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THE RETURN TO RITUAL: VIOLENCE AND ART IN THE MEDIA AGE

Trauma Art

IN THE LAST SCENE of Sam Mendes's *American Beauty*—as foretold in the first—Lester Burnham dies.¹ The film presents a series of epiphanies about his dreary life, but he finally approaches a moment of happiness as he sits in his kitchen gazing at an old black and white photograph of his wife, daughter, and himself bespangled by the dazzling lights of a carnival amusement ride. The camera angle holds him in profile, while the muzzle of a silver revolver approaches the back of his slightly balding head. Then the camera shifts to the white tile of the kitchen wall, the revolver fires, and Lester's brain splashes bright red against white. Lester's daughter and her boyfriend, Ricky Fitts, climb cautiously down the stairs to the kitchen to investigate. Ricky is a budding artist and the main spokesman for beauty in the film. He has an extensive collection of homemade art films and almost always carries a video camera. He records homeless people and trash because they overwhelm him with sensations. Mendes's screen image and the viewfinder of Ricky's camera often merge, as if the filmmaker is using the young artist's vision to tutor the audience about the ancient craft of beauty. For example, at one remarkable point early in the film, we are abruptly given the grainy image of a dead bird, while another character is heard asking Ricky what he is doing.

"I was filming this dead bird," he answers.

"Why?"

"Because it's beautiful."

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Ricky is the first to discover Lester's body. He drops to his knees to inspect the bloody head. The camera captures his point of view. Lester's skull is positioned on the white kitchen table—as if in a still-life—his tranquil features reflected in a pool of luminous red blood (fig. 1). The lifeless lips are almost smiling, and his eyes, open and clear. Ricky groans with awe—speechless—but the ecstatic expression on his face is meant to tell us that, once again, he has discovered something beautiful.



Figure 1: Lester Burnham dead, video still, *American Beauty*, 1999

Few Hollywood films comment on the contemporary art scene. Fewer still contribute to it. *American Beauty* seems to do both. Ricky Fitts never expresses an opinion about contemporary art. He is hardly an art critic. Nevertheless, his philosophy of art summons what Hal Foster has called “the return of the real,” and his final vision of Lester's head—and any number of his experimental films—would fit perfectly into the contentious “Sensation” exhibition that was

shown to so much controversy in 1999 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.² Ricky, like many contemporary artists, realized that there is "an entire life behind things" creating an occasion for new forms of art; however, this art is often shocking in its display of wounded bodies and traumatized flesh. Mat Collishaw's *Bullet Hole* (fig. 2), a huge photograph of a gunshot wound in a skull mounted on 15 light boxes, provides a close-up of Ricky's vision of Lester, while Marc Quinn's preoccupation with the human body, especially his own, gives the idea of a bloody head a surrealistic twist. In *Self* (fig. 3), he presents a bust of his head sculpted from his own frozen blood. These lesser known works by young British artists provide the background for Damien Hirst's more notorious manipulations of animal flesh in art works such as *A Thousand Years*, where a mock cow's head is being devoured by maggots that grow into fruit flies and are in turn devoured by a nearby bug zapper; or in his *This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed at home* (fig. 4), where a pig is sliced in half lengthwise and suspended in formaldehyde.



Figure 2: Mat Collishaw, *Bullet Hole*, cibachrome mounted on 15 light boxes, 229 x 310 cm, 1988-93

² See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996) and *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 1999).



Figure 3: Marc Quinn, *Self*, blood, stainless steel, refrigeration equipment, 208 x 63 cm, 1991

Of course, the preoccupations visible in these works are not the unique province of the "Sensation" exhibition. What one might call "trauma art" has overtaken the contemporary art world, as well as the wider media representation of cultural events. Another notable and controversial example is the work of Andres Serrano. *Piss Christ*, a day-glow crucifix floating in a vat of Serrano's own urine, was at the center of the NEA controversy, but other works take his love of flesh and bodily substances to even greater heights. *The Morgue* is a photograph of the head of a victim of infectious pneumonia; *Cabeza de Vaca* pictures a severed cow's head on a platter, and *Frozen Semen with Blood* is one of many abstract expressionist works created by photographing concoctions of human fluids run together and frozen.

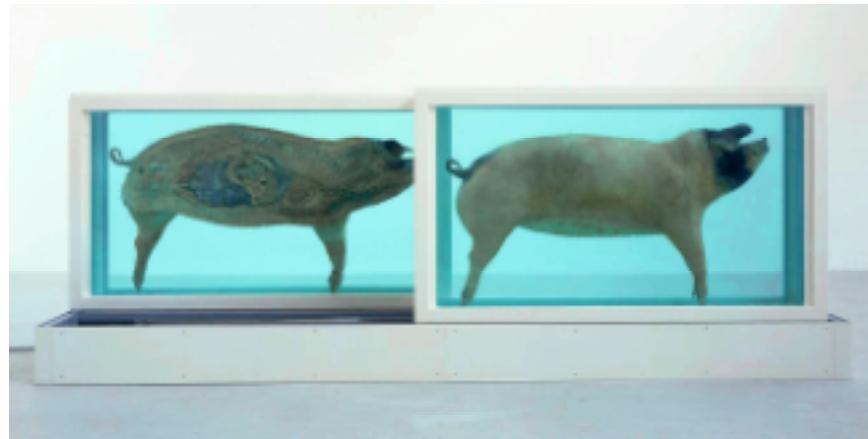


Figure 4: Damien Hirst, *This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed at home*, steel, GRP composites, glass, pig, formaldehyde solution, electric motor, 2 tanks, each 120 x 210 x 60 cm, 1996

