Death in America

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Death in America

HAL FOSTER

The human organism is an atrocity exhibition at which he is an unwilling spectator.

—J. G. Ballard, The Atrocity Exhibition

In The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (1975) the great idiot savant of our time chats about many big subjects—love, beauty, fame, work—but when it comes to death this is all he has to say: “I don’t believe in it because you’re not around to know that it’s happened. I can’t say anything about it because I’m not prepared for it.”¹ On first hearing there is not much in this stony demurril (which has little of the light wit of the rest of the book); yet listen again to these phrases: “not around to know . . . can’t say anything . . . not prepared.” There is a break in subjectivity here, a disorientation of time and space. To me it suggests an experience of shock or trauma, an encounter where one misses the real, where one is too early or too late (precisely “not around,” “not prepared”), but where one is somehow marked by this very missed encounter.

I fix on this idiosyncratic passage because I think it encrypts a relation to the real that suggests a new way into Warhol, especially into the “Death in America” images from the early 1960s, one that may get us beyond the old opposition that constrains so many approaches to the work: that the images are attached to referents, to iconographic themes or to real things in the world, or, alternatively, that the world is nothing but image, that all Pop images in particular represent are other images.² Most readings not only of Warhol but of postwar art based in

1. Andy Warhol, The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 123. This text began as a talk at a conference convened at the Andy Warhol Museum by Colin MacCabe, Mark Francis, and Peter Wollen in April 1995. I also thank participants in the Visual Culture Colloquium at Cornell University, in particular Susan Buck-Morss, Geoff Waite, and especially Mark Seltzer. Finally, I dedicate the text to the memory of Bill Readings, a true critical theorist who possessed a terrible joie de vivre.

photography divide somewhere along this line: the image as referential or as simulacral. This is a reductive either/or that a notion of traumatic realism may open up productively.3

Traumatic Realism

It is no surprise that the simulacral reading of Warholian Pop is advanced by critics associated with poststructuralism, for whom Warhol is Pop and, more importantly, for whom the theory of the simulacrum, crucial as it is to the poststructuralist critique of representation, sometimes seems to depend on the example of Warhol as Pop. “What Pop art wants,” Roland Barthes writes in “That Old Thing, Art” (1980), “is to desymbolize the object,” that is, to release the image from deep meaning (metaphoric association or metonymic connection) into simulacral surface.4 In the process the author is also released: “The Pop artist does not stand behind his work,” Barthes continues, “and he himself has no depth: he is merely the surface of his pictures, no signified, no intention, anywhere.”5 With variations this reading of Warholian Pop is performed by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard, for whom referential depth and subjective interiority are also victims of the sheer superficiality of Pop. In “Pop—An Art of Consumption?” (1970), Baudrillard agrees that the object in Pop “loses its symbolic meaning, its age-old anthropomorphic status.”6 But where Barthes and company see an avant-gardist disruption of representation, Baudrillard sees an “end of subversion,” a “total integration” of the art work into the political economy of the commodity-sign.7

The referential view of Warholian Pop is advanced by critics and historians who tie the work to different themes: the worlds of fashion, celebrity, gay subculture, the Warhol Factory, and so on. Its most intelligent version is presented by Thomas Crow, who, in “Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol” (1987), disputes the simulacral account of Warhol that the images are indiscriminate and the artist impassive. Underneath the glamorous surface of commodity fetishes and media stars Crow finds “the reality of suffering and death”; the tragedies of Marilyn, Liz, and Jackie in particular are said to prompt “straightforward

3. My way to this notion has come through the art work of Sarah Pierce. I think it opens onto other realisms not only after the war (photorealist and appropriation art in particular) but before as well (Surrealism in particular)—a genealogy that I sketch in “Reality Bites,” in Hidden in Plain Sight: Illusion and the Real in Recent Art, ed. Virginia Rutledge (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, forthcoming, 1996). I am also interested in this notion as one way to think beyond the stalemated oppositions of new art history—semiotic versus social-historical, text versus context—as well as of cultural criticism—signifier versus referent, constructivist subject versus naturalist body.
7. Ibid., p. 35. Neither position is wrong, I will argue throughout this text; rather, the two must be thought somehow together.
expressions of feeling."8 Here Crow finds not only a referential object for Warhol but an empathetic subject in Warhol, and here he locates the criticality of Warhol—not in an attack on "that old thing, art" (as Barthes would have it) through an embrace of the simulacral commodity-sign (as Baudrillard would have it), but rather in an exposé of "complacent consumption" through "the brutal fact" of accident and mortality.9 In this way Crow pushes Warhol beyond humanist sentiment to political engagement. "He was attracted to the open sores in American political life," Crow writes in a reading of the electric-chair images as agit-prop against the death penalty and of the race-riot images as a testimonial for civil rights. "Far from a pure play of the signifier liberated from reference," Warhol belongs to the popular American tradition of "truth-telling."10

