Death in America and Life Magazine: Sources for Andy Warhol’s Disaster Paintings

That’s why the American government and the American media are so great. The President, the news magazines, television – they only want to capture America’s mood at the moment, reflect it back, and tell anyone who’s not in the same mood to get over it and start feeling American like everyone else.

– Andy Warhol

Andy Warhol’s Death and Disaster paintings remain at the center of an enduring, and still essentially unresolved, ideological polemic in Warhol scholarship: whether the artist passively reflected media images in a complacent glorification of consumerism, or purposely manipulated them in a subversive critique of postwar American commodity culture. Warhol’s Disaster theme emerged in paintings of the 1960s and dominated the artist’s production throughout his career, even though the sensationalistic works contradicted common notions of American Pop Art during the Cold War. Depictions of car wrecks, suicide leaps, electric chairs, police brutality, most wanted criminals, and atomic explosions provided striking contrast to the cool consumer goods and idyllic suburban icons that defined Pop Art to American audiences in many domestic exhibitions throughout the early 1960s. The Disaster paintings raise significant but still unanswered questions of aesthetic agency, political intention, and critical distance over mass-media imagery and spectacle.

Of these paintings, however, the discrete group of screenprinted canvases that Warhol produced between 1962 and 1964 and collectively titled Death in America carries particular significance. In a now famous and frequently quoted 1965 interview with critic Gene Swenson, an interview that was especially candid on account of Swenson’s hidden microphone, Warhol explained his conception of the group.
We went to see [the first James Bond film] Dr. No at Forty-second Street. [...] We walked outside and somebody threw a cherry bomb right in front of us, in this big crowd. And there was blood, I saw blood on people and all over. I felt like I was bleeding all over. I saw in the paper last week that there are more people throwing them — it’s just part of the scene — and hurting people. My show in Paris is going to be called “Death in America”. I'll show the electric-chair pictures and the dogs in Birmingham and car wrecks and some suicide pictures.\(^8\)

When asked why he started painting death-images, Warhol continued, "I believe in it. Did you see the Inquirer this week? It had "The Wreck that Made Cops Cry" — a head cut in half, the arms and hands just lying there. It's sick, but I'm sure it happens all the time.\(^8\)

And when asked when he began the series, Warhol stated, "I guess it was the big plane crash picture, the front page of a newspaper: 129 DIE.\(^8\)

These are among the most significant recorded statements from the 1960s in which Warhol substantially discussed the works.

Warhol's comments are unusually thorough and precise — particularly for an artist known more for empty stunts and rapid responses than lucid explanation. First, he insists on direct sources for his Death in America paintings: specific representations of violence from newspapers and tabloid magazines prompted the works. Second, Warhol labels the paintings as a unique group created for display in an explicitly defined setting. Warhol's blunt and provocative exhibition title, formulated by the artist for his international solo debut at the Galerie Islena Sonnabend in Paris in January and February of 1964, marks clear and ambitious juridical intentions. Indeed, Islena Sonnabend, the gallery's founder and proprietor, confirms that Warhol had complete control over the show's content and thematic logic: "When I prepared Andy's show, I didn't make any special selection of the work; he made the choice.\(^6\)

In contrast to the prevailing nationalistic framing of American Pop Art during the early 1960s — the exhibitions titled after patriotic songs and the catalog covers saturated with red, white, and blue — Warhol chose these grisly paintings for his first solo international exhibition; he chose Death in America as his premier statement abroad.\(^7\)

But despite the artist's exacting comments on the series, the Warhol scholarship reveals a curious lacuna; the original media images behind the Death in America paintings and the group's important context as an international exhibition held during the Cold War are largely missing.\(^6\)

The debate over these particular paintings continues to revolve around two dominant approaches, both outlined in seminal essays on the series by Thomas Crow and Hal Foster.\(^8\)

One interpretation presents Warhol as a disinterested vehicle for the relentless but seductive barrage of images saturating the American visual field. In this reading, Warhol's paintings illustrate the pervasiveness of ambiguous, authorless, and arbitrary simulacra in postwar media culture, and indicate the artist's apathy toward particular content and consumer spectacle.\(^8\)

The competing interpretation presents Warhol as a subversive commentator on the pictures and events of contemporary life. Warhol's charged paintings, laden with highly referential imagery of spectacular breakdown, reflect the artist's critical engagement with social and political realities in Cold War America.\(^8\)

These parallel methodological approaches to Warhol's silkscreen canvases enact a familiar but fatal deadlock between the simulacral and the referential reading of appropriated media imagery in contemporary artistic practice. This debate places signifier against signified; one view focuses on the reproduction of media images, while the other focuses on the media images reproduced. Neither methodological approach wholly considers the works.

In a persuasive attempt at resolving this dialectical tension, Hal Foster sets forth a "third way" into the paintings through...
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His notion of traumatic realism. Psychoanalysis allows Foster to articulate the affective charge that erupts through Warhol's canvases as a return of the Lacanian Real. The paintings thus operate as both simulacral and referential, mediating affect by simultaneously screening viewers from it and providing access to it; a culture of death simmers just below a deceptive media surface. Foster's reading is compelling and convincing, but certain key questions remain: Are we so certain that the original images behind these paintings always already represented death and disaster? Is there any material or visual evidence anchoring our reading of the canvases' affective charge to the media pictures from which they derive? How did such paintings register to the international audiences for whom Warhol produced the works during the height of the Cold War?

