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Alan Shane Dillingham

### **Valerie Solanas and the Creation of a Radical Feminist Ideology**

“I consider that a moral act. And I consider it immoral that I missed. I should have done target practice.”<sup>1</sup>  
-Valerie Solanas on the shooting of Warhol

On the morning of June 3, 1968, Valerie Solanas entered into Andy Warhol’s Factory office. Solanas was wearing make-up, something she had only done on special occasions, and was carrying a brown paper bag that she twisted suspiciously in her hands.<sup>2</sup> At 4:15 pm, Warhol entered the elevator and Solanas followed. They got off together on the fifth floor, already occupied by Warhol superstar Fred Hughes and art critic Mario Amaya. No one noticed when Solanas pulled out a .32-calibre automatic pistol from her brown paper bag and pointed it at Warhol. She fired three shots at him, the last of which entered his left lung, hit his spleen, stomach, liver and esophagus, then hit his right lung and exited through his side.<sup>3</sup> She then turned and aimed at Mario Amaya, hitting him near his hip. When she pointed the gun at Fred Hughes, it jammed. Hughes was saved by the elevator, which came as Solanas reached into her bag for her back up .22 pistol. “There’s the elevator, Valerie. Just take it,” he said.<sup>4</sup> Solanas obliged and took the elevator to the first floor. The harrowing ordeal was over.

Solanas’ shooting of Warhol received considerable attention immediately after, but was quickly overshadowed by the assassination of Robert Kennedy two days later. Warhol had

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Smith, “Valerie Solanas Replies,” *Village Voice*, July 25, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Harron, “Introduction: On Valerie Solanas” in *I Shot Andy Warhol* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), xxv; James Harding, “The Simplest Surrealist Act: Valerie Solanas and the (Re) Assertion of the Avantgarde Priorities,” *TDR/ The Drama Review* 45 no.4 (2001): 142.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Harron, “Introduction: On Valerie Solanas” in *I Shot Andy Warhol* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), xxv.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Bockris, *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 229.

survived and Solanas was committed to a mental institution. Often, the history of Valerie Solanas ends there. 1968 was a time of great political and social upheaval and Solanas' attempt to assassinate Warhol is now merely considered an isolated and insignificant footnote in the history of that year. Further discrediting the event is Solanas herself, who is portrayed as mentally unstable and radical. But Solanas' shooting of Warhol coincided with a rise of a radical feminist ideology in the United States and greatly impacted the entire movement. Valerie Solanas was a pioneer in radical feminism and served as an important figure and symbol in the movement.

Valerie Solanas was born on April 9, 1936 in Ventnor, New Jersey to a mother who would eventually throw her out and a father who sexually abused her.<sup>5</sup> She was homeless by the age of 15, but managed to graduate from Oxon Hill High School in Prince George's County, Maryland and entered the University of Maryland, College Park in 1954. She was an open lesbian on campus and spoke on how to combat abusive men. Solanas was well ahead of her time in the conservative 1950s in which she attended college; open lesbianism and public discussion of domestic violence did not begin until second-wave feminism took hold in the next decade.

Without the support of her family, Solanas paid her way through school by working at the psychology department's animal laboratory and occasionally prostituting, a career she held throughout her life. In 1958, she graduated with honors and spent a year in graduate school at the University of Minnesota and took a few courses at the University of California, Berkeley. She eventually dropped out. By 1965, she was living an untraditional life in New York City, vastly different from what was expected from the intelligent young woman who graduated with honors. She now spent her time prostituting and panhandling on the streets of Greenwich Village.

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<sup>5</sup> The biography of Solanas comes from Freddie Baer, "About Valerie Solanas", in *SCUM Manifesto* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 48-57; Mary Harron, "Introduction: On Valerie Solanas" in *I Shot Andy Warhol* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), vii-xxxix; University of Maryland, College Park, *The Terrapin: 1958*, 367.