This reading of Warhol as empathetic, even engagé, is a projection (an essay could be written on the desire of left critics to make Warhol over into a contemporary Brecht). But it is no more a projection than the superficial, impassive Warhol, even though this projection was his own: "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it."11 Both camps make the Warhol they need, or get the Warhol they deserve; no doubt we all do. (What is it, by the way, that renders Warhol such a site for projection? He posed as a blank screen, to be sure, but Warhol was very aware of these projections, indeed very aware of identification as projection; it is one of his great subjects.)12 In any case neither projection is wrong; but they cannot both be right . . . or can they? Can we read the "Death in America" images as referential and simulacral, connected and disconnected, affective and affectless, critical and complacent? I think we must, and I think we can if we read them in a third way, in terms of traumatic realism.

One way to develop this notion is through the famous motto of the Warholian persona: "I want to be a machine."13 Usually this statement is taken to confirm the blankness of artist and art alike, but it may point less to a blank subject than to a shocked one, who takes on the nature of what shocks him as a mimetic

9. Ibid., p. 322.
10. Ibid., p. 324. Again, his "attraction" to these subjects may not be "complacent," but it is not necessarily critical.
11. Gretchen Berg, "Andy: My True Story," Los Angeles Free Press (March 17, 1963), p. 3. Warhol continues: "I see everything that way, the surface of things, a kind of mental Braille, I just pass my hands over the surface of things. . . . There was no profound reason for doing a death series, no victims of their time; there was no reason for doing it at all, just a surface reason." Of course, this very insistence could be read as a denial, that is, as a signal that there may be a "profound reason." This shutting between surface and depth may be unstoppable in Pop; indeed, it may be characteristic of (its) traumatic realism.
12. This is not say that there are no qualitative differences between projections, or between fascinated projections and motivated interpretations.
Sixteen Jackies. 1964.

Tunafish Disaster. 1963.
defense against this shock: I am a machine too, I make (or consume) serial product-images too, I give as good (or as bad) as I get. “Someone said my life has dominated me,” Warhol told Gene Swenson in the celebrated interview of 1963. “I liked that idea.” Here Warhol has just confessed to the same lunch every day for the past twenty years (what else but Campbell’s soup?). In context, then, the two statements read as a preemptive embrace of the compulsion to repeat put into play by a society of serial production and consumption. If you can’t beat it, Warhol suggests, join it. More, if you enter it totally, you might expose it; that is, you might reveal its automatism, even its autism, through your own excessive example. Used strategically in Dada, this capitalist nihilism was performed ambiguously by Warhol, and many artists have played it out since. (This is a performance, of course: there is a subject “behind” this figure of nonsubjectivity who presents it as a figure. Otherwise the shocked subject is an oxymoron, for, strictly speaking, there is no subject in shock, let alone in trauma. And yet the fascination of Warhol is that one is never certain about this subject “behind”: is anybody home, inside the automaton?)

These notions of shocked subjectivity and compulsive repetition reposition the role of repetition in the Warhol persona and images. “I like boring things” is another famous motto of this quasi-autistic persona. “I like things to be exactly the same over and over again.” In POPism (1980) Warhol glossed this embrace of boredom, repetition, domination: “I don’t want it to be essentially the same—I want it to be exactly the same. Because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.” Here repetition is both a draining of significance and a defending against affect, and this strategy guided Warhol as early as the 1963 interview: “When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn’t really have any effect.”

14. Ibid.
15. I hesitate between “product” and “image” and “make” and “consume” because, historically, Warhol seems to occupy a liminal position between the orders of production and consumption; at least the two operations appear blurred in his work. This liminal position might also bear on my hesitation between “shock,” a discourse that develops around accidents in industrial production, and “trauma,” a discourse in which shock is rethought in the register not only of psychic causality but also of imaginary fantasy—and so, perhaps, a discourse that is more pertinent to a consumerist subject.
16. Indeed, artists like Jeff Koons have run it right into the ground. For this capitalist nihilism in Dada see my “Armor Fou,” October 56 (Spring 1991); and in Warhol see Benjamin Buchloh, “The Andy Warhol Line,” in The Work of Andy Warhol, ed. Gary Garrels (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989). In Dada, in much reactionary representation of the 1920s, and again in contemporary art, this nihilism assumes an infantilist aspect, as if “acting out” were the same as “performing.”
19. Swenson, “What Is Pop Art?” p. 60. That is, it still has an effect, but not really. I mean my use of “affect” not to reinstate a referential experience but, on the contrary, to suggest an experience that cannot be located precisely.
this is one function of repetition: to repeat a traumatic event (in actions, in dreams, in images) in order to integrate it into a psychic economy, a symbolic order. But the Warhol repetitions are not restorative in this way; they are not about a mastery of trauma. More than a patient release from the object in mourning, they suggest an obsessive fixation on the object in melancholy. Think of all the Marilyns alone, of all the cropping, coloring, and crimping of these images: as Warhol works over this image of love, the “hallucinatory wish-psychosis” of a melancholic seems to be in play. But this analysis is not right either. For one thing the repetitions not only reproduce traumatic effects; they produce them as well (at least they do in me). Somehow in these repetitions, then, several contradictory things occur at the same time: a warding away of traumatic significance and an opening out to it, a defending against traumatic affect and a producing of it.

