



WARHOLA: A HORROR FILM

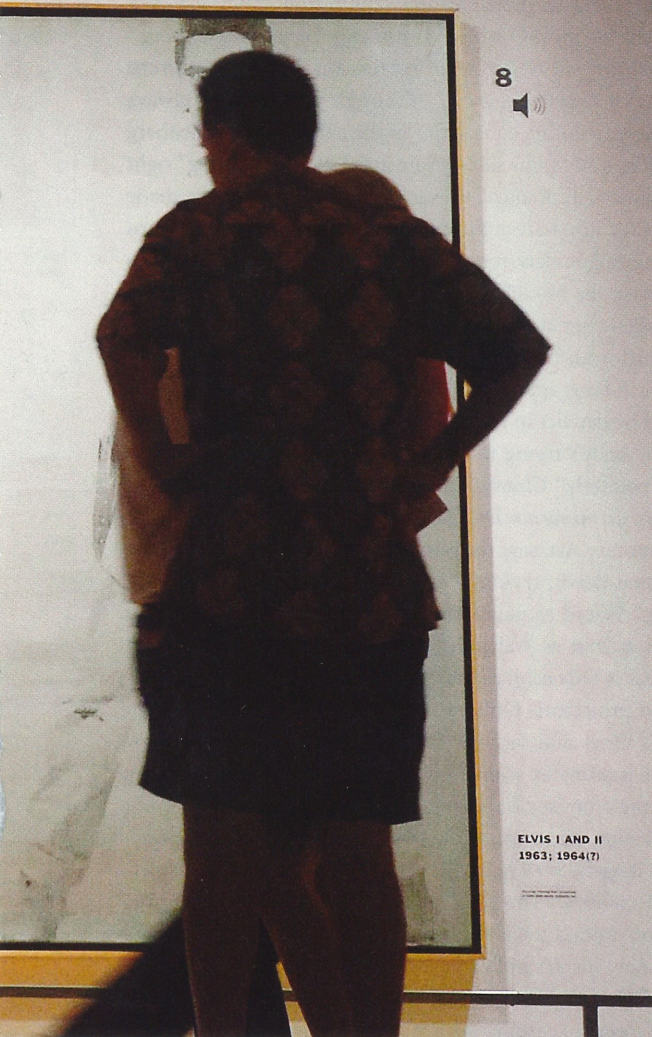
DAVID CRONENBERG'S

CURATORIAL DEBUT AT THE ART
GALLERY OF ONTARIO by PHILIP MONK

THE PROSTHESIS WAS A TELLTALE SIGN. We all had one; forty extras in the first room at least. Without asking, we were each given one for free. Even before we reached the admission desk, it was a necessary interface. Automatically, we knew what to do. It was a sign of our induction.

The filmmaker David Cronenberg directed us by means of the prosthesis joined to our ears. What were we looking at under his direction? Indeed, as we listened to Cronenberg's monotone voice through this device, were we looking at all? What exactly was Cronenberg doing for hire on this set of "Andy Warhol/Supernova: Stars, Deaths and Disasters, 1962-1964," in the dead zone of the Art Gallery of Ontario's construction site? We were in a bad dream reprising Cronenberg's old films, like so many zombie throwbacks to *Shivers* and *Rabid*. From the first word, we were taken to the market of this exhibition.

What had Warhol and Cronenberg in common apart from Cronenberg's statement that he thinks of Warhol as a hero? At the AGO, he was on par with Warhol. Yet Cronenberg was after the fact of "Supernova"'s conception, which took place in Minneapolis, where Douglas Fogle curated it for the Walker Art Center. Cronenberg was an afterthought. He was the figment of another's thought, but whether a curator's or a marketer's creative idea we



ELVIS I AND II
1963; 1964(7)

Installation view of Andy Warhol's
Elvis I and II 1963 Silkscreen ink
and spray paint on linen (silver canvas);
silkscreen ink and acrylic on linen
(blue canvas) Two panels: each
2.08 x 2.08 m COLLECTION ART GALLERY
OF ONTARIO © ANDY WARHOL FOUNDATION
FOR THE VISUAL ARTS / SODRAC (2006)



Construction hoarding with exhibition posters for "Andy Warhol/Supernova: Stars, Deaths and Disasters, 1962-1964"

cannot be sure. What had Warhol and Cronenberg fortuitously in common except their names, names, *names*? What celebrated event or disaster could bring their names together?

Innovative in so many ways in its curating, "Transformation AGO" invented an exhibition by re-curating another and constellating it anew. The AGO invited a guest curator, Toronto's David Cronenberg, to intervene in the Walker Warhol show. In Toronto, "Supernova" was "guest-curated exclusively for the AGO by film director David Cronenberg." *Exclusively!* Yet the AGO *itself*—the corporation—would curate, or orchestrate, or direct...yes, *direct*, as in making a box-office movie. Direct *and* produce. Curating, directing, producing? Who wastes time talking semantics when you can *learn* from Warhol?

Let's call him "Andy." Everyone does. "*Andy would have loved it.*" What a democrat Warhol was. Everyone can get in on the game. When it comes to Andy Warhol today, *anything goes!* I have to admit, democratic Andy was brilliant: a brilliant painter, filmmaker *and* curator. He was America's first democratic artist. All of us could learn from Andy. I have. Obviously others in Toronto have, too. Warhol said that business was the best art. If art equals business, then curating equals marketing. The AGO is business, and its business is...well, to curate. If anything goes, and if curating equals marketing, *ergo* Warhol equals Cronenberg and Cronenberg equals Warhol. Side by side and alternately top or bottom. Words are proof if you say them enough. Andy was into repetition.

