

# Homologizing Accident: Notes on Warhol's Car Crashes

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on some paintings by Andy Warhol depicting car crashes to demonstrate how he uses them not only to underscore the commodity fetishism of contemporary capitalism but also subversively to undermine such traits in contemporary American culture. It also explores the connection between the ambivalence reflected in the paintings and Warhol's sexuality. In the process, it connects the paintings to the category Susan Sontag has famously categorized as "Camp" and Warhol's own facetiousness and love of surfaces and mixed modes as well as gimmick and parody.

My purpose in this essay is to interrogate how some paintings by Andy Warhol constitute the theme and motif of car crash as the locus of encounter between two competing cultural positions on the one hand, a celebratory complicity in the commodity fetish of advanced capitalism in America; on the other, a gesture of resistance or subversion towards such forces of conformity. The article will further speculate on how, or whether, this encounter is inflected by or invested with the idiom of a sexual alterity or marginality.

Warhol had a unique biographical perspective on the American reality. Born of working class parents who emigrated from Slovakia and struggled to get American citizenship, he went on to become a millionaire, a cult icon. At the same time he flaunted his gayness in an increasingly homophobic society and actively participated in the underground life of New York drag queens, which made sure that he was disaffiliated from the mainstream of American bourgeois temperament posited on normative heterosexuality. His well-rehearsed facetiousness, love for surfaces and mixing of modes are best discussed under the category of Camp (as famously envisaged by Susan Sontag in her "Notes on Camp"), which is also intimately connected with sexual ambiguity. Throughout his public

and private life (the boundary between which he intentionally and aggressively blurred to engineer his self-image), Warhol constructed a repertoire of gimmick and parody that propagated itself by ceaselessly appropriating the resources of the late capitalist culture to which he was reacting.<sup>1</sup>

Warhol's paintings on car crashes belong to his *Death and Disaster* series, a loosely connected group of more than seventy works produced in the early 1960's, which also includes images of race riots, electric chairs, atomic clouds, a teenage suicide, and working class women killed by tuna fish poisoning.<sup>2</sup> All of these involve the silkscreen technique, and employed synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Warhol accessed the photographs of disaster from newspapers or police records and replicated the images in question (usually multiple times) on over-sized canvas to produce these paintings. His *Five Deaths on Orange* (1963) shows the single image of a car crash, where two victims try to crawl out of the wreck while looking at the dead body of the third. The dead person looks disconcertingly straight at the observer in the eye. The scene has been made more macabre by Warhol's use of a lurid orange background. The photograph used for this painting is redeployed in other paintings, for example, *Five Deaths Seventeen Times* and *Five Deaths Eleven Times in Orange*. In *Saturday Disaster* (1964) the image of a car crash has been reproduced twice vertically in black and white. The image shows a chaotic mass of twisted corpses, with one body hanging upside down and another lying on the ground with a face distorted beyond recognition. According to Sotheby's website, the most remarkable oeuvres of Warhol on this subject are the *Orange Car Crash Fourteen Times*, the *Black and White Disaster#4*, the *Orange Car Crash*, and the *Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)*. Sotheby's website also recognizes the *Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)*, with its "silk-screened images cascading down [its] left-hand canvases, evoking filmstrips" as the most successful of these four works, in which "Warhol's use of reflective silver paint as background color charges the painting with a shimmering, cinematic quality," and shockingly juxtaposes a "bright, shimmering field" with "a sputtering image of a fatal car crash" (Kamholz).

Warhol's work is usually classified under the rubric of Pop Art, which is recognized in the Western institution of art history as a radically ambiguous movement or tendency in art with respect to aesthetic or generic commitments (Lucie-Smith). Warhol appropriated product designs, publicity stills and press photographs of popular currency, using techniques of commercial art in his canvases so as to challenge the traditional boundary between mass culture and high art. This indeterminacy, in fact, inaugurates the dialectic of conflicting allegiances in his work, prompting fundamental questions about the nature of art and its relation to society.

