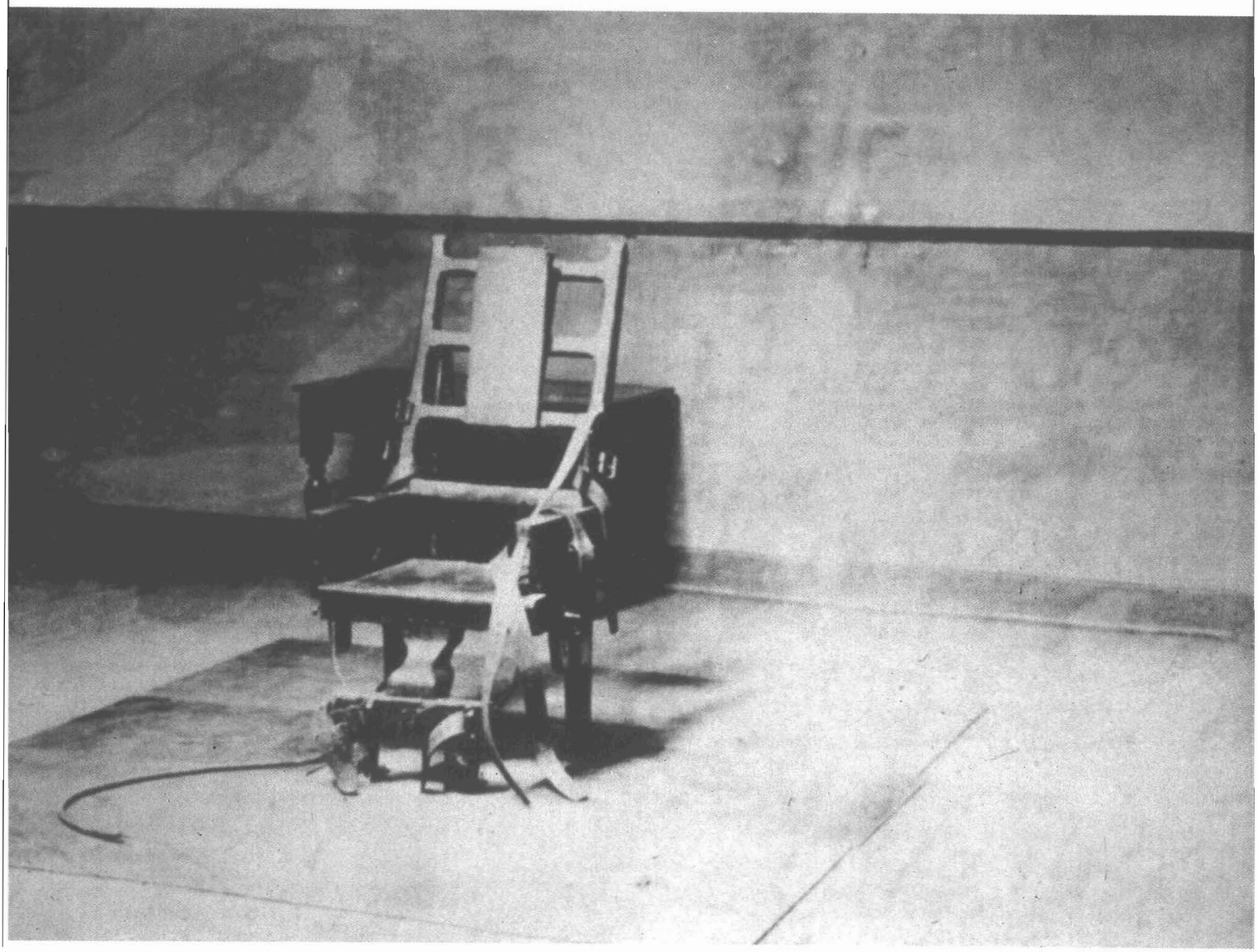


Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair,* 1967.

DECAPITATION, CRITICISM AND TERROR

PHILIP MONK

Where are we with respect to the body, we who for more than a decade have experienced text as a body and the body as text; who have experienced the body as inscribed in and as a network of social relations or social texts; for those of us who have produced a type of writing which called for certain effects, effects of writing that took the body as a model, or rather took the body of the text as licence, and thus gave itself the appearance of a politics?

I speak as a writer, more than as a curator which institutionally defines me, and as a writer who writes on art, who must physically confront the work of art before writing. Paul Valéry wrote that the painter "takes his body with him". What happens to the critic's – his or her – body in looking and writing? Or, what happens to the critic's body (and here I can only talk of *his* body, which happens to be *my* body) first in looking and then writing? Where does that body place and then displace itself in that activity?