Here I should make explicit the theoretical model I have implicated so far. In the early 1960s Jacques Lacan was concerned to define the real in terms of trauma. Titled “The Unconscious and Repetition,” this seminar was roughly contemporaneous with the “Death in America” images (it ran in early 1964). But unlike the theory of simulacra in Baudrillard and company, the theory of trauma in Lacan was not influenced by Pop. It was, however, informed by Surrealism, which has its deferred effect on Lacan here, an early associate of the Surrealists; and Pop is related to Surrealism as a traumatic realism (certainly my reading of Warhol is a Surrealist one). It is in this seminar that Lacan defines the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real. As missed, the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it must be repeated. “Wiederholen,” Lacan writes in etymological reference to Freud on repetition, “is not Reproduzieren”; repetition is not reproduction. This can stand as an epitome of my argument too: repetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier). Rather, repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic. But this very need points to the real, and it is at this point that the real ruptures the screen of repetition. It is a rupture not in the world but in the subject; or rather it is a rupture between perception and consciousness of a subject touched by an image. In an allusion to Aristotle on accidental causality, Lacan calls this traumatic point the tuché; in Camera Lucida (1980) Barthes calls it

20. But this is the role of art history in relation to Warhol (among many others): to find a referent, to develop an iconography, in order to integrate the work. In some ways Warhol defies this process, as did Rauschenberg before him; in other ways they both play right into it.
the punctum.24 “It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me,” Barthes writes. “It is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there.” “It is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence. Odd contradiction: a floating flash.”25 (This confusion about the location of the rupture, tuché, or punctum is a confusion between subject and world, inside and outside. It is an aspect of trauma; indeed, it may be this confusion that is traumatic. “Where Is Your Rupture?” Warhol asks in a 1960 painting of a newspaper advertisement of a nude female torso.)

In Camera Lucida Barthes is concerned with straight photographs, so he relates the punctum to details of content. This is rarely the case in Warhol. And yet there is a punctum for me (Barthes stipulates that it is a personal effect) in the indifference of the passerby in White Burning Car III (1963). This indifference to the crash victim impaled on the telephone pole is bad enough, but its repetition is galling, and this points to the general operation of the punctum in Warhol. It works less through content than through technique, especially through the “floating flashes” of the silk-screen process, the slipping and streaking, blanching and blanking, repeating and coloring of the images. To take another instance, a punctum arises for me less from the slumped woman in the top image in Ambulance Disaster (1963) than from the obscene tear that effaces her head in the bottom image. Just as the punctum in Gerhard Richter lies less in details than in the pervasive blurring of the image, so the punctum in Warhol lies less in details than in this repetitive “popping” of the image.26

These pops, such as the slipping of the register of the image and the washing of the whole in color, serve as visual equivalents of our missed encounters with the real. “What is repeated,” Lacan writes, “is always something that occurs . . . as if by chance.”27 And so it is with these pops: they seem accidental, but they also appear repetitive, automatic, even technological (the relation between accident and technology, crucial to the discourse of shock, is another great subject of Warhol).28 In

24. “I am trying here to grasp how the tuché is represented in visual apprehension,” Lacan states. “I shall show that it is at the level that I call the stain that the tythic point in the scopic function is found” (ibid., p. 77). This tythic point, then, is not in the world but in the subject, but in the subject as an effect, a shadow or a “stain” cast by the gaze of the world. Lacan argued that this gaze “qua objet a may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration” (ibid., p. 77). In other words, the gaze queries us about our rupture.


26. Yet another instance of this popping is the blanking of the image (which often occurs in the dipythchs, for example in the black panel opposite the panel of the crashes in Five Deaths Seventeen Times in Black and White [1963]). This blanking works as a kind of correlative of a black-out or a blank-down in shock. (For the point about the blur in Richter I am indebted to the art and music critic Julian Meyers.)


this way Warhol elaborates on our optical unconscious, a term introduced by Walter Benjamin to describe the subliminal effects of modern technologies of the image. Benjamin developed this notion in the early 1930s, in response to photography and film; Warhol updates it thirty years later, in response to the postwar society of the spectacle, of mass media and commodity-signs.29 In these early images we see what it looks like to dream in the age of television, Life, and Time; or rather, what it looks like to nightmare as shock victims who prepare for disasters that have already come, for Warhol selects moments when this spectacle cracks (the JFK assassination, the Monroe suicide, racist attacks, car wrecks), but cracks only to expand.30

Content in Warhol is thus not trivial (Crow is absolutely right here). A white woman slumped from a wrecked ambulance, or a black man attacked by a police

29. In fact the notion is not much developed by Benjamin. See the passing references in “A Short History of Photography” (1931), in Classic Essays on Photography, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), in Illuminations.