In terms of methodology, Foster's accommodation of both simulacral and referential readings through this third way also inevitably permits interpretive ambivalence. A scholarly consensus has thus formed around concession to the interpreter's position and resignation to the artist's infamously blank persona; corroborating visual evidence is, so it seems, no longer necessary. In one eminently quotable line, Foster summarizes the state of the field: "Both camps make the Warhol they need, or get the Warhol they deserve; no doubt we all do."

Such a sentiment ultimately allows the openness of interpretation to subsume critical perspectives on the works.

Perhaps no image better illustrates the ambivalence so central to contemporary Warhol scholarship than a photographic collage produced by John Wilcock for The Autobiography and Sex Life of Andy Warhol, an ironically (and misleadingly) titled volume Wilcock published in 1988. The book, a compendium of interviews with hangers-on and associates at Warhol's Silver Factory of the 1960s rather than an actual biography, purports to tell all the sordid details and seamy sexual gossip. But the chapter on Warhol is oddly missing from the volume, replaced instead with a single full-page photographic portrait of the artist. Warhol stares vacantly out of the picture plane. An entirely empty speech bubble hovers over the image's surface, suggesting a now familiar storyline: the artist has absolutely nothing to say. We fill in the blank.

Rather than play Warhol's game of smoke and mirrors, I want to consider an alternative approach into his work based on the readily available but previously ignored evidence - the actual media images behind the paintings. Andy Warhol's sources matter. They provide a means beyond the methodological dead end. Although frequently denigrated to footnotes or mentioned in passing, the sources with which Warhol produced his screen-printed canvases actually reveal how the artist motivated popular images to particular purposes and mediated them for defined audiences. More specifically, Warhol appropriated source material for his Death in America series from Life magazine. His ironic use of Life for death images is surely a play on words, a tongue-in-cheek linguistic joke. But Warhol's strategy is also more complicated. By inventing the meanings originally carried in Life's pages through a strategy of appropriation as well as inversion, Warhol additionally challenged the magazine's idealized and plainly conformist view of American culture in the early 1960s.

I return, then, to a familiar debate about a well-known series of paintings, and at a point when most scholarship instead considers Warhol's films, production and shred of celebrity culture, in order to recover the paintings' largely unexplored sources and to propose a methodological turn that might allow us to synthesize referential and simulacral readings of these paintings without erasing their elaborate historical contingency, specificity, and context. Can we move beyond interpretive ambivalence? As Foster notes, all readings of Warhol are secondary projections, but perhaps we can anchor this particular interpretation upon new visual evidence. We might even, through recourse to the artist's original sources, be able to read a form of critical intention back into this portion of Warhol's practice.

"The Abiding Truths of "Our Town""

To begin: the feature photographic essay from the September 7, 1962 issue of Life magazine, titled "The Abiding Truths of "Our Town," is an important but frequently ignored source for the Death in America paintings. The subject of the picture essay is Thornton Wilder's 1938 play Our Town. Wilder's play creates intimate portraits of a family's life in the fictional New England village of Grover's Corners, and follows the daughter of a newspaper editor and a doctor's son as they journey from childhood through old age. In the Life essay, a tableau of photographs reveals a theatrical production of Wilder's play performed by the residents of Oakes, North Dakota, a rural town of fewer than two thousand. Documentary photographs of everyday life in Oakes further relate Wilder's narrative to lived experience, with regular townpeople serving as surrogates for characters and real-life events serving as parallels to specific scenes. Descriptions of life in Oakes and lines from Wilder's play both function as captions to the images. The article seamlessly blends images of the theatrical performance with candid snapshots of life in Oakes. In effect, it layers the play's fictions upon indexical facts.

Moreover, the Life photo essay presents Wilder's work as a national play, an "American masterpiece" that has "won the heart of America because it talks to the heart." The essay didactically explains its synecdochic function as a mirror of contemporary life in the United States, as a glass for small town America everywhere: "Our Town talks of birth, love and death in only one New England village - but our town is everybody's town." Lacking the literary richness and nuance of Wilder's
play, the photographic essay instead creates a relentlessly sentimental caricature of rural America.

The article's opening two-page spread shows a lone man meandering down a typical Main Street just after sunrise (Fig. 2). He passes the quintessential emblems of small town life: the drayman's drug store, bowling alley, laundromat and bank, the billboards advertising Pepsi and 7-Up, parked station wagons and a gas station. From the lower left corner of the two-page spread, a well-dressed man with a fedora observes: "There's Doc Gibbs, comin' down Main Street now". It's morning in America. The deserted street starts to come to life. The text beseeches: "Come now and see Our Town".