Ten years ago this past month I published a pamphlet entitled *Peripheral/Drift: A Vocabulary of Theoretical Criticism*, organized alphabetically, where we find under the heading "Body/Convulsion" the following:

> Through criticism I bring my body (my language) into crisis. What is my body to me but a representation, an image-repertoire, an identity? That is the representation I bring to my body as a subject. But I am also inscribed in representation from "outside": against the insistence of this recording gaze (a technique) I offer the resistance of the surface of my body. Yet against this representation, my body convulses; it breaks; it disarticulates this inscribed surface of representation and identity. It distends and extends itself; or, rather, language/writing imposes a limit to the body, impels the body to the limit.
>
> The "truth" of the body (its phenomenology) is an ideology (not natural but created, with its own history); its limit, this necessary fiction. Phenomenology cannot ensure the "truth" of the body. Its promotion of the experience of temporality is only the most recent of abstractions created from the medi-

> tative space of the art gallery, while outside I am condemned to the political technology of my body. Against *this* body, against the resolution of tension in the experience of the work of art, all that is left to me in *my* body is my own physical disgust and convulsion, my own control of my body in the willed loss of control and usurption by cataclysmic desire. The convulsive body is exemplary in its lack of control, as a usurper of intensive moments, displacing energy over the body onto the other, outside of any hierarchy, identity or coercion. It is an anoedipal organ.

In the late nineteen seventies a different economy existed (in every sense), a "libidinal economy" to take the title of Jean-François Lyotard's book of 1974. The era of *Anti-Oedipus*, which began in North America with that book's translation in 1977, gave licence, under more names than Deleuze, to a certain style of writing that both eroticized and politicized text, confusing the two in a seemingly liberating way, even inscribing the death instinct positively.

My text on the body obviously was written under the excessive sign and tutelage of Georges Bataille. Amongst many possible, a critique of this attitude could be found in Sartre's review of Bataille's book *Inner Experience*. "Here then is an invitation to lose ourselves without forethought, without counterpart, without salvation. Is it sincere? . . . For, after all, M. Bataille writes, occupies a position at the Bibliothèque Nationale, reads, makes love, eats." Exactly. For Sartre, it is a question of responsibility and identity, in particular, the responsibility of writing, a writing that should be able to be ascribed to an identifiable author, that by nature, in that it is alive, can be located in a particular body. Is the invitation to lose ourselves sincere? For this writing has a body, named Bataille, that writes, occupies a position, reads, makes love, eats. The responsibility for the effects of writing, it seems, is tied to a body with its own proper name rather than to writing itself. The effects are controlled in that designation of a *mundane* body – the body that works, reads, etc. *That* body is proof against the loss promoted by this writing, which represents another body through the effects of its writing. That is, there are two bodies: the body in writing and the body that writes, and for Sartre one has to take responsibility for the representation of the other, the latter for the former. The means of controlling the body – and writing – is to designate one body as mundane, and this is the author's body, or the name of the author. That body outside the text represents the body inside, but only on the condition at the same time that the bodiliness of the former is negated. Sincerity lies not in the generalized relation between writing and body – which could be called the "death of the author" – (or even between writing and intention), but between writing and this responsibility.

That mundane body can be disposed of, however, as long as an identity is maintained. So the body is worthless, but in a different sense than Bataille's. This is the case for Sartre.

When he sits down to write, the body disappears. He repeats the most traditional philosophical gestures when he writes in the opening line of his 1936 study *Imagination*: "I look at this white sheet of paper lying on my desk". The white sheet certainly is no threat: it is merely the preparation of the traditional metaphor for the ground of certitude.

That white sheet of paper lets us recall the originating myth of an altogether other writing: of course, Mallarmé's blank. It is by way of that other white sheet of paper that we begin our itinerary, without necessarily lingering over Mallarmé, although still caught in his writing's effects, as we transpose the white sheet of paper illuminated by a writing lamp, to the exposed sheet of the photograph, and then to a certain inscription of photography in painting.

This itinerary necessarily is circumscribed by an historical moment and a negative movement. This moment and movement partake of an uncertain facing, as if of an other, but an other that is maintained in its difference as a generating force, not to be resolved in the Same, an ego or a project. To be maintained in that otherness might entail a threat to us, leading to the loss of one's head, and incurring a headless writing.

We will take these two instances – the losing of one's head and a headless writing – to be represented respectively by two writers, Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille. That historical moment consisted of the encounter of a generation of French writers with Hegel, who were thus guided by his thoughts on death, negation, and the dialectic of lordship and bondage. Obviously, I do not want to give an explanation of Hegel or a history of that encounter as mediated by the seminars of Alexander Kojève, only to signal what is pertinent as a model of meetings between a body and an image, but not merely as a model: this encounter occurs under the sign of death and through the movement of negativity.