30. These shocks may exist in the world, but they occur in the subject. Certainly they develop as traumas only in the subject. And to develop in this way, to be registered as a trauma, requires that the first event, the shock, be recoded by a later event (this is what Freud meant by the deferred [nachträglich] action at work in trauma: it takes two traumas to make a trauma). This distinction is important for my reading of Warhol especially in the next section, for what is first a calamity, like the JFK assassination, or a disaster, like the Challenger explosion, only becomes a trauma later, après-coup; and the mass subjectivities effected by shock and trauma are different.
dog, is a shock. But, again, it is this first order of shock that the repetition of the image serves to screen, even if in doing so the repetition produces a second order of trauma, here at the level of technique where the *punctum* breaks through the screen and allows the real to poke through. The real, Lacan puns, is *traumatic*, and again the tear in *Ambulance Disaster* is such a hole for me, though what loss is figured there I cannot say. Through these pokes or pops we seem almost to touch the real, which the repetition of the image at once distances and rushes toward us. Sometimes the coloring of the images has this strange double effect as well.  

In this way different kinds of repetition are put into play by Warhol: repetitions that fix on the traumatic real, that screen it, that produce it. And this multiplicity makes for the Warholian paradox not only of images that are both affective and affectless, but also of viewers that are neither integrated (which is the ideal of most modern aesthetics: the subject composed in contemplation) nor dissolved (which is the effect of much popular culture: the subject given over to the schizo intensities of the commodity-sign). "I never fall apart," Warhol remarks in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, "because I never fall together."  

Such is the subject-effect of his work too, and it resonates in some art after Pop as well: some photorealism, some appropriation art, some object art today. In other words, there is a genealogy of traumatic realism, and it has surfaced strongly in the present.

*Mass Witnessing*

Barthes was wrong to suggest that the *punctum* is only a private affair; it can have a public dimension as well. The breakdown of the distinction between private and public is traumatic too; again, understood as a breakdown of inside and outside, it is one way to understand trauma as such.  

But this understanding is

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31. In "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe" Mary Anne Doane argues that television coverage serves to block the shock of catastrophic events, only to produce this effect when its coverage fails (in *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990]). As suggested, the Warhol washing of the image in color often screens and reveals the traumatic real in a similar way. These washes might then recall the hysterical red that Marnie sees in the eponymous film by Hitchcock (1964). But this red is too coded, almost safely symbolic, even iconographic. The Warhol colors are more acrid, arbitrary, *effective*.

32. Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, p. 81. In "Andy Warhol’s One-Dimensional Art: 1956–1966," Benjamin Buchloh argues that "consumers... can celebrate in Warhol’s work their proper status of having been erased as subjects" (*Andy Warhol: A Retrospective*, p. 57). This is the other extreme of the position argued by Crow that Warhol exposes "complacent consumption." Again, rather than choose between the two, they must be thought somehow together.


34. I repeat this point because with artists like Warhol and Richter the *punctum* is not strictly private or public. This is especially the case with the Richter suite of paintings titled "October 18, 1977" (1988) concerning the deaths in the Baader-Meinhof group. The painting of the little record player kept by Andreas Baader holds a special charge for me. This is not a private affair, and yet I cannot explain it through any public *studium*—its use in prison, its status as an outmoded leisure-commodity, whatever. I am aware of the psychologicist tendency of this section of my text, in particular the slippage of trauma from a psychoanalytic definition to a sociological application, but I think my subject requires it.
Crowd. 1963.
historical, which is to say that this traumatic breakdown is historical, and no one
evokes its effects quite like Warhol. "It's just like taking the outside and putting it
on the inside," he once said of Pop in general, "or taking the inside and putting it
on the outside." This is cryptic, but it does suggest a new relay between private
fantasy and public reality as both an object and an operation in Pop. "In the past
we have always assumed that the external world around us has represented reality,"
J. G. Ballard, the best complement of Warhol in fiction, writes in an introduction
to his great Pop novel Crash (1973),

and that the inner worlds of our minds, its dreams, hopes, ambitions,
represented the realm of fantasy and the imagination. These roles, it
seems to me, have been reversed... Freud's classic distinction between
the latent and manifest content of the dream, between the apparent
and the real, now needs to be applied to the external world of so-
called reality.