The article instructs readers that the man in the margin of the opening page is actually Harry Houser, a minister in Oakes, dressed for the town's theatrical production. He costumed as the narrator of the Our Town performance. In the accompanying photograph, the lone man walking down Main Street is a proxy for Doc Gibbs, a main character in Wilder's play. The opening thus establishes the formal logic of the photo essay as a convoluted simulation of town life through theatrical performance, and vice versa—a dizzying reflection of the real in the hyperreal. Continuing through the photo essay, we see farmers in Oakes chatting on Union Street during "Goodwill Wednesday", a monthly community raffle day. While an adjacent photograph shows ladies from the play production "whispering about a church organist who drinks too much". High school seniors dance tearfully at a prom on one page, while two characters performing in the play "talk heart to heart over a strawberry soda". An obstetrician holds a newborn up to the light. A puppy and two kids jump in puddles on a sunny day. A lovers meet secretly in the woods, a bride prepares for her wedding, and a memorial service commemorates an elderly woman's death. "Milestones are pasted. Childhood..."
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is over. All at once life is full of fearful paintings and futile meetings. The overwrought platitudes turn an entire life cycle into Thornton Wilder sound bits and their corresponding tear-eyed images of life in Oakes. Readers, however, confirmed the authenticity of Wilder's play and of Life's pictures. In subsequent letters to the editor, readers extolled the "masterpiece of simplicity and truth" for picking that, as another reader wrote, "prove the realism of this play." One gushed:

I join hands with you in sharing the beauty of a play meant for ideas, a play that is beautiful and sad, that makes us want to put ourselves on the back and lock ourselves in the pants - both at the same time. Hail your photographer and writer, and once again, HALU Wilder.

Another reader wrote to the magazine, "Many of the play's lines return to mind in everyday life. When my son flogs on my sleeve and finds me too busy, the words of Emily [a leading character in the play] prod me: 'Oh, Mother, look at me as if you really, really saw me'. The article and the play resonated as more real than daily life.

It is precisely Life magazine's visual presentation of a fictionalized rural America as the real America that Warhol challenged in his Death in America paintings. One source photograph depicts a normal and healthy childbirth at Oakes County Hospital [Fig. 3]. In the accompanying caption, Harry Houser, again in his role as the narrator of the Our Town production, recalls his lines from the play: "Every child born into the world [...] is Nature's attempt to make a perfect human being. [...] We all know that Nature's interested in quantity, but I think she's interested in quality, too." A gauze surgical mask barely conceals the doctor's large grin after the successful delivery, and a nurse with a cross and habit watches from behind. The doctor holds the newborn up in the air; he marvels at the miracle of childbirth.

Pulled from its context, fractured from its caption and its succession of structuring images, the birth photo takes on new meanings in a Warhol painting [Fig. 4]. The artist's high-contrast, polarized prints strip away the haloines of the grayscale photograph and purge vital narrative details like the obstetrician's beaming smile and facial expression. The doctor raises the infant at arm's length, distancing himself from the body as if in revulsion. A nun seems to watch in solemnity, preparing, as it were, for the last rites. The infant's dark flesh suggests disease or stillbirth. The image is so grim that one exhibition catalog describes it vaguely but hauntingly as an image of 'birth trauma'. Although titled simply Hospital in catalog reproductions, the painting's stretchers bear a handwritten inscription in blue pen that more aptly names the canvas Hospital Disaster.

Warhol exploited the medium-specific traits of the silkscreen process in order to make the picture of birth from Life appear to be a picture of death. Warhol densely saturated the silkscreen with ink before squeegeeing in order to render viscous, ink-stained images; alternatively, he restricted ink to create ragged, faded impressions. By printing the screen without consistently cleaning the surface, Warhol allowed abrasions from the fine mesh netting and defects caused by blips of dried ink on the screen surface to bookmark the picture plane. Punctured and ruptured, torn and pulled, the legible image breaks down.

The effect is visceral. The readable reference to a subject breaks through the visible surface. Warhol describes the viewing process: "I see everything that way, the surface of things, a kind of mental Braille. I just pass my hands over the surface of things." He continues, "I just feel the shape with my eyes." Warhol's evocative description of "mental Braille" explains how the viewer translates the texture of the silkscreen print. Functioning like a visual and perceptual metaphor, the surface bleed.

Warhol's painterly manipulation of the silkscreen process is not unique to this work - such techniques maximized iconographic content in many of his Disaster paintings. But Warhol here distorts source images not to redouble their original content, not to reinforce the original photograph's indexical meanings. Instead, Warhol graphically ruptures previously operational images - photographs that succeeded in fulfilling a performative function within Life's pages -- and thus aims to destroy their original content, to splinter signifier from the signified of Life's representational apparatus. He creates visual puncta through silkscreen effects in order to deflate the very premise that the photo essay's documentary referents "abide sub rosa".

Warhol's appropriation and inversion may also have been an attempt to construct a specific iconographic reference with contemporary resonance in Europe and the United States. Warhol wrote retrospectively in 1960 that he spent the early 1960s reading tabloids because he "was fascinated by all the Thalidomide stories." Thalidomide, a pharmaceutical prescribed to pregnant women for the relief of morning sickness and insomnia, became popular abroad starting in 1957 and awaited FDA approval in the United States through 1961. The medical establishment initially hailed the medicine as a miracle drug, neither addictive nor toxic. Yet by 1961 it was clear that the chemical actually caused congenital birth defects due to the malformation of bone in the developing fetus, and produced severe and often disturbing deformities, including missing limbs, flipper- or wing-like hands, fingers that sprouted from the shoulders, and feet that protruded from the hips. Before the drug's removal from the European market in 1961, thalidomide caused deformities in 8,000 to 12,000 infants.