Blanchot is preliminary. He enunciates by way of *dread* the problems for writing. Writing confronts dread as its practice, and what dread requires of the writer is that "he must be destroyed, in an act that really puts him at stake .... Dread orders him to lose himself, without that loss being compensated by any positive value". Not only is the writer destroyed in this act, writing is negativity itself, a negativity that passes by way of dread to terror: *that* is the communication of the writer. Blanchot writes in "From Dread to Language": "It seems comical and miserable that in order to manifest itself, dread, which opens and closes the sky, needs the activity of a man sitting at his table and forming letters on a piece of paper". Starting with this blank, with a writer at a desk, writing is a nothing that becomes everything:

> Let us acknowledge that in a writer there is a movement which proceeds without pause, and almost without transition, from nothing to everything. Let us see in him that negation that is not satisfied with the unreality in which it exists, because it wishes to realize itself and can only do so by negating

something real, more real than words, more true than the isolated individual in control: it therefore keeps urging him towards a worldly life and a public existence in order to induce him to conceive how, even as he writes, he can become that very existence. It is at this point that he encounters those decisive moments in history when everything seems put in question, when law, faith, the State, the world above, the world of the past – everything sinks effortlessly, without work, into nothingness. The man knows he has not stepped out of history, but history is now the void, the void in the process of realization; it is *absolute* freedom which has become an event. Such periods are given the name Revolution ....

Revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in literature: the passage from nothing to everything, the affirmation of the absolute as event and of every event as absolute ....

Revolutionary action also has the same demand for purity, and the certainty that everything it does has absolute value, that it is not just any action performed to bring about some desirable and respectable goal, but that it is itself the ultimate goal, the Last Act. This last act is freedom, and the only choice left is between freedom and nothing. This is why, at that point, the only tolerable slogan is: *freedom or death*. Thus the Reign of Terror comes into being. People cease to be individuals working at specific tasks, acting here and only now: each person is universal freedom, and universal freedom knows nothing about elsewhere or tomorrow, or work or a work accomplished .... No one has a right to a private life any longer, everything is public, and the most guilty person is the suspect – the person who has a secret, who keeps a thought, an intimacy to himself. And in the end no one has a right to his life any longer, to his actually separate and physically distinct existence. This is the meaning of the Reign of Terror. Every citizen has a right to death, so to speak: death is not a sentence passed on him, it is his most essential right; he is not suppressed as a guilty person – he needs death so that he can proclaim himself a citizen and it is in the disappearance of death that freedom causes him to be born. Where this is concerned, the French Revolution has a clearer meaning than any other revolution. Death in the Reign of Terror is not simply a way of punishing seditionaries; rather, since it becomes the unavoidable, in some sense the desired lot of everyone, it appears as the very operation of freedom in free men. When the blade falls on Saint-Just and Robespierre, in a sense it executes no one. Robespierre's virtue, Saint-Just's relentlessness, are simply their existences already suppressed, the anticipated presence of their deaths, the decision to allow freedom to assert itself completely in them and through its universality negate the particular reality of their lives. Granted, perhaps they caused the Reign of Terror to take place. But the Terror they personify does not come from the death they inflict on others but from the death they inflict on themselves. They bear its features, they do their thinking and make their decisions with death sitting on their shoulders, and this is why their thinking is cold, implacable; it has the freedom of a decapitated head. The Terrorists are those who desire absolute freedom and are fully conscious that this constitutes a desire for their own death, they are conscious of the freedom they affirm, as they

> are conscious of their death which they realize, and consequently they behave during their lifetimes not like people living among other people, but like people deprived of being, like universal thoughts, pure abstractions beyond history, judging and deciding in the name of all of history. ("Literature and the Right to Death")

For Blanchot, writing destroys reality ("the word is the murder of the thing": Hegel), but through this process in writing a more essential meaning is produced which links being to death. For Blanchot, "negation is tied to language", and thus terror, as well, is linked to language (and reason), and terror, in turn, strikes dread in the reader. For the terror that acts on the body and puts it at threat is the very terror that brings that subject to consciousness.

If writing destroys reality, if the word is the murder of the thing, can we say, in turn and by analogy, that critical writing destroys the work of art in writing on it? Haven't we gotten ahead of ourselves? Before even confronting the work of art we are talking of the dynamics of writing and asking whether the relation of writing to art is one of violence or destruction.

