



FILM  
LOVE

## THE VELVET UNDERGROUND

Films by Andy Warhol,  
Music by The Velvet Underground  
Atlanta Contemporary Art Center  
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curated by Andy Ditzler

The Velvet Underground's divergent roots in rock & roll, doo-wop and the downtown New York avant-garde are well-documented. Less well-known in the band's history is that it was New York underground filmmaking that provided the central context for these influences to cohere into the band's unique sound, and that this deep relation to filmmaking continued throughout their alliance with Andy Warhol. Perhaps due to a lack of adequate documentation of the band's early shows, the fragility of the period's avant-garde filmmaking legacy, or to the ephemeral nature of the events themselves, this deep connection with underground film remains underexplored. By way of tribute to the legacy of the Velvet Underground, tonight's show – while in no way intended to re-constitute these performances – explores this aspect of the Velvet Underground's epochal achievement in American music.

Filmmaking was deeply intertwined with the downtown New York artistic scene that provided one important lineage for the Velvet Underground. John Cale's membership in the group Theatre of Eternal Music brought him into contact not only with minimalist music pioneers La Monte Young and Tony Conrad, but also with underground filmmakers such as Jack Smith and Ron Rice. Conrad went on to make the classic early Structural/psychedelic/expanded cinema film *The Flicker*, while sometime Theatre of Eternal Music percussionist Angus MacLise provided a soundtrack for Rice's film *Chumlum*. Cale himself took part in informal recording sessions and loft performances by Smith and others. All this took place at a peak of production in what was variously called the New American Cinema or simply "underground cinema" in New York. Underground cinema was produced, exhibited

and reviewed within an expansive network of artists centered on Jonas Mekas and the shows he presented in various permutations (and addresses) of the Film-Makers' Cinematheque.

Curiously, even though they weren't playing rock & roll at the time, Conrad and Cale were already manifesting a confluence of rock with the avant-garde, through their listening habits, long hair and general punk intellectual demeanor. As such, at a party in the fall of 1964 they met reps from a fly-by-night record label, who offered them a gig touring the northeast as a pick-up rock band. The idea was to support a would-be dance craze and hit single called "The Ostrich," written and sung by 22-year-old Lou Reed. Though *The Ostrich* quickly faded, Cale and Reed continued their musical alliance, soon joined by MacLise and Reed's friend, guitarist Sterling Morrison.

By spring and summer of 1965, this configuration of the group (under such names as The Warlocks and The Falling Spikes) was gigging steadily as a kind of house band for underground film screenings. A key figure here was poet, publisher and quintessential underground filmmaker Piero Heliczer, who worked closely with MacLise on several ventures. These included a series of multimedia spectacles at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque, with the band providing a sonic and musical environment for films and slide projections, drawing on both Cale's hardcore minimalist training and Reed's rock & roll volume and drive.

The benefit was mutual: the musicians provided live and taped soundtracks for films by Heliczer, and the screenings allowed the band to cohere as a performing unit and as a musical concept. For Morrison, the context provided by Heliczer's screenings was crucial. He had despaired of ever finding an audience for the band's unprecedented and decidedly subcultural sound. But at the underground film screenings, "the path ahead became suddenly clear – I could work on music that was different than ordinary rock'n'roll since Piero had given Lou, John, Angus and me a context to perform it in."<sup>i</sup> By the summer of 1965, only a few months after beginning to play together, these musicians had found the first of several contexts in which to

revolutionize rock & roll the way underground filmmakers were attempting to storm the gates of American cinema.

That summer, the band even adopted a name representing a deliberate alignment with underground film. Although they famously appropriated “Velvet Underground” from the title of a mass-market paperback on the perverse sexual underbelly of America, they chose this, as Morrison later wrote, “*not* because of the S&M theme of the book, but because the word ‘underground’ was suggestive of our involvement with the underground film and art scene.”<sup>ii</sup> Famously, the band was then discovered and signed to a management contract by Andy Warhol in December 1965, through underground filmmaker Barbara Rubin.

It seems likely that Warhol actually would have known of, and heard, the Velvet Underground prior to this, once again through underground film. The connections between artists, filmmakers and musicians in this world were numerous and multifarious, and Warhol was known to attend (and premiere his own films at) underground screenings. Perhaps he saw one of the Barbara Rubin or Piero Heliczer Cinematheque screenings of summer 1965 at which the band provided soundtracks. (Both Rubin and Heliczer were frequent visitors to Warhol’s Factory studio.) Almost certainly he would have seen John Cale perform as a member of the Theatre of Eternal Music; earlier in 1963, he definitely attended John Cage’s notorious concert of Erik Satie’s eighteen-hour composition *Vexations*, in which Cale was one of the serial pianists.