As a representation of a Thalidomide baby, Warhol's Hospital Disaster fits within the larger iconographic project of the Death in America series. The painting reflects the gruesome perversion of a trusted medical prescription into a poison, the transforma-
tion of a “perfect human being” from Life’s pages into the by-product of a corrupt commodity culture. Such readings repeat throughout the group of paintings. In his Tuna Fish Diasters, Warhol screen-printed portraits of two women killed by botulism and a photograph of the tainted can of tuna that carried the lethal bacteria. The canned good, a symbol of sustenance and modern innovation, turned fatal. Similarly, Warhol’s car crash paintings show how a modern machine of efficiency and pleasure also has the capacity to murder. Commercial products are not always what they appear to be.

A Life cover story on the drug that ran in the magazine just one month prior to the publication of the source image for Hospital Disaster corroborates Warhol’s potential reference to thalidomide babies. The article, titled “The Drug That Left a Trail of Heartbreak,” tells the stories of devastated parents overcome with grief and desperation. One expectant mother, after realizing that she unknowingly consumed the medicine during her early pregnancy, visited her doctor, who showed her pictures of babies injured by the drug. She explains to Life readers what those pictures looked like: “These babies weren’t just deformed. There were no arms, and there were fingers coming out of things.” Similarly, the article describes how shocking the defects appeared. “[T]he babies’ arms were tiny stumps or not there at all. Sometimes their legs were deformed. Sometimes they had internal deformities as well.” But despite such detailed language, the editors at Life resisted including graphic images in the photo essay. Life employed textual description while censoring visual representation. Warhol provided the explicit image of the thalidomide baby through his own violent manipulation of Life’s later birth scene.

Warhol also appropriated a photograph from “The Abiding Truths of Our Town” depicting a 77-year-old woman’s memorial service in Oakas [Fig. 5]. In Life’s photo essay, the image anchors a description of time’s passing in small-town America and also serves as a sober parallel to the death of a character in Wilder’s play. The photograph is captioned with words from Our Town: “Everybody knows that something is eternal.” In the photograph, mourners gather on both sides of the burial, while the Reverend Harry Houser — now in his real-life role as minister — conducts the blessing.

In a screen-printed painting from early 1963, Warhol turned the solemn funereal photograph from Life’s article into a sinister scene of Mafia murder [Fig. 6]. While Warhol’s heavily inked prints give the image a dark and threatening sky, the artist more pointedly controlled associations by naming the painting Gangster Funeral. Warhol was typically content with letting art dealers give works bland, descriptive names as they saw fit, but he instead appears to have explicitly titled this work. The elderly lady’s memorial service suddenly suggests hit men, drive-by shootings, and scheming mobsters. Small-town life is not so innocent after all.
"Everybody knows that something is eternal"


"The Magazine of National Purpose"

Warhol’s appropriation and inversion of Life’s photographs drastically altered the meanings embedded within individual images, but such strategies also staged a larger critical intervention against the magazine’s hegemonic way of seeing. In the early 1960s, Life bombarded readers with the clichéd images—and illusions—of postwar American life. Fourth of July celebrations garnished with hotdogs and sauerkraut; teens heading back to school, to the movies, or—even worse—out on dates; rugged men sipping whisky on the rocks (or gin, scotch, bourbon, rum, vodka); cowboys feasting Lucky Strikes, Chesterfields, Newport, Salem, or Winstons; blonde bombshells splashing beachside; nuclear families dinging cross-country; nuclear weapons readied on launch pads; the space race slipping; the iron curtain closing; and—as nearly every other page, in seductively lavish color—crowds of grinning kids slurping Campbell’s chicken noodle, or savoring SpaghettiOs, crunching Corn Flakes, Frosted Flakes, or Rice Krispies, guzzling Coca-Cola, 7-Up, or Pepsi. Before the sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll of the "Warhol Sixties", there was Life’s vision of America.

The magazine was pervasive. Life instantly established a monopoly over photojournalistic print media in the early twentieth century. Created by Time Inc. founder and editor-in-chief Henry R. Luce after Time and Fortune magazines made him into a magazine of the mass-media, Life was the first magazine ever devoted...
John R. Blakinger

exclusively to pictorial journalism. On its first day of publication in 1936, the entire week's quarter million newsstand copies sold out, prompting dealers to telegraph urgent pleas for more magazines. But production could not satiate Americans' voracious visual appetite. Time Inc. struggled to match demand, and, in just three months, began printing one million copies per week; and, by the end of the first year, weekly circulation skyrocketed to one and a half million copies. This upward spiral peaked after World War II. By 1960, Life was selling nearly seven million copies per week, making the magazine first in circulation among weekly publications and second only to the monthly Reader's Digest. It put out thousands of advertising pages per year, and pulled in annual revenues of more than $138 million. A Time Inc. promotional advertisement from 1963 trumpeting the magazine's circulation suggests just how wide-readership in the early 1960s really was: Life subscribers eventually passed their copies along to a total of thirty-two million readers. Life dominated America's magazine market, but in an era before color TV, cable networks, digital media, and the Internet promiscuously proliferated images, Life's photograph-saturated pages also dominated America's entire visual field.

