirs that she sold afterwards. We lived a very poor life and more than once we had nothing to eat. Mum was a very thrifty and humble woman. She never threw out anything, she used to say that anything could come in handy one day.'

Let's try to interpret those words by John Warhola in the light of the reality of older Rusyns even today. The attics full of old objects, unused tools, rusty nails, etc. '... anything can come in handy one day'.

Let us refer to John Warhola's words about his brother, Andy: 'Andy liked collecting various things. He rarely threw out anything, as if sticking to our mother's words that anything could come in handy one day. In his place he had lots of things from flea markets, dozens of plaster gnomes, toys, grinders, colourful plates, fake fruit, various unused kitchen utensils, etc. He took great pleasure in buying all of that at markets and people wondered what he needed it for.'

Frequent illnesses and poverty caused a certain condition in young neurotic Andy. Comparing inwardly his situation with the world of celebrities, he dreamt about his own star in the firmament of popularity. He surrounded

himself with newspaper cut-outs – photographs of well-known and famous people of America. He wanted to be as famous as Truman Capote or other celebrities and he tirelessly sent them letters.

The journey of 'Spot' (the nickname that Andy obtained in his childhood, related to the loss of facial skin pigment) from numerous evening stories told by his mother, long days spent in bed while ill, browsing through, among others, copies of icons, the upbringing, emphasising the necessity of believing in God, the first words, the information on the land 'from nowhere' (that's how he described his origin in one of the interviews), on Miková – they come to life in Andy as he rises in fame, an engram – a memory trace in the grey matter of his brain.

Nobody can question his American identity or the fact that Andy Warhol was one of the most famous Americans, but also the fact that he was a Rusyn by origin and that the genes and the upbringing play an important role in the life of an individual, even more so in the life of a sensitive person with a neurotically predisposed personality full of shyness, insecurity, but also, on the other hand, desiring recognition and fame. The fame that can't be said to have fulfilled him. His 'schizophrenic' lifestyle, on one hand of an extravagant superstar, and on the other, of an introvert – can be considered an expression of compensation and relaxation. Considering the ontogenesis of the social and psychological character as well as his origin, Andy Warhol is one of the greatest personalities of America, but, on the other hand, also one of the most atypical ones. This neurotic and shy provocateur is far from American independence, confidence and self-control. It must have cost him a lot of strength and energy to be, at first sight, a true American, and, as a superstar, create the appearance of extravagance. He confirms it in his own words: 'I have to go to a party..., I have to take Valium again'. A tranquilizer. Why?

Why did he want to be in the world of American fame and the cream of American society, but most preferably only as an on-looker? Why did he escape from the superficial world into the cosiness of his flat full of antiques and banal objects, to his mother, a simple village woman, to prayers?

At the cemetery in Miková there are countless numbers of graves with the names Varchola or Zavacky. The names of Andy Warhol's father's and mother's relatives. By the old fence of the cemetery there was an old wooden cross, standing there, leaning against the fence for years. We guessed it was at least 60 years old. It was a unique artefact, sculpted, so to speak with absolute mastery. We were mostly intrigued by the sculpture of the skull. The unknown artist gave it a 'face' with a smile. And that's not an isolated incident. We often came across smiley skulls on old crosses in the areas inhabited by the Lemkos. Similarly, in the icons.

Why are we mentioning skulls? In one of the conversations, John Warhol told us: 'Our mother used to tell us about the terrible war that swept across Miková.

For many years to follow, in nearby forests the skulls of dead soldiers were shining like mushrooms.' When referring to death, Andy Warhol said: 'I don't believe in death, because you're not around to know that it's happened'. John Warhol said: 'When our father died, Andy was terrified. He was not able to look at his dead father. He was afraid of death.'

Andy Warhol himself seems to complement that thought, saying: 'People shouldn't die. It should be so that they have gone far away and they are not coming back.' A strange 'chromaticism' of looks, and then, suddenly... Andy, already as a famous pop-art artist, makes numerous works with human skulls. He even adds a skull, very much resembling the physiognomy of his own face, to his own portrait. As if he was convincing himself that he was not afraid of death. But really? One of the skulls painted by Warhol casts a shadow, as if creating an outline of a small child. Why? A coincidence? An intention? The beginning and the end?

From the stories of people close to Andy we know that he didn't want to have an inscription on his grave. Supposedly, he wanted the inscription 'Nobody' there.

Michal Bycko, PhD

curator of Andy Warhol Museum of Modern Art in Medzilaborce

FACTORY

Billy Name /22.02.1940 – 18.07.2016, born William Linich/ a photographer and a conceptual artist, a long-time collaborator of Andy Warhol's, his assistant and friend.

Together with Andy, they rented a studio, known especially in the '60s as the SILVER FACTORY. It was Billy who unified the colouring of the studio with a silver paint and aluminium foil. And that is how, spontaneously, this characteristic name, very popular with the New York art scene, came into being. Everyone was interested in the life that was going on within the silver walls, so Billy, actually, became a sort of documentarian and photographer of what was happening in the studio. He captured the events, the people and the situations; he portrayed Andy in the process of creation. Billy re-did one of the bathrooms into a darkroom, where he was processed and developed films – as he had made his living as a lighting engineer in a theatre before, his experiments with light can be also seen in his approach to photography.

