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Vitality in Crisis: Rethinking the Atomic Legacy in Postwar U.S. Art

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Art History, Theory, and Criticism

by

Benjamin Andrews Snyder

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2016
The Dissertation of Benjamin Andrews Snyder is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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2016
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Vitality in Crisis: Rethinking the Atomic Legacy in Postwar U.S. Art

by

Benjamin Andrews Snyder

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History, Theory, and Criticism

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor W. Norman Bryson, Co-Chair
Professor Grant Kester, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines the role of atomic weapons in the formation of post-World War II United States national culture and the post-1945 U.S. art canon. While the consideration of the presence of nuclear weapons in postwar art history has often been constricted to specific atomic imagery existing within an accepted historical framework (e.g. the “Atomic Age,” c. 1945-1960), this dissertation traces a much deeper level of influence beyond the standard “atomic” imagery and outside the received (art) historical framing.

The argument begins by exploring the distinct rupture that occurred within United States public consciousness in the wake of the U.S. bombings of
Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and identifies how, as a recuperative gesture in the wake of this rupture, a new problematic rhetoric of life, under a rubric of “vitality,” emerged across mainstream U.S. political, economic, and art discourses. The dissertation then extends this framework forward to provide new studies of three important U.S. artists, Robert Morris, Andy Warhol, and Ana Mendieta. Together, the studies show how, often contrary to their standard receptions and placements within in the art historical literature, their transformations of the U.S. avant-garde landscape, beginning in 1960, were deeply informed by questioning the troubled, paradoxical idea of life that had become dominant in mainstream postwar United States discourse in the wake of the U.S.’s development, use, and proliferation of atomic weapons.
On August 20, 1945, *Time* magazine published its first run of the postwar era. Its contents and tone were far from what readers might have predicted just a few weeks earlier. Instead of a celebratory mood welcoming a long anticipated Allied victory, a foreboding sense that “progress had a price” at Hiroshima and Nagasaki pervaded the magazine’s early appraisals of the new “Atomic Age.” In those early days, news of the atomic bomb in the U.S., while tightly controlled, produced an initial sense of shock and confusion that sent a wave through U.S. public consciousness. Under a column titled “THE PEACE,” yet tellingly subtitled “The Bomb,” *Time*’s editors described the atmosphere that hung over the war’s end in the United States in a series of startling and lucid statements: “In what they said and did, men were still, as in the aftershock of a great wound”; people of all stations were trying to grasp “out of the chaos an age in which victory was already only the shout of a child in the street”; the win itself by the bomb was dubbed the “most grimly Pyrrhic of victories.” In a strange and chaotic initial reception, the *Time* editors describe a situation in which the U.S. public almost assumed the posture of a victim, bringing the news of the bombing into an odd rhetorical equivalency with the bombings themselves: in the “aftershock of a great wound” they appraised the sudden emptiness of victory and the development of a new dramatic precariousness to their own survival. “Humanity,” the editors wrote, “was brought inescapably into a new age in
which,” taking the form of the chain reaction that birthed it, “all thoughts and things were split.” Scientists were quoted warning that now “civilization would have a means to commit suicide at will.” Discussing the inevitability that other world powers and potential enemies would acquire the bomb’s secret, they cautioned how it “put a new premium on aggression (surprise) and even on chance.” Straining for a silver lining, they wrote how “It was wonderful to think of what the Atomic Age might be, if man was strong and honest. But,” they conceded darkly, “at first it was a strange place, full of weird symbols and the smell of death.”

One such symbol found its way onto the cover of that very issue.

The August 20, 1945 cover of *Time* broke with tradition. In a rare instance of not picturing a face, the editors presented instead a symbolic effacement, with the red circle of Japan X’ed out by two bold black marks. With no accompanying quote or slogan (also a break from tradition), this X, rendered in the distinct style of lively, expressive, oil-paint brush strokes, ostensibly reached for a totalizing representation of the U.S.’s atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the fall of Japan, the final end of World War II, and the distinct beginning of a new age.

The X is startling for how, on the cover of a quintessential U.S. magazine, it transforms the U.S. into a black mark of violent erasure in the opening act of the postwar era. The cover was made by Boris Artzybasheff, a mid-century magazine and book illustrator of some fame, who seemed to go out of his way
to combine a sense of aggression and violence in the X with what is, in fact, a sense of ‘Americanness.’ For in making the X in the way that he did, Artzybasheff departed from his usual recognizable style, which was closer to the Surrealism of Dali, to employ an expressionistic mode that echoes the contemporaneous ascendant trends of U.S. art. Adding to the sense of deliberateness of this choice, the style of his August 20, 1945 X also departed from the only precedent in which an X appeared on a cover of Time, which occurred some four months earlier on May 7 over the face of Hitler. In that instance, the X was red, much thinner, without texture, and semi-transparent, as if done in a diluted acrylic pigment. The style of the Hitler X has led some to (mistakenly) conflate the meaning of the X with Hitler himself, as in one journalism study that cites its "blood-red color and smeared, dripping appearance" as a "reference of the [Nazi] regime’s brutality." But, style aside, the X cannot sensibly be understood as that which it crosses out; it is, rather, the agent of effacement. As if to correct this, Artzybasheff seemed to make the August 20, 1945 X in the way he did to emphasize the extent to which it represented the United States as the prime agent of the (atomic) destruction of Japan: the dry oil brush effect and the crisp wisps at the marks’ ends gives the strokes a clear feeling of brisk motion and directionality, spontaneity and yet intention, characteristics that align them with the distinct ascendant trends of U.S. painting. (These qualities, interestingly, were not lost on the readers.)

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I discuss the paradoxical and
contradictory formation of a new rhetoric of “vitality” in U.S. public discourse in the wake of the atomic bomb. My argument traces how a heightened but detached expression of liveliness crystalized into a dominant rhetoric across U.S. political, economic, and artistic discourse in the early postwar period, and how this functioned as a complex Trojan horse that helped usher in, under a banner of “vitality,” an environment that threatened life unlike ever before. In this context, it is provocative to consider Artzybasheff’s cover prophetic, as a cypher that expresses the U.S.’s atomic erasures in Japan in a feigned mode of what would come to be called action painting.

As a herald of certain new parameters of postwar visuality, the “X” on the Time cover points to a rupture within the normal channels of signification in the U.S. emanating from a complex initial public reception of the atomic bomb. With no sense of joy, relief, or safety at the news of the war’s end, the X reinforces a sentiment expressed in Time and elsewhere that the reality of “victory” was not at all what the U.S. public had imagined for itself.9 Admittedly there is a triumphalism of the mark in context, as a final sign of enemy defeat wrought by unimaginable force, one that even perhaps reclaims the “X” from a previous wartime use as the military code (“X-day”) for the attack on Pearl Harbor that launched the Pacific War in the first place.10 In this sense, the Time cover allows for the victor’s idea of an enemy crossed off and conquered, echoing, perhaps, the “contemporary trope of X-ing out an enemy kill on the side of an aircraft.”11 However, on the other hand, the X is a sign of rupture; it carries forth the sense,
reinforced in the magazine’s commentary, that the bomb produced a self-inflicted destabilization of the victor’s psychological (and perhaps physical) position, leaving them struggling to grasp, let alone express, the means by which they ended the war (or the meaning of those means). The usual configuration of the cover, with faces and words, was thus rendered inadequate; *Time* had to break with tradition to create a cover—the X effacing a symbol—that had never been done before and has never been repeated since. The removal of text, done to great dramatic effect, is also noteworthy. Just a few weeks before, the magazine showed it was not at all squeamish in using text to account for the gruesome score of the Pacific theater when it captioned, right on the cover, a likeness of Third Fleet commander William Halsey with the quote “Kill Japs, kill Japs, and then kill more Japs.” That ‘pre-atomic’ cover, with its willingness to ‘speak’ the killing, indicates how the unprecedented death and violence of World War II had still existed in the U.S. public consciousness within a relatively stable logic. The lines drawn at Pearl Harbor, the idea of the enemy, the source of the threat, the safety of the homeland, and the justness of the cause were all more or less intact on that cover. But at the revelation of the atomic secret and the news of the U.S.’s violent erasure of entire cities by a single “gadget,” text, words, logos disappeared. The omission of text so soon after the bombings is perhaps indicative of how native the notion of “unspeakability” was to the atomic issue, even in the U.S.

When we talk about ‘rupture,’ as I often do throughout this dissertation, it
is important to grasp the full extent of what that might imply. The bulk of this dissertation is concerned with modes of cultural production within a state of ‘postwar rupture,’ and, throughout the chapters, I place great stock on the presence of atomic weapons in the world as a primary agent of that rupture. But the idea of a state of postwar rupture also implies that there was something there to be ruptured, a somewhat coherent idea in the U.S. public imaginary before the end of the war of what the postwar world would look like. And indeed, this image was present, when, in the first half of the 1940s, even before they had officially entered the war, the U.S. public imagined a postwar world in which they assumed a positive, just mandate to lead, or some would say dominate, the world. In the first chapter I discuss how this idea existed within U.S. public consciousness as a relatively undisturbed, ‘pre-atomic’ “vision” of the postwar world to come, a narrative that Time and Life publisher (and MoMA board member) Henry Luce exemplified in his famous 1941 essay “The American Century.” Luce’s article affirmed a certain imperial, U.S.-centric attitude in its vision for postwar world affairs that resounded in public discourse and through the pages of his own magazines during the war years. Throughout the first half of the 1940s, Time ran a “Postwar” column and continually discussed plans for the U.S. role in the world after World War II. In themselves, the successive wartime “Postwar” columns are indicative of the extent to which U.S. discourse assumed an Allied victory and positioned itself to ascend to the role of the world’s new leader when it arrived. One example: while the Pacific theater was
still very active, a “POSTWAR” column on July 9, 1945 detailed “two solemn petitions…bearing signatures or finger prints of 835 natives on Arno Atoll [and] 1,025 natives on Majura Atoll” that ‘asked’ the United States “to be our guardian and protector,” after they had “been held successively by Spain, Germany, and Japan.”\textsuperscript{17} This is a good example of the self-serving, ‘pre-atomic’ vision that the U.S. public held of its postwar role in the world, how it was happy to poise itself to replace the old colonial powers with their own imperial forms framed as overwhelmingly morally sound and just. While in the column itself there are sufficient grounds for suspicion about the account (e.g., who authored those petitions?), from today’s vantage point it is also a good example of how the post-1945 atomic reality would utterly undermine the positivity of this pre-atomic vision of a postwar world, particularly when we recall the U.S.’s nuclear devastation of the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958 in the name of testing their nuclear arsenal.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, while in “The American Century,” Luce would assert how the U.S. was the inheritor “of all the great principles of civilization,” or how the U.S. must provide positive leadership to “our world of 2,000,000,000 human beings,” his vision was so destabilized by the U.S.’s atomic bombing of Japan that, once the “Postwar” actually arrived, the August 20, 1945 issue of his own magazine could feature a cartoon in which the U.S., as the sole possessor of the atomic secret, was now the single greatest threat to the very survival of “humanity.” (Interestingly, the cartoon’s threat is centered above the U.S.)
Even earlier than Luce’s “American Century” article, and from a rather different context, another highly relevant, New York-based ‘pre-atomic’ vision of the potential postwar future of “America” can be found in the startlingly prophetic work of Diego Rivera. Just as we can trace an idea of postwar rupture by pitting the vision of Luce’s “American Century” article against the first postwar issue of his own magazine, we can follow a similar movement through a comparison of Rivera’s notorious 1933 fresco *Man at the Crossroads* designed for the Rockefeller Center in New York (along with the text “Portrait of America” that he published in 1934) with his 1952 mural titled *The Nightmare of War and the Dream of Peace*. While dating some six years before the outbreak of World War II, *Man at the Crossroads* is remarkable for how it foresaw not only the war, with its representations of “hordes of masked soldiers in the uniforms of Hitlerized Germany,”¹⁹ but also, with the rather incredible central depiction of atomic power in 1933, and in pitting the forces of communism against those of capitalism, the stakes of the postwar as well. When discussing the mural in “Portrait of America,” Rivera even foreshadows the way the rhetoric of vitality would be connected to the atomic issue after World War II, although he also demonstrates how, in its prewar form, this rhetoric was still overwhelmingly linked to an idea of biological life as opposed to one of economic or industrial life. That is, for Rivera and contrary to its postwar iteration in the U.S., “vital energy” and what may come of it was always reaffirmed as being of and for the sake of actual life.

To create the crossing atomic disks that mark the center of his mural, Rivera
tells how he was assisted by a “doctor and biologist of international reputation” who “carried his generosity to the extent not only of lending me his biological skill and knowledge to be made plastic on the wall, but of working at my side night after night, sometimes until three o’clock in the morning, so that the material he supplied me might possess its correct social and esthetic function in the finished painting.”

“In the center,” Rivera writes of his vision for humanity and atomic energy, “Man, the intelligent and producing skilled worker, controls vital energy and captures it for his own use…[he] grasps within his fingers the vital sphere—atoms and the cell, which are the essential reality of all life.”

Even apart from the politics or political rhetoric that conditions much of “Portrait of America” (and later the conditions of The Nightmare of War), behind Rivera’s dream for the future of “America” lies a relatively simple hope that life—“atoms and the cell”—will be harnessed for life’s sake. His mural sought “to realize in the future the synthetic human compound divested of racial hates, jealousies, and antagonisms, the syntheses that will give birth to intelligent and producing Man…” And it is precisely this vision that is shattered at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, destroyed by the atomic X of the U.S. as that X was brought into the world as an unprecedented instrument of death. To inaugurate the postwar era, the U.S. harnesses the very same energy that Rivera makes central to his vision of an inclusive collective American future for an extraordinary act of violence, an act which has continued to condition a relentlessly confrontational geopolitical situation through to our present day.
In 1952, Rivera updated the vision of *Man at a Crossroads* to fit the new postwar conditions in *The Nightmare of War and the Dream of Peace*, a large mural on moveable panels depicting a billowing mushroom cloud rising over a scene of Koreans being flailed, hung, and crucified. At the time Rivera called it “the best thing I have ever done.” Like *Man at a Crossroads*, the 1952 mural, commissioned by Mexico’s Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura to be exhibited in Europe, was censored on account of the political content, with Carlos Chávez, then the director-general of the Instituto, admitting: “It contains grave political charges against various foreign nations.” *Time* magazine ran a full sketch of the mural and remarked on how it “brought back memories of the famous mural he painted for Manhattan’s Rockefeller Center in 1933.”

The visual form that unifies both the Rivera murals and the *Time* cover is the X. In *Man at a Crossroads*, it represents the vital atomic intersection of the vast potentials and energies of humanity. At the inauguration of the postwar, the *Time* cover makes devastatingly clear which road “Man” chose, with the X now proclaiming the United States as an indisputable agent of aggression and erasure. By 1952, in *The Nightmare of War and the Dream of Peace*, the cross returns, in one of the mural’s largest compositional components, in the form of a crucifix, with a Korean nailed to it and against the backdrop of an atomic explosion.

Despite their vast differences and the fact that they stem from opposing sides of the political spectrum, the vision of *Man at a Crossroads* shares
something with Luce’s “The American Century.” Both recognize their own moment as a moment of “crisis” and both articulate a positive vision for how to emerge out of it, affirming something redeemable and optimistic in humanity within the possibilities of politics, science, and the imagination. These were the qualities that were ruptured across the spectrum by the overwhelming negativity inherent in the inauguration of the postwar, a negativity captured both in the August 20, 1946 *Time* cover and in Rivera’s 1952 mural, whose bleakness completely overrides its nominal appeal to a “Dream of Peace,” (a “dream” which was likely highly politically motivated in the first place⁴⁶). This disturbance, and the attempts to restabilize it in the U.S., is a key context to many of the problems posed by the artists discussed in the following chapters. The “X” on the cover of *Time* magazine after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, much like the reappearance of the X as a crucifix in *The Nightmare of War*, indicates how the realization of the prewar dream of a postwar future, imagined previously in relatively positive terms across the spectrum, was ruptured by the U.S. as it thrust upon the world an incomprehensible negativity, one in which cities could now be erased in a matter of moments by the deployment of a single weapon on the order of a single politician. *Time*’s X announced a fundamentally new necropolitical dimension to what was supposed to be the post-war era, a notion not lost on the editors of *Time* in the August 20, 1945 issue, as when they wrote how “the kindly physicists handed plain people (like Harry Truman and Clement Atlee) the fissioned atom and said: You have to decide who owns it; who can kill
whom with it, and under what circumstances."

Film theorist Akira Lippit, whose important book *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* I cite frequently throughout the following chapters, discusses how “X,” as a general sign, “eludes the economy of signification, generating a phantasmatic signifier without signification or, conversely, a full signification with no signifier.” Whether a sign of no meaning or meaning without reference, “X” signals a rupture within the usual modes of perception and signification. And at the dawn of the postwar landscape, the X on the *Time* cover suggests this rupture as a fundamental quality of the new era. “X,” Lippit continues, “can be seen as the master signifier for no signification, for deferred or postponed, over inscribed and erased signification. An image of imagelessness, a figure for what (Daniel) Tiffany calls the ‘negativity of the modernist Image.'” In its near perfect realization of Luce’s pre-atomic call to enact “such enormous human progress as to stagger the imagination,” the atomic event maintained the U.S. as a “master signifier” while emptying it of its previously meaningful signification. The postwar political establishment’s push to construct a postwar rhetoric of “vitality” in the wake of this initial shock is, in a way, a contentious attempt to recuperate this lost meaning by the very forces who unleashed the bomb, and it sets the stage for a persistent condition of ‘postwar rupture’ as the idea of U.S. “vitality” is continually tested against itself throughout the Cold War, the civil rights struggles, and other upheavals."

Taking a cue from Lippit’s analysis, in the chapters ahead I explore ways
in which canonical postwar artists in the United States inverted or shunned modernist trends in the formation of critical practices that were conditioned by new circumstances of the post-atomic environment. The August 20, 1945 *Time* cover, for the ways in which it announces a new state of rupture specifically linked to the announcement of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, offers a kind of initial map for this investigation; it in a sense preempts the critique of “Vital Forms” that I develop in chapter one, where I question the ability of a mode of painting that proclaimed itself, in the words of Jackson Pollock, as “very vital…very vibrant, very alive,” to adequately express the age of the atom bomb.\(^{30}\) In chapters two and three, on Robert Morris and Andy Warhol, I trace the presence of the nuclear issue in the early formation of these artists rejection of the earlier “Vital Forms” at the beginning of the 1960s, postulating the rise of a second generation of “postwar” artists that were concerned with holding the ‘vitality’ of the initial postwar formulation up to the light in an attempt to reveal its emptiness. In the fourth and final chapter, I push the category of the postwar into its late phase with a focus on Ana Mendieta, who I investigate as attempting to formulate an approach to history and politics that is at once more universal and more incisive to the nuances of the postwar conditions that so deeply affected her life and work.

Robert Morris and Andy Warhol both emerged as U.S. art world forces beginning around 1961, the same year Mendieta, at twelve years old, emigrated from Cuba to the United States. While Warhol and Morris have represented two
very different worlds within U.S. art and art history since 1945, they have, as this
dissertation will argue, more in common than their art and literatures would
seem to suggest.31 Coming to prominence at the same time and in the same
place, together Warhol and Morris represent a second generation of postwar
artists whose artistic vision was conditioned by the rupture of the postwar,
pushing them toward a new reckoning with the socio-political circumstances in
which they came up. In the first years of the sixties, as both Morris and Warhol
were on the brink of meteoric rises within the respective nascent fields of Pop
and Minimalism, a tumultuous Cold War political environment continued to
dominate the public’s tenuous attitude toward life and vitality. I explore how real
violence and premonitions of mass death saturated the cultural landscape,
further defining the reality of the “American Century” away from Luce’s vision
while at the same time eroding the credibility of the idea of postwar U.S. vitality
as it had been reconstituted in the immediate wake of WWII. In chapters two
and three I demonstrate how both Morris and Warhol made work that hollowed
out the mainstream idea of what gave culture its vitality, mounting a critique of
(and showing concern for) the attitudes toward life that were in crisis within
postwar U.S. culture and politics.

Still, while the work of both Warhol and Morris presents a reckoning with
the self-contradictory ideas of life that became increasingly visible across United
States culture into the 1960s, they also both stop short of presenting any real
reconciliation with those contradictions. That is, neither Warhol nor Morris seem
overly concerned with reformulating a positive vision for the problematic trajectories and attitudes of art and life, leaving much, particularly in the earlier work that made them famous, up to interpretation. In the fourth chapter I take up the art of Ana Mendieta as facing the situation more head on while also adopting alternative models. In many ways Mendieta can be seen as joining the legacies of Warhol and Morris with that of Rivera, particularly when we recall how, in relation to *Man at a Crossroads*, he wrote of wanting to forge an “American” art by fusing “the marvelous indigenous art which derives from the immemorial depths of time in the center and south of the continent (Mexico, Central America, Bolivia, and Peru)” with “the industrial worker of the north.” While being deeply versed in the U.S. and European precedents of modernist and post-modernist art history and production, having received two master degrees from an experimental and highly reputable art department in Iowa, Mendieta looked outside of those frameworks to find alternative approaches to time, history, progress, and the role of art that escape certain linear and totalizing aspects of U.S.-centric Atomic Age narratives, aspects by which even Warhol and Morris are often bound. But, as I explore, she did so always ultimately for the sake of a critique of those narratives, exploring ways in which models outside of the dominant forms might allow her to develop a more incisive critico-poetic means of exploring the political and cultural ‘centers’ that exerted such a powerful influence over the trajectory of her life.
In each case, Robert Morris, Andy Warhol, and Ana Mendieta offer us crucial examples of a U.S.-based artist attempting to come to terms with the troubled, nuclear inflected socio-political situation that dominated their surroundings. As I discuss in chapter two, in his essay “Notes on Sculpture 4: Beyond Objects,” Robert Morris included an epitaph citation from Immanuel Velikovsky which asserts: “The past of mankind, and of the animal kingdoms, too, must now be viewed in the light of the experience of Hiroshima and no longer from the portholes of the Beagle.” I use this citation in support of understanding Morris’s posture toward “Hiroshima,” how he felt it was important to engage the legacies of that event in the United States within a critique of the formation of a postwar U.S. national culture. But as John Whittier Treat writes, “It is important to remind ourselves that speaking of America’s ‘Hiroshima’ and Hiroshima’s ‘America’ cannot ever mean speaking in compensatorily balanced equivalencies. As the target of nuclear war, and then as client state and proxy, the Japanese have never been as free to construe ‘America’ as vice versa.” As Treat demonstrates, with Peter Schwenger, in the essay “America’s Hiroshima, Hiroshima’s America,” the discourses of how the one formulated the other are rife with problems and complications that are themselves unequally distributed. Central concepts such as responsibility and victimhood, memory and testimony, propaganda, competing interests and internal domestic divisions, and the different histories of imperialism are all crucial components of this wider discourse. I make no claim to address them all here; my focus in this
dissertation, in staying within the relative confines of the U.S. canon, is to understand the ways in which a critique of the “Vital Center” was able to rise or fall mostly from within the center. The center of U.S. power as it has developed since the late 1940s was and continues to be one in whose interest it is to forget Hiroshima. The rupture that occurred in the immediate wake of the bombing violently injected “Hiroshima,” however ill-defined, into the U.S. public consciousness, with *Time* writing on August 20, 1945 how “there was no pretending Hiroshima had never happened.” But since then, that is precisely what U.S. power has tried to do. As Schwenger writes, the U.S. cannot be “morally upright, strong yet compassionate, good” while also remembering Hiroshima: “This myth of America,” he continues, “America as mythical hero, is in danger of being lost through Hiroshima.” My discussion of the post-atomic ‘vital Trojan Horse,’ above and throughout this dissertation, implicitly and explicitly seeks to recall the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the center in an attempt to demystify the image of aliveness that played cover for a dramatic increase of the means of violence, death, and covert imperial forms in and by the United States, all while it pointed the public’s awareness away from it in the facilitation of a ‘lively’ facade. And my discussion of the nuclear inflected formation of “Blank Form” by Robert Morris, of how “the war and the bomb” worry Andy Warhol, and finally, how Ana Mendieta sought to “revitalize nature in a different way” in the late postwar, seeks to string together the ways, both coded and overt, in which U.S. artists sought to remember how what really
underwrote the formation of postwar life at the center in fact only hollowed that center out.
Chapter 1: New Economies of Life: The Shifting Rhetoric of Vitality in U.S. Art and Politics of the Early Postwar Period

After World War II, in the early years of the “Atomic Age,” a new rhetoric of vitality emerged in the United States. More than just a marker of importance, the word “vital” and its derivatives began to support economic, political, and aesthetic appeals to life endorsed in different ways by allied governments, private enterprise, and the cultural milieu of the early postwar period. The new orientation of this rhetoric marked a departure from the earlier paths of vitalist discourse, which in the first half of the 20th century had led more toward essentialist explanations into the sources and currents of biological life. Vitalist rhetoric of the early postwar period moved, on the other hand, toward political, economic, and cultural arenas.

This chapter probes three examples of that movement. One revolves around Arthur Schlesinger’s popular book The Vital Center (1949) and the new liberal political rhetoric of President Harry Truman that it influenced. The second is the notion of Vitalpolitik—“vital policy”—espoused by the influential German economist and originator of “neoliberalism” Alexander Rüstow as a new organizing logic for postwar labor and enterprise. The third is in the arts, where a new cultural environment in New York adopted the rhetoric of vitality immediately after the war in a trend labeled by certain later art historical and museological discourse as “Vital Forms.”

My argument is that the shifting surge in vitalist rhetoric after World War
II came with a catch; that it laid claim to a very specific and narrow idea of life that itself was not always to life’s benefit. Through a close reading of texts, speeches, interviews, and other sources, I will explore how a troubling paradox arose in the early postwar years in which a language of vitality was used to usher in policies and trends that approached life in deeply ideological and partisan ways. In economic and political spheres, the new liberal policy behind postwar vitalist rhetoric economized life to a new degree, often effectively eroding the status of the social and the individuals’ connection to public life for the sake of a view that reconfigured people as units of production, as “enterprises,” within a booming but increasingly complex economy.

More importantly, the new shift in vitalist rhetoric occurred, overall, within the context of one of the most explosive and non-vital developments of human history: that of atomic weapons and the inauguration of the Atomic Age. In surveying the emergent Cold War rhetoric of life, one notices how “the bomb” is often brought under the umbrella of the vital, as if its psychological force depended on its ability to straddle the lifeline, always carrying within it the two opposing significations of savior and destroyer, taker and preserver of life.41 In his final State of the Union address in 1953, President Truman comes eventually to what he calls “the most vital question of all”: “Could there be built in the world a durable structure of security,” he asks, “or would we drift...toward another terrible disaster—a disaster which this time might be the holocaust of atomic war?”42 While we will come to see many more examples,
this citation captures some of the paradox of the postwar vitalist rhetoric as it developed in political discourse; as the “most vital question of all,” Truman, deflecting any sense of agency or culpability as to the development or offensive use of the bomb, casts the possibility of “the holocaust of atomic war” as the life or death scenario which now only the political will of the United States public, in his argument, can prevent.

Situated within the facts of his administration, in which he ordered the debut of atomic warfare over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in which he built a structure of “security” that was centered around an arsenal of atomic weapons, in which he sparked a great nuclear arms race, in which his administration set in motion doctrine for preemptive first use of atomic weapons in the context of Korea and heightened tensions in Eastern Europe, and in which he oversaw a generally dramatic hardening of the Cold War environment, Truman’s statement points to some of the paradoxes of the new vitalist rhetoric in its historical context. Despite that it was, if anything, the Unite States’ ideologically tinged scientific militarism that made the end of all human life feel more palpable than ever before, postwar U.S. political discourse shifted the narrative so that it became incumbent on the “vitality” of a newly invigorated form of postwar U.S. liberalism to rescue the world from “the holocaust of atomic war.”

Truman’s State of the Union addresses, delivered between 1946-1953, are themselves interesting sites to look for changing currents in the postwar
rhetoric of life. He uses the word “vital” and its derivatives six times in that 1953 speech, and 29 times across all eight addresses (by contrast, FDR used the word only 10 times across 12 addresses). But more than just more frequent usage, the word increasingly served as a companion to the nascent postwar neoliberal pillars of political freedom, individualism, and free enterprise, marking a clear departure from its earlier uses in late nineteenth and early twentieth century contexts. Where the *élan vital*, for example, was a notion around which philosophico-biological theories of life were constructed, the new “vital” slipped ubiquitously into popular political, economic and cultural language, attaching itself to a broad selection of postwar society. In his State of the Union addresses, Truman speaks repeatedly of “vital people,” “vital industries,” “vital interests,” “vital raw materials,” “vital minerals,” “vital economy,” “vital measures of foreign policy,” and so on. He further describes things, such as, in 1951, “the benefits of modern science and industry,” as the “ideals [that] give our cause a power and vitality that Russian communism can never command.”

**The Vital Center.** This last citation, a veiled reference to, among other things, the atomic arms race that was by then in full swing, is a testament to the influence and staying power of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s 1949 book *The Vital Center*, which, in its strong attack against the communist left, offered the “vitality” of the free (U.S.) individual life as the only tenable blueprint for political progress.
Arthur Schlesinger (b. 1917), an activist and public intellectual, was, from as early as 1939, considered “well connected to powerful institutional structures in American society.” In 1947, he was a founding member, along with Eleanor Roosevelt and Hubert Humphrey, of the Americans for Democratic Action, a political organization aligned with the centrist wing of the Democratic party that was strictly anti-communist and opposed any cooperation with the Soviet Union. As the Democratic party fractured after the war and as FDR’s former vice-president Henry Wallace was nominated to lead a newly formed Progressive Party, Schlesinger remained a steady champion of and strategist for the centrist liberalism that kept Truman in office after the 1948 elections. Schlesinger's public profile was often paradoxical. A Harvard professor tenured at the young age of 29, he showed early disdain for the left discourses of campus intellectuals. And indeed, while making sympathetic gestures to certain ideas of the U.S. Left (“During most of my political consciousness this has been a New Deal country. I expect that it will continue to be a New Deal country”) it is also sometimes difficult to distinguish his rhetoric or the effect of his rhetoric, particularly as relates to progressive politics in the U.S., from that of the Republican party. This we see as early as 1946, when in an illustrated Life magazine article titled “The U.S. Communist Party,” Schlesinger wrote that people became Communists “for reasons best understood by psychiatrists and dictators,” that they were “‘lonely and frustrated people’ who received ‘social, intellectual, even sexual fulfillment’ they
could not ‘obtain in existing society.’” Michael Wreszin has written of that *Life* article, noting how Schlesinger was “determined to awaken his readers to the party’s ‘conspiratorial presence’” and that Schlesinger warned “ominously that Communists had become active in Washington in the 1930s.” Indeed, Schlesinger insisted balefully that “some [communist] members were still well placed in the administration.” In 1948, Schlesinger disparagingly applied the “fellow-traveler” logic squarely on Henry Wallace after he was endorsed by the U.S. Communist party during that year’s presidential campaign, writing, for example, how “[Wallace’s] own sense of martyrdom was swiftly generalized to embrace all friends of Soviet totalitarianism.” For context, Schlesinger’s *Life* article appeared a whole year before Joseph McCarthy entered the Senate; in it, we see how he aligned establishment Democratic Party rhetoric to the right, creating a politically expedient path for Truman to link the Progressive party to a trumped up idea of communism while, in the process, implicitly paving the way for the damaging anti-Communist spectacle that occurred across the nation once party control in congress switched hands at the end of the decade.

Within the context and legacies of the atomic bomb, when discussing Schlesinger’s contribution to the political discourse in the early postwar years it is important to understand how, for him, Communism, and the communist left, effectively posed a greater threat to human life than atomic warfare itself. Schlesinger maintained publicly in 1950, even after the Soviet Union
successfully tested their own atomic weapon, that the United States “cannot afford to take too intransigent a position on the use of the bomb.”54 “Our first obligation,” he argued in the pages of the New York Post that April, “must be to assure the survival of the free world, and this must override our objections to particular weapons.”55 This statement doubles down on ideas from The Vital Center, in which, for example, despite being in “an age of anxiety,” he positions “the toleration of conflict” as “basically our central strength.”56 These statements are Schlesinger’s attempt at the reconsolidation, by means of a picture of entrenchment, of the position of the ‘victor’ that was seismically shocked by the initial reception of Hiroshima in the U.S., which had originally “burst upon their consciousness.”57 They point, moreover, to how popular discourse used a feeling of entrenchment toward the end of the decade to promote a more willingly militaristic resolve that was less “intransigent” to the use of nuclear weapons. This willingness bears witness to how far public opinion had traveled since the initial reception of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, which saw the United States’ development and use of the atomic bombs as a greater threat to the West’s survival than even the war itself had ever been. Popular broadcaster Edward Murrow expressed the precarious position of the ‘victor’ just a few days after the bombings when he declared over the airwaves: “seldom, if ever, has a war ended leaving the victors with such a sense of uncertainty and fear, with such a realization that the future is obscure and that survival is not assured.”58 This rather stunning sentiment
shows how the news of the U.S.’s development and use of the bomb was received in the U.S. as a grave threat to life, including, or especially, their own.\textsuperscript{59}

This sentiment, however, abated from 1945 to 1948, with U.S. commentators devoting successively less and less column inches to the atomic question over the course of those years.\textsuperscript{60} This abatement allowed space for a more hardened militaristic attitude to take hold both in relation to Soviet Russia and to domestic progressives, an attitude that was herded along by both parties, with the new conservatism of figures like Schlesinger reflecting a fundamentally altered Democratic party under Truman. As one commentator in 1955, Chadwick Hall, wrote in \textit{The Antioch Review}, “The shift in outlook which has prepared the way for a more sympathetic reception of the conservative’s message is clearly visible in Schlesinger’s analysis of the contemporary crisis.”\textsuperscript{61} Hall concludes his study by asserting “What is revolutionary about the new [postwar] outlook which is so conservative in tone is the fact that it has become so pervasive that it has even altered the foundations of progressive thinking.”\textsuperscript{62} In setting Murrow’s radio broadcast reflecting the shaken status of U.S. power in the immediate wake of the bomb against Schlesinger’s statements at the end of the decade, we see the transformation of Democratic sentiment in the early postwar period. In both examples, the endurance of U.S. life is at stake; but while Murrow’s progressivism casts the bomb as an unprecedented threat to life in the United States, Schlesinger, five years later,
reclaimed it as its protector.

The essentially necropolitical argument for preemptive use of atomic weapons against civilians in the name of “free” political life is inherently contradictory, and it required rhetorical maneuvers on behalf of the U.S. establishment aimed at displacing inevitable feelings of public unease and responsibility. For people like Schlesinger, and President Truman, it was necessary to move public anxiety away from the bomb and onto their perceived adversaries; and, in the first years of the postwar period, they did so with great success. In his “Vital Center,” for example, Schlesinger appropriated the pervasive atmosphere of anxiety across the postwar U.S. landscape, which was deeply rooted in the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and spun it as an inevitable result of a truly free political system. “The ‘anxious man,’” wrote Schlesinger, “is the characteristic inhabitant of free society in the twentieth century.” This he contrasted against the constructed totalitarian alternative in which political subjects were barred from making their own choices in life. As Hall put it, “Schlesinger insists that the omnipotent state threatens liberty” and that “Freedom, he argues in The Vital Center, is generated by conflict, by the friction of competing interests.”

The irony, of course, is that political freedom was hardly the source of U.S. anxiety and feelings of alienation. Rather, the single deepest cause of public uncertainty and fear for survival in the wake of World War II was the atomic bomb itself and the rupture it engendered within public consciousness.
And, unlike communism, it was entirely ‘American made.’ To understand the extent to which the bomb was the true source of the pervasive anxiety, one need simply look at the immediate reactions to the bomb in the U.S., exemplified by the Murrow broadcast cited above. The widely read pages of *Time* magazine, as discussed in the introduction, expressed much the sentiment: On August 20, 1945, *Time* described gravely how “the greatest and most terrible of wars ended, this week, in the echoes of an enormous event—an event so much more enormous that, relative to it, the war itself shrank into minor significance. The knowledge of victory was as charged with sorrow and doubt as with joy and gratitude.” Again, just as in Murrow’s citation, the bomb explicitly throws the victor position into crisis, a crisis that would have had eroded the logic of the U.S.’s increasingly (neo)imperial role in the world had it not been forcefully addressed by the political establishment. In context, it is startling to see the reception of the U.S.’s development and use bomb as being absorbed into public consciousness as “an event so much more enormous” than a war that had just claimed sixty million lives worldwide. That the bomb would charge even the end of such a catastrophe as WWII with an equal or increased degree of “sorrow and doubt” is in many ways remarkable. Together, the sentiment of the Murrow and *Time* citations point to the ways in which initial public reception of the Atomic Age in the U.S. was far more destabilizing than the reception of a war that had itself broken all records of violence and mass death. It jolted public consciousness and imagination in its introduction of
something altogether new with an unprecedented capacity for large-scale
destruction. And when we remember the actual agent of this jolt, that is,
Truman’s order to drop the bomb, these sentiments also suggest the extent to
which the U.S. assaults on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ruptured the perceived
justness of the United States’ role in the world that had been firmly established
during the war and which had survived all previous lengths of allied military
strategy. In the introduction I discussed how Henry Luce, the influential
publisher of *Time* and *Life* (and also a board member at MoMA since 1940),
exemplified the U.S.-centric ‘pre-atomic’ vision for the role of the U.S. after the
war in his widely read 1941 article “The American Century.” In that article,
explicitly taking victory as ultimately a foregone conclusion, Luce declared that
the U.S. had “within it the possibilities of such enormous human progress as to
stagger the imagination.”66 (my emphasis) Luce’s prediction perhaps turned
out to be truer than he bargained for, for in an uncannily resemblance of Luce’s
language, on August 6, 1945, broadcaster Don Goddard in his midday national
radio program filled U.S. households with news of a “special announcement”
penned by President Truman telling “the story of a new bomb, so powerful that
only the imagination of a trained scientist could dream of its existence.”67 (my
emphasis) “Without qualification,” Goddard continued, “the President said that
Allied scientists have now harnessed the basic power of the universe. They
have harnessed the atom.” The complexity of the bomb’s early legacy is thus
couched within the fact that, by exceeding the economies of popular
imagination in its near-perfect realization of the country’s ‘prewar’ fantasies with an unprecedented yet deeply (ethically) ambiguous event, the bomb ruptured the grounds on which U.S. pre-war fantasies of a post-war world were built. The result was a dramatic problematization of the previously neat self-image of ‘The American Century’ that the country had constructed for itself before they unleashed atomic weapons on the world, an image of its own just mandate to lead a postwar world that seems to have been shared across a broad spectrum of political opinion, even by Henry Wallace. The initial reception of the Atomic Age transformed public sentiment at the end of the war into a brand of fear for the continuation of life that was unthinkable before it and unprecedented, even in the context of what had been, until then, the unprecedented devastation of World War II.