Once the band got together with Warhol, underground film continued to be the primary context of their performances and their identity. (In fact, their first national exposure – in a CBS television special from December of 1965 titled *The Making of an Underground Film* – shows the band playing and being filmed in costume by Heliczer.) By February 1966, the Velvets were billed alongside the premiere of Warhol’s film *More Milk, Yvette* as a part of the multimedia show entitled *Andy Warhol, Up-Tight*. In March, the Velvets were billed with a double

feature of Warhol’s films *Lupe* and *Vinyl*; then, the *Up-Tight* show was booked at the Ann Arbor Film Festival. All of this film and music activity was leading up to the April 1966 New York debut of the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, the culmination of Warhol’s involvement in live performance and multimedia work.

Branden Joseph describes the elements of the EPI at its peak: “three to five film projectors, often showing different reels of the same film simultaneously; a similar number of slide projectors, movable by hand so that their images swept the auditorium; four variable-speed strobe lights; three moving spots with an assortment of colored gels; several pistol lights; a mirror ball hung from the ceiling and another on the floor; as many as three loudspeakers blaring different pop records at once; one to two sets by the Velvet Underground and Nico; and the dancing of Gerard Malanga and Mary Woronov or Ingrid Superstar, complete with props and lights that projected their shadows high onto the wall.”<sup>iii</sup> The EPI combined light-show, music, sound barrage, cinema, performance and other inexplicable elements as much social as artistic, into a kind of total environment. Along with the band’s epochal first LP, the EPI was the peak of Warhol’s collaboration with the Velvet Underground.

The EPI seems to have differed in fundamental ways from all other such projects during this era of unprecedented cross-fertilization between multimedia art and rock music. Writing at the time, Mekas suggested that the pioneering light-show collective USCO and the burgeoning psychedelic movement were partaking of a traditional mystical Christian spirituality – a “sunset peace of the Age of the Fish” – while the EPI was “a dramatic break just before the dawn.”<sup>iv</sup> Joseph suggests that the EPI’s subversions contrasted not only with other rock-oriented light shows but with Marshall McLuhan’s emerging media theories of “retribalisation” and such spectacles as the IBM Pavilion at the 1964 New York World’s Fair, in which multiple visual stimuli were deployed to reinforce capitalism’s technological modes of information delivery.<sup>v</sup> The EPI’s abrasive multiplicity of imagery and sound, its radically disorienting effects and its social milieu – the queer outcasts of the

Factory as opposed to the hip counterculture – meant that the whole project stubbornly refused to be located among the prevailing theories or uses of technology or art. In this, it reflected the artistic and musical priorities of its main players.

Artistically, the Velvets and Warhol were an ideal match. Warhol's own art and especially his films mirrored and encouraged the development of the band's aesthetic in several ways. First, the repetition for which Warhol was known had obvious affinities with the band's minimalist avant-garde origins as well as its rock & roll side. In a written essay published in the magazine *Aspen* in 1966, Reed went so far as to call the films "Rock-and-roll films": "Andy Warhol's movies are so repetitious sometimes, so so beautiful. Probably the only interesting films made in the U.S. Rock-and-roll films. Over and over and over. Reducing things to their final joke. Which is so pretty."<sup>vi</sup> Writing in 1969, Robert Somma made the claim for a deep connection between Warhol's and the Velvets' use of repetition, pointing out that songs such as "All Tomorrow's Parties" trade linear motion for a kind of stasis, "a tableau...the picture doesn't change, the scene is the same, the stanzas don't vary."<sup>vii</sup>

In addition, as Somma also points out, the Velvets benefited greatly from simple proximity to Warhol, and his process of making art and films.<sup>viii</sup> They were able to observe first-hand an intensive artistic process that was collaborative and social, but uncompromising. Thus, through word and deed, Warhol encouraged the band to keep its experimental edge while moving further into pop. In this way, Warhol did far more than provide material support for the band's early performances and first LP, more even than the valuable publicity of his artistic cachet and notoriety, or providing Lou Reed with a crucial social and artistic demimonde on which to draw for his songs. As a manager of a rock & roll band, he was formidably attuned aesthetically, and in their own sophistication the Velvets clearly drew deeply on him.

I've been trying to draw a picture of how underground film (including Warhol's films) permeated the downtown scene in general, and the

Velvet Underground's musical development in particular. But the Velvets themselves were also subjects for the film camera, and their first appearance in a Warhol film reveals interesting aspects of their collaboration.