Certainly, writing obeys specific laws the dynamics of which it does not control. But before concentrating on what effects the writer has on the work of art, what consequences does he have for himself? If dread orders the writer to lose himself, this loss is enacted in front of the reader (an act entailing the complex formations of recognition, prestige and rivalry outlined in Hegel and Bataille). This is the first communication of writing in response to the work of art.

At the beginning of the lecture I asked where the body of the writer places and then displaces itself in its activity. (The writer shifts between two tasks – looking and writing – and two locales – in front of the artwork and at a writing desk.) With Blanchot, we are left with a decapitated head: the body has disappeared. This head without a body is "my consciousness without me". The cold, implacable thinking, which is the freedom of a decapitated head, asserts itself, it seems, initially against the body, or at least this opposition seems to fall within the conservative critique – rationality versus body – that is presently raising its head in the art community.

For all the nothingness Blanchot's notion of writing entails, nonetheless, writing is productive. Out of what it negates, it produces itself and transmits the effects of its terror. If Blanchot's is a productive writing, Bataille's is receptive. The modality of terror it transmits will be of a different nature. And because of the particular *loss* his writing entails, this receptive character will be more closely analogous to the position of reader or viewer.

Blanchot and Bataille find common ground in Hegel, or a particular understanding of Hegel. Both apply Hegel's notion of negation to writing, in fact both quote from the same

paragraph of the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, lines that could be taken as guiding principles for their writing. To quote Bataille: "Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality [the negative], is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength". And to quote Blanchot: "But the life of the Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it".

Blanchot has the more traditional (i.e. Hegelian) interpretation of negation, finding in it the essentiality of meaning, but an essentiality that is not apart from language. On the contrary, Bataille radicalizes this notion, for what is essential in Bataille is that essence is brought low. Meaning, for Bataille, is the loss of meaning; but that loss has to be enacted for oneself and in front of another. That is why the model of sacrifice is overlaid on Hegel's notion of negativity and the dialectic of lordship and bondage. Bataille writes in "Hegel, la mort et la sacrifice":

> The privileged manifestation of Negativity is death, but death, in truth, reveals nothing. In principle, death reveals to Man his natural, animal being, but the revelation never takes place. For once the animal being that has supported him is dead, the human being himself has ceased to exist. For man finally to be revealed to himself he would have to die, but he would have to do so while living – while watching himself cease to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self) consciousness at the very moment when it annihilates conscious being. In a sense this is what takes place (or at least is on the point of taking place, or which takes place in a fugitive, ungraspable manner) by means of a subterfuge.

But here is where he deviates from Hegel, continuing:

> In sacrifice, the sacrificer identifies with the animal struck by death. Thus he dies by watching himself die, and even, after a fashion, dies of his own volition, as one with the sacrificial arm. But this is a comedy! Or at least it would be a comedy if there were some other method of revealing the encroachment of death upon the living: this completion of the finite being, which alone accomplishes and can alone accomplish *his* Negativity which kills him, *finishes* him and definitely suppresses him .... Thus it is necessary, at any cost, for man to live at the moment when he truly dies, or it is necessary for him to live with the impression of truly dying. This difficulty foreshadows the necessity of *spectacle*, or generally of *representation*, without the repetition of which we could remain foreign to and ignorant of death, as animals apparently remain. In effect, nothing is less animal than the fiction, more or less removed from reality, of death.

According to this example, then, the necessity of representation would be assumed by the work of art. Its spectacle would be the loss performed in the identity between work and viewer with the work substituting for the sacrificial victim and in simulation dying the viewer's

death. The principle of loss pertains to these representations or spectacles, but they must be of a certain type:

> unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality) – all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves. Now it is necessary to reserve the use of the word *expenditure* for the designation of these unproductive forms, and not for the designation of all the modes of consumption that serve as a means to the end of production. Even though it is always possible to set the various forms of expenditure in opposition to each other, they constitute a group characterized by the fact that in each case the accent is placed on a *loss* that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its true meaning.

In my lecture, the meaning of the work of art will be that loss, not as enacted in the symbolic expenditure of the work of art itself, but as that which takes place in front of it, as if expelled from it, in the act of the writer or spectator.

I have set up Blanchot and Bataille as two moments rather than necessarily as an opposition. To Blanchot's decapitated head, we pose Bataille's headless body; to Blanchot's productive writing, we counterpose Bataille's receptive writing; and to Blanchot's blank sheet that takes the inscription of writing, we bring forward for analysis Bataille's "formless" photograph. Did not Bataille in his book *Eroticism* approvingly quote de Sade that "there can be no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image"? That licentiousness for Bataille was merely a means of bringing low. As laughter was to philosophy, so shall we find a role for photography.