Like the still life of Lester Burnham's head, these works reference a desire to contribute to the contemporary cultural scene. At the same time, they comment on the nature of social violence, and yet there is something active in them that is more difficult to capture. They are not merely about the art world or social violence. Their self-reflexive attitude toward both culture and violence works hard to anchor the one in the other, as if their purpose were to expose the fact that we recognize the presence of culture more and more via images of violence. In some ways, the emergence of trauma art is only a dramatization of this fact. Of course, the notion that violence serves as an index of culture is an idea with us at least since the Romantic age, when Rousseau first charted the nature-culture split and Wordsworth summoned images of a benevolent nature by which to measure the aggressive tendencies of society. However, trauma art pushes these insights one step further by insisting that violence is readable increasingly as a signifier not only of culture but of aesthetic culture. The aesthetic representation of violence replays the idea of culture with an added dimension, serving both as the principal sign of the "cultural" and as a way of transforming what "culture" means. Consequently, it was almost to be expected that examples of trauma art would emerge at the center of the so-called culture wars, since these political quarrels are determined to dispute what "culture" will mean in the coming years.

Recently, people in cultural studies have begun to treat "trauma" as a major concept for understanding media society. Trauma is the proper response, they say, to the panic culture produced by global capitalism, yet many questions

remain.³ Images of wounded bodies may trigger a sense of trauma: but in whom and by what mechanism? If an art work is traumatic, it is so because it supposedly captures an event personal to the beholder. But art works of this kind are not concerned with the death or injury of a loved one, a close relative, or even a fellow citizen. The works are traumatic because they mean more than they should, and not in the way that the work of art always means “too much”—this would indicate that art works are only and always traumatic, which they are not. These works of art disturb because they attach an excess of meaning to the objects designed to convey meaning. More specifically, their meaning grows and circulates via what I am tempted to call the materiality of wounding.

Trauma art poses a radical challenge to conventional models of aesthetic explanation. It is at once impersonal and painful—both communicating between cultures and retaining an affective power. It is often more challenging to aesthetic form than representative of it—which means that it is readable as “aesthetic” in the modernist sense, and yet it disrupts the paradigm of modernism because it offers a specimen or sampling of culture rather than representing it in broad or universal terms. Trauma art produces emblems of “culture,” but in unexpected ways, perhaps because “culture” itself is no longer the same.

The function of art seems to be changing in our culture, and trauma art records the change. We are no longer pleased by traditional art works that contain violence in an aesthetic frame, despite the fact these kinds of works grow more vicious everyday and fill our museums. Increasingly, we are attracted to art forms and entertainments that make fathoming the distinction between real and artificial violence an urgent but baffling task. Reality TV dedicates itself to bloody car crashes, dog attacks, police brutality, and talk shows featuring obscenities and fist-fighting. These new forms of entertainment use footage from real events photographed by the police or news media because their emotional effect relies as much on violence as on the inability of the spectator to know what is real—which means that everything is real. There is no way to escape the emotional impact of these phenomena, even though one desires to, because there is no perceivable distinction between the thrill and terror felt before so-called artificial forms of violence, e.g., slasher films, and what is felt before the media reportage of biological disasters, terrorist bombings, ethnic conflicts, and famines. Simply put, there is no context in which the differences between artificial and real violence might be understood.

Trauma art thrives on this double image of violence—that of being itself and

³ The work of Arthur Kroker comes to mind in this context. See also Cathy Caruth’s psychoanalytic approach in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1996).

the bearer of meaning beyond itself. It also places violence in the service of both cultural identity and the exhaustion of culture. The display of violence reads as an index of culture, while simultaneously announcing that culture is dying. In fact, this is the way that most people in the world identify American culture and its influence. We recognize the influence of the United States by its fascination with violence, but we also fear that this violence, so typically American, foreshadows the end of culture as we know it. The point here is not that the growing violence of the cultural is coeval with its Americanization (the young British artists, for example, are not Americans); it is only to acknowledge the widespread intuition that the United States is the premiere site in which to study the violence and trauma embodied in aesthetic objects.

To say that trauma art is about “culture” is to recognize that it possesses a symbolism, one that constitutes an excess of communication that arcs specific objects or individual bodies to responses related to collective emotions. Trauma art compels beholders to experience the contradictory impulses of this symbolism as emotional fusions, evoking what used to be called “transubstantiation.” A particular and ordinary object becomes the subject of intense focus, with the result that it changes into another object, but an object of a special kind, one that maintains a peculiar materiality while achieving a universal and communicable meaning beyond its materiality. In short, the objects and bodies become symbols without their signifying effects being attributed to the power of a specific language. The symbolism remains in the thing itself, charging it—and it alone—with extraordinary significance.

If this description sounds familiar, it is because it fits extremely well with a model of thought that dominated the study of culture for many years—ritual. The excess of meaning in violent images and art forms, I want to claim, is best understood in the context of a return to ritual. The media age compounds this ritual effect—providing the context for its emergence—in the desire for a form of communication that produces affective responses in a world audience without requiring the mediation of specific world languages. It grasps at a symbolism based on the manipulation of objects—in particular, the manipulation of human and animal bodies. Art and other forms of representation are growing increasingly ritualistic, and their impact is more shocking and compelling as a result.