In 1967, Valerie Solanas wrote and self-published the *SCUM Manifesto*. Short and fiery, the *SCUM Manifesto* was a revolutionary work that called for the total elimination of men. It was separated into two parts: “the first part of the manifesto [was] an analysis of male psychology, and the second part [was] like, you know, what to do about it.”<sup>6</sup> Based on a conclusion that men are a “biological accident: the Y (male) gene is an incomplete X (female) gene” Solanas made the bold claim that “maleness is a deficiency disease and males are emotional cripples.”<sup>7</sup> In addition, she claimed that men were the cause of all problems in the world due to the male desire to “complete himself, to become female.”<sup>8</sup> The second part of the manifesto called for the creation of an organization known as SCUM (later known as an acronym for the Society of Cutting up Men) that would “take over the country within a year by systematically fucking up the system, selectively destroying property, and murder.”<sup>9</sup> The *SCUM Manifesto* was written in a satirical tone and thus it is difficult to ascertain whether Solanas actually believed in the ideas she presented in *SCUM*. She had changed her view on the SCUM organization throughout her lifetime. In 1967, she placed an advertisement in *Village Voice* announcing the creation of the SCUM organization.<sup>10</sup> Ten years later, Solanas claimed that SCUM did not exist and the manifesto was not to be taken literally.<sup>11</sup>

*SCUM Manifesto* signaled an evolution in feminist beliefs. Solanas’ misandry was direct and unabashed as she boldly declared that all of women’s problems are caused by men. Most notable, however, was Solanas’ references to militancy, which made her work both unique and fitting for the time. After years of pacifist protests, disillusioned civil rights and student group

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Smith and Brian Van der Horst, “Valerie Solanas Interview,” *Village Voice*, July 25, 1977.

<sup>7</sup> Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Richard F. Sheperd, “Warhol Gravely Wounded In Studio; Actress Is Held: Woman Says She Shot Artist, Who Is Given a 50-50 Chance to Live Andy Warhol Is Shot Here Actress Is Arrested,” *New York Times*, June 4, 1968.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Smith and Brian Van der Horst, “Valerie Solanas Interview,” *Village Voice*, July 25, 1977.

activists openly embraced violence in the late 1960s. Solanas mirrored Stokely Carmichael's famous comment, "it's time to end this non-violence bullshit" when she claimed that "marching, demonstrating. That's for little old ladies who aren't serious. SCUM is a criminal organization, not a civil disobedience luncheon club."<sup>12</sup> Solanas' open embrace of militancy followed the trend of militant activism groups at the time. What resulted was a radicalization of second-wave feminism, akin to how the Black Panther's radicalized the Civil Rights Movement.

*SCUM Manifesto* captured attention from two men that became significant to the rest of Solanas' life: Maurice Girodias, her publisher, and Andy Warhol. She met Girodias in 1967 in the Chelsea Hotel where they both lived. Girodias was the founder of the Olympia Press, a small publishing company that focused on avant-garde works. He published the first edition of *SCUM* shortly after the shooting. In 1967, Solanas sold mimeographed copies of the manifesto on the streets of Greenwich Village: \$2 for men and \$1 for women.<sup>13</sup> A copy eventually got into the hands of Andy Warhol. After reading it, he claimed that Solanas was a "hot-water bottle with tits...She has a lot of ideas."<sup>14</sup>

It is unclear how Valerie Solanas met Andy Warhol. By 1967, Warhol was a cultural phenomenon. He was constantly surrounded by an entourage of his Factory workers, a wild group that starred in his films, inspired his artwork, and followed him to parties. In 1967, she gave him the script to her play, *Up Your Ass*, and asked him to produce it for her, confident that he had the power to do so. Warhol had later claimed that he "thought the title was so wonderful

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of the Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 172; Mary Harron, "Introduction: On Valerie Solanas" in *I Shot Andy Warhol* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), xxiv.

<sup>13</sup> James Harding, "The Simplest Surrealist Act: Valerie Solanas and the (Re) Assertion of the Avantgarde Priorities," *TDR/ The Drama Review* 45 no.4 (2001): 151.

