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Andy's Buried Pleasures

FRED W. McDARRAH

BY AMY TAUBIN

On the second page of his autobiography *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, Warhol indicates that the great unfilled ambition of his life is to have his own TV show. "I'm going to call it *Nothing Special*." Some eight years later, Warhol's got his wish—twice-over. The series *Andy Warhol's TV*, which ran on Madison Square Garden Cable Network in 1983, was followed by *Andy Warhol's 15 Minutes*, still playing on MTV when he died in 1987. Far from being "nothing special" the shows were the low points of his career.

Conceived as television analogues to *Interview*, they lacked both the gossip quotient and visual panache of the magazine. Messy color, crude effects, and graceless helvetica titles made them indistinguishable from the average cable access show. One was forced to assume that television postproduction technology was either something that Warhol had no interest in, or that by the time it became available to him, he was no longer capable of channeling it, as he had channeled silk-screening and filmmaking, to his very particular aesthetic ends. He left the production to others—primarily producer Vincent Freemont and indie videomaker Don Munroe. And since the series aimed no higher than cable, it missed even the queasy whole-world-is-watching tension that marked Warhol's guest appearance on *Love Boat*.

***Fight*'s Bridget Berlin and Charles Rydell**

It was a pleasure, therefore, to discover the existence, undisclosed except to Warhol studio insiders, of *Fight* and *Phoney*, two projects from the early '70s, which seem to be in a class with such early Warhol film talkies as *Vinyl* or *Kitchen*. Freemont, who collaborated with Warhol on all his television works explained that "Andy had these wonderful ideas for TV series, which we started to develop. *Phoney* was going to be a cross between *Stage Door* and *The Chelsea Girls* with everyone on phones, hence the title. The basic situation involved a group of women living in a hotel that was also managed by a woman. The regulars included both women and transvestites although there would be the occasional male guest. In *Fight*, we cast Bridget Berlin [then Brid-

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get Polk] and Charles Rydell because they were infamous for their fights. Andy wanted to do a series that was a constant fight—one per episode. In each one, Bridget reduced Charles to rubble."

Shot with a black-and-white port-a-pak camera on half-inch reel-to-reel, both series have a magnificently beat-up, high-contrast look—the electronic equivalent of silent film. But their effectiveness owes as much to the intensity with which the performers elaborate on the basic concepts as it does to the primitive technology. (Between 1971 and 1976, the same camera was also used to record countless hours of banal and inept studio "diaries.") Like the most powerful Warhol films, *Fight* and *Phoney* provide a space in which fantasies of dominance and submission can be played out for extended periods of time (i.e., until the breaking point). In *Phoney*, the desperate Candy Darling practically stuffs the receiver in her mouth as she whines away at an invisible "manageress" who's determined to evict her.

While the camera in *Phoney* is totally static, in *Fight*, it swoops and wheels back and forth between the two antagonists. Berlin reclines on her couch, like an upper-class version of Roseanne, baiting and jeering at Rydell. The veins start popping out of Rydell's mesmerizingly bullish neck. Rage drives him to his feet, but confined by the tiny dimensions of the room and its oversized furniture, he's reduced to turning round and round in one spot like Rumpelstiltskin. The style is basically parodic but the threat of real violence is never out of the picture, which makes it simultaneously funny and scary. *Fight* and *Phoney* are composed in lenghthy real-time camera takes. It's melodrama shorn of the niceties (the momentary diversions) that Hollywood-style editing provides.