In Bataille, the photograph enters into a special relation with writing. Or, at least for us, the photograph is the means by which we can find a communication between his writing and politics. Rosalind Krauss has already analyzed how Bataille's notion of the *informe* or the "formless" and his axial turn of the body from vertical to horizontal found its reflection in Surrealist photographic practice. However, it is not the images of Surrealist photography that I want to interrogate here, even though the body is the object of its constructions. Rather, it is a type of photography accidental to intention, since it serves another use, the newspaper photograph, for instance, that is a clue. Here, too, the body is the subject, but not just the individual, rather the body of the crowd. We shall interrogate the meaning of this body in relation to decapitation.

For Bataille, the notion of the *informe* has a use as well as a description. He defines it: "A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down

in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form". This definition can be applied not only to an object or image but to a crowd, as in the essay "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade", where Bataille positively discusses the masses as "comparatively decomposed, amorphous and even violently expelled from every form". And, thus, he indicates in "The Notion of Expenditure" that the task of the now formless crowd is class struggle which "becomes the grandest form of social expenditure when it is taken up again and developed, this time on the part of the workers, and in such a scale that it threatens the very existence of the masters".

The shift from object to crowd that takes place in Bataille through the term "formless" we transpose to the photographic image of the crowd, finding a political rather than aesthetic function there. This was never carried through by Bataille himself; the usual photographic subjects he took up in writing displayed the "formless" in, for instance, Boiffard's images of the mouth or the big toe. What is brought down or expelled in these other images is not the crowd. The crowd is now a positive revolutionary force expelling the bourgeois class; and Bataille indicates that "it is only because of this negativity that the sacrificial character of a revolution remains profoundly unconscious".[1]

The crowd is a formless and headless body, formless because that is its nature as a body, and headless because it has participated in the decapitation of its head, usually in the assassination of its leader. The leader, which is also the image of the ideal, is brought low in the action of the crowd.

In 1982 in the British magazine *ZG*, I published an article entitled "Notes on the Sumptuary Destruction of Leaders" where I discussed the relation between leaders and crowds in terms of iconoclasm as a class war of images. In 1983, after having examined the print media image of the crowd, in the aftermath of assassination or in the succession crises of heads of states, I published the article "Image of the Leader, Function of the Widow" in *C Magazine*. I discovered there that a conscious strategy is used to contain the iconoclastic force of the crowd, in that every image of a crowd was secured in publication by a representation of leadership, and not just by a caption, and that the forces released in the crowd by assassination were temporarily cathected in the image of the widow until a political successor was in place and the chain of representation secured. These acts of representation contain the formlessness of the crowd, and they do so by putting a body in place, substituting for that other image of the crowd. This substitution is already an act of representation, letting one thing stand for another, representing that crowd in the political franchise of the leader.

For the print media, the *image* of the crowd could only come to meaning in the restoration of representation which is the image of the leader. I suggest that it is the opposite that

the crowd can only come to meaning in the sense suggested by Bataille in the death of its leader, in a positive act of iconoclasm. Confronting a work of art, the viewer stands in the position of the leader to the image, above and outside it; but he or she does not command it, being simply its focal reception. Does this relation partake of the same mechanism? Yes. Take the image of the crowd. Since the subject of these images then is an expulsion and since the operation of the *informe* leads to expulsion, what is expelled no longer inheres within the image of the crowd as an individual entity. Which means that the viewer can only exist outside the image, with no sense of identification, in other words, expelled from it. In effect, the surface of the image is the blade that decapitates the viewer in turn. Where does its head roll, and how does this act leave the viewer: as a decapitated head or a headless body?

We are left with the viewer or writer forced from this image. For Bataille, the loss seems willed, the opposite of Blanchot. Writing, for Blanchot, seems to produce this violent destruction, while for Bataille, the writer or viewer is the recipient of an equally violent force. How do I resolve or unify the two in one theory? The reciprocity of this action may be the source.

We are surprised, as formed as representation is on our dictates – think of the rules of perspective, for instance, which also construct the camera apparatus – that this image has no place for us, or rather that our place is in this expulsion. Now what attracts the writer to these images? We take it that some desire or lack in the writer directs this attempted control, and that these desires are compensations for sexual frustration or expressions of a nihilistic will to destruction which is just a disguised will to self-destruction. If images of the (headless) crowd, revolution, acts of iconoclasm writ large attract the writer, are these desires fulfilled in the image admission of his incapacity to act or could the images be representations that somehow correspond to his own activity? (Remember Blanchot's "everything is possible"; but he also notes that the writer destroys acting for others.) An 'object' – albeit a formless mass – and an aim may exist in this relationship between writer and image, but perhaps we are reading the wrong way – in the sense of the wrong *direction*. What the writer finds in the image may not merely be a mirror of his desire as much as a pre-inscribed representation of *his* violence. But can it merely be a representation? Or is this violent inscription always already there in the act of representation? In other words, maybe the *informe* is 'outside' representation by being the ground for it.