<sup>14</sup> Freddie Baer, "About Valerie Solanas", in *SCUM Manifesto* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 49.

and I'm so friendly that I invited her to come up with it, but it was so dirty that I think she must have been a lady cop. We haven't seen her since."<sup>15</sup>

Solanas returned to Warhol's Factory again and appeared in his films *I, A Man* and *Bikeboy* later in 1967. Maurice Girodias commented that Solanas seemed "very relaxed and friendly with Warhol."<sup>16</sup> Soon after the films, however, Solanas began complaining and insulting Warhol, claiming that talking to Warhol was like "talking to a chair."<sup>17</sup> Solanas was not the only person to have problems with Warhol. He was distant and thus difficult to work with. In addition, he paid his actors and actresses little while he made thousands off of the underground films he produced. Solanas was not even the first person to bring a gun to the Factory office. There were several instances of gun violence: in 1964, Dorothy Podber fired at a stack of Marilyn Monroe paintings and in 1967, a man known only as Sammy nearly kidnapped and shot Warhol. After the shooting, Warhol actor Taylor Meade claimed that if Solanas had not shot Warhol, he might have.<sup>18</sup>

Immediately after the shooting, Solanas was taken to the thirteenth precinct police station. Waiting for her was a room filled with journalists and photographers, so many that the police could not hear Solanas' voice. Asked why she shot Warhol, Solanas answered "I have a lot of very involved reasons. Read my manifesto and it will tell you what I am."<sup>19</sup> The media was fascinated with the event and the shooting appeared on the front page of major newspapers the day after. However when they wrote on Solanas, they focused on her misandry in *SCUM* and her unfeminine appearance. They also frequently focused on her apparent mental instability, writing

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<sup>15</sup> Victor Bockris, *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 207.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 207.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 207.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 232.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Harron, "Introduction: On Valerie Solanas" in *I Shot Andy Warhol* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), xxv.

articles for when she was committed to a mental institution and when she was given psychiatric tests. In 1968, for example, four articles were written on Solanas in the Washington Post, two of which with the titles “Warhol Assailant Is Committed in N.Y.” and “Mental Test Ordered as Assailant Of Warhol Loses Cool at Hearing.” Newspaper reports served to discredit any sensible reasoning Solanas may have had about shooting Warhol. As a result, they made the event appear as an unnecessary act of violence by an insane person. Lou Reed and John Cale’s song “I Believe” summed up the public’s view on Solanas:

Valerie Solanas took three steps  
pointing at the floor  
Valerie Solanas waved her gun  
pointing at the floor  
From inside her idiot madness spoke and bang  
Andy fell onto the floor

I believe life’s serious enough for retribution  
I believe being sick is no excuse and -  
I believe I would’ve pulled the switch on her myself<sup>20</sup>

Regardless, a few radical women immediately saw Solanas’ shooting of Warhol as an act of rebellion against male oppression. On June 14, 1968, Florynce Kennedy, who defended Valerie Solanas in court, claimed that Solanas was “one of the most important spokeswomen of the feminist movement.”<sup>21</sup> At that point, Valerie Solanas became a key figure in the growing radical feminist movement.

Radical feminism arose in 1968 as an offshoot of the second-wave feminism of the 1960s. Unlike traditional feminism at the time, radical feminists demanded for more than mere equality. They created new theories on male-female relationships, coining the term “sexism” and

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<sup>20</sup> Lou Reed and John Cale, *I Believe*, “Songs for Drella,” Sire, 1990.

<sup>21</sup> Marilyn Bender, “Valeria Solanis a Heroine to Feminists,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1968.

defining it as a social construction imposed by law, tradition and organized religion.<sup>22</sup> Unlike other feminists in the second-wave, radical feminists fought for the elimination of the concept of a man's world, not equality within it. In addition, radical feminists were generally against freedoms perpetuated by the sexual revolution. Their biggest influence, however, was in abortion rights. They formed often militant campaigns for the repeal of oppressive abortion laws. *Roe v. Wade* was signed in 1973 as the radical feminist movement was ending.

The radical feminist group Cell 16 was founded by Roxanne Dunbar in the summer of 1968. A woman's liberation and militant group that claimed that guerilla style warfare would eventually be necessary; this group was the closest realization of Solanas' SCUM.<sup>23</sup> Cell 16's ideology was heavily borrowed from the *SCUM Manifesto*; in fact, the members of the group read the *SCUM Manifesto* "as their first order of business."<sup>24</sup> The program advocated for celibacy as they believed that many women did not derive pleasure from intercourse and that it was used as a tool of sexual oppression. According to Dunbar, sexual desires were "conditioned needs" that could be "unconditioned."<sup>25</sup> This closely resembled Solanas' argument that "the female can easily...condition away her sex drive."<sup>26</sup> They also sought to blur the lines between the social constructions of masculinity and femininity, something Solanas did daily since she was a student at the University of Maryland, College Park by wearing men's clothing and keeping her hair short.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Maurice Girodias would later claim that Solanas "did not look quite like a

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<sup>22</sup> June Hannam, *Feminism* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2007), 144; Ellen Willis, "Foreword," in *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), ix.

