

Warhol's *Death and Disaster*: The Byzantine Icons of Pop

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Abstract

In his *Death and Disaster* series, Andy Warhol's Byzantine Catholic upbringing and beliefs take shape in his portraits of celebrities and unnamed disaster victims alike, converging into an iconography rooted in American daily life. While previous scholarship on Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series describes Warhol's representation of death as consumerist, callous, and contributing to spectacle culture driven by mass media, my work instead focuses on Warhol's adoption and transformation of the Byzantine iconic tradition in his *Death and Disaster* series. Using Byzantine visual language, Warhol elevates press photographs of both Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy-Onassis to the realm of the sacred, emphasizing the symbolic resonance of their tremendous cultural influence. In choosing to appropriate tabloid images of otherwise anonymous fatalities in the *Disaster* series, Warhol additionally dignifies disaster victims in a way which was perhaps most familiar to him: as the secular martyrs of a rapidly modernizing world, where we are often mere casualties sacrificed in the name of industrial progress. As Warhol glorifies the dead in his *Death and Disaster* series, he allows these images to pivot from their former lives as tabloid spectacles, instead taking on new meaning in Warhol's contemporary version of Byzantine Catholic iconography.

Introduction

In the late afternoon hours of June 3rd, 1968, Andy Warhol was shot at point-blank range in his Manhattan art studio, The Factory. Dressed casually in her yellow blouse, tan slacks, and brown jacket, Warhol's assailant did not initially cause a stir as she entered through the studio's private elevator.¹ Once inside, she sauntered toward an unsuspecting Warhol, who didn't register her presence as he sat at his desk, chatting on the phone and opening mail.² Now standing before him, she drew a gun from her jacket pocket and began firing. She fired first at Warhol, then turned her pistol onto the others present at The Factory that day. A single bullet tore through Warhol's chest and abdomen, wreaking much damage to his lungs, stomach, liver, and esophagus in its wake.³ Before anyone could stop her, the shooter fled through the elevator doors, started the car down, and escaped.⁴

As Warhol was hurriedly carried out from The Factory on a stretcher, photographers for local news outlets that had caught wind of the assassination attempt congregated on the street below. A flurry of camera shutters clicked as police gingerly loaded Warhol's body into an ambulance. The photographs captured that day reveal an uncanny resemblance between Warhol—unconscious and with his head hanging limply in the arms of an officer—and biblical depictions of Christ descending from the cross. Warhol underwent five hours of emergency surgery, during which his heart stopped beating; he was pronounced clinically dead.⁵ However, after massaging his heart for one and a half minutes, the medical team was able to bring him

¹ Frank Faso, Martin McLaughlin, and Richard Henry, "He's on Critical List; She Gives Up to Cop," *Daily News* (New York), June 3, 1968.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jewell Homad Johnson, "Warhol's Byzantine Iconography," *Art and Mysticism: Interfaces in the Medieval and Modern Periods* (2018), 97.

back to life.⁶ Warhol was quite literally resurrected. Together, the images of Warhol's disaster which were splashed across the front pages of national news that day paint a picture of an artist martyred for his celebrity.

Six years before his own disaster became a media spectacle, Warhol began his *Death and Disaster* series in 1962. The series featured bloody car wrecks, suicides, perished celebrities, and other morbid imagery which Warhol appropriated from tabloids. Why might an artist so well-known for his blasé approach to life be compelled to deviate from his oeuvre—his usual subjects of beauty, fame, and commodity—and instead turn to the macabre? Most scholars have described Warhol as relentlessly consumerist, driven by a populism anchored in consumer products like Campbell's Soup and Coca Cola elevated to the level of the sacred. Though this may be true of Warhol's oeuvre including the *Disaster* series, my work instead focuses on Warhol as a devout practitioner of Byzantine Catholicism, analyzing the adoption and transformation of the Byzantine iconic tradition in his *Death and Disaster* series.⁷

Much of the discourse concerning the *Disaster* series frames the works as commentary on our desensitization to media coverage of tragedy. Although, recent literature on Warhol has discussed his body of work in relation to his faith, namely *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* by Jane Dillenberger and Blake Stimson's *Citizen Warhol*. Both draw comparisons to Byzantine iconography—especially Dillenberger's work, which uses Christian theology as a framework to analyze Warhol's oeuvre—and both mention works from the *Disaster* series in their remarkable analyses. However, the series always takes a backseat to more obvious comparisons, such as *The Last Supper* (1986), *Raphael Madonna-\$6.99* (1985), or *Cross* (1981-82). However, as I hope to

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Though the term 'Byzantine' is a misnomer and no longer preferred when referring to the Eastern Roman Empire, I am using the terms 'Byzantine' and 'Byzantium' to coincide with terminology adopted by the Byzantine Catholic Church.

demonstrate, the *Disaster* series is perhaps the *most* pertinent example of how Warhol's Catholic faith has materialized in his work and it is sorely overlooked in this discussion. In the *Death and Disaster* series, Warhol deviates from a literal use of traditional Christian iconography, and instead applies Byzantine pictorial language to victims of tragedy and political issues of the 1960s, situating archaic biblical narratives in the here and now. In doing so, he lets it sink in that this is our past, present, and future: tragedy will strike us all someday, and all that will be left of us is a memory. We can only hope that it won't be a media spectacle.

Beyond Warhol's faith, the dark undertones present in the series echo the atmosphere of the 1960s: the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the fight for civil rights, capital punishment—the list goes on. Many monumental events that defined the decade colored the era with a tinge of collective grief. News sources like *Life* and *Newsweek* regularly published gruesome images of accidents or public suicides, providing a reminder of the nation's grim underbelly. Perhaps it was the desire to visibly process these traumas that drove Warhol to create the *Death and Disaster* series, resulting in the formation of a contemporary American iconography of death. Warhol confronts us with often violent media images of death and physical trauma yet affords the images of the recently deceased the sanctity of a religious icon. Despite being widely criticized as a consumerist artist, Warhol's *Disaster* series, with its focus on gruesome imagery from tabloids and other media sources, can be interpreted as a commentary on the ethics of media and spectacle in the 1960s, and as a call to honor the dignity of individual lives in the face of collective tragedy and trauma. Through his utilization of Byzantine visual language, Warhol's *Death and Disaster* works venerate victims of tragedy, moving them away from their former lives as tabloid spectacles and instead positioning them as secular icons of the twentieth century—their images memorialized as the saints and martyrs of our time.

I'll Be Your Mirror

In both his public persona and his larger body of work, Warhol is perhaps best known for providing his audience with a reflection—be that of themselves or of the larger, capitalistic structures under which we exist. Regardless of their subject matter, his works serve as a mirror which reflects our rampant consumerism, consumption of mass media, and obsession with celebrity. However, Warhol presents this to us in a very non-judgmental fashion; rather than criticize, he offers us this mirror to reflect what we truly demonstrate to be most sacred in this country, be it celebrities, sex, Coca Cola, or Jesus Christ. This remains true of his *Death and Disaster* series, which reflect a darker preoccupation with tragedy and the media exploitation of others' suffering. Through his appropriation of tabloid images, Warhol reflects a sort of spectacle culture generated by mass media in which human tragedies become spectacles, and those spectacles become commodified. Images of tragedy in the news inevitably attract our attention, reinforcing the power of spectacle culture. The captivating visual stimulus of death and disaster images overwhelms our attention, and in doing so inscribes these images with the ideology of commodity culture—in this case, the cultural and economic value of human suffering.⁸

It is mass media which renders tragedies as spectacles through excessive and often voyeuristic news coverage—Warhol simply holds the mirror up for us to see that the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images.⁹ In his *Death and Disaster* series, Warhol presents the media spectacle of tragedy not only as reflecting American society but as an instrument of social unification, as spectacle culture both implicates us all as spectators *and* commodifies our bodies. In short, we all consume news coverage of

⁸ Charles R. Garoian and Yvonne M. Gaudelius, "The Spectacle of Visual Culture," *Studies in Art Education* 45, no. 4 (2004), 301.

⁹ Guy Debord. "The Commodity as Spectacle." *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords* (1994): 118.

tragedy while also understanding that we all hold the potential to become the next tabloid headline.¹⁰ In this regard, Warhol's *Disaster* works present America itself as an exhibition where its citizens are continually pressed into service as complacent spectators.¹¹

This idea of spectacle and media sensationalism complicates the Byzantine theory of icons implemented by Warhol by potentially draining the *Disaster* works of their divinity. In the Byzantine tradition, icons are considered sacred objects that serve as a connection between the divine and the mortal worshiper, and are therefore treated with great reverence and respect. However, Warhol's use of tabloid images in his *Death and Disaster* series as part of a larger cultural spectacle could diminish their sacredness and significance, as images can be drained of their force depending on how they are used, the context in which they are viewed, and how often they are seen. The commercialization and commodification of these images raises further questions about the role of the media in shaping and manipulating our perceptions of disaster, and how these concepts are packaged and presented to the public.

Sunday Morning

In his *Death and Disaster* series, Warhol's seemingly indifferent representation of death was taken by many as callous commentary on the public's desensitization to widely published images of disaster in the news. Yet when considering the recurring topics of death, celebrity, and anonymity in his work, one might reach a conclusion that his attitude toward the matter is quite the opposite of callous. Rather, Warhol's representation of the wounded and recently deceased can perhaps be read as sacred. Using Byzantine visual traditions, Warhol consecrated these images with the divine and eternal presence of their subjects, akin to icons of holy figures.

¹⁰ Ibid., 117.

¹¹ Garoian and Gaudelius, "The Spectacle of Visual Culture," 301.

To better understand Warhol's inclination to cite Byzantine iconography in his works, it is essential to understand his religious upbringing. Andrew Warhola was born in August of 1928 in a close-knit and impoverished Pittsburgh community of Carpatho-Rusyn immigrants. His parents Julia and Andrej Warhola had immigrated from the extremely small and deeply devout Slovakian village of Miková. The two came to America when Warhol's father, a construction worker, joined other Carpatho-Rusyn laborers in leaving Miková for Pittsburgh in an effort to escape both abject poverty and a threatened military draft.¹² This community of Rusyn immigrants lived in the Ruthenian section of Pittsburgh, or the *Ruska Dolina*, in which life revolved around the Byzantine Catholic Church.¹³ The community here preserved their native tongue, culture, spiritual traditions, and adhered to the ancient Byzantine calendar—all of which helped them to maintain a close connection to their motherland of Slovakia.