The writer may desire these images of dissolution. But they are also images of the writer's own exclusion, in a sense, of his own decapitation, one that may be self-willed. This exclusion may be met by a violent reaction or rapture. Maybe the writer desires his exclusion which is disguised by his own violent act of iconoclasm. It is easy to overlook this desire in light of a

recognition of the violent act and, thus, in turn, to misinterpret that second act as well. But once again it is the reciprocity that tells us something about what is taking place in representation. Violence is misunderstood in the narrow concentration on the scopic drive for possession of the *contents* of the image, and not on the structure as a whole.

I came to the conclusion that exclusion has something to do with representation and, more particularly, the violence of representation in the article "Breach of Promise" published in 1982 in *File magazine*. In this article, I was "witness" to a dialogue established through the gap of centuries between Michelangelo's incomplete *Entombment* and Picasso's *Desmoiselles d'Avignon,* a dialogue that was carried out as the understanding of what attracted me in the pairing of these images in the first place. I wrote:

> The spectator is not necessary to the Michelangelo painting; although he can observe, he is closed to that drama, discreet and distanced. The man is absent in the Picasso painting, but the spectator is structurally demanded forcibly excluded by the gazes, but demanded to fill an absent place. How does man return here in his absence? Are the women simply and solely the object of his gaze substituted by the spectator? . . . .
>
> My figure at that moment of facing is taut, collapsing within, like the tensile arch of the figures supporting the body of Christ, a play between the arch of the bodies and the limp, dead body. Like a veil, and as the female, the paintings open to reveal the dead object at the base of woman's sex. They open to disclose the male. The male can only be absent. Dead or excluded, he projects himself into that absence in the painting. And he projects himself through the violence of exclusion. What is the object of man's gaze if it is not his own absence? Woman is not the object of his gaze. It is not a single object, but the schema. His gaze is aggressive if excluded, but it is also dissolute and frenzied in a forced absence. In that exclusion, he wishes the immediacy and presence of a violent sexuality, death itself. The gaze is not possessive but destructive: the other is destroyed as a surrogate for himself. Destruction is figured as the women of the *Desmoiselles*, what the man of mastery desires and is not.

We perhaps may read this expression as man's double desire for woman: over woman and what woman represents for him, which is both conscious and unconscious: as mastery and destruction, and a loss of self (a double falling and dissoluteness in sex and death.) But the aim of the gaze is not women nor the desire for their destruction. Woman is merely figured as that destruction. Destruction is aimed at the viewer, positively, as what *we* desire directed back towards ourselves, not to any reified image of woman. She or, rather, that *image* is *figured* as a loss of mastery which representation imposes. Desire is for loss, not possession.

It would be a mistake then to believe that one can simply take a moral position against what is depicted, for instance, the image of a woman, or an image of violence, without under-

standing what forces bring that image forward into recognizability, but not necessarily into consciousness. In other words, Death is behind every image.

Is exclusion functionally necessary for a representation, indeed, for the body to appear at all? Let us ask another question. Why is it so difficult to represent violence, death, terror or revolution? Why does the photograph evince a greater capacity to capture these "disasters"? Is it perhaps because violence and terror – the unrepresentable – are the basis of representation and so cannot be presented within its schema? Representation founds itself on violence; it would not exist without violence. As I indicated in my article "Violence and Representation":

> René Girard, in *Violence and the Sacred*, sees the origin of society and all cultural forms in murder. Recoiling from this original divisive violence, a community creates a set of prohibitions [the origin of representation] which include a mechanism for redirecting violence outside itself. This is the role of sacrifice based on the substitution of a scapegoat. Repeated in ritual and communal crises, this arbitrary substitution protects the community by deflecting internal violence to victims outside itself or on its margins, victims unable to be revenged.
>
> Emulation becomes rivalry, when one appropriates the objects or desire of another [and this is the situation in looking], leads to conflict which spreads throughout the community. To end this interminable revenge, representing eye for eye and tooth for tooth, is the function of the scapegoat, because the scapegoat cannot be revenged.
>
> The scapegoat must resemble the person it substitutes (which it represents) in order that the violent and vengeful impulse be satisfied. This is the mimetic function of the scapegoat. But, at the same time, the scapegoat must be different, recognized as different, in order that it not be confused with the original object and continue the chain of vengeance. It must represent the violence that afflicts the community, allowing the community to differentiate by excluding what is different: the violence of the other.
>
> Representation is a marking preparing for exclusion. Marking is a stigma, which allows the surrogate victim to be identified as different; it sets the limits of exclusion; and it locates the marks of violence for sacrifice.