The claims of photographic realism central to "The Abiding Truths of Our Town" were in fact typical of the magazine's images from its very founding. Early suggestions for the publication's title reflect how the editors formulated the magazine primarily as a visual rather than textual medium. Henry Luce's potential titles emphasized the photographic process (Candids, Camera, Snap, Flash) and the photographic product (Graphic, Picture, News-Views, Scene, Vista) or the viewer's relation to a photograph (Witness, Eyewitness, Spectator) and comprehension of its image (Eye, See, Sight, View). From the publication's start, Luce considered the photographs in the magazine to have mimetic authenticity and an ability to legitimate the magazine's truth claims; in the publication's founding prospectus he explains that when Life "tells the story of [an] event it will do so with pictorial finality." A theorization of the camera's mechanical objectivity helped buttress conceptions of the photographic apparatus as purely impartial, as a neutral recording device rather than a subjective interpreter. A book on the fundamentals of photojournalism published in 1952 by Life's first executive editor in charge of photography, a former photo editor at the Associated Press named Wilson Hicks, suggests how such assumptions framed the magazine's image production. In a discussion on photography transcribed in the book, Hicks states, "The camera is a scientific instrument." It can see like the eye, and it can see better than the eye. It has a "unique ability to capture reality, reality that hasn't been tampered with, the reality that is." Hicks writes most pointedly, "People are sometimes heard to remark that looking at the photograph of an event is like being there. The fact is that, when expertly made, a photograph is better than being there, in a sense it is more real than reality." Photographic realism apparently makes the image more exact than human sight—and thus more powerful and enduring in creating and upholding ideologies. The veneer of photographic realism and transparency could turn the real into the hyper-real simply through the mediation of a mechanical and scientific apparatus.

Of course, seeing is never neutral, but in Life magazine it became expressly political. But to what ideological ends did Luce actually put his carefully constructed images? In "Life: A New Prospectus for the Sixties", Luce reduces the photographic magazine's agenda to essentially militaristic objectives, a manifested destiny for postwar America:

So what would be the purpose of Life in the Sixties? My answer: Life is and shall be designed to be the magazine of national purpose. [...] The national purpose, as seen by the Editor-in-Chief, and for which he sees the need of a great magazine, can be summarized under two heads: 1) Win the Cold War; 2) Create a better America.

Life magazine, through the directive of its editor, arrogated to itself the task of reflecting and reifying the American Cold War consensus culture of the early 1960s—and intended to do so through its images. Luce conceived of Life's pictures as potent weapons of the Cold War.

"The Volkswagen Theory of Evolution"

Advertising, however, also played a central focus in Life's mission. There were more pages of advertising than editorial content in a typical issue of Life, and these ads looked just as much like photographic essays as advertisements, mimicking the large photo and sparse caption format to compete for readers' attention—and to gain the same unquestioned authority that the magazine's articles apparently possessed. A 1963 promotional advertisement for supermarket goods from the Life editors reflects how the magazine presented the purchase of advertised products as support for uniquely American values: "You're also casting a vote for a reputable manufacturer. [...] There's nothing like an American supermarket anywhere in the world. And there's no more of an all-American businessman than your own supermarket manager". The magazine's editors explicitly equated consumerism with patriotic duty.

Warhol applied a strategy of appropriation and inversion to Life's advertisements that precisely replicated the intervention he staged against Life's editorial content. By imitating the layouts of advertisements, but changing the narratives they originally produced in the magazine, Warhol undermined the truth claims behind consumerist spectacle.

A Volkswagen advertisement, published in the September 14, 1962 issue of Life, is a new source for the visual design of
Warhol's Death in America paintings (Fig. 7). The ad pictures a grid of identical VW beetles labeled for each year from 1949 through 1963, suggesting durability and consistency despite mechanical advances. The ad, titled "The Volkswagen Theory of Evolution", explains why the car appears to be the same each year: "The reason you can't see most of our evolutionary changes is because we've made them deep down inside the car". In Car Crash, from 1963, and in a number of similar silkscreen paintings, Warhol copied the ad's crisp grid format but replaced the identical image of a smashed vehicle with an image of a mangled body spilling from the passenger-side door (Fig. 6). Warhol's silkscreen crashes cars to emphasize the advertisement's appeal to progress into destruction; Volkswagen's "evolutionary theory" becomes an ultimate end to technological improvement.