Throughout his childhood and college years, Warhol attended liturgy at St. John Chrysostom Byzantine Catholic Church in Pittsburgh where his family regularly worshiped (figure 1).¹⁴ The Carpatho-Rusyn church which he attended closely adhered to Byzantine liturgical tradition, wherein the visual image, or religious icon, is venerated as a mediator between the worshiper and the holy person represented. Ornamented with cult icons, moveable icons for each day of the year, and the iconostasis, Byzantine Catholic churches are characteristically dense with icons, this multiplicity intensifying their impact.¹⁵ Unlike American iconostases which generally have only two vertically stacked layers of icons, the impressive iconostasis at St. John Chrysostom is done in a traditional Slavic style featuring an astounding four layers of icons. Spending his Sunday mornings gazing at the many glittering icons of Christ,

¹² Jane D. Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (A&C Black, 2001), 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵ Johnson, "Warhol's Byzantine Iconography," 90.

the Virgin Mary, and martyred saints adorning the iconostasis of his church, Warhol gained a sense of the divine power of images.¹⁶

Though the impact of Warhol's Byzantine Catholic upbringing on his artwork is no secret, the general discussion of the correlation between his religiosity and his oeuvre is centered on a much more biographic—and, often, psychological—analysis.¹⁷ Warhol's enigmatic persona makes this sort of approach all the more compelling, as a deeper look into his personal life reveals a complicated and lifelong relationship with his Catholic faith.¹⁸ However, rather than focus solely on *why* Warhol made the aesthetic choices he did, my aim is to instead examine *how* these works function in relation to Eastern Catholic theology and mass media coverage of tragedy in 1960s America. An understanding of Warhol's Catholic upbringing and faith is necessary to unpack the Christian visual motifs present in his work; however, the theory of the icon and Warhol's utilization of this centuries-old visual tradition helps us to understand the aesthetic significance of these works in relation to their subject matter.

The Theory of Icons

Warhol's Byzantine Catholic upbringing and beliefs take shape in his portraits of celebrities and unnamed disaster victims alike, converging into an iconography rooted in American daily life. Though his works are often presented in a secular disguise, Warhol's

¹⁶ Paul Elie, "Andy Warhol's Religious Journey," *The New Yorker*, December 7, 2021.

¹⁷ Leading scholarship on this topic includes Jane D. Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (A&C Black, 2001). Dillenberger provides a comprehensive analysis of Warhol's body of work in the context of his religious upbringing and lifelong piety, and largely employs a biographical approach as opposed to a theological one. See chapter 3, "Memento Mori: Death and the Artist," for mention of the *Death and Disaster* series.

¹⁸ Curated by The Andy Warhol Museum, the exhibition *Andy Warhol: Revelation* was held at both The Andy Warhol Museum and the Brooklyn Museum between 2019 and 2022. The goal of the exhibition was to highlight the recurring Christian motifs in Warhol's work and explore the artist's complicated relationship with Catholicism. Featuring more than a hundred objects from the Warhol Museum's permanent collection, the exhibition is successful in providing a very intimate glimpse into the artist's childhood, his personal faith, queer identity, and relationship with his deeply devout mother, Julia Warhola.

frequent reference to Byzantine visual traditions in his paintings only makes sense when considered through a Byzantine lens, where the icon makes the sacred visible. The Byzantine Catholic Church, whose practices and beliefs are non-normative to Western and American doctrines of Christianity, has a tradition of icon painting rooted in Byzantium which is still being practiced today.¹⁹ Using Byzantine iconographic methods, Warhol infuses contemporary secular iconography with the divine power of icons.

Warhol's omission of his signature on the surface of his paintings can be read as an attempt to further imbue his paintings with the power of the icon. Icon-writers of the long-standing Byzantine tradition remained anonymous, taking no credit for their work, as icons are not thought of as artistic representations but rather replications of an original image. In this regard, by omitting his signature Warhol downplays the role of the artist as a creator of a unique and original work. Instead, Warhol presents the *Disaster* paintings as replicas of images that already exist in the public consciousness, such as newspaper photographs of car crashes and electric chairs. This approach mirrors the Byzantine tradition of icon-writing, which emphasizes the replication of existing images rather than individual artistic expression.

In theory, icons are made holy through their adherence to tradition, meaning that their style and type must remain immutable.²⁰ In response to periods of iconoclasm in the 8th and 9th centuries of early Byzantium, it was protested that while it was one thing to represent a saint (who had a visible body) in an image, it was quite another to try to present the invisible God in a visible image.²¹ Thus in order to justify creating visual depictions of Christ, the iconographer's task was to duplicate an original image, or *acheiropoieta* (medieval Greek for "made without

¹⁹ Johnson, "Warhol's Byzantine Iconography," 85.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

²¹ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.

hands”), such as the Mandylion, the Hodegetria, or the Shroud of Turin. Each of these icons were claimed to have been made supernaturally, either painted in the presence of the divine or as a miraculous impression of the face or body of Christ. Unconcerned with Western notions of individuality and naturalism, icon painters strove not to innovate but to faithfully emulate venerated ‘originals’ to be read as sacred images that not only represented holy figures and events but also embodied their holiness.²²

The practice of icon painting thus centers on given types that refer back to real or alleged archetypes as their first formulations.²³ For an image to achieve its sacred identity with the prototype, the image must depict the characteristic features of the holy person represented in accordance with authentic sources.²⁴ These sources were either *acheiropoieta*, contemporary portraits or descriptions, or, in the case of narrative representations, the Holy Scriptures.²⁵ To be fit to receive proper veneration from its beholder, the icon must be comprehensible, easily recognizable, and easy to interpret.²⁶ This also meant that individual icons (such as the Virgin Mary) must be identified by cohesive, unmistakable attributes that match their original prototype. Although materially different from its prototype, the image is nevertheless identical with it, and the worship accorded to the image is passed on through the image to its archetype.²⁷ Therefore, in Byzantium it was understood that painted icons were pictorial duplicates of these archetypes, and that creating replicas of these original images would extend their power.²⁸

²² Johnson, “Warhol’s Byzantine Iconography,” 92.

²³ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 30.

²⁴ Otto Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration; Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (London: Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1948), 240-41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

²⁸ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 30.

Images of saints, on the other hand, are a much simpler subject for recollection. Because saints had existed in mortal form, they are remembered not only through legends of their virtuous lives (and subsequent martyrdom), but additionally through their portraits. In Christian theology, a saint is someone who has lived a holy life and is now believed to be in heaven. Saints are typically venerated for their virtues and miracles, and they often serve as intercessors between God and humanity. Martyrs, on the other hand, are individuals who died for their faith and refused to renounce it, even in the face of prosecution or death. Their sacrifice is seen as the ultimate act of devotion and is honored with sainthood. Memory is a recurring theme here—the task of the New Testament Scripture is to recall the story of salvation, with the image playing a supporting role. Though the saints are no longer among the living, the memory of their virtue is kept alive alongside their portraits. To ensure this, their portraits are derived from historical accounts and images which were memorized in order to retain the thread of memory.²⁹ Icons thus served, in part, as visible memory aids.

Death

If considered from a Western point of view, there is nothing original nor individual about middle Byzantine decorative schemes.³⁰ In this regard, Warhol's appropriation of tabloid and press images can also be read as Byzantine. In a 1962 interview with art critic David Bourdon, Warhol asked, "But why should I be original? Why can't I be non-original?"—a sentiment which echoes the theological basis of icons in the Byzantine tradition. This tradition of appropriation lent itself well to Warhol's favored method of screen printing. Coinciding with the advent of his *Death and Disaster* series, Warhol's affinity for screen printing began in the summer of 1962.

²⁹ Ibid., 10

³⁰ Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, 238.

Warhol discovered the silkscreen method of printing, experimented with it, and in doing so had finally found the most mechanical technique possible to transfer the world of tragedies, images of the mundane, portraits, and horror scenarios onto his canvases.³¹ Warhol himself went so far as to relate himself to this mechanical process, saying “I want to be a machine, and I feel that whatever I do and do machinelike is what I want to do.”³² Screen printing allowed Warhol to distance himself even further from the role of creator and instead mimic both the anonymity of icon-writers and endlessly reproduce exact copies of an original prototype.

It was that same summer that the headline in the *New York Mirror* on June 4, 1962 shouted: “129 DIE IN JET!” It was Henry Geldzahler, curator of twentieth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, friend and mentor of Andy Warhol, who showed him the front page of the *New York Daily News* that day. Geldzahler, who urged that the media, the spectacle of violence, and hypocritical morality were elements of a portrait of 1960s America, advised Warhol to engage artistically with contemporary events of tragedy.³³ Warhol created a photocopy, burned the image into a silkscreen, and printed it, creating a replica of the *New York Mirror* front page, headline and all. Standing at about eight feet tall, *129 Die in Jet! (Plane Crash)* (1962) features a single photograph of anonymous bystanders gathered around the scattered remains of the jet plane. Cutting diagonally through the composition, the plane’s colossal, tattered wing juts out from the wreckage. *129 Die in Jet! (Plane Crash)* became the first image of death featured in Warhol’s artwork, marking the birth of the *Disaster* series (figure 2).

Created shortly after *129 Die in Jet! (Plane Crash)* is one of the best-known examples of appropriation in Warhol’s work: *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) (figure 3). Warhol, struck with grief at

³¹ Heiner Bastian, “Death and Disaster in the Work of Andy Warhol,” in *Andy Warhol: Death and Disaster* (Kerber Verlag, 2015), 16.

³² Andy Warhol, “What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, pt. I,” *ARTnews* 62 (November 1963), 26.

³³ Bastian, “Death and Disaster in the Work of Andy Warhol,” 16.

the news of Marilyn's sudden demise, felt compelled to create *Marilyn Diptych* immediately following her death in August of 1962.³⁴ The left panel of the diptych is embellished with printed rows of Marilyn's portrait, appropriated from publicity shots promoting her breakout role in the 1953 film *Niagara*. Each of the five rows contain five Marilyn busts, featuring a magenta complexion, teal eyeshadow and shirt collar, canary-yellow hair, and finished with her signature scarlet lips, set against a flat, orange background. The right panel poses a striking contrast; in opposition to the vibrantly saturated palette on the left are five additional rows of Marylins presented in greyscale. The portraits on the right vary from unrecognizable faces smeared with black ink to faded ghosts of the original. Mimicking a 16mm film strip, Marilyn's image on the right appears overexposed. This spectral gradation perhaps serves as a reflection of the often invasive media exposure Marilyn received both in life and death. Warhol distorts Marilyn's image from left to right, manipulating the silk screen to produce images that range in coherence and fidelity to the original photograph.