Contrast the extraordinary sentiments of anxiety from leading U.S. media outlets and personalities immediately after World War II, exemplified in the citations from Murrow’s broadcast and the August 20, 1945 issue of *Time*, against the vision that materialized in Schlesinger’s *Vital Center*, after four years of fading memory, propagandistic steering of information, and dramatic shifts in the U.S. political landscape. Instead of stemming from the uncertainty of human survival as a result of the threat of atomic war, Schlesinger’s anti-communist activism repositioned public anxiety as a necessary, and indeed heroic, repercussion of U.S. liberalism and modernity. This he performed by setting up a contrast between the U.S.’s political system and that of a
totalitarian (read: Soviet) regime:

The final triumph of totalitarianism has been the creation of man without anxiety—of ‘totalitarian man.’ Totalitarianism sets out to liquidate the tragic insights which gave man a sense of his limitations. In their place it has spawned a new man, ruthless, determined, extroverted, free from doubts or humility, capable of infallibility, and on the higher echelons of the party, infallible.
Against totalitarian certitude, free society can only offer modern man devoured by alienation and fallibility.\(^{70}\)

The hubris of a statement like this is glaring when one understands that Schlesinger’s voice was part of, and in many ways was emblematic of, the political machine (the Democratic party under Truman) that unleashed the atomic bomb, i.e. the historical source of the anxiety, in the first place.

Schlesinger’s formulation of communists as “a new man ruthless, determined, extroverted, free from doubts or humility” is in this context a highly self-serving construction (in fact, in Europe, and France in particular, it is not an inaccurate characterization of how Americans themselves were viewed\(^{71}\)). The rhetorical move of *The Vital Center* to admit a degree of fallibility and alienation effectively works undercover as absolution of the original sin, a sin that, nevertheless, Schlesinger clearly viewed as worth repeating to protect his ideal of liberal politics against communism.

This is the postwar U.S. rhetoric of the “Vital Center” at work. It suggests the “vital” as a Trojan horse, which, under the banner of life and freedom of political choice, ushered in an age of foreign and domestic policies that in fact raised a threat to human life the likes of which had never before been seen.

We might ask, in August 1945, or for that matter a few years later in Korea,
who was it who was at least equally well described as “ruthless, determined, extroverted, free from doubts or humility,” who thought themselves “capable of infallibility?” While there were some U.S. voices that tried to call attention to these paradoxes, such as when W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, in 1951, that the U.S.’s aggressive nuclear bravado worked “to maintain and restore where possible the essentials of colonialism under the name of Free Enterprise and Western Democracy,” the hubris of the liberalism championed by Schlesinger and enacted by Truman went unchecked by the mainstream discourse, and it won out.\textsuperscript{72} By attacking their left flank, by ushering in a more dominant role of the private sector, and by presiding over a hardening of the United States’ militaristic foreign policies, the Democrats’ steering of the United States at the beginning of the postwar period represents a general shift “toward the right” of the entire political spectrum.\textsuperscript{73}

\textbf{Vitalpolitik.} We find this rightward drift, and the presence of the “vital” within it, again in the language of Truman’s State of the Union addresses. Truman warns, for example, both in 1947 and 1949, against “the special and unique problem” of labor strikes within “vital industries affecting the public,” declaring them potential for “national disaster.”\textsuperscript{74} He cheers, in 1953, the ability of “this live and vital economy of ours” to, among other things, “sustain a great mobilization program for defense.” With “defense” always serving as a stand-in for militarization and armament, the contradictions of praising such a system as “live” and “vital” come better into focus. In a 1949 appraisal of Truman’s 1948
election victory, considered one of the greatest electoral upsets in U.S. presidential polls, one commentator pointed to Truman’s political acumen and the presents of the “vital” within it, explaining how Truman “won favor” by making “direct and specific appeals, appeals of man to man, appeals in terms of the vital interests to whom he was speaking.” In a letter between two high level Truman advisors in preparation for the 1948 State of the Union speech, Leon Keyserling wrote to Clifford Clark about how he was “particularly concerned about the discussion of the economic program, which seems to imply that the Government is going to do the whole job. …The first responsibility for employment and production rests with business.” These sentiments, reflecting a more conservative tone amongst Truman’s liberal advisors, clearly made it into Truman’s 1948 State of the Union, as when he asserted how “growth and vitality in our economy depend on rigorous private enterprise.”

This last quote, in particular, bringing “vitality” and “private enterprise” together, puts Truman and the dominant politico-economic discourses of postwar America into contact with Alexander Rüstow’s contemporaneous neoliberal ideas concerning a *Vitalpolitik*. The ideas of *Vitalpolitik* are traced back to some of Rüstow’s writing in the 1930s and the concept is explicitly present in his massive treatise “Freedom and Domination,” which was published in 1949 and was known to economist and political theorists in U.S. Contrasted against *Sozialpolitik*—a system of socially oriented (statist)
economic strategies or subsidies—Rüstow’s “vital policy,” like Truman’s winning election strategy, emphasized the individual and sought to frame all aspects of an individual life in economic terms. Inherent in Vitalpolitik, particularly as it was understood in the United States, was a suspicion of the social as “an absolute value rooted in its ethical purpose”; instead, if anything, Rüstow’s notion supported the configuration of smaller “communities” as more conducive paths to individual well-being (with a feeling of well-being understood in turn as crucial to one’s productivity).79 (In The Vital Center, Schlesinger also championed the idea of community as being constructed for the sake of the individual, writing: “We require individualism which does not wall man off from community; we require community which sustains but does not suffocate the individual.”80) Rüstow described “the vital situation of man” as that which “extends from the tangible facts of his income, of his profession, of his dwelling, of his family, to the intangibles of his subconscious, of his Weltanschauung, of his religion.” “Everywhere,” Rüstow declared, “it must be our goal to create conditions and attitudes which make it possible for man to feel well.”81

Some have argued that the consequence of this policy, which was echoed by the growing chorus of influential postwar neoliberal economists and policy makers, is a general splintering of the social for the sake of the economic productivity of the individual, pointing toward that paradoxical construction of a community of (economized) individuals. In his lectures on
“The Birth of Biopolitics,” at the Collège de France in 1979, Michel Foucault looked back at what this proposal actually promised, asking

But what is this Vitalpolitik that Rüstow talks about, and of which this is an expression? Actually, as you can see, it is not a matter of constructing a social fabric in which the individual would be in direct contact with nature, but of constructing a social fabric in which precisely the basic units would have the form of the enterprise […]\(^{82}\)

Foucault marks out a tendency of Vitalpolitik to decrease individuals’ “direct contact with nature” within the social field for the sake of their reconfiguration as discrete units of production and consumption (turning everyone into an “enterprise”). He later describes this as “a policy of economization of the entire social field.”\(^{83}\) When we read Foucault’s description of Rüstow’s Vitalpolitik in conjunction with, for example, Truman’s 1948 statement that “growth and vitality in our economy depend on rigorous private enterprise,” we see not only the convergence of early neoliberal thought within mainstream, U.S. Democratic Party political and economic discourse at the beginning of the postwar, but, within that, a system which has the clear potential, in a certain un-doing of the politics of the New Deal, to prioritize private economic productivity above an individual’s integration within a natural “social fabric.”\(^{84}\) This could perhaps be seen as the ‘atomization’ of postwar life in action.\(^{85}\) With the stated dependence of economic vitality on rigorous privatization and free enterprise, we see how this important discourse of vitality at the dawn of the Atomic Age worked to deprivilege the “social” integration of individual lives for the sake of lively industry, a lively economy, and a lively military.
Whatever Rüstow and Truman’s intentions, when pushed, this system transformed the economy into a powerful means of distraction and dissociation away from the idea of a collective social fabric. The sum of this policy seems to want to look after individuals’ material “well-being,” to convince them that their worldly unease and alienation is a consequence of their freedom, and cast perceived challenges to that freedom from the outside, more than any atomic bomb, as the single most dangerous threat to human life. In the process, that which is inorganic and, in fact, unnatural, from a fervent economization of life to the very act of splitting the atom, underwent a process of widespread normalization, eventually assisting in the construction of a radically different attitude toward life in the postwar period that would have far reaching consequences, in both foreign and domestic affairs, over the years to come.

**Vital Forms.** With their real-life parallels to the more theoretical neoliberal concepts of *Vitalpolitik*, Truman’s statements and policies marked a dramatic turn away from the public sphere that was a departure for a party that in the previous decade had given the country a New Deal. Chadwick Hall, in concluding his detailed 1955 article on “America’s Conservative Revolution” in the *Antioch Review*, summed up how much attitudes had shifted in the early postwar period:

What is so surprising about the change which took place in the American scene in the late 1940s is not that the businessman was able to rehabilitate his reputation, so badly damaged by the Great Depression, nor that a shift occurred in American attitudes which has made the public more susceptible to his message. What is so extraordinary about this period is that the shift was so
sweeping, so profound. The ideas which came into fashion in the 1940’s had never been popular in America—their pessimistic and anti-equalitarian character do not suit the American temper. [...] What is revolutionary about the new outlook which is so conservative in tone is the fact that it has become so pervasive that it has even altered the foundations of progressive thinking. 86

Citing Schlesinger and *The Vital Center*, among other sources, Hall describes how postwar political discourse shifted away from an optimistic view of the social to form a new conservative climate, one that cultivated the idea of discrete, skeptical individuals as the basis for a new kind of enterprise culture. A striking parallel occurred contemporaneously within the arts too, as the ascendant language of abstract painters and their critics in New York in the second half of the 1940s effectively shunned the social politics that many of those same figures had previously cut their teeth on. In 1947, Mark Rothko spoke of the “unfriendliness of society” and asserted that turning away from the “hostility” of “a false sense of security and community” can “act as a lever for true liberation.” 87 “Both the sense of community and of security depend on the familiar,” he continued, “free of them, transcendental experiences become possible.” 88 In a talk from 1949, Willem de Kooning developed similar ideas, stating for example how “an artist is forced by others to paint out of his own free will.” 89 The sustained presence of the language of “free will” and “true liberation” was a new postwar development in these artists’ language; in 1943, for example, Rothko, along with Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman, published a manifesto of sorts in the *New York Times* that defended their approach to painting against critical detractors, but the language of liberation or
freedom, let alone of vitality, does not appear.\textsuperscript{90} Yet, by 1947, Rothko describes even his shapes as moving “with internal freedom, and without need to conform with or to violate what is probable in the familiar world.”\textsuperscript{91} The shift is even more evident in the language of Jackson Pollock, who in a 1944 interview never discusses any notion of freedom, liberation, or aliveness in relation to his painting, despite being asked questions about technique and the distinctions between American and European painting that would later solicit such a response.\textsuperscript{92} Six years later, in 1950, in the midst of the Truman administration and the continuing rise of Schlesinger’s public stock, Pollock gave an interview in which the descriptions of his painting techniques now bore an uncanny resemblance to the new political rhetoric. Using a stick instead of a brush, for example, allowed Pollock, in his words, “to be more free and to have greater freedom” to move about the canvas.\textsuperscript{93} These are techniques that Pollock deployed, according to him, in order to “express an inner world—in other words—expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces.”

Across the language of these statements from the early postwar period we see a sustained drive toward “true liberation,” “free will,” and to be "more free" amongst the newly dominant New York school in tandem with a distinct rhetorical turn inwards, away from community, away from the contingencies of the world, in a reinforcement and in some cases an enshrinement of the status of the individual, which together marked a new development in the rhetoric and posture of the New York painters after 1945. Contemporaneous art criticism
from across the spectrum famously reinforced this new rhetorical posture. For
Harold Rosenberg, Pollock’s “gesture on the canvas was a gesture of
liberation.” Sidney Tillim remarked on Pollock’s “singular principle of aesthetic
freedom.” For Meyer Schapiro, "the consciousness of the personal and
spontaneous in [Pollock’s] painting…confer to the utmost degree the aspect of
the freely made.”

Throughout the rise and institutionalization of the postwar New York
School from the late 1940s and into the 1950s, a heightened framework of a
certain idea of life, one characterized by energy, action, and “vitality” went
hand in hand with the notion of a “free” mode of production. In his discussion of
the decline of Cubism, even before his full-throated endorsement of the New
York School, Clement Greenberg painted a picture of a lively new postwar U.S.
avant-garde, citing Pollock in particular, as “so full of energy and content.” In
1953 James Sweeny, then the director of the Guggenheim museum who was
instrumental in bringing the Abstract Expressionists into the Guggenheim’s
collection in the 1950s, also reflected on the scene’s general energetic and
lively mood, claiming wistfully that “yesterday is not quite out of sight; tomorrow
is not yet in view. But the atmosphere of vitality is unquestionable.” Sweeny
further conferred this new rhetoric of life even on artistic institutions,
maintaining: “a museum should be a vital organism.” On the occasion of a
1957 MoMA exhibition of Pollock’s work, Sam Hunter wrote for the Bulletin of
the Museum of Modern Art that Pollock “was responsible for injecting into
American art a vitality and confidence,” and that he and his peers were responsible for a “vital burst of energy in American abstract art.” It was in 1949 and 1950, he went on “that Pollock perhaps attained the ripest expression of his vital material sensibility.” In 1950, the Yale University Art Gallery included Pollock and Rothko in an exhibition of “the most vital painting this century has known,” that promised to “sample the vitality of the modern movement.” Aline Saarinen, art critic for the New York Times, argued in 1955, in the context of international artistic exchange that was increasingly being drawn in to Cold War cultural politics, that the United States should deploy “the most vital, the most hopeful, the most imaginative aspects of our culture.” In adding to the increased cache of this rhetoric of life, Rothko discussed in 1947 the means by which “a picture lives” and dies, and Pollock insisted on multiple occasions after 1945 that his “painting has a life of its own,” and that he “kind of let[s] it live.” Pollock moreover described, in 1950, the current thrust of the New York School as “very vibrant, very alive, very exciting,” citing “five or six of my contemporaries around New York are doing very vital work.”

The sheer frequency with which the words “vital” and “vitality” were used by New York School artists, postwar art critics, and in institutional contexts, and the idea of the artistic situation at the dawn of the Atomic Age as characterized by energy and ‘aliveness’ that it supported, points to an almost compulsive drive on behalf of those who had a stake in the new U.S. art scene
to frame the artistic situation after WWII as bursting with life. But, as in the
case of the political rhetoric, when such a chorus of people repeatedly asserts
the ‘aliveness’ of their situation, it almost works in itself to raise suspicions as
to the validity, earnestness, or accuracy of the claim. While before 1945 their
rhetoric and attitude was more diverse and less dogmatic to a particular point
of view, after 1945, almost like a group of suspects getting their story straight, it
was as if they all suddenly got on message, aligned with the new political
mood.

“Modern art to me,” Pollock asserted in the 1950 interview, “is nothing
more than the expression of contemporary aims of the age that we’re living
in.” But if the age that he was living in was one in which, as he in part
acknowledged, the U.S. introduced the atomic bomb, spurred an
unprecedented nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union that was underpinned
by dramatic ideological tensions, and in which the U.S. was so quick to return
to war in Korea, among other features, one wonders how well an expression of
liveliness can function as an true "expression of the contemporary aims" of the
age. According to him, his new techniques were required to express the new
postwar era in which he and his contemporaries found themselves, the age, in
his own words, of “the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio.” The case,
however, for how an aesthetics of liveliness, energy, and freedom actually
adequately expresses those things remains in the end unstable. Whatever the
intention, we must ask whether in its historical context the effect of this posture
was the formation of an aesthetics and politics of obliviousness, a feigning of
an expression of the age of “the atom bomb,”—a development in fact
responsible for more violence, more armament, more militarization, and more
political tension—that in point of fact does not live up to the stated aim of
expressing its age to the extent that it turns away from all its real implications.
More convincing is the extent to which the new techniques and the new
formulation of painting to which they gave rise, however unwittingly, absorbed
and reflected the underlying principles of the age’s mainstream politics as it
reached to stabilize an idea of U.S. supremacy that had been dramatically
called into question, even in the U.S., at the inaugural moment of the Atomic
Age with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This comes not simply
through the compulsive need for “greater freedom” and the repeated claims to
the creation of a lively art, but also in the inward turn, away from the realities of
the world, in an attempt to express vaguely, in Pollock’s words, “an inner
world.... the energy, the motion, and other inner forces.”

Together, the excerpts from artists of the initial postwar U.S. art boom,
their critics, and their institutional backers, bring all the elements of the coded
political and economic language of vitality in the second half of the 1940s into
the contemporaneous avant-garde circles of postwar New York painting. And
for a group who advertised themselves as apolitical, it also must be noted that
Pollock and James Sweeney, along with other important figures, were members
of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom whose co-founder and vice-
president was none other than Arthur Schlesinger himself. This was an environment in which Alfred Barr, first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, could describe without any trouble the new styles of New York artists in 1949 to Henry Luce, author of “The American Century,” and Board Member at the Museum of Modern Art, as “artistic free enterprise.” In Pollock’s own telling, he crafts his techniques to maximize his freedom; he asserts but then quickly turns away from the importance of recognizing the new Atomic Age, reaching instead to try to express his “inner world”—his own vital situation. And, while shunning the tendency to form collective visions and voices that marked the interwar avant-garde (the Surrealists, for example), he nevertheless identifies a small community of individuals, whose “vital” work he affirms through an unequivocal language of life.

But again, when work is characterized as being “very alive,” one must wonder the extent to which it could possibly express the age of the atom bomb. As this question went relatively unposed in the early postwar years, let alone unanswered, a sense of life, or liveliness, one that often aligned itself with the neoliberal attitude of mainstream politics, continued to saturate the production and reception of the early postwar U.S. avant-garde in New York. It was this impulse to express the age of the atom bomb through a language of vitality, without ever asking what the sources and meanings of this brand “vitality” represented, both within and outside the borders of the United States, that rests at the core of the “Vital Forms” paradox. We have seen the presence of
“vitality" in the political and economic discourses of the new liberalism that took hold in the years immediately following WWII. And now we see it in the period’s most influential artistic idiom.

It is also worth noting the staying power of the rhetoric of vitality as regards the New York school within art historical and museological contexts. A 1985 monograph of Franz Kline was titled “The Vital Gesture.” A 2012 book on Pollock notes how he conveyed “a raw physical vitality—the same explosive force and dynamism present in his paintings,” and how “we cannot avoid using the word ‘energy’-the overwhelming impression of the great Pollocks is one of immense power, a raw, explosive aliveness that some have chosen to call aggression and others an essentially religious ecstasy. It is the sense of anarchic vitality being given form that lends the drip paintings their excitement.” (emphasis original). An essay titled “A Vital Force: Abstract Art and Cultural Politics at Mid-Century,” appears in the catalog of the 2012 Guggenheim exhibition “Art of Another Kind,” in which the author describes a 1950 Statement on Modern Art asserting “the basic human aspirations toward freedom and order” as “foremost an affirmation of the vitality and diversity of contemporary art in the United States.” And the Brooklyn Museum organized the 2002 exhibition titled “Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age.” In that exhibition’s catalog appears an essay titled “The Great Mystery of Things: Aspects of Vital Forms in American Art” that suggests the “philosophy of vitalism” as a “source for vital forms in American art of the 1940s and
The essay groups the postwar work of de Kooning, Newman, Pollock and others into what is essentially a prewar notion of vitalism, one that was far less political and more concerned with a strictly Bergsonian notion of *élan vital* without recognizing the way in which political discourse as well as the stated priorities of the artists themselves had shifted the contours of that rhetoric after 1945. Emblematic of this is the way the essay asserts, for example, that “the feeling of crisis brought on by World War II during the early 1940s did not subside at the end of the decade, but instead continued on into the 1950s, fed by the anxieties produced by the atom bomb, the Cold War, and the threat of Communism.” This citation is indicative of a widespread problem with the historical record that too easily lumps two very different crises—that of World War II itself and that of the introduction of the atomic bomb and the inauguration of the Atomic Age—into one. This elision does not adequately account for the way “the anxieties produced by the atom bomb” were in fact distinct from the war itself, how they were the result of a significant rupture and transformation of public consciousness which produce an altogether new crisis just as the crisis of World War II had begun drawing to an end.

Recalling the statement made in 1953 by Guggenheim director James Sweeny that “yesterday is not quite out of sight; tomorrow is not yet in view. But the atmosphere of vitality is unquestionable,” helps to bring the goal of my research into focus. That is, I am trying to undo the unquestionableness of
the atmosphere of vitality in the United States, to probe and investigate its new construction in the immediate postwar period that stretched across politics, economics and the arts in an attempt to understand how an unprecedented threat to life and an erosion of life’s social fabric could have been facilitated by life’s very image.

Indeed, the purpose of my research is to posit this troubled construction of “vitality” as a framework for refining our understanding of the category of the postwar and the legacy of the atomic bomb, particularly in an art historical context. I’ve offered the triangulation of Schlesinger’s “Vital Center,” Rüstow’s Vitalpolitik, and the “Vital Forms” of the initial postwar U.S. art boom—all reaching widespread mainstream prominence contemporaneously around 1949—as a preliminary means of tracing the shifting discourse of life away from earlier philosophico-biological fields and onto the hardening realms of postwar U.S. politics, economics, and culture. This line of inquiry strongly suggests that claims to a new vitality were not all that they seemed, and that the trumping up of life can be reconsidered as in fact coming at its own expense. The most striking and powerful example of this occurs within the context and legacy of the atomic bomb, which, after instantly ending many thousands of lives in the announcement of a new age, and after rattling the U.S. psyche to its core, was transformed, under the banner of life, into the most important protector of American liberalism.

The utility of this research, finally, exceeds the primary time frame given
here of roughly 1945-1953, as it can assist in constructing a new groundwork for rethinking later emergent developments and practices. As we will see, this is particularly the case in the arts at the beginning of 1960s, in which a younger generation of artists in the United States began to question and refute the ability of energy, inwardness, and individuality to be adequate conceptual pillars of a national art of the Atomic Age in the United States. The following chapters seek to reevaluate the efforts of some of the central actors of the postwar U.S. avant-garde, such as Robert Morris and Andy Warhol and, later, Ana Mendieta, from squarely within this framework.
Chapter 2: Robert Morris’s Non-Vital Forms

“Blank form is like life, essentially empty.” – Robert Morris, 1960-61

In a short, relatively unknown text called “Blank Form,” composed between 1960 and 1961, Robert Morris wrote that “Blank form is like life, essentially empty, allowing plenty of room for disquisitions on its nature and mocking each in its turn.” That text, which, as I will discuss below, went narrowly unpublished at the time, is an early source for what amounted to a radical shift in attitude within the development of postwar art in the United States. For the first fifteen years of the postwar period, U.S. politics and culture, together with the dominant strands of the new U.S.-based avant-garde took a rather different approach. That is, and as previous sections of this dissertation have discussed, paradoxical notions of vitality and aliveness (not emptiness) deeply marked the cultural formation and artistic development of the early postwar era in the U.S. The claims to energy, action and liveliness of, for example, Jackson Pollock’s new contributions to art were reinforced many times by his own repeated assertions that, for him, painting took on “a life of its own,” and that he tried simply to “let it live.”

In 1990, Robert Morris made a painting about Pollock. Titled Monument Dead Monument / Rush Life Rush, it is a doubled, mirrored image in encaustic wax based on a well-known photograph that Hans Namuth took of Jackson Pollock at work in 1950. The original Namuth photograph shows Pollock as he was, presumably, trying to let his painting “live.” The lower half of Morris’s
painting, crisp and well defined, renders the photograph upside down. The unnatural orientation pits Pollock’s notorious drips and pours against the very force of gravity that made them famous. It turns, in other words, the lively action that reshaped art in the U.S. on its head. The top half of the painting rights the image, but here Morris heated up the encaustic wax in which it was executed, melting the image away, disfiguring the artist, the materials, and the artwork into a watery blur. Up the sides of the painting runs obscured stenciled texts, giving us a fractured version of the title: NUMENT DEAD MONUM on the left, RUSH LIFE RUSH on the right. In an account of the painting, W.J.T. Mitchell has written:

> If Pollock showed us that the primary material fact about paint is that it pours, Morris shows us that the primary material fact about wax (encaustic) is that it melts. What we are left with is neither merely a tribute to Pollock’s rushing life, nor a sardonic commentary on his subsequent monumentalization, but a vision of the birth and death of a monument, its vital origin, its fixing as a memorable icon, and its melting down in forgetfulness and chaotic oblivion. 122

This reading, convincing as it is, understands Morris’s painting as figuring a kind of historical deterioration, as the representation of a transformation over a series of vaguely defined (art) historical stages, one that originated from a “vital origin” and ended “in forgetfulness and chaotic oblivion.” But is that really what we get when we look at this work? If there is a representation of deterioration in the picture, is it that linear and clear-cut? By maintaining that the picture is not “merely a tribute to Pollock’s rushing life,” the reading seems, before anything, to accept that “rushing life” at face value, to perpetuate, in other words, the
sacrosanct “vital origin” story that has so deeply marked the histories and understanding of the postwar in the United States. But what if, instead, we saw Morris’s painting as a kind of self-portrait? Not of Morris himself per se, but of the central critique that his work launched? Of, in a way, his own art’s origin story as it began to unravel the cult of postwar vitality. The question might then become, can we go back to the “beginning,” say to 1960 when Morris first began to formulate his intervention, and ask whether and in what ways Morris rejected the brand of aesthetics (and politics) of life that had become dominant in the first 15 years after World War II. How do we best understand and situate Morris’s own description of the new aesthetic he developed as being “like life, essentially empty”? What can we make of the fact that while in 1950 Pollock described his most respected colleagues as doing “very vital work”—worked that seemed to him “very vibrant, very alive”—Morris, ten years later, would develop a new aesthetics of life under the banner of “Blank Form” that in itself showed no vital signs? Instead of energetic, colorful, painterly pours, as I explore below, at the beginning of the 1960s Morris experimented with performative gestures of loss, sculptures of static gray cubes, paintings of blankness, and a politically inflected allegorical nothingness. These gestures of Morris’s, which constitute an influential contribution to the broader formal and conceptual shifts of postwar U.S. art as it progressed into the 1960s, reflect a new contingent attitude toward the relationship between art and life that, in a departure from the general affect
of Abstract Expressionism, could no longer afford to turn inwards and ignore the troubled status of life that surrounded them. These are some of the questions or issues I hope to answer and explore in this chapter. To begin to do so, it is important to go back to the beginning of Morris's mature career, to 1960 in New York City, in order to locate and historically ground his rejection of 'vital' aesthetics, and ask how a new understanding of this rejection might allow for both a rethinking of his critical reception and pave the way for new readings of the work. Indeed, many of what have become the dominant readings of postwar U.S. art, from Michael Fried's notion of theatricality to Rosalind Krauss's ideas of the “expanded field,” have been constructed through readings of Morris's work; as such he is a good figure through which to rethink them. This chapter suggests that what is missing from the analysis of Morris’s canonical 'minimalist' work is an understanding of them within the full extent of his complex notion of “Blank Form.”

Before launching into the mechanics of how Morris’s “Blank Form” operated, and the mysterious story of the “Blank Form” text itself, it should be said first of all that Morris’s canonical 'minimal' sculpture, in its earliest formulations, was in fact “Blank Form.” We know this because at the very end of that short text, Morris lists “some examples of Blank Form sculpture,” all of which precisely match his early so-called “minimalist” works. The first, for example, is “A column with perfectly smooth, rectangular surfaces, 2 feet by 2 feet by 8 feet, painted gray.” This is an exact description of Column, perhaps
Morris’s first ‘minimalist’ work, albeit one that predates the term “Minimal Art” by some five years. In fact, Column appears to be one of the first pieces Morris developed after he had, in his words, “completely stopped painting,” and moved to New York in 1960. To put this into perspective, Morris produced Column six years before Artforum published the first of Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture” series in 1966. It is even apparently earlier than certain key works of Morris’s experimental so-called ‘pre-minimalist’ or ‘neo-dada’ period, such as Box With the Sound of Its Own Making (1961) and Card File (1962). In an interview with Guggenheim director Thomas Krens, Morris himself recalled how Box is “dated January 1961…something …right on the box.” “The Column,” he continued, “was made in 1960 and put together in ‘61. Then these other small things were being made. Sometimes I’d work on things 2 – 3 at a time. I didn’t have a lot of room to work on big things. That’s why the Column was not put together for a while.” Thus, in a clarification of the timeline, it is accurate to say that the development of Morris’s minimal work in fact preceded the neo-dada experimentations that are often written off as early investigations that pre-dated his ‘mature’ style. Reading Morris’s interview with Krens, a picture forms in my mind of him perched in a crowded loft at 275 Church St., thinking about Column, working on a letter response to John Cage, and being surrounded by, among other things, boxes of unbound copies of La Monte Young’s experimental publication An Anthology of Chance Operations, his contribution with “Blank Form” still there, but bothering him. This picture will hopefully become clearer
below, as its components will be key points throughout this chapter. For now, suffice it to say that it hardly seems to have been a period of “inactivity,” as Morris once claimed.\textsuperscript{128}

In addition to being one of the first works he conceived after moving to New York, \textit{Column} also served as the centerpiece for one of Morris’s earliest minimal performances. The catalog for Morris’s 1994 retrospective at the Guggenheim museum, among other sources, documents how it was “adapted as a performance at the Living Theater in New York.”\textsuperscript{129} It goes on to describe how:

For the event, [Morris] positioned an unadorned, gray-painted rectangular column in the center of the stage. There it stood erect for three and a half minutes, after which time he toppled it with a string from offstage, and it remained prone for another three and a half minutes. Clearly a “performer,” the column concentrated into two positions—standing and lying down—the multitude of possible dance gestures, just as it literalized the way dance is meant to fill otherwise empty time.\textsuperscript{130}

While the Guggenheim catalog gives passing acknowledgement to the sculpture’s obvious “anthropomorphism,” it otherwise reads this early work and its performance (together with related works such as \textit{Two Columns} and \textit{L-Beams} that followed over the next five years), in the formalist terms of a “form-class.” The “form-class” was a central notion of George Kubler’s book \textit{The Shape of Time}, and the catalog identifies it outright as “an autonomous formal problem that exists independent of any given historical context.” Morris would indeed be influenced by the idea of the form-class, which was central to the reading of Brancusi that made up his masters thesis in art history at Hunter
College six years later. However, Thomas Krens, the one time director of the Guggenheim museum who was instrumental in assembling the comprehensive 1994 catalog, rests the entire significance of Morris’s “minimalism” on the concept of the form-class, stating that Morris’s study of Brancusi either anticipates or follows the mapping activity that is both the foundation and the literal blueprint for Morris’s minimalist enterprise. His work from 1963 (Green Gallery) to 1968 (200 Pieces of Steel…) is nothing less than a systematic catalog of the major form classes of solid geometry keyed to human scale.

The problem with this reading—over and above the obvious point that Morris made Column some two years before Kubler’s book was even published and some six years before completing his masters thesis—is that it forecloses another, very different account of Column as the earliest sculptural instantiation of “Blank Form.” As I stated above, we know from the end of the “Blank Form” text, when Morris proposes an example of “Blank Form” that exactly fits the description of the work, that Morris explicitly conceived of Column as “Blank Form.” To understand how that might shift the interpretive parameters of Morris’s “minimalist enterprise,” we can turn to the text where, in addition to saying “Blank Form is like life, essentially empty,” Morris also describes Blank Form as something that “waves a large gray flag and laughs about how close it got to the second law of thermodynamics.” Putting these statements together, Morris effectively says that he understands the earliest formation of his minimal work as both being “like life, essentially empty” and that it “laughs at how close it got” to nuclear fission. In this way, before really unpacking what those
statements might even mean, is it possible to see *Column* not as “an autonomous formal problem that exists independent of any given historical context,” but precisely as a historically-constituted idea marking a reorientation within the forming aesthetics of postwar avant-garde art away from abstract liveliness toward an idea of life as empty. *Column*’s anthropomorphism behaved very differently from the organicity of its predecessors. The plywood edges were crisp and, as dramatized in his performance, the work functions like mark of vitality that was hollowed out and fallen. Keeping that in mind, Morris’s allusion to atomic fission in the reference to the second law of thermodynamics as a description of *Column* as “Blank Form,” suggests, at the least, that the legacies of the nuclear issue, with all the contradictory attitudes toward life they encompassed, were not an interest of Morris’s later work alone (in which he explicitly and repeatedly engaged the theme), but were in fact, contrary to every narrative, present from the beginning. While so evident in his later works, most understandings of Morris’s minimalism hardly allow for such an interpretative framework. These readings kept Morris’s new blankness, as witnessed in the leveraging of the form-class, to varying degrees at a safe distance from history and the socio-political realities of the postwar period.

This foreclosure, as we will see, is symptomatic of a larger problem within the critical reception of Morris’s work. Indeed, it is perhaps not at all surprising that the dominant critical narrative, in its numerous “disquisitions” on the “nature” of Morris’s canonical work, would perform such a foreclosure. The move to read
Morris’s sculpture as “an autonomous formal problem that exists independent of any given historical context” was in line with a long-established perspective which offered up Morris’s art in the early to mid sixties as, in the words of Rosalind Krauss, “the purest example” of sculpture entering a “categorical no-man’s land.”

As opposed to that, on the other hand, my research probes the extent to which Morris’s early production was concerned precisely with (recent) history, and in particular, with the unprecedented violent impulses within U.S. history since 1945 as well as the façade of vitality that was constructed in its wake. It is, in a sense, a response to W.J.T. Mitchell’s point that a challenge to the “art-historical master narratives” regarding Robert Morris’s work might well require looking at “a larger historical frame,” one that asks us “to consider the relation of this (mainly American) story of art to the fortunes of American culture in the era of the Cold War and the nuclear nightmare…”

This task, which Mitchell ultimately passes up, is of course easiest performed in retrospect, with Morris’s willingness to engage these legacies of the “the nuclear nightmare” increasing dramatically as his work progressed over the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. “The atomic explosions of 1945 are perhaps comparable to the introduction of Gutenberg’s press,” he wrote later in 1978, “both represent technological turning points in the world’s history,” and as his career progressed he made everything from atomic themed war memorials to mushroom-cloud covered bed sheets. My task, which is less obvious and
rarely done in the Morris scholarship, is to investigate how those concerns of his later career were present, if not central, within the very formation of his early canonical work.

**The story of Morris’s “Blank Form”: 1960-62.** The story of the mysterious circumstances of the “Blank Form” text begins, like many stories of Morris’s early art, with his move to New York City from San Francisco in 1960. I turn first however not to the Judson Church or the Living Theater or the Green Gallery, as is usually the case, but to 275 Church Street a few blocks below Canal in lower Manhattan. There Morris lived next door to his friends La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, whom he had met previously in San Francisco in the milieu of Anna Halprin’s dance studio and workshops before moving to New York. Since the autumn of 1960, directly predating the emergence of the Fluxus movement, Young had been at work, with Jackson Mac Low and George Maciunas, on the now famous publication of (neo) avant-garde art known, short hand, as *An Anthology of Chance Operations*. In the history of Fluxus, this publication is a kind of origin-event, a prototype for the brand of collaboration and artistic priorities that Maciunas would pursue into the sixties. But that is not our story; here, of concern is Morris’s particular contribution to *An Anthology*, which included his “Blank Form” text.

As stated above, it is a contribution shrouded in some mystery. While a complete manuscript of *An Anthology* was assembled by 1961, perhaps foreshadowing the dramas that were to bedevil Fluxus, the publication ran into
editorial and financial problems, and was delayed for two years. (The event at which Morris performed his notorious *Column* piece at the Living Theater in New York was a fundraiser for the effort.\(^{138}\) *An Anthology* was eventually released in 1963, at which point both Young and Morris had distanced themselves from Fluxus, which had been formally constituted in the interim period.

The radical content and experimental typography of *An Anthology* was underpinned by a relatively basic structure. At the beginning, behind the busy cover, was a list of contributors in alphabetic order; in the body, each contributor had a title page followed by the pages of his or her contribution. Contributions varied from one to several pages in length. Morris’s name appears at the beginning in the introductory list of contributors between Richard Maxfield and Simone Forti (then Simone “Morris”). And, in the unnumbered pages of the body of the book, he has his title page announcing a contribution of “Essay and Compositions.” Following that, however, all that appears is a single, blank page. This, however, was not the original plan. In fact Morris had produced a series of texts and performance scores for the publication, which, in addition to “Blank Form” included “Travelling Sculpture – a means toward a sound record,” “Project for Sculpture,” and “Make an object to be lost.” But none of them made it into the final run.