<sup>23</sup> Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 159.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 158.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>26</sup> Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 26.

<sup>27</sup> Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 162; University of Maryland, College Park, *The Terrapin: 1958*, 280.

woman but neither like a man.”<sup>28</sup> Based on an ideological hodgepodge of Marxism, Maoism, and Solanas’ *SCUM Manifesto*, Cell 16 redefined feminism as a sisterhood of women against the works of villainous men.<sup>29</sup> Essentially, Cell 16 redefined feminism as a manifestation of Solanas’ SCUM.

The Feminists was founded on October 17, 1968 by Ti-Grace Atkinson, an ivy-league educated former president of the National Organization of Women’s New York chapter. Her increasing radicalism put her at odds with the more conservative nature of the organization; she wanted NOW to take “unequivocal positions...on abortion, marriage, the family,” controversial issues NOW wanted to avoid.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Atkinson’s support of Valerie Solanas after the shooting angered many NOW officers including Betty Friedman who claimed that “No action of the board of New York NOW...advocated shooting men in the balls, the elimination of men as proposed by that *SCUM Manifesto!*”<sup>31</sup> On October 17, 1968 Atkinson’s radicalism became too much of a problem for NOW and she resigned her position. She left NOW with Florynce Kennedy, the black Columbia-trained lawyer who defended Solanas in court. Ti-Grace Atkinson also attended Solanas’ court proceedings to show her support.

The Feminists’ core ideology, like Cell 16’s, was clearly *SCUM* inspired. They believed that “sex roles of both male and female must be destroyed.”<sup>32</sup> To the Feminists, sex roles were created by men to fulfill a need—reminiscent of *SCUM*’s argument that men are “incomplete

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<sup>28</sup> Mary Harron, “Introduction: On Valerie Solanas” in *I Shot Andy Warhol* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), xxi.

<sup>29</sup> Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 166.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

<sup>32</sup> Ti-Grace Atkinson, “Radical Feminism” in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 86.



female[s]” and have a strong desire to complete themselves.<sup>33</sup> They also argued that men were “insecure and frustrated” who alleviated their “frustration...through anger—*oppression*.”<sup>34</sup> Like Solanas, The Feminists considered men the weaker sex and their oppression was a result of this weakness. In addition, they held Solanas’ and Cell 16’s view that women needed to liberate themselves from sex. They sought to “destroy love...Love promotes vulnerability, dependence...and prevents the full development of woman’s human potential.”<sup>35</sup> In 1968, Atkinson showed Solanas’ influence on her cultural analysis of sex when she began her article, “The Institution of Sexual Intercourse,” which argued against traditional sexual relations, with a quote from the *SCUM Manifesto*. Valerie Solanas was influential to the development of The Feminists’ ideology, and Atkinson found it necessary to give her credit.

Despite Solanas’ impact on radical feminism, her name was quickly erased from its historiography. In 1973, the first collection of writings on radical feminism, aptly titled *Radical Feminism*, was released. It included several manifestos that were clearly inspired by Solanas’ life and manifesto, including those by Ti-Grace Atkinson and Kate Millet, author of The Feminists’ manifesto. *The Bitch Manifesto*, for example, appeared in the women’s experience section of the anthology. Published in 1970 by Joreen Freedman, it created and defined a new organization: “BITCH is an organization which does not yet exist...BITCH is composed of Bitches.”<sup>36</sup> *The Bitch Manifesto* followed the same format as Solanas’ *SCUM* that was published three years earlier: it created an organization with a derogatory name and was written in a satirical tone. It

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<sup>33</sup> Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 172; Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ti-Grace Atkinson, “Radical Feminism” in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 87.