Marilyn Diptych depicts the duality of Marilyn's mythic public image as an idol and that of her private, troubled self. Further, it is a portrait of her in life and in death, the tension between presence and absence. The public's idolization of Marilyn was mythically heightened after her death as she was posthumously elevated to a cultural icon, embodying the ideals of feminine beauty, sexuality, and fame in twentieth century American society. Marilyn's untimely death, which was shrouded in mystery and scandal, only added to her mythic status, and her image was relentlessly used in popular culture, fashion, and advertising, perpetuating the notion

³⁴ For the sake of cohesion, I will continue to refer to both Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy Onassis by their first names rather than their last. This is due in part to Warhol's omission of their last names in the titles of their respective portraits. Additionally, I want to emphasize their status as icons of contemporary popular culture whose names carry such weight that they are easily recognized by the general public even when referred to as simply 'Marilyn' or 'Jackie'—much like that of the holy figures Warhol strove to emulate.

of her as a timeless symbol of glamor and allure. Through this cultural phenomenon, Marilyn became more than just an actress or a person but a larger-than-life figure, a mythic embodiment of the American Dream and its dark underbelly of excess and tragedy. In his appropriation of Marilyn's image, Warhol too presents Marilyn as the flawlessly aesthetic media object that society had made of her and does so without overtly depicting her personal trauma. Any literal evidence of her death is absent from this portrait; Warhol instead deifies Marilyn, choosing to memorialize her life and cultural impact as eternal. Like an icon, Warhol renders Marilyn's portrait as identical to its prototype and thus identical to Marilyn, infusing *Marilyn Diptych* with the iconic presence of Marilyn herself.

By elevating Marilyn's portrait to the realm of the sacred, Warhol emphasizes the symbolic resonance of her tremendous cultural influence. Warhol draws from the spiritual (and, theologically, literal) power of the Byzantine icon to present her image as being charged with her enduring presence. Though Marilyn may no longer be on this earth, spiritually, Warhol suggests, she is present in her icon. This idea is furthered by Warhol's affinity for screen printing, which echoes the theological basis of the *acheiropoieta*. The belief that the divine possess the ability to imprint their image onto a material object through direct contact with their body, such as the Mandylion, is quite similar to Warhol's process of screen printing. Like the Byzantine icon, the practice of screen printing makes a kind of mark which is indexical, showing evidence for the existence of what—or, in this case, whom—it refers to. To prepare a silkscreen for printing, the desired image must first be burned into the screen using photo emulsion and a bright, concentrated light source. This process transfers the original image, such as a tabloid photograph, to the screen itself. Once the source image has successfully been burned into the screen, the screen can be used to endlessly create printed copies of the original. This method of using light

to burn a copy of the original into the screen has a somewhat miraculous quality like that of an *acheiropoieta*. In using this technique, Warhol too was able to endlessly reproduce the media images of cultural icons such as Marilyn while keeping the incorporeal essence (or soul) of the original—and thus, the spiritual power of the archetype—intact.

Perhaps the most striking comparison to Byzantine icons is *Gold Marilyn Monroe* (1962), in which Marilyn's portrait is presented against a metallic gold background (figure 4). Here Warhol repurposes the image of Marilyn used in *Marilyn Diptych*; however, in this instance Warhol has printed a single image of her directly in the center of the canvas. Here her portrait is represented with the same saturated color palette used in the diptych—the yellow hair, bubblegum-pink skin, and teal eyeshadow—yet the remainder of this monumental canvas has been painted gold. Nearly seven feet in height, *Gold Marilyn Monroe* is surely meant to be presented to the viewer in the same manner which one would view as a religious icon. Like *Marilyn Diptych*, Warhol offers *Gold Marilyn Monroe* as both an icon to be venerated and a spiritual mediator between the beholder and Marilyn herself.

When displayed in the brightly lit spaces of a gallery or museum, the vast expanse of gold paint covering the canvas of *Gold Marilyn Monroe* creates the visual effect of a halo which echoes the flat, glittering surfaces of both painted and mosaic Byzantine icons. In the Byzantine tradition of icon-writing, this flatness is integral to the function of the icon. Unlike Renaissance depictions of biblical narratives which leaned heavily on the use of one-point linear perspective, Byzantine icons deny the illusion of perspective, instead refusing the viewer access to the realm of the sacred. Rather than inviting you *in*, the “reverse perspective” created by the unarticulated backgrounds of Byzantine icons pushes the viewer *out*. This flatness collapses the distance between the viewer and the sacred icon; yet, the flat plane of the icon can only pretend

dimensionality—its image is only apparitional.³⁵ The icon is thus a symbolic abstraction of the divinity it represents, and becomes the ideal screen upon which we focus our gaze.³⁶

Light plays an important role in sacred Eastern Catholic spaces, which are methodically structured to allow natural light to be cast onto mosaics, frescoes, and textiles. Windows are often designed architecturally to cast light onto specific features of the church depending on time of day, such as during a morning liturgy or evening vesper; thus the iconography takes on different meanings depending on the ritual context. As light fills the church, it pools in the negative space of glittering gold leaf between or around icons, evoking the sense of divine presence.³⁷ By fixing Marilyn's image against a thick coating of metallic gold paint, Warhol too achieves this effect in *Gold Marilyn Monroe*. Her portrait pops against its monochromatic backdrop, almost appearing to be three-dimensional. The interaction between light and gold is especially significant in the case of spatial icons, as it creates a visual effect which collapses the distance between the holy figure represented and the beholder. Spatial icons, which are incorporated into the architecture of the church such as a mosaic or fresco, are meant to be perceived as both being within and sharing the space with the viewer. The flat, gold backgrounds common in middle Byzantine iconography is not a symbol of unlimited space; rather, the golden walls allow sufficient space for the figures to come forward.³⁸ The shape and the confines of the physical space of the church are not dissolved, but rather stressed and clarified by the solid coating of gold.³⁹

³⁵ Johnson, "Warhol's Byzantine Iconography," 93.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, 245.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Though flatness is essential to the function of spatial icons, to describe these mosaics encased within the architecture of the church as two-dimensional would be inappropriate.⁴⁰ While it is true that there is no space beyond the picture plane of these mosaics, spatial icons spiritually occupy the physical space in which they are enclosed, and this space is included in the picture.⁴¹ The icon and its beholder are not separated by the imaginary threshold of the picture plane nor the illusion of a background receding into space: it opens into the real space in front, where the beholder lives and moves.⁴² As the reverse perspective created by the flat and unarticulated backgrounds of icons pushes the holy figure into the foreground, the beholder feels as though they are conversing with the holy person represented or, in the case of narrative icons, is witnessing the holy events depicted. The beholder is not cut off from them; rather, they too are physically enclosed in the grand icon of the church, are surrounded by the congregation of the saints pictured, and take part in the events they see.⁴³ The icon is thus an apparition which lives within the sacred space that surrounds the viewer. Just as the icon itself is magically identical with the holy person it represents, the physical space of the beholder and the space in which the holy person exists are identical.⁴⁴

Towering over the altar of St. John Chrysostom Byzantine Catholic Church in Pittsburgh is one such example of a spatial icon: a monumental painting of the Virgin Mary, known in the Eastern Catholic tradition as *Theotokos*, the Bearer of God (figure 5). Located in the semicircular dome of the church's apse, the Virgin presides over all liturgical services here. Pictured with the Christ Child seated in her lap, *Theotokos* is shown with both arms extended skyward in the *orans*

⁴⁰ Ibid., 248.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

gesture of prayer. Her figure is quite imposing; several feet in height, her colossal form towers over the viewer. A divine light emanates from the monochromatic gold halo which encircles her head and shoulders, evoking her divine presence. Her straight-faced expression seems to oscillate between stern compassion and ferocity. Her gaze is fixed forward as if to address and engage directly with the church's congregants. Warhol exploits this same effect in *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, achieving a compositional flatness and reverse perspective which positions the viewer as Marilyn's focal point, encouraging the viewer to engage with her supratemporal presence.

Similarly, Warhol transformed cultural notions of celebrity by imbuing their images with a sense of intimacy. Through his iconic treatment of images, Warhol portrayed celebrities as being both sacred and accessible. Warhol, who at this stage in his career had too achieved celebrity status, understood the necessary delineation between public persona and private self, the latter being vulnerable and in need of protection. Often described as sphinxlike, Warhol himself took great effort to remain enigmatic as he increasingly gained the attention of the public eye. The public encountered Warhol's celebrity portraits at a time when the private lives of celebrities were still mostly unknown.⁴⁵ When creating *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, Warhol applied this sensitivity to his memorial iconography of Marilyn, forcing the viewer to encounter her image in a way which counteracts the public's obsession with the private lives of celebrities.⁴⁶ By isolating Marilyn's portrait and placing it in the center of the canvas where, presumably, the viewer would come face to face with her likeness, Warhol too collapses the distance between the viewer and the icon of Marilyn, prompting them to consider her dual humanity and cultural deification.

⁴⁵ Johnson, "Warhol's Byzantine Iconography," 92.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Outside of viewing icons in the sacred space of the church, Warhol decorated the walls of his Manhattan apartment with them as well. Reports from friends visiting Warhol's first apartment focused on the religious imagery they saw there.⁴⁷ One such friend provided this description: "It was very small, two rooms, and just candle-lit ... A candle swung on a chain, suspended, and as it swung, it illuminated a portrait of St Barbara, the black saint, with her slashes. I asked, 'What's she doing there?' He said, 'Well, look at all the slashings. Read up on her.'"⁴⁸ In his book *Citizen Warhol*, Blake Stimson explains that in all likelihood, the image referred to in this quote was not St Barbara, but instead a reproduction of the well-known and much-venerated Black Madonna of Częstochowa, said since 1656 to be 'Queen' and miraculous protector of Poland, a status attributed in part to the slashes on her cheek (figure 6).⁴⁹ Currently housed in the Jasna Góra Monastery in Częstochowa, Poland, this icon is said to have saved the monastery from a 1655 Swedish invasion, during which the two deep scars on her cheek were inflicted by a Swedish soldier. Warhol's retort to read up on the slashes on her face, Stimson claims, was meant to refer to her divine status as a protector.⁵⁰ Warhol was steeped in Catholic iconography from a very young age; however, the historic significance of this particular icon might help us to glean insight into the aesthetic choices behind Warhol's memorial depictions of female celebrities and public figures. Warhol's reverence for the Virgin and her representation in Eastern Catholic theology as a fierce defender and maternal warrior likely informed his memorial portraits of secular figures like Marilyn. Warhol treats Marilyn's portrait with a similar level of reverence, representing her lasting presence and deification in American popular culture as sharing the eternal and ineffable qualities of the divine.