Ritual Bodies

Before the beginning of this century, anthropologists associated ritual with repetitive and standardized behavior, primarily symbolic in character, often attached to objects, and aimed at influencing human affairs involving the

supernatural realm.⁴ Today, the meaning of ritual has changed considerably due to two factors. First, the effect of secularization granted ritual behavior a new emphasis; since the early 1900s, ritual has been linked not to religious behavior but to symbolic action *per se*. Second, structural anthropology stressed myth and linguistic patterns, shifting attention almost exclusively to the *symbolism* of ritual. Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner revived the study of ritual for our day by focusing on this symbolic character, with the consequence that many anthropologists now typically identify ritual as any moment or area in which meaning is invested, crystallized, or displayed.⁵

Nevertheless, some features long associated with ritual remain. Emile Durkheim made perhaps the most significant contribution to the definition of ritual when he developed the idea of the collective representation. Collective representations are symbols of community disguised as sacred ideas. They express a desire for social cohesion, creating a form of solidarity without consensus. In fact, most anthropologists today take it for granted that ritual forms aim, whether successfully or not, at social cohesion. Ritual is crucial to the theory of collective representation because these representations originate most powerfully when embodied in material objects. "Collective representations," Durkheim argued, "originate only when they are embodied in material objects, things, or beings of every sort—figures, movements, sounds, words, and so on—that symbolize and delineate them in some outward appearance. For it is only by expressing their feelings, by translating them into signs, by symbolizing them externally, that the individual consciousnesses, which are, by nature, closed to each other, can feel that they are communicating and are in unison."⁶ Ritual action dramatizes the collective ideas by which a given community imagines its communal status, because rituals give these ideas material form. The schools of Geertz and Turner may not agree completely about the function of ritual, but both accept Durkheim's linkage between ritual and collective representation. Geertz claims that culture is not found in people's heads but in the public symbols used to communicate the worldview of a society to its members and future generations. For Turner, symbols are not vehicles for seeing a worldview but operators in a social process. They transform society by moving actors from one status to another. Nevertheless, both Geertz and Turner accept that culture is embodied in public, material symbols.⁷

⁴ See David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 8-9.

⁵ Nicholas B. Dirks, "Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact," *Culture/Power/History*, eds. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 487.

⁶ Emile Durkheim, "The Dualism of Human Nature," *Emile Durkheim, 1858-1917: A Collection of Essays, with Translations and a Bibliography*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1960), 325-40, esp. 335-36.

⁷ See Sherry B. Ortner's survey of anthropological theory, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties," *Culture/Power/History*, esp. 374, 376-77.

Certain schools of anthropology give a precise character to symbols. They insist that ritual relies on bodily symbolism, that something like a ritual body underwrites collective representation. Marcel Mauss's early and important essay on the technology of the body argues that the human body is always treated as an image of society.⁸ Similarly, Turner claims that the human body itself is the base and origin of symbolic classification, while Mary Douglas enlarged a similar claim at great length in her work.⁹ By the way, we can find a reflection of this position outside the field of anthropology in the work of Michel Foucault, who privileges the body as the site of the micropolitics of power. I raise this connection between ritual and the human body because I do not believe it an accident that new forms of art have embraced the body as a primary aesthetic symbol. I also want to suggest that art represents through its preoccupation with the body a preoccupation with the body found at another site—the mass media—and that the fascination of the media with the body is based on its adaptability to collective representation.

However, there is an important limitation placed on symbolic action in current anthropological theories of ritual. Durkheim claimed that the god of the community is the community itself, and that divinity is a collective representation projected to a transcendental site. But Durkheim's collectives are always defined as communities whose members are present to each other. Thus, the symbolic action of ritual, whether invested in bodies, gestures, or material objects, operates on groups that must be defined as gatherings of human bodies. I know of no anthropologist who does not accept Durkheim's definition of community on this point. When Geertz claims that ritual communicates a worldview, for example, he is not in fact discussing the world. He is referring to a single, rather small collection of human beings. This explains why the example of Balinese cockfighting is the cornerstone of his theory of ritual display. Geertz shows that ceremonial repetitions of hierarchical power among the Balinese are equivalent to its social realization, but this realization is limited to a certain arrangement of bodies in space.¹⁰ Likewise, the school of Turner embraces Durkheim's definition of community. The spectacle of the ritual process creates a "communitas," physically present to, and felt, by its members.

It is obvious that the nature of community changed rather drastically during the twentieth century. In fact, these changes were already apparent to group psychologists working at the end of the nineteenth century. In the early 1900s, Gabriel Tarde changed forever the theory of group formation by introducing the idea of the "public." Tarde defined the "public" as a community whose

⁸ Marcel Mauss, "Les Techniques du corps," *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: PUF, 1950), 365-86.

⁹ Cf., Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 90, and Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412-53.

members are not present to each other but who compose a community by virtue of their ability to communicate through print and other media technologies.¹¹ In short, Tarde anticipated the media age and the new forms of collective representation that develop because of it. In fact, collective representation always had an element of virtual community at its heart. It involves a projection, to a transcendental location, of the image of community desired by a particular community. The media age merely realizes this projection with technology. We are assaulted everyday by images of ourselves and our communities projected from the vertical site of mechanical reproduction. We are a public by virtue of these shared images.