Why did they not appear? As one account goes, sometime after the volume was printed, but not bound, La Monte Young asked Morris to store in his loft next door on Church Street the roughly one thousand unbound copies of *An*
Anthology, to which Morris agreed. For reasons not entirely clear, Morris, likely wishing to distance himself from the newly constituted Fluxus group (with which he formally broke in 1964\textsuperscript{139}), or apparently either unsatisfied with his contribution or with the publication as a whole, or for the sake of some other gesture, removed his original contribution from all the unbound copies, leaving only the single blank page.\textsuperscript{140}

There are, of course, practical reasons why Morris could not entirely erase his presence in the publication without disturbing the contributions of Maxfield and Forti, who came before and after him in the book’s order. However, in the original act of withdrawing the page, Morris would have seen how it looked. That is to say, the announcement of a blank page as “Essay, Compositions,” and the withdrawal of a text entitled “Blank Form” (as well as others entitled, for example, “Make an object to be lost”) is a rich gesture. Morris was deeply concerned at this very moment with the notion of blankness and deprivation, and it is difficult to think he would not have been attuned to this situation. In the place of his treatise on “Blank Form” now stood a blank page.

The actual text of “Blank Form” helps to shore up a view that Morris’s blank page can in itself be read like a proto-minimalist work, and thus as a kind of substantive contribution to An Anthology. “From the subjective point of view,” Morris writes at the beginning of “Blank Form,” “there is no such thing as nothing—Blank Form shows this, as well as might any other situation of deprivation.” From the outset, then, Morris’s establishes his idea to some extent
positively; never “nothing,” it is a manifestation of something, something stemming out of a general “situation of deprivation.” This begins to lend a kind of substance to the blank page in An Anthology. It also echoes similar sentiments of an ‘active’ nothing that Morris iterated elsewhere at the same time. In a letter to John Cage from 1962 (written perhaps while the unbound manuscripts of An Anthology were sitting in his apartment), he wrote that he “cannot conceive of nothing happening” and that “some of us really are trying to say nothing in an elegant manner.”¹⁴¹ (I note now in passing the collective tone—“some of us”—present in his early language.) The statement in Morris’s letter to Cage is directly reflected in his original contribution to An Anthology, where one of the works “Project for Sculpture,” instructs: “Begin a series of images such that each successive one arrives close by one half the distance to zero than the preceding one; the images need not be related.”

At any rate, if there is “no such thing as nothing” and if “nothing happening” cannot be imagined as such, are we not compelled to see the blank page in An Anthology as some kind of positive ‘essay’ and/or ‘composition’ as Morris’s title page would seem to have it? Can we not understand Morris’s appearance in An Anthology, today anyway, as a “situation of deprivation,” in which the meaning of the blankness presented is somehow predicated on or informed by his act of erasing the original text on “Blank Form”? Morris goes to some length in these early writings to assert that perceived presence as such always constitutes something, some trace of being or meaning, even when that
something is evacuated of intention or inflection, or made inert or non-vital. While maintaining no apparent signs of life, nothing perceived now signifies something, the active conjuring of a situation of deprivation.

The question then becomes: what exactly is that “something,” the something generated through the perception of absence? How is it determined and what is its particular significance for Morris in 1960-62? In other words, what could the blank page in An Anthology ‘mean’? To inform this, we can introduce another series of works that Morris was working on at the time, the Crisis series (1962). These were works in which Morris put gray paint over front page newspaper articles announcing the Cuban Missile Crisis, almost completely blanking out the text. Between the blank page in An Anthology and Morris’s claims in the removed text that “Blank form waves a large gray flag and laughs about how close it got to the second law of thermodynamics,” (my emphasis) a connection arises between the “Blank Form” situation and the large gray Crisis paintings of blanked out news of nuclear brinkmanship. Through this connection, clear evidence emerges of Morris’s preoccupation with the presence of atomic weapons in the world, as well as their role within public discourse (through the newspaper), within the earliest formation of his Minimalist sculpture.

I will discuss the Crisis pictures more below, but in light of this connection, it is important to dwell for a moment on the fact that in “Blank Form” Morris connects the ‘something’ to a “situation of deprivation.” “Deprivation” implies that at least Morris formulated his idea of blankness as being
conditioned by, or the result of, a contingent loss. This is rather different from a situation of “reduction,” and this distinction can help us separate Morris’s brand of blankness from other precedents of modernist reduction. It is true that Morris writes to Cage at this time, referring to a piece of music, about trying to “reduce the stimulus to next to nothing,” but even then it is for the sake of turning “the focus back on the individual.”

Brandon Joseph has taken Morris’s statement of trying to “reduce the stimulus” as evidence of a “reductivist logic of modernism” present in Morris’s “initial minimalist position.” But if Morris’s reduction was explicitly for the sake of the viewer’s own self-awareness and subjective grounding within a particular historical context, then it behaves quite differently from the relevant precedents of modernist reduction. Understanding Morris's reduction as a function of an investigation into “the subjective dynamic of the ideally grasped gestalt of the minimalist shape”—which, as relates to Morris, is what Joseph accepts as “established” from Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss—aligns Morris too closely with a modernist tradition from which he was in fact radically breaking. Morris’s goal seems to be contrary to the precedent traditionally set by modernism’s reductive logic, in which notions of “immediacy” “presentness,” “truth to materials,” “zero,” “infinity,” and so on were, in the words of one important historian and critic, “ways of rephrasing the old dream of a purely visual totalization.” Ad Reinhardt, who was Morris's professor at Hunter College beginning in 1962, exemplified this precedent in the postwar period. Reinhardt conceived of his reductive practice as the final point
in a successive (d)evolution of pictorial expression. In 1962, at the same time Morris was writing to Cage and also studying at Hunter, Reinhardt was arguing publicly that, rather than being contingent on something outside of itself, the pure reduction of abstract pictorialization to blankness was the end game of a long (d)evolutionary process of what was always, in his terms, the "one history of painting," one that began long ago in "a variety of ideas with a variety of subjects and objects" and ended in "the idea of no object and no subject and no variety at all." In other words, Reinhardt’s reductions do not betray an absence; on the contrary they show, or purport to show, what was always there. Whether calling it “reduction” or “deprivation,” Morris’s practice behaved very differently. This is a difference perhaps best clarified by Morris himself who, while praising Reinhardt, has conceded in interviews that “there were certain things about the way he looked at art that were not very acceptable to me” and that Reinhardt “tended to break everything down into formal categories and not be interested in any of the context of the thing.”(my emphasis) In other words, to be “deprived” is to be deprived of something, and for Morris, that 'something' was created or informed by its “context.” In this sense, Morris’s initial formation seemed to speak less of reduction and more of a sense of absence constituted or conditioned by specific histories or situations, and thus broke from the precedent set by modernism’s more universal reductive formalist logic.

Absence, as a quality of any “situation of deprivation,” seems to provide an important kind of platform for Morris, one on which, as we will explore, he
enacted his work into the sixties. As David Antin wrote in 1966, Morris’s work presented not subject matter so much as “the ghosts of subject matter…the absent reference, the absent context. That’s what’s ghostly about it. A ghost can be described as the presence of absence.”

It is an absence that for Morris seems to exist both on a micro level (the encounter of the absence, say, in *An Anthology*) as well as on a macro level (a larger deprivation present in postwar culture), with each level reflecting back onto the other.

It is this ‘macro’ level, present in Morris’s Cuban Missile Crisis paintings, that I will discuss more below. But before that, to begin to understand the ‘macro’ level’s importance, it is first necessary to establish and reevaluate further the other crucial pillar of Morris’s concept of “Blank Form”: the viewer. In the text, Morris asserts the role of the viewer through his contention that signification of (and subjective reaction to) “the form (in the broadest possible sense: the situation)” depends on that form’s perceptibility: as he says, there is no such thing as nothing “so long as it is not reduced beyond perception” or “so long as it perpetuates and upholds itself as being object in the subject’s field of perception.” (my emphasis) If perceptibility is the basic prerequisite for form to have meaning, that can only be sensibly understood as that of a perceiving subject, and thus we find an early explicit formulations by a postwar U.S. artist of the elevation of the viewer that will become so central to the understanding of art in the 1960s and 1970s. Morris’s early notion of blank form collapses the significance of the object into the act of viewing, elevating the role of the viewer
as an actor within the form’s generation of meaning.\textsuperscript{149} In the case of Morris’s “Blank Form,” the viewer’s perception of a deprivation, of some unspecified something missing from the scene which he staged in many different ways, sets the stage for the blankness to have meaning. The collapse of form, viewership and absence into one situation, enacted here in a more textual context, provides the early blueprint for his art as it unfolded in the 1960s.

To understand a final piece of Morris’s notion of “nothing” and its relationship to the viewer, we might turn again to his 1962 correspondence with John Cage, where he writes:

In your letter of July sent in response to my sending you the first draft of the Ensemble you said I left no room for nothing to happen. Now the changing of the 3rd movement is not conceived by me as “nothing happening” but rather the change was motivated by my increasing concern to achieve an allegorical function in my work. Actually, I can not conceive of nothing happening - I'm not trying to make a logical statement. In fact, a kind of "nothing" image is very important to me and I have even said that I want to arrive at zero, although going toward it is like successive divisions of a line - for the arrival one must go outside the process. ... You mentioned in your letter of July that "most of what happens never was in anybody's mind"; I feel that all of what does happen is in everybody's mind – the statements are not exclusive of one another, I guess it is more a matter of focus. I feel that by reducing the stimulus to next to nothing (some of us really are trying to say nothing in an elegant manner) one turns the focus on the individual, as if to say, "whatever you got in the past you brought along anyway, so now really work at it." [sic]\textsuperscript{150}

The crux of Morris’s argument, in pushing back against Cage’s criticism that a work of his “left no room for nothing to happen,” seems to hinge, however paradoxically, on the substance of that “nothing.” That is, crucially, the “nothing” is now “allegorical.” The introduction of an allegorical component to his notion of
blankness, self-proclaimed in 1962, is a somewhat overlooked aspect in the formation of Morris’s work and its progression into the sixties. It further distinguishes his brand of blankness from that of Reinhardt and others. As we saw, pictorial nothingness for Reinhardt, being the inevitable end of the “one history of painting,” was conceived as universal, having always been latent in that history as it worked its way towards the ideation of the “one true painting.” Morris’s conceptualization of ‘blank form’, on the other hand, seems radically different as it appears not to be without “object,” “subject,” or “variety,” but instead “allegorical.”

The introduction of allegory gives out onto another simple question: an allegory of what? The end of the above citation provides a way to begin to unpack this important question, when Morris’s conceptualization of blank form turns on viewers’ mobilization of their own circumstances, their own “past,” in the very act of viewing. When we put the pieces together, it seems that the young Morris is attempting to construct an encounter with absence designed to prompt viewers to “work at” what they have “brought along with them” by assigning some kind of allegorical content to the blank form. What is more, Morris raises the stakes when he conflates the individual’s memory with a sense of collective or wide-reaching cultural memory, maintaining: “I feel that all of what does happen is in everybody’s mind.”

This is Morris’s self-proclaimed “focus” before he even had his first solo-show in New York. Blankness is becoming allegorical, inflected by the “second-
law of thermodynamics," and the viewer is no longer conceived in the abstract. Instead, Morris’s language presupposes a historically situated viewer in crisis, a viewer with baggage that needs to be ‘worked through,’ a working through activated moreover in the confrontation with a “situation of deprivation.” Enacting such situations at that historical moment— at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, after a decade and a half of nuclear weapons testing and hardening of Cold War tensions, and after a decade and a half of a facade of “vitality” that tended to obscure the mechanics of these tensions— has a particular resonance. In that sense, Morris’s idea of Blank Form works to encourage viewers to draw on their own position in order to see how the deprived situation that they encounter in the work reflects one in which they are somehow already submerged. It is then that the viewer, faced with her own situation of deprivation, is presumably able to begin to ascribe meaning to the absence, to fill the ‘nothing’ with ‘something’, to wake up and reckon, perhaps, with the myths of postwar life, to see how the form is perhaps, as Morris wrote, “like life, essentially empty.” This should not be mistaken as Morris aiming to provide his viewers with a neat moment of catharsis. His work does not take its positivity that far. But Morris’s letter to Cage illustrates the desire in 1962 to compel his viewers, in their act of confronting a situation of deprivation, to be attuned to their own situation, their own environment, and their own “past.” When we combine that with the move he makes from the individual’s memory and situation to that of the collective, so that we are hard put to imagine any viewer
(in the U.S.) to which the situation would not apply, the result is a convincing means of reading Morris’s early work as actively addressing a specific postwar politico-cultural atmosphere in the U.S. whose dominant logic is reasserted negatively through absence.

This then becomes a tenuous object of the “allegory.” Viewers, caught between the encounter of the blank form and the specific culture that that blankness reflects, have an opportunity to notice the nature of the situation that surrounds them and to ask themselves not only about what is missing but also about the agent of the erasure. With Morris’s profession to Cage of his “increasing concern to achieve an allegorical function” in his work properly contextualized, we continue to move further away from the understanding of Morris’s early work and its influences, as described in the 1994 catalog, as “an autonomous formal problem that exists independent of any given historical context.”

And indeed, the sense of urgency in Morris’s self-professed “increasing concern to achieve an allegorical function” finds substantiation in the geopolitical situation of 1962, when Cold War anxieties about nuclear war came to a head during the standoff between the U.S. and Soviet Union over Cuba that October. As that form that, as he wrote in the text, waves “a large gray flag and laughs about how close it got to the second law of thermodynamics,” Morris’s “Blank Form” is deeply suggestive of the atmosphere produced by the threat of nuclear war. For the fifteen years leading up to Morris’s arrival in New York, this threat
palpably conditioned the political and cultural environment of the U.S. At the beginning of the 1960s, it provided Morris with a kind of real world grounding for his critical reconstitution of postwar U.S. avant-garde aesthetics, one performed out of a vision of a world in crisis.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can say that Morris has been preoccupied with the legacies of war and nuclear weapons across many decades. But we need not rely on his nuclear war memorials of the 1970s or his post-apocalyptic hydrocal works and *Jornada del Muerto* installation in the 1980s to back up this claim. Instead, we can turn to that lesser-known series of works Morris executed at the exact time that he removed his contribution to *An Anthology* and wrote his letters to John Cage, the series in which Morris explicitly engages the dramatic tensions that were playing out between the United States and the Soviet Union over nuclear weapons in Cuba.

In blanking out sheets of newspaper with gray paint, Morris's *Crisis* series adopted a visual language reminiscent of Jasper Johns's flag paintings and Robert Rauschenberg's transfer drawings of the immediately preceding years. But where, for example, Johns's approach tended to suppress the newspaper's "denotative function," Morris's gesture is made whole only by the comprehension, finally, that what is being blanked out is a non-fragmented front-page news announcement of the Cuban blockade.

Read in conjunction with both his contemporaneous "Blank Form" text and his letter to Cage, what we see in Morris's *Crisis* work is a kind of
visualization of Blank Form as a work brought to the limits of, but not reduced beyond perceptibility. It is, indeed, a compelling (and quite literal) visualization of blank form as the “large gray flag that laughs about how close it got to the second law of thermodynamics.” Reading these works together allows us to connect the explicit politico-cultural concerns of the Cuban Missile Crisis to Morris’s “Blank Form” text removed from An Anthology, including the minimalist sculpture—Column—that it describes. Crucially, in the Crisis series, it is precisely the obfuscation of the news of the crisis that generates this connection. The works wash grey over the unprecedented and contradictory drive of postwar humanity, spearheaded by the United States, to produce the means of their own annihilation through nuclear weapons, confronting an apex of Cold War tension with the notion of “nothing” that would resonate in different artistic forms over the years to come. The proximity in time of these paintings to the other works and texts in question strongly suggests that Morris’s notion of blankness, even at this early stage in his career, was inextricably tied to the circumstances of the nuclear-armed Cold War politico-cultural environment around him. In the Crisis paintings Morris drapes ‘blank form’ over a media-driven discourse of Cold War culture that had come to dominate public imagination since the end of WWII. In the fall of 1962, this discourse reached a pinnacle in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Morris engages it directly. If during this same year Morris was writing to Cage about the “increasing need to achieve an allegorical function” in his work, these paintings would seem to further suggest the more macro object of this
allegory.

But as one important critic once wrote, “allegory is not hermeneutics.”\textsuperscript{154} It is not sufficient to say that Morris is offering an interpretation of the day’s news. Instead, what we get is something more like a site-specific intervention into the present situation, a situation in which the public is confronted, repeatedly and at dramatic scale, with the idea of their own death and the end of their civilization. More than a mere interpretation of the days news, the gesture of the \textit{Crisis} painting, in its overlay of “Blank Form” onto media representations of the Cold War, generates a new allegorical object in the midst of an unraveling postwar landscape. It \textit{détournes} the news, empties it out, collapses the real threat of nuclear crisis into how the perception of the threat operated, with all its “vital” contradictions, within the public imaginary. And in the process it creates a new object, a dreary critique of both state power and postwar media culture as they settled into new “realities” of a nuclear-armed world, which is to say, a world with the distinct ability to destroy itself and to end life in the name of political and ideological conflict. All this Morris presents, finally, through a “situation of deprivation” that the viewer is now, at the beginning of the 1960s, presumably in a position to “work at.”

\textbf{Prefiguring theory.} In 1961 American historian Daniel Boorstin would describe a U.S. media landscape that was increasingly characterized or defined by what he called “pseudo-events.”\textsuperscript{155} Such impulses swirled around the news of the Cold War that had been a dominant staple of postwar public discourse for
some time. Indeed, Boorstin’s book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, first published in 1961, gives perhaps the first full-throated account, albeit more historical than critical, of a media culture of spectacle that Guy Debord would make famous in avant-garde circles some six years later with his *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). In their proper context, Morris’s *Crisis* paintings are, in many ways, powerful and early iterations of similar positions. They give voice, on the one hand, to the “real” public fears of nuclear war through the trace legibility of the front-page news. But, on the other, in the act of blanking the news out, they point not only to the potential oblivion that nuclear war could enact but also to what we could call the crisis of the pseudo-event, of the spectacle that more and more becomes the other side of the postwar crisis, one that would only increase after the Cuban Missile scare.

Jean-Pierre Chirqui, a curator of Morris’s work, has compared the *Crisis* paintings to the artist’s somewhat better-known *Card File* work of the same year:

A bachelor machine of limited effectiveness, a maker only of disappointment, *Card File* gives a very deadpan take on the tedium of administration, its repetitious chores and approximate rationality, the blocked prospects it affords its agents. It is this quotidian grey that covers the pages of newsprint used that same year in Morris’s *Crisis* series. The color hides from our sight more than it reveals, allowing only a few words or images to come to the surface here and there, like signs of a possibly imminent catastrophe.\(^{156}\)

Chirqui’s description of the disappointment and tedium of administration suggests Morris’s awareness of how not all U.S. labor lived up to the image of vitality that the politico-economic discourse promoted. And Chirqui stops short of
stating what is otherwise obvious: that these works address not just a general sense of “disappointment” or “tedium” or “imminent catastrophe” in the abstract, but instead grasp at the ways in which these notions were felt explicitly throughout U.S. culture at that particular time and place due to a specific set of politico-cultural circumstances. “The color hides from our sight more than it reveals”; it presents a crisis in both vision and visuality, in both the logic of the modernist image and in the status of the image in postwar U.S. society. And in this presentation of a crisis in vision, Morris begins to reveal, in his very act of blanking out, something about the historical moment through which he was living. Chirqui does not dwell on the Crisis series in sufficient detail, nor is it his objective, to make the point that these catastrophes form part of the legacy of the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and its fallout in the United States, and that they belong to an evolving critical discourse of the atomic legacy in the postwar era.

The “master narratives” of criticism and theory, as they evolved into the 1980s, have suggested that the logic of Cold War culture was to move more and more in the direction of Boorstin’s “pseudo-event,” (or Debord’s “spectacle”). The nuclear issue, with its dominant media presence, its centrality in political debate and public imagination, its legacy of a spectacular nuclear weapons testing regime, and yet its distance from the real, having only been used in actual warfare in 1945, is a singular and potent locus for the momentum of the spectacle. Resituated then within a postwar and atomic discourse, the gesture
of Morris’s *Crisis* series, of blanking out the news of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and indeed his general conceptualization of “Blank Form” as waving a “large gray flag that laughs about how close it got to the second law of thermodynamics,” seems to foreshadow by some twenty years a point made by Jean Baudrillard in his *Simulation and Simulacra* that

> The equilibrium of terror rests on the eternal deferral of the atomic clash. The atom and the nuclear are made to be disseminated for deterrent ends, the power of catastrophe must, instead of stupidly exploding, be disseminated in homeopathic, molecular doses, in the continuous reservoirs of information. Therein lies the true contamination: never biological and radioactive, but, rather, a mental destructuration through a mental strategy of catastrophe.\textsuperscript{157}

Rethinking Morris’s work throughout the 1960s as reaching for and against a “mental destructuration through a mental strategy of catastrophe” will bear significant fruit. And the blanking out of the nuclear news in the *Crisis* paintings uncannily prefigures what we might call a second phase of the atomic age to which Baudrillard in the above citation gives voice, and which could be said to have concretized in earnest after both the Cuban Missile Crisis and the signing of the Partial Test Ban Treaty: the age of perpetual deterrence, the “eternal deferral of the atomic clash.” Situated in its proper context, in Morris’s *Crisis* series, in the figuration of “Blank Form” as the large gray flag, we see, before ever having a New York solo-show, Morris’s early critical effort to work through the forming aesthetics of the (neo)avant-garde within the post-atomic cultural and political U.S. landscape.

**Rethinking Morris’s critical reception.** The difficulty with the canonical
reception of the operations of Morris's ‘minimalism’ is, in a sense, that it only ever asked half the question. Above, my research discussed how, through “allegorical functions” and situations of “deprivation,” Morris’s “Blank Form” sought to stage a new confrontation between the artwork and the viewer that elevated the act of spectatorship within the artwork’s meaning. At first glance, this would seem to be a simple reiteration of what is, in fact, the dominant reading of Morris’s (and others’) “minimalist” works. We have heard time and again about the “critical dialogue between viewer and object” created by “Minimalist space”\(^{158}\), about how “highlighting the viewer’s cognitive and perceptual awareness…is precisely the pivotal historical role played by Morris’s minimal and antiform sculpture,”\(^{159}\) and so on. This understanding was also much the same for his detractors, with Michael Fried’s famous rebuke of the works’ “theatricality” being grounded in same operational assumptions.\(^{160}\) (Tellingly Morris has faulted Fried’s attack only for “not going far enough.”\(^{161}\)) And finally, these readings are often reinforced by Morris’s own public “disquisitions” on sculpture beginning in 1966, in which he sought out, for example, methods that produce “the maximum awareness of the object.”\(^{162}\)

The problem with this dominant reading across its different permutations is that it almost never asks what specific form the “critical dialogue between viewer and object” actually takes. Yes, the works were meant to highlight “the viewers cognitive and perceptual awareness” – but awareness of what? In discussing the “transformation” from the autonomy of “pure art” to the new
subject/object relationship, critics absorbed the fact that “the viewer, refused the safe, sovereign space of formal art, is cast back on the here and now.” But this “here and now” was seldom if ever unpacked, demarcated, or contested. When, thirty years later, this lapse is called out, it is left for the footnotes. That Minimalism dismantled the enshrined autonomy of art and enacted a blanket desublimation of aesthetic experience was enough for the majority of readings to claim an inaugural reorientation in the field of artistic production and viewership, one that would moreover, according to the same critics, lay the ground for conceptual art, institutional critique, and so on. But by leaving this “here and now” untouched, by allowing or even insisting that the “awareness” remain abstract, these readings effectively reproduce the very formalistic function of aesthetic experience that Morris’s minimalism was otherwise said to break down. The result is an unwitting reinforcement of the modernist impulses that these narratives sought to challenge, for they maintain a sense of “autonomy” through their refusal to acknowledge or ground the “here and now” in the specific historical terms in which, as my research has tried to show, it was in fact produced. The effective result merely shifts the locus from an aesthetic experience in which viewers lose themselves in the contemplation of the artwork itself to one in which they lose themselves in an understanding that the artwork is supposed to make them aware of their surroundings. In both cases, the ‘self’ and awareness are left adrift, disconnected from any actual referent, context, or grounded subjective mode. The dominant art historical readings of Morris do not
in any event seem to describe his work in the terms that he himself imagined it behaved or performed, as evidenced by his letter to Cage, when he tells him how his new efforts might turn “the focus on the individual, as if to say, ‘whatever you got in the past you brought along anyway, so now really work at it.’”

From Morris to “Morris.” When we list and link together the early activities in question—the association of life to emptiness and the second law of thermodynamics, the production of deprived situations in which viewers might become attuned to their own past, and an explicit engagement with the possibility of nuclear war as a present condition of cultural crisis—there seems to be plenty of historical material with which to inform the “here and now” of Morris's earliest mature work. But something happened as his fame grew that helped to block this reading from taking hold. Some of this can be attributed to how Morris’s persona changed as the new “minimal” work gained serious traction across the art world, and as he became central to its discourse. A handwritten note from 1980 by Thomas Krens, reprinted in Guggenheim retrospective catalog, makes the point:

Ever since Art Forum published the first of Morris’s four installments entitled ‘Notes on Sculpture’ just over a year after the Green Gallery show, the public persona of Robert Morris as Renaissance Man has contributed in no small way to the almost mythic aura that came to surround his work. With a writing style and message that was uncharacteristically dense for an artist-cum-writer, Morris revealed the conceptual mechanics behind relatively simple geometric plywood forms in the Green Gallery show.”
This citation serves a few purposes. For one, in it we can observe the establishment of a “mythic aura” of Morris’s work and persona, an aura developed in part through a mixture of the apparent simplicity of the new work together with the complexity (or ‘density’) of its critical defense that he published in *Artforum* beginning in 1966. However, by the same token it also points to the complicity of the critical establishment in the construction of the myth, for while Krens tacitly acknowledges the “mythic aura,” he makes no attempt at demystification. Symptomatic of certain strains of the Morris discourse, Krens does not sufficiently acknowledge the extent to which Morris may have deliberately crafted this aura, a notion perhaps informed by Morris’s claim some six years earlier that “Blank Form…allows plenty of room for disquisitions on its nature and mocking each in its turn.” Secondly, the Krens citation serves to illustrate, as a matter of the historical timeline, the sheer weight that the critical reception of Morris’s work in general has placed on “the Green Gallery show,” which was in fact his second solo-exhibition at that gallery held between December 16, 1964 and January 9, 1965. This was Morris’s famous exhibition of simple, geometric, gray painted plywood sculptures, a foundational show in the inauguration of “Minimalism.” The very act of calling it “the” Green Gallery show serves to efface what was in fact his first Green Gallery exhibit, between October 15 – November 5, 1963, along with any importance one might attach to the variety of early so-called ‘neo-dada’ works that it included. The second Green Gallery show is more or less universally held up as an origin point for the
rupture and reorientation of postwar art in the U.S. that Minimalism inaugurated. Virtually every text on Morris, and more or less every anthology that touches on postwar U.S. art, has reproduced the same one or two photographs of the second Green Gallery exhibition, a point alone that illustrates the extent of its role in shaping the discourse. The first show, on the other hand, is but a footnote.

Connected to this and relevant to the construct of "Morris" is the extent to which that second Green Gallery show, and by extension Morris's “minimalist” work, has become the point of origin for the persistent question among critics of his career's consistency. This is a question that invariably extends to the contested notion of whether Morris is or is not an authentic artist. Popular critics have derided him publicly as an “artistic kleptomaniac and, consequently, a bit of a fake,” an appraisal that his “shocked” defenders naturally deemed “unacceptable.” The search for authenticity beginning with the minimal sculpture is so prevalent a theme in the discourse on Morris that David Antin used it as a frame for his entire essay in Morris’s Guggenheim retrospective catalog.

It took Antin, a critic neither within nor outside the establishment, to begin to unravel the ways in which both Morris’s detractors and supporters attempt to establish, or question, his authenticity. He reminds us of the problems of using “persistency” in the first place as a measure of the authentic, eventually closing his essay with the observation that “it's hard to see why a persistent persona is
more authentic than a nervously attentive and mobile one. A nomad is surely as authentic as a homeowner." Perhaps more than any other critic up to the mid 1990s, Antin worked to demystify the progression of Morris’s “mythic” art world aura, in part by acknowledging and paying attention to the differences of Morris’s first two Green Gallery shows. The authority of his account comes less from a removed art-historical or art-critical standpoint than from the perspective of someone who was actually there at the time and seemed to be paying attention. Simply emphasizing, for example, the point that there were two Green Gallery shows, and that the “neo-dada” sculpture of the first appeared “to have virtually nothing in common” with the hard-edged plywood constructions of the second, sets him apart from many historians and critics of Morris at the same time as it works to break down the myth by recognizing Morris had other interest than just the geometric shapes. Putting the two exhibitions on equal footing within the dominant discourse could have presumably allowed for a more expansive reading of how Morris formulated his early work. Antin further contributes to Morris’s demystification by calling out the defense that the artist mounted in his “Notes on Sculpture,” which was the other pillar of the myth in Krens’s citation. Observing how Morris’s article “explicitly rejected nearly all of the ideas” from his first Green Gallery show the year before, Antin describes “Notes” as a “polemical and deliberately pedantic essay” that served to “quickly [establish] a minimalist persona for him—precise, intellectual and humorless—that seemed to make his 1960s career intelligible.”
Antin’s essay follows Morris’s work as it proceeded publicly through the diverse currents of exhibitions and gestures that mark his long career. He comes eventually to “the new situation of the 1970s” that seemed to require “a kind of abdication from universalist claims.” “As the master narratives of history and art history collapsed,” he continues, “local and contingent narratives came to replace them.”

171 Morris’s 1980 Jornada del Muerto installation at the Hirshorn Museum, which Antin describes as initiating “a massively scaled and obviously emblematic meditation on death, the atomic bomb, and planetary extinction,” and other works such as the Burning Planet hydrocal paintings, are called up, in a way, as Morris’s response to these shifts. 172 Still, for Antin there does not seem to be much space left for an understanding of Morris’s earlier notions of blankness (from the beginning of the 1960s) as prefiguring these shifts that the 1970s are said to have “required,” even while, as my research above has tried to show, they seemed certainly to do so. At any rate, Antin comes around to a reading of these later works as clichés, and ultimately as parodies, either of the “large, decorative, and essentially banal paintings” of someone like Anselm Kiefer, or as self-parody of Morris himself (“Self-parody is even more probable,” Antin writes, “especially if one remembers his 1974 S and M poster. Perhaps the work functions to parody both.”) 173

Reading these works simply as parody gives them short shrift. Couching the Hydrocal works, at least, between parody and magniloquence would seem to be only half the picture, a half-critique that Morris himself tacitly mobilized
against himself in an anonymous editorial appended to his 1981 Art in America article “American Quartet.” There, playing the role of a sort of amateur critic, Morris attacked his own work, in W.J.T. Mitchell’s words, for a “kind of ghoulishness and gloom in his meditations on the aesthetic monumentalizing of death and destruction.” By preempting the reaction that his new work and contemporaneous writing is simply ‘ghoulish,’ which Mitchell uses in a coded way to write it off as either unserious or simply following the trends of the 1980s, Morris seemed to double down in a backhanded way on whatever was in fact genuine or authentic about the gestures in the Hydrocal works and elsewhere.

Indeed, against a notion of parody, the viewer confronts in the Hydrocal work molded picture-frames depicting visceral, skull-and-debris-ridden representations of a post-nuclear landscape. Inside the frames are expressionist paintings that nod to a pseudo-vital past (in some cases the actual framed pictures—swirling, expressive abstractions—are old works by Morris himself, leftovers from the 1950s before he “quit painting”). For Mitchell the “knot” of these works “arises when one realizes that this future would be one in which these paintings could never exist”—there could be no art after a nuclear holocaust—and thus “they critique a world in which, as Benjamin put it, ‘mankind…can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.’” The Hydrocal works, much like the later Tar Babies of a New World Order (Venice, 1997), where Morris suspends numerous large blackened cherub-like figures from a gallery ceiling, provide a layered détournement of the
postwar era from a post-Cold War vantage point. That is, they take the moments from his own past (e.g. his old expressionist paintings), as echoes of the larger circumstances of postwar U.S. art, and surround them with an idea of nuclear holocaust which Cold War politics had refused to let go of. The works oscillate between a loss of their “original” meaning (a feigned gesture toward abstract expression that represents the initial substantiation of postwar U.S. art) and new meaning conditioned on that loss.

While normally this later work appears to have nothing to do with the reorientation in postwar art that Morris’s Minimalism helped bring about, when properly contextualized and understood within the complex early formulation of “Blank Form” it is not a far cry from the logic of the Crisis works. The early formulation stemmed from a crisis in vision, one out of which, in 1960-62, Morris formulated an “allegorical” notion of blankness that “slowly waves a large gray flag and laughs at how close it got to the second law of thermodynamics,” and which was “like life, essentially empty.” In it’s picturing of an impossible future, mixing art and politics and a postwar U.S. (war-obsessed) cultural-economy, the later work emerges as an inverted, critical, yet somehow logical vision of that crisis.

While Antin’s essay is far more nuanced than the dominant readings of Morris's work, it too stops short of attending to the full complexity of Morris’s early work and writing. The more archival excavation into Morris’s early works and writings that I have undertaken can show that kernels of the ‘requirement’ to
abdicate from universalist claims toward “local and contingent narratives” were present in Morris’s work from the very beginning in 1960-61. In this sense, after triangulating this requirement between the _An Anthology_ text, the _Crisis_ paintings, and the letters to Cage, and noting Morris’s engagement with the specifics of postwar U.S. history as well as his appeal to a historically situated viewer in crisis, we can understand “Blank Form” as enacting, by the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, its own version of the challenges to modernism that otherwise arrived from what “the new situation of the 1970s seemed to require.” Antin describes how “a certain political tone begins to color Morris’s writing” in the 1970s. This tone, in fact, began with “Blank Form” at the beginning of the sixties.

With that in mind, we might attempt to reevaluate the very tendencies that led to the construction of the “Morris” myth in the first place, a myth which, as we’ve seen, biased the critical reception of his work away from the “local and contingent.” The reception of the “minimal” work itself is paradigmatic. We have seen how the origins of Morris’s minimalism, in _Column_ for example, can be directly traced to and rethought within the complex and contingent notions of “Blank Form,” while the critical establishment insisted on them as being apart from historical context. The “Notes on Sculpture” series was also an influential part of this reception. As Antin correctly describes, these “deliberately pedantic” essays worked to shore up Morris’s position as the “chef d’école of the new object sculpture.” With a surprisingly long life span, they have been used as a
foundation for the reception of 1960s art as those readings claimed to locate and reveal the "crux of minimalism." But the “Notes” series can also be interpreted in a way that supports my own analysis of “Blank Form.” They further detail Morris’s ideas of the role of the viewer that, as we saw, were central to the dominant readings, but which were first introduced in “Blank Form.” We get this, for example, in “Notes on Sculpture Part 2,” when Morris famously criticizes the establishment of “internal relationships” within sculpture, deriding qualities like a “rich surface” that “reduces the public, external quality of the object and tends to eliminate the viewer to the degree that these details pull him into an intimate relation with the work and out of the space in which the object exists.” Not only does this reinforce the emphasis on the viewer that took shape in his letter to Cage, but the oblique reference here to “the space in which the object exists” sets the stage for the jump into the specific contexts of the viewer’s environment.

Morris makes this jump more explicitly in the series’ fourth and final installment, “Notes on Sculpture 4: Beyond Objects.” Richard Williams has shown in his book After Modern Sculpture (2000) that this essay “not only asserted, through its images, the dissolution of the boundary between the art object and the world, but it made statements about the condition of the world.” Williams is referring to the pop culture images that appeared in the article along side reproductions of Morris’s work and the work of fellow artists Robert Smithson and Carl Andre, Rafael Ferrer, Richard Serra and others. These pop
culture images included the ‘Varga Girl’, a “pin-up used to advertise car batteries” from August 1946 that, a year after the end of WWII, was emblematic of the initial postwar advertising boom. A Model T Ford also appeared. For Williams, the argument that Morris makes in conjunction with these images, namely that “once seen they can never be forgotten” is less instructive than their presence alone in Morris’s article, which, for Williams, “marks the reappearance of the world in concepts of sculpture.”

As we’ve seen, however, for Morris these issues had never fully disappeared. Still in his final installment of “Notes on Sculpture,” Morris brings them to the fore to a far greater extent than he had previously done, referencing explicitly many of the issues of his day. “The most startling of these,” as Williams recounts,

returns us to the image of nuclear destruction, which I have argued is present in Smithson’s work. In Morris’s case, the image is present in ‘Notes on Sculpture Part 4’ in the form of a quotation from Earth in Upheaval by Immanuel Velikowsky, which demanded that ‘the past of mankind, and of the animal kingdoms too, must now be viewed in the light of the experience of Hiroshima, and no longer from the portholes of the Beagle’.