Here's proof: one AGO Warhol advertisement reads, "Sex Symbols/Car Crashes/Electric Chairs. We'd expect this from Cronenberg, but from Warhol?" At first shocked sight I went, "Huh?! This makes no sense at all. Do they think we're stupid? Have they no respect for Warhol?" Then the syllogistic logic of the AGO's marketing campaign convinced me with its countless variations posted everywhere on the streets and advertised in colour repeatedly, week after week, in Toronto newspapers and magazines: "A *History of Violence*, *The Dead Zone* & *Crash*: Films by Cronenberg or subjects of Warhol?" *Exactly!*

When Warhol found out that abutting a monochrome canvas onto one of his silkscreened paintings could fetch twice

the money, these paintings became all the more influential. Imagine the double-your-money cachet in abutting the names of Warhol and Cronenberg.

Double-your-money abutment is "Supernova's" principle. Of course, I mean the supernova exhibition "guest-curated exclusively for the AGO by film director David Cronenberg." Juxtaposition is just another expression of the indifferent exchange of "anything goes." Although prior to and always worth more, painting equals film in the exhibition. Cronenberg put paintings and films side by side in the galleries, "hung" right on the same wall. *Radical!* Clever Cronenberg, of course, made his own little joke here at the expense of art historians who learn about painting in dark rooms from juxtaposed slide images. No art historian, he brought this pratfall pairing to the light of day of the gallery, but at the expense of his *métier*, film. However, as no art historian but a curator now, it's lame for him to say, as James Adams quotes Cronenberg in the *Globe and Mail*, "I would be derelict in my duties as a curator to ignore film, [as it's clear] Andy's trying to make paintings cinematic and make cinema painterly." *Clearly!* That is, it's lame for him to say this when the *art historian* Dr. David Moos, the AGO's Curator of Contemporary Art, says the same thing: that Warhol "was slowing cinema down, trying to still it" while he "accelerated the painting." Placed as paintings, the films are unrecognizable as films, or at least as Warhol's films. The film image's pixelated brightness is only achieved in the light of day by powerful digital-video projectors. Only as companions to his paintings do Warhol's films achieve their fifteen minutes of fame, and any film here is probably scanned in much less time, unless offering viewers the promise of underground naughty bits.

Marketing was creative. As painters do, it made things up: "Vanity/Tragedy/& Despair. All presented in a delightful assortment of colours." The pink-and-black hearse advertising the exhibition around town was too much. Andy would have loved it. He knew his art didn't mean anything. Car crashes? Who cares? What a joke! Bring on the hearse. Get it? *Car crashes...hearse*. Learning from Warhol, it was better that he was dead. *Who* shot Andy Warhol?

Confusing "Warhol" and "Cronenberg" and confusing the

definition of “curating” both worked to confuse the exhibition. If you read the Toronto papers, two exhibitions were disguised in one, but only one was in your face. It was confusing. It was difficult to tell if newspaper reviews referred at all to an actual exhibition or if the AGO’s strategic marketing had created a contagion of language. In words no different from the advertising indifference of “Sex/Carnage/Electric Chairs. It must be summer at the AGO,” the *Toronto Star*’s Peter Goddard wrote, “This is hot. This is the stuff of drive-ins. This is your classic hyper-intense, sizzling, hot weather happening, the art-world’s answer to a party weekend at Wasaga Beach.” Goddard’s language failed to refer to any Warhol exhibition I saw. But, tit for tat, it immediately became one of the AGO’s Web site blurbs. His words were as good as a movie trailer for Cronenberg’s *Warhola*.

There was nothing new in this exhibition, except if you read the press. It was old news as soon as Warhol painted these images. Warhol made it apparent, in-your-face—car crashes and celebrity icons—not the curator Douglas Fogle in “the brilliance,” as Sarah Milroy put it, of *his* exhibition. Old news is still fresh if you are Warhol, the Warhol who, by the way (according to the *Globe and Mail*’s Milroy), after his “best period...would later slide away into self-parody, decadence and lazy opportunism.” Yeah, right, blame the Factory films. Toronto divides on this interpretation of Warhol, with whom it has been intimate since the 1960s. The AGO indifferently continues to go the way of painting, commercial galleries and collectors while the Toronto art community has always gone the way of the Factory and films. Never the twain shall meet.

Maybe through his curatorial invention the guest curator learned something new about Warhol. The *horror!* Cronenberg understood: the sickly, working-class, immigrant child’s Charlie McCarthy doll, radio programs and fan photos. Cronenberg understood the wound iterated in Warhol’s paintings. He understood Warhol’s dissimulation that to know him one only need look at the surface of his paintings and films: “There I am.” Only a camp artist could expose a wound on the surface of a painting so in-your-face that you cannot see it as your own!

Cronenberg understood: the *ear*, the *thing*. The prosthesis externalized the thing within—the wound made by America’s industrial culture. Saint Andy! Cronenberg had an ear for it, though he, too, was a filmmaker. He would make the exhibition into a film. He would supply the soundtrack (available for purchase on CD and marketed—really, I’m not making this up—as the exhibition’s “original soundtrack”). And since it was *he*, Cronenberg, who was asked—the Toronto filmmaker with the T.O. cachet of his name (the *sight* and *sound* of his name, which are the elements already of film, and of promotion, too)—he would supply other images as well: the silent pictures supplemental to painting. He would be asked. He would do it. *Exclusively in Toronto!* ■

WHAT A DEMOCRAT
WARHOL WAS.
EVERYONE CAN GET
IN ON THE GAME...
ANYTHING GOES!



ANDY WARHOL *Sixteen Jackies*
1964 Acrylic and silkscreen ink on
linen 2.04 x 1.63 m COLLECTION WALKER
ART CENTER © ANDY WARHOL FOUNDATION
FOR THE VISUAL ARTS / SODRAC (2006)