<sup>35</sup> Kate Millet, “Sexual Politics: A Manifesto for Revolution” in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone (New York: Quadrangle, 1973), 375.

<sup>36</sup> Joreen Freeman, “The Bitch Manifesto” in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 50.

even capitalized the organization, BITCH, like SCUM, without defining the acronym. And yet, Solanas' name was never mentioned in Freedman's work or in the book *Radical Feminism*. This was directly related to Solanas' shooting of Andy Warhol. While the shooting made Solanas recognizable and was the catalyst for the publication of *SCUM Manifesto* (allowing it to reach the hands of radical feminists), it also made her a controversial figure. Many feminists were wary of acknowledging Solanas' influence on their beliefs, although it was clearly there. Thus, Solanas' name was erased from radical feminist history, but her influence was not. The principle remains the same today.

After pleading guilty, in June of 1969 Valerie Solanas was sentenced to three years in prison, one of which she had already done in a mental institution.<sup>37</sup> Her short sentence was due in part to Warhol's refusal to testify against her. She did the full time and was released in September 1971 from the New York State Prison for Women at Bedford Hills, although she was arrested again in November for sending threatening letters to Warhol. Solanas spent a considerable amount of the 1970s in mental institutions.<sup>38</sup> She was seen sleeping on park benches and wandering the streets of New York aimlessly and continued prostituting until her 50s. And yet she never gave up on her *SCUM Manifesto*. In the late seventies, she printed another edition of her *Manifesto*, which included the following advertisement:

Olympia Press went bankrupt and the publishing rights to *SCUM Manifesto* reverted to me, Valerie Solanas, so I'm issuing the CORRECT edition, MY edition of *SCUM Manifesto*...I'll let anybody who wants to hawk it...hawk *SCUM Manifesto*...Andy

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<sup>37</sup> Freddie Baer, "About Valerie Solanas," in *SCUM Manifesto* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 55.

<sup>38</sup> Although this view is supported by most historians, in 1991 Solanas' mother, Dorothy Moran, gave an interview in which she claimed that Solanas was not in mental institutions during the 1970s and was living with friends that supported her. For more, see: Rowan Gaither, "Andy Warhol's Feminist Nightmare," *New York Magazine*, January 14, 1991.

Warhol, peddle it at all those hot shit parties you go to...Minimum orders for peddlers is 200...And don't have gang wars over territories—that's not nice.<sup>39</sup>

She was clearly frustrated with how she and her work were viewed by society. In 1977, she took out the New York Public Library's *SCUM Manifesto* published by the Olympia Press and angrily included hand written annotations in the book. She scratched out her name in the byline and replaced it with "by Maurice Girodias," calling him a "flea." On the back cover, she wrote "LIES! LIES!" and signed her name.<sup>40</sup> Her friend Jeremiah Newton claimed that Solanas was negatively impacted by the shooting because she became "the crazy woman who shot Andy Warhol." She would never be taken seriously as a writer.<sup>41</sup>

On April 25, 1988, Valerie Solanas was found dead in a welfare hotel in San Francisco, 14 months after the death of Andy Warhol and two weeks after her own 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday. Her official cause of death was bronchopneumonia brought on by emphysema.<sup>42</sup> She died alone and in destitution, a minor character in the grand history of 1968. In 1996, however, the independent film based her life, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, was released. It helped to renew interest in Valerie Solanas and reevaluate her place in history. The film revealed that she was more than a mentally unstable woman who unjustly shot Andy Warhol. Valerie Solanas was a revolutionary, an early follower of radical feminism before it was even defined. She heavily influenced the basic ideologies of radical feminism and yet was rarely given credit due to her shooting of Warhol. Indeed, Valerie Solanas did much more in her life than damage the internal organs of Andy Warhol.

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Harron, "Introduction: On Valerie Solanas" in *I Shot Andy Warhol* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), xxix.

<sup>40</sup> James Barron, "Warhol's Assailant Left Another Mark, on a Library Book," *The New York Times*, <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/22/warhols-assailant-left-another-mark-on-a-library-book/>, (accessed October 13, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Mary Harron, "Introduction: On Valerie Solanas" in *I Shot Andy Warhol* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), xxvii.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, xxx.