The grid is not a design format exclusive to Warhol's series of car crashes, nor a feature necessarily derived from a single advertisement. However, the range of design elements that Warhol appropriated from the same visually distinctive Volkswagen ad campaign suggests the broad relevance of advertising layouts to Warhol's practice. Warhol's use of monochromes – paired with printed canvases – also resembles the VW ads. A two-page advert from the July 13, 1962 issue of Life uses the magazine's spine to divide a comparison between two pages (Fig. 9). On the left-hand page of the spread, the blurred profile of a beetle suggests its high velocity. The right-hand page is entirely blank and a caption is split between both sides. "One nice thing


about an air-cooled engine", reads the left page. On the blank right page, "You never run out of air". The text explains that the car uses an air-cooled engine rather than a radiator; it equates engine cooling with breathing. Mechanical function becomes a human process. "Inhale. Exhale. Now you know exactly how the Volkswagen engine is cooled. With air!". In Orange Car Crash Fourteen Times, dated 1963, two canvases mimic the Life spread [Fig. 10]. One is filled with a repeated grid of crashed cars. The other is the same size as its screen-printed double but entirely blank. The monochrome visualizes "running out of air"; it represents asphyxiation as dead space.

Warhol similarly mimicked the use of bright colors — electric yellows, neon reds, hot pinks — in Life's ads. A four-page Chevrolet spread from the September 28, 1962 issue of Life shows the year's newest models racing over highly saturated color grounds.44 On one page of the ad, a Chevy sedan zooms across a Day-Glo orange page [Fig. 11]. "It's exciting!" exclaims the advertisement caption; flashy colors mean flashy cars. Warhol used these same saccharine colors with ironic juxtaposition under printed images of car wrecks. In 8 Deaths, painted in early 1963, a similar orange is matched with the image of an upturned convertible suffocating five passengers [Fig. 12]. Life's advertisements used colors to make their products exciting, to sell the sizzle. Here, the shocking visual discordance between subject and color assaults the viewer.62

"His Show Shakes You Up"

Identifying a coherent reaction to these paintings is no easy task.66 The Death in America group received little exposure as a cohesive series in its time, especially in the United States. The show at the Sonnabend Gallery in Paris in 1964 contained only eight of the hundreds of Disaster paintings Warhol eventually produced — and, significantly, none of the paintings derived from the Our Town images. Moreover, reception studies are necessarily limited by the reactions recorded, and the accounts were sparse in an era of emerging international art criticism.

Nonetheless, in a rare English-language review of the exhibition at the Sonnabend Gallery in Paris, American poet John Ashbery, serving as the Paris-based art critic for the New York Herald Tribune, described the show as a violently political provocation:

From the beginning there has been a polemical element in Pop art, but it is one thing to poke fun at supermarkets and TV commercials, and another to use art as a means of confronting us with the raw terror of so much that happens today. [...]. With Warhol, [...] the latest work is unmistakably polemical, or, as the French say, engagé. And he brings all his tremendous talent for meaningful decoration to the task of putting his message across. His show shakes you up.  

After debuting in Paris, a number of Warhol's Death in America canvases traveled throughout Europe, making appearances as part of numerous group exhibitions in Stockh"olm, Hunkebaek, Amsterdam, Ghent, The Hague, Vienna, Berlin, and Brussels. In Germany, the works garnered similar critical attention, with one observer calling the paintings a representation of "the violent death and the social oppression in American society."  

Admittedly, the complexities of cultural politics are hardly so straightforward. French critics also viewed the exhibition of an American in Paris as an imperialist show of cultural chauvinism. A review in Le Monde derisively called Warhol's canvases an "accumulation" of images that "neither adds anything nor removes anything." The review attacked Warhol as a barren appropriator of others' work, and suggested "above all it's the photographer we should congratulate [...] or the women who committed suicide for daring such a big jump."  

Interestingly, the French press labeled her an "imperialist CIA agent" for appearing to import American culture through her gallery operation.  

But, regardless of the works' recorded reception and in spite of the ways in which the artist may have utilized painting for the "task of putting his message across", Andy Warhol still remains infamous for his impenetrable façade, his lack of engagement. It is the running cliché in Warhol scholarship: the artist as mirror, elusive and enigmatic, evasive and inexplicable. His self-effacing suggestion to "just look at the surface" of his paintings, personas, and filmic productions; the glib claim that "there's not very much to say" about him; the shiny wig worn under the media's spotlight; the aluminum walls at Warhol's tin-foiled studio, the Silver Factory – these reflective surfaces continue to deflect interpretation. Warhol erases authorial voice, denying significance in the images on his painted surfaces and affirming little more than the glitz and the glitter. "There's nothing behind it", he deadpans. The result is an apparently blank canvas onto which anyone can project a meaning (Fig. 1).

Perhaps we all have become too comfortable in conceding to interpretive ambiguity. Warhol's appropriation and inversion strategy, as embodied in these sources, reveals a violent subversion of Life's assumptions about photographic realism and attempts at visual indoctrination through its editorial content and its advertisements. Sources suggest a sumptuous – and in fact otherwise invisible – critical strategy frequently denied to the artist. They demonstrate how Warhol re-presented the familiar pictures of Life as death, and thus transformed Life's America into Death in America.
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2. Gerard Malanga, Warhol's studio assistant in the 1960s, states, "Gene [Sweerson] had the microphone under the table, and Andy didn't know he was being taped. So, Andy was not self-conscious. [...] As with the rest of the interview, he was unaware of the fact that he was being taped." P. S. Smith, Warhol: Conversations about the Artist, Ann Arbor, MI, 1998, p. 145.