⁴⁷ Blake Stimson, *Citizen Warhol* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 47.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The iconography of the Virgin Mary is additionally helpful in understanding the visual impact of Warhol's *Sixteen Jackies* (1964) (figure 7). In the 1960s, America was afflicted with a near-constant string of monumental disasters that were broadcast by the media on a massive scale. Like Marilyn, Jackie Kennedy-Onassis' image underwent a metamorphosis, being transformed into a representation of national grief following the 1963 assassination of her husband, President John F. Kennedy. Immediately following the death of President Kennedy, Warhol, who according to friends was deeply impacted by the event, selected eight recent press photographs of Jackie Kennedy which he felt depicted the transitions of a world forever altered.⁵¹ These images showcased Jackie both before the tragedy and in the aftermath of her husband's assassination, capturing the mourning widow during an incomprehensible and traumatic loss. For days the nation grieved alongside Jackie, her anguished expression becoming a symbol of the shock and sorrow felt by the American public.

Like *Marilyn Diptych*, Warhol again uses repetition in *Sixteen Jackies* to emulate the visual effect of a Byzantine iconostasis, much like the one from his Pittsburgh neighborhood church. In Byzantine iconography, repetition is used to emphasize the divine presence and convey a sense of timelessness, with each repeated image representing a moment of eternity. Warhol's use of repetition in *Sixteen Jackies* not only pays homage to this tradition but also adds a new layer of meaning to his work. The repetition in *Sixteen Jackies* amplifies the emotional impact of Jackie's grief and the nation's collective mourning. As indicated by the title, Jackie's image is printed sixteen times in a neat, grid-like pattern. Arranged side-by-side, the photographs of Jackie smiling bear a striking contrast to her joyless and empty expression following the assassination of her husband. This juxtaposition emphasizes the weight of her intense despair.

⁵¹ Bastian, "Death and Disaster in the Work of Andy Warhol," 27.

Just as the Virgin Mary bore the sorrows of her people, so too does Warhol's *Sixteen Jackies* bear witness not only to Jackie's personal suffering but to the shared grief of the mourning nation.

Using a restricted color palette of only blue, white, and gold to fill the negative space around Jackie's printed outline, Warhol visually relates *Sixteen Jackies* to the iconography of the Virgin. In the Byzantine tradition, the Virgin is commonly represented in blue robes with gold trim, a golden halo, and a white handkerchief attached to her belt to wipe away the tears of those who come to her with their suffering. Warhol has cropped the images to draw our attention to Jackie's face and expression, yet her iconic pillbox hat persists, evocative of the Virgin's halo. If we relate this visual correlation to the event of Kennedy's assassination, the layered symbolism of *Sixteen Jackies* additionally evokes the narrative iconography of the Crucifixion and the Virgin in mourning. Just as the Virgin grieves the public execution of her son, so too does Jackie mourn the public assassination of her husband. Through this visual reference, it is possible that Warhol intended to draw a parallel between the martyrdom of both Christ and Kennedy, the implication being that Kennedy too promised deeply divided Americans a path to political salvation and was instead assassinated for his convictions. As both a high-profile public figure and a surviving witness to this event, Jackie takes on the iconographic role of mourning Virgin in *Sixteen Jackies* as Warhol transforms her portrait into an icon, fixing her image in the realm of the eternal.

How, then, might these works function spiritually? In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin argues that cult objects (instruments of magic used in the service of a ritual, such as an icon used in liturgy) generate value through their uniqueness

and authenticity.⁵² In this regard, the “cult value” of such an object is deepened through its inaccessibility, not its exhibition. Take, for instance, the iconostasis typical of a Byzantine Catholic church: this highly ornamented screen—a portable icon in its own right—functions as a barrier separating the realms of the sacred and the mortal, serving as a link between heaven and the congregation. Only the clergy are permitted behind the iconostasis to the altar where the Eucharist is performed. In some churches, such as St. John Chrysostom in Pittsburgh, the iconostasis allows for some visibility—the congregation can perhaps see the spatial icons depicted in the apse or catch a fleeting glimpse of the clergy as they move about—while the altar and icons behind the iconostasis remain obscured from our vision. Others conceal this sacred space altogether with floor-to-ceiling iconostases with a single door through which only the clergy can pass, shutting us out behind them. In this example, we can see that locking sacred items away and out of sight heightens their cult value. Many churches cover images of the Virgin for most of the year, only unveiling them during special liturgical rituals. Only priests may approach the altar and certain divine statues.⁵³ This separation, inaccessibility, rarity, and isolation generates cult value.

For Benjamin, a cult object (which we now recognize as a work of art) possesses an “aura.” The aura of an artwork is “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be,” meaning that the value of a work of art is based on its singular presence and perceived authenticity.⁵⁴ Through mechanical reproduction, Benjamin insists that art has become secularized and has lost its original cult value. Instead, it has gained a new exhibition value, allowing for broad dissemination and accessibility of art to a much wider audience. This

⁵² Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1936” (1935), 6.

⁵³ Byung-Chul Han, “The Society of Exhibition,” in *The Transparency Society* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2015), 9.

⁵⁴ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1936,” 3.

has led to a democratization of art, where it can be seen and appreciated by a larger and more diverse group of people. Benjamin claims that technological reproducibility (namely film and photography) cause the aura to decay by draining the artwork of its uniqueness and authenticity.⁵⁵ Yet where Benjamin sees only imitation, I would argue that Warhol perhaps viewed the aura of celebrity as a result of a multiplication of images, and that mass dissemination and replication even reifies that aura through fame and widespread notoriety.

Benjamin argues that the authenticity of an original piece eludes technological reproducibility, but that is precisely the point which Warhol makes through appropriation and repetition of images: the authenticity of an artwork can only be perceived through its many inauthentic replicas. We can apply this logic to celebrities as well. The *Mona Lisa*, for instance, is the most reproduced painting in the world. We would not travel from other continents to view it in the Louvre and experience its aura in person if we had not seen its image endlessly reproduced in magazines and books, printed on bags, or referenced in film and television. This concept corresponds with the theory of icons, in which the aura of the original is captured through endless reproductions of the prototype. The same applies to Marilyn, whose soul is the authentic original, while her portrait remains a reproduction that perpetuates the enigma of her personality. Marilyn's fame and fortune generate her mystery, which is amplified through the endless reproductions of her image in movies and magazines. The concept of aura is not an archaic form of existence that has been replaced by technological advancement, but instead, it is a result of technological reproducibility. The aura is like the reflection of an object that is only perceived in contrast with its copies, similar to how the spiritual power and value of a religious icon is increased by its reproductions.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 4.

The cult value of reproductions allows for the experience of the aura of the original artwork, which Benjamin argues is lost in technological reproducibility. This is exemplified in the case of Marilyn, whose image has become a cult object that carries the aura of the original with it. The fact that Marilyn's image continues to be reproduced and revered decades after her death suggests that there is still a powerful cultural attachment to her as an icon. The Byzantine theory of icons similarly emphasizes the power of images as mediators between the divine and human realm. Icons are considered holy objects and their production and veneration are closely tied to religious practice. The cult value of icons was heightened by their separation from the world, and their ability to channel the presence of the divine.

In a similar way, Warhol's paintings of Marilyn and Jackie elevate their images to an iconic status, capturing their auras and essence through the medium of painting. The replication of both Marilyn's and Jackie's image through Warhol's prints and subsequent reproductions heightens their cult value by making their image accessible to a wider audience. In Byzantine theory, the aura of an icon is closely related to its cult value, which is the veneration and reverence that a particular image or object receives due to its association with a religious figure or event. This is similar to the way that Marilyn's image has become iconic and revered in popular culture due to her status as a celebrity and symbol of beauty and glamor. Furthermore, the process of reproducing an image, whether it be an icon or a photograph, can actually enhance its aura and cult value by making it more widely accessible and visible. This is exemplified in the way that Byzantine icons were reproduced and distributed, as each copy of an original icon is believed to possess the same divine power and aura as its prototype. Similarly, Warhol's mass reproduction of Marilyn's and Jackie's images through screen printing made their images more ubiquitous and accessible, thereby enhancing their statuses as icons. Like a Byzantine icon, the

repeated images of Marilyn and Jackie take on a ritualistic quality and are associated with cult value. Additionally, the aura of Marilyn, which is her unique and transcendent quality, is captured and emphasized by Warhol's reproductions. The repeated image of Marilyn becomes a symbol of her timeless beauty and celebrity status, creating an aura that extends beyond her physical presence.

Using the Pop principles of reproduction and appropriation, Warhol extends the aura of both Marilyn and Jackie. When we view *Gold Marilyn Monroe* or *Sixteen Jackies*, we understand that we are viewing an indexical sign of either Marilyn or Jackie—a specter, if you will. We understand that we are not standing before Marilyn or Jackie in the flesh, nor an original photograph. However, in consumer culture, celebrities are fixed in the realm of the eternal. Their images possess a static duality of being representative of both the physical person and of their mythic celebrity persona, similar to the depictions of saints in hagiographic literature. Marilyn, like the *Mona Lisa*, embodies a beauty that is immortalized in art or film, surpassing her physical appearance. This enduring quality is what creates her aura. We remember Marilyn as a static figure, frozen in time as a product of consumer and celebrity culture, perpetuating her image as an eternal symbol of glamor and beauty. In his iconographic treatment of both Marilyn's and Jackie's portraits, Warhol divinizes the aura of their images, presenting their portraits as part of a contemporary liturgy.

Disaster

Martyrdom is a prominent theme throughout Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series, some of which bear eerie resemblance to biblical narrative icons. Among the *Disaster* works are numerous images of the perished forms of the recently deceased, such as Warhol's 1963 *White*

Burning Car III, taken from a photograph published in *Newsweek* on June 3, 1963 (figure 8).⁵⁶ Printed in black ink against a stark white canvas are five repeated images of a grisly car wreck. Our attention is first drawn to the crumpled and overturned car engulfed in flames from which a plume of smoke billows up and out of the frame. Once our eyes move away from the car, a strange scene begins to take form: a man casually strolls across the adjoining lawns between two cheery suburban houses, either failing to acknowledge or simply ignoring the astoundingly surreal crucifixion before him. On the upper-left side of the picture plane is the figure of a dead man. Flung from the burning car, his lifeless body is pinned to a spike on the telephone pole into which he crashed. His head is slumped to one side, his arms hanging limp at his sides, yet he is suspended upright on the post high above the ground. Although we cannot see his suffering, we can imagine the agony of his final moments. With Warhol's deeply religious upbringing in mind, it seems only natural that this tabloid photograph would grab his attention not only for its gore, but its resemblance to Christ's Crucifixion. Without Warhol's intervention, the image of this victim would not receive the same veneration as the revered icons of Marilyn or Jackie, yet Warhol elevates the gruesome tabloid image of this man's demise to be on par with Christ's own suffering.