The Work of Ritual in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Walter Benjamin explored in a famous essay the resources of mechanical reproduction for attacking the cult value of art.¹² He argued that photography, film, and lithography, among other forms, introduce profound changes in the ancient craft of the beautiful. These new forms supposedly destroy the ritual aura of the artist and art work, enable art to illustrate everyday life, and make art available to the masses. This is all true to a degree, but Benjamin was mistaken when he claimed that mechanical reproduction distances art from ritual values. In fact, the ease with which mechanical reproduction represents human violence forces art to return to the scene of its emergence from ritual, where human violence and the rise of signifying practices were first fused together.¹³ Of course, to say that ritual fuses together violence and human significance is to recognize that it has a religious function, although today one might as well refer to it as a cultural function, since no one after Hegel has found it tenable to separate the cultural and the religious. Hegel first allied religion with the higher values of culture, and his legacy has produced the series of readings visible in our own day, including Marx's, that attack both religion and aesthetics as violent ideological constructions. Once we have

¹¹ Tarde argues not for a psychology of crowds, as had Gustave Le Bon, but for a psychology of the public. Unlike a crowd, the public represents a "purely spiritual collectivity, a dispersion of individuals who are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental" (277). "The public could begin to arise," Tarde explains, "only after the first great development in the invention of printing, in the sixteenth century" (279). He also mentions the railroad and telegraph, especially for their ability to increase the formidable power of the press and its ability to enlarge the audiences of orators and preachers. "The public can be extended indefinitely," Tarde concludes, "and since its particular life becomes more intense as it extends, one cannot deny that it is the social group of the future" (281). See Gabriel Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd," *On Communication and Social Influence: Selected Papers*, ed. Terry N. Clark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 277-94.

¹² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217-52. This section reflects ideas and language explored in a different context in "The New Art," *The Body Aesthetic: From Fine Art to Body Modification*, ed. Tobin Siebers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 217-41.

¹³ See "Differentiation and Reciprocity in Lévi-Strauss and Contemporary Theory," "To Double Business Bound": *Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 155-77, where René Girard argues that the origin of symbolicity arises in the context of human violence.

recognized violence as an integral feature of culture—and it begins to register increasingly as evidence of the presence of culture in the aesthetic sense—we should realize that we have not left behind but returned to the ritual era. Ritual is alive and well today because mechanical reproduction has made it impossible to escape the representation of violence as culturally meaningful. Displays of human conflict and suffering are readable as art because they shoulder the burden of meaning in our culture. As art grows more brutal and violent scenes register increasingly as art, the cult value of the aesthetic re-emerges—which is to say that it returns to its status as rite.

Trauma art returns aesthetic experience to the sacred dualities of ritual where the only recognizable distinction between the real world and the shadow world of the sacred is the surplus of meaning in the latter. Ritual gives to violent images a function beyond death or the urgencies of animal existence; it attaches human significance to violence and presents its spectacle as laden with higher meaning and purpose. The desire to transform the human, now apparent in aesthetic forms as diverse as body modification and high-art painting, finds its origin in the era of ritual.

It is no accident, as I mentioned earlier, that new forms of art have embraced the body as a primary aesthetic symbol. The only way to understand this effect is to acknowledge the use of the body by the media age as a collective representation. Images of the body, especially of traumatic bodies, are available to people on a daily basis as never before, and if it is the case that the body is one of the privileged sites of symbolic action, this development cannot be meaningless. The media age makes possible a return to ritual that has renewed the effectiveness of the body as a collective representation. The body has elicited such a strong presence in the art world for this reason.

The Case of Andy Warhol

The work of Andy Warhol hinges on two factors whose fusion contributes to his unique place in the history of art. On the one hand, Warhol is the first artist to have made mechanical reproduction essential to his mature work. His embrace of silk-screening, enlargement, symmetrical formatting, and serial repetition seems to remove human craft from his work and to give it the glow of factory production.¹⁴ His art is mechanical. His place of work is referred to as the Factory, and he claimed famously that he wanted to be a machine. On the other hand, Warhol is uniquely American, both because of his dependence on the commercial and media culture of the United States and because he depicted American forms of death, wounding, and violence with a power unrivaled before or since his time. His *Car Crashes*, for example, portray hideous deaths.

¹⁴ Andy Warhol, *Death and Disasters* (Houston: Houston Fine Art Press, 1988), 7.

They are among the most violent images in the history of art; consequently, they elicit powerful psychological responses. His other works represent or allude to the open wounds in American society created by political assassinations or the suicides of celebrities. These and similar images come from the media. This origin led Warhol to the techniques of mechanical reproduction, as if the images could not be reproduced for aesthetic effect without acknowledging that they were already being reproduced because of their appeal to a mass audience. That this reliance on mechanical reproduction emerges simultaneously with Warhol's preoccupation with the deaths of both the famous and unknown is not an accident, but a discovery about the power of ritual in the media age.¹⁵ Warhol transforms mechanical reproduction's threat to ritual into a cult logic either by basing his subject matter on totems of American culture (soup cans, the dollar bill, the hand gun), or by capturing mass spectacles of violence and death in the form of traumatic art objects (car crashes, race riots, assassinations, executions, suicides, celebrity illness). The emotions of Warhol's art are created by allowing individual events, bodies, and objects to be overlaid with communal significance. This significance relates specifically to the power of violence to invoke a vision of collective existence, which explains why his work seems "to contain" violence, simultaneously exposing and organizing it, witnessing it both as a threat to and as a symbol of "America."

The conventional interpretation of Warhol's work attributes its power not to the ability to contain but to create a distance from violence. His art supposedly empties images of their meaning, attacks with serial repetition the speed with which pictures are consumed, and ironizes the numbing of experience induced by daily exposure to tragedy and panic.¹⁶ Similarly, the passivity of his personality serves only to mimic the permanent stupor produced by the alienating environment of American consumerism. No difference, no emotion, and no new ideas are possible in media and commercial culture. The constant, undifferentiated flow of information and images puts the imagination to sleep, exhausting both our waking and dreaming existence.