The result of this confusion is a pathological public sphere, a strange new mass
subjectivity, and it fascinated Warhol as it does Ballard. I want to turn to this
fascination because it does much to illuminate not only "Death in America" but
Politics in America as well. To do so, however, a quick detour through political
theory is necessary.

In his classic study The King's Two Bodies (1957) the historian Ernst Kantorowicz
provides an anatomy of the body politic in the feudal order. On the one hand
the king represents this body politic (as in the synecdoche "I am England"), on
the other hand he serves as its head; and in this corporal metaphor lies a mea-
sure of social hierarchy and political control. (A late imaging of this body politic
appears as the famous frontispiece of the Leviathan of Hobbes [1651].) However,
with the bourgeois revolution, this image, this social imaginary, is threatened. As
democracy decapitates the king, it "disincorporates" the body politic as well, and
the result is a crisis in political representation. How can this new inchoate mass
be represented? For the political theorist Claude Lefort totalitarianism is a

36. This introduction appears in the French translation of Crash (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1974); it
was published in the original English in Foundation 9 (November 1975) and in Re/Search 8/9 (1984;
J. G. Ballard issue), p. 98. In this regard Warhol and Ballard point to an important concern in
recent psychoanalytical art and criticism (e.g., the work of Slavoj Žižek): the role of fantasy in the
social imaginary and the body politic.
37. Mark Seltzer develops the notion of a pathological public sphere in "Serial Killers II," Critical
Inquiry (Fall 1995).
38. This is a primary question for many modernists, mainly socialists, across a range of practices
(e.g., Sergei Eisenstein, El Lissitzky, John Heartfield, Diego Rivera), but Warhol addresses it too, from
his own perspective. In Crowd (1963), for example, the mass appears as a truncated blur of a newspaper
photo or a television image barely seen or remembered. In crowd theory of the nineteenth century,
most of which is quite reactionary (e.g., Gustave Le Bon), the problem is posed explicitly in terms of
control: how to restrain the mass in representation. (I am grateful to Susan Buck-Morss for her attention
to this neglected part of the modernist project.)
Frontispiece of Hobbes’s
Leviathan. 1651.

Xanti. Mussolini. 1934.
belated response to this crisis: the figure of the supreme leader returns as an “Egocrat” to reembody “the People-as-One.” But this return of the sovereign figure has a correlative in spectacular societies of the West: the politician as celebrity, the celebrity as politician, who rules through a politics of identification-as-projection—a return that Jürgen Habermas has called a “re-feudalizing” of the public sphere. In a gloss both on Habermas on the public sphere and on Lefort on democratic disincorporation, the critic Michael Warner describes this reembodiment in these terms: “Where printed public discourse formerly relied on a rhetoric of abstract disembodiment, visual media—including print—now display bodies for a range of purposes: admiration, identification, appropriation, scandal, and so forth. To be public in the West means to have an iconicity, and this is true equally of Muammar Qaddafi and Karen Carpenter.”

Again, Warhol was fascinated by this mass subject. “I want everybody to think alike,” he said in 1963. “Russia is doing it under government. It’s happening here all by itself.” Warhol was no situationist, but in his own blankly affirmative way he does register here a convergence between the “concentrated” spectacle of the Soviet Union and the “diffuse” spectacle of the United States, one that Debord foresaw in The Society of the Spectacle (1967) and confirmed in Comments on the Society of the Spectacle (1988). And with his Maos, made in 1972 at the point of the Nixon opening to China, Warhol does suggest a related convergence of spectacular orders. In any case he was concerned to address the mass subject. “I don’t think art should be only for the select few,” Warhol commented in 1967. “I think it should be for the mass of American people.” But how does one go about such a representation in a society of consumer capitalism?

One way at least to evoke the mass subject is through its proxies, that is, through its objects of taste (thus the wallpaper kitsch of the flowers in 1964 and the folk logo of the cows in 1966) and/or its objects of consumption (thus the serial presentation of the Campbells and the Cokes, the Heinzes and the Brillos, from 1962 on). But can one figure this subject? Does it have a body to figure? Or is it

