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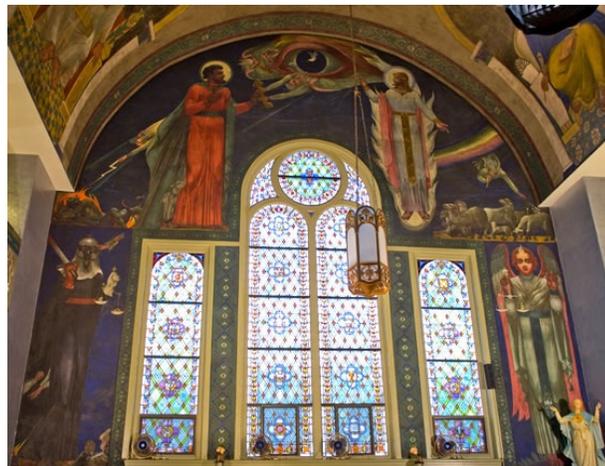
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Roving Eye: Warhol's Socialist Side

by [eric shiner](#) 04/15/11

Last week in New York I did a studio visit with Russian artist Yevgeniy Fiks that harkened to a meeting I had days earlier in Pittsburgh. In his conceptual practice, Fiks examines the rise and fall of Soviet Communism and he's realized numerous works that take Lenin, Socialism and Russia as their main theme. We met to talk about his latest work, *The Andy Warhol Project*. Fiks has been conducting extensive research on the strong labor movements that took hold in Pittsburgh during the 1920s and 1930s—the time when Warhol was born and raised in the working-class neighborhoods of the city. Fiks is also examining the Socialist leanings of some of Warhol's college professors and their penchant for social realism in their own work. Although the final product may have little to do with Warhol himself, it will shed new light on the environment within which he was raised and it might even hint at Warhol's later interest in Mao, Lenin and Communist iconography. We will premiere the work at the Warhol Museum in the fall of 2012.



With the studio visit still fresh in my head, I had a meeting on Thursday with a local preservationist, Bill Lefe, who has formed a group to raise funds for a set of incredibly strange murals in a Catholic church in Pittsburgh's Millvale neighborhood. Painted by the unsung artist Maxo Vanka in the 1920s, the murals depict not only Christ and the Virgin Mary (albeit engaged in less than normal scenarios), but a full litany of—surprise—social realist imagery of laborers being victimized by robber barons of the period. I'd heard of these strange

paintings before, but after looking them over more closely, I realized that these pictures were of the very time that Fiks is interested in researching.

I sent him a link to the [church's Web site](#) and he wrote back immediately, hugely excited. It turns out that Max Vanka was an immigrant from Croatia. He was rumored to be of royal lineage, and eventually moved to Bucks County, Pennsylvania, after marrying a wealthy American woman who once visited him in Eastern Europe. While there is probably no direct connection between Vanka and Warhol, I very much look forward to what Fiks will do with this new information.

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