However, if the conventional interpretations of Warhol were correct, his works would have little impact beyond mere commentary, and one would expect his force to ebb as more and more images pile up and the context for his irony is lost in the rush of time. In fact, even today his earliest art objects retain the ability to summon powerful responses, seeming to tap into a collective American consciousness, exposing both our identity as a people and what we fear most about ourselves. Even for beholders who do not recognize the

¹⁵ 129 *Die (Plane Crash)*, 1962, a hand-painted copy of the front page of the June 4, 1962 *New York Mirror*, effectively begins Warhol's series on death and disaster, but it is the only work in the series that is not mechanically reproduced, for by late 1962 with *Suicide*, he had discovered silk-screening. It is apparently the interest in the media display of death that turns Warhol to silk-screening and other mechanical techniques.

¹⁶ Warhol, *Death and Disasters*, 17. See also Rainer Crone, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Praeger, 1970).

historical events and symbols pictured by his works, Warhol maintains the power to shock and stun because he exhibits so ruthlessly traumatic bodies, accidents, and events (e.g., the profile of a crouched figure plunging to death from a great height; the limp body of man impaled with great force on a telephone pole; the jaws of a savage police dog tearing into the legs of a fleeing protestor; a woman in a black veil, named Jackie, contemplating with funeral expression the death of her beloved).

Warhol's art is so shocking and poignant because he possesses the uncanny ability to select objects and images that arouse, because of their vivid attachment to violence and wounding, extreme emotions about what it means to live a life in common. The power of repetition in his work is not merely a function of mechanical reproduction, but of the rhythms and patterns of daily life conceived as a specific form of collective existence. In fact, Thomas Crow claims that Warhol's use of mechanical reproduction increases rather than numbs sensitivity to violence.¹⁷ Repetition serves to enhance the referential power of Warhol's art because it registers "the grim predictability, day after day, of more events with an identical outcome, the leveling sameness with which real, not symbolic, death erupts into daily life" (60-61). In short, what happens vividly and repeatedly determines the collective imagination of an existence lived in common, thereby defining its symbols, affects, and organization. Moreover, Crow explains that Warhol dramatizes the breakdown of commodity culture by exposing the inadequacy of mass-produced images compared with "the reality of suffering and death" (51). His art feeds off the violence of consumerism, providing both a counter intuition about what American society should ideally be and a powerful expression of what it is. For Crow, Warhol is political because he reveals the collapse of American consumer society into violence and inauthenticity. He dramatizes the representations of media society to create a "kind of history painting" (57) by exposing how dangerous and transitory fame and other consumer products are.

It has often been observed that violence levels the forms of distinction produced by consumer society. Nevertheless, violence has the capacity to create its own brands of distinction. It underscores in blood eruptions of individuality recognized instantly by communities and commemorated by them in a fashion that underwrites their own conceptions of their future as a collective form of life. Warhol is usually seen as a philosopher of the first observation, someone who either uses or abuses the power of "brand names." In fact, he is a philosopher of the second observation, a thinker who understands the resources of violent actions and wounded bodies for collective representation. Aesthetics and ritual merge in his art because they present the private as the substance of public

¹⁷ References are to Thomas Crow, "Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol," *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 49-65.

communication. This accounts for the seemingly contradictory effects of his works. They are “political,” as Crow understands, because they make visible the instability, falsity, and danger of symbolic networks, giving the lie to the fake harmony of a consumer society pretending that all conflicts can be resolved because all are exchangeable. But Warhol’s works are intensely private as well because they exhibit how the social world attacks individuality—even as it produces it. The social seems to neutralize individual feelings and thoughts because it enforces a horizon of collective interpretation fitting particular events, bodies, and objects into a cycle of repetition whose meaning is beyond the ken of individual minds. Individuals respond to this social imperative with feelings of alienation, and no one has a better eye for these feelings than Warhol. But it is a mistake to see Warhol exclusively as a painter of consumerism gone bad. Alienation is supposedly a new emotion produced by the rise of secularization, but the age of ritual manufactured a good share of it. The ritual process also creates victims who feel like victims because it treats individuals as symbols required for collective action. Frantic participation of individuals in collective life does not define a new condition created by modernity in general or consumerism in particular. It defines the human condition as such.

Hal Foster describes the “return of the real” in aesthetics as a response to the trauma of modern existence.¹⁸ In the specific case of Warhol, he understands that the choice between what he calls the simulacral and referential interpretations is false. Foster claims that Warhol does not ask his beholders to decide between a world of commodity fetishism and a world of brutal facts exposing the inauthenticity of consumerism (130). He fuses together these two worlds in a “traumatic realism,” presenting a picture of reality that terrifies because it calls forth affects incommensurable with its objects (130). Because it both wards off and opens one to death and wounding, Foster claims that traumatic realism transgresses the line between the public and private spheres (136). In particular, he locates traumatic art works in the Lacanian “real”—the psychological register ascribing a bloated plenitude to objects and events—but what he does not pursue is the idea that the real is the experience of ritual. For if the symbolic is composed of kinship relations (the social) and the imaginary records the life of the body (vision, gesture, surface), then the real is the register in which the body undergoes of process of transubstantiation that charges it with meanings seen as hierarchically superior to those of the social world. The ritual body exists beyond the social body, even though it takes the form of one physical entity among many in the community, because its surplus of meaning is projected to the vertical site of transcendental authority. Nor is the ritual body identical to any one body positioned in time and space. It is a body that bursts the coordinates of time and space, appearing to determine rather than being determined by them.