The Velikowsky citation in ‘Notes on Sculpture,’ not unlike the Crisis paintings, puts forth a two-fold commentary straddled between a contemplation of the true threat/effects of nuclear war on the one hand and, on the other, the extent to which the fears of such a war were exploited by various forces throughout U.S. culture. (Velikovsky’s popularity can be attributed in part to this exploited fear).
The citation clearly supports the notion that the ‘past of mankind’ be read in light of postwar atomic history—“the experience of Hiroshima.” This gives more specific texture to, for example, the positions of his earlier letter to Cage, in which, in addition to his concern to achieve allegory, he claimed that his work was attempting to say to the viewer: “whatever you got in the past you brought along anyway, so now really work at it.” By “really work at it,” we might wonder the extent to which Morris means for the viewer to question the real conditions of the post-atomic environment: the forces of ideological control, the dramatic increase in the means of war and death, and the manipulation of these qualities under the banner of a certain exploited, idealized, U.S.-centric conceptualization of energy, individuality, freedom, and life. The truth of the postwar condition, this citation seems to suggest, is that “the experience Hiroshima” destroyed something about history and evolution that was previously held intact, producing a kind of crisis in historical, political, and cultural vision that must now see the world in its “light.” This is a light, however, in which vision itself is impossible. As the historical rupture that inaugurated the category of the postwar, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the beginning of a new period that would call for altogether new practices, new images. Taken together, these examples compel a reading of Morris’s art during the sixties, including the underlying notion of “Blank form,” as emerging from a vexed confrontation with the ontological crisis of the postwar as such.
Other readings. Morris’s concerns in 1969 for the “past of mankind”—understood through the “experience of Hiroshima”—began to play a more prominent and explicit role in his work following “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4.” In 1970 he designed his *Five War Memorials* in a series of lithographs in the context of the on-going wars in South East Asia (Maurice Berger describes them as a “direct response to the United States’ bombing of Cambodia in 1970”\(^{186}\)). Each of the five memorials carried its own kind of theme, usually represented by a subtitle, one of which was “5 War Memorial: Scattered Atomic Waste.” (This was also the same time as Morris’s so-called “scatter pieces,” one picture of which is reproduced in “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4.”) These early war memorials, like later atomic memorials that Morris would propose, were never realized, though at least two designs appear to have been sold by Leo Castelli to the collector Giuseppe Panza in 1974-5, along with the lithographs.\(^{187}\) The memorials each feature a different geometric shape reminiscent of Morris’s “minimalist” constructions—a triangle, a star, a symmetrical cross, a gridded square, a circular crater—all situated within an otherwise charred and barren landscape. The prints suggest the memorials were intended to be many times human scale. In all the designs of the *Five War Memorials*, a single geometric shape is placed within a barren field. In what looks like a realization of the “allegorical function” of Morris’s “Blank Form,” the landscape communicates blankness through a distinct feeling of post-conflict destruction and desertion.
It is worth noting that Morris is not the only one to propose blankness as a logic for confronting the postwar environment “in light of the experience of Hiroshima.” Indeed as one account of the memorial of an actual post-atomic landscape goes, “when the people of Hiroshima were discussing plans for a memorial at the site of ground zero, one survivor suggested leaving a large empty space around the place where the bomb struck, a representation of nothingness—‘because that is what it was’. Morris’s memorial, and indeed much of his ‘blank form’, has a kinship with this atomic bomb survivor’s perspective. As they memorialize (atomic) war, Morris’s war memorials present ‘nothing’. Yet it is a substantive ‘nothing’ in context, activated through a sense deprivation that serves as both a mode of presentation reminiscent of an atomic aesthetics as well as an allegory of the postwar viewers own subjective position, realized within the complex notion of “Blank form”.

The logic of an active, contextualized presentation of nothing in relation to the atomic bomb, to its debut, its memorialization, and its lasting fallout, can be read in parallel to the development of what has been termed in other contexts as an atomic aesthetics or atomic visuality. We already saw the trope of this visuality surface in the account above of the Hiroshima survivor’s suggestion for a memorial that presents nothingness as the only possible representation of the attack on Hiroshima. The character of the Japanese architect in Alan Renais’ Hiroshima Mon Amour (1959), gives us another notable example, when he famously repeats to his French lover “You saw nothing at Hiroshima. Nothing.” A
number of critics, such as Rosalyn Deutsche or Jalal Toufic, have identified in that line a kind of formula for an atomic visuality, one that presents an “objective nothing” which embodies “the catastrophic loss that is the withdrawal of tradition after a surpassing disaster.”\textsuperscript{189}

Deutsche borrows from Akira Lippit’s study \textit{Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)}–in which Lippit contends at one point that “there can be no authentic photography of atomic war because the bombings were themselves a form of total photography that exceeded the economies of representation”\textsuperscript{190}–to make the point that “only symbols can represent atomic warfare, symbols that bear witness to the avisuality, that is, the unrepresentability, of the catastrophe.”\textsuperscript{191}

We might apply this concept to Morris’s never realized war memorials, whose hollowed out geometric symbols, echoing his earlier minimalist sculptures, reach for a visualization of a crisis that itself exceeds vision.

The framework of this ‘atomic visuality’ extends, however incidentally, to much of Morris’s work both in the crisis in vision and visuality that produced “blank form” to a more material, filled-out vision of crisis as the work moved into the 1970s and 80s. Surveying the whole, Morris’s concerns come to resemble those connected to the \textit{avisuality} outlined by Lippit and Deutsche (and prefigured by figures such as Paul Virilio before them) that were connected to a visuality specific to post-Hiroshima history.

Before leaving Morris’s \textit{5 War Memorials}, they can provide a final context to other concurrent works as they developed outside of the gallery. For instance,
one of the memorials, *Trench with Chlorine Gas*, adopts the language of Morris's *Steam* works that began in 1967 and were reproduced in 1974. The *Trench with Chlorine Gas* memorial, one of the ones bought by Panza, shows a cross-shaped trench equipped with a steam-producing device, a likely reference to both WWI, where trench warfare was made famous and chemical warfare (including chlorine gas) was first used offensively on a mass scale, and the continuation of chemical warfare by the U.S. in the context of the wars in South East Asia. By itself, the use of steam, an already ‘dematerialized’ material that easily evokes either the smoke or clouds associated with the explosion of bombs or the use of chemical weapons, lends an ‘avisual’ dimension to the ‘art object.’ In a 1968 interview, Morris described to Paul Cummings the logic of the in-progress steam piece as he was developing it under LACMA’s “Art and Technology” initiative in Los Angeles:

> I'm working with a company that produces refrigeration and heating units for missiles and aircraft ground support, computers and things that have to be cooled, huge devices. And I'll bury all these things in the ground over the distance of about a square mile in any landscape so that nothing will be visible. And the output will be wherever the heat comes out. It may be under the ground so it's radiant. It may come out of rocks or cracks. I want none of the technology to be visible. But I'll take a lot of photographs, infra-red, from the air and so forth.¹⁹²

Working with advanced military and industrial materials, Morris aimed to create an ephemeral work within “any landscape” whose origins were by design invisible—or ‘avisual’, i.e., “there and not there.”¹⁹³ For a proper visualization, that is, the new work required a techno-scientific vision (“infra-red”) and a
technologically mediated perspective (“from the air”), both of which, to paraphrase Lippit, “exceed the economies” of natural vision. However, Morris’s approach made the museum’s program and its sponsors too nervous, and the project was called off. In a footnote to his brief mentioning of the War Memorials, Maurice Berge explains how “The antiwar message of Los Angeles II [Morris’s LACMA steam project], however, overstepped the boundaries of an exhibition designed to bring artists into contact with the ‘resources of modern industry and its related technologies.’ [LACMA curator Maurice] Tuchman eventually abandoned the controversial ICBM project when the corporation (Litton Industries) matched with Morris—a major producer of aeronautics technology—withdraw its support.” Censored by a nervous military-industry and an acquiescing curator, Morris translated and expanded the ‘avisual’ parameters of the concept developed at LACMA into the 5 War Memorials. All told, the developments indicate a more precarious relationship between Morris’s activist position and the institutions that supported him and, at the same time, an extension of the development of a more incisive, technologically mediated “avisual” aesthetics in his work as it entered the 1970s.

Throughout this chapter I have tried to show how the earliest formulations of Morris’s canonical minimalist work were inflected by a sensitivity to a specific set of postwar historical conditions, first among them the conditions of a post-atomic socio-political environment. This serves not only as a significant departure from the dominant readings of this work, which seem to insist on that
work’s autonomy even as they recognize the way it shifted the parameters of viewship and subjectivity. It also serves as a means of bridging one of the most diverse and long running artistic careers of the postwar era, one in which the early work is always privileged over the later work where concerns of the implications of a nuclear armed society became more explicit. In the process we can recognize Morris as foreshadowing the critical shifts that took place in the 1960s. And in his early insistence that “Blank form is like life, essentially empty,” we can locate an acute understanding of the problematic attitudes around life and vitality that had developed in the wake of World War II within one of the most influential artistic practices of the postwar period.
Chapter 3:  
“Everything Would Go”: The Nuclear Issue in the Early Work of Andy Warhol

Toward the end of 1964, writing in the *Village Voice*, David Bourdon opened a review of Andy Warhol’s latest show at the Castelli Gallery with an account of a recent science fiction movie. Set in a post-nuclear holocaust future, *The Creation of the Humanoids* (1962) tells the story of how, after a staggering loss of life around the globe, humanity’s survivors created robots—or “clickers”—to help, in the words of the opening narration, “rebuild their cities and maintain a high standard of living.” Tensions mount as the robots become more humanlike. “The denouement,” Bourdon recounts, “comes when the heroine and the hero (a militant anti-humanoid who goes around throwing bombs at uppity ‘clickers’) discover themselves to be machines.”

Starting a rumor that would delight sci-fi fans for years to come, Bourdon, a close friend of Warhol’s, asserts that the artist regarded *The Creation of the Humanoids* as “the best movie he has ever seen.” For Bourdon, the point set him up as a foil to other artists. That is, others “appear frivolous as they transform used machinery into art,” while Warhol, on the other hand, “insidiously [manufactures] art that tends to transform us into machines by showing us mechanical ways of seeing and feeling.”

In a larger sense it seems Bourdon’s point was meant to show how the sun had set on those paradigms of artistic production still intent on siphoning some kind of ‘pure’ aesthetic experience from the ruins—the “used machinery”—of
modernity, and how Warhol offered a new model. It was no longer credible for Bourdon and others to understand their times, with all its commerciality, its techno-militaristic development, and its violence, as an incubator for a vital art. The young critics embraced U.S. Pop’s eagerness to dismantle the traditional posture and priorities of art, including the enshrined status of formalism and individuality, along with tropes of energy and aliveness that had been dominant in postwar art and its reception in the U.S. up to that point. Warhol, along with a cohort that included James Rosenquist, Claes Oldenberg, Roy Lichtenstein and others, compelled the operations of Pop away from these dogmas toward the public and an explicit confrontation with the world around them. For Bourdon, Warhol’s work emerged to provide a paradigm that already took technology for granted and instead shifted its focus of critique back onto “us,” creating an iteration of art that is not all that different from the ideas of Robert Morris’s early formulation of “Blank Form,” though the two are virtually never considered together.

But a question arises from Bourdon’s account: what does it mean, really, to see and feel in a mechanical way? Bourdon’s argument gives the idea that Warhol’s early art initiated viewers into a passive, affectless mode of processing the world. But to put a finer point on it, was this an initiation into a new mechanical mode? Or was it, on the other hand, an awakening, a staging of a certain loss of humanity (or humanness) within public life in order to point to how that loss was already there, brooding below the surface of postwar society,
obscured behind a lively façade of economic (materialistic) and political “vitality”?

This chapter poses that question as a jumping off point in rethinking Warhol’s early production in the context of Atomic Age, Cold War history. To begin to investigate it, we might look again to Warhol’s alleged favorite movie *The Creation of the Humanoids*, from 1962, from which Bourdon draws his point. All the film’s action and drama leads up to the final scene in which the main character—Capt. Kenneth Craigis (played by Don Megowan)—discovers he has been a machine from the beginning of the movie. In Bourdon’s argument, this is a one-way scene in which a human discovers he is a machine. But it also works the other way; more accurately even, it shows a machine that discovers it is *not* human. This scene pictures an awakening in the recognition of a loss; in an odd moment of ‘self’-discovery, a machine realizes and accepts, begrudingly, that ‘he’ had been a machine since the beginning of the film. That is, the climactic discovery affects no internal transformation within the make-up of the main character. Craigis is not “transformed” into anything; the scene is but a reckoning.

Once it is proven indisputably to Craigis that he is, and has been throughout the movie, a machine, he pleads disbelievingly (and with all the clichéd passions of a rugged Hollywood actor of the time): “But I’m me. I grew up. I remember it all. I had little hands and they grew larger. I grew up. I can hate. I can kill. I’m a man.” Bourdon passes over this scene’s complexity; the
movie’s sensibility, like Warhol’s work, “tends” not just to “transform us into machines.” It also suggests more deeply the extent to which memory, identity, (masculine) passion, and political convictions had come together to create a fiction of postwar, post-atomic life. And despite clawing to life, we see how all of Craigis’s vitality, punctuated finally with his self proclaimed ability to “kill,” had been mechanized and programmed, depending just as much on circuits and wires as it may have once on some notion of blood and guts (the definitive proof for Craigis that he is not human comes when he is stabbed in the heart and no blood comes). In this way, it turns out that the “best movie” Warhol had ever seen, which begins with radio transmissions and film footage of atomic bomb explosions (taken from U.S. testing sites) over its opening credits, conveyed many of the underpinning codes of the vital Trojan horse within the imaginary of post-1945, post-atomic U.S. landscape. These codes can translate to—and complicate the critique of—Warhol’s early work, in which that era’s troubled underlying socio-political atmosphere was tested against its own visual culture. This chapter reconsiders Warhol’s work in the 1960s in this context, looking at how it interacted with the historical circumstances of the Atomic Age and how it can be thought through as a critique of the framework of vitality that I have discussed in the previous chapters.

When Bourdon claims that Warhol’s work “transforms us into machines,” he is of course paraphrasing Warhol himself, who famously stated in an interview with Gene Swenson, published in Art News in 1963, that “everybody
should be a machine,” a quote to which I will return.\textsuperscript{199} But, as argued above, Bourdon’s review, like many others, risked taking the statement too much at face value, seeing it travel in only one direction by emphasizing how the work “transforms us into machines,” without asking whether it reveals a certain mechanicalness that was already present and programmed beneath the ‘lively’ surfaces of the U.S. in the postwar era. With further observations of how Warhol “seems to be on automatic pilot” and how he turns out “as many as 80 paintings a day,” the Bourdon review accurately captures the much noted shift away from the sanctity of artistic individuality and the traditional understanding of aesthetic experience embedded in Warhol’s ‘Factory’ production at the beginning of the sixties.\textsuperscript{200} But what the review leaves out, and what we must now ask, is whether and how that shift also functioned as a critical reckoning with how the public and artistic sensibility of the postwar age had, like Cragis, been programmed, mechanized, and not entirely human, right from its opening scene in 1945.

For Warhol, if Cragis had a counterpart in postwar U.S. art, it might have been Jackson Pollock, an artist who spoke of poetic notions of an inner energy to describe his works while being openly aggressive and violent in his public, social life. Like Cragis, Pollock, particularly in Warhol’s account of him, did not seem to recognize any extent to which his values, far from being radical, were in fact reflective of the parallel values of mainstream socio-political discourse. In some ways it is as if they were both unwittingly pre-programmed into a mode of
liveliness by the politico-cultural atmosphere that dominated their respective postwar environments. When Craigis, in disbelief at the possibility that he could be a machine, conditions his ontological understanding of himself by asserting “I can hate. I can kill. I’m a man,” he actually reflects the well-established reputation of the New York School persona, one with which Warhol himself was very familiar. Warhol wrote in *POPism* about how “the world of the Abstract Expressionists was very macho.”

“The toughness was part of a tradition, it went with their agonized, anguished art,” he went on, “they were always exploding and having fists fights about their work and their love lives. This went on all through the fifties when I was just new in town…. In a way, Jackson Pollock had to die the way he did, crashing his car up.” One imagines Warhol hearing Pollock on the radio describing his poetic attempt to express “an inner world…. the energy, the motion, and other inner forces” or looking at the *Life* magazine spread asking if Jackson Pollock, with his mesmerizing, transporting style, is the greatest living painter in the U.S., and then seeing that description crash into the reality of Pollock at the Cedar Bar as he went around picking fights with everyone (apparently, Warhol notes, with special inclination toward harassing minorities, homosexuals, and drug addicts.) This was the New York art world context that Warhol met when he arrived from Pittsburg, and it is the context out of which he reshaped U.S. art. Taking it all by storm in 1962, it was as if he, with the help of others, was shaking (without ever shaking) it out of a stupor, awakening it to a radically new paradigm for life and art in the postwar
U.S. landscape. And it was in this context that he called *Creation of the Humanoids* the “best movie he has ever seen.”

In those early years of the 1960s, while much of the critical establishment initially dismissed Warhol and Pop art, Bourdon’s criticism took it seriously, attempting to identify the ways in which Warhol indeed ruptured what had become the established paradigm of postwar art in the U.S. And Bourdon wasn’t the only one. The futility of ever being certain of an artist’s true intentions, for example, did not stop the young Gene Swenson from observing in 1964 that “certainly [Warhol’s] is not to sell a product or publicize an actress.”205 The “what then?” question that this simple assertion begs has by now generated many books across a wide field of speculation. But the way the critical lines were drawn in the early sixties, before dominant narratives hardened into textbooks, can help us understand the extent to which attitudes in criticism were in flux and how that volatility reflected broader changes afoot. For one, there was a rather clear age divide within early critical responses to the styles. Bourdon (b. 1934) and Swenson (b. 1934), along with Henry Geldzahler (b. 1935), each a crucial figure in the establishment of U.S. Pop, were all in their twenties in 1962 as the genre swept over New York.206 They were divided from the heroic enshrinement of the Abstract Expressionists by a generation (Reyner Banham’s characterization of the Pop movement as the “revenge of the elementary schoolboys” can include its critics207). Even a young Michael Fried (b. 1939), for whose formalist pedigree and perspectives Pop art made an otherwise obvious
target, nevertheless recognized in Warhol’s work, in 1962, a “feeling for what is truly human and pathetic in one of the exemplary myths of our time that I for one find moving.” On the other hand, older generation critics from across the spectrum who had been involved with Abstract Expressionism, including Hilton Kramer, Dore Ashton, Stanley Kunitz, and even Leo Steinberg, all of whom responded to Pop art in 1962, conveyed an early open hostility to Warhol and the other “new realists.”

To the old guard, as Swenson put it succinctly in 1964, “art should not be electric chairs or car accidents” because “these subjects do not touch our innermost feelings…not least our highest aesthetic feelings; it is said that the intangible, the ‘order in chaos’ of the abstract patterns of the tortured inner life of the artist are the only things that are important.” We may take it for granted now, but the unabashed turn away from this attitude is a crucial component of early Pop criticism. Like Bourdon, Swenson contextualized Warhol’s “ways of seeing and feeling” within a binary of human/machine, but Swenson expanded this more explicitly to include a shift from the private—the “tortured inner life of the artist”—to the problems of the public sphere in context. Swenson’s understanding of Pop on this level, as operating in a more public manner, is clear: while “abstract art” he writes, “tries to be an object which we can equate with the private feelings of the artist…Andy Warhol presents objects we can equate with the public feelings of an artist.” In Swenson’s eyes, the notion of the privatization of feeling had become old hat. The prospect of its reality, such
that all become “soulful esthetes and artists,” was “frankly…more terrible to me than the mechanization of men.” This represents the emergence of a “Pop” attitude in the younger generation of criticism paralleling the concerns of Warhol and the “cool” that he epitomized. But where Warhol was loath to openly analyze or intellectualize the situation, the young Swenson was eager to take stock of the changing times, to take off the blinders imposed by formalist criticism vis-à-vis art and the postwar U.S. socio-political situation. Swenson’s attack on the old guard critics also loosely foreshadows the cascade of ‘poststructuralist’ criticism that would later use Warhol to explore the erosion of “that old thing, art.”

Swenson closes his appraisal of the new critical imperative, published as “Random Notes on Andy Warhol” in the Italian journal Collage, on an upbeat note:

Advertising and popular culture have created stock situations and stock responses. To fight them simply in the name of individuality no longer seems fruitful. There seem to be other ways of dealing with ourselves [sic]. A great deal that is good and valuable about our lives is that which is public and shared with the community. It is the most common clichés, the most common stock responses which we must deal with first if we are to come to some understanding of the new possibilities available to us in this brave and not altogether hopeless new world. We not only can but must deal positively with the challenges Andy Warhol has given us.

Pop’s emergence as the dominant form of avant-garde art in the early 1960s also allowed for this attitude in criticism to gain ground against the formalist approaches that had been the status quo. Swenson’s call away from individuality and the private toward “that which is public and shared with the
community” is crucial within the emergent critical discourses of Pop. He acknowledges the need for an art criticism that is willing to look squarely at the “stock situations and stock responses” of popular culture, and asserts, moreover, that this “fight” must shift its ground in order to address itself within the public sphere. His recognition of a shared public experience conditioned by capitalism and violence (the explicit “challenges” of Warhol’s work) forms the basis of a new social critique within art criticism targeting the status-quos of both popular culture and the postwar avant-garde up to that point, and it prefigures ideas behind the unrest that would shake the country later in the decade.

Maintaining the fruitlessness of addressing these issues “in the name of individuality” in the early sixties suggests in Swenson’s appraisal a clear de-prioritization of the dual concepts of private feeling and private enterprise as necessary for the ‘vitality’ of U.S. society. The early Pop critics gave voice to the faltering confidence in socio-economic and aesthetic privatization that had been stoked with such fervor since the early postwar years. Within the emergent art critical discourse of Pop, Swenson’s statement is an inherent rejection of the Vitalpolitik characteristic of the new postwar liberal politics as much as it is a rejection of the “Vital forms” of postwar formalist criticism. The dominant mode of liberal politics framed postwar life, as I discussed in previous chapters, as being dependent on “rigorous private enterprise” (in the words of President Harry Truman). The emphasis on vital private enterprise converged in the understanding and reception of the dominant modes of U.S. painting, when, for
example, Pollock declared his art as expressing “an inner world.... the energy, the motion, and other inner forces” and how the similar minded work of his colleagues was “very vital....very vibrant, very alive,” or when MoMA’s founding director Alfred Barr described the new painting in a letter to *Life* and *Time* publisher Henry Luce positively as “artistic free enterprise.”214 The early proponents of Pop like Swenson and Bourdon rejected this position, taking cues from Warhol and the other Pop artists to formulate what amounts to a radically new criticism in relation to the new work. Standing in clear opposition to this previously dominant mode, they give us an important marker of Pop’s early relevance not just within art criticism, but also within the broader socio-political and cultural shifts taking place at the beginning of the sixties.

In demanding that “we” deal “positively with the challenges Andy Warhol has given us,” Swenson refers to the confrontation that Warhol’s work staged between the U.S. public and the things they consume, an act of consumption that Warhol quickly expanded in 1962 from soup and the Stars to include the growing specter of violence and death within daily U.S. life. It was also Swenson, a year before his “Random Notes on Andy Warhol,” who interviewed the artist about his turn toward explicit depictions of violence in the new “Death in America” series. In that interview, Warhol talks about seeing another 1962 film, *Dr. No*, which he deems “a fantastic movie, so cool.”215 Like *The Creation of the Humanoids*, this first James Bond film takes nuclear war as its raison d’être, with Bond “licensed to kill”216 and tasked to stop a mad scientist (part of
an international terrorist organization called SPECTRE) from developing a
dangerous atomic beam on a remote island off Jamaica. Warhol tells Swenson
a story about coming out of the movie theater after seeing the film:

We walked outside and somebody threw a cherry bomb right in
front of us, in this big crowd. And there was blood, I saw blood on
people and all over. I felt like I was bleeding all over. I saw in the
paper last week that there are more people throwing them—it’s just
part of the scene—and hurting people. My show in Paris is going to
be called “Death in America.” I’ll show the electric-chair pictures
and the dogs in Birmingham and car wrecks and some suicide
pictures.217

Notice the seamlessness, in Warhol’s account, of the transition from the space
of the movie theatre, in which was raised (on screen) the specter of radioactive
conflict on a Caribbean island in the midst of a lot of fighting and killing (Bond),
to the new violent reality of daily U.S. life out on the street. In a way, the violent
action on the screen simply continued in the city; “hurting people” had become
“just part of the scene.” But the violence in the movie was nominally heroic;
Bond fighting, planting explosives, or shooting people was all part of the
formation of a “cool” heroic archetype. The violence on the street, however, was
perverse and nonsensical, betraying the heroics that had previously been
promised by the violence on the screen. The issue is further complicated by the
theatrical nature of the “real” violence in Warhol’s account; cherry bombs are
more like pranks and its not clear whether Warhol was bleeding or if he only “felt
like” he was bleeding, a simulation of pain in the real world that would be in
tension with the passage from the cinematic experience of the theater to the
immediate experience of violence outside it.218 The interchange between the
violent realism on screen and the simulation of violence in the ‘real world’ blurs the boundaries of both within the contextual origin story Warhol provides for the “Death in America” series. The appearance of those pictures in this context indicates an interest in this paradoxical and troubled intersection between the dreams of U.S. life on the one hand, and its sources, realities, or effects on the other. Warhol’s account suggests a perverse loss, an emptying out of the heroic archetype, as the violence of the screen is suddenly and messily superimposed onto the experience of life. When the screen promised the dream of sophisticated masculine heroics, ensconced in an abundance of material gadgetry and triumphant over ideological, nuclear armed enemies (Bond), it lied; the reality was senseless, theatrical, anonymous violence in a crowd, its function, even its logic, being simply something meant to be reported on and read about in the newspaper.

Warhol’s 1963 response to Swenson compliments Swenson’s later appraisal of the work’s “challenges” in relation the “stock responses and stock situations” of popular culture. Swenson called for criticism to follow the new art and shift the site of its discourse from the inner life of the private individual to tensions and contradictions being played out in the public sphere. In the same interview, Swenson asked Warhol further about the origins of the “Death” series, to which he responds

I guess it was the big plane crash picture, the front page of a newspaper: 129 DIE. I was also painting the *Marilyns*. I realized that everything I was doing must have been Death. It was Christmas or Labor Day—a holiday—and every time you turned on
the radio they said something like, “4 million are going to die.” That started it.

Warhol’s subjects were not just all “Death,” they were all death in public, “Death in America,” a public experience of death and its specter mediated and disseminated through the channels of U.S. news and information (front page of the newspaper, holiday radio broadcasts). Warhol’s serially repeated images of car crashes and race riots were not just repetitions of violence, they were also repetitions of the way violence was diffused and digested publicly. In Warhol’s telling, what “started” the “Death in America” series was the repeated radio broadcast warning that millions of people were going to die, a clear allusion to the threat of annihilation from nuclear war that was so central to public discourse and the public imaginary at the time, particularly in the context of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962.

With the threat of atomic war giving rise to the most powerful–and most public–specter of death and violence in the postwar U.S. consciousness, it is at first perhaps curious that Warhol did not deal with the theme more explicitly in the death paintings. There was apparently only one painting, Red Explosion (Atomic Bomb) (1963), in which Warhol addressed the subject of the mushroom cloud. It is a large canvas over eight and a half feet tall in which a grainy mushroom cloud image is silkscreened some twenty nine times across five diminishing registers. The painting has not been readily associated in the critical and historical literature with the early “Death in America” works, having until recently been often incorrectly dated to 1965. While in 1989 Bourdon himself
attempted to correct the record and noted the implausibility of a 1965 date, critics and scholars, even as late as 2001, continued to make the mistake, as when Wayne Koestenbaum wrote how “In 1965 [Warhol] would commemorate the bomb and, indirectly, his birth, in a silkscreen painting, Atomic Bomb” which he describes as “an explosive self-portrait – an image of Andy as international trauma.”219 (By “his birth,” Koestenbaum refers to the fact that Warhol was born August 6, 1928, and that the U.S. dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on Warhol’s seventeenth birthday.) But, as Bourdon wrote the theme and style of Red Explosion are uncharacteristic of Warhol’s production in 1965, and indicate an earlier date. Adopting Bourdon’s logic, the 2002 Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné corrects the official record, observing how the “serial format of the composition, the overlapping impressions in the lower two rows, and the monochromatic background are all indicative of a date in early 1963 and conspicuously out of character with the work of 1964-66.”220

Red Explosion was perhaps ripe for such a clerical error. Unlike many of the other, better-known disaster subjects such as the car crashes, race riots, and suicides, Warhol apparently made no other copies, variants, or serialized versions of this work.221 Nor was the picture widely exhibited, reproduced, or mentioned in the many contemporaneous news clippings, reviews, press releases, or critical essays of Warhol’s disaster works in the early and mid 1960s.222 Still, the incorrect date is not simply an inconsequential accounting oversight; it improperly displaces the picture outside of its historical context (the
immediate wake of the Missile Crisis), as well as its context in Warhol’s oeuvre, which, with the Catalogue Raisonné date of “early 1963,” positions it on the early side of the “Death in America” production. When we combine that with Warhol’s own telling in 1963 of the series’ origin—his account that “every time you turned on the radio they said something like, ‘4 million are going to die.’ That started it”—it is not improbable to think of Red Explosion as an origin work in Warhol’s turn toward ‘death in America.’ At the least, little doubt is left of the nuclear issue’s strong presence within Warhol’s turn toward the public consumption of violence in his subject matter.

Warhol’s Red Explosion reveals certain anomalies of the status of the mushroom cloud’s image within postwar visuality and visual culture. Keeping in mind Warhol’s own account of the series’ origins as being rooted in the repeated broadcasts of mass death on the radio, we can say first and foremost that the painting, like all the “Death and Disaster” series, represents not only its violent subject, but also the mediation of that violence through the mass media’s transmission of its image and information. Warhol reenacted the transmission of violent imagery by reproducing images of death and violence drawn exclusively from images produced for media consumption. 223 This was perhaps a natural extension of his longtime preoccupation with newspapers and magazines, witnessed not just in his commercial art career throughout the fifties, but also in lesser-known early works, like the hand drawn reproductions of newspaper pages he did in Journal American (ca. 1959), The (Wall Street) Journal (n.d.),
and, later, *Daily News* (1962). Indeed, one of the earliest precursors to the “Death and Disaster” paintings, *129 Die in Jet!* (1962), reproduced the June 4, 1962 *New York Mirror* front page in its entirety (though with some important omissions). These works display an unmistakable early interest in the mediated site of postwar image culture as they reproduce and manipulate the refined layouts of front-page newspaper design that had become increasingly image-based, particularly with the rise of wirephotos, of which Warhol was keenly aware. Art historian John J. Curley demonstrates this awareness in his discussion of *129 Die in Jet!* by closely comparing Warhol’s picture and its front page source. Curley points out that Warhol omits all the caption text from the original source above and below the main headline except for the wire-credit information: “(UPI RADIOTELEphoto).” That Warhol went through the pains of hand painting that tiny text below the picture while consciously erasing all the “narrative aspects of the caption” clearly indicates to Curley Warhol’s intentional emphasis of “the transmitted nature of the photograph.” Over the months from 1962 to 1963, Warhol displayed less and less of a need to contextualize the images within the explicit frame of the newspaper, such that headlines were no longer included and even original image captions and article text, as appear in the *Tuna Fish Disaster* works (1963), were widely dropped. As these “narrative aspects” diminished, the repetition of images on single canvases increased. Eventually, in many instances the repeated images of violence were all that was left, and with the loss of the original frame, the repetition took on a heightened
role.

The most influential narratives of the literature on Warhol’s painting have all made repetition central to their arguments, particularly in regard to the “Death and Disaster” works. A general line eventually hardened between two opposing perspectives: repetition either dulls the affective quality of violence and its consumption, or it heightens it. Thomas Crow, in his essay “Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol,” comes down squarely in the latter camp, holding that Warhol’s repetition reaffirms the “moments where the brutal fact of death and suffering cancels the possibility of passive and complacent consumption.” Of Warhol’s repetition, he asks, “might we just as well understand it to mean the grim predictability, day after day, of more events with an identical outcome, the leveling sameness with which real, not symbolic, death erupts in our experience?” And later: “repetition of the photographic image within the pictorial field can increase rather than numb sensitivity to it.” Crow’s position forms a concerted and not unconvincing effort to read beyond or beneath Warhol himself, who had told Gene Swenson in the 1963 interview: “When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn’t really have an effect.” Crow’s argument, one might say, hinges on Warhol’s “really.” His essay in turn paved the way for others on Warhol’s repetition, such as one drawing on psychoanalysis perhaps most notably performed by Hal Foster.

How can repetition in Red Explosion, as well as the source of its screened image, help us understand more about the picture, its relation to public
image culture, and its odd place in Warhol’s early work? It is an anomaly of *Red Explosion* that while Warhol repeated his subject in that picture more times on the canvas than in almost any other “Death and Disaster” picture (c. 29 times), the subject of atomic bombs, unlike those of the car crashes, suicides, race riots, or electric chairs, was itself apparently never repeated on any other canvases. That is, there is only one Warhol atomic bomb painting in his *Catalogue Raisonné*. This opens up the possibility of distinguishing two different types of repetition in Warhol’s work: repetition on individual canvases, and thematic repetition across multiple canvases. The criticism of figures like Crow and Foster has always been concerned with the former. But in considering the latter, we can say that *Red Explosion* is an unusual case across Warhol’s body of work, where nearly every other topic or subject was serialized, either thematically or multiple reproductions of the exact same image. But not the mushroom cloud, for while it was repeated in *Red Explosion*, there is only one such painting made, and never was the form revisited explicitly in a painting throughout the rest of Warhol’s career.

There are important differences between the violence of the mushroom cloud and the violence of, for example, car crashes or race riots that might offer some clues as to why Warhol did not make more mushroom cloud paintings. Chief among these differences is the *immediacy* with which they present violence. Most of the “Death and Disaster” pictures project and repeat human inflicted violence close up; dead (and often mangled) bodies, cropped images of
people falling to their death, or images of racial police violence, for example, are shown from an eyewitness (camera) perspective. The mushroom cloud is also shown from an eyewitness perspective, but the explosive nature of the bomb meant that eyewitness photography of it was necessarily at a distance (usually at least seven miles away). This physical distance, necessary for the very comprehensibility of an atomic blast as a “mushroom” (and, by extension, the distance needed to take a picture of a mushroom cloud), is hard wired into the psychology of the image. It sets the stage for a psychic disassociation between the mushroom cloud image and the catastrophic violence it (mis)represented. This disassociation in turn provided a basis for its appropriation by the visual cultures of postwar entertainment and popular culture, not simply in the movies, but in things like beauty contests (“Miss Atomic”), fashion and leisure (“atomic hairdo,” “bikinis,” “atomic cocktails”), and advertisement campaigns (by Levi’s, for one example). The descriptive misuse of the mushroom cloud even reached art journalism about Warhol and his contemporaries: “And then in the summer of 1962 they all went whoosh together in the big, colorful, sensationaly promoted mushroom cloud called Pop Art.” Only a dramatic psychological and aesthetic distancing between the violence of the atomic blast and the form to which it gave rise would make descriptions like these possible. In all cases, neither a more accurate representation of the atomic blast nor images of its devastating effect, both of which were available by the mid-fifties, could have served these ends. And the shape and naming of the atomic explosion as a ‘mushroom’—a
label that has itself been criticized “for its depoliticizing organicism”\textsuperscript{233}—found resounding echoes in new domestic design trends of the fifties.\textsuperscript{234} For these reasons, the image cannot function like the other disaster subjects; the mushroom cloud cannot correlate to its violent reality in the same way as an image of a police dog biting a black man or a corpse impaled on a telephone pole next to a wrecked car can.

Another important point about mushroom cloud photographs is their dependence on controlled and inherently simulative sources. All mushroom cloud photography was closely guarded, carefully censored, military photography. And unless its one of the small handful of photos taken during the Hiroshima or Nagasaki bombings, they always necessarily picture a simulation, an image of one of the more than one thousand nuclear weapons tests that had been conducted by the time Warhol made \textit{Red Explosion}.\textsuperscript{235} Nuclear testing photography was a massive undertaking that was absolutely central to the U.S. military’s overall testing program. Beginning in earnest in July 1945 and swelling all the way to the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963 which banned above ground nuclear testing, the U.S. military invested heavily in new photographic and cinematographic technologies to picture the bomb, first through the wartime Photographic and Optics Division at Los Alamos and then, beginning in 1947, through the 4881\textsuperscript{st} Motion Picture Squadron (later re-designated as the 1352\textsuperscript{nd} Photographic Squadron). Their mission was “the production of classified motion pictures and still photography in support of the Department of Defense, the
Atomic Energy Commission and the testing of Atomic weapons. The source photograph in Warhol’s *Red Explosion* is a direct offspring of these priorities and investments. It almost certainly comes from one of the ‘Desert Rock’ exercises at the Nevada Proving Grounds in the mid fifties, conjectured by some as coming from a 1955 *Life* magazine spread with a full page colored picture of a mushroom cloud at Yucca Flats.