Accident informs Warhol's paintings on car crashes at multiple levels. First, it is homologized in his artistic technique itself as he exploits the contingencies of silk-screen printing to generate an impression of asymmetry and discord. He would carefully magnify the original photograph on canvas and overlay it with a silkscreen print. But the lack of perfect congruency between the two surfaces would mean overlapping and misplacing of chunks of colour. Warhol would repeat an image all over the screen in a haphazard fashion,

leave wide areas of the screen blank and happily retain all the irregularities introduced by his ghost-painters. Dyer marks this process as a deliberate means of undercutting the paradigm of mechanicity evoked by and through the painting, and of re-injecting the human presence (if not of the painter Warhol's *qua* painter in the classical sense, then his associates' and assistants')

Understood as traces of his making activity, accidents are displayed overtly on the surface of his images. Thus Warhol's colours are unnatural, theatrical, and randomly articulate the subjects in each image. The unnaturally large size of images exaggerates not only their flatness but also the accidents which differentiates them. Further, sloppy brushwork, hatching or scribbles over the images heighten the element of arbitrariness. The accidental, differentiating activity of Warhol is presented as fundamental to his practice and therefore to his images. ... In describing himself as a machine, Warhol ironically pushes the metaphor to its ridiculous limit. The machine repetitively performs the same operation of differentiation which continually produces the same product: difference as accident. (43)

This, in conjunction with the flat and garish colours, produce an effect of *estrangement*, if we may borrow a term from Brecht's dramaturgy. It serves to draw attention to those totemistic images of mass media and consumer culture that are rendered invisible by their ubiquity.

Secondly, accident is thematized in the series as a whole as it stages various forms of death or death-dealing apparatuses and events ultimately traceable to the uncertainties or dangers of capitalism. In the capitalist way of life chance or accident is the keyword as it is governed by free-market competition and financial speculation. It may be added here that Warhol's father lost his job because of the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the formative years of his childhood were spent during the great Depression. Other features of American capitalism would be all-pervasive consumerism, class-based exploitation, racial tension, ever-changing fashions and ephemeral cults of celebrities. Warhol's paintings in the *Death and Disaster* series may be seen as approaching those occasions of rupture where the malaise and oppression of the American capitalism are no longer insidiously disguised as normalcy, but become almost *accidentally* spectacular. Accident in the pedestrian sense of an R&T mishap becomes the summational metaphor for the series.<sup>3</sup> Foster for one is not prepared to take at face value Warhol's own bland statement "When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect," and he goes on to explore the dual effect of Warhol's paintings on disaster:

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-psychoanalysis” 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. (41-42)

Warhol's paintings of car crashes are widely read as staging an encounter with the dark reverse of America's glamour cult and material prosperity that is at the focus of his better known works. The paintings feature loud, voyeuristic images of car crashes, perhaps metaphorically foregrounding the element of devastation inherent in the American ideal of speed, mobility (locomotory and/or economic and/or geo-political) and possessiveness.<sup>4</sup> This admonitory quality of the paintings has been emphasized by Crow:

These commemorate events in which the supreme symbol of consumer affluence, the American car of the 1950s, has ceased to be an image of pleasure and freedom and has become a concrete instrument of sudden and irreparable injury. (In only one picture of the period, *Cars*, does an automobile appear intact.) Does the repetition of *Five Deaths* or *Saturday Disaster* cancel attention to the visible anguish in the faces of the living or the horror of the limp bodies of the unconscious and dead? We cannot penetrate beneath the image to touch the true pain and grief, but their reality is sufficiently indicated in the photographs to force attention to one's limited ability to find an appropriate response. As for the repetition, might we just as well understand it to mean the grim predictability, day after day, of more events with an identical outcome, the levelling sameness with which real, not symbolic, death erupts in our experience? (57)

Crow also factors in Warhol's conscious intervention in terms of the choice of the source photographs and the lay-out (58).

But this need not stop one from making a case for Warhol's avant-garde aestheticism and frivolity that posets it as decadent, even anti-communitarian and ultimately apolitical. Warhol's car crashes may be seen as inserting death itself into the consumerist imaginary as a commodity comparable to his better known Campbell soup cans, Brillo boxes or coke bottles. The technique of mechanically repeating the images in a single frame transmutes their semantic potentials. The array of images resembles a celluloid strip, a series of postage stamps or the display of commodities on the shelves of a departmental store. The image is robbed of any narrativity except that of the conveyor belt or shop window. In Warhol accident is no longer an event, but a motif, an object of mass consumption. They thus encapsulate the epistemology of a media-dominated culture, one of hyper-reality, where events are represented by their simulacra or depthless, reified representations (cf. Baudrillard).