¹⁸ References are to Foster, “The Return of the Real,” *The Return of the Real*, 127-68.

Warhol promised that modern society would give everyone 15 minutes of fame. He was supposedly commenting on the fickleness of American consumerism, whether considering the famous or the almost famous. In fact, he was thinking about death and disaster, and their productiveness as collective representations in which the body is presented as a spectacle to the public as a symbol of its own collective nature. The famous and almost famous in his works are dead or dying—and only notable because of it. It makes no difference whether he is picturing Marilyn Monroe, Jacqueline Kennedy, Mrs. Colette Brown, or Mrs. Margaret McCarthy (see *Tunafish Disaster* 1963). It makes no difference because while individual and temporary fame may be one product of disaster, the ultimate product is not the fame of the individual—thus the 15 minute time constraint—but the identity of the culture. Warhol's works are more about America than its famous or unknown victims. Their bodies are only the material used to symbolize this culture. His work on unknown disaster victims is about the making famous of the dead and thus about the coming into being of the society that kills them. His work on celebrity victims reveals that the famous are sacrificed to create that broader horizon of signification called "America." Both types of work reveal that violence is the principal signifier of the cultural as such. It is as if Warhol's art announces that culture appears only with the consciousness of violence. The victims and wounded bodies portrayed in his art do not die or suffer alone. They have caught the attention of a collectivity, through great cost to themselves, and are famous for its sake. They are sacrifices killed on the altar of America.

The Tank Hero of Tiananmen Square

Let us pause to look at an example beyond the American context, though one that will return us to it because of the unassailible Americanization of the world media. The Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 was, among other things, a struggle for the right to represent the collective image of China. The struggle was extremely violent, as is often the case in matters of collective representation, but the violence guaranteed that the events would be given cultural significance if only the proper focus could be found. This competition for focus is evident in the words of Chai Lang, a student leader of the pro-democracy movement. "We knew," he said the day after the massacre, "that the purification of the Republic could only be achieved by our sacrifice" (192).¹⁹ The Chinese Communist Party sought to assert its image of China by purging competing representations. Its audience was internal and nationalistic, but a different, more international focus was given to the rebellion despite the CCP's efforts. On June 5, 1989, an unexceptional figure in slacks and a white shirt, carrying a shopping bag, was photographed in Tiananmen Square by the Western media as he blocked the advance for 20 minutes of a column of 17

¹⁹ References are to Pico Iyer, "The Unknown Rebel," *Time*, 13 April 1998, 192-93, 196.

tanks. The lead tank swerved to the right, but he moved to block it. It swerved left, and the unknown rebel again placed his body in harm's way. Then he climbed onto the tank and exchanged words with its driver, until bystanders dragged him away, and he disappeared forever into the crowd. All that remains of the event are the photographic images, but they are no small things because they impressed the hero's image vividly on global memory. "Almost certainly he was seen in his moment of self-transcendence," *Time* magazine reported, "by more people than ever laid eyes on Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, and James Joyce combined" (192).

The image of the unknown rebel resonates with an ancient ritual truth about what it means for one human being to risk violence for many others. The tank hero did not exactly sacrifice himself—we do not know that he was killed—but he did disappear, and he now figures as a kind of sacrifice by virtue of his absence.²⁰ That he is viewed as a sacrifice is demonstrated by the fact that his absence from the continuing scene of his representation reads as if it were an action by "him" for "us," although it is not certain who "we" are. His actions are viewed as more representative of claims made on the part of a collective than of claims he might make for himself. In short, he is a "hero," a figure who stands for ideals of value to a polity, and so a figure claimed by polities as representative of themselves.

Perversely, violence against human beings is both symbolic of the cultural as such and symbolic of any one culture's highest ideals. It is this double symbolism that the media age both conceals from view and uses as its first principle of meaning production. On the one hand, media images of traumatic bodies travel so easily from culture to culture because they are floating signifiers of the cultural. On the other hand, these images gain a stunning potency in local contexts because any given culture will readily attach its own communal meanings to them, thereby transforming a floating signifier into a collective representation capable of invoking particular meanings. Global studies understand these effects as symptoms of the extraterritoriality of meaning, although the theory is inadequate to the actual phenomenon because the point to emphasize is not that meaning in the global world has become groundless or extraterritorial, but that there is much greater competition over when and where meaning will be grounded.

The media response to the tank hero provides a powerful example of this competition. Both East and West found the image equally appealing and useful,

²⁰ It was first reported that the tank hero, originally identified as 19 year old Wang Weilin, was summarily tried and executed some days after making his place in history. A year after the events of June 5, when Chinese leader Jiang Zemin was asked about the fate of the symbol of Chinese freedom, he replied, "I think never killed" (Iyer 193). The identity and fate of the tank hero are now generally admitted to be unknown.

and it is easy to see why. First, the violence displayed by the image, which relies on the opposition between the fragility of the human body and the brute power of the tanks, conjures a symbolism easily transformed into collective representation. Second, the simplicity and starkness of the image lend it great translatability, prompting its status as an icon for different cultural claims. Third, the availability of the image via the media to a global audience means that any number of communities will compete to attach their own specific cultural meanings to it.