The victim pictured in *White Burning Car III* may be seen as a modern martyr in his own right. In Warhol's deeply religious upbringing, martyrdom was a prominent theme, and it's clear that the victim's final moments resemble the agony of Christ's crucifixion. The victim in *White Burning Car III* may not have been a saint or a religious figure, but in Warhol's representation of the event, he becomes a symbol of sacrifice, a modern-day martyr whose suffering is elevated to the level of religious iconography. Unlike Christian martyrs who have died for their religious

⁵⁶ Donna M. De Salvo, "Andy Warhol: I Work Seven Days a Week," in *Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (Yale University Press, 2018), 25.

beliefs, this victim is a martyr of modernity, a symbol of the dangers and risks of the contemporary world. Warhol's use of the image highlights the ways in which modernity can be both violent and unpredictable, and the potential for anyone to become a martyr of the modern world. Thus, this instance of martyrdom is not bound by religious beliefs, but rather to the perils and uncertainties of a rapidly evolving world, where we are often mere casualties of modernity sacrificed in the name of industrial progress.

White Burning Car III is one of several photographs of cadavers published in the media which Warhol appropriated for use in the *Disaster* series, along with other various images of horrific car wrecks like that of *Orange Car Crash* (1963) (figure 9). Dragging themselves out from under the crushing weight of an overturned vehicle, the subjects of Warhol's *Orange Car Crash* look back in agony at the twisted form of their fellow passenger, whose blank expression informs us that she has not survived the crash. Behind the dead woman's head is what appears to be the lower half of another rider who, judging by their crumpled posture, has met the same grave end. The pavement is streaked with what we can only assume to be blood, engine fluid, or a grotesque palette of each, forming a dark trail that ends with the limp forms of the deceased. The composition is split into two parts: a starless night sky above and the horizontal figures below, the overturned car serving as the dividing line between the two realms. As Warhol repeats the image from top to bottom of the canvas, they begin to overlap and fade, becoming further distorted as if over-exposed and stitched together in a darkroom. Just as it does in *White Burning Car III*, the repetition here comes to a sputtering halt; the bottom right has been left intentionally blank, inspiring feelings of finality—it is as if Warhol announces *this is the end*. Just as Byzantine icons of martyred saints aim to commemorate the saints' lives and sacrifice, tabloid images of car crashes can elicit a profound emotional response from viewers, who may

experience a sense of empathy or even identification with the depicted victims. As we as viewers witness the agonizing scene of *Orange Car Crash*, we meditate on our own mortality, and our shared potential to also become casualties of the American auto industry in the name of corporate greed. Here Warhol makes the suffering of the crash victims palpable, compelling us to contemplate the modern circumstances that contribute to their sacrifice.

In a radical departure from the candy-colored, ironic commercial imagery of Pop, *Disaster* works such as *Orange Car Crash* prompted a critical examination of the very pictorial language that defined the movement. By blending Byzantine iconography with Pop, Warhol created a unique visual language that presented the deaths of everyday Americans as icons worthy of veneration. In contrast, images of human suffering sensationalized by the news can also be seen as a distortion of the true meaning of martyrdom, as it reduces individuals to mere objects of spectacle and entertainment. Could *Orange Car Crash* provide commentary on the shameless media consumption of tragedy while also visually rendering these victims as martyrs to be venerated in the form of a secular icon?

In *White Burning Car III* and *Orange Car Crash*, the lifeless forms of those who suffered agonizing deaths not only remind viewers of the transient nature of life, but also confront us with the harsh realities of modern society ever-present in the zeitgeist of the 1960s, where the perils of modernity were brazenly apparent. These paintings serve as haunting reminders of the dangers and uncertainties of a rapidly changing world, where advancements in technology and industry have given rise to new levels of risk and vulnerability. As Warhol once said of the suicide and car crash victims, “My death series was divided into two parts, the first one famous deaths and the second one people nobody ever heard of ... It’s not that I feel sorry for them, it’s just that people go by and it doesn’t really matter that someone unknown was killed ... I still care about

people but it would be much easier not to care, it's too hard to care."⁵⁷ For Warhol, the real tragedy is dying unknown. The figures that adorn Warhol's canvases, whose deaths have been transformed into public spectacles, receive his sympathy in the form of monumental paintings which commemorate them as secular martyrs of modernity. Perhaps Warhol hoped to dignify these otherwise unknown victims in a way which was most familiar to him: as the saints of a rapidly modernizing world, their suffering memorialized as parallel to the brave sacrifice of martyrdom.

Warhol's inclination to appropriate macabre images of the recently deceased and present them in a gallery or museum setting is best understood through the use of iconography depicting martyrdom in the Eastern Catholic tradition. Imagery of death in Byzantine iconography is quite varied; although Byzantine art avoided showing decaying corpses, the *Menologia* (an illustrated manuscript which functioned as an ecclesiastical calendar and short martyrology used for services in the Byzantine Catholic Church) depicted hundreds of bloody executions of martyrs and other saints.⁵⁸ Just as Christ made the ultimate sacrifice to save humankind, so too did the martyred saints die defending their faith. Morbid as they are, illustrations of their grisly torment function as memorials of their bravery and virtue, just like pictorial representations of the Crucifixion.

Like portrait-type icons of the divine which Warhol emulates in his paintings of Marilyn and Jackie, images of martyrdom serve a similar purpose in the church to engage deeper levels of experience with the viewer than living church authorities were able to address.⁵⁹ As explained by

⁵⁷ Jonathan Flatley, "Warhol Gives Good Face: Publicity and the Politics of Prosopopoeia," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, edited by Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1996), 119.

⁵⁸ Branislav Cvetković, "The Living (and the) Dead: Imagery of Death in Byzantium and the Balkans," *Ikon* 4 (2011), 28-30.

⁵⁹ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 1.

art historian and theorist Hans Belting, the image of the dead (in the place of the missing body), the artificial body of the image (the medium), and the visible body of the living each interact in creating iconic presence as bodily presence.⁶⁰ He elaborates on this theory further, stating that:

Images traditionally live from the body's absence, which is either temporary or, in the case of death, final. This absence does not mean that images revoke absent bodies and make them return. Rather, they replace the body's essence with a different kind of presence. Iconic presence still maintains a body's absence, and turns it into what must be called visible absence. Images live from the paradox that they perform the presence of an absence or vice versa (which also applies to the telepresence of people in today's media). This paradox in turn is rooted in our experience to relate presence to visibility. Bodies are present because they are visible (even on the telephone the other body is absent). When absent bodies become visible in images, they use a vicarious visibility ... We therefore could rephrase the presence of an absence, which still is the most elementary definition of images, in the following way: images are present in their media, but they perform an absence, which they make visible.⁶¹

Just as Marilyn is no longer alive, her legacy endures in many forms, including the telepresence of the silver screen and in Warhol's art. Similarly, we as viewers are able to witness the bodily horror these victims of car wrecks and suicides endured long after their passing, memorialized eternally on the coveted canvases of one of the world's most famous artists. In choosing to represent these otherwise anonymous fatalities displayed in a gallery or museum setting, Warhol has given their image the value of permanence and timelessness reserved for the divine.

Where then do depictions like *Little Electric Chair* (1964-65) (figure 10), an instrument of capital punishment, fit into Warhol's collection of secular icons? Public debates about the abolition of the death penalty in the early 1960s brought the image of the electric chair to the forefront of the media as a symbol of the complex issues surrounding capital punishment.

Warhol's model for *Little Electric Chair* was the one in Sin Sing prison in Ossining, New York, with which 641 prisoners were executed by electrocution—the last of which took place in 1963,

⁶⁰ Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2005), 307–8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 312-13.

the year before he began his series of *Electric Chairs*.⁶² *Little Electric Chair* can be read as a silent protest against the death penalty, which is deepened further through Warhol's utilization of Byzantine pictorial language.

When observing the piece, one's eye is initially drawn to a solitary electric chair in the center of an otherwise empty room. A black cloud of shadows encroaches upon the pictured scene, descending from the distorted ceiling that has been overexposed in the process of transferring the photograph to a silkscreen. Darkened doorways lead to unknown halls beyond the grave stillness of this room. In the upper right corner a lone sign reads *SILENCE*, its message perhaps unintentionally mirroring the eternal silence of death—or the silence of its sitters who are no longer able to appeal their lethal sentence. Leather straps dangle on either side of the empty chair, calling to mind both the victims it has already claimed and those who await it. Initially printed in monochromatic grayscale to mimic its press origin, Warhol soon began to opt for a brighter, candy-colored palette in a serial arrangement, as seen in *Twelve Electric Chairs* (figure 11). Obscured and outshone by the repetitive pattern and bright color palette, the electric chair only emerges upon closer inspection.

Warhol's straightforward presentation of this highly politicized instrument of death prompts the viewer to consider the systems of power that determine whose crimes are punishable by death, akin to the biblical Last Judgment. Familiarly, this chair is transformed from a grotesque means of execution and into a spiritual object, much like the crucifix. Used for a distinctly cruel form of execution, the cross is represented in Christian iconography as a symbol of salvation. In rendering the electric chair a ritual object, Warhol implies its sitters' spiritual transcendence as martyrs of the prison industrial complex. Conversely, *Little Electric Chair*

⁶² Ingrid Mössinger, "Introduction," in *Andy Warhol: Death and Disaster* (Chemnitz: Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz, 2014), 10.

seems to reveal an America which, despite its evangelical reputation, has replaced the redemption of the cross with the revenge wrought by the death penalty.⁶³ Ultimately, Warhol's depiction of the electric chair elicits a reflection on the morality of state-sanctioned violence and the value of human life under such hegemonic structures, evoking themes of verdict and salvation inherent to the Last Judgment.

Together these early works from the *Death and Disaster* series premiered at the Sonnabend Gallery in Paris in January of 1964.⁶⁴ Entitled 'Death in America,' the exhibition featured a compelling display of American vanitas and memento mori, with Warhol's painting of the recently deceased Marilyn emitting a memorializing aura at the center of the exhibition.⁶⁵ Warhol's show received mixed reviews—for many, the *Disaster* works marked a turning point in the Pop movement, breaking from polemic depictions of supermarkets and television ads and instead confronting the public with the violence and raw terror of contemporary American life. Though Warhol did not have the advantage of flickering candles or shifting sunlight of the church, he utilized harsh gallery spotlights to illuminate his icons; through these means Warhol was able to transport the spiritual presence and divinity of Byzantine icons into the museum space, forming an iconostasis of contemporary icons in secular disguise.

Femme Fatale

As fate would have it, Warhol's own disaster became national news on June 3rd of 1968. Just four years after his debut of the *Disaster* works, Warhol was shot by Valerie Solanas—a radical feminist and writer who Warhol had recently cast in a small role in his 1967 film *I, a*

⁶³ Johnson, "Warhol's Byzantine Iconography," 88.

