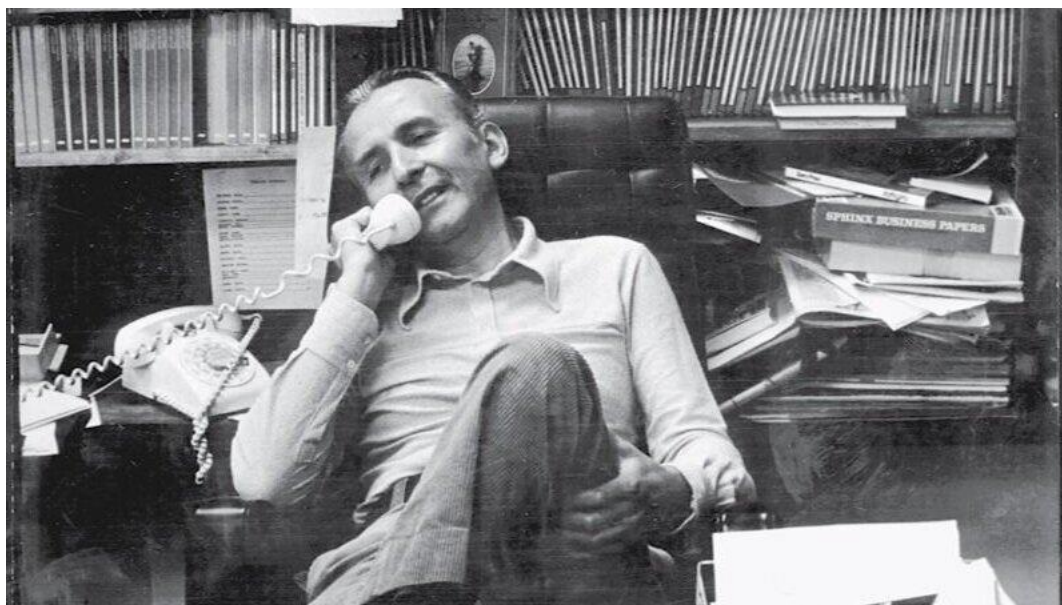


## Why Valerie Solanas shot Andy Warhol by Karen Moller



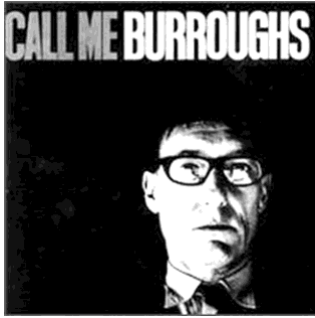
*SCUM Manifesto*

Andy Warhol was not the first-person Valerie Solanas intended to kill, it was Maurice Girodias the founder of the Olympia Press, Paris printer of books banned in England and America. The 1950s and early 1960s were Girodias' fruitful years. He was the most talked about avant-garde editor of the time and several of his books rode at the top of the bestseller list. Despite his faults, Girodias was a brilliant publisher. Most of his literary publications had an intellectualized sexual and political style. He opened *La Grande Séverine* a place of great elegance and style to launch his books, *The Ginger Man*, *Lolita*, *Candy* and *Naked Lunch* and many others. Being a starving young art student at the time, I was thrilled to be invited to those spectacular evenings to down champagne and smoked salmon with the Parisian elite. The rumor was that Girodias spent the author's royalties on these dinners, which was probably true because the authors all ended up having disputes over the lack of royalty payments.



Despite Girodias being Jewish (he had taken his mother's name) he managed to survive the war. His father, Jack Kahane, had been a fearless prewar publisher of banned English writers James Joyce, Anaïs Nin, and Henry Miller. To clear his father debts he encouraged hungry expatriates, many of them working for the literary review *Merlin*, to come and write *dirty books* for the American GIs still hanging about in Paris. Among those who accepted were Anais Nin,

Henry Miller, Christopher Logue, and Alexander Trocchi. To keep ahead of the police and to confuse the authorities Girodias added more literary works, *The Ginger Man*, *The Naked*



*Lunch*, *Candy* and—most famously—*Lolita*.

The story goes that Girodias was not too keen on *Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs, a series of loosely connected vignettes that can be read in any order. Allen Ginsberg took Burroughs' rather bulky, manuscript along to Olympia Press and declared, "It a work of genius such as you could never hope to find." Girodias found *Naked Lunch* unreadable. It was in a terrible state with bits and pieces stuck

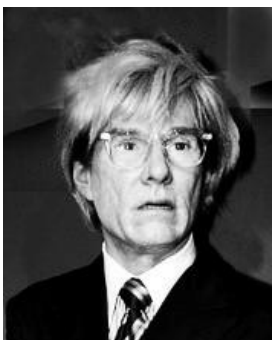
together and eaten away by rats and its erratic plot-less flow could well have been dug up from some ghastly nightmare full of sadism, misogyny, sexual brutality, cannibalism, and hanging ejaculations. Allen passed it on to Gregory Corso who plunked the manuscript down in his usual brazen manner in front of Mason Hoffenberg, a man known for his ability to recognize talent. Hoffenberg thought *Naked Lunch* impressive and in order to perk Girodias' interest he told him *Naked Lunch* was American slang for sex in the afternoon. Like Cinq-a-Sept with a mistress? Girodias asked. 'No, more like an orgy.' In truth, the sexual content is sparse and rather horrible and Girodias clearly did not see the commercial potential, however encouraged by Hoffenberg he published it. The intriguing part is the title, *Naked Lunch*, which Burroughs explained rather cleverly as 'the frozen moment at the end of every fork.'