Somewhat predictably, the competition in this case breaks down between East and West. *Newsweek* magazine displays concisely the American appropriation of the image in the "People of the Year" issue of 1989: it includes the now famous picture of the unknown rebel facing down the tanks with the caption: "In Beijing, a lone youth showed a profile in courage" (fig. 5).²¹ The tank hero's actions summon the memory of other heroic sacrifices in the name of liberty, a number of which were recounted in *Profiles in Courage* by the assassinated President John F. Kennedy. Here the tank hero represents one man standing up for the rights of others—the very icon of Western liberal individualism, or as *Newsweek* described it, "a lone man armed only with courage faced down a column of tanks" (19). In this view of society, individuals fight for liberty, and once it is won, it must be displayed in individual terms, even if it is shared by many people. Thus, Agence Presse France reported that the unknown rebel's "fearless image in the face of violence represents the spirit of the Chinese people," and Pico Iyer of *Time* magazine described the tank hero as "One lone Everyman standing up to machinery, to force, to all the massed weight of the People's Republic—the largest nation in the world, comprising more than 1 billion people—while its all powerful leaders remain, as ever, in hiding somewhere within the bowels of the Great Hall of the People" (192).²² Each of these accounts emphasize crucial elements in the collective representation of Western liberal society: individual courage before brutality and numerous enemies, a secret affiliation with another community yearning for freedom, a vivid account of an event or image that captures the struggle by an individual for liberty, usually at the cost of death, disaster, or disappearance from the scene of representation.

²¹ References are to "Special Report," *Newsweek*, 25 December 1989, 18-19.

²² "China's 'Tank Man' Probably Doesn't Know He's A Hero," *Agence France Presse*, 2 June 1999. See also Strobe Talbott, "Defiance," *Time*, 19 June 1989, 10-11, who describes the tank hero as "One man against an army. The power of the people versus the power of the gun. . . . For a moment that will be long remembered, the lone man defined the struggle of China's citizens" (10).

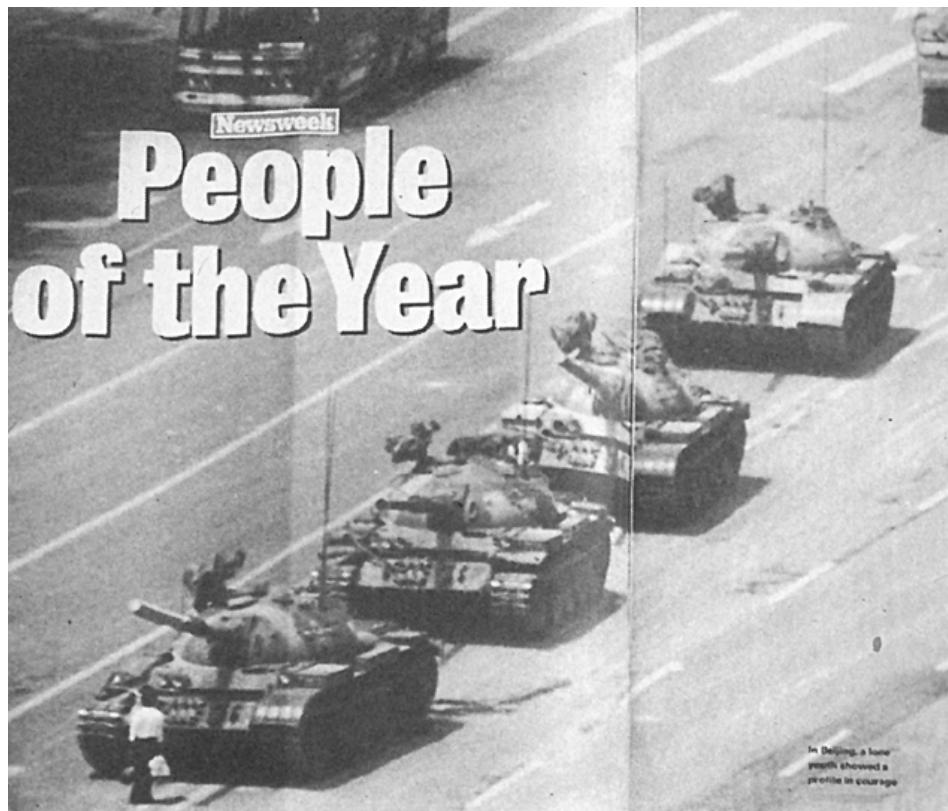


Figure 5: *Tank Hero*, *Newsweek*, 25 December 1989, pp. 18-19

The appropriation of the tank hero by the Chinese Communist Party was multiple and more complex than the Western usage.²³ China Central Television broadcast the footage on June 5, a day after the crackdown on the network by the CCP (fig. 6). In other words, the appearance of the film clip on national television was not the work of the rebels but of the ruling regime in the process of putting down the revolt. To its foreign audience, the government claimed that the People's Liberation Army exercised restraint: a column of 17 tanks halted and tried to maneuver around a lone, unarmed individual. A few weeks after the rebellion, the Chinese Foreign Ministry continued to make this argument in press conferences. To the national audience, the CCP sent another message. The footage reminded the people in Beijing of the raw power they

²³ Concrete information about the Chinese context is hard to find, so I have had to rely for my analysis on informants, some of whom were on Tiananmen Square during the events of 1989. I owe a great debt of gratitude to conversations with Liu Kang, Kenneth Lieberthal, and Lydia Liu. Faults in analysis are my own. See also Zhou He, *Mass Media and Tiananmen Square* (New York: Nova Science, 1996), for a chronology of the events and a first-rate examination of the media coverage, with special emphasis on CCTV, Voice of America, and *People's Daily*.

would find in the Square should they be foolish enough to join the rebellion. It also showed the disposition of the PLA. People had been feeding soldiers in the hope that they would support a coup, but the image of the tanks in action demonstrated that the army had not been won over and remained solidly behind the CCP.