About five years ago Warhol turned over his enormous film and video oeuvre to the Whitney Museum to be catalogued and archived. I saw the *Fight* and *Phoney* excerpts when Whitney curator John Hanhardt screened them in London at a British Film Institute symposium on Warhol in which we were both participants. As someone passionately involved with Warhol's work who also has occasional intimations of her own mortality, I'm a trifle impatient with Hanhardt's considered, or less generously, constipated, curatorial approach to these treasures. When queried in September about why he has not taken the opportunity offered by "Image World: Art and Media Culture," the Whitney's humongous catch-all show, to screen *Fight* and *Phoney*, he responded that he had only discovered the tapes three months ago (which means five months before the show's opening on November 9). Therefore, rather than risk precipitous decisions, Handhardt seems to have chosen to take a best-and-worst-of approach to this exhibition. He includes excerpts from two great silent films (a taste of *Kiss* and a nap-length section of *Sleep*), but passes over not only the new discoveries in favor of one episode each of *Andy Warhol's TV* and *Andy Warhol's 15 Minutes*. (Three mordantly witty spots that Warhol produced and starred in for *Saturday Night Live* are included, although not billed on the "Best of *Saturday Night Live*" program.) Forgive me if I don't mention the dates for the video screenings. The shows barely inspired one to turn on the TV, let alone to make a trip to 75th Street.

A whole day of life is like a whole day of television. TV doesn't go off the air once it starts for the day, and I don't either." Warhol made the analogy to illustrate why he thought it was "dangerous" to take naps, but, in passing, he nailed television's distinguishing characteristic. Television theorists refer to it as "flow"; TV executives, as "scheduling." Flow, or scheduling, figures at least as much, and probably more, in how TV makes meaning, or money, as do specific shows. TV reviewers are at considerable disadvantage here since they base their criticism on preview cassettes of individual programs. One can get a handle on how, for example, having *Chicken Soup* for a lead-in might affect *thirtysomething*, but that's hardly the meat and potatoes of flow. Some preview cassettes even include several 30- to 60-second intervals of blank tape, helpfully identified as "suggested commercial breaks," which encourage reviewers to imagine the ads and news breaks (i.e., news promos) that might fill them come airtime.

Given these constraints, it was impossible even for astute reviewers to identify the last moments of *The Final Days* as the most significant. But between 10:58 and 11:01 p.m., the reenactment of Nixon's disgraced exit from Washington (helicopter hovering above the capital) astonishingly segued into the reappearance of the actual Nixon, now an elder statesman whose current visit to China merits headline coverage by ABC's Eyewitness News. The relatively minor effect *The Final Days* might have had on the Nixon recuperation was hugely augmented by the news story, which functioned as its epilogue. (A side effect of the news coverage was the transformation of Kissinger, portrayed in the docudrama as a sycophantic babbler—"Mr. President, you vill be remembered for your foreign policy"—into a genuine prophet of history.) One could hardly fault Nixon for fleeing the country prior to showtime, thus precluding the masochistic temptation to tune in, if only for a few seconds, to what millions of the households in America were watching. But in wrangling so strategically timed an invitation from the Chinese, he displayed not only a new and improved media one-upsmanship, but also an awareness of the Reagan-inspired symbiosis between entertainment and news from which, it seems, there is no turning back. ■

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where the visuals don't conflict.

One of the partnership ads supersedes the antidrug-ad snafus. Maybe because it stars a nine- or 10-year-old boy so sweet that everyone I know who watches it pouts out their lower lip in baby love. He's telling us what happened last night: "A noise woke me up. It was my older brother Ricky, he was going through my pockets looking for money. He grabbed my throat and threw me against the wall. He was high on crack. He was my older brother, man, and he was gonna kill me for some crack? I'm never gonna be like him."

"The primary focus of our campaign is black kids under 13," says Ross Love, chair of the campaign's African-American task force and VP of advertising at Procter & Gamble. "We want to create such a negative attitude among our young that they will reject even trying them."

The partnership campaign is as focus-grouped and press-kitted as anything by AT&T. "It originated out of marketing theory," says Hedrick, who worked for 15 years in marketing at two major agencies. "What we needed to do was the simple inverse of what we do every day—we needed to unsell. In a way, we look at ourselves as the competition of the drug business. Illegal drugs are an annual $150-billion retail business, by far the most profitable one in the world." Doing drugs, he says, "is like a buying decision—first your awareness of the product and its 'benefits' is raised. That should lead to an initial trial, and if that's successful, to retrial and eventually high usage.

"We know from long-term experience that the one thing we can change is willingness to make the initial trial. That's why we don't focus on drug users or addicts. Say you're a Johnnie Walker Black drinker for 10 years. My chance of getting you to change brands is very slight."