⁶⁴ Stimson, *Citizen Warhol*, 190.

⁶⁵ Enwezor, "Andy Warhol and the Painting of Catastrophe," 38.

Man. In his autobiography, Warhol describes the event from the perspective of a close friend, saying, “The founder of the Society for Cutting Up Men wanted you to produce a script she’d written and you weren’t interested and she just came up to your work studio one afternoon. There were a lot of people there and you were talking on the telephone. You didn’t know her too well and she just walked in off the elevator and started shooting.”⁶⁶ Having undergone surgery to remove the bullet, Warhol lived with deep scars that twisted across his abdomen, serving as a poignant reminder that he was not an icon, but rather a human being with a fragile, mortal form.⁶⁷

Much like the subjects of his *Disaster* series, Warhol’s assassination attempt and its gory details became a tabloid spectacle. On June 4, 1968, the front page of the New York *Daily News* proclaimed in large, bold font: “ACTRESS SHOOTS ANDY WARHOL” (figure 12). The following page included an enlarged photograph of Warhol strapped to a stretcher and being lifted into an ambulance by what appears to be two police officers and a paramedic (figure 13). Lying with his head slumped over one side of the stretcher, Warhol’s limp figure echoes the twisted forms of the dead in *Orange Car Crash*. Yet, perhaps most eerily, the news of Warhol’s shooting shared the most in common with the first of the *Disaster* works, *129 Die in Jet! (Plane Crash)*. Like the coverage of Warhol’s near-fatal shooting, the source image for *129 Die in Jet! (Plane Crash)* was also pulled from the front page of the *Daily News*. Warhol himself made the connection between the first of the *Death and Disaster* series with Solanas’ assassination attempt, saying: “Whenever I look back at that front page, I’m struck by the date—June 4, 1962. Six years to the date later, my own disaster was the front page headline.”⁶⁸ This remarkable

⁶⁶ Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 12.

⁶⁷ Elie, “Andy Warhol’s Religious Journey.”

⁶⁸ Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*, 65.

coincidence aligns Warhol with the subjects of the *Disaster* series as an icon and martyr of the twenty-first century.

The attempted assassination of Warhol by Solanas has been interpreted as a tragic consequence of Warhol's own fame, which positioned him as a martyr for his celebrity status. Warhol's persona and work had elevated him to the level of a cultural icon, but they also made him a target for Solanas, who viewed him as a symbol of a corrupt society she sought to overthrow. This parallel between Warhol's status as a martyr and the Byzantine Catholic tradition of depicting holy figures who were also targets of persecution is striking. Byzantine icons often depicted martyrs who suffered and died for their beliefs, and these images were venerated by the faithful. Similarly, Warhol's near-death experience and subsequent recovery only added to his mystique and solidified his status as a cultural icon. The enduring power of Warhol's celebrity and the veneration of martyrs in the Byzantine tradition demonstrate the complex and often dangerous relationship between worship and persecution. In both cases, the individuals are elevated to an iconic status and become the subject of admiration and veneration.

Martyrs were often depicted in religious art and were considered models of faith and devotion in the Byzantine pictorial tradition; similarly, Warhol, as a cultural icon, was revered and celebrated for his contributions to art and popular culture. Furthermore, both Warhol and the Byzantine martyrs were also subjected to persecution and violence. The Byzantine martyrs were often executed for their religious beliefs, while Warhol was targeted by a violent act that almost took his life. The fact that Warhol survived the shooting and went on to live with the scars of the event only adds to his iconic status and the cult of personality surrounding him. The parallels between Warhol's shooting, the media coverage it received, and the depiction of martyrs in Byzantine iconography underscore the potential dangers of elevating living individuals to such

iconic status, as it can render them targets of persecution and violence. The tabloid imagery of Warhol's shooting fits into the larger Death and Disaster series by exemplifying the series' theme of violence and death in contemporary American culture. The images of Warhol's bloody and wounded body, which were widely circulated in the media, are similar to the violent and disturbing images that Warhol used as source material for his *Death and Disaster* paintings. In this sense, the tabloid images of Warhol's shooting can be seen as a kind of “real-life” manifestation of the themes and imagery explored in the *Death and Disaster* series.

Apocalypse Now

Though the *Disaster* works are not explicitly religious, the series can be interpreted as echoing the Christian theology of eschatology. Eschatology is a theological branch that focuses on the ultimate destiny of humanity, final events in human history, and the end of the world. Its significance in Byzantine Catholicism lies in shaping beliefs about the afterlife and the goal of human existence, and often includes themes of judgment, salvation, heaven, hell, and the return of Christ.⁶⁹ The disaster images Warhol selected depict moments or objects representative of extreme violence and suffering, much like apocalyptic literature in Eastern Catholicism concerning the end of the world and the Last Judgment. The series can be seen as a meditation on the fragility and transience of human life and, in relation to eschatology, the inevitability of death and Judgement Day—be that by the Christian God or by the American public. In the case of both the *Death and Disaster* series and eschatology, there is an emphasis on the fate of humanity and an insistence to come to terms with the reality of death.

⁶⁹ Jürgen Moltmann and Margaret Kohl, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Trans. Margaret Kohl. First Fortress Press edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 4.

As exemplified by Warhol's disasters, eschatology and disaster are inextricably linked. Regarding eschatology, Christians have long nurtured a vocabulary of disaster, seeking to identify the signs of the times which mark the approach of the final judgment.⁷⁰ Traditionally, these signs have consisted of natural disasters such as earthquakes, famines, or plagues. Yet as our world has become marked by the rapid advancement of technology and industrialization, apocalyptic signs have been joined by man-made disasters—economic collapse, chemical spills, and nuclear war.⁷¹ Thus, as we continue to progress further into the future, our ability to imagine, anticipate, and witness disasters on an apocalyptic scale has only increased. As a result, what were once regarded as religious manifestations of catastrophe have since become integrated into secular popular culture.⁷²

By using visual tropes of Byzantine iconography, Warhol creates a reflection of the relationship between eschatology and modern disasters in his *Death and Disaster* series. The images of car wrecks, plane crashes, electric chairs, and other violent scenes evoke a sense of doom and impending destruction, much like the catastrophic consequences of modern human actions. Warhol's focus on these media spectacles of destruction, as well as his frequent use of Byzantine iconography in his presentation of these images, can be seen as a comment on the fragility and vulnerability of human life in the face of modernity. Like Christianity's emphasis on the need for redemption and salvation in the face of the end times, Warhol's works serve as a reminder of the need for spiritual and moral preparation in the face of the unpredictability and uncertainty of the modern world.

⁷⁰ Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium* (Syracuse University Press, 1986), viii.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Further, the relationship between eschatology and disaster can also be seen in the media coverage of disasters. With the increasing power of technology and the speed of communication in the twentieth century, disasters and their aftermaths became more quickly disseminated through various media platforms, resulting in a heightened awareness and anticipation of potential catastrophic events. Moreover, the sensationalist nature of media coverage often draws parallels between disasters and apocalyptic scenarios, further fueling eschatological beliefs. This has led to a cultural preoccupation with disaster and the end of the world, with the media perpetuating and amplifying this fascination. As such, the media has become a key player in the fusion of disaster and the millennium, perpetuating a culture of fear and anticipation of total catastrophe. Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series reflects our preoccupation with disaster, as it confronts the public with the violence and raw terror of contemporary American life. By appropriating and recontextualizing images of death and disaster in the media, Warhol underscores the exploitive and voyeuristic nature of news coverage, while also blurring the lines between the Christian theology of eschatology and media sensationalism of human disaster.

Being a spectator of calamities has become a quintessential part of the modern experience. Media images of tragedy are presented to the public as objects to be regarded, rendering us spectators to other people's suffering from a distance through the medium of photography. The phrase "if it bleeds, it leads" has become an unofficial guideline for news outlets and photojournalism, which often rely heavily on our shock as viewers in witnessing the grisly details of true horror. But in addition to shock, there is often shame in looking. There are those of us who socially may have an ethical right to view images of extreme suffering, such as a

coroner or surgeon, who possess the ability to learn from it or alleviate it. The rest of us, whether or not we intend to be, are voyeurs.⁷³

However, in the Christian tradition there are instances where depictions of bodily suffering are presented to us without an ethical charge; in fact, the act of looking at others' pain is encouraged to heighten one's sense of morality. Illustrations depicting the gruesome executions of the twelve apostles are commonplace in the Byzantine Catholic Church, as exemplified by the use of a Menologia in liturgical service. In addition to commemorating the lives of saints, the illustrated scenes of martyrdom in a Menologia functioned as an example of the dedication and discipline one must put into their faith. Both the illustrated scenes of passion and narrative icons of martyrdom remind the beholder to strive for the same moral standing as Christ's own disciples, the most outstanding members of the faith.

Like icons of individual holy figures, narrative scenes of martyrdom serve to keep the memory of saints' virtue alive alongside their portraits. Memory, thus, plays a crucial role in the theological basis of icons. Remembering is itself an ethical act, as memory is the only relation we are able to have with the dead.⁷⁴ To remember is to keep alive the spirit of those who have passed; to forget would be a heartless disservice. Since its conception, photography too has had an inherent relationship with death and memory. Any photographic image contains a trace of whatever or whomever is brought before the camera lens.⁷⁵ How, then, does one cement the impact of an image when we are incessantly overexposed to graphic images in the news? Certain photographs—in this case, emblems of suffering—can be used like depictions of martyrdom as a meditation on death, much like a memento mori, and to commemorate the deceased. Deviating

⁷³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 34.

⁷⁴ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 90.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

from the traditional hand-painted icon, Warhol uses the medium of photography as the material mediator between the physical icon and the divine. By doing so, he extends the power of the sitter's "trace" captured in the photograph, preserving their memory and iconic presence long after their death.

Though media sensationalism of these tragedies complicates the function of the *Disaster* works, it is possible for the works to simultaneously further the spectacle and consumption of tragedy *and* afford a level of dignity to the subjects of these photographs as deserving great veneration on par with the divine. On the one hand, his use of tabloid imagery and bright, eye-catching colors can be seen as perpetuating the media's tendency to sensationalize tragedy. On the other hand, Warhol's use of images that were originally meant for news dissemination and recontextualizing them as fine art, Warhol challenges the role of the media in shaping public opinion and sensationalizing tragedy. By taking images that were originally meant to shock and provoke a reaction from the public, and placing them in a new context, Warhol forces the viewer to re-examine their relationship with these images and their own emotional response to them. In doing so, he questions the media's power to manipulate public opinion and sensationalize tragedy, and suggests that these images can have a more complex and nuanced meaning beyond their original context. By fusing media sensationalism with the visual language of Byzantine iconography, Warhol perhaps amplifies the resonance of the *Disaster* works as a more accurate representation of martyrdom in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Like the glittering Byzantine icons of Christ, the Virgin in mourning, or martyred saints which offered meaning to the cruel process of life and death, mid-twentieth century art also

responded to the prevalence of death in everyday life. Rather than contribute to the media consumption of others' suffering, Warhol's *Disaster* works seem to rectify this, presenting the dead to us as holy figures deserving of our reverence. As Warhol divinizes the dead in his *Death and Disaster* series, he allows these images to pivot from their former lives as tabloid spectacles, instead taking on new meaning in Warhol's contemporary version of Eastern Catholic iconography. In the news, the deaths of the famous and the nameless alike are presented to the public for shameless consumption fueled by morbid curiosity. In his application of Byzantine pictorial tropes, Warhol shifts how we engage with these images, prompting us to consider our own role in their exploitation.