Figure 6: *Tank Hero*, video still, CCTV, 5 June 1989

More than ten years after Tiananmen Square, the Western view dominates interpretations of the tank hero's image everywhere, except in China. In 1998, *Time* magazine named the unknown rebel one of the top 20 leaders and revolutionaries of the twentieth century. Numerous Western web sites celebrate the tank hero and translate his resemblance into works of art and political images. In China, it is a different story. The CCP is uninterested in the unknown rebel for obvious reasons, but liberal-minded Chinese are equally reluctant to revisit his image, either because it is too painful or too politically sensitive to discuss in public. In short, the image failed to achieve status in China as a collective representation of the principles valued by the pro-democracy movement. Perhaps, the competition for the image between the liberal democracies and the CCP was too strong to permit another community to appropriate it as a representative symbol. Perhaps, interpretation is one of the

spoils of victory, and the rebels were defeated.

The many and opposing meanings attached to the tank hero expose the fact that traumatic bodies may serve the collective representation of competing communities. Images of wounding, danger, and disaster travel effortlessly for this reason. Nevertheless, my interpretation of the tank hero raises two cautions worth keeping in mind for future work of this kind. While ritual always strives to produce collective representations, it does not always communicate common understandings of its central symbols, and collective representations are by their nature extremely difficult for any one individual to interpret.²⁴ This is especially true in a global world where images and objects are uprooted from their local context and circulated by competing communities as potential symbols of themselves. If we are to gain some understanding of this new climate of meaning, we will need not only to produce many more case studies of traumatic images and their multiple, local contexts but to develop strategies to account for how the media age uses the ritual fascination with violence to globalize the influence of collective representation itself.

Coda: September 11

The vision of Americans proposed by *American Beauty* as an armed populace ready to attack anyone perceived as different seemed obsolete for a time after the events of September 11. The terrorism in New York and Washington impaired the efficacy of violence as a cultural signifier of the United States both here and abroad. Americans suddenly saw themselves as victims of foreign aggressors, but more important the world also viewed the United States as a victim for the first time in a long while. The terrorists traumatized Americans and turned their attention from the dangers of home to distant places populated by strange people. "Why do they hate us?"—was the question posed by our newspapers and television shows. Many Americans asked themselves the same question. This polarity between the known "us" and the unknown "they" temporarily split our understanding of what violence in America is and how to represent it. On the one hand, there is the story told by *American Beauty*—a quintessentially American story because only in the United States does one find gun collections in the den, blood-splattered kitchen walls, and firing guns as a form of therapy or self-help. As Warhol knew, the revolver is a totem of American society, as surely as violence is our national past-time. On the other hand, September 11 made this view of the United States seem unpatriotic and irresponsible. Violent films, television programs, and art exhibits were pulled from view after the attacks, and the media mentioned the desires for cooperation and peace as primary American virtues. Moreover, the events

²⁴ On these two points see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 183.



Figure 7: Susan E. Evans, *Implements of Terror*, 2002.
Courtesy of the Ricco Maresca Gallery of Chelsea New York

seemed to give every reason to perceive violence as an external force, alien to American society. The war on terrorism surely tried to make a project of this perception, demanding that we represent violence as coming from un-American sources, sources infinitely creative in their ability to make weapons against us out of the most ordinary objects.

Predictably, however, the attempts by politicians and the media to expel American violence to the outside largely failed. Less than five months after the attacks, the representation of violence became acceptable again, and films momentarily deemed too violent for distribution were back at the multiplexes. The military might displayed in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq reaffirmed the standing of the United States as the greatest power in the world for both its friends and enemies, while the newly created Office of Homeland Security quickly returned our attention, although somewhat inadvertently, to the forms of violence that most threaten the American way of life, i.e., the American way of life itself. Thanks to security measures designed to reveal the terrorists among us, the most ordinary and generic Americans have been removing their shoes and emptying their pockets at airports under the suspicion of being mass murderers. Many of these ordinary Americans either found it comical or useful to send letters laced with phony anthrax to their neighbors, and it will probably be established some day that disgruntled American citizens were the ones who mailed real anthrax to the television networks and capital building. September 11 may have established box cutters as the weapon of choice for terrorists, but the widespread fear of our fellow citizens has marked more ordinary objects as "implements of terror"—toenail clippers, safety pins, children's forks, corkscrews, golf tools, pen knives, and hair picks (fig. 7).²⁵ These common objects, now rendered murderous by ritual action, offer a vision of violence difficult to reconcile with their simple materiality. They have become symbols of collective truth. They are trauma art. It is as if they ask us to accept, with the rest of the world, that the United States is culture at its most violent. They reveal where the danger lies in our country. It lies within.

²⁵ Implements of Terror by Susan E. Evans originally appeared as "The Things They Carried," in the Gallery feature section of the *New York Times Magazine*, 10 February 2002, 20. The title of the photograph refers to the phrase used to describe the objects at the Orlando International Airport. The photograph carries this statement by the artist: "Post tragedy we are forced to examine that which may provide both possibility and opportunity of threat. In doing so, we find both. Such an examination, though ultimately incurred for our protection, personalizes your national fear of further terrorist attacks. Working with the Orlando International Airport, I photographed on scene with a 4" x 5" camera, items not making it past security checkpoint where passengers have the option not to get on the plane with the item or 'throw it away' by giving it to security."

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