43. For an extraordinary meditation on different mass subjectivities from Chairman Mao to Doctor Moon, from the novel to terrorism in the news, see Don DeLillo, Mao II (New York: Viking, 1991).
44. Berg, “Andy: My True Story,” p. 3. He also preferred the term “commonist” to “Pop.”
45. The Philosophy of Andy Warhol includes an ode to Coke that celebrates the absurd democracy of consumerism at issue here: “What’s great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just
displaced in the fetishism of the commodity-sign, dissolved in the society of the spectacle: "The mass subject cannot have a body," Warner asserts, "except the body it witnesses." If we grant this principle provisionally, it may suggest why Warhol evokes the mass subject through its figural projections—from celebrities and politicians like Marilyn and Mao to all the lurid cover-people of Interview magazine. It may also suggest why the world of Warhol was overrun by voyeurs and exhibitionists. For Warhol not only evoked the mass subject; he also incarnated it, and he incarnated it precisely in its guise as "witness." This witnessing is not neutral or impassive; it is an erotics that is both voyeuristic and exhibitionist, both sadistic and masochistic, and it is especially active in two areas, the Factory filmmaking and the Warholian cult of celebrity. Here again Ballard is the best complement of Warhol, for while Ballard tends to explore the sadistic side of mass witnessing (his "Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy" [1966] and "Why I Want toFuck Ronald Reagan" [1967] are classics of the genre), Warhol tends to slip into its masochistic side (as in his servility before the likes of Imelda Marcos and Nancy Reagan).

However, Warhol did more than evoke the mass subject through its kitsch, commodities, and celebrities. He also represented itself in its very unrepresentability, that is, in its absence and anonymity, its disaster and death. Eventually this led him to the Skul](76), the most economical image of the mass subject, for, as his assistant Ronnie Cutrone once remarked, to paint a skull is to do "the portrait of everybody in the world." Yet Warhol was drawn to death, the democratic leveler of famous mass object and anonymous mass subject alike, long before. Here is one more statement from the 1963 interview:

I guess it was the big crash picture, the front page of a newspaper: 129 DIE. I was also painting the Marilyns. I realized that everything I think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Côkes are the same and all the Côkes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it" (pp. 100–101). In this ad for democracy there is only one Real Thing, and We are indeed the World.

47. This is where the principle "the mass subject cannot have a body except the body it witnesses" might be qualified. For the mass does "have" a body (as with the phallus, having and being a body are not the same): it has a body in the sense that it may be convoked not only through a body (e.g., a celebrity) but as a body (e.g., a collective shocked or traumatized by the same event). It also retains its bodies in the usual sense (mass subjects as "organisms" rather than as "spectators" in the terms of my Ballard epigraph). These individual bodies of desires, fears, and fantasies allow mass subjects to customize mass objects in personal and/or group ways (e.g., gay, Catholic, working-class); in the case of Warhol to camp or to clone images of Elvis, Troy, Warren, Marlon, and other most wanted men in terms of gay desire (on this point see Richard Meyer, "Warhol's Clones," The Yale Journal of Criticism, vol. 7, no. 1 [1994]). To use a notion like "mass subject," then, is not necessarily to massify the subject, to disallow personal and/or group appropriations. In fact the Factory was a virtual factory of such reinventions. For another analysis of some of these problems, see Christopher Phillips, "Desiring Machines," in Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document, ed. Gary Garrels (San Francisco: MOMA, 1995). (The two Ballard texts are collected in The Atrocity Exhibition [London: Jonathan Cape, 1969].)
was doing must have been Death. It was Christmas or Labor Day—a holiday—and every time you turned on the radio they said something like, “4 million are going to die.” That started it.49

But started what exactly? Nine years later Warhol returned to this question:

Actually you know it wasn’t the idea of accidents and things like that. . . . I thought of all the people who worked on the pyramids and . . . I just always sort of wondered what happened to them . . . well it would be easier to do a painting of people who died in car crashes because sometimes you know, you never know who they are.50

This implies that his primary concern was not disaster and death but the mass subject, here in the guise of the anonymous victims of history, from the drones of the pyramids to the statistical DOAs at the hospitals.51 Yet disaster and death were necessary to evoke this subject, for in a spectacular society the mass subject often appears as an effect of the mass media (the newspaper, the radio), or of a catastrophic failure of technology (the plane crash), or, more precisely, of both (the news of such a catastrophic failure). Along with icons of celebrity like the Marilyns or the Maos, reports of disastrous death like “129 Die” is a primary way that mass subjectivity is made.52

Now even as the mass subject may worship an idol only to gloat over his or her fall, so too it may mourn the dead in a disaster only to be warmed by the bonfire of these bodies. In “The Storyteller” (1936) Benjamin suggests that this is one service performed by the novel—to stir anonymous readers with a singular death—and I want, through Warhol, to suggest that media news offers a contemporary version of this mass warming.53 Here, again, in its guise as witness the mass subject reveals its sadomasochistic aspect, for this subject is often split in relation to a disaster: even as he or she may mourn the victims, even identify with them masochistically, he or she