The mushroom cloud image, which represents the single most violent potential and destructive capability of human origin, is drawn away from violence by physical distance, by its simulative source, by its mass transmission, and by its eventual appropriation into the benign realms of entertainment and popular culture. The sum of these qualities adds up to a complex, hyper-mediated image that had undergone, already by the time Warhol made *Red Explosion*, a concerted campaign of manipulation and misappropriation that began in 1945. Despite all the apparent best attempts in *Red Explosion* to reendow the image with a sense of violence—the image has a menacing feel, its red palette (blood? fire? communism?) is foreboding—in the end it is still bound by all the inescapable trappings of the image discussed above. Other slightly later images of the mushroom cloud by Warhol’s Pop contemporaries, such as in James Rosenquist’s *F-111* (1964) or Roy Lichtenstein’s *Atom Burst* (1965) and *Atomic Landscape* (1966), can serve as a foil to Warhol’s picture. Where Warhol perhaps attempted in vain to establish the violence of the image and its transmission using the formula of his other disasters, Rosenquist embraced its
problematic status within postwar visuality and visual culture, describing the mushroom cloud section of his monumental *F-111* painting as someone “raising his window in the morning, looking out the window and seeing a bright red and yellow atomic bomb blast, something like a cherry blossom, a beautiful view of an atomic blast.” Rosenquist emphasizes the disassociation of the mushroom cloud from violence by increasing it, expanding it to a “cherry blossom” and calling it “beautiful” out right. Lichtenstein’s mushroom cloud paintings similarly subvert the image, in this case through a kind of knotted impotence, cartooning it into a cute splash in the water that feels no more threatening than a chef’s toque. Perhaps in a similar vein, possibly acknowledging the futility of using it in his disaster paintings, the only other time Warhol engaged the form was in his early film *Eat* (1964), in which Robert Indiana slowly ate a raw mushroom over the course of forty-five minutes, an act of consumption that, if containing any reference to the mushroom cloud, would be more in line with Lichtenstein and Rosenquist’s approach to the problematic role of the mushroom cloud in U.S. visual culture.

We might also venture a further comparison between the mushroom cloud image and Warhol’s other disaster subjects as they relate to the public ‘realities’ they purport to represent. For this I turn to Hal Foster, in particular the part in his “Death in America” essay that leads him, albeit through differing means, to agree with Thomas Crow that “content in Warhol is thus not trivial.” In this context, Foster brings up Walter Benjamin’s idea of the ‘optical
unconscious,’ stating how

Warhol updates it thirty years later, in response to the postwar society of the spectacle, of mass media and commodity-signs. In these early images we see what it looks like to dream in the age of television, *Life*, and *Time*; or rather, what it looks like to nightmare as shock victims who prepare for disasters that have already come, for Warhol selects moments when this spectacle cracks (the JFK assassination, the Monroe suicide, racist attacks, car wrecks), but cracks only to expand.

This passage in many ways nicely sums up Foster's reading of Warhol's early work, as he draws on a poststructuralist vocabulary and the unstable landscape of the “commodity-sign” spectacle within a psychoanalytic framework to produce a subject-centered reading of the work’s operative forces. The observation that Warhol's subject matter shows “cracks” in the spectacle which reveal subjects as “shock victims” dreaming “disasters that have already come,” cracks whose net effect is nevertheless the continuous expansion of the spectacle, is compelling in the context of the bulk of the “Disaster” paintings. But does it fit with *Red Explosion*, a painting or theme Foster never mentions? To what extent is *Red Explosion* representative of a “disaster that [has] already come”? While Hiroshima and Nagasaki had experienced two “real” atomic attacks, the facts of the painting suggest it is less referential to those than it is to the idea of a forthcoming nuclear holocaust from which the U.S. would not be spared. It’s source, repeated 29 times, is a testing image from U.S. soil, it was created in the immediate wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis, its name and red palette suggests an allusion to the Soviet Union, and Warhol himself cites contemporaneous U.S. radio broadcasts of millions of people dying as an
originating idea for the series. If this is the case, then it is not only a disaster that has not already come, but it is one for which there would be no future.\textsuperscript{240} The other subjects do not operate in the same way; a car crash is a disaster that happened yesterday and will be repeated again tomorrow. Ditto even a Kennedy assassination. News of these events shocks the public in their initial encounter with it. And, returning to repetition, according to Foster, “it is this first order of shock that the repetition of the image serves to screen, even if in doing so the repetition produces a second order of trauma, here at the level of technique where the \textit{punctum} breaks through the screen and allows the real to break through.”\textsuperscript{241} But this \textit{punctum}, to continue Foster’s borrowed framework, cannot break through in the same way in \textit{Red Explosion}, where the “real” waiting to “break through” is one that would shatter, not crack, the spectacle. The second level of trauma is, to borrow the language of another relevant theorist, eternally deferred, and \textit{Red Explosion}, because of the nature of its subject, cannot, unlike the car crashes or race riots, break out of the entrenched systemic “simulation of nuclear catastrophe.”\textsuperscript{242} It’s a simulation that can never be real, for its realization violently and totally destroys the real. So if Foster is right, and it was Warhol’s intention to lead to some authentic experience of the “real” through the backdoors of subjective exposure to multiple levels of traumatic repetition, one can understand how the image of the mushroom cloud, with its complex system of “deferred” representation, might indeed be a useless motif for his aim. In this way, perhaps Lichtenstein’s cartoon rendering of a mushroom cloud as chef’s
hat is in fact a more successful, or more “real,” depiction of the form’s operative function. And if Foster is not right, then we might see Warhol’s death pictures, with *Red Explosion* now as the paradigm, as pointing to the *end* of the “real,” not in a theoretical sense, but rather in the sense that if society keeps producing the conditions for such rampant death by privileging its means and its consumption, there may eventually be no one left alive to experience the real.

It is easy to be drawn in to the “screens” and “shocks” and “second orders of trauma” of a reading like Foster’s, but they must be read with some caution. They too have a tendency to ‘screen’ the real. Foster sees “tears” and “holes” in Warhol’s disasters, but his brand of theory is destined to remain a refusal to really engage history: “what loss is figured there I cannot say.”

My study is interested, on the other hand, in attempting a more material identification of the “loss” that is so evident in Warhol and his contemporaries, one that in this case is drawn from the documents of postwar (art) history and focuses on the broad networks of visuality and signification relative to death, violence, and the nuclear issue. Insofar as Foster’s essay forms one of those documents, it is important in understanding the reception of Warhol at a given moment, and his role in the development of the theory of art since 1945. But such readings have a tendency not to extend themselves beyond theory, or, perhaps more accurately, they ascend too quickly to theory, even when the most pressing questions are often formed and grappled with on the ground of more material histories.
The historical quirks of *Red Explosion* as a ‘document’ within Warhol’s early work come not only in its subject matter, being his sole atomic bomb painting, but also in its style. While its subject and revised date make it a natural member of the “Death and Disaster” paintings, its format and style also connect it with works slightly predating that series which repeated seemingly more benign or ‘positive’ symbols of U.S. culture. It shares, for example, a lot of characteristics with a work like *Statue of Liberty* (1962). This painting is part of a newly delineated category of “optical paintings,” suggested by the *Catalog Raisonné* in 2002. While *Red Explosion* is not done in the two-toned 3-D color register of the optical paintings, it shares other interesting qualities with *Statue of Liberty*.

They have formal similarities; they both repeat a single image across multiple rows, and each screens their images imperfectly, so that the recurrences of the images, while drawn from the same source, is visibly different in each repetition. Thus they are both transmission pictures, sourcing media images whose significance is conditioned by their circulation and recognition. Both mushroom cloud and Statue of Liberty are vertically oriented with legible ‘head,’ ‘body,’ and ‘feet’ components, formal attributes only intelligible from a distance. This distance is a precondition to another fundamental similarity: both were, by 1962, iconic symbols conditioned by contested ideological, Cold War undertones.

With *Statue of Liberty* and *Red Explosion* both being executed at the
cusp of the disaster paintings, we might wonder the extent to which Warhol saw the one as a symbol of disaster and the other as an emblem of the United States. In doing so, the comparison can teach us something about the mushroom cloud as a symbol as well as offer a suggestion as to why Warhol perhaps felt moved to discard it as a thematic subject. In other words, it furthers the suggestion of how either Red Explosion does not quite fit as a “Death and Disaster” work, or that it is the death and disaster work par excellence. In either case, it is perhaps better understood as a kind of transitional work between Warhol’s shift in focus from the icons of postwar U.S. culture and consumption (1961-62), to the iconography of postwar U.S. violence (1962-64), one that hovers between both camps. It is a painting that represents in a way the sum of all the Warhol subjects of the early and mid sixties, one that is equal parts Statue of Liberty and Suicide, car wreck and Campbell’s soup can, Jackie Kennedy and flowers, dollar bills and electric chairs.

I draw that list because not only can we find in all those subjects traces of the nuclear issue, but also because Warhol’s retrospective admission in his account of the origin of his disaster paintings that “everything I was doing must have been Death” justifies to some extent an understanding of all these subjects in this way. In a line rarely quoted from what is perhaps Warhol’s most famous interview (the interview is virtually never reproduced in full246), Warhol discusses his philosophy: “every day’s a new day. I don’t worry about art or life: I mean, the war and the bomb worry me but usually, there’s not much you can do about
them. I’ve represented it in some of my films and I’m going to try and do more…”247 I will return to this quote below, but it is worth noting here that this passing mention of “the war and the bomb” as things that “worry” him is in fact terribly uncharacteristic of Warhol. He almost never mentions any current event, let alone one that ‘worries’ him. But reinforcing this admission, we find traces of this specific worry within many of the subjects listed above, with contextual or archival evidence connecting most of them in one way or another with atomic discourse in the United States at the beginning of the sixties. The electric chair, for example, pictured by Warhol was the one used to execute Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for atomic espionage.248 Jackie and Marilyn were both connected to the President who shepherded the country through the Cuban Missile Crisis and, by 1963, both were inked into the public imaginary as glamour-death.249

The otherwise banal subject of a Campbell’s Soup can was advertised throughout the 1950s and early 1960s as the food of nuclear fallout shelters. It is a point art historian John J. Curley makes when, in the context of Warhol’s subjects in popular magazines, he points out that Campbell’s soup “was not only a distraction from nuclear terror in Life during these dangerous years of the Cold War; it also served as an emblem of apocalypse, a point also evident in the fallout/soup layout.”250 The disaster pictures, of course, brought the theme of increasingly rampant U.S. violence to the surface; they were ‘emblems’ of the heightened presence of violence as well as the often problematic attitude of the public toward it. Again, Warhol’s admission that “war and the bomb worry me,”
and his account of what “started” the disaster paintings—of constantly hearing warnings in the media that “4 million people are going to die”—brings the series’ origins squarely into contact with the fears of nuclear war.\textsuperscript{251}

Even in Warhol’s \textit{Flowers}, the subject with which he emerged from the disaster paintings in November 1964, we find the coded legacy and continued currency of death and the nuclear crisis in the U.S. About the \textit{Flowers}, Warhol told \textit{Newsweek} in late 1964, “I waited till after the elections…I was going to make the show all Goldwater if he won, because then everything would go, art would go…but now it’s going to be flowers—they’re the fashion this year. They look like a cheap awning. They’re terrific!”\textsuperscript{252} Warhol’s notion that “everything would go” if Goldwater won is a direct reference to fears of nuclear war, for in the presidential campaign that raged all throughout the summer and early fall of 1964, Goldwater’s apparent willingness to use nuclear weapons in what he called then the “Communist War” became a central issue.\textsuperscript{253} (His addition that “art would go” seems a further confirmation that Warhol was aware that the idea that the ‘real’ behind, say, \textit{Red Explosion} would be one in which art could not exist.) Warhol’s “flower” theme reflects this in the way it references a key moment of the 1964 presidential election, where Lyndon Johnson, facing Goldwater, debuted the television campaign ad “that changed American politics.”\textsuperscript{254} It was a spot called “Daisy” that opened with a young girl counting pedals as she picks them off a flower. As she picks the last pedals, counting them off aloud in her innocent toddler voice, mistaking the order and repeating
the numbers, the transmission of a male voice suddenly interrupts to count
down a nuclear weapons launch. The camera zooms into Daisy’s eye; it fills the
screen completely, the countdown reaches zero, and the spot cuts to nuclear
explosions. Moving mushroom cloud images fill the screen, now with audio of a
Johnson speech overlaid in which he warns, finally, over a billowing fireball: “We
must either love each other, or we must die.” The suggestion is unmistakable:
vote for Johnson on November 3, or suffer atomic death.

Never mind that there was effectively no difference between Goldwater’s
military policy positions and those of Kennedy or Johnson. (After winning
reelection, of course, Johnson proceeded to escalate dramatically the conflict in
South East Asia, despite campaigning on the idea that this would be the
outcome of a Goldwater administration.) And never mind that Goldwater himself
was simply carrying on the postwar legacy of Johnson’s own party, with his
statements closely mirroring those of figures such as Arthur Schlesinger’s from
earlier in the decade, who warned that the United States “cannot afford to take
too intransigent a position on the use of the bomb” when confronting
Communism. These similarities were of no consequence to Johnson’s
reelection; his campaign’s political savvy and understanding of the still powerful
resonance of the atomic threat within the public imaginary made clear to him
that he need not bother with the details and instead simply establish an
association between Goldwater and atomic death in America. On August 20,
1964, three weeks before “Daisy” aired, Johnson had a telephone conversation with his press secretary, George Reedy:

-Reedy: We got to play that atom theme as heavy as we can. I think it’s a little too early right now to–

-Johnson: What theme?

-Reedy: The atom theme.

-Johnson: Yeah. A-T-O-M. But you don’t say it. 256

And indeed, on September 7 the ad aired on NBC without ever saying the words “atomic bomb” or “Goldwater,” relying on the impact of the visual image alone. Johnson understood the ad would be more effective the more simply it appeared, allowing for viewers to make their own connections: “you don’t say it.” Still, the spot is not as simple as it seems, and in fact its complexity reinforces the paradoxes within the politics of the atomic issue and of the visuality of the mushroom cloud. That is, the ad is nominally anti-nuclear, trading on fears that Barry Goldwater would escalate the Cold War to a nuclear conflict. But, never mentioning Goldwater, and, with the innocent mid-western girl in a field of flowers as the main character, it clearly exploits the general atmosphere of fear and anxiety among the U.S. public that they might die by nuclear war. Without this fear, the ad would be completely ineffective, thus while nominally anti-nuclear, the spot also depends on and benefits from nuclear fear. Expanding the significance beyond the LBJ-Goldwater election contest, the ad is further complicated by the realization that the scare tactic is sourced from motion picture footage of US nuclear weapons tests, film rolls of the US government’s
atomic bombardment of its own soil. This is the same brand of footage, produced by the same people, that opened “the best movie [Warhol] has ever seen,” and which was featured in scores of other Hollywood-produced ‘science-fiction’ movies between 1945 and the year Johnson was reelected. It is also the same crop of images from which Warhol took the source picture for his own atomic bomb painting, Red Explosion.

On November 21, 1964, two weeks after Johnson safely beat Goldwater in his reelection bid, the Castelli Gallery opened Warhol’s Flowers. In his December 3, 1964 review of the show (the same one that opened with an account of the post-apocalyptic Creation of the Humanoids being the best movie Warhol had ever seen), David Bourdon wrote finally that Warhol’s treatment of the flower image “actually lands him on the far side of realism, in a region where visual fact turns into phantasmagoria that becomes all the more hallucinatory because it is without a shred of fantasy.” This sentence displays the sensitivity in early Pop criticism to the competing layers of reality and fiction that applies just as much to the psychological mechanics of Johnson’s Daisy as it does to Warhol’s Flowers. In other words, the same could be said of the potency of nuclear weapons testing footage in the context of Johnson’s political campaign ad: the “visual fact” of the nuclear weapons test footage functioned in the public imaginary as a distinctly horrific “phantasmagoria,” imprinting on the public imaginary a televisual sequencing of the their own death, a hallucination that in turn resonated so strongly because the weapons did in fact exist “without
a shred of fantasy.” In the context of Warhol’s statement about his choice of flowers as subject matter, the Flowers at first seem like an odd sort of poster for LBJ’s victory over Goldwater—“I waited till after the elections.” But Warhol acknowledges the exploitation of nuclear anxiety within that victory, both in the choice of Flowers as a subject matter that would have echoed in the context Daisy as well as in the statement that, if Goldwater won, “everything would go.” By connecting his Flowers to the idea of this anxiety within the context of Johnson’s victory that was facilitated by the flower/atomic themed political advertisement, Warhol also suggests that a critique of the political discourse is embedded in his new work. In one sense, the paintings perform the operation of Johnson’s ad in reverse, with Warhol’s statement suggesting an attitude of ‘we averted Goldwater and nuclear annihilation, now we can have our daisies.’ But Warhol’s Flowers in context also seem too ready to acquiesce to Johnson’s election strategy. That is, we might ask, do they celebrate Johnson’s victory or do they reflect a misbegotten mood of celebration behind which lies an apathetic acknowledgement that there is no real difference between Johnson and Goldwater? As I will discuss below, some moments in Warhol’s films explicitly question this point. As for the Flowers, rather than celebrating fashion or peace, the question at the very least suggests possibilities for alternative readings. One the one hand, it suggests them as uncanny prefigurations of Allen Ginsberg’s “masses of flowers” from exactly one year later, meant for the benefit of protestors to disarm counter-agitators (police, politicians, Hell’s Angels) in the
context demonstrating against Vietnam war (in that sense Ginsberg almost seems to take a ironic cue from Johnson’s speech in the “Daisy” ad in which his voice warns, over the mushroom cloud, “We must either love each other, or we must die.”)\(^{259}\) On the other hand, it casts them as funerary objects that represented a continuation—not a break—with the death series (some of the death pictures from the year before had indeed already featured flowers).\(^{260}\) In this sense, the ‘masses of flowers’ at the Castelli gallery memorialize a mass death either barely avoided or not yet come, but in any case still dominant in the imaginary and also still “without a shred of fantasy.” The Flowers exist in a world in which the death of everybody, whether understood as a reality, a possibility, or an idea (Johnson’s ad) became a fundamental condition of politics and society in the U.S., further eroding the legitimacy of the idea of an atmosphere of vitality. “These are the stakes,” rang Johnson’s voice over the flaming mushroom cloud footage after Daisy picked her flower’s last pedal, “to make a world in which all of God’s children can live; or to go into the dark.” The apparent optimism of Warhol’s quote in Newsweek buys into Johnson’s ad so perfectly as to call it squarely into question.

Around September 1963, in the midst of a year long stretch of making paintings revolving around death, entertainment, violence, and consumption, Warhol began to make films. He displayed an early interest in the technical side of the budding postwar low-budget film and video industry that strongly conditioned the experimental openness of his movies.\(^{261}\) Warhol also connected
this interest to his preoccupation with the death culture of postwar America. In some instances, such as his first color picture *Suicide* (1965), he directly continued a theme of his disaster paintings in the films. The vacuous and static qualities of the early films, together with their long durations and embrace of technical image “distress” all create formal continuities between them and the contemporaneous death paintings. When contextualized in these ways, there seems to be an air of death that hangs over Warhol’s very approach to photography and film. When a journalist in the Factory once suggested that he take pictures of himself with a remote camera for the story, Warhol responded: “Why, this is really marvelous. I could do my paintings this way, I mean if a person were dying he could photograph his own death.”

As his ‘style’ developed and the films became more collaborative, the movies took on an increased narrative dimension that continued to exhibit an undertone of engagement with violence, sexuality, and Cold War culture. Again, he spells this engagement out in a little quoted part of the otherwise famous 1966 interview with Gretchen Berg:

> My philosophy is: every day’s a new day. I don’t worry about art or life: I mean, the war and the bomb worry me but usually, there’s not much you can do about them. I’ve represented it in some of my films and I’m going to try and do more, such as *The Life of Juanita Castro*, the point of which is, it depends on how you want to look at it. …I feel I’m very much a part of my times, of my culture, as much a part of it as rockets and television.

When we piece together Warhol’s admission here that the “the war and the bomb worry” him and his insistence that he is “very much a part of” his times
with other quotes, such as the account of the origin of the death series (radio broadcasts of 4 million people dying) or of the Flowers (that if Goldwater won “everything would go”), a picture begins to emerge in which, quite contrary to all the indicators of being aloof and detached from concerns of the day, Warhol was steadily preoccupied with the politics of nuclear terror in context throughout the early and mid 1960s. Later paintings, such as Map of Eastern USSR Missile Bases (1985-86), as well as recent scholarship in Warhol’s archive, in which he was found to save many newspaper and magazine clippings in the early 1960s that explicitly reference nuclear weapons, only hardens this picture.264

When in the Berg interview Warhol says that he has represented his “worry” about “the war and the bomb” in The Life of Juanita Castro, he does not mean by mushroom clouds. The move toward such a ‘representation’ shifts away from the mode of Red Explosion to reach for a “political vision” (in the words of Ronald Tavel, the movie’s screenwriter) that is more complex and, perhaps because of this, more successful.

The Life of Juanita Castro was a theatrical cinematic production that staged a raucous fictional dialogue between siblings Juanita, Fidel and Raul Castro and Che Guevera. In the early sixties, Juanita Castro had worked covertly for the CIA. By 1964 she had publicly broken with her brothers, disavowed the revolution, and defected to the United States. In July 1964, an article on her story appeared in Time magazine titled “Cuba: The Bitter Family” and, in August, Life published “My Brother is a Tyrant and He Must Go,” the
latter of which was, according to Tavel, “compulsory reading” for Warhol.\textsuperscript{265} Tavel, a close collaborator who wrote the screenplays of many of Warhol’s films including \textit{Juanita Castro}, tells of “one of the most important evenings in my life” in which he went with Warhol for dinner at Fidel Castro’s ex-brother-in-law Waldo Díaz-Balart’s townhouse on 10\textsuperscript{th} street in Manhattan.\textsuperscript{266} It is an interesting and important account for how it provides a glimpse into the relationship between topical, political Cold War issues within Warhol’s subject matter decisions. It establishes, firstly, the \textit{presence} of ‘Cuba’ in the Warhol milieu of the early 1960s: in addition to Warhol being “fascinated” by Juanita Castro, Tavel recounts how he himself went to Cuba after Castro came to power but before the travel ban was in place, how he had “written short light verses and serious long poems about Cuba,” and how he had “been introduced by Andy to two very charming, politically active Cuban sisters, Aniram Anipso and Mercedes Ospina.”\textsuperscript{267} Interestingly, Tavel also mentions attending one of Fidel Castro’s “eight-hour speeches, in which, riveting my attention, he made extensive, theatrical use of a great white handkerchief.”\textsuperscript{268} Thus, in the wake of the missile crisis and LBJ’s reelection, “Cuba,” present in the minds of Factory people, is not only politically charged fodder in relation to thematic subject matter, but also provides strange formalist parallels between Warhol’s cinematic production and Fidel’s political aesthetic, as both were known for their interminable durations. (Could Tavel’s explicit reference of an “eight hour” speech by Fidel Castro, in which he no doubt railed against the U.S. as an
imperial aggressor, add a wrinkle to Warhol’s own famously long, ‘eight-hour’ film *Empire*?)

In his telling of the actual dinner with Díaz-Balart and Warhol in February 1965, Tavel recounts how the conversation “turned to the Cuban revolution and its political intrigues, particularly the in-fighting on the part of the Castro siblings,” which provided the initial inspiration for *The Life of Juanita Castro*. Tavel makes a particularly interesting observation that what “made a most permanent impression” on him was “the tone of what Waldo said that night, his particular indifference, distance, amusement and sang-froid concerning his homeland and the missile crisis of October 25-28, 1962 that nearly had brought this world to an end.” It was as if, by association with a member of Castro’s family, the notorious “cool” of the Pop attitude had reached the highest levels of geo-political brinkmanship. Tavel continued:

But all of it amazed me in a deep, undramatic way as if, fixed on and mesmerized by Waldo’s twisting of his black walrus mustachios, I were at the center of a vast whorl [sic] in that room, in all its Samuel Goldwyn sumptuousness, and that all of it existed for me, and that all of it, whirling about me with its orbit rapidly shrinking, came to center in my chest.269

This experience, Tavel’s “undramatic” shock at the indifference and sang-froid vis-à-vis a crisis that could have violently ended the world on the part of an insider that produced a dizzying subjective Hollywood-esque fantasy, came together to generate the script and unconventional format of *The Life of Juanita Castro*. It formed in Tavel a general “political vision” which continued unaltered “essentially throughout all the matter I’d subsequently mine for political
themes.” And while Tavel was responsible for the screenplay, he admits the direct influence in all of this of Andy Warhol, who he insists “chose the subject matter.”

The politically charged topic delivered through a radical and experimental theatrical format forms what we might call the Warhol-Tavel “political vision.” The lynchpin of this vision in the unusual production of *The Life of Juanita Castro* is the character of the film’s ‘Director,’ who for the duration feeds lines and stage direction on camera to the characters of Fidel, Raul, Juanita, and Che. The Director is both in and out of the movie, a character who controls the other characters, but who is himself controlled by a script, confusing the source of authority within a political reading of the film. The result is funny and absurd, painting both the revolution and the U.S. response as doubly theatrical, pre-scripted and presupposing an audience, but enacted with undertones of genuine mistakes, shock, and violence (the script is never rehearsed, neither the actors or the director know the lines before hand). At one point the Director cues Juanita to “scream” to Fidel: “If this whole audience wasn’t watching, I would empty this pistol into your belly!!” Armed and acknowledging their audience, the characters concede upfront the theatricality of not just the play, but of the family, the revolution, and even to an extent the geopolitical relationship between Cuba and the US. The rupture of the fourth wall joins with humor and violence to form the film’s “political vision.”
In many ways *The Life of Juanita Castro* is a comedic lament, with the director falling asleep during Fidel’s long speeches or when all the characters (thus also Raul and Che) directed to “scream and yell, ‘Censored! Censored!!’” over Fidel’s more ‘serious’ lines, like that “The U.S. has some reason of its own for punishing us. To make an example to the rest of Latin America.” But lest the “political vision” be too clear, it must be said that Juanita, who in real life worked covertly for the CIA against the revolution during her brother’s rise, is also cast as a hero. At one point she is fed the line, “By the end of 1960, I begin to help the underground.” In this utterance there is a strange conflation of affiliations, an unexpected identification by a counterrevolutionary CIA spy not only with that particular historical moment of the U.S. avant-garde, where the “underground” was quickly becoming a dominant site of art and film making, but within that, with Warhol himself, who in many ways not only reigned over it, but was its greatest benefactor. Under the guidance of Warhol’s ‘fascination’ with Cuba and his interest in trying to make a film that “represents” the “war and the bomb,” Tavel channels his “shock” at the indifference to the political crisis that he witnessed in Fidel’s brother-in-law to create a theater of absurd that laid bare the insanity of the geo-political crisis that had swirled within the public imaginary during the previous three years. And through a general atmosphere of absurdity and humor, by acting them out themselves, or by, for example, making all the characters transvestites, they appropriate the real life actors of violent political and nuclear brinkmanship into their own underground world.
Sex and the discourse of postwar geopolitical violence mixed again in the first film Warhol made after Valerie Solanas shot him in 1968. Originally titled *Fuck* but later changed to *Blue Movie*, the film stars Louis Walden and Viva (the Warhol ‘superstar’ who was on the phone with Warhol when he was shot in June). In the succinct words of one review of the film at the time, the two “lie about, make love, eat, and shower.” After a one week run at the Garrick Theater in Manhattan, the police ceased *Blue Movie* on the grounds of it being hard-core pornography in the summer of 1969. Warhol recounts how the police “came all the way down to the Village, sat through Viva’s speeches about General MacArthur and the Vietnam war, through Louis calling her tits ‘dried apricots,’ and through her story about the police harassing her in the Hamptons for not wearing a bra, etc., etc., etc.–and then they seized the print of our movie.”

But the sex and nudity in Warhol’s films, particularly those post-1968, was not really pornographic at all, as even the reviews at the time pointed out. While in *Blue Movie* “the [sexual] act is technically complete,” wrote David Denby in *Film Quarterly*, “not much happens; there’s no intimacy, no lust, no climax, and no satisfaction.” Or about *Trash* (1970), another wrote: “Of course, the failure of *Trash* as a pornographic movie is that it doesn’t turn anyone on—not anyone you’re likely to invite home for dinner, anyway. In all pornography, it’s the dream that counts, not the illustration, and the flesh on screen will do nothing for you unless it comes at you in ways that match up with
your own fantasies." The starkest block against the pornographic “dream” in Blue Movie is its heavy dose of politics, one that in many ways develops further the Warhol-Tavel “political vision” discussed above in relation to The Life of Juanita Castro. The absurdist theatricality in format is dramatically toned down in Blue Movie as the film essentially shows two people lounging about an apartment for three hours one afternoon. But it is still present in the mixture of humor, violence, political discussion, and the absurd, all of which are simply adapted to a more tranquil setting and updated to reflect contemporary developments in the world.

The political dimension of this update is announced in the film’s very framing; the program note announced it as “a film about the Viet Nam war and what we can do about it.” Throughout the movie, the two characters, mostly naked in bed, discuss a range of topics relative to military violence and the U.S. role in the Cold War. Viva’s commentary, more than Louis Walden’s, is astute and wide ranging, and in certain instances she connects to ideas that relate, for example, to Warhol’s Flowers and Johnson’s reelection campaign ad. Warhol alludes to these connections when, in the quote from POPism cited above, he mentions her “speeches on MacArthur.” This refers to a moment in the movie when Viva recounts hearsay conversations between Dean Rusk, General Douglas MacArthur and others regarding U.S. military superiority over East Asia during the Eisenhower administration. She ‘quotes’ MacArthur: “If you go into Asia in an infantry situation, you will never win unless you use tactical atomic
weapons’—which means atomic bullets, atomic hand grenades and so on.” At this moment in Viva’s speech, her longest uninterrupted piece of dialogue in the film, a bee stings her, an interruption that, while being far more low-key, is reminiscent of the crazily disjointed flow of dialogue in *The Life of Juanita Castro*. She says “So for one solid year they discuss this—whether or not they could use—my God! Lookit. Something bit me in the finger. Look at that—whether or not they could use tactical…” Warhol moves the camera at this point, and she picks right back up: “…ten years later they’re still trying to decide whether we should use atomic bullets because then we’ll start using grenades, and this, that, and the other thing. No one’s used the atomic bomb since Hiroshima—.”

Contrary to the implication in reviews at the time (Denby, focusing more or less exclusively on the sex, refers to her dialogue dismissively as a “steady flow of chatter”), Viva’s pillow talk in this scene amounts to a completely accurate account of U.S. nuclear policy in the early and mid 1950s. In particular, it is true that the technological advances in making smaller, tactical atomic weapons broadened the political willingness to use them, not just in editorials but in official policy. The top secret “New Look” strategy that Eisenhower approved in October 1953 stipulated, for example, that “the United States will consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions,” and the policy was extended in early 1955, saying that “the United States cannot afford to preclude itself from using nuclear weapons even in a local situation.” These attitudes, of course, were key to the growing fears within the U.S. public
imaginary that were greatly exacerbated by the Cuban Missile Crisis and which, as we saw before, were exploited by Johnson in his reelection campaign against Goldwater. Goldwater, a Republican, was seen as a more direct continuation of the official policy that was developed in the 1950s under Eisenhower’s Republican administration, which Viva accurately describes as willing to use nuclear weapons preemptively (a quality that Johnson’s Daisy used to great effect). It is the same sentiment that Warhol himself reflects within the origin story of his Flowers when he said that if Goldwater won “everything would go.” But as mentioned before, there was effectively no daylight between Johnson and Goldwater, and it is this point that Viva also makes in Blue Movie, when Louis asks her slightly later whether she voted for Johnson in the 1964 election: “Well, I didn’t vote for Goldwater. …I mean, I would have been better off voting for Goldwater. At least he told us what he was going to do.” Viva’s sense of political betrayal translates into a radical politics, with her vowing: “I will never register. I will never vote. I will never pay taxes.” Louis responds, “I know. I’m going to try not to. …The government keeps claiming a debt and we just keep paying. What are we paying for?” Viva responds succinctly: “Guns, bombs, missiles. …We’re paying taxes to see ourselves be obliterated. …We’re paying destruction taxes. We’re paying to hasten our debts and to hasten the extinction of the species. So I’m not paying anymore. Let them put me in jail.”

With these lines, Viva wraps up a critique of militaristic policy and political participation within a general context of U.S. nuclear discourse. She implicates
the U.S. taxpayer as culpable in the development of a policy that is not just violent, but violently suicidal, threatening not only the end of politics but the “extinction of the species.” This dialogue pushes an understanding of *Blue Movie* as easily more political than pornographic, despite that its sexual nature certainly overshadowed the politics within its reception. It is unclear whether this reception did or did not bother Warhol. Branden Joseph points out in a footnote that “Although Warhol is evasive about the political implications of his painting, he immediately pointed to the recently completed *Blue Movie* (1968)” when asked about his works political significance. This seems to suggest he placed weight on the politics of *Blue Movie*. But Joseph draws this point from a question, in an unpublished manuscript, posed to him by left wing film maker and close friend Emile De Antonio, who asks him “What about politics. Do you feel that you’re [sic] work has any political significance?” To which Warhol responds “Oh yeah, the last movie we made was a blue movie.” So yes, in one sense, this is a clear affirmation of the political nature of the film, with the “blue” of *Blue Movie* even humorously inverting the idea of politics that might be carried through in a “red” movie. But in another, by saying “a blue movie,” a euphemism for pornography, Warhol also refers to it as if it is just another dirty picture.

The movie and these contexts strongly suggest that the *point* of the film may have in fact been the very mixture of sex and radical politics, and in this sense Warhol seems to be testing the limits of these discourses and grounds of
its censorship. While pornography was the ostensible reason for its seizure, he questions the arbitrariness of this designation when writing in *POPism*: “Why, I wondered, hadn’t they gone over to Eighth Avenue and seized things like *Inside Judy’s Box* or *Tina’s Tongue*? Were they more ‘socially redeeming,’ maybe? It all came down to what they wanted to seize and what they didn’t, basically. It was ridiculous.”

This observation in *POPism*, combined with Warhol’s own emphasis of the political aspects of what the censors “sat through,” and the observation by critics that the film showed “no lust, no climax, no satisfaction,” not to mention the announcement on the movie’s poster that it was about “the Viet nam war [sic] and what we can do about it,” suggests that the socio-political commentary of the film was just as much if not more of an underlying reason for its censorship than its display of sex. In an interview with *Vogue* published March 1970, against the allegation that *Blue Movie* was “hard-core pornography, Warhol replies, “*(with a slightly put-on smile)*: It’s soft-core pornography. We used a misty color. What’s pornography anyway? …I mean, the way things are going now–people are alienated from one another. Movies should–uh–arouse you. Hollywood films are just planned-out commercials. *Blue Movie* was real. But it wasn’t done as pornography–it was an exercise, an experiment.” In this quote, Warhol collapses the sexual into the political by using sex to frame a fundamentally central political affect of the so-called Atomic Age: alienation. By saying that *Blue Movie* “wasn’t done as pornography” and yet still suggesting that movies should “arouse you,” Warhol implies that the arousal should be for
ends other than an orgasm. When that option is removed, Viva’s socio-political commentary (while, yes, naked, giving blow jobs, having sex) provides an “experimental” reconfiguration of arousal as an antidote to social alienation and within the context of topical politics.

Not long after Blue Movie was ceased by the censors in 1969, critics would begin making their first attempts to reflect on Warhol’s output and frame the Pop Art movement of the 1960s in a broader historical context. Warhol’s mechanicalness and automation within a general understanding of Pop as a comment on mass-production and consumer culture was perhaps the most obvious and oft repeated line. But while most accounts understood Warhol as a detached, cool, affectless “high priest of camp,” some, like Gregory Battock, a close acquaintance of Warhol since the early 1960s, maintained in 1970 that he “is not supremely aloof and indifferent but, rather, deeply committed and surprisingly sophisticated concerning the repressive society. …Warhol is not socially uninterested and politically ambivalent but has some understanding as well as sympathy for the causes of protest and revolt in American society.”

Battock did not necessarily represent a majority opinion, and his views did not harden into a dominant narrative, but he makes points that are very relevant to this dissertation. That is, for Battock, Pop had helped expose the artifice of the “vital center” that was reflected across politics and art in postwar U.S. society. “The eminence, relevance, and vitality,” he wrote, “of so artificial an institution as the Metropolitan Museum of Art was demonstrated (so they tell us) by its ability
to exhibit Rosenquist’s “F-111.” (my emphasis). Battock’s example indicts New York’s art institutions, which Guggenheim director James Sweeny had anointed “vital organ[isms]” in 1960, for their failure to understand how Pop was meant not to reinforce the image of vitality in U.S. society, but to expose it. And he does so citing the example of a painting, F-111, that famously features a mushroom cloud. “Modern Culture is a repressive, police agency,” Battock continues later, “The police function of modern culture has been recognized by Warhol. His paintings of electric chairs, police attacks, most-wanted men, and car crashes, all seem to reflect in art the reality of an official culture of repression rather than of life.” Writing in 1970, after the traumatic clashes and political violence that had “cracked” (but not shattered) the political status quo in the U.S. in the context of civil rights and anti-war protests, Battock claims Warhol’s work as part of a critique of the life-suppressing structures of postwar culture that exposed the darker nature of postwar U.S. “vitality.”

This chapter has tried to extract a pattern of concern for public, social life within a contextualized understanding of postwar politics and violence on behalf of an artist who was famously cool, soft spoken, elliptical, and vague. It has seized on the moments where this concern appears in Warhol’s work and connected them not only to the contemporary events and their real-time cultural reception, but also to a record of Warhol’s own words that reflect a sustained concern with the politics of life and the sustained presence of the nuclear issue within those politics. Through this, two arguments emerge. One, more
specifically, that Warhol was deeply influenced by the atomic discourses and threats of nuclear terror that conditioned postwar United States society, far more than dominant art historical narratives have been willing or cared to acknowledge. This concern broadens the parameters of our understanding of his work and allows for new associations to emerge that are independent of the conventional procession of art historical narratives and groupings. And two, that it is possible, indeed rewarding, to perform such a reading of Warhol's art across the shared grounds of history, theory, and criticism; that we gain more than we lose by linking theory and criticism to real history to generate new grounded understandings of, in this case, one of the 20th century’s most influential artists.
Chapter 4: 
Reclaiming Vitality: Ana Mendieta in the Late Postwar

“The USA from afar,” wrote Ana Mendieta on a postcard from Rome in 1984, “seems like the oppressor I felt from within. It's good to get a little air.”

