FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE: WARHOL’S ART AS RELIGIOUS ALLEGORY

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In his eulogy for Andy Warhol who died in 1987, John Richardson noted that “though ever in his thoughts, Andy’s religion didn’t surface in his work until two or three Christmases ago” (141). In fact, Warhol’s most overtly religious imagery did not appear in his work until the late 1970s. Warhol is best known for the paintings of popular culture that he made in the 1960s, including Coke bottles, Campbell’s soup cans, flowers, celebrity portraits, and cars. These impersonal subjects, combined with Warhol’s impersonal style, make it difficult to read this work as more than a superficial record of the period. John Coplans, for example, wrote that Warhol “has no surreal, metaphoric or symbolic edge. His work is literal throughout” (Andy Warhol 52). “Warhol has consistently made it clear,” Calvin Tomkins asserted, “that what he cares about is fame, period” (118). Moreover, his use of bright colors and repetitions of commercial images suggest gaiety and bounty.

Yet, if one considers his entire oeuvre, a profound theme runs throughout, summed up in one of his last works, on which are painted the words Heaven and Hell Are Just One Breath Away! (1986). Like the seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas painters whose lavish display of wealth in their art incorporated reminders of transience, decay, and death in the form of food, mirrors, flowers, skulls, and so forth, Warhol’s paintings of an opulent era in America depict comparable symbols to comment on the transient nature of life and the imminence of death. In Warhol’s work, the persistent reminder of death functions as a religious allegory, motivated by his Catholic belief in heaven and hell, and his fear of the final judgment.

The numerous paintings of automobiles that Warhol made during the early 1960s exemplify this allegory. He first began his series of paintings of cars in 1962 when Harper’s Bazaar commissioned him to “make a visual comment on the phenomenon of the American motorcar” (“Deus Ex Machina” 159). Warhol made nine silkscreen paintings of cars, which Harper’s pictured in its November 1962 issue. One of these paintings included rows of Cadillacs aligned with Coke bottles—both symbols of America. To Warhol, the soft drink epitomized democracy: “Tab is Tab and no matter how rich you are, you can’t get a better one than the one the homeless woman on the corner is drinking” (America 22). For most
Americans in the early sixties, the automobile, especially the Cadillac, embodied the American Dream of success and social mobility (Guimond 10).

However, around the time he was working on these paintings for Harper's, Warhol also made a number of other paintings of cars, this time uncommissioned works, that belie this image of the American Dream. In these paintings, such as Optical Car Crash (1962), Green Disaster Ten Times (1963) and Saturday Disaster (1964), Warhol depicts various car crashes; the symbol of American prosperity becomes an omen of death. To make these works, Warhol silkscreened press photos onto canvas and, typically, repeated the image of the crash several times until it almost became an abstraction or pattern that requires some study to discern the horror of the image itself.

Among the paintings of car wrecks, Ambulance Disaster (1963) is particularly horrifying, with its double image of a body hanging out of a crashed ambulance window. By painting the image black and white instead of using colors, and limiting the canvas to only two large images, Warhol enhanced the reality of the crash because of its resemblance to a news photo. The rescue vehicle has become a death carriage in this painting, and thereby serves to stress the omnipotence of death.

Warhol implied that he made these car crash paintings as nothing more than another impartial record of American society. He stated that when he began making them, “It was Christmas or Labor Day—a holiday—and every time you turned on the radio they said something like, ‘4 million are going to die.’” He planned to show them with other paintings of death, including suicides and electric chairs, and call the exhibit “Death in America.”

A clue to the religious meaning behind these paintings is found in Warhol’s archives in a pamphlet entitled “Your Death” (ca. 1960), the cover of which is reproduced in his 1963 silkscreen painting, Five Deaths Twice on Green and Orange (fig. 1). The picture on the pamphlet is slightly cropped compared to the one in the silkscreen painting, indicating that for this he must have obtained the original photograph. The painting repeats this image twice in black with a green background in the top image and an orange background in the bottom representation. It depicts a silkscreened photograph of an overturned convertible on top of five passengers, two of whom are struggling to escape. Warhol made an earlier version of this painting in 1962, Five Deaths in Red, consisting of one silkscreened image in black on red, and he also made at least two other paintings using this image, Five Deaths on Orange, 1963, and Five Deaths Seventeen Times, 1963.