49. Swenson, “What Is Pop Art?” p. 60. It is at this point that Warhol remarks, “But when you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn’t really have any effect.” And yet this particular image from 1962 is not repeated, and with the blackened wing become a deathly scythe Warhol heightens its grim fatality.
50. David Bailey, Andy Warhol: Transcript (London, 1972), quoted by Buchloh in “Andy Warhol’s One-Dimensional Art,” p. 53. Here, perhaps, there is a point of contact, however inadvertent, with Brecht; see, for example, his poem “The Worker Reads History.”
51. Warhol captures the catastrophic version of contemporary death, in which “death is no longer the culminating experience of a life rich in continuity and meaning but, instead, pure discontinuity, disruption—pure chance or accident, the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time” (Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” p. 233).
52. “Disaster is popular, as it were,” Warner writes, “because it is a way of making mass subjectivity available, and it tells us something about the desirability of that mass subject” (“The Mass Public,” p. 248). What are the different effects of the different mediations (newspaper, radio, network television, satellite and cable news, Internet) of modern disaster? For example, what is the difference in subject-effect between readings of the Titanic sinking and viewings of the Challenger exploding? Is the first as given over to compulsive repetitions, to the jouissance of the death drive, as the second?
53. “What draws the reader to the novel,” Benjamin writes, “is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (Illuminations, p. 101).
may also be thrilled, sadistically, that there are victims of whom he or she is not one. (There is a triumphalism of the survivor that the trauma of the witness does not cancel out.) Paradoxically, perhaps, this sadomasochistic aspect helps the mass subject cohere as a collectivity. For the death of the old body politic did not only issue in the return of the total leader or the rise of the spectacular star; it also led to the birth of the psychic nation, that is, to a mass-mediated polis that is not only convoked around calamitous events (like the Rodney King beating or the Oklahoma City bombing) but also addressed, polled, and reported as a traumatic subject (the generations that share the JFK assassination, the Vietnam War, and so on). Warhol was interested in this strange avatar of the mass subject; it is a shame he did not live to see the golden age of hysterical talk shows and lurid murder trials.

For the most part Warhol evoked the mass subject in two opposite ways: through iconic celebrity and abstract anonymity. But he came closest to this subject through a compromise-representation somewhere between celebrity and anonymity, that is, through the figure of notoriety, the fame of fifteen minutes. For me his best representation of the mass subject is an implicit double-portrait: the

54. This point may bear on the guilty implication that a mass subject may feel in relation to a disaster—that he or she has somehow participated in it, even indirectly caused it, as a spectator. Sometimes a disaster prompts a confusion of cause and effect, let alone of public and private, that is difficult to register except as a reversal, in which the subject—paranoically and pathetically—feels that he or she has dictated the event, or at least colluded in its fixing. Consider the superstitions of sports fans, who gyrate in front of televisions so that a catch be made, a putt sunk, or who turn off the game lest the hero fail, the team lose. (I am indebted to Christopher Pye for this example of reversal.)

55. Again, the difference is this: a shock may be instantaneous; a trauma takes time to produce (see note 30). This convoking of a mass subject through shock may be easier to register at the level of the city. To be a witness in New York in the 1980s, for example, was to lurch from one fatal event to another (from Lisa Steinberg to Jennifer Levin, say, from Howard Beach to Bensonhurst), events usually marked by extreme violations of difference—generational, sexual, and/or ethnic. These events wired New Yorkers, shocked them into a collectivity of (dis)identification, which is a role that New York long played for the rest of the psychic nation. This part has now passed in part to Los Angeles, the city that, outside of Hollywood Babylon, was long imagined to be free of such events.

The term “psychic nation” may be too slippery to define, let alone to locate. The “psychification” of the nation is an old tendency in cultural criticism, from the “nervous” 1880s to the “narcissistic” 1970s and the “schizophrenic” 1980s. I do not intend an analogy, much less an equivalence, between psyche and nation. Rather I see the presumed commutability of the two as another symptom of a breakdown between private and public (which is also difficult to define, let alone to locate). There is also the question of the technological mediation of the psychic nation: again, how does this kind of collectivity change with different media? And when does it exceed the national as a matter of course? This question may point to a difference between the early 1960s and the middle 1990s. In an almost sociological way Warhol could use certain images to represent “death in America” for a show in Paris, with the assumption that these images would not be known there, and that American types of death were somehow distinctive. Today images of the carnage of the Oklahoma City bombing (or, for that matter, of the Sarajevo shelling) are broadcast internationally: the nation is hardly a boundary of the psychic collectivity effected by disaster and death. Indeed, not long after the early 1960s “death in America” might just as well signal death in Vietnam. Perhaps it was then, with the television reportage of the war, that the national boundary was definitively transgressed. In any case it is significant that Warhol tended to steer clear of these war images and indeed of television images.