The card’s recipient, the art critic and historian Judith Wilson, had written an article four years earlier on Mendieta in The Village Voice. The piece opened with an account of Mendieta speaking to students at the School of Visual Arts in New York. One student had apparently asked about political oppression in Mendieta’s home country, Cuba. As Wilson recounts, Mendieta demurred “by asserting that most Americans are at a ‘goo-goo stage of consciousness’ about freedom.” “Several students,” Wilson reports, “walked out of the room.”

In another postcard, this one to her friend Sherry Buckberrough (also an art historian and curator), Mendieta signed off: “All is well otherwise except the State Department still hasn’t answered about my pending trip for next Friday to Cuba. (It’s like mind torture). Love, Ana.”

A running theme through these citations is Mendieta’s vexed relationship with the United States, her sense of exasperation at not just the dominant culture of her adopted country, but of the actual bureaucratic control it exerted over her life. This chapter explores Ana Mendieta’s work in the context of her relationship to Cold War political and state structures as well as to certain postwar art world forces, identifying in her art and writings a politically inflected critique of postwar U.S. attitudes toward life that expands on those which have been the running theme of this dissertation. Key to this critique will be
Mendieta’s approach to particular ideas of nature, history, and progress, which, with a greater emphasis on colonial history and a broader view of Cold War political thought, either elaborated on or outright broke from those of her postwar U.S. art peers and predecessors. Through this reading we will come to see Mendieta as a third generation voice within the postwar U.S. canon, an artist who challenged this canon on how it relates to place, time, and historicity while also working to rescue a notion of “vitality” for the avant-garde. From her work and writing in Iowa, New York, Oaxaca, and in Cuba, I will explore how she offered alternative paradigms for the operations of the artist in the postwar ‘American’ landscape particularly within the framework of vitality as discussed in this dissertation. In the process, we will see Mendieta as moving beyond pure critique in an attempt to extricate and reclaim a concept of life that had been persistently exploited by the postwar Atomic Age discourses of her adopted country.

“In my work,” Mendieta explained to Joan Marter just months before her early death, “I’m revitalizing nature in a different way.” This simple statement sets the stage for us as we begin to understand her incisive challenge to the crisis of vitality that I have discussed in this dissertation, both within the specific conditions of postwar U.S. art as well as in the broader cultural and socio-political landscape in which it operated. By itself, the notion of “revitalizing” implies the recognition of a loss of vitality, with her statement suggesting an implicit understanding of the natural as having been under attack or on the point
of dying off. When Mendieta claims she is “revitalizing nature in a different way,” she does so in the context of critiquing the dominance and violence of what she identifies as a techno-imperialist spirit in mainstream U.S. culture, as well as the way that attitudes toward life and nature had been in flux among her peers of the postwar U.S. avant-garde. In some cases, this latter attitude manifested itself in a clearly negative way. In the same interview with Marter, she took aim at Robert Smithson’s attitude toward nature and suggested it reflected that of the dominant culture. “He brutalized nature,” she said of Smithson, “he used it.”

For Mendieta, this perceived brutalization aligned the practice of many so-called Land and Earth artists (with whom she was often associated) with the dark side of, in her words, the “industrial spirit.” On the other hand, Mendieta oriented the “spirit” of her work in a rather different way as operating between alternate registers of time, history and progress, insisting instead on a “human scale” and a “connection with the Paleolithic.”

It is important to understand Mendieta’s claim to the “Paleolithic” spirit—along with her appropriation of and influence by modes of cultural production outside of the U.S.-centric ‘Modernist’ or ‘Post-modernist’ traditions in which she was trained as an artist—as being made in the context of, on the one hand, the time and place in which she lived and, on the other, the marginalized histories to which she connected herself through her work and writing. Far from an abstract appeal to some other side of historical time, her adoption of the ‘Paleolithic spirit’ was decisively performed through the lens of her own understanding of the
contemporary state of politics, culture, and technology, particularly since the end of WWII and since she was forced to emigrate to the United States as a Cold War refugee in 1961. In a way, the historical moment of Mendieta’s dislocation, when the threat of all out nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union was so palpably felt as a real possibility in the wake of the Cuban revolution, is like a bookend to the Paleolithic, encompassing a full circle of ideas and conditions introduced by the phenomenon of man-made human extinction. An alignment with the Paleolithic serves not just as counter-identification against the violence exerted by a dominant “industrial spirit” of her adopted country, but also in fact as a new reckoning with that violence through an appeal to the temporal register of history’s first, primordial moments of man-made extinction.300 “I believe,” Mendieta wrote, “that much in the same way that the unconscious affects instinctual residues in man, civilization emerges as the gathering and use of past experiences, more or less done in an intuitive way.”301 Thus this accumulative, long view of history that Mendieta articulated should be taken together with one of the central preoccupations of her work, namely the recurrent impulse throughout human history, beginning in the ancient times, to cause, in her words, “the extinction of whole cultures and peoples.”302 These events, or events of resistance to them, are the markers with which Mendieta seemed to plot the historical movement of humankind, and by insisting that these moments are the primary pillars of history, she frames the foundational ideas on which her historically inflected art is built.303 It is a concern that covers
her appeals to different historical and temporal registers at different moments of her practice, from her claim to a “Paleolithic” spirit, to her engagement with cultural forms and architectural spaces of particular colonized (and now extinct) civilizations such as the Zapotec in Oaxaca and the Taino in Cuba, to, finally, in the context of her contemporary moment, her incisive criticisms of the U.S. culture’s dominant misbegotten ideas of life that were inflected by the realities or potentialities of a nuclear armed world. Each of these cases represents a moment in history in which the very act of history-making is pushed into crisis by the need to externalize and make intelligible acts of (or impulses toward) mass exterminatory violence, erasure, and human induced extinctions of other human cultures. The events that surrounded and precipitated Mendieta’s own dislocation in 1961, when the United States and the Soviet Union brought themselves very close to nuclear extinction that would have surely first and foremost destroyed Cuba, was precisely one of those moments, albeit one with the added dimension of not actually having to occur in order to be activated as such.

Mendieta’s simultaneous hostility toward the “industrial spirit” and claim to the “Paleolithic” underwrote, then, an up-to-date political critique of the United States in the postwar period as a neo-colonial, nuclear armed power that tended, after the Second World War, to replace, again in her words, “open brutal violence” with “modern techniques” that were meant to “uproot the culture of the people to be exploited” under a guise of “progress” understood to be deeply
ideological. Mendieta suggests how the contours of the situation had changed so dramatically after WWII that history no longer required an event of outright mass extermination to initiate the crises of history-making that were perhaps previously unique to those events. The erasure was occurring at new speeds and through new technologically mediated channels. “Culture is a historical phenomenon that evolves at the same level as society,” she stated “and that is the problem we are facing today. To establish its empire over nature, it has been necessary for man to dominate other men, and to treat part of humanity like objects. Western civilization’s most pervasive task has been the spread of technology and its claim to culture seems to be devoted to the assimilation of technology.”

This quote is also important for how it represents Mendieta’s expanded understanding of the concept of ‘nature’ that I would like to keep in mind throughout this chapter, one that is specifically linked to ideas of emancipation and unbridled political and cultural life.

Culture, playing itself out both conceptually and materially, was, for Mendieta, the battleground of postwar neo-colonialism, and she expressly framed this struggle in the context of life: “The struggle for life today is the cultural war.” Gloria Moure expands on these positions, writing how for Mendieta “It was clear that in third world countries, former direct violence had been replaced by technological and cultural predominance, as these were far more productive and effective weapons of subjection. In [Mendieta’s] own words, the strategy was to ‘simplify, destroy and trivialize, so as to impose a
lifestyle.\textsuperscript{309} In Mendieta's view, moreover, it was not simply within “third world countries” that this struggle was playing out; the culturally demarcated bounds of this struggle were acutely represented within the United States itself. She once told a group of people gathered at the New Museum in New York “I feel that the very fact that you are here today is proof that there is another culture aside from the ruling class culture.”\textsuperscript{310} In a more incisive way, she wrote how “the ruling class in the US pushes to paralyze the social development of man in an effort to have all of society identify with and serve their own interests,”\textsuperscript{311} which not only draws the lines of this struggle within the U.S. but also interestingly points to how Mendieta placed the debates around spectacle society from the 1960s squarely within a colonial framework.

Mendieta’s appeals to the specific histories and pre-histories of groups who experienced extinctionary violence served as an alternative source of power and reference from those of the ‘dominant’ forces in her postwar U.S. art milieu, and she used these associations to break away from the parameters of art and life that mainstream forces prescribed. For Mendieta, of course, the ability of neo-colonial structures to impose a lifestyle, or in fact to control the trajectory of life, was no mere abstraction. Twenty-three years before describing her interaction with the U.S. State Department as “mind torture,” it was that same state apparatus that, in the midst of their crumbling colonial relationship with Cuba, precipitated her relocation against her will from her home on the island to a makeshift refugee camp housed in a dilapidated mental institution in
Kendall, Florida outside Miami.\textsuperscript{312} The year was 1961; she was twelve years old, without her parents, and spoke no English. The move marked a dramatic shift in fortunes for Mendieta, who had up to then lived a privileged, upper class life in Cuba.\textsuperscript{313} At the beginning of the 1960s, the Cold War completely uprooted her life.

"I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette)," wrote Mendieta of perhaps her most famous body of works, the Siluetas (c. 1973 – 1980), "I believe this to be a direct result of my having been torn away from my homeland during my adolescence."\textsuperscript{314} By explicitly tying her Siluetas to this history, she opens up a means by which we can situate these works and others within the legacies of the Cold War and its postwar art and visual cultures.\textsuperscript{315} She made her Siluetas against the backdrop of a profound preoccupation with the theme of life (and death) that was mediated by her own experience of nuclear conditioned neo-colonial disruption, using this experience as a point of reference in her exploration of how the politics and ideologies of the Cold War in the United States constituted a unique threat to life and culture at the same time as it significantly altered the parameters of postwar visuality and avant-garde practice. By adopting the "silhouette" as the most prominent and recurring image of her work, she employed a form that itself has decisive postwar nuclear age roots as the powerful and mystifying symbol of the after-effect of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As early as 1946, John Hersey’s widely read
articles on Hiroshima reported to U.S. audiences how “consequently the bomb had, in some places, left prints of the shadows that had been cast by its light… A few vague human silhouettes were found, and these gave rise to stories that eventually included fancy and precise details.” These silhouettes became dark emblems of the unprecedented dimensions of the destructive nuclear technology and the new parameters of atomic age visuality that they opened up, with Paul Virilio eventually labeling them “the 'human negatives' of the atomic age.” I will return to Virilio more below; here I just want to draw attention to how little Mendieta’s Siluetas have been considered within a post-Hiroshima or post-atomic framework, even as the themes and language of the two discourses display so much overlay, particularly as the silhouette is expanded into the terrains of the “trace” or how it tested in various ways the limits or parameters of visibility. The conceptual and linguistic frameworks of exhibitions, articles, and scholarly studies on Mendieta (e.g. “Unseen Mendieta,” “Ana Mendieta: Traces,” “Afterimages by Ana Mendieta,” “Tracing Ana Mendieta,” “Displacement: Traces of Ana Mendieta,” “Tracing Mendieta,” “Beyond the Threshold”) share obvious rhetorical and thematic similarities with post-atomic and ‘Hiroshima’ discourses in works like Virilio’s War and Cinema as well as others like Lisa Yoneyama’s “Hiroshima Traces,” Akira Lippit’s “An Atomic Trace,” Kyo Maclear’s “The Limits of Vision” and so on.

Unlike Robert Morris and Andy Warhol, who to varying extents displayed an explicit concern regarding the consequential presence of nuclear weapons
and military technology within U.S. culture and politics, the archive does not paint a picture of Mendieta as overly preoccupied with nuclear issue in the same way. However, through her combination of an aesthetics of violence, disappearance, and absence in her *Siluetas*, in her persistent reflection on modes of extinction, in her profound preoccupation with how the ideas of nature, life, and politics intersected each other, and in her critical attitudes regarding the relationship between postwar technology, culture, and U.S. imperial attitudes, we will see Mendieta furthering a critical Atomic Age discourse into the new terrains of the late postwar period. In this sense she is a compelling heir within the postwar U.S. art cannon to the likes of Warhol and Morris as they have been discussed in this dissertation. But where, for example, Robert Morris for the most part both represented and pointed to a concept of culture that was effectively monolithic and homogeneous, equally projected in the likely direction of an apocalyptic fate, Mendieta displayed a far more nuanced view of *cultures*, cultures in which groups exerted dominance over others, in which political violence and colonial forms persisted within the postwar era, in which threats and emancipation did not touch all groups equally, and in which resistance could be formulated in the context of marginalized constituencies expressing themselves as Other.  

Within that context, this chapter explores how Mendieta offers a new paradigm for thinking through how the postwar U.S. art cannon could interact with life and with nature in the context of the political. Mendieta, coming to prominence more than ten years after Warhol and Morris, carried
forward a critique of U.S. power as well as of other dominant strands of postwar U.S. art up to that point. As such, Mendieta’s work, focusing on a vast cross-sections that touched on life, nature, politics, history, and technology (among other themes), and being itself so heavily inflected by downstream effects of the Cold War, is critical to the archive of the U.S. avant-garde as it developed in the nuclear era, helping us to develop richer (art historical) narratives as to what did or did not give United States culture its vitality.

In August of 1974, Mendieta was at Yágul, an archeological site of Zapotec temples and civic structures outside of Oaxaca, Mexico. It was her second summer in a row there. The year before, she had begun the prolific Silueta series, in which, over the course of seven years, she would inscribe her body’s trace into diverse landscapes using different methods and materials (such as sand, snow, animal blood, fire, flowers, and gunpowder). For First Silueta or Imagen de Yagul (1973), she lay down in an open tomb at Yágul, covered herself with flowers that she had bought earlier at a market, and was photographed by Hans Breder. “The analogy,” she explained about First Silueta, “was I was covered by time and history.” The next summer she returned to Yágul to make Silueta del Laberinto (1974), a pivotal early work in the Silueta series in which for the first time Mendieta removed her body altogether from the artwork, leaving only its trace. This removal set the stage for the bulk of the series as Mendieta continued in this way over the next six years.
Silueta del Laberinto (1974) survives on a silent color super-8 film and in photographic stills that show the shadowed crimson mark of a body inscribed into a courtyard like space within the old Zapotec structure. In one photograph, beyond the roofless inner courtyard and its surrounding hallways and antechambers, we see a mountain landscape in the background. A cloudy gray sky hangs over the scene. The figure in the center of the courtyard is traced with its arms spread wide, and a strange flare disrupts the left hand. It is as if a body in the sky, among the clouds, dressed in a loose garment, casts its shadow into the center of the courtyard. But the picture’s ground-to-clouds perspective makes clear there is no body; between sky and shadow there is nothing. In this first Silueta in which Mendieta removed her actual body completely, she also seemed to make every other effort to emphasize that it is a silhouette without a body, the ghostly index of an absence or disappearance that resounds in the multiple historical registers that are implied by the gesture in context, from “Paleolithic” to pre-Columbian to her own Cold War dislocation (as, in her words, the Siluetas being finally “a direct result of having been torn away from my homeland”). Over the next two years, Mendieta returned to Yágul to expand the series within the same civic complex. In Siluetas Muertas del Laberinto (1976), for example, she traced her figures in slight relief with an apparent plaster like material, positioning them, contrary to the 1974 piece, tightly in corners or upright against walls. The 1976 figures do not maintain their bodily integrity; they are cut off just below the neck and shoulders and use the natural cracks in the
ground to affect a kind of disintegration. They fade into the worn surfaces of the old site, gradually becoming indistinguishable from the colored stone and the ground spattered in sienna and green. On the one hand, these qualities make the figures feel old, like fossils of silhouettes partially petrified into the stone, their ‘archeological’ surroundings imbuing them with an extra sense of age and ruin. But again that sense collides with another, that these *siluetas* are contemporary, caught off guard and out of place within the old site. There is something keeping them from being fully integrated into the ruins, something about the plaster-like material that reinforces them as uncanny additions, cornered, caught, and frozen. The effect is similar in *Silueta del Laberinto* (1974), where the figure, which was in fact traced on the ground with animal blood bought from a butcher in Oaxaca, has a shimmering color whose freshness contrasts against the worn stone around it.

In any case, what is certain is how, over an extended period of years, Mendieta populated the archeological trace of an erased civilization with shadows suggestive of a particular kind of violence, one that is in many ways “atmospheric” to borrow from Frantz Fanon, and “rippling under the skin.” For Mendieta, it appears to be a violence informed by the sense of (colonial) extinction that links the different historical moments to which she appeals, ending finally in an Atomic Age shadow that finds direct corollaries in the after effects of an atomic attack. The multiple time signatures of the works that these details affect, volleying back and forth between pre-historical and pre-
Columbian, conquistador, colonial, and finally, contemporary history, is suggestive of a certain expansiveness in Mendieta’s attitude and approach toward time, history, art, and technology. Mendieta’s Yáguil Siluetas seem at once to localize and make universal certain patterns of disappearance or erasure, threading them through and within pre-political states of nature, imperial histories, and the Cold War. But all these histories are filtered through Mendieta’s hyper-present, the moment of the mark making, and thus are coordinated within what is in a sense the latest historical situation, being, again, a direct result, in Mendieta’s own words, of the nuclear age upheaval that dispossessed her of her home. This non-linear yet still specific approach to historical time is not unlike an idea that Ken Cooper develops in a discussion of Leslie Marmon Silko’s contemporaneous novel Ceremony (1977), where Silko takes up the Native American relationship to nuclear testing sites in the United States that often occurred on or in proximity to Native American lands. Through an analysis of Ceremony, Cooper suggests how Silko “situates nuclear colonialism within a more comprehensive, frequently prophetic narrative that is centuries old,” and that Silko “constantly reaffirms the connectedness of this world and unseen others,” from an “explicitly Native American perspective.”327 Borrowing from Cooper’s conclusions, Mendieta’s critical approach would seems to share something with Silko’s, where at Yáguil she inflected her own ‘explicitly’ “other” nuclear-inflected history328 with “unseen” and “centuries old” colonial narratives in an attempt to develop a more rich exploration of the
problematic of her own contemporary moment, connecting the histories of the Cold War to the histories of colonial erasure through the charged poetics of the silhouette.

The Yáguil Siluetas first of all existed as they were produced, as physical in-situ inscriptions that had been planned and executed with a timely precision. Mendieta reportedly had to make, for example, the 1974 Silueta del Laberinto (Labyrinth Blood Imprint), very quickly, “as this ceremonial site was patrolled by a guard who, according to [Hans] Breder, quickly swept away the evidence of it having existed.” Thus, after a short life of a matter of minutes or hours, the silhouette, itself a dialectical index of presence and absence, was erased. Breder’s account of the security guard and the work’s covert production conjures an image not readily associated with Mendieta, but that fits well with a certain rebel persona she maintained: that of a graffiti artist in whose mark is reclaimed certain notions of violation, effacement, or violence performed in an inverted mode of trespass and criminality. Interestingly, other examples in the postwar U.S. art canon have been explored using this framework. In the context of the marks of Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly, for example, Rosalind Krauss writes of graffiti, noting how “the formal character of the graffito is that of a violation, the trespass onto a space that is not the graffitist’s own, the desecration of a field originally consecrated to another purpose, the effacement of that purpose through the act of dirtying, smearing, scarring, jabbing.” Krauss’s formulation is in the context of a progression of modernist modes of painterly artistic
production, but, when their historical scope is expanded, they are in fact very adaptable to Mendieta and her Yágul Siluetas. Mendieta’s gesture is not often considered one of trespass or desecration; quite the contrary, her Siluetas in Mexico, as early works, are more often framed as leading to “the emergence of rebirth and regeneration as central themes in her art,” with Mexico as a site framed more generally (and backed to some extent by her own statements) as in someway belonging to her—as a “surrogate homeland” that Mendieta used as a stand-in for Cuba. However, the graffitist framework is provocative, and, especially in light of Breder’s account above, relevant, for considering Mendieta’s Siluetas as marks of trespass within “a field originally consecrated to another purpose.”

The figure of the graffitist artist is necessarily a figure of protest, of covert criminality, one outside of, against, or not accepted by the ‘civilized’ orders of power and authority. In this context it is worth noting that Mendieta, asserting how her “art comes out of rage and displacement,” assured one interlocutor: “I know if I had not discovered art, I would have been a criminal.” A certain idea of graffitist artists has them flaunting their criminality in the face of an established power; they tag spaces of authority with their own encrypted names or slogans (or, in Mendieta’s case, the mark of her own body), disturbing or exposing the grounds of that authority and, along with it, the logic of the ‘civilized’ as such. Within the colonial history of Latin America, even as far back as the first half of the 19th century, dissidents used graffiti as a means of resisting the hegemony
of European values over the very idea of “civilization.” Thus this framework of the graffitist creates an intriguing means of aligning Mendieta’s own gesture with certain historical forms of resistance that sought to depose the conceptual and material hegemony of “civilization” itself in the context of anti-imperial struggle. This is a concept that, in the context of post-revolutionary Cuban thought, forms one of the pillars of Robert Fernández Retamar’s influential essay *Caliban*, which, as I demonstrate further down, Mendieta certainly read.

The framework of the graffitist is thus useful in thinking about the *Siluetas* for the combined sense of protest, violation, and violence it embeds in the mark, positioning the mark’s logic as existing within a state of crisis or rupture (the graffitist’s mark, as an essential mark of protest, makes little sense without or outside of such a state). Within that, it can also help us elaborate on the complicated posture the *Siluetas* take toward presence and historical time. Krauss writes:

The graffitist goes up to a wall. He [sic] makes a mark. We could say that he makes it to register his presence, to intervene in the space of another in order to strike against it with his declaration, “I am here.” But we would be wrong to say this. Insofar as his declaration is a mark, it is inevitably structured by the moment *after* its making that even now infects the time of its making, the future moment that makes of its making nothing else than a past, a past that reads “I was here.” Thus even at the time the marker strikes, he strikes in a tense that is over; entering the scene as a criminal, he understands that the mark he makes can only take the form of a clue. He delivers his mark over to a future that will be carried on without his presence, and in so doing his mark cuts his presence away from himself, dividing it from within into a before and an after.
This citation, made in reference to Pollock and Twombly, is uncannily adaptable to Mendieta’s work, particularly at Yagul, where she entered the ceremonial ruins as a “criminal” and where her Siluetas, as they were produced in-situ, could “only take the form of a clue.” As “clues,” the Yagul silhouettes serve as indexes to multiple registers of having-been, multiple pasts in which, for example, Mendieta “was here” and in which Zapotec culture “was here,” but also, based on Mendieta’s statement about the origin of the Siluetas, of Mendieta having been in Cuba, or of Cuba, her home, having been politically upended. Krauss’s plunge into the micro temporal registers of the graffitist’s mark suggests how instability is endemic to it; how the mark can never have a present, how it always exists in a state of expiration, in a tense that is “over.” The description points to the graffitist mark as an essential expression of resistance within rupture, one brought about both by its essentially expired time signature, its status as a “clue,” and, at the same time, its elevation and sanctification of a mode of production against “civilization.” The internal divisions (“his mark cuts his presence away from himself”) that Krauss points to as producing a “before and an after” are epitomized by the trace, and they can help us understand how Mendieta’s Siluetas are emblematic of many historical befores and afters (of a time when that site was populated by its Zapotec creators, and a time when it was not; of a time when Mendieta was there, and of when she was not; of a time before the Bay of Pigs invasion, and a time after it, etc), all of which are strung together to create a long interrelated state of rupture
that, in their interconnectedness, can begin to bear down on the contemporary moment.

There is, in any case, an agility to the graffitist’s mark to make meaning within a state of rupture; its inherently divisionary quality “infests” the ability of the mark to thrive within a state of instability, and Mendieta exploits this to great effect. Adding further complexity to Mendieta’s Yagul Siluetas is the fact that, in the immediate wake of their production, before being swept away, they served as centerpieces for the photographs and films that constitute the works’ primary formal existence within Mendieta’s extended archive. These form a further temporal register of the works, projecting them, through a cinematographic archive, into the future. And lest we see these films as mere documentaries of original works, it is important to note Mendieta’s continued manipulation of the work after travelling back from Oaxaca. In some cases, for example, once back in Iowa she conducted lab-experimentations with the films, often involving videotape transfers, to produce altogether new works. As the original film documentation became the last trace of the original silhouette, Mendieta’s experimentations with videotape transfers bear witness to an even further extension of the pieces in their technological scope, expanding in turn the interpretive parameters of the act of inscription from the original Silueta. For example, in 1975 Mendieta experimented with films she had made in Yágul the year before, most notably by manipulating the processing method of a 16mm film that documented a work titled Burial Pyramid executed at the same site and
on the same trip as *Silueta del Laberinto* in 1974. The result was a separate film entitled *Yaagul* that has never been exhibited publicly.\(^3\) To make *Yaagul*, she ran the original film through technical processing equipment at the University of Iowa, where she was an MFA candidate at the time, in order to “break down visual information into 16 channels through which color could be manipulated,” a technology which “was also used for ‘false color’ displays, such as infrared and X-ray, in scientific and industrial fields.”\(^4\)

The retroactive application of simulated medical (X-ray) and military (infrared) imaging technology onto the cinematic representations of her *Siluetas* is a fascinating yet largely untold detail in the interpretive framework of the early works.\(^3\) On one 16-mm reel in Mendieta’s film archive labeled “Multiples” from 1975, the experimental *Yaagul* film appears next to two others made in Iowa, *Energy Charge* and *Source*. The “Multiples” reel encapsulates the full scale of Mendieta’s simultaneous investigations into the early *Siluetas* as both the traces as they are popularly known and, at the same time, an advanced cinematic practice exploring the silhouettes through highly mediated, postwar, televisual modes of seeing. The results transformed one film, *Energy Charge* (1975), into a field of infrared vision in which Mendieta’s figure is revealed mid-way through the cut in bright red against a dark tree by an effect that mimics heat-sensored night vision. In another, *Source* (1975), a close-up shot of a lactating breast is transformed into an inverted, X-ray like image. Mendieta continued these experiments throughout 1975 not only in the three films mentioned above, but in
other film works such as *Butterfly* and *Butterfly (2)*, which use a similar posterizing process to that in *Energy Charge*, *Source*, and *Yaagul*, and in *X-ray*, in which she used the University’s cinefluorography unit to make an actual moving X-ray film of her own skull.340

Studying these experiments helps to place Mendieta more squarely within a lineage of postwar artists who were preoccupied with combining technological modes of seeing with the silhouette as an inflected atomic age form. This speculative lineage could encompass a diverse group of artists who are otherwise not often grouped together, from the experimental photographic and film work of Japanese artists such as Eikoh Hosoe and Jun Morinaga, to Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil’s experimental photo exposure portraits, Yves Klein’s *Anthropometries* (including one titled *Hiroshima*), Francesca Woodman’s photography, or, more recently, elin o’Hara slavick’s light engravings (a collection titled “After Hiroshima”), among many other examples. In each case, to varying extents, the artists allude to the photographic effect of the atomic bombs that occurred in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, graphing a technologically inflected visuality onto silhouetted bodies and objects, many of which are cast in blue, a significant color in the visual legacy of the atomic bomb.342 In each case, as in Mendieta’s film experiments that I explored above, the thresholds of what is visible, the interplay between interiority and exteriority, and the aesthetics of (dis)appearance are all to varying degrees at stake.
Paul Virilio was one of the first theorists to explore the significance of the postwar silhouette, or what, as I cited above, he called “the ‘human negatives’ of the atomic age,” within the context of post-nuclear techno-cinematic vision. He writes a description of the effects of the first atomic bomb on its victims in Hiroshima that uncannily fits Mendieta’s Yácul inscriptions: “it left its imprint on stone walls, changing their apparent color through the fusion of certain minerals. [...] The Japanese shadows are inscribed not, as in former times, on the screens of a shadow puppet theatre but on a new screen, the walls of the city.” Virilio’s description echoes John Hersey’s earlier 1946 report: “The scientists noticed that the flash of the bomb had discolored concrete to a light reddish tint, had scaled off the surface of granite, and had scorched certain other types of building material.” As in both Hersey and Virilio’s description, Mendieta’s Oaxaca silhouettes appear as discolored shadows imprinted on the walls and surfaces of a city, Yácul. Her siluetas become traces of casualties, both contemporary and ‘timeless’ but always essentially ‘postwar.’ They are “dead silhouettes” (Siluetas Muertas as she titled some), produced in a mode of covert, subversive criminality and placed at the center of a labyrinth of “time and history” through which inevitably the histories of imperial violence echo. She then subjected this already complicated form to techno-televisual experimentations, pushing further still the limits of their conventional visibility. Her Siluetas thus became double investigations into the avisual body, the post-atomic body that is, to use film theorist Akira Lippit simple description, “there
and not there,” the body whose interiority is on the outside, who registers at a threshold of visibility and intelligibility that is somehow indicative of the body’s precarious position in the postwar landscape. They are the specters of invisibility that populate the necropolis, traces of bodies who were “forced to live in a compromise state of both life and death at the same time.” And, as being, in Mendieta’s words, the “result of having been torn from my homeland,” they are rooted by the artist in her personal experience of nuclear age history, making them, by extension, part of the archive of the “proliferation of concrete and abstract, literal and figurative tropes of invisibility that move toward the atomic referent.”

Indeed, traced directly from her own likeness, the figures at Yágul were also indisputably signs of Mendieta herself, marks of her sustained presence in and disappearance from the contested spaces in which she operated. The Yágul works, the repetition of her body’s imprint in different scenarios over a matter of years within the same civic ruins, exemplify Mendieta’s description of the Siluetas series as “carrying on a dialogue.” What we can ask in greater detail is what it means for that dialogue to be, as Mendieta herself described it, “a direct result of my having been torn away from my homeland during my adolescence.” For as we’ve already remarked, Mendieta’s homeland was Cuba and by “having been torn away” she refers to her forced emigration to the United States as an unaccompanied minor in 1961. The outlines of this story recur frequently within the Mendieta literature, with the artist herself often referencing
this upheaval in statements and interviews as having had a significant impact on her work. But we can do more to unpack Mendieta’s claim, to understand how the complexities of her Yagul Siluetas, for example, could be informed or inflected by her experience as a Cold War refugee. Understanding these marks, her traces, as heirs to a certain postwar state of rupture that leave clues as to the continued legacies of Atomic Age imperial attitudes and their visual cultures can, as suggested above, form one part of this effort. In a more material vein, it is moreover worthwhile to understand the intricacies of Operation Peter Pan, the program that brought Mendieta to the U.S., and its aftermath, in accounting for the ways it may have influenced or shaped Mendieta’s work as she insisted it did. The Mendieta literature’s tendency to simultaneously repeat this history while also gloss over it has in some cases had the effect of producing a general poetics of “exile” as a dominant interpretive tool vis-à-vis Mendieta’s work.\textsuperscript{349} This generality can obstruct the actual historical mechanics of that exile within the specific contexts in which it occurred, an obstruction that, as we will see, can risk reinforcing certain disciplinary biases within the Mendieta literature regarding both her work and her position in the postwar cannon.

In beginning to look at the mechanics and significance of Mendieta’s relocation, it is worth stating the obvious, to source the origin of her separation from her parents and her relocation to the U.S., a “devastating experience” in her words,\textsuperscript{350} in no uncertain terms to the Cold War. And while this is often specified as “the intensification of the U.S-Cuban political conflict in the wake of
the Bay of Pigs invasion,” we can remember that Cuba’s agency and posture came often at the expense of the broader conflict between the United States and Russia that in many ways was out of Cuba’s control. In any case, at twelve years old, Mendieta was a political Cold War refugee, one of some 14,048 unaccompanied Cuban children between the ages of 6 and 16 who, as part of Operation Peter Pan, were expatriated to the U.S. in the aftermath of the revolution. Once on U.S. soil, Mendieta came under a federal U.S. government program that coordinated a complex structure of care and “integration” of Cuban refugee children. The logic behind this program was, as we might expect, itself deeply ideological. In 1962, one year into Mendieta’s five years of living in foster homes and orphanages funded by this program, its director, Katherine Brownell Oettinger, chief of the Social Security Administration’s Children’s Bureau within what was then the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, issued a report on the “Services to Unaccompanied Cuban Refugee Children In the United States.” By way of introduction, she wrote:

The right of people to freedom of thought and religious belief has reverberated throughout our society from the days when the early settlers came to our shores to escape a tyranny that was intolerable. The refugees now coming to the United States from Cuba are, in many respects, following this tradition. They are seeking sanctuary because they find life under the present communistic regime impossible.

This introduction helps us frame right away certain aspects of the historical backdrop of this program. Oettinger’s rhetoric of “freedom” and “tyranny,” first
and foremost, as well as the idea of life being “impossible” under communism, situates even the bureaucratic reporting of this program squarely within U.S.-centric Cold War ideology. Mendieta herself would eventually come to criticize this rhetoric, deflecting, as we saw above, a question about political repression in Cuba to emphasize instead how “most Americans are at a ‘goo-goo stage of consciousness’ about freedom.”\(^{354}\) It is worth remembering that the impetus for the Cuban revolution was a struggle against the power and economic strong arming that the United States had exerted over “Our Cuban Colony” since the 19th century.\(^{355}\) In that sense, the rejection of U.S. imperialism that was so central to the Cuban revolution was very much like the U.S.’s own rejection of British “tyranny” which Oettinger refers to in the ideological framing of the report. Here the comparison becomes ironic because Oettinger cites the historical anti-colonial revolution against Britain in the formation of a historical “tradition” that is unwilling to see or accept the distinct similarities between the basis of that tradition and the basis of the Cuban revolution.\(^{356}\) It is worth noting further that the report’s suggestion of the ‘impossibility of life’ under communism marks the staying power of the rhetorical tradition of the postwar liberal establishment in the U.S. that repeatedly sought to position communism as the single greatest threat to life, displacing this threat away, for example, from violent tendencies in U.S. culture, or from a foreign policy of aggression and neo-imperialism backed by the world’s largest nuclear arsenal.\(^{357}\)
Indeed when the report, in the citation above, claims that they were “seeking sanctuary” from communism, the head of the Children’s Bureau imposes pro-U.S. political agency onto a group of children who in many instances were simply too young to be aware of the politics of the situation. Many never wanted to leave the island. Lucy Lippard, who was close to Mendieta, captures the full arc of this sentiment when she describes Mendieta’s “outrage at being ripped from a happy childhood within a privileged extended family in a warm Latin country and exiled to a hostile foreign orphanage and foster homes in the cold American Midwest, where she was treated with incomprehension and disdain.” Mendieta herself wrote in a diary in 1981, “When they uprooted me from my homeland, I felt as if I had sinned without really knowing what I had done to be separated from Cuba, the subconscious idea of having committed a sin gives me the tendency toward self-destruction.” In an interview from a year earlier, she put it this way: “to be taken away and sent to an orphanage—it was like punishing me. And I didn’t know what I’d done wrong. I feel my whole life has been directed by forces out of my control. Maybe it makes me want to take control more emphatically.”

As the children’s bureau report makes clear, the “forces” in the United States to which Mendieta refers that shaped her formative teenage years were neither abstractions nor coincidences. They consisted of a concerted effort directed by a U.S. federal agency that was imbued with the tensions of the Cold War and established against the backdrop of military conflict and nuclear
brinkmanship over Cuba. This is the historical context for when Mendieta links her *Siluetas* to “being torn away from my homeland.” The Children’s Bureau report itself walks a fine line between being consoling toward the child refugees and treating them as a threat. While displaying sympathy toward the children’s desire to escape “tyranny,” a desire which to some extent Oettinger imposes on the group, the report also rhetorically conflates the presence of child refugees with the nuclear threat itself, as when Oettinger describes the possibility of the dramatic increase in unaccompanied Cuban minors in the U.S. as “a problem that might be expected to *mushroom* to immense proportions within a very short period of time.” (my emphasis)\(^{361}\) The use of nuclear weapons imagery to describe the wave of unaccompanied child refugees shows, for one, the lengths at which this term was abused and disassociated from its direct Cold War source. But more than that, in this instance it is deployed rhetorically to construct the image of an invasion of non-white, non-English speaking orphans from a newly formed Left state, pointing to a racist and politically biased dimension of even the program’s best intentions. This contradiction was reflected in Mendieta’s own personal experience of the program; while it was supposedly created for the children’s benefit, her sister Raquel has described how, while under its care, Mendieta was the frequent recipient of racial slurs and put in abusive foster care situations. Mendieta herself recalled later on Cuban television: “since I look Latin, I was always ‘*la putica,*’ the little whore, to them.”\(^{362}\)
At many points, in fact, the 1962 report on Unaccompanied Cuban Child Refugees feels like an uncanny description Mendieta’s personal experience:

But the parents of many of the children are still in Cuba. Some are in prison because of political activity. …For children of such families, the need for care in the United States may stretch over a considerable period of time.