4. Swaenson, "What is Pop Art?", pp. 18–19. Presumably Warhol is referring to the National Enquirer.

5. Swaenson, "What is Pop Art?", p. 19. Warhol is referring to 129 DIE IN JET, a painting dated 1962 that reproduces a newspaper front-page story. Warhol also notes in retrospectively in 1963 about the same painting, "We were having lunch one day [...] and he [Warhol confides Henry Geldzahler] told the Daily News out on the table. The headline was 129 DIE IN JET. And that's what started me on the death series." A. Warhol and R. Hackett, POPism: The Warhol Set, New York, 1980, p. 17. The work actually copied the New York Mirror rather than the New York Daily News. Like many of the paintings that comprise the complete Death in America group, it was not exhibited at the Galerie Beaux Souvenirs in Paris in 1964.

6. Personal communication to the author. December 2005. Correspondence between Warhol and Beaux Souvenirs from March 1963 further corroborates Warhol's control over the show's content. Letters document Warhol's intention to delay the show until a new body of work — his Death in America group — was completed, despite Beaux's desire to present an exhibition that surveyed work from several of the artist's series as soon as possible. See The Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné, vol. 1: Paintings and Sculpture, 1950–1987, ed. by G. Frei and N. Prinzing, London and New York, 2002, pp. 311, 475. I should also note that the exhibition actually opened as simply Andy Warhol, despite the artist's professed intention of naming the show. Warhol apparently never pushed for a specific title and Beaux Souvenirs has no recollection of his suggestion. In a personal communication she explained, "i don't remember if Andy told me whether he wanted the show to have a title, if he had, i would have agreed". Nonetheless, the show's thematically unified content remained the same.

7. Numerous early exhibitions of Pop Art revolved around patrician themes, and they made a compelling case for the strong nationalist resonances Pop Art once held. See, for example, the grid of Uncle Sam icons on the cover of the exhibition catalog "Pop Art USA", written by John Coplans and published by the Oakland Municipal Art Museum and the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1963. Similarly, an ad that ran in Artforum for the 1962 Dean Gallery exhibition "My Country 'ys of Them" shows the names of participating artists put to the musical score of the patriotic tune. The title of John Rubalcaba’s Pop Art and the American Dream, London and New York, 1965, also suggests Pop’s patriotic associations.


11. Thomas Crow and Hal Foster's important essays describe the poetics in similar terms. Crow writes, "The debate over Warhol centers on whether his art fosters critical or subversive apprehension of mass culture and the power of the image as commodity, succumbs in an innocent but telling way to that numbing power, or exploits it cynically and morbidly" ("Saturday Disasters", p. 69). Foster explains the debate as an issue of whether "images are attached to referents, to iconicographic themes or to real things in the world" or whether "the world is nothing but image, that all pop images in particular refer to other images" ("Death in America", p. 68).


16. The lack of attention to source material derives in part from its previous inaccessibility. Since the publication of the first volume of the definitive catalogue raisonné in 2002, a wealth of archival information is now readily accessible. This material demands renewed critical attention. See The Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné, ed. by G. Frei and N. Prinzing, 2 vols, London and New York, 2002–2004. Additional volumes are forthcoming.

17. The turn to Warhol's films as well as the theorization of his place in celebrity culture is particularly evident in the essays included within a special issue of the journal October, 132, Spring 2015, edited by B. H. D. Buchloh.


20. ibidem, p. 65.
34. Tom Foster, letter to the editor, Ibidem.
36. Brandon W. Joseph, following the classification provided in Frei and Pinto, Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné, vol. 1, pp. 338-341, highlights the distinct status of these works as “Our Town Paintings” and consequently separates them from the larger Death and Disaster series. See B. W. Joseph, “1963,” October, 132, 2010 (Spring), p. 125-141. These paintings are specific groupings due to their source material and the strategies Warhol employed in their production, they also continue the larger project put forth in the Death and Disaster paintings; I therefore consider them part of the full Death in America series.
38. The image is so heavily inked that one of the few descriptions of the painting erroneously refers to it as “the birth of a black baby assisted by black doctors.” See R. Cronin, Andy Warhol, trans. J. William Deihl, New York, 1976, p. 29. Cronin’s monograph is the first on Warhol.
42. Ibidem.
44. Archival evidence confirms that Warhol likely named the work, Ellen Johnson, a professor at Oberlin College, documented the painting in a slide that shows Warhol on a ladder as he hangs Gangster Funeral. The slide is labeled in Johnson’s handwriting: “Andy’s Gangster Funeral, Hall, 1st Street. In his home on Lexington, March 1963.” See Frei and Pinto, Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné, vol. 1, p. 341. The inscription indicates that later art dealers did not give the work the title Gangster Funeral, since the painting was never exhibited by the Gallerie Ressomond in Paris until after March of 1958. This suggests that Warhol provided Johnson with this title. The painting was, however, exhibited as simply Funeral. Presumably because the gangster reference is not clear in the image alone and because Warhol rarely pushed dealers to use particular titles. The first monograph on Warhol states that the painting was “known for a long period as Kennedy Bull,” though I find no such mention in the literature. See Cronin, Andy Warhol, p. 29.
46. Warhol chronicles the decade as such in The Life of Warhol and Hackett, POPism: The Warhol Years.
50. Prendergast, The World of Time, p. 9. By 1963, however, proﬁle fell precipitously. Advertising sales and revenue dwindled through the late 1960s, ﬁnally resulting in the magazine’s demise in December 1972. Then followed it was published semi-annually until October 1976, then monthly until May 2002. It was resuscitated in 2004, in name only, as a weekly newspaper. The insert folded in 2007.
Death in America and Life magazine: Sources for Andy Warhol’s Disaster Paintings