56. These are opposite but not opposed, for most celebrities are so constructed in the social as to appear characterless if not anonymous.
most wanted man and the empty electric chair, the first a kind of modern icon, the second a kind of modern crucifix. What more exact representation of the pathological public sphere than this twinning of iconic mass murderer and abstract state execution? That is, what more difficult image? When Warhol made his Thirteen Most Wanted Men for the 1964 World's Fair in New York, power—men like Robert Moses and Philip Johnson, who not only designed the society of the spectacle but also represented it as the fulfillment of the American dream of success and self-rule—could not tolerate it. As is well known, Warhol was ordered to cover up the image (which he did with his signature silver paint), and Moses was not amused when Warhol offered to substitute a portrait of Moses.

In a sense the notoriety of the most wanted man is not so different from the notoriety of Warhol. For, again, he not only incarnated the mass subject as witness; he also instantiated the mass object as icon. This double status allowed Warhol to mediate between the two as well as he did; but it also suspended him between the iconicity of celebrity and the abstraction of anonymity. Perhaps it was this in-between position that made for his strange presence, at once very marked, even targeted (he was an easy celebrity to spot, a trait that advertisers came to exploit), and very white, even spectral (he was never quite there when he was just there on the street). Warhol emanated a flat uncanniness—as if he were his own double, his own stand-in. As both witness and icon, voyeur and exhibitionist, he often seemed caught in a cross fire of gazes, which is to say that he too became an object of the sadomasochism of the mass subject. "In the figures of Elvis, Liz, Michael, Oprah, Geraldo, Brando, and the like," Warner writes, "we witness and transact the bloating, slimming, Wounding, and general humiliation of the public body. The bodies of these public figures are prostheses for our own mutant desirability." Even as he represented these figures, Warhol became one of them—a status that he both wanted desperately and refused quasi-autistically (no prosthesis of desirability he).

Perhaps, finally, it was this status as a star that set him up to be shot. For stars are products of our own light projected above us, and often we come to feel that they influence us (etymologically: flow into us) too much. As Warhol must have

57. Traces of churchly art are everywhere in Warhol: the gold relics of the shoe ads, the shrines to Marilyn and others, the Vanitas skulls, the patron portraits, and so on. (I am indebted to Peter Wollen for the association of electric chair and crucifix.)
58. Even though these criminals fulfill this dream too, equal (if opposite) to any other top ten (or thirteen) list: the richest, the best dressed, and so on. On this point see Sidra Stich, "The American Dream/The American Dilemma," in Made in USA: An Americanization in Modern Art, the '50s and '60s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 177.
59. Barthes: "Pop art rediscovers the theme of the Double . . . but [it] is harmless—has lost all maleficent or moral power . . . the Double is a Copy, not a Shadow: beside, not behind: a flat, insignificant, hence irreligious Double" ("That Old Thing, Art," p. 24). Perhaps any encounter with a celebrity produces a degree of this flat uncanniness.
Thirteen Most Wanted Men No. 11, John Joseph H. 1964.

Silver Disaster. 1963.
sensed, this star-production can pass beyond the sadomasochistic to the paranoid: the relation to the star becomes a problem of distance (the star is too far from us, or too close) that is a problem of control (the star has too little, or too much, over us). Sometimes this conflict is only ended with the fall of the star; once in a while the mass subject is driven to shoot the star down—to eject this ideal double from the blinded self. Such, it seems, was the case with Mark David Chapman vis-à-vis John Lennon in December 1980. Perhaps a similar imperative drove Valerie Solanis, a frustrated hanger-on of the Factory, to shoot Warhol in June 1968.

In lieu of a conclusion I will end where I began, with the *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*. This final monologue touches on most of my concerns here: a traumatic notion of the real, a contemporary version of the optical unconscious, a historical confusion between private fantasy and public reality, a hysterical relay between mass subject and mass object, a forging of a psychic nation through mass-mediated disaster and death: 61

Before I was shot, I always thought that I was more half-there than all-there—I always suspected that I was watching TV instead of living life. People sometimes say the way things happen in movies is unreal, but actually it’s the way things happen to you 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’s all television. When you’re really involved with something, you’re usually thinking about something else. When something’s happening, you fantasize about other things. When I woke up somewhere—I didn’t know it was at the hospital and that Bobby Kennedy had been shot the day after I was—I heard fantasy words about thousands of people being in St. Patrick’s Cathedral praying and carrying on, and then I heard the word “Kennedy” and that brought me back to the television world again because then I realized, well, here I was, in pain.

61. This statement appears on p. 91 of *The Philosophy*. It also touches on a few related concerns that I have not much developed here: the dialectic of media and technology as both shock and shield for the subject, the complication in trauma of causality and temporality, the irreducibility of the body in pain. As for the first point, also see this statement in *The Philosophy*: “The acquisition of my tape recorder really finished whatever emotional life I might have had, but I was glad to see it go. . . . During the ’60s, I think, people forgot what emotions were supposed to be. And I don’t think they’ve ever remembered. I think that once you see emotions from a certain angle you can never think of them as real again. That’s what more or less has happened to me” (pp. 26–27).