In light of his *Death and Disaster* series, it is safe to say that Warhol, in his own right, was an icon-writer. However, to say that his icons are nontraditional would be an understatement—Warhol's fusion of Byzantine Catholicism with secular subject matter recontextualizes secular images within Catholic thought: all is holy, though some things may appear sacrilegious.⁷⁶ Easy as it may be to deem Warhol's representation of death in the series as callous, detached, and consumerist, reading these works through an Eastern Catholic lens opens the conversation to much more nuanced interpretations of how these works function in both the museum setting and in the public eye. Beyond the *Death and Disaster* series, this approach can be applied to Warhol's greater body of work. It is no secret that Warhol often utilized Christian iconography in his artwork, and this can (and has been) interpreted in many different ways; yet it is clear that Warhol drew from a source which he was immersed in for the entirety of his life: religious icons. Applying this theory to his oeuvre as part of a deeper investigation on the

⁷⁶ Johnson, "Warhol's Byzantine Iconography," 97.

influence of icons may reveal a body of works that together form an iconostasis of contemporary American iconography.

All are made holy in Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series, as he presents the radically contrasting themes of sainthood, commodity, eschatology, and spectacle packaged and presented as sacred icons. Understanding the influence of Byzantine Catholic iconography on Warhol's work can aid us in exploring not only how the series functioned in the social and political climate of the 1960s, but its relevance today. While we continue to exist in a world where human suffering is made increasingly visible by the media, we are exposed to horrendous catastrophes on a near-daily basis. Be it environmental or man-made, disaster is seemingly lurking around every corner, waiting to claim us all. America is in a state of continual political polarization; our citizens are continually robbed of their human rights; and we continue to progress our industrial and technological expansion at an alarming rate with total disregard to its toll on human life. As we become increasingly exposed to death and disaster in the 24-hour news cycle, Warhol reminds us to shift our attention to the victims of these tragedies—onto the very real and precious lives of individuals whose final moments are exploited and sensationalized in the news, their absence forever memorialized through their iconic presence.

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Figures



Figure 1. Interior of St. John Chrysostom Byzantine Catholic Church at Christmastime, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Credit: <https://catholicnewslive.com/story/653920>. Accessed September 30, 2022.)



Figure 2. Andy Warhol, *129 Die in Jet! (Plane Crash)*, 1962. Acrylic and pencil on canvas, 100 x 72 in (254 x 182.9 cm). Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany.



Figure 3. Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962. Silkscreen ink and acrylic paint on 2 canvases, 80.88 x 114 in (205.44 x 289.56 cm) each. Tate Modern, London, England.

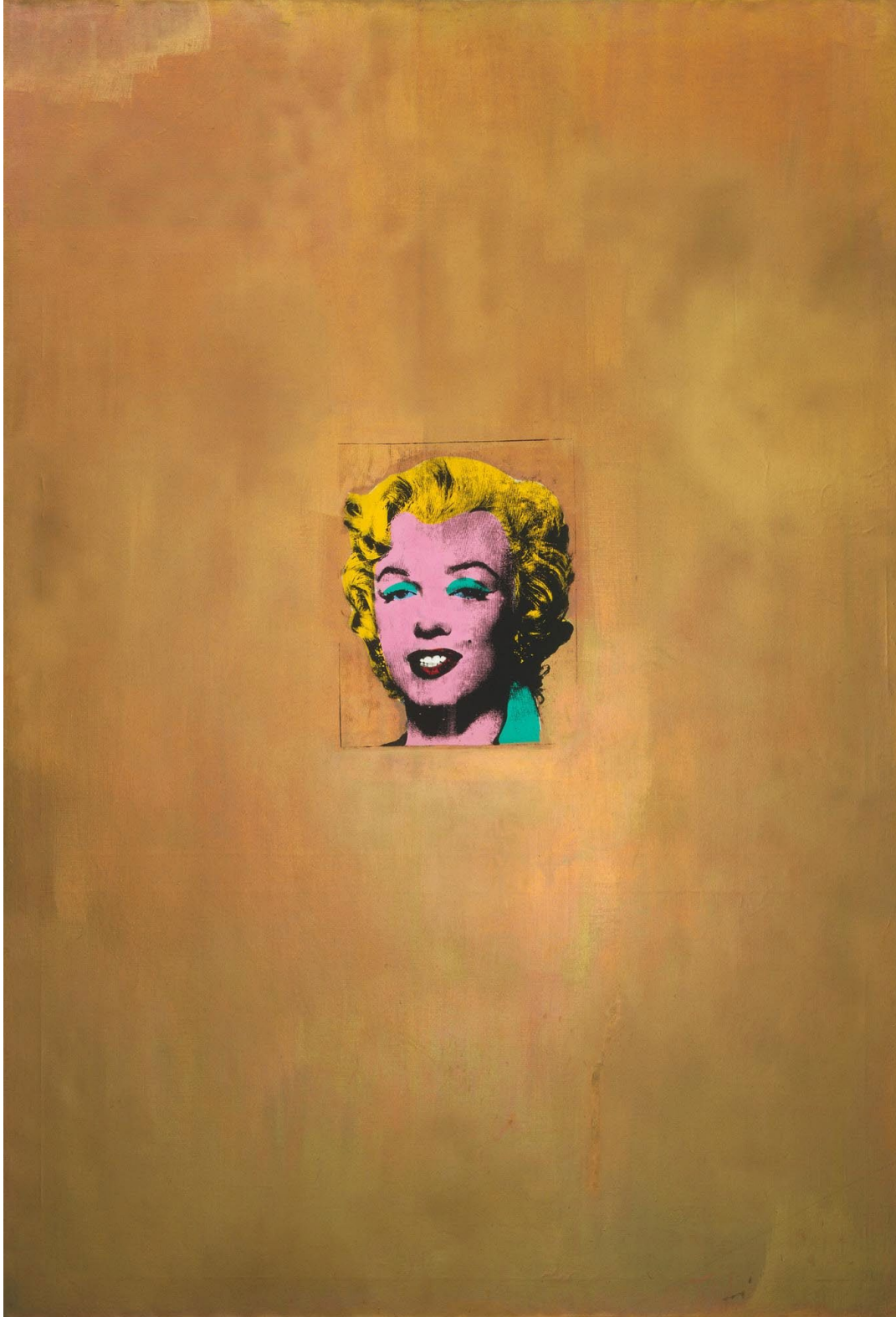


Figure 4. Andy Warhol, *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, 1962. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 6'11 1/4 x 57 in (211.4 x 144.7 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 5. Apse of St. John Chrysostom Byzantine Catholic Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Credit: <https://byztex.blogspot.com/2013/07/the-redemption-of-bathsheba-before.html>. Accessed September 30, 2022.)



Figure 6. *The Black Madonna of Częstochowa, Poland, c. 14th century.* Wooden icon, bejeweled, 122 x 82 cm. Jasna Góra Monastery, Częstochowa, Poland.

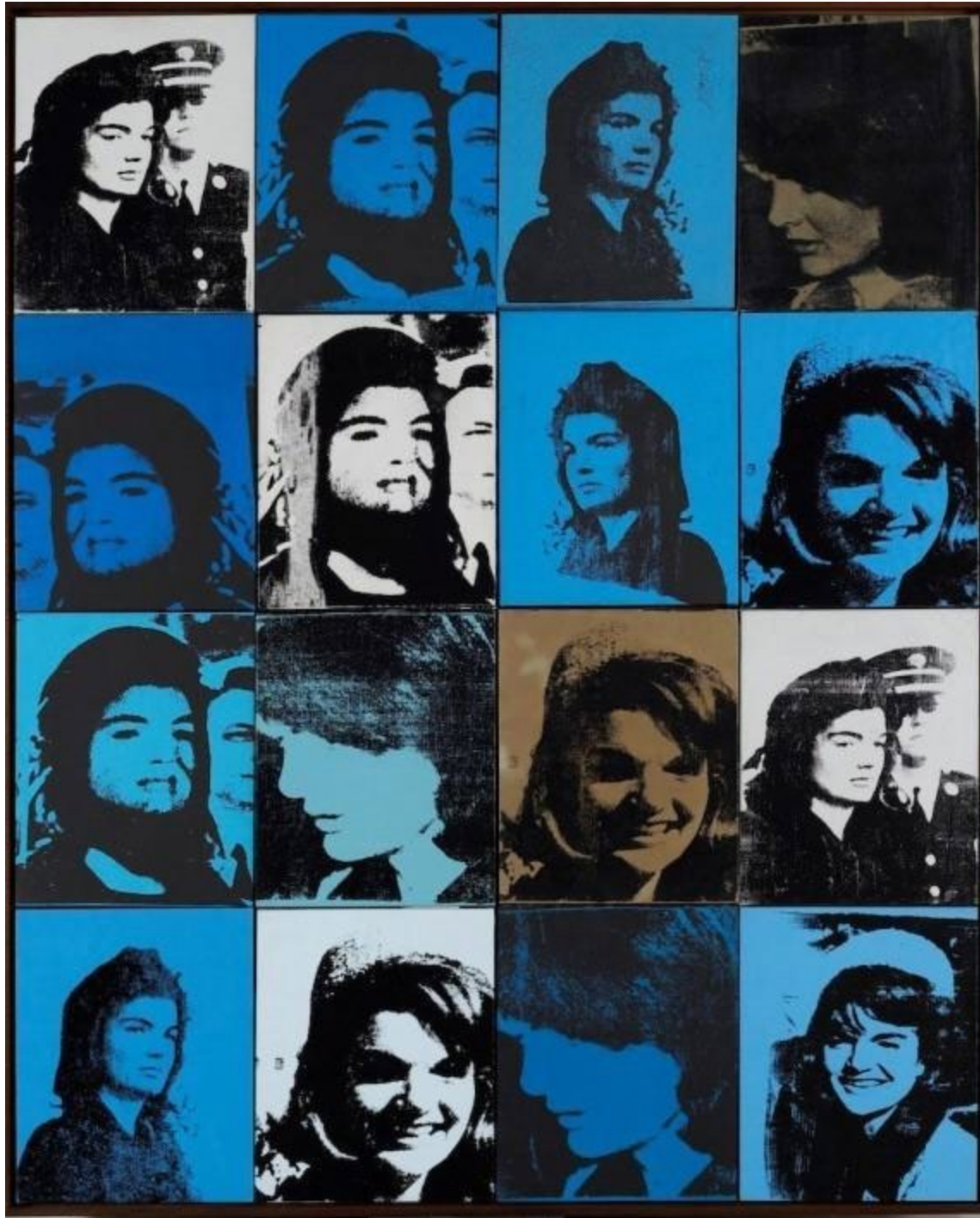


Figure 7. Andy Warhol, *Sixteen Jackies*, 1964. Acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas in 16 panels, 20 x 16 in (50.8 x 40.6 cm) each. Muğrabi Collection.