Children who become part of the community for a more prolonged time are soon expected to fit into the customs and patterns of life there. This can be a shattering experience—or it can be a broadening and exciting one, a source of permanent enrichment when the children do eventually return home. If their stay in the United States is to be a constructive experience, these children need specialized guidance of many kinds to help them find their way, including diagnostic evaluation of any special physical, mental, or emotional handicap.

A remarkable number [of unaccompanied Cuban children refugees] adjust to their new circumstances with relative ease, but others develop situational anxieties which might become chronic without professional help.¹³⁶³

Mendieta and her sister Raquel were five years in Iowa orphanages and foster homes before reuniting with their mother and younger brother there in 1966. Her father remained jailed in Cuba for seventeen years for his alleged involvement in the Bay of Pigs. In the institutional framing of the unaccompanied Cuban children’s experience, Oettinger always favors a best-case scenario, passing over the likely outcome of a “shattering experience” to privilege the idea of integration in the United States and its “patterns of life” as a “source of permanent enrichment.” But as Mendieta’s example and testimony suggests, Oettinger was perhaps overly optimistic. For those who do not adapt well, the Children’s Bureau calls for institutional efforts—“special guidance” and
“professional help”—to avoid “situational anxieties.” But these anxieties nevertheless developed in Mendieta and in many others; literary theorist Román de la Campa, who also came to the U.S. as a child under this program, claims “being a lone refugee was a traumatic experience for most of the children involved in Operation Peter Pan.”

Understanding the context of the Children’s Bureau program as that which collected the children who came from Operation Peter Pan, and pitting the institutional reporting of the program against Mendieta’s own experience living through it, allows us to rethink the mechanics of Mendieta’s early upheaval and its significance in how Mendieta constructed the critical narrative of her own life and work. It allows for a more substantive understanding of how Mendieta arrived at her ideas of “DECULTURATION”, which was, in her own words, a dominant means by which U.S. neocolonial strategy in the postwar period attempted “to uproot the culture of the people to be exploited.” These were among the ideas, framed explicitly as a “Struggle for Life,” that she developed in conjunction with her Siluetas. While reading these statements in context of the children’s report, my research here aims to provides a means by which we can move further away from an abstract or poetic idea of Mendieta as exile qua exile toward a historically grounded account of how an ideological state apparatus, conducting itself through a series of foster homes and orphanages, guided her first five years as an “exile” in the United States. In her important study on Mendieta, Jane Blocker has suggested that the emphasis on Mendieta’s exile by
critics, while ostensibly backed by her own statements, serves to amplify Mendieta’s alterity in a way that hinders critical appraisal by reinforcing certain hegemonic impulses within the U.S. critical establishment. “The obsessive concern with Mendieta’s exile,” writes Blocker, “appears to me to be a mask for a much deeper concern with the dangers that we all face in contemporary life as ‘border citizens.’ Beneath this focus on her dislocation lies an unspoken fear of our own.” Blocker’s point is strong for the way it identifies how “dislocation” is not necessarily dependent on place, how the battle for culture exists even, or particularly, within the circles of the dominant culture (“our own”), and for the sense in which mainstream attitudes, including those in the art world, in the U.S. had served to “mask” the agents of “deculturation.”

Edward Said once addressed a general tendency of western, postwar scholarship to ignore historical forces in this way, offering instead that “to see Others not as ontologically given but as historically constituted would be to erode the exclusivist biases we so often ascribe to cultures, not least our own.” Studying Mendieta’s removal from Cuba and relocation to the United States as “historically constituted” rather than inscribing her status as an exile as “ontologically given” creates an opening in the critical narrative; as Said says, “exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can therefore provide us with new narrative forms.” An Atomic Age (i.e. historically constituted) reading of Mendieta’s work has allowed us, for one, to explore her Siluetas as rooted in a specific nuclear inflected aesthetics. The recognition of a
graffitist element in her trace, moreover, opened up the work both to specific Cuban discourses (e.g. Retamar) that created serious fissures in the concept of “civilization” as it was constructed in the colonial context, as well as to other important strands of postwar art theory in the U.S. (e.g. Krauss). From this posture, moreover, we can better rethink and resituate her extension of the silhouettes into cinematic experimentations in the language of advanced medical (e.g. x-ray) and military (e.g. infra-red) technologies within a specific legacy of postwar, Atomic Age art and visual culture. These are examples of the potentially new “narrative forms” that can emerge in the Mendieta literature from a methodology that deprioritizes the “ontologically given” status of exile as such.

But just because the narratives benefit from being “historically situated” does not mean we cannot expand the horizons of that history. Mendieta’s description of her relocation from Cuba under the auspices of the federal Children’s Bureau program as being “punished” by “forces out of her control” can point to a much broader state of dislocation, upheaval and rupture that, as conditions of the new postwar environment in the U.S., were repressed by U.S. citizens in the postwar period. For Mendieta, this dislocation went hand in hand with the contradictory attitudes toward life that coursed through postwar Nuclear Age culture. She identifies, as we saw above, “films, radio and television” as the means by which “the ruling class in the US pushes to paralyze the social development of man in an effort to have all of society identify with and serve their own interests.”

She writes that these channels “idealize and propose
ways of lives and behavior with a vision of social reality and history that causes conformism and submission. [...] They banalize, mix, distort, and simply life.”

These positions point to Mendieta’s conviction that the ‘vitality’ which underwrote the formation of postwar national culture in the United States was not at all what it advertised itself to be, a point to which the previous chapters of this dissertation have attested through evidence of the thinness of organic “vital” forms in the arts as it related to the troubled rhetoric of “vitality” in U.S. social, political, and consumer discourses. In the year that Mendieta came to the United States, artists like Warhol and Morris were beginning to confront this environment by disavowing lively artistic forms to create a subversive, politically inflected blankness. While she certainly inherited these attitudes from the 1960s avant-garde, the power of Mendieta’s art is also rooted in its return to the vital, to a certain idea of liveliness, within the context of politics and visuality that marked a very different approach to life (and death) than those of her predecessors. Where the initial formation of postwar U.S. art in New York created a lively aesthetics that was happy to accept a position in the canon that remained mum on the realities of the postwar politics of life, Mendieta’s appeal to life elevated a politically inflected idea of nature precisely within the context of a critique of Cold War political and cultural structures. In the midst of a revival of expressionist painting that occurred in the 1980s, she once described in an interview with Eva Cockcroft how

It is one thing to have figurative art or pseudo expressionistic art— but for me, I judge a work of art from the gut. That work is gutless.
It may have an image that is expressionistic or whatever, but it’s superficial. There’s nothing behind it because we’re living in a sterilized, dehumanized society. I’ve been told that in English to speak about humanism carries a bad taste, at least as far as the philosophers are concerned. I guess, because “the Humanists” were not really humanist. But I do believe in human beings and I consider myself a humanist. That means that my work deals with the conditions of myself and other people.371

This perspective, with its no holds barred attitude, points to her work as attempting to resuscitate a genuine idea of life—of “guts,” of humanness—in the wake of that idea’s erosion within the complexity and contradictions of postwar U.S. culture, a culture that she experienced first hand as marginalizing and exploitative. Indeed, it is precisely those contradictions that required her to stage a confrontation with death, loss, and cultural extinction (most acutely through the dialectic of the Siluetas as traces oscillating between presence and absence) as means of “revitalizing” life. In a sense she turns the paradox of the vital in the postwar era on its head: while the initial postwar formation saw the U.S. usher in unprecedented threats to life (e.g. through a series of neocolonial wars backed by nuclear arsenals) under a banner of ubiquitous “vitality,” Mendieta staged a years long confrontation with death across diverse contested landscapes in order to “revitalize nature in a different way.” Seen in this way, it is as if she recognized the extent to which the concepts of “vitality” had been used in the postwar period to promote its opposite, not just in the form of post-nuclear violence but also in the increased economization of life and the social field, such that the modes of living in the U.S. were, contrary to the image they projected, in fact further and further removed from the “natural.” “It is true” she wrote, “that in
the past some developed capitalist countries projected the image of great cultural progress and achievement. However in these times such an image does not coincide with reality. That reality does not have today the force and spiritual richness it had 40, 50, 100 years ago." In her 'return' to nature through the lens of her own Cold War experience as well as her critique of neocolonial structures, Mendieta undercuts the “vital” grounds on which the United States projected its “great cultural progress and achievement.” By specifically pointing, in the 1980s, to “40, 50, 100 years ago,” she displays an acute awareness of the timeline, indicating her understanding of the rupture as occurring not just in the 20th century, but in tandem with the inauguration of the postwar era.

Again, as we've seen, in her own words, Mendieta is not only “opposed to the industrial spirit,” but, in her work, she is “revitalizing the idea of nature in a different way.” I already remarked how the very idea of “revitalizing” nature presupposed an understanding of the natural as having been under threat or killed off. This killing off, contextualized with the citations above and within the general thrust of the previous chapters, can be further specified as being traced to the ruptures that occurred at the dawn of the Atomic Age and its legacies in postwar United States, but also, through Mendieta's own experience, to the history of the new forms of colonialism as they manifested themselves in the postwar period. Mendieta's own forced removal from her home, as a direct result of political, Cold War conflict, which also had such an important role in the construction of the narrative around her work, was itself a downstream effect of
these ruptures. In a way, Mendieta brings late postwar U.S. avant-garde art in line with a tradition of U.S. thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, for whom in 1951 “the Cold War had to be understood in relation to centuries of colonial exploitation.”

And thus there is “more at stake,” as Jane Blocker notes, than John Perrault’s formulation that “the tragic sense of exile that informs [Mendieta’s] art work suggests the separateness from nature and spirit that is almost the definition of modern life,” to the extent that Mendieta’s work “also makes vivid the troubling inconstancy of all those origins through which we define ourselves.” Instead of looking for “a clear understanding of the relation between Mendieta’s art and her exile,” Blocker is interested in how Mendieta’s relationship to exile exhibits “both a level of experience that I believe made Mendieta aware of travel’s meanings and a profound anxiety on the part of critics about travel and exile generally.” Putting Blocker and Perreault’s ideas together opens up a way, again, to connect Mendieta to the underlying themes of this dissertation regarding the development of and confrontation with problematic attitudes toward “life” in the ‘postwar,’ nuclear-armed age. While certain critics read Mendieta’s work as a means of “establishing a ‘sense of being’” and a connection with nature as a kind of poetic expression of her perceived exile, my research has tried to better account for those moves within the specifics of that exile. That is, not simply as an exile as such, but as, in her words, a “Cuban-American,” as a Cold War refugee who, in the midst of
the Cuban revolution and her own family’s involvement in the Bay of Pigs invasion, was resettled in of all places Iowa (where, as Mendieta once reminded an interviewer, “they didn’t even know what avocados were”\textsuperscript{378}). 1961-62 was a pivotal historical moment that significantly dramatized the problematic ideas of life underwriting the neoliberal or neocolonial positions as those positions paved the way to U.S.’s failed Bay of Pigs invasion and the U.S.-Soviet nuclear missile crisis over Cuba. It was also a time in which the reckoning with such problematic attitudes began to materialize. Thus we can further specify Perreault’s identification of “modern industrial life” as the historical period in question to the heightened economization, politicization, and indeed exploitation of life that occurred in and by post-1945 U.S. policy under the umbrella of liberalism and the rhetoric of “vitality.” Where Perreault characterizes Mendieta’s work as unearthing an estrangement from “nature and spirit” engender by “modern industrial life,” we should thus also connect it to a critique of U.S. liberalism and “vitality” in the wake of the advent of nuclear weapons and the Cold War that I have developed throughout. As we remember, Michel Foucault maintained, in relation to \textit{Vitalpolitik}, that the postwar vital policy was precisely not concerned with “constructing a social fabric in which the individual would be in direct contact with nature.”\textsuperscript{379} Instead, it privileged a conceptualization of the individual as an “enterprise” in support of, in Foucault’s words, “what is cold, impassive, calculating, rational, and mechanical in the strictly economic game of competition.”\textsuperscript{380} (In a related vein, Derrida, in 1984, referred to the conditions
created by the nuclear issue under the revival of these attitudes under Reagan as “dissociation itself, the division and the dislocation of the socius, of socialty itself."\textsuperscript{381}) Foucault asks of postwar Vitalpolitik, “for what is private property if not an enterprise? What is a house if not an enterprise? …It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society.”\textsuperscript{382}

If that was true, if the initial dominant iteration of postwar life sought to reconfigure the formative power of society away from nature and the social toward privatization and “free enterprise,” Mendieta’s practice took up arms against this, drawing on an array of sources that pushed back decisively against the mainstream postwar consensus. She disputed the idea that the source of society’s power was in its domination and economization of nature and life, seeking instead a politics that communed with the natural in such a way as to reestablish, in her words, “an emotional, sexual, biological affirmation of being.”\textsuperscript{383} Mendieta’s desire to ‘affirm being’ presupposes the recognition on her part of an ontological crisis underway within the politico-cultural milieus that she encountered in the United States, whether being met with racism and bewilderment in Iowa in the early 1960s, or whether, later, in her struggle with systemic social prejudices within even what were supposed to be the friendly circles of feminist artists in New York.\textsuperscript{384} Mendieta’s attitude toward nature suggests the ways in which her reverence to it clearly spills out into the political to become a cornerstone in how she conceptualized debates within Cold War
culture. Using a variety of methods and strategies, she critiqued the mainstream postwar U.S. ontological conditions as racist, exploitative, and influenced by the destructive tendencies of technological progress, situating her work within certain strands of postwar nuclear discourse. “What our most advanced technological societies have done today,” she said in a 1981 lecture at Alfred State University in New York, “is that they have almost destroyed nature by imposing technology upon it. Now, I am not against technology, but I’m against abuse.”

She followed this kind of criticism up by developing a practice in which she quite literally (re)inscribed herself into nature, often drawing (albeit selectively) on the legends and traditions of a homeland of which she was dispossessed by Cold War geopolitics. In 1981, for example, she used one of her late gunpowder Siluetas to illustrate an account of the Cuban legend of the Venus Negra, a story, in Mendieta’s reproduction, of a nineteenth century “young Black woman” who, through “passive protests” against colonists, won her right to live freely in Cayo Loco, a key off the southern coast of Cuba. For Mendieta, the Black Venus “represents the affirmation of a free and natural being who refused to be colonized,” and with the image of Mendieta’s own bodily trace atop the text, she brings this discourse, through herself, into the present day discourse.

The context of Cuba is important in understanding how Mendieta was able to extricate herself from what are some of the confining aspects of other U.S. postwar artists who were critically preoccupied with political and cultural
issues in their art. Also ‘America’, Cuba offers an alternative site for this discussion, not simply as a foil to the hegemony of U.S. centric Atomic Age narratives, but for how Mendieta looked to the island on its own terms, finding there historical and aesthetic groundings for comparatively (re)approaching narratives of postwar life that were not of the United States. In a grant proposal for a planned book of drawings illustrating Tainan (indigenous Cuban) myths, she clearly framed the stakes: “In a matter of a few years due to the inequality of weapons, overpowered by hunger, sickness and hard labor and stripped of their national identity, the few survivors where [sic] rapidly assimilated by the conquistadors. From that tragic event little has been saved….“ Describing herself, moreover, as “Cuban American and cultural inheritor of the Tainan Culture,” she styled the planned book as a “collaboration” between herself and the “the ancient inhabitants of the Antilles.” There is an acknowledgement of a devastating loss and an attempt at some kind of recovery that, when seen in the broader context of Mendieta’s more contemporary political views, insists on the insertion of the context of Cuba’s colonial history (and that of Latin America more broadly) into Cold War political discourse in a way that was not necessarily in vogue in the United States at the time.

As I have already suggested, Mendieta’s relationship to Cuba provides a lens through which we can look at Mendieta’s art at the intersection of what Ken Cooper calls “the racial history and latent cultural myths of the Atomic Age.” In
1980, for example, she co-curated the exhibition titled “Dialectics of Isolation” and in the introduction to the exhibition’s catalog, she wrote:

After World War II, the label Third World came into being in reference to the people of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The movement of Unaligned Nations was founded in 1961 with a meeting which took place in Belgrade. Their aims are to end colonialism, racism and exploitation. We of the Third World in the United States have the same concerns as the people of the Unaligned Nations. The white population of the United States, diverse, but of basic European stock, exterminated the indigenous civilization and put aside the Black as well as the other non-white cultures to create a homogenous male-dominated culture above the internal divergency.\textsuperscript{391}

On its face, this citation does much to clarify Mendieta’s insistence that the long history of colonial violence be included within the ideological struggles of the Cold War that had affected her life so profoundly. The text also extends the logic of the Cuban revolution to the disenfranchised groups within the United States itself. The influence of Cuban revolutionary thought within this statement is made abundantly clear when read next to Roberto Fernández Retamar’s essay \textit{Caliban}, first published in Cuba in 1971 and appearing in English in the U.S. in 1974, in which he wrote: “The white population of the United States (diverse, but of common European origin) exterminated the aboriginal population and thrust the black population aside [...].”\textsuperscript{392} This is just one instance in which Mendieta’s introduction to \textit{Dialectics of Isolation} plagiarizes Retamar’s important essay outright (he is not cited and the text is even signed “Ana Mendieta © 1980”). Whether Mendieta’s failure to properly attribute her text to Retamar’s was somehow tactical or simply ungenerous is difficult to say.\textsuperscript{393} That very curious
question aside, the ideas that Mendieta takes from Retamar are proof not only of the extent to which the underlying anti-colonialist theory of the Cuban revolution influenced her, but also of how she was intent on expanding this theory to attack a situation in the United States that she experienced first hand as neocolonial and racist.

For just one example of how she did this, we can consider the lead premise of *Caliban*, a story Retamar recounts in the essay’s introduction about how a “leftist” journalist startled him with the question “Does Latin American culture exist?” Retamar boils the question down to an even simpler formulation—“Do you exist?”—writing “For to question our culture is to question our very existence, our human reality itself, and thus to be willing to take a stand in favor of our irremediable colonial condition, since it suggests that we would be but a distorted echo of what occurs elsewhere. This elsewhere is of course the metropolis, the colonizing centers, whose ‘right wings’ have exploited us and whose supposed ‘left wings’ have pretended and continue to pretend to guide us with pious solicitude.” Looking from Retamar to Mendieta, we see how the logic and location of the *Dialectics of Isolation* exhibition and catalog, which took place at the A.I.R. gallery in New York City and in which Mendieta explicitly articulated a protest against “American Feminism as …a white middle class movement” that “failed to remember…non-white women,” fits neatly into Retamar’s formulation. In her introduction to *Dialectics of Isolation* Mendieta also asks “Do we exist?”; there, as in *Caliban*, colonial attitudes extend from the
metropolis (New York) and the disenfranchised find themselves perpetually under existential threat, even by what ought to be the safe company of the ‘left.’

Mendieta’s sensitivity in *Dialectics* to the postwar historical timeline is also important; she places specific markers on 1945 and 1961, years around which this dissertation pivots. This echoes earlier citations in which she referenced the situation of “40, 50, 100 years ago” as evidence of Mendieta’s repeated emphasis on the timeline and her understanding of how the state of rupture in which she enacts her critique is traced through the end of World War II. The full scope of her identification in *Dialectics* of the “white population of the United States” as a colonial power responsible for the extermination of “other non-white cultures” puts her critique squarely within not only a broader nuclear age discourse, but within the specific legacies of the bomb itself, which whether in Japan, in the United States, or in the South Pacific, have had an outsized effect on non-white or indigenous populations. Critics like Ken Cooper have explored the racial dimensions of the bomb’s legacy that can further inform our contextual understanding of Mendieta’s position. He reads racial codes in Truman’s statements like “We thank God that it has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His way and for His purposes,” extrapolating: “To put the matter bluntly, the bomb was built by people like me for the protection of people like me.” The United States’ relations with Cuba are certainly part of this story, a story that some have developed under the name “nuclear age colonialism.” A history of colonial
control dating back to the 19th century, followed by a revolution that sparked attempted coups, military standoffs and nuclear brinkmanship, embargoes, severing of diplomatic relations, the displacement of peoples, and deeply entrenched ideological impasses all come together to form the troubled trajectory of these two American neighbors’ relationship. Mendieta challenged the grounds of these ideological impasses through the questions she raised around postwar attitudes toward life and nature that were dominant in the U.S. artistic circles and in mainstream culture. This challenge often went hand in hand with Mendieta distancing herself from the various groups of postwar artists with whom critics otherwise associated her. While being acutely aware of the changing trends in postwar art, and indeed being often associated with post-minimalism, land/earth art, performance, and feminism, she herself often rejected such comparisons. In a written project proposal to Bard College in 1984, she drew these lines clearly in the context of attitudes toward nature. While the “Earthworks of the 1970’s [used] nature in its most literal sense,” Mendieta sought instead to reconnect to “nature’s symbolic meaning,” opposing her practice to “the modernist tradition, which…exploits physical properties and an enlarged scale of materials.” She also distanced herself from what she called “the commercially historical-self-conscious assertions of what is called post-modernism.” Instead of these, she explains her work as having “evolved dialectically in response to diverse landscapes as,” as I cited above, “an
emotional, sexual, biological affirmation of being." As such, being neither modern nor post-modern, she continues,

My art is grounded on the primordial accumulations, the unconscious urges that animate the world, not in an attempt to redeem the past, but rather in confrontation with the void, the orphanhood, the unbaptized earth of the beginning, the time that from within the earth looks upon us.

Much like her appeal to the ‘Paleolithic spirit,’ this shows how she performs her alignment with pre-historical registers of time squarely out of an oppositional posture vis-a-vis the debates that were swelling around her. The Bard College letter bares witness to the way Mendieta saw herself as rescuing the concepts of life and nature from positions of abuse, exploitation, and the agents of extinction, which together, “in the XX century,” had created a state of rupture that manifests itself in the form of a “void.” Through her complex approach to history and time, she roots her critique of a historically specific set of circumstances in a transcendence of history, a move geared toward reconnecting with nature within the super-accumulations of history and culture that had been threatened to the point of total extinction at multiple times throughout that history. When seen in context, her appeal to the “Paleolithic” or to “the unbaptized earth of the beginning” makes little sense unless it is understood as occurring within a very specific moment in time and history, within certain specific legacies of exploitation and abuse. This is an indication of one of Mendieta’s most important and most complicated contributions to postwar United States art; the way she relates to political and historical development that
both escapes the linear notion of time that defines many Atomic Age narratives while also remaining grounded within specific contexts of postwar U.S. violence and visuality. She looked backward and forward through time to formulate an alternative artistic language that challenged the various status quos of postwar U.S. art and culture up to that point. As I cited at the outset, she spurned a comparison between her and the Land Artists, singling out Robert Smithson in particular as propagating “a culture of working with nature,” saying “he brutalized nature. He used it.” In the same interview, when asked by Joan Marter if she felt any connection to performance artists, Mendieta replied:

No, not at all. Because my works have really been about trying to establish a dialogue between myself and nature [...] It was a way of really learning about myself, placing myself within a cultural structure. It’s been a very connected thing for me that I really had no homeland. To me, [what] nature represented [...] was outside the boundaries of culture. It was nature-culture with a human connection, not a structure put in place...in the sense of ‘culture’ meaning America [...] Setting aside the accuracy of Mendieta's appraisal of performance art as such, what is important is her emphasis on how the “dialog between myself and nature” had to nevertheless be placed within “a cultural structure,” a specific structure that had gone so far as to dispossessed her of her “homeland.” The natural, both perceived as under attack in the U.S. as well as being situated outside of history and “the boundaries of culture,” provided Mendieta with a framework to deal critically with the hegemonic attitudes of the United States. As she constructed it within the United States, she did everything she could so that it would be a framework not of the United States, distinguishing the maneuvers...
of her critical practice from many of her peers and predecessors within the postwar U.S. art canon.

The most significant and singular vehicle of Mendieta’s critical framework within her artistic oeuvre was the silhouette. It was the index of presence and the marker of absence through which she adopted critical postures and conducted original experiments that touched on the fields of postwar culture, politics, history, time and technology. As I have discussed above, we can say that the first postwar silhouettes were drawn not by artists but by the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki when, within their critical radius, the bombs left nothing but ruin and the occasional shadowed traces of city dwellers and common objects on the cities’ ruined surfaces. The postwar silhouette was born of a gruesome gesture toward extinction, one whose presence in the world, while posing a threat to humanity as a whole, has affected real damage almost exclusively against non-white constituencies by the hand of United States’ techno-militaristic violence. Thirty years later, Mendieta, in a meditation not simply on how she was dispossessed from her home country as a result of Cold War tensions and nuclear brinkmanship, but on how the dominant socio-political forces had dispossessed nature from culture on a larger scale, imprinted the shadow of her own body onto the ruins of Yágul, the first of hundreds of traces of her body that she would leave in landscapes from Iowa to New York to Oaxaca and eventually in Cuba. She photographed them, filmed them, and then
further experimented with those documents, creating in the process one of the
most innovative and original bodies of critical art in and of the postwar era.

To best understand these connections, it is worth citing Paul Virilio again
more fully, when he describes the mechanics of the atomic event and suggests
its significance within the historical development of modes of visual culture:

If photography, according to its inventor Nicèphore Niepce, was
simply a method of engraving with light, where bodies inscribed
their traces by virtue of their own luminosity, nuclear weapons
inherited both the darkroom of Niepce and Daguerre and the
military searchlight. What appears in the heart of darkrooms is no
longer a luminous outline but a shadow, one which sometimes, as
in Hiroshima, is carried to the depths of cellars and vaults. The
Japanese shadows are inscribed not, as in former times, on the
screens of a shadow puppet theatre but on a new screen, the
walls of the city.406

Akira Lippit, who elaborated on Virilio in the context of Japanese cinema to
construct an incisive theory of postwar visuality as conditioned by ‘atomic light’
and ‘shadow optics,’ describes the after-effects of the first bombs: “seared
organic and nonorganic matter left dark stains, opaque artifacts of once vital
bodies, on the pavements and other surfaces of this grotesque theater.”407 Once
vital bodies: Lippit’s language emphasizes how that most “vital” of U.S.
inventions, championed and upheld by mainstream political rhetoric in the U.S.
as a protector of life, was never anything but the most efficient and “grotesque”
means of taking life from bodies on a mass scale. The rhetoric of life that
provided cover for such a “grotesque theater” also facilitated, more generally, a
more problematic attitude that touched a broad swath of United States culture.
When Mendieta claims that her art “revitalizes nature in a different way,” this then becomes a provocative context in which to understand her statement.

Both Virilio and Lippit construct a theory of visuality that is conditioned in large part by how the atomic bombs transformed city walls into photographic surfaces that produced silhouettes of its victims in the act of destroying their bodies. From these events, for many artists, postwar silhouettes and specific forms of violence against the body took on a new meaning linked to notions of the limits of the visible, to absence and the void, to the index, and to a new state of rupture conditioned by the U.S. invention and use of the all too feasible technological means by which civilization(s) could become instantly extinct. I have already mentioned some examples of this pedigree, including Yves Klein’s anthropometries, where bodies were performatively imprinted onto surfaces in blue paint in a clear allusion to the atomic bomb. Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece, which, as Julia Bryan Wilson writes “cites the visual culture of atomic war in order to confront the influence of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on post-war Japanese art” is another such example, in this case one in which Ono’s “shifting notions of identification” between “‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’” share a further quality with Mendieta’s own oscillations between ‘North’ and ‘South.’

Another more abstract example, also from outside the U.S., is Lucio Fontana’s own cut pieces, works he made after declaring, in 1955, that “painting after Hiroshima and Nagasaki is impossible.” Fontana described his cuts as a new kind of “drawing,” one which, as Jaleh Mansoor points out, expands on drawing for how
it creates a "gap in the canvas [which] itself constitutes a silhouette." Together these cases serve as examples of postwar artists grappling with new modes of production in the wake of the inauguration of the Atomic Age, of interacting with (bodily) surfaces as sites to grapple with a new sensibility conditioned by the "gruesome theater" of the post-atomic landscape.

And they are all provocative precedents when imagining Mendieta making her Siluetas amidst the architecture of Yagul, particularly when we remember that they were not just any silhouettes, but her own, silhouettes of a body that, as a result of her forced emigration to the United States, she increasingly saw from outside of herself as a marker of the problematic attitudes toward life that coursed through postwar, Cold War culture. "I became aware of my own being, my own existence as a very particular and singular being," she wrote of the effects of moving to the United States, "This discovery was a form of seeing myself separate from others, alone." She used the mark of her body as a way of establishing a grounds of critique for the cultural super structures of the United States that at the same time were not of those structures, allowing for new forms and new terrains to emerge that were at once more universal and more incisive than many of her postwar U.S. art precedents. And much like how she looked at her body from outside itself, she adopted a conceptual framework that looked outside of history precisely in order to return to history, to form a more historically sensitive critique. In doing so she moved the critical parameters of art's relationship to life within the postwar U.S. canon beyond
both the abstract pretenses of expression and energy of this canon’s first
generation and the totalizing blankness and emptiness posed by its second
generation in the 1960s. Pushing this canon toward a third generation of Atomic
Age artists, she reincorporated vitality into a critical appraisal of both what
postwar U.S. culture had done to life in the Atomic Age, and how, perhaps, it
could be revived.
Endnotes

1 This issue was the third weekly issue since the first atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. The first came out the same day, August 6, as the bombing, and thus did not mention the event. The second was August 13, and it did run a column entitled “Birth of an Era” that reproduced parts of Harry Truman’s press release with commentary. By the third issue, on August 20, the first since Japanese capitulation, the bomb and its implications across all areas of the new postwar landscape consumed the magazine.

2 *Time*, August 20, 1945, 29.
5 *Time*, May 7, 1945.
7 While slightly predating the solidification of U.S. painters’ dominant postwar style under the banner of Abstract Expressionism, there would have been many references on hand for Artzybasheff to make such an allusion. In the twelve months leading up to the August 20 cover, the Museum of Modern Art in New York alone (where *Time* publisher Henry Luce sat on the board) exhibited such paintings as Robert Motherwell’s *Pancho Villa Dead and Alive* (1943), Jackson Pollock’s *She-Wolf* (1943), Paul Bergin’s *Fallen Angel* (1943), Morris Graves’s *Woodpeckers* (1941), and Virginia Admiral’s *Composition* (1942), among others, all of which were characterized to varying extents by strong black painterly marks like the ones on the *Time* cover.

All of these paintings were exhibited at MoMA between 1944-45 before August. Motherwell’s *Pancho Villa* was even shown twice, once in “An Exhibition of Recent Acquisitions” from February 14 – March 18, 1945 and, with Pollock’s *She-Wolf*, in the “Museum Collection of Painting and Sculpture: First General Exhibition” which opened June 20, 1945. Another painting by Admiral, who was then studying under Hans Hoffman in New York, titled *The Red Table* from 1944, even has a pattern of two distinct black X’s that strongly resemble the X on the *Time* cover.
8 In a letter to the editor, printed a few weeks later in the September 17, 1945 issue of *Time*, one reader recounts how

*TIME'S cover of Japan's Xed-out sun [Aug. 20] has inspired a heated controversy concerning the artist. As amateur Sherlocks, we have compiled two lists of deductions made from what we could see in the cover. We would appreciate your settling this argument for us.*
Captain Harrington: Artist used ⅝-inch brush. Artist had not dipped brush before on this particular day. The direct stroke from upper left to lower right was made first. The stroke from lower left to upper right was made second. The sun was stenciled before the cross. The artist was inspired suddenly with his idea and started impetuously. The artist is between 30 and 40 years old. The artist is righthanded. He is above average height, about 5 ft. 10 or 11. [...]

The editors appended a reply, stating:

TIME'S tall (6 ft.), middle-aged (46), ambidextrous male artist used a tired old ½-inch, previously dipped brush to make the unstenciled sun before X-ing it out in the manner correctly described by Reader Harrington. The idea came suddenly, but was deliberately planned before execution. It was drawn to size. Contestant Harrington is the winner. Artzybasheff was the artist.— ED.

Thus the letter and its response confirm that the X was rendered expressively with a certain mixture of spontaneity and deliberation in a dry brush style that together point to a startling affinity with the artistic style of a contemporaneous group of ascendant U.S. painters. “Letters,” Time, September 17, 1945. 9 For a description of this attitude, see Boyer, By the Bomb’s Early Light, 7-8.


12 The Hitler-style X that appeared on the May 7, 1945 cover has been reprised 3 times in the post-911 era, with Saddam Hussein (April 21, 2003), Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (June 19, 2006), and Osama bin Laden (May 20, 2011) all receiving the treatment. In each of the four cases, the X is nearly identical to the Hitler X from May 7, 1945, rendered in an ink-like, semi-transparent red color with two drips coming off of the mark originating in the top left, and one drip coming down from the top right mark. The abstract expressionist-esque style of the August 20, 1945 X is thus unique among the five instances of Time using the X motif.


14 The idea of atomic destruction as being “unspeakable,” a corollary to the aesthetics of nothingness and blankness that it also engendered, is a recurring trope within the discourse. For one good example, see Lisa Yoneyama, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” in Hiroshima Traces: Time Space, and the Dialectics of Memory, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 87 – 92.

15 Henry R. Luce, “The American Century,” Life, February 17, 1941, 61-5. When I refer to the “vision” of Luce’s article as being “undisturbed,” I mean that its logic, particularly how “[America] must undertake now to be the good Samaritan
of the entire world,” made more sense in U.S. public opinion before the dialectic of atomic weapons was thrust by them onto the world. I do not mean to diminish the problematic of the imperialist attitude implicit in Luce’s argument that existed before atomic weapons, in which he advocated, for example, that the U.S. “exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.” (63). Indeed, one of the great tensions of postwar U.S. neo-imperialist attitudes, and all the contradictions they stirred, is how the postwar government attempted to square the pre-atomic “internationalist” ideas, epitomized in Luce’s article when he asserted the U.S. had to offer “an internationalism of the people, by the people, and for the people,” with how they were in fact the very source of the new means by which the world the could so easily destroy itself.

16 *Time* asked in October 1944, for example, “how big will the postwar income of the U.S. really be? “Postwar: All Wrong but Brookings,” *Time*, October 16, 1944; In June, 1943, for another, they reported on a “Postwar Realist” senator who warned on the senate floor how Russia and Britain intended to continue their imperial positions after the war, and that the U.S. needed to prepare to do the same: “We in the United States, on the other hand, are committed to speedy victory and to effective measures to preserve peace thereafter. But in the field of definite and practical aims there seems to be a vacuum. …As a fervent believer in the pressing need of effective international collaboration after the war, I submit that the United States owes it to the world as well as to herself to define her needs.…” “U.S. at War: Postwar Realist,” *Time*, June 28, 1943.

17 “POSTWAR: We all Agree,” *Time*, July 9, 1945.


23 *Time*, March 17, 1952.

24 *Time*, March 17, 1952.

The 1952 mural depicts Stalin as the force for peace against evil Western caricatures. As *Time* magazine described it: “At the left stood a benign Stalin, filially flanked by a boyish Mao Tse-tung, who held out the Red dove of peace to three glum cartoon villains—a gun-toting, Bible-clutching Uncle Sam, a fist-clenching John Bull, and a somewhat hung-over Marianne.” It is at least possible that this formation had other ulterior motives in Rivera’s contemporaneous political posturing. As someone who had harbored Trotsky and who had “never stopped attacking Stalinism,” things changed in 1952, which was the same year that “Rivera sends a request to the Communist Part of Mexico to be readmitted, humbly acknowledging ‘all his political mistakes’.” See Serge Fauchereau, “Moscow–Paris–Havana–Mexico, 1945-60” in *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)*, ed. Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, Piotr Piotrowski, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 416-17, 420.

27 *Time*, August 20, 1945, 29.

28 Akira Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 54.

29 The paradox of “U.S. vitality” is best encapsulated through the Cold War insofar as the most palpably felt threat to the U.S., in its nuclear brinkmanship with the Soviet Union, stemmed from a U.S. invention, the bomb, and the U.S.’s (mis)handling of international relations in the immediate postwar period. In terms of the Civil Rights movement, the paradox of “U.S. vitality” is revealed internally when we recognize how while “vitality” was linked in postwar discourse, through the ideology of postwar liberalism, to the preservation of “freedom” (as I detail in chapter 1), this freedom, and thus this *vitality* did not even extend to all people *within the United States*, a contradiction crystalized by Martin Luther King, Jr:

“The justification for risking the annihilation of the human race was always expressed in terms of America’s willingness to go to any lengths to preserve freedom […] that readiness for heroic measures in the defense of liberty disappeared […] when the threat was within our own borders and was concerned with the Negro’s liberty.” Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (1964) (New York: New American Library, 2000), 7. Quoted in Alive L. George, *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 162, and in Paul Williams, “White Rain and the Black Atlantic,” in *Race, Ethnicity, and Nuclear War: Representations of Nuclear Weapons and Post-Apocalyptic Worlds* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 147.

30 *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 585. This is a quote I will return to often in the chapters to come.

31 Within the literature, the sixth chapter of Rosalind Krauss’s *The Optical Unconscious* on Jackson Pollock is one interesting and rare exception to the apartness of Warhol and Morris. “Ony three demurrals,” Krauss writes, “register within the afterhistory of the works that cannot be so assimilated, three refusals
of the verticalization of Pollock, three reminders of the time when the drop pictures could still be thought of as having been 'painted with a broom,' a floorbound condition that elicited the comment that 'a dog or cat could do better,' the polite version of what both Thomas Craven and Tom Benton accused Pollock of in 1950: making the drip pictures by peeing on them. The three dissenting voices came from the practices of Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol, and Robert Morris. None of these was interested in the sublimated Pollock."

Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 248. However, the proximity of Warhol and Morris in this instance is not for the sake of a comparative analysis between them, but instead how they both relate to a certain attitude toward Jackson Pollock (i.e., a non-optical attitude). This analysis in *The Optical Unconscious*, as I will argue, privileges an art historical comparison at the expense of also understanding the relationship of the work to history itself. Krauss positions Morris and Warhol in relation to Pollock in the context of an understanding of Pollock that was itself positioned in relation to Modernist painting and art history (Greenberg)—or in otherwords purely within a discursive trajectory of Modernist and Post-Modernist art—which ultimately obscures other important non-art historical aspects of how or why the work was made. For example, Krauss cites Morris’s notion of "anti-form" from the late 1960s as a means by which he "decoded" Pollock’s gesture. "For Morris did not look," she writes, "at the structural condition of the mark, nor at the thematics of the man standing over the supine field. He looked instead at the operations of gravity, of the way the horizontal is a force that pulls against the vertical, pulling it down." Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 293. To make my point, Krauss does not, and nor would it make sense in the context of how she makes her argument, take into account Morris’s contemporaneous citation in "Notes on Sculpture Part 4: Beyond Objects" that the “past of mankind…must now be viewed in the light of the experience of Hiroshima and no longer from the portholes of the Beagle.” See Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture 4: Beyond Objects” in *Continuous Projects Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993): 63-64.

33 Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture 4: Beyond Objects,” in *Continuous Projects Altered Daily*, 63-64.
34 Peter Schwenger and John Whittier Treat, “America’s Hiroshima, Hiroshima’s America,” *boundary 2*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production (Spring, 1994), 238.
35 “A Strange Place,” *Time* magazine, August 20, 1945, p. 29.
36 Schwenger and Treat, “America’s Hiroshima, Hiroshima’s America,” 247.
37 As Paul Boyer details, this term came into use “almost immediately” after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were announced. It was only some 10 days after Hiroshima that Pocket Books published *The Atomic Age Opens*, a 256-page paperback compendium of news stories, editorials, and pronouncements by world leaders intended to help those who were ‘grasping for
solid ideas through the haze of the first excitement.' The general tenor of these utterances is summed up in one chapter title: ‘The Whole World Gasped.’” Boyer, By the Bomb’s Early Light, 8.

38 As in Henri Bergson’s notion of the élan vital, first iterated in L’Évolution créatrice in 1907.

39 Rustow is attributed with coming up with the term, which was agreed upon at the Colloque Walter Lippmann in Paris, 1938, attended by, along with Rustow, Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Michael Polanyi, Wilhelm Röpke and other influential conservative economists. They apparently chose the term over other suggestions such as “néo-capitalisme, liberalisme positif, liberalisme social, and even liberalism de gauche.” Dieter Plehwe, “Introduction,” in The Road From Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Though Collective, ed. Philip Mirowski, Dieter Plehwe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 13-14.

40 “Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age, 1940-1960” was an exhibition and catalog organized by the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2001. Vitalist rhetoric and the atomic legacy are connected in other recent museological contexts, such as the catalog of the Guggenheim’s 2012 exhibition Art of Another Kind: International Abstraction at the Guggenheim 1949-1960, in which an essay titled “A Vital Force: Abstract Art and Cultural Politics at Mid-Century” appears next to another titled “Abstract Sculpture of the Atomic Age.”

41 The problematic idea of the bomb as a “preserver of life” is dramatized, for example, by the Truman administration’s propagandistic guiding of the narrative of how the bomb “saved lives” by ending the war. This is well captured by Mick Broderick in his analysis of the White House’s involvement in the first Hollywood movie about the Manhattan project The Beginning or the End: “The other significant distortion by the Administration afforded from nearly eighteen months of historical revision after the Hiroshima attack is the film’s stated justification that the bombing would mean, according to the president, ‘life for three hundred thousand—maybe half a million—of America’s finest youth.’ Now there is no doubt that Truman’s decision to use the bomb ‘against the enemy as soon as it could be used’ saved American lives. […] But it is the size of potential casualties and their increasing inflation, according to scholars such as Gar Alperovitz and Barton Bernstein, which was magnified over the years in order to combat increasing domestic and international criticism about the decision to drop the bomb. As Alperovitz has convincingly demonstrated, from August 9, 1945 to late 1946, the time of The Beginning or the End’s script approval, Truman’s statements on the public record increase anticipated American invasion casualties from ‘thousands of American lives’ to ‘a quarter of a million’ on December 15, 1945, to the movie’s articulated three hundred thousand to a half million. By 1953, the president claimed, ‘as much as a million, on the American side alone,’ and finally in 1959, Truman announced ‘the dropping of the atomic bombs stopped the war, saved millions of lives.” Broderick cites J. Samule Walker’s comprehensive historical study that showed “according to the scholarly consensus, the United States did not drop the bomb to save hundreds of
thousands of American lives. Although scholars generally agree that Truman used the bomb primarily to shorten the war, the number of American lives saved, even in the worst case, would have been in the range of tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands." See Mick Broderick, “The Buck Stops Here: Hiroshima Revisionism in the Truman Years,” in Filling the Hole in the Nuclear Future: Art and Popular Culture Respond to the Bomb, ed. Robert Jacobs (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010), 150-151.


Going back even further, the word vital and its derivatives appear 7 times across Hoover’s four State of the Union speeches, six times in Coolidges’s six speeches, five times in Harding’s two speeches, and eleven times in Woodrow Wilson’s seven speeches. Again, over and above frequency of use, the ways in which it was used, while at times being connected with economic and industrial issues, still often seems to differ from its postwar use. For Wilson, for example, making changes to the rules of presidential candidate nomination contests were a “matter of vital domestic concern,” (1913) and Harding, to cite another, insisted in 1922 that “Agriculture is a vital activity in our national life.”

From the 1951 State of the Union, Pennsylvania State University online transcripts, 137.

Michael Wreszin, “Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Scholar-Activist In Cold War America,” Salmagundi, no. 63/64 (Spring-Summer 1984), 262

“What may set Schlesinger apart from a common stereotype,” writes Michael Wreszin, “is that, as a precocious undergraduate during the same years at Harvard, he was not terribly interested in politics and had ‘no patience with the turgid debates of the campus Marxists, finding their dogmatism downright silly.’” And later: “Schlesinger’s tutor was the legendary F.O. Matthiesen. Schlesinger recalled years later that he had learned a great deal from Matthiessen about ‘literature and society’ but that their political differences subsequently became so sharp that when Schlesinger returned to Harvard to teach after the war they were no longer on speaking terms. Schlesinger was to single out Matthiessen on a number of occasions as one of the more odious of ‘doughfaces’ i.e., democrats with totalitarian ideas.” Michael Wreszin, “Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Scholar-Activist In Cold War America,” 258, 259.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom (1949; rev. ed., New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1998), xx. See also Wreszin: “In effect it was essential for the survival of an American left, of which he felt himself
a part, to expose the clandestine conspirators in their midst.” Michael Wreszin, “Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Scholar-Activist in Cold War America,” 264.


50 Ibid, 263.


52 Schlesinger, Vital Center, 115.


56 Schlesinger, The Vital Center, p 255

57 From Scientific Monthly, September 1945, quoted in Boyer, By the Bomb’s Early Light, 3.


59 It is important to question the extent to which, in either of Murrow or Schlesinger’s formulations, lives are created equal. We must ask to what extent is Murrow’s shock a confrontation with the idea of extinction touching not just life per se, but in fact, the lives of the “victors,” of the United States citizens who were shielded from an intimate experience of the wars conducting in Europe and the Pacific. Which is to ask, by extension, to what extent the crisis is so extreme because it constitutes a new threat to white lives, of the lives that populate the Euro-American consciousness, and of the lives of the colonists. This is an important framework to keep in mind as we survey how quickly it became incumbent on the U.S. political establishment to transfer the perception of the threat away from the bomb and onto Communism, which was so often the Communism of non-white people, whether in Korea, Cuba, Ghana, or, eventually, Vietnam. Ken Cooper has begun such a discussion in an essay from 1994 entitled “The Whiteness of the Bomb” where he says, for example:

The bomb appalls me, as the whale did Ishmael, because the properties of idealized whiteness are inseparable from its power,
whether as the apotheosis of Anglo-American scientific mastery or as the weapon of an atomic elect described by President Truman: “We thank God that it has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes.” To put the matter bluntly, the bomb was built by people like me for the protection of people like me; it was not an integrated bomb any more than the U.S. Army was an integrated army, although African Americans were a presence in both hierarchies. So is there no room for apprehension, to echo Ishmael, that possession of this cosmic force insinuated—among other things—the “white man[']s] ideal mastership over every dusky tribe”? Or that, conversely, the dangerous proliferation of nuclear technology to “irrational,” “immature,” and “unstable” Third World countries (the term Third World itself a postwar invention) was deemed somehow unnatural? And if the bomb was regarded as a properly (white) American possession, to what lengths would we go in preserving a privilege that indirectly secured many others? As far as an avowed racist like Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, who said that he “would prefer to see my race and my civilization blotted out with the atomic bomb than to see it slowly but surely destroyed in the maelstrom of miscegenation, interbreeding, intermarriage, and mongrelization”? Is the end of whiteness really that terrifying, as unthinkable in its way as nuclear war?


In a survey from 1950 of 14 popular U.S. columnists writing between 1945-1948, it was found that “The amount of attention given to the bomb and the problems arising from it varied considerably. However, a glance at Table II shows that the broad curve of attention to the bomb was similar, dropping off after the initial novelty wore off.” Janet Besse and Harold D. Lasswell, “Our Columnists on the A-Bomb,” World Politics, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Oct., 1950), 77.


Ibid.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Vital Center, 56.


Henry R. Luce, “The American Century” Life, February 17, 1941, 65. (my emphasis). As for the idea of victory as a foregone conclusion, Luce writes of the war, which the U.S. had not at the point even formally entered, “But we will win it…the big question is how.” (62).

This argument acknowledges that Hiroshima was by no means the first deeply ethically ambiguous event of WWII committed by the Allies, with the fire bombing of Dresden, occurring some six months prior to Hiroshima, being perhaps the most powerful ‘pre-atomic’ example. A quick survey of popular rhetoric in the wake of Dresden, however, shows that the belief in America’s moral mandate—along with the belief in its clean hands—survived Dresden’s incineration intact. Throughout WWII, the Allied publics, following the stated sentiments of Roosevelt and Churchill, had been willing to “hold the hand of the Devil” in order to defeat Hitler and win the war. The atomic attack on Hiroshima, while of course not without substantial defenders and apologists, ruptured this sentiment in popular discourse in an unprecedented fashion.

Luce, a conservative who had consistently opposed FDR, and his provocative article garnered a response from Roosevelt’s Vice-President Henry Wallace, which switched out ‘The American Century’ for the ‘Century for Common Man.’ While clearly different from Luce’s perspective, at the core of Wallace’s article, which implicitly called, according to Serge Guilbaut, for a “New Deal for the whole world,” was an anticipation of American ideology spread for good throughout the world. See Guilbaut, Serge. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), 61.

Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, 56.


Pennsylvania State University Transcript, 87. In 1949, he echoed the same warning, declaring “Without endangering our democratic freedoms, means should be provided for setting up machinery for preventing strikes in vital industries which affect the public interest.” (116).


Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, 249.


Truman’s repeated insistence on the importance of “free enterprise” in fact adopts the language of some of the greatest organized opponents to FDR and the New Deal from the 1930s, groups such as the Constitutional and Free Enterprise Foundation and the National Association for the Preservation of Free Enterprise. See Chadwick Hall, “America’s Conservative Revolution,” 207.


Mark Rothko, “The romantics were Prompted…,” *Possibilities*, New York, I, (1947), 84.

Ibid.


Mark Rothko, “The romantics were Prompted…,” *Possibilities*, New York, I, (1947), 84.


*Art in Theory 1900-2000*, 583-85. The interview was taped for the Sag Harbor radio station in the summer of 1950.


101 Ibid.
107 Art in Theory 1900-2000, 583.
109 See Guilbaut, “Postwar Painting Games, 73, 79, n. 62.

It is worth noting that some critics since the 1990s, perhaps most notably Rosalind Krauss, have identified an alternative reading to Pollock that sees his mark as in fact an “attack on presence, an attack on organicity, good form.” On discussing the extent to which there were perceived to be human figures beneath his network of drips and pours, Krauss writes: “In striking at the schema, the web cancels more than just this or that figure. It operates instead on the very idea of the organic, on the way composition can make the wholeness of the human form and the architectural coherence of the painting into analogues of one another, each repeating and magnifying the other’s continuity. It strikes against the organic form’s condition as unified whole, its capacity to cohere into the singleness of the good gestalt, its hanging together, its self-evident simplicity, its Prägnanz.” In this very interesting reading, Pollock would, at least implicitly, be aware of the paradox and contradictions of “vitality” in the new Atomic Age. However and nevertheless, this is not only not at all the dominant reception of the work, but also not the way Pollock himself framed his work, especially after 1945. Rosalind Krauss, The Optical Unconscious (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 266.

This is a tendency found even in some of the most complex and astute critical theory, as when, for example, Jean Baudrillard discusses the “hot” abstractionism of the 1950s as “somehow reminiscent of the bodily holocaust of the extermination camps and of the imminent nuclear holocaust.” See Jean Baudrillard, “Hot Painting: The Inevitable Fate of the Image,” in Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Montreal, and Paris 1945 – 1964 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 23. My point is that, when the histories are properly contextualized and retained, the events of WWII and that of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (and by extension the nuclear age) are two distinct forms of catastrophe that have radically different implications for historical criticism and theoretical discourse.

My focus is clearly on how this development played out in the United States, but this framework could also be directed toward potentially new discussions of how similar situations played out in Japan and Europe as they came under United States occupation in the immediate postwar years. Post-surrender Japan is particularly important, not just as the site of the U.S. atomic assault, but for how, within that legacy, the U.S. occupation likely had a hand in creating a whole other set of circumstances relevant to the problematic development of ‘vitality’ that developed in the U.S. A comparative study would also likely be fruitful for how the compounded crisis of postwar positionality that arose in Japan vis-à-vis the immediate adaptation of a position of victimhood in the wake of the atomic assaults on Hiroshima and Nagasaki could have pushed certain artists closer to the hegemonic attitudes of postwar U.S. liberalism, and how this in turn may have sparked a new generation of critical art in the later 1950s and early 1960s. In Japan, as Bert Winther-Tamaki explains, the U.S. presence had a deep impact on the postwar Japanese art scene; an influence “manifested,” for example, “through the censorship of art journalism, public commentary by American SCAP personnel on matters of art, and the lucrative private American patronage enjoyed by certain artists.” (349)

In this environment, certain conservative trends in Japanese painting, such as colorful Japanese Fauvism, flourished in the immediate postwar period. Winther-Tamaki details how later Japanese critics like Hariu Ichiro denounced this initial postwar formation for its “escapist aestheticism” and “skewered the conservatism of this movement by likening it to an ‘anachronistic season of the White Birch Society,’ referring to the pioneering group of Japanese modernist who had celebrated an ideal of autonomous artistic selfhood three decades earlier.” (351). Through this account alone, interesting parallels emerge between Ichiro and, for example, the Pop criticism of Swenson and Bourdon against the old guard of Abstract Expressionist criticism that I discuss in chapter three. Other routes for this inquiry might include how U.S. artists (and Western society more generally), for example, appropriated “decontextualized” versions of traditional Japanese practices, such as Zen, without understanding the extent to which these practices had militaristic and nationalistic histories that played a significant role in Japanese Imperialism before 1945. With the appropriation of Zen by artists such as John Cage who were themselves so influential to the U.S. avant-garde in the late 1950s and 1960s, the downstream effects of these histories on postwar U.S. artists is fodder for further study. These narratives could become part of the reappraisal of how alternative and critical practices developed in the U.S. at the beginning of the 1960s (e.g. Morris and Warhol) particularly when considered within the legacies of the nuclear issue and read next to later postwar developments in Japan beginning in the late 1950s, such as, for example, the pained and colorless aesthetics of Tatsumi Hijikata and Butoh. For the transformation of Zen in postwar discourses, see Christopher Ives, Imperial-Way Zen: Ichikawa Hakugen’s Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics (particularly the chapter “Quick Conversions and Slow Apologies in

120 “Blank Form” from Morris’s withdrawn contribution to An Anthology of Chance Operations, which survives in its intended placement in an unbound pre-published manuscript copy of An Anthology in the Jean Brown Papers at the Getty Research Library special collections, box and folder number 94-B19099. “Blank Form,” but not the full contribution, was eventually published over twenty years later in the exhibition catalogue for Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism and Performance 1958-1964, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984), 101. The story of the text will be explored in more detail below.


123 Art in Theory 1900-2000, 585.


125 The term “Minimal Art” is generally traced back to Richard Wollheim’s article of the same title which first appeared in Arts Magazine in January, 1965. The influential Battcock anthology of the same name, which reproduced Wollheim’s text along with many others, states that he “may well have been the first critic to apply the label ‘Minimal’ to recent art.” Gregory Battcock, ed. Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 387.

Ibid. The catalog later states, “It was in 1960 that Morris rejected the enterprise of painting and built his first sculptural object, entitled Column,” 90.


Krens, “The Triumph of Entropy,” 90. The catalog leaves out the fact that this evening of performances at the Living Theater was organized by La Monte Young and served as a fundraiser for An Anthology, where Morris’s “Blank Text” was originally intended for publication. See Branden W. Joseph, “The Tower and the Line: Toward a Genealogy of Minimalism,” Grey Room, no. 27 (Spring 2007): 64. Also Barbara Haskell in the exhibition catalogue for Blam!, 101.


Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” October, Vol. 8, (Spring, 1979), 36. Lately there have been some important studies that resituate Morris within the historical framework that has been so important to his work. See, for example, Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Robert Morris’s Art Strike” in Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 83-125.


Robert Morris in a proposal for a sculptural monument for the Bay Pines Veterans Administration Hospital, 1978. The proposal is reproduced in Nena Tsouti-Schillinger “Thematics in the Art of Robert Morris,” (PhD diss., University of Sussex, November 2010), 258. Reference to works include “War Memorial for Scattered Atomic Waste,” which was part of a series of lithographs entitled 5 War Memorials, some of which, as Julia Bryan-Wilson has noted, were included in Lucy Lippard’s Collage of Indignation II show at the New York Cultural Center in 1970. See Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Robert Morris’s Art Strike” in Robert Morris: October Files (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 206, n 58. Copies of the lithographs, which were for sale by Leo Castelli, can also be found in the Panza Papers located in the Special Collections library at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. The “bed sheets” referred to were part of a project at the Fabric...

See, for example, The Fluxus Reader, ed. Ken Friedman (Sussex: Academy Editions, 1998), 13: “Although it can be argued that An Anthology is not strictly a Fluxus publication, its development and production was a central event in the formation of Fluxus.”


Morris clearly did not see eye to eye with Maciunas. In 1988 he told Maurice Berger, “The Fluxus performances under the direction of Maciunas were nothing more than vaudeville, shallow revivals of the Dadaist performances of Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara. I could not abide by the notion of theater as entertainment played for laughs.” And Morris’s disavowal of Fluxus was fairly well known; Berger notes: “In 1964 [Morris] wrote to Maciunas to inform him that he wanted nothing more to do with Fluxus.” See Berger, Labyrinths, 28. But An Anthology was ultimately the brainchild of La Monte Young; it pre-dated Fluxus and included others that were not strictly part of the group. In other words, it seems like, in 1962-63, there could have at least been other motives beyond simply not liking Maciunas or not agreeing with Fluxus for Morris to have removed his contribution page from An Anthology. The blank page is like a gesture, it was, in a sense, a piece ‘made to be lost’ as one of Morris’s removed performance scores went.

This account comes from Charles Curtis, close associate and collaborator of La Monte Young, in phone conversations March 2012. Another version of the story is found in Haskell, Blam!, 100. That catalog, published in 1984, is apparently the first time the “Blank Form” text was made publicly available. In the rare instances in which “Blank Form” is mentioned in the Morris literature, by, for example, Maurice Berger in Labyrinths and by Branden Joseph in “The Tower and the Line: Toward a Genealogy of Minimalism,” Haskell’s Blam! catalog (not the original page) is given as the source.


Morris, “Letters to John Cage,” 73


T.J. Clark, “God Is Not Cast Down,” in Farwell to an Idea (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 253. Thierry de Duve writes similarly in the context of the “early minimalists” and historical precedents to reduction: “It is of course not the first time that monochrome or quasi-monochrome painting appeared in the history of modern art. In each case, its advent has spelled out the zero degree of painting. For some (like Rodchenko) it meant death, for others (like Malevich) it meant its birth or rebirth under a new name, for others still (like Tarabukin) it meant its birth and its death all at once.” Thierry de Duve, “The Monochrome

146 See Ad Reinhardt, “Art as Art” (Art International, Lugano, VI, no. 10, December 1962).


149 This is an element of Morris’s work that was widely discussed into the late sixties, but is not often traced back to his own writing before ever having a solo exhibition in New York. Nor was it ever properly situated within the context of postwar United States cultural history. Well after writing the “Blank Form” text, the role of the viewer in the generation of meaning was further elucidated by Morris himself in his “Notes on Sculpture” essays published in Artforum between 1966-1968. It also formed the basis of the well-known “theatricality” attack of Morris’s work (and minimalism more generally) by Michael Fried in his “Art and Objecthood” essay, also in Artforum (June 1967).


151 It may not be a new claim that his work and others during this time were turning in this way–towards allegory– but this text provides an early an explicit account of his concern, and helps illuminate both how Morris formulated these ideas and what was behind them. An important and rather immediate precedent to Morris’s concerns to achieve allegory would be Robert Rauschenberg. In addition to making a work in 1959 specifically entitled Allegory, Rauschenberg has been noted, by Branden Joseph, for advancing a relationship between culture and memory by which he moves “the idea of memory…from a privileged, internal, subjective connection to the past to a space understood as external.” See Branden W. Joseph, Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-avant-garde. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003), 131. The difference between Rauschenberg and Morris seems to reside in the characteristics of this “past.” On the one hand, objects of Rauschenberg’s “past” are “just sort of there.” (Ibid). For Morris, on the other hand, there seems to be a more pointed urgency to his “increasing concern to achieve an allegorical function,” an urgency registered in a crisis unfolding around him.

152 In an essay on Morris, for example, W.J.T. Mitchell writes, “A larger historical frame, for instance, would ask us to consider the relation of this (mainly American) story of art to the fortunes of American culture in the era of the Cold War and the nuclear nightmare, a period that, in the very moment of Morris’s retrospective, seems now to be clearly ‘behind’ us, replaced by the quite different concerns of a post-nuclear, post-Cold War ‘New World Order,’ and the final victory of capitalism as a world system.” W.J.T. Mitchell, “Word, Image, and Object: Robert Morris” in Picture Theory, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 245.
In the catalog of a recent Jasper Johns exhibit, we read that the artist “frequently incorporated strips of newspaper text, partially obscured by ink or encaustic, into his crosshatch work. By refusing easy access to the content of the newsprint, Johns suppressed its denotative function so that other aspects would become more conspicuous.” See Jennifer L. Roberts, and Jennifer Quick, Jasper Johns/in Press: The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2012), 71.


One exception would be Maurice Berger’s book Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s, which discusses how “Morris’s production reveals an intense commitment to social issues and to political and cultural activism.” (though, while mentioning Morris’s anti-war attitudes, it is not overtly preoccupied with the nuclear issue). See Berger, Labyrinths, 4, 113-116. More recently, another one, focusing on Morris’s connection to labor activism, is Julia Bryan-Wilson’s “Robert Morris’s Art Strike” in Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 83-125.

Mitchell, “Word, Image, and Object: Robert Morris,” 270, n. 51: “In this context I must disagree with Hal Foster’s suggestion that ‘the minimalist delineation of perception…is somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality power—that the perceiver is not a sexed body, that the gallery museum is not an ideological apparatus.’"


Antin, “Have Mind, Will Travel,” 119.

Antin, “Have Mind, Will Travel,” 102, 103.

Antin, “Have Mind, Will Travel,” 114.


ibid.

Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 252

Antin, “Have Mind, Will Travel,” 114.

Antin, “Have Mind, Will Travel,” 104.


In his influential essay “The Crux of Minimalism,” Hal Foster identifies Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture,” along with those of Donald Judd and Michael Fried, as Minimalism’s “fundamental texts. Foster, *Return of the Real*, 36.


Williams, *After Modern Sculpture*, 70.


This is according to invoices and documentation in the Morris boxes of Panza Papers at the Getty Research Institute special collections.


Lippit, _Atomic Light_, 95
Deutsche, _Hiroshima after Iraq_, 46.
Lippit, _Atomic Light_, 77.
Berger, _Labyrinths_, 125-26, n. 23.
The _Creation of the Humanoids_ opening narration.
Ibid.
Ibid, 15-16.
In _POPisms_, Warhol refers to a conversation with artist Larry Rivers: “I asked Larry about Jackson Pollock. ‘Pollock? Socially, he was a real jerk,’ Larry said. ‘Very unpleasant to be around. … I’ll tell you what kind of guy he was. He would go over to a black person and say, ‘How do you like your skin color?’ or he’d ask a homosexual, ‘Sucked any cocks lately?’ He’d walk over to me and make shooting-up gestures on his arm because he knew I was playing around with heroin then.'” (16-17).
One great exception to the generation divide in early Pop reception would be _Artforum_ co-founder John Coplans (b. 1920), who was one of the most incisive observers of how Pop functioned in the specific problematics of postwar U.S. politics and culture. Coplans, a South African who after WWII had lived in the U.K. and eventually settled in San Francisco, was well outside the New York orbit. He was, moreover, one of the few players in this pivotal moment of the U.S. art scene to have actually experienced serious combat in WWII. He remembered hearing the news of Hiroshima while fighting in the jungles in Burma: “the idea of an entire city being wiped out seemed to be the end of one point of civilization. It had a shattering effect on us. Because what we had been doing, we seemed to pay such a personal price. If you took a man’s life or saw a man’s life taken, it was always at such a personal level. But it just seemed so impersonal. It was vast impersonality.” (Oral history interview with John Coplans, 1975 Apr. 4-1977 Aug. 4, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution). Coplans seemed to have found a critical reckoning with this “vast
impersonality" in Warhol's art, which reminded him, in 1962, of “a hive of grey flannel clerks, all identically clothed, all working for a pay check, to be spent on identical goods in identical supermarts to get identical stamps to redeem them for identical goods to be put in identical homes.” John Coplans, “New Paintings of Common Objects,” *Artforum*, vol. 1, n. 6 (December 1962), 28.  


209 A “Symposium on Pop Art” held at the Museum of Modern Art on December 13, 1962, in which Pop was attacked to varying degrees by Hilton Kramer, Dore Ashton, and Stanley Kunitz. Even Leo Steinberg was loathe to commit: “Whether their productions are works of art I am not prepared to say at this point.” See “Special Supplement: A Symposium on Pop Art” in *Arts Magazine*, April 1963, 36 – 44.  

210 Swenson, "Random Notes on Andy Warhol."  

211 Ibid.  


213 Swenson, "Random Notes on Andy Warhol."  


216 This was the description of Bond on a contemporary *Dr. No* film poster.  


218 Critic and curator Lawrence Alloway's captures related tension between on-screen violence and its “real world” corollaries in the context of another Bond movie about nuclear bombs—*Thunderball* (1965)—in which he discusses the ways in which the “fantastic and the realistic are frequently expressed together.” See Lawrence Alloway, *Violent America: The Movies 1946-1964*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 9. And of course, this violence would become far more real to Warhol five years later when Valerie Solanas shot him.  


the idea of the catalogue to Warhol in 1976. Warhol gave his blessing. Some twenty five years later, Thomas Ammann Fine Art and the Warhol Foundation sponsored the finished product when it was finally published in 2002, long after both figures had died. *Red Explosion* is owned by the Daros Collection in Zurich, which was built by Ammann and the collector Alexander Schmidheiny. This is documented in the Warhol Foundation’s “20-Year report, 1987 – 2007” (New York: The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, 2007), 42 – 45.

One scholar more recently went so far as to claim that *Red Explosion (Atomic Bombs)* was indeed “the only image not to be serialized in different variations in Warhol’s ‘Death and Disaster’ series.” (emphasis added) See: Denise M. Rompilla, *From Hiroshima to the Hydrogen Bomb: American Artists Witness the Birth of the Atomic Age*, (PhD diss., Rutgers University, October 2008), 295.

This is based on thorough reviews of all the Warhol files in the Leo Castelli Gallery papers and in the David Bourdon papers (both of which collected reviews, news clippings, and press releases of Warhol exhibitions and group shows not only in New York but Los Angeles, Chicago, Pairs, and elsewhere.) According to the catalogue raisonné it was not exhibited in the United States until the 1970 Pasadena show organized by John Coplans. It was first exhibited in the *Campo Vitale* (“Fields of Vitality”) exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 1967, and its first printed reproduction was in 1968 by Moderna Museet Stockholm, 1968. The provenance traces *Red Explosion’s* first owner to Illeana Sonnebend in Paris, where Warhol first exhibited the “Death and Disaster” pictures in 1964. Thus, it is likely, or at least plausible, that the picture was sent to Paris then, but not included in the exhibition. See *The Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné, Paintings and Sculptures 1961-1963*. Phaidon, 2002, cat. no. 366.

Although, as Thomas Crow has noted, Warhol’s selection of mass media images was not always simply passive, as in selecting images from the paper that happened to be lying around his studio. Instead he often “sought out glossy press-agency prints normally seen only by professional journalists” but which were nevertheless for mass media use. See Thomas Crow, “Saturday Disasters: Trace and Referent in Early Warhol,” in *Reconstructing Modernism*, ed. Serge Guillibaut (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 322.


Ibid

Ibid

Swenson, “What is Pop Art?,” 60.

The “epitome” of Foster’s argument: “repetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier). Rather, repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic. But this very need points to the real, and it is at this point that the real ruptures the screen of repetition. It is a rupture not in the world but in the subject; or rather it is a rupture between perception and consciousness of a subject touched by an image.” Foster, “Death in America,” 42.


More accurate documentation of the blast was in fact being captured by ultra high speed cameras that operated at rates as high as 2,000 frames per second. These images, with a more sickly character, are difficult to imagine being used in the same way as the mushroom cloud.

Deutsche, Hiroshima after Iraq, 46

An exhibition titled Vital Forms: American Art and Design in the Atomic Age 1940 – 1960 was mounted by the Brooklyn Museum and Walker Art Center in 2002 documenting this widespread trend premised around the emergence of biomorphic, organic forms that were contextualized as the result of atomic technological developments.

There were 904 tests at the Nevada Testing Site alone, another 106 at the Pacific Proving Grounds in the Marshall Islands. This does not include the additional hundreds of tests conducted by the Soviet Union, the UK, France, and other nuclear powers. In total there have been more than 2,000 nuclear weapons tests since 1945.

Peter Kuran, How to Photograph an Atomic Bomb, (Santa Clarita, California: VCE, Inc., 2006), 37.

Art historian John Curley wrote in a footnote to his 2013 book that, “No one has securely identified the source of the painting, but a full-page photograph in the article, “Close Up to the Blast,” Life, May 30, 1955, 42, appears to be the same image.” The image is very similar, but not the exact image. There were eventually many hundreds of thousands of photographs taken from the Nevada test site, and many of them have clear similarities with the Red Explosion image, including both the pattern of the mushroom cloud form (expansive cloud at the base, gradually widening stem, haloed top) as well as the low mountain range landscape in the background.


Foster, “Death in America,” 45

W.J.T. Mitchell has advanced a similar argument in regard to Robert Morris’s paintings of the 1980s, which I discuss in the Morris chapter: For Mitchell the “knot” of these works “arises when one realizes that this future would be one in which these paintings could never exist”–there could be no art after a nuclear holocaust–and thus “they critique a world in which, as Benjamin put it,
‘mankind...can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.’” See Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 252

241 Foster, “Death in America,” 46.


243 Foster, “Death in America,” 46.

244 These works mimicked the trends of 3-D film and photography by screening the image in two red and green colored registers. The trend of 3-D photographs and cinema had become popular in the fifties, and Warhol even provided 3-D glasses to viewers of these works on at least one occasion. As one 2004 review of the catalogue put it, the “optical paintings” are a series that “has been left unexamined in the critical literature of the artist to date.” Michael Lobel, “Authorizing Warhol,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Summer, 2004), 97.

245 Bedloe Island was officially renamed “Liberty Island” by an Act of Congress in 1956. Also included in the act were provisions for a museum to be located on the island. As one historian has pointed out, “the National Park Service, which had recommended the museum be located at the Statue of Liberty, agreed with [William H.] Baldwin and [Pierre S.] Du Pont that the museum should join the Cold War debate and emphasize American unity or the idea of a ‘melting pot.’ During the political ferment of the 1960s, however, spokesmen for Polish, Italian, and black organizations in this country voiced criticisms of exhibit plans and demanded more treatment on the respective ethnic groups that had formed the immigrant stream.” See John Bodnar, “Symbols and Servants: Immigrant America and the Limits of Public History,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (June, 1986), 140.

246 “Often quoted from but rarely reprinted in full, this interview is considered the most important that Andy Warhol gave in the 1960s: so important, in fact, that when the U.S. Post Office issued its Warhol stamp in 2002, the quote on the stamp’s selvage originated here: “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it.” *I’ll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, ed. Kenneth Goldsmith (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004), 85.


248 See Curley, *Conspiracy of Images*, 155: “Furthermore, Warhol’s series of electric chair paintings, begun in 1963, suggest an additional, secretive layer of Cold War conspiracy: according to the caption attached to Warhol’s source photograph, the depicted chair is the one in Sing Sing Prison that executed the Rosenbergs for atomic espionage in 1953.”

249 For Warhol, the early subject of glamorous movie stars was squarely within the context of his interest in death: “The Monroe picture was part of a death series I was doing, of people who had died by different ways.” *I’ll Be Your Mirror*, 88; “I also did movie stars—Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Troy Donahue—
during my ‘death’ period. Marilyn Monroe died then. I felt that Elizabeth Taylor was going to die, too, after her operation. I thought that there were a lot of people who were going to die—like Troy Donahue.” *I’ll Be Your Mirror*, 99. When Warhol got a group together for dinner on the night of the Kennedy assassination, the only detail of actual conversation he recounts was about how “Jackie was the most glamour First Lady we’ll ever get…” *POPism*, 78.


Curley also discusses this connection in greater detail. He explores the “many paranoid connections between nuclear anxiety and Warhol’s art works and archival material. … In his words, Warhol implies—or encrypts—that the origin of his silkscreened disaster paintings was the specter of nuclear terror that was made suddenly more tangible in October 1962.” Curley, *A Conspiracy of Images*, 166.

“Communist War” is Goldwater’s term, his alternate for the Cold War: “We must recognize this war as a war. Not a cold one, but the Communist War—and we must win it.” (original emphasis) Barry Goldwater, *Why Not Victory? A Fresh Look at American Foreign Policy* (New York: MacFadden, 1962), 25. Quoted in Robert Mann, *Daisy Petals and Mushroom Clouds*: 21.


258 Bourdon, David. Andy Warhol (art review). The Village Voice, 3 December 1964, 11.
259 This is Allen Ginsberg’s expression, from exactly one year after Warhol’s Flowers show at Castelli, credited with the rise of ‘flower power’ within Vietnam protest. He wrote: “Masses of flowers—a visual spectacle—especially concentrated in the front lines. Can be used to set up barricades, to present to Hell’s Angels, police, politicians, and press and spectators whenever needed or at a parade’s end.” Allen Ginsberg, Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995 (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 10.
260 In an interview in the fall of 1963, Warhol and Taylor Mead listed some of the death and disaster subjects, including “Hearses….Great piles of flowers.” See I’ll Be Your Mirror, 36.
261 This technical interest is on full display in, for example, an interview he did with Richard Ekstract for Tape Recording magazine in 1965. In the midst of all the famously impersonal and stand-offish encounters with journalist during this time, the Tape Recording interview might have been one of the most elaborate and candid of the Warhol interviews since Gene Swenson’s What is Pop? See Richard Ekstract, “Pop Goes the Videotape: An Underground Interview with Andy Warhol” Tape Recording, September-October 1965, reproduced in I’ll be Your Mirror, 71 – 78.
264 See Curley, A Conspiracy of Images, 120, 153-156.
268 Ibid.
269 Ibid.
270 Ibid, 2.
271 Ibid, 6.
272 Warhol’s presence at the top of the “Underground” was a repeated theme in many news reports on his art and the Factory scene throughout the 1960s and
70s. Warhol also discusses the topic on multiple occasions, often in his typical, straightforward way. In the same interview in which he talks about how “the war and the bomb worry me,” for example, Warhol says how he likes “film-makers of the New American Underground Cinema, I think they’re terrific. An Underground movie is a movie you make and show underground, like at the Film Makers’ Cinémathèque on 41st street.” I’ll Be Your Mirror, 92.

273 In POPism Warhol wrote this about The Life of Juanita Castro, “Our movie had a group of people talking about ‘fags on the sugar plantation.’ Everyone adored the idea that Raul, the real life brother of Fidel, who was a defense minister or something like that, was supposed to be a transvestite, so that was a big camp. And even campier were Fidel’s on-the-record attempts to become a Hollywood star—we tried to pick him out in an Esther Williams movie that Waldo swore he’d appeared in as an extra.” Warhol, POPisms, 143.


275 Warhol, POPism, 371.


278 See interview “Andy Warhol, Movieman: ‘It’s Hard to Be Your Own Script’” with Letitia Kent, Vogue March 1, 1970, reproduced in I’ll Be Your Mirror, 189.

279 Secretary