This insight may be fruitfully compared with Jameson's observations on late capitalism, where he traces a symbiotic relationship between postmodern art and the consolidation of capitalist hegemony. According to him, postmodernism does not playfully interrogate commercial culture but assimilates it dumbly in the form of "pastiche" or "blank parody." Such a regimen is devoid of irony or satire and can operate only in terms of the simulacrum or the stereotype. Hence, according to these insights, Warhol's artistic stance evidences a successful interpellative function of consumerist culture, and is immediately translatable as political quietism. Many of Warhol's paintings, what with their psychedelic colour schemes and hallucinogenic layouts, apparently allude to a drug-happy counter culture. Warhol has been often linked to dissident youth cultures of the '60s, whose rebellious stance in hindsight appears as fashionable narcissism that served to reinforce the status quo. Added to this connection, Warhol may be seen as gesturing towards a radically adventurous aesthetic where death itself is a legitimate subject of pleasure. This may be explained with reference to the category of the "sublime" as proposed by Jean-Francois Lyotard where an irresolvable irony or *dissensus* is the basis of a heightened aesthetic experience. This aesthetic revolves around resistance to and incommensurability with consumer culture, but it is not replicable in terms of any social or political activism. In the final analysis it is self-complacent, idealistic, and politically innocuous.

Warhol's public stances almost invariably gravitate towards a parody of the dominant cultural ethos. Apart from the quasi-industrial repetitiveness and replicability of his art, he called his studio *The Factory*, his assistants workers, and himself an artist-businessman or a businessman-artist. According to Perniola, the ludic postmodernism informing Warhol's work elides or omits the personal but engages the market in order to fashion an economy of affective non-commitment.

Its point of departure is the image of modern information such as we find in newspapers, television or advertisement. This image conveys the modern myths of beauty (Marilyn Monroe) well-being (Coke), power (Mao Tse Tung), wealth (Gianni Agnelli), success (Elvis Presley) and so on. Warhol submits the image to a process of transformation that removes it from 'directly competitive and competing' *business* so to speak, and places it in *another business*, that of art. The business of art, however, is not really an alternative with respect to the other, but constitutes, precisely, a kind of opposite duplicate of the first. *Art business* constitutes a kind of particular business but is always a 'production' and not really creative doing. While the latter implies the presence of a creative subject, the former has 'nothing personal'. (27-28)

But is not the knowingness underlying Warhol's car crashes fraught with contestatory potentials? Is not the epistemic investment in shock an enabling step towards a subversive mimicry? Warhol leaves no ground for ascertaining whether the parody is intended to be contestatory and fulfilled as such. Warhol's role finds an analogy in one of his lifelong preoccupations and recurring subjects that I have already hinted at, namely - the condition

of the androgyne, the transvestite, the fairy, the drag queen. In his 1972 film *Women in Revolt!* three transvestites play the eponymous revolutionaries; in 1975 he portrayed several black and Hispanic transvestites under the title *Ladies and Gentlemen*; whereas in 1981 he produced an especially bleak exhibition of self-portraits in drag. This interaction implicates his artistic paradigm as a whole, and occasions a fraught encounter between the mainstream culture (as regards sexual normativity) and a marginal or underground one.

A drag queen plays a woman while consciously not being a woman. Her performativity is self-indulgent, strategic, aggressive and hyperbolic. They may be seen as endorsing traditional femininity or heterosexuality by choosing to enact it, albeit in their own terms. But this seeming conformism has the effect of revealing all gender roles as constructed, artificial and provisional. The over-assertive enactment of femininity is laden with the potential of a subversive mimicry, an implicit resistance against norms of gender or sexuality. As Perniola suggests,

on the one hand, the transvestite exalts femininity beyond any limit, on the other it reproaches the woman, implicitly, for not being sufficiently feminine. In either case, only one discourse is possible: that of femininity for the transvestite, that of modern capitalism for postmodern art. At the same time, however, they tend to level an accusation to femininity and capitalist society. (29)

But the role in question cannot simply be a parody since it is holistic and perennial, although very ironically for a drag queen (and this irony in fact forms an integral part of her repertoire of strategic self-fashioning). The very identity of the drag queen is contingent upon this performance; she does not command an Archimedean point from which to designate it as parody. Similarly for Warhol, as I have already mentioned, his mimicry and theatricality are so total in his work as in his life, it is difficult to label them as parody. However, the parodic mode of enactment marks his work inescapably as divided in itself, lacking in groundedness and coherence. This ontological irresolution need not be a deficiency, for it engenders much of the Dionysian energy that is identifiable with the subversiveness of drag and the cultural poetics/politics of Warhol. The self-sustaining irony of Warhol's aesthetic has been theorized thus by Perniola:

As the transvestite is both superfeminine and antifeminine, so Warhol's art is both supercapitalist and anticapitalist. On the one hand, Warhol's art is a supercommodity whose economic value is hyperbolically disproportionate with respect to the value of the materials employed and to the work done to realize it; on the other hand, the fact that it utilizes the same materials and the same forms of the products of capitalistic industry ridicules the latter on its own ground, namely, that of speculation and exploitation. (29)

Moreover, it has to be recognized that the practices of both the drag queen and Warhol are necessarily revisionary or interrogatory even if they may choose from time to

time to coincide with the originary norms they mime. As such, they must (re)visit the ideology they contest, if not derive their identity deterministically from it. As a part of her peculiar modality, a drag queen has to refer to the heterosexual code since her performance/identity is contingent upon its playful manipulation. Likewise, the validity of Warhol's programme is inescapably based on the dominant culture---whether we are talking about advanced capitalism or compulsory heterosexuality. The drag queen has to negotiate a space between being a woman and not being one, and the ambiguity defines her self-fashioned status. In this tension between unresolved antinomies any residual meaning is available or constituted as such in the form of an *accident*. Much in the same way, Warhol's art tries to negotiate a space between complacency and awareness, between conformism and subversion, between the fine arts and mass culture, between capitalism and anti-capitalism. In this realm of seemingly irresolvable dialectics, meaning itself is an *accident* and needs to be recuperated as such.<sup>5</sup>

The present attempt at conjecturing about a homology between Warhol's aesthetics and car accidents (as a theme and a trope) stresses some associations of accident, such as chance, surprise, incongruity, and forcefulness, and elides or occludes others, namely, violence, fatality, the macabre, the uncanny. But in Warhol's treatment there is no marked preference for one set to the other. In fact, one set becomes a metaphor for the other, reinforcing and supplementing each other. The interplay of chance and violence is amply embodied in the production process as well as the viewing experience of Warhol's car crashes.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Warhol never rejected the apparatus of capitalism and continues to reap its fruits posthumously. In 2002 *Five Deaths on Orange* fetched 3 million dollars at a Sotheby's auction while in 2005 he was fourth in *Forbes* magazine's list of top earning dead celebrities. More recently, a 1963 portrait of Liz Taylor with a turquoise background, entitled *Liz (Colored Liz)*, cost the Hollywood star Hugh Grant 23.7 million dollars at a Christie's auction. Earlier, in May 2007, Warhol's *Green Car Crash (Green Burning Car I)* became his auction record, selling for 71.7 million dollars at Christie's. The record was bettered in November, 2013 when his diptych *Silver Hall Car Crash (Double Disaster)* sold at Sotheby's for 105.4 million dollars.

<sup>2</sup>Through the choice of a real contemporary event (or the representational trace of it) as the subject, Warhol's painting references and reworks the hallowed genre called *history painting*, the greatest exemplar of which in the last century would be Picasso's *Guernica* (1937).

<sup>3</sup>It would perhaps not be out of place to reiterate the significance of car accidents in two important parables on the American dream, namely, *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman*.

<sup>4</sup>Thus they may be seen as gesturing towards the medieval Christian trope of *vanitas*, investing in death and disaster with the same warped glee which is evident in the *danse macabre*. If the paintings allude to the gnomish homiletic conviction about the vanity of worldly splendor and the inevitability of fall, the ethos they embody and represent hardly possesses the fideistic confidence with which to sustain this admonitory sentiment. This is how the operative philosophy of these paintings, and the visual experience they involve, presupposes a space for irony and burlesque.

<sup>5</sup>Nancy in fact talks of a fundamental irresolution and impasse that jeopardizes modern art in general: "In saying "art," we evoke a cosmetics that has a *cosmic, cosmological*, even a *cosmogonic* import or stake. But if there is no *kosmos*, how can there be an art in this sense? And that there is no *kosmos* is doubtless the decisive mark of our world: world, today, does not mean *kosmos*. As a consequence, "art" cannot mean "art" in this sense" (84-85). The calculated blandness and affective distance cultivated by Warhol's Pop Art may be recognized as a knowing nod in the direction of this cosmological vacuity.

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