Filmed most likely in mid-January 1966, barely a month after they met Warhol, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* is most easily described as a "rehearsal film" of the band, made to be projected over or alongside the band during their EPI performances. Given the paucity of available synch-sound footage of the Velvets playing, the film is a valuable document. But it thwarts expectations of a straightforward concert. The Velvets do not perform standard-format songs here. Instead, seated in a semi-circle tableau – the visual composition instantly recognizable as Warhol – they explore a steady rhythm pulse and single chord for roughly fifty of the film's sixty-six minutes. Both open-structured and highly disciplined (never varying from the steady pulse and minimal tonality), the Velvets find endless slight variations for their limited content. They seem content to play on like this forever; the music's end appears to come not from the band but from an escalating situation with the police, responding to a noise complaint.

Characteristically for Warhol's films, deeper observation makes categories of genre less fixed. What does a "rehearsal film" mean, in fact? Through the act of filming and exhibiting, this rehearsal becomes at least partly a performance. Further, the film's wild cinematic devices, such as extreme zooms, pans, and defocusing – sometimes used all at once – reinforce a sense of "performance" in the filmmaking and at the same time take this musical event into a uniquely cinematic realm.

The ambiguity between rehearsing and performing in this film mirrors another one closer to us: one between the fixed film artifact and the ephemerality of its exhibition and presentation. As an archival document, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* is endlessly repeatable. But its exhibition in the Exploding Plastic Inevitable contributed to a live *experience* that, while by all accounts memorable, was fleeting and unreproducible outside its unfolding in time and space. Film Love's

presentation of *The Velvet Underground and Nico* draws on accounts of the EPI, as well as some of the devices used by Warhol and his collaborators in the shows: multiple simultaneous projections (including Warhol's other films of the Velvet Underground such as screen tests used in the EPI and *The Velvet Underground*, a desultory two-reel film of the band clowning with whips and food), as well as sound mixing, colored gels, strobe light and a custom machine that exploits the frame rate of 16mm projection to create flicker effects. All of these are mixed and combined in different ways in the moment, to temporarily unfix the recorded music and images of *The Velvet Underground and Nico*.

This presentation is partly in tribute to the Velvet Underground as well as an attempt to delineate a less-known part of the band's history. But we do not seek to re-enact or reproduce the EPI in any way. Rather, this unique screening is intended to enact a kind of research into some of the possibilities presented by Warhol's collaboration with the band, as we are able to see it today: the ambiguity of the lines between rehearsing, performing, behavior, and social space; the relation between film's ability for repetition and the fleeting qualities of its projection in space and time; and the palpable, if mysterious, connection between artistic process and artistic product so fruitful in the work of both Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground. As a film *The Velvet Underground and Nico* may raise as many questions about the band's music as it answers – but like the Velvets' relation to underground film in general, these questions are part of what makes them so successful at both rock & roll and the avant-garde.

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Notes by Andy Ditzler 2014

THE VELVET UNDERGROUND is a Film Love event, programmed and hosted by Andy Ditzler for Frequent Small Meals. Film Love promotes awareness of the rich history of experimental and avant-garde film. Through public screenings and events, Film Love preserves the communal viewing experience, provides space for the discussion of film as art, and explores alternative forms of moving image projection and viewing.

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#### UPCOMING

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Three screenings of films from the classic New Wave

White Hall, Emory University

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<sup>i</sup> Sterling Morrison, "Going Back in Time to Piero Heliczer," *Little Caesar* no. 9 (1979): 227.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 227. At the beginning of this article Morrison states unequivocally that in the early 1960s, the term underground "referred to underground cinema, and to the people and lifestyle that created and supported this art form" (p. 223; italics in original).

<sup>iii</sup> Branden W. Joseph, "'My Mind Split Open': Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable," in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate Publishing in association with Afterall, 2008), 92.

<sup>iv</sup> Jonas Mekas, "On the Plastic Inevitables and the Strobe Light," in *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 243.

<sup>v</sup> Joseph, "'My Mind Split Open': Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable," 109–111.

<sup>vi</sup> Lou Reed, "The View from the Bandstand," *Aspen: The Magazine in a Box* no. 3 (1966): 3.

<sup>vii</sup> Robert Somma, "Problems in Urban Living," in *All Yesterdays' Parties: The Velvet Underground in Print: 1966-1971*, ed. Clinton Heylin (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005), 93; Cale, for his part, later recalled being suspicious at first of this aspect of Warhol's art, contrasting Warhol's repetition with La Monte Young's interest in "long duration." John Cale and Victor Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen: The Autobiography of John Cale* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 83.

<sup>viii</sup> Somma, "Problems in Urban Living," 94–95.