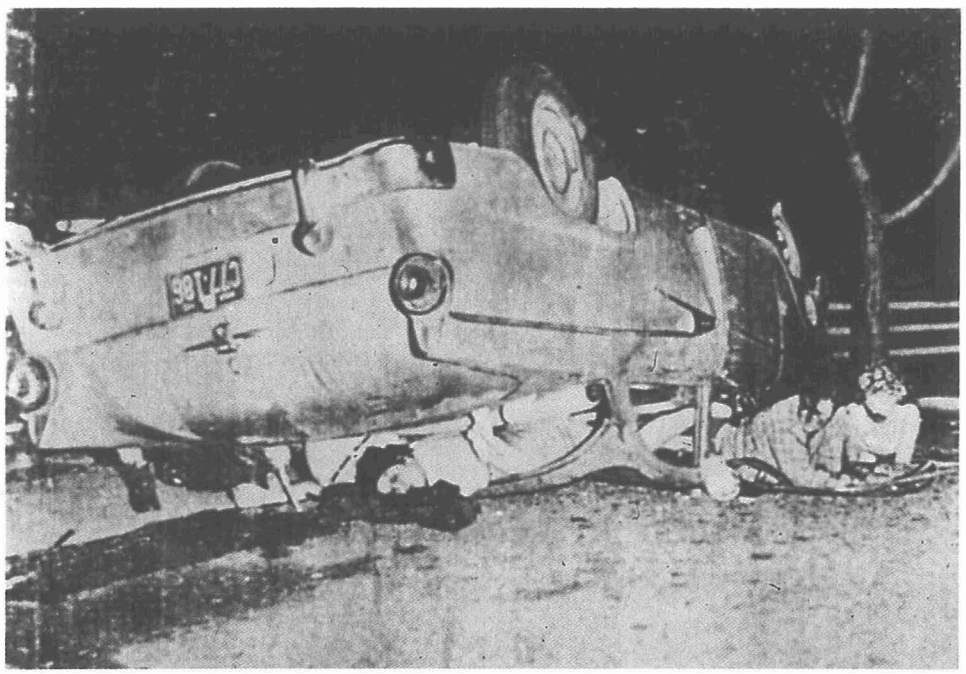
Representation which meets a perceived threat from *outside* is a means of establishing social relations *within* a community. That is why the ritualized social practices that arise become cut off from their origins and disguise a relation to an outside, an outside that actually determines the inside. Representation is tied to expulsion and is the site of that active struggle.

Representation is founded on violence. It is a means of dealing with violence, which is why violence does not appear in representations but can in photography be unbound by the constraints of representation, though a representation can evince horror, nonetheless. If repre-

sentation is founded on violence, what representation sets in motion between image and viewer is a reciprocal violence which is equivalent to a type of prestige rivalry based on mimesis.

This violence that acts on the body has consequences. The body cannot be represented; a painting cannot represent the threat the other imposes because that condition exists in the situation as a whole, between body and image. A painting cannot picture the struggle of life and death since it is an image, unless the very nature of representation itself – its schema – imposes those conditions: the conditions of representation must be that threat, *terror itself*.

Andy Warhol, *Car Crash,* 1963.



If my role, in this lecture series, as a curator or writer on art was to deal with representations of the body, then I have failed, because by the logic of what I have presented, the body does not appear in representation. This body *per se* does not exist. It only 'exists' through representation but is not something pictured there. Something of the relation between the work of art and the spectator, more particularly here the work of art and the critic, then, must inform this 'body'. But the effects are not located in one place or one instance, as if we could find the body located or represented in an image affecting something in the body of the viewer. Nor are they stable or uni-directional. They work back and forth, as we say, composing and decomposing the other. This is no gentle give and take, as if a conversation between two friends or the placid movements of a connoisseur back and forth from the surface of the painted image. A mutual violence is inscribed there. This is a violence that, like all violence, *acts*. It acts upon, the one receiving the effects or blows of the other, active and passive in turn. We are not thus in a position to witness each of the work or spectator as fully realized entities with their own identities. They *make* each other. And the viewer certainly is not in a secondary position to the work of art; because what takes place also structures the image itself. That is, the iconoclasm that greets the work on the part of the spectator has already composed the image. The violence that greets it is the violence that it metes out. This active struggle is a fight to the death. One tries to overcome the other, the image overcoming the viewer, the viewer overcoming the image. Usually, we rest with the former, with the reception of the force of the image and rarely look at the return, which finds its analogy in the violence of criticism.