This is what Andy Warhol said about him:

'Billy's photographs were the only thing, which could convey and reflect the atmosphere of the SILVER FACTORY in the '60s'.

Billy Name was, for a long time, in touch with dr Michal Bycko, the main curator of Andy Warhol Museum of Modern Art in Medzilaborce (MMUAW). Thanks to that, the Museum has in its collection unique photographs from Andy's Factory, signed by their author.

CROSSES

The cross. The symbol and instrument of the passion of Jesus Christ, our Saviour. It has been presented in countless images for hundreds of years by various artists, one of them being the most famous personality of the art of the second half of the 20th century, Andy Warhol.

His numerous canvases and graphics depicting the cross in various colour and linear compositions are more than just the well-known symbol. Warhol decided to present the cross in a variety of colours and compositions, just like he did with the paintings of the Last Supper and portraits of Jesus Christ. Repeated each time, many times. Why? As a Christian, Warhol knew well the history of the Last Supper and the image of Christ's death.

'One of you will betray me'- the words supposedly said by Jesus, about expecting betrayal from the ones closest to you, interested him so much that during one of the conversations with his brother, John Warhol, he said: "Everything repeats itself. Seasons, people come and go, wars, killing... also pain and betrayal. Judas's deed was not the last one. This act has been repeated for centuries and brings nothing but suffering. Betrayal and suffering are constantly haunting us. That is why, I have repeatedly painted the recurring motif of the Last Supper and the crosses. And even if I repeated it a million times, it would still not be enough, because betrayal and suffering have not left this world. Do you remember what our mother used to tell us? *NIT DVORYKA BEZ KRIŽIKA**. And so everyone carries his or her own cross. Maybe even like the one from my paintings.'

Andy Warhol concluded his extensive series of religious art with numerous canvases of crosses. A reminder, a message, a warning...? All recipients have to answer this question by themselves. I believe that for each of us the content of this answer will be close to that intended by Warhol.

*the Polish version of this saying is: There is no nook without a cross

Michal Bycko, PhD

curator of The Andy Warhol Museum of Modern Art in Medzilaborce

THE LAST SUPPER

At the end of January 1987, Andy Warhol went to Milan for the opening of his exhibition entitled "The Last Supper". It turned out to be his last exhibition. On the 22nd of February, 1987 he died after a routine gall bladder surgery at the age of 58. The king of pop-art, a revolutionary figure of the 20th century art, a famous personality of the cultural and artistic scene, but at the same time the son of simple Rusyn parents coming from the small village of Miková in the north-east of Slovakia. The artist completed his approach to death very symbolically - with the monumental theme of the Last Supper, which he created in the years 1984-1986, at a time when his worldwide fame and recognition as an outstanding personality of the art world were at their peak. Life brings many surprises, death only one - the mystery of the Last Judgment. Warhol - to the surprise of many - was aware of that because he was a deeply religious man. This religious background, clearly rooted in his childhood and developed in the Rusyn community of Pittsburgh, remained with him for life. Warhol is not only Marilyn Monroe, Campbell's soup, Coca-Cola, portraits of Lenin, Jagger, Kennedy, not only Flowers, or Camouflages. He is also Saint Apollonia, Saint George with the dragon, the Annunciation and especially the Last Supper - the works in which he pays tribute not only to great figures of the Renaissance such as Leonardo da Vinci, della Francesca, Uccello, etc., but also to the themes presented by those masters.

The work "The Last Supper" is a declaration of Warhol's combination of a significant historical event, a pop-art interpretation of the Renaissance painting with his constant personal fears of death, which appeared more and more often as his close friends died. Leonardo da Vinci's painting "The Last Supper" is a part of art history, a part of the canon, but also a part of popular culture. The fact that Warhol was inspired by it is not an accidental result of the almost timeless nature of Leonardo's painting. One of the reasons was that this painting stood out from the background of the artist's life: his mother carried a reproduction of that painting in her Bible, and another one hung on the wall of their family home. So it was a part of Warhol's very personal universe; it was an image from his childhood that created a kind of recurring background in his life.

The theme of the Last Supper was presented to Warhol as the idea of Alexander Iolas, a Greek-born gallerist who opened a new gallery opposite the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. Warhol's "Last Suppers" were just metres away from Leonardo's original work, and immediately after the opening, the exhibition began to play a comprehensive role of visual semantics, a game whose rules were complicated by the fact that Warhol's "Last Suppers" were at that time in many ways clearer than the original work. Excerpts from the masterpiece in Warhol's artistic interpretation emphasised the fact that it was not the original painting in the old shot. The original

painting by Leonardo in Milan was incomplete due to a controversial restoration in 1986, where only half of the work was restored. As a result, the spectators probably had a better view of the subject itself, having the option of going to the Iolas gallery on the other side of the square.

In the early 1980s, Andy Warhol dealt more intensely with religious themes, which he discovered time and time again and incorporated into his art work, as a reminder of his own confrontation with the fact that earthly time has a physical end. This confrontation with death, its dark awareness, got transformed with time into a more assimilable attitude in which Warhol's interest in redemption and salvation was demonstrated. The work "The Last Supper" and its visual fragments became the culmination of his inner rebirth, the final image in which he understood the meaning of the words sacrifice and forgiveness, all in a delicate harmony, respecting Leonardo's work as the source code for his own expression. In this way, he grew up to a much clearer and calming state of understanding of life and death.

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