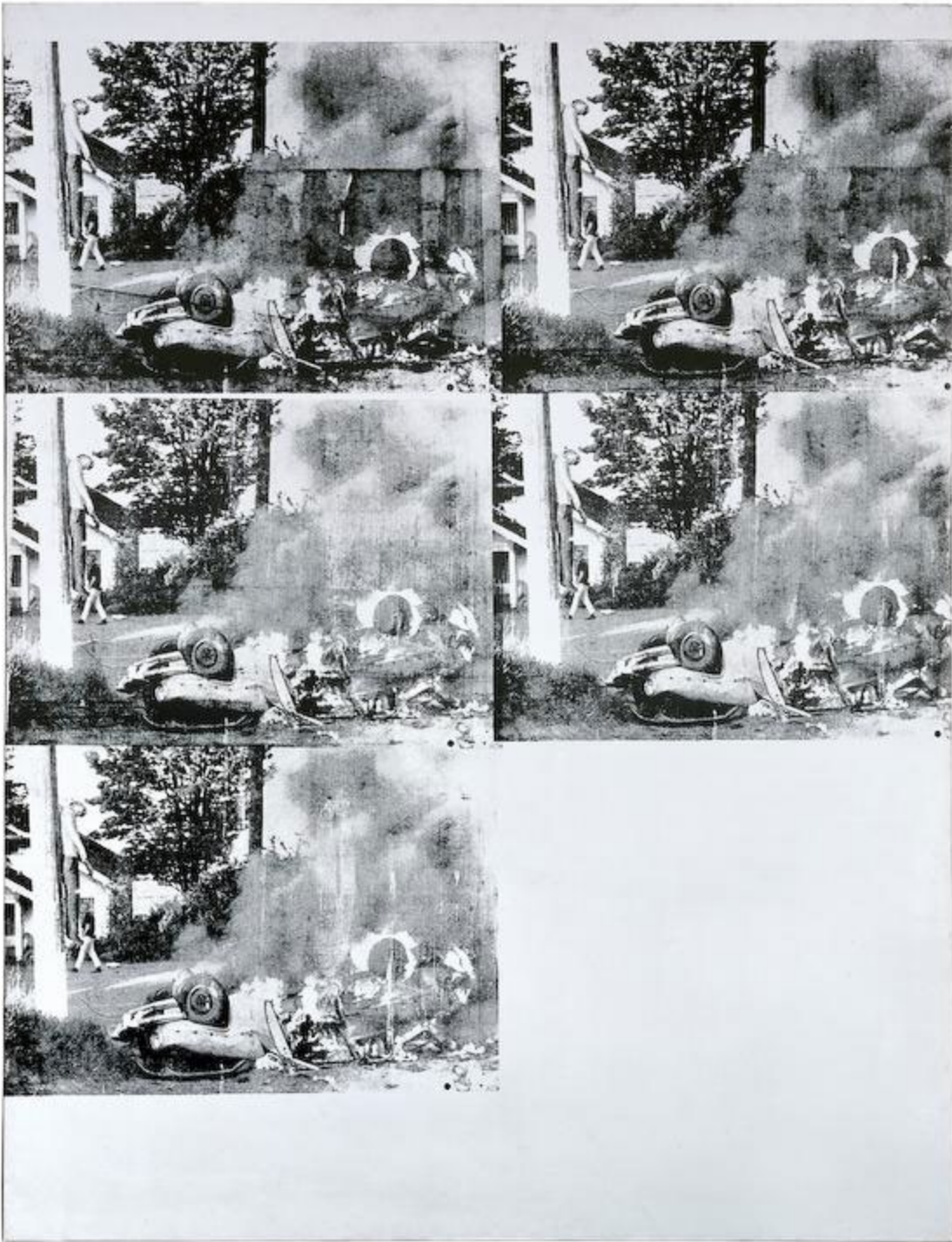


Figure 8. Andy Warhol, *White Burning Car III*, 1963. Silkscreen ink on linen, 100 ½ x 78 ¾ in. (255.3 x 200 cm). The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh.

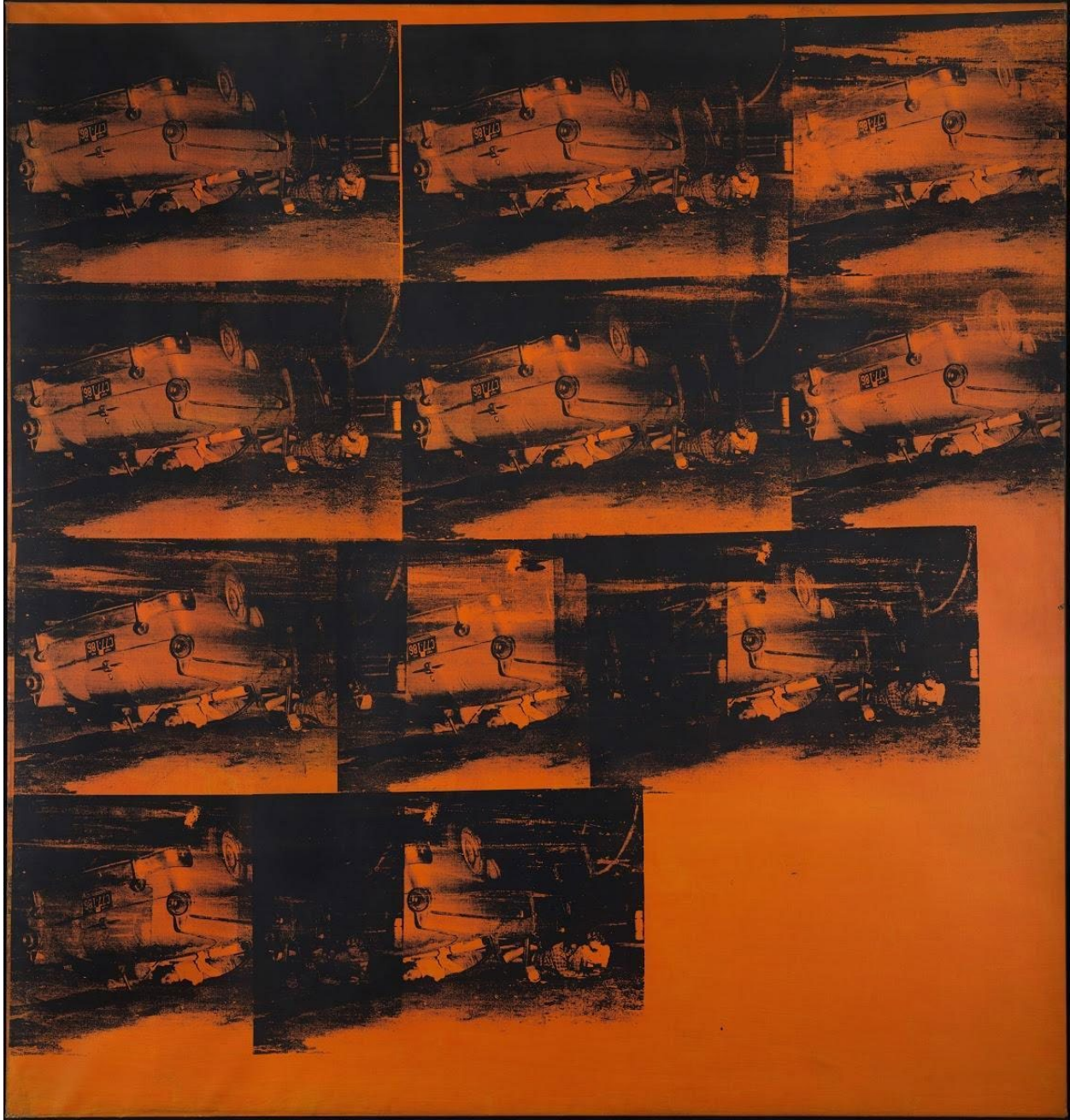


Figure 9. Andy Warhol, *Orange Car Crash (5 Deaths 11 Times in Orange) (Orange Disaster)*, 1963. Acrylic paint on canvas, 82.6 x 86.6 in (210 x 220 cm). Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin, Italy.



Figure 10. Andy Warhol, *Little Electric Chair*, 1964-65. Acrylic paint and silkscreen ink on canvas, 21 ³/₄ x 27 ³/₄ in (55.25 x 70.49 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California.



Figure 11. Andy Warhol, *Twelve Electric Chairs*, 1964. Synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on canvas, 88 ½ x 84 ¼ in (224.8 x 213.9 cm). Private collection.

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New York, N.Y. 10017, Tuesday, June 4, 1968*

WEATHER: Sunny and warm.

ACTRESS SHOOTS ANDY WARHOL

Cries 'He Controlled My Life'



NEWS photo by Jack Smith

Guest From London Shot With Pop Art Movie Man

Shot in attack on underground movie producer Andy Warhol, London art gallery owner Mario Amaya, about 30, walks to ambulance. Warhol was shot and critically wounded by one of his female stars, Valerie Solanas, 28, the "girl on the staircase" in one of his recent films. She walked into Andy's sixth-floor office at 33 Union Square West late yesterday afternoon and got off at least five shots. Valerie later surrendered. See → —Stories on page 3



NEWS photo by Tom Monahan

Warhol (r.) was doing his thing with friend in Village spot recently.

Figure 12. The front page of the *Daily News* on June 4, 1968, regarding Warhol being shot and critically wounded by an actress he hired to play in one of his films, Valerie Solanas. (Credit: NY Daily News via Getty Images.)



Figure 13. Andy Warhol being carried to an ambulance after being shot by Valerie Solanas on June 3rd, 1968. (Credit: Jack Smith/NY Daily News Archive/Getty Images).