In addition to pictures, Lucie’s explicit political opinions frequently punctured Life’s editorial pages. For example, Lucie first published an essay on American exceptionalism titled “The American Century” in Life. It advocated intervention in World War II to contain Axis aggression or enroaching fascism, but as a means of establishing US global supremacy. The essay was later published in book form, titled The American Century, New York, 1941.

63 Advertisement, Life, 53, no. 11, September 14, 1962, p. 28.
66 I should also note an additional Volkswagen advertisement, containing the profile of a VW beetle printed in four overlapping impressions, that evokes the superimposed images on many of Warhol’s canvases. See Life, 54, no. 11, March 15, 1963, p. 19. The similarity is particularly evident in comparison to, for example, Green Car Crash, dated 1963. While the advertisement uses the visual mechanism to suggest movement and “one of the world’s smoothest transmissions”, Warhol used it to signify destruction in Green Car Crash. He screen-printed an image of a burning car with a man’s body hanging from an adjacent telephone pole in overlapping impressions. The repetitions on the canvas create a skewed and illegible surface, thus undermining the eff’s suggestion of speed and efficiency by instead suggesting collision.
67 Inconsistencies in the historical record are partially to blame for the difficulty in understanding the group’s international function, context, and meaning. A second Warhol exhibition containing Flower paintings and held at the Galerie Beaux Sonnenbend in Paris in 1965, as well as the gallery’s later relocation to New York City, has caused confusion. Charles Burchfield incorrectly states that this 1964 exhibition contained Jackie paintings in “Warhol in Context”, in The Work of Andy Warhol, ed. D. Gannia, Beattie, 1989, p. 12. This error seems to have emerged from studio assistant Gerard Malanga’s ambiguous statement that the Jackie paintings were “part of a show we did at the Sonnenbend Gallery in Paris”, in P. S. Smith, Andy Warhol’s Art and Films, Ann Arbor, MI, 1966, p. 394. Bob Colacoello, Warhol associate in the 1970s, claims that Warhol’s first European show in 1964 contained the Flower paintings, which were in fact part of the 1965 exhibition. See B. Cacciolio, Holy Son: Andy Warhol Close Up, New York, 1990, p. 28. Peter Keiltenberg incorrectly states that the Death in America show was held in New York City in Andy Warhol, Pest, Liddele, 2001, p. 1.
mentarische Fotos und Filmstreifen, die den gewohnten Tod und die soziale Unterdrückung in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft zum Gegenstand haben”.
70 “À travers les galeries”, Le Monde, January 31, 1964. My translation. Original reads: “Warhol a beau répandre et justifier sur les toiles le même ciel dramatique de la solitude ou de l’accidenté (par un procédé à l’image de soleil), cette accumulation n’apporte rien ni n’offense rien à ce qu’a d’indélébilement individuel (c’est-à-dire d’anti-‘pop art’) l’accident de la route le plus classique”.
71 “À travers les galeries”, My translation. Original reads: “Personnellement, malgré tout ce qu’on peut dire du rôle de la couleur rose ou bleue dans laquelle Warhol baigne sa chaise électrique ou ses cadavres, c’est surtout le photographe qui nous parait avoir été fidèle, et le fabriquant de la chaise, ou la suicide pour avoir cédé le grand soir, ou l’automobile pour n’avoir pas freiné à temps et être venu si joliment s’acrocher comme un pantin désarticulé à la branche d’un arbre”. See also a similar review by G. Masson-Talabot, “Le trente de Paris”, Art International, 8, no. 2, March 20, 1964, pp. 78-79.
72 Personal communication to the author, December 2005. Reins Sonnenbend explained how she was misinterpreted. “My only agenda was showing the works of artists I admired. All I wanted to do was share my enthusiasm with others.”
74 “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surfaces of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it”, from Berg, “Andy Warhol: My True Story”, p. 90. “Uh […] well, there’s not very much to say, you know, about me”, from L. Steer, “USA Artists: Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein”, in Goldsmith, “Tell Your Money”, p. 82. Lance Sutro’s interview with Warhol was recorded on an 18 mm film by National Educational Television in 1965 and transcribed in Goldsmith’s volume.
76 The artist’s goals in doing so remain, of course, unclear. Perhaps Warhol was challenging the glorified representation of small town life because its portrayal differed so violently from his tumultuous childhood in working-class Pittsburgh; Warhol’s social position, economic background, and gender and sexual identity confounded so obviously with his ascension. His transformation implicitly endorsed in Life. Or perhaps Warhol, an infamous hypochondriac, was simply paranoid about the reality of death behind every product he bought, ever ride he took, and every substance he consumed.