A MULTITALENTED HOUSTONIAN-TURNED-NEW YORKER, TREY SPEEGLE CAME OF AGE IN 1980S MANHATTAN, CAVORTING WITH LUMINARIES AS VARIED AS GOOD OL' BOY JOHN CONNALLY AND PUNK ROCK PRINCESS DEBBIE HARRY. NOV SPEEGLE'S OWN ART, FILM AND PAINT-BY-NUMBER COLLECTION HAVE PEOPLE TALKING.

Artist, art director and self-described "appreciator," Trey Speegle is originally from Houston, where we met and became friends in the early 1980s. Now a diehard Manhattanite, he caught up with me at his weekend house in upstate New York, a 100-year-old former church with a bell tower and Revolutionary War cemetery in the backyard. A sublime canvas for his own masterpieces.

Carolyn Farb: You started working in publishing at an early age.
Trey Speegle: Still in high school...at 17. I began working in the art department at Houston City Magazine, and, in a short time, I was its art director. Francois de Menil hired stylists Kezia Keeble and her husband Paul Cavaco [now Allure magazine's creative director] to improve the fashion. We became friends, and they really opened my eyes to the opportunities in New York.

Tell me about your early 1980s RePOP series with such Houston notables as Dr. Denton Cooley, Governor John Connally and Dominique de Menil.
I've always identified with Andy Warhol and his approach to art. He made icons of American culture, and I thought Houston was ripe for that. I just did my own version. His famous nose job painting inspired me to do Channel 13 anchor Marvin Zindler.

Andy Warhol's death was a shock for everyone. How did you come to design his gravestone?
Accidentally. My friends, artists David MacDemott and Peter MacGough, had a memorial poster they brought back from Italy. It's customary to plaster the streets with them to announce a death. I used a blank poster with just the border and copied the cover of the New York Post from the day Andy died. At the top, I removed the praying hands and added a high school photo of Andy. A friend gave the poster to Andy's brother, and he gave it to the gravestone maker who used it as a template. Though he took out Andy's picture and put back the praying hands, I'm making a documentary called Your 15 Minutes Are Up. I'll interview all the different people who were involved in it so the untold story can be revealed.

What was the Houston mentality in the 1980s?
It was a bit too sleepy for me. I was young, and I wanted more action. That's why I moved to New York.

Tell me about the scene in New York during that time?
All these different worlds came together back then. You found yourself in a room with Lee Radziwill, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Debbie Harry...all at the same party. That's where everyone met everyone. The scene has really changed.
What brought about the change?
AIDS, expensive real estate. Of course, 9/11 changed it in a terrible way. There's a loss of innocence and freedom. In the 1980s, I was in my 20s... your attitude towards life is different then.

The creative process in art, design and publishing is really what interests you. You've been interviewed for a new television series called The Process.
Yes. The series' premise is to reveal the creative process. Everyone has a different process, and ultimately, it's about the process more than the product. Once you've made something, you're on to the next thing. It's been interesting for me to understand my own creative process. I was never aware of it... it just happened.

What about the art you are making now?
For years, I have been doing word-art pieces like Fear of Faith, which came out of my spiritual reawakening. I'm taking those and merging them with paint-by-numbers.

You have quite a significant paint-by-number collection. How did you become interested in them?
My late, great friend Michael O'Donohue, a brilliant comedy writer, bought a few of them to decorate his office in L.A. He had about 250 of them, and I organized a show that created renewed interest in paint-by-numbers. After his death, his wife Cheryl Hardwick gave me the collection. I began buying more and probably have 1,300 to 1,400 now.

What's been the reaction to them as an art form?
In 2000, I loaned part of my collection to the Smithsonian for a big paint-by-number retrospective. At that time, I did CBS Sunday Morning and Egg on PBS, and there were articles in The New York Times and in Nest magazine. Living with these visuals over the years, I began to see them in a different way. I realized there were more layers of interest to paint-by-numbers than I initially thought... and they challenged people's idea of art. "Who is an artist?" and "What is art?" I began to use the visual language of paint-by-numbers, which is vast and varied, to say something other than what was originally intended.

Describe the process.
I'm working on one called Love Conquers All, which is made up of three floral still-life paintings. Each word is on a separate panel. I merge the words with the painted and unpainted ones. In other pieces, I have digitally enlarged them, cropped them and also cut them up. So I am kind of deconstructing them.

What's on the horizon?
I'm doing work for a new show and plugging away at my day job as art director of US Weekly. Like Warhol, I was always fascinated with celebrity, but now I may have had my fill.

Any great words to live by?
One of the pieces I've been working on is titled What Are You Waiting For? Another is Decide What You Will Be and Do What You Must.