The liberalization of censorship laws, in the late 1960s brought about the Olympia Press demise. In an attempt to start a new publishing company, Girodias went to New York hoping to tie up with Barney Rosset of Grove Press or another publisher. He stayed at the shabby-chic Chelsea Hotel in New York, the favorite dwelling place of artists and visiting art world aficionados. It was there he met Valerie Solanas, not quite the human form divine, as she tended to dress down in drab sexless clothes to hide her looks. Girodias said he could vaguely sense the sunken dreams fermenting away inside and described her in truly pictorial words: her aggressive expression is that of a Douanier Rousseau personage frozen in wooden, hostile immobility. I assume that was a stretch of his imagination, but it brings her to life and haunts me almost as if she were actually a work of art. Dangling his description before us, he embraces her as significant, but what he doesn't see, is that she is dangerous. Her *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* should have warned him. What he does recognize is that she is unusual and part of New York's subterranean culture. Intrigued, he offers her a contract to write an autobiographical novel.

Once the contract was signed, Valerie being very paranoid began to fret that she had signed away her rights to her words. As it turned out, the contract was in no way binding. That, however, did not resolve her dilemma – in order to write an autobiographical novel, she feared being dragged back into the wayward, drink sodden, chaos-creating world where past and present collided. In New York, she had lead a nomadic life, wandering the city with her typewriter, sleeping on rooftops, reading her plays in luncheonettes and turning the occasional trick for money when the need arose.

Her claim, ‘sex is the refuge of the mindless,’ caught the attention of the notorious Andy Warhol. (Valerie the active wanting to smash up the system and Warhol the passive combatting his exclusion). She was known as ‘a fast-talking hustler,’ the sort Andy liked to record. Their conversations, which he used in his movies, are surprisingly playful and amusing. She unwisely gave him a hand bound copy of her play, *Up Your Ass*, dedicated to him. Andy was an expert at knocking the ground out from under people by heaping praises on something unimportant – in this case, her typing. She left the script in his care, in the hope he would produce it. A foolish mistake as it was promptly lost in the chaos of *The Factory* which caused Valerie to believe Andy was plagiarizing her precious work and would get credit for it as his own.

When Valerie went on her shooting spree Girodias, her prime target, was nowhere to be found. The truth apparently, according to John Calder the British publisher, was that she didn’t see Girodias lying drunk and unconscious behind his desk when she broke into his office. Frustrated by his absence, she strode off to Andy’s *Factory*, intending to kill everyone there. She fired three shots, injuring Andy and one of his collaborators before the gun jammed. Slipping back into the street, armed with an icepick, she headed for Barney Rosset’s office. Very odd since she’d never met him, and whose publishing house she had previously championed. Fortunately, she was quickly arrested.



*Andy Warhol*

Andy Warhol comment was insightful: Before I was shot, I always thought that I was more half-there than all there. People sometimes say the way things happen in movies is unreal, but actually it's the way things happen in life that's unreal. The movies make emotions look so strong and real, whereas when things really do happen to you, it's like watching television – you don't feel anything. Right when I was being shot and ever since, I knew that I was watching television. The channels switch, but it was all television.’

Valerie’s story does not end with the trial. She was put in an insane asylum and escaped, so they say, but after three years maybe they just let her out, no one seems to know. Now famous

for having shot Warhol, Girodias published her *S.C.U.M Manifesto*, an instant bestseller though I doubt Girodias ever paid her any royalties. Certainly, she was always poor. I was ready to hate her book, but to my surprise I found it unexpectedly lucid: the sheer energy of her writing brilliant if brutally psychotic. Her hostile ravings clearly expose how patriarchy adversely affects women, isolating them both structurally and socially. In her amazingly witty caricature of the patriarchal Freudian theory of femininity: penis envy becomes pussy envy and the scientific legitimacy that Freud attributes to patriarchy is shown as absurd. Her conclusion that men should be eliminated to clear away the dead weight of misogyny and masculinity is a parody based on Jonathan Swift's parody *A Modest Proposal*, 'Irish children should be fed to swine as a solution to the Irish famine.' The purpose of these two proposals was shock effect, with the intention to raise public consciousness.

Valerie's later *Manifesto* is surprisingly inspiring: 'A true community consists of individuals – not mere members, not couples – respecting each other's individuality and privacy, at the same time interacting with each other mentally and emotionally – free spirits in free relation to each other – and cooperating with each other to achieve common ends.' She pinned her hopes on language and its power to change the world; to her profound grief, her words not only failed to change the world they even failed to make any impact.

Warhol never fully recovered. He was in constant pain and had to wear a surgical corset that more or less glued him together. He had suffered from the loneliness of difference, the loneliness of undesirability and the loneliness of not being accepted until he cleverly created his own professional group with him in the center. After he was shot, he suffered post-traumatic stress disorder; it came at him in surges of overwhelming terror and anxiety that prevented him from continuing his artworks and films. He avoided people and would sit for hours alone in his office listening to the tapes he'd previously recorded of various crazy, druggy people jabbering away and doing insane things.

Andy did not alter his creative spirit. He set up a magazine called *Interview*, composed of people just talking to one another, their speech creating a sort of symphony of words – a staggering jumble of inconsequential, limitless, and unfinished connections of ordinary existence, extraordinary to say the least. Andy had a knack for paying non-judgmental attention to the people and for fifteen minutes he offered the neglected, insecure, unhappy people that surrounded him. The poet and film maker Jonas Mekas said 'Andy was an open psychiatrist with all those sad confused people. They used to come and feel at home. Andy never disapproved of them: *Nice, nice, good, oh, beautiful*, he'd say giving them feeling of significance. Ondine, his collaborator said, 'Andy was the dream listener, the vessel by which

the transient and trashy were sanctified and preserved. When Andy put them in front of the camera, they felt they could be themselves. They weren't acting, they were doing their own thing.'