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Investigating the historical role of photography in the definition of the subject in law, Bernard Edelman in *Ownership of the Image* (*Le droit saisi par la photographie*) wrote: "The soulless body of the machine and the coldness of the lens [*objectif*] reproduced what people wanted them to be [i.e., merely a mechanical apparatus] and what people were afraid they might be: the crowd, the turf, the people", leading to spectacles which could disturb public order. In this quotation I hope you can recognize the crowd of Bataille and the hear the terror of Blanchot: "They bear its features, they do their thinking and make their decisions with death sitting on their shoulders, and this is why their thinking is cold, implacable; it has the freedom of a decapitated head". The camera is thus both the decapitated head and with its shutter mechanism the guillotine; and the photograph is the decapitated body. The moment of the image is the act of the guillotine and what it splits apart is the terror of the moment.

Terror erects a subject

The guillotine appears at a certain moment in penal history in relation to spectacle and the body (and thus to a constitution of the subject). According to Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, it marks the point of "the disappearance of public execution" and "therefore the decline of the spectacle; but it also marks a slackening of the hold on the body . . . . The guillotine, that machine for the production of rapid and discreet deaths", however, lent itself for a period as a theatrical ritual to Revolution's concept of the subject, as we learned from Blanchot: "every citizen has a right to death". "The same death for all" and "a death that lasts only a moment" represent a "new ethic of legal death" that the guillotine shared with various European legal systems. "The guillotine takes life almost without touching the body, just as prison deprives of liberty or a fine reduces wealth. It is intended to apply the law not so much to a real body capable of feeling pain as to a juridical subject, the possessor, among other rights, of the right to exist. It had to have the abstraction of the law itself." This law is both the destruction of a subject and its creation, just as the moment of terror is that subject's dissolution and consolidation.

If the photograph of the crowd established the position of the absent body as the paradigm of representation, then how might that relationship figure in something like painting? Commenting on the changing role of spectacle in capital punishment, and hence the role of the crowd in spectatorship, with the hiding of the guillotine within the precincts of the prison wall, Foucault indicated that "capital punishment remains fundamentally, even today, a spectacle that must actually be forbidden". How might that subject and spectacle appear today in painting? I give the example of one of Andy Warhol's electric chair paintings (juxtaposed to David's *Marat*). Warhol's work is not only a certain inscription of photography in painting, it is also, through its repetitions, an inscription of death and disaster and probably its richest expression in contemporary art. But this inscription and elaboration can only form the subject of a future lecture.

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The writer vacillates between a decapitated head and a headless body, because that vacillation points out the uneasy nature of representation, the violence it inscribes and gives over reciprocally. Criticism is the middle term between decapitation and terror, registering that violence and inflicting it in turn. I hope that through this recognition we can understand some of the motives and mechanisms of writing that cause so much potential hostility between reading and writing, authors and artists, in the various prestige rivalries for recognition that

are the stock in trade of our profession. The blank paper, the glare of the image are both moments of terror; but they are also emblems of consciousness. As Blanchot says of rationality:

> The existence of the writer is proof that within one individual there exist side by side both a man full of dread and one who is cool and calculating, both a madman and a reasonable being, a mute who has lost all words firmly wedded to an orator, master of discourse. The case of the writer is special because he represents the paradox of dread in a special way. Dread challenges all the realities of reason, its methods, its possibilities, its very capacity to exist, its ends, and yet dread forces reason to be there; it summons it to be reason as perfectly as it can; dread itself is only possible because there continues to exist in all its power the faculty that dread renders impossible, that it annihilates.

What has been annihilated here, in the subject of this talk, is the representation of the body or, at least, a certain interpretation of it. What I have said concerning representation and violence tonight are tentative notes, and perhaps the function of this talk has not been merely a wilful violence directed towards another but a loss enacted before another.

NOTE

1. "Of course the term *excretion* applied to the Revolution must first be understood in the strictly mechanical – and moreover etymological – sense of the word. The first phase of the revolution is *separation,* in other words, a process leading to the position of two groups of forces, each one characterized by the necessity of excluding the other. The second phases is the violent *expulsion* of the group that has possessed power by the revolutionary group. But one also notes that each of the groups, by its very constitution, gives the opposing an almost exclusively negative excremental character, and it is only because of this negativity that the sacrificial character of a revolution remains profoundly unconscious. The revolutionary impulse of the proletarian masses is, moreover, sometimes implicitly and sometimes openly treated as sacred, and that is why it is possible to use the word *Revolution* entirely stripped of its utilitarian meaning without, however, giving it an idealist meaning." Georges Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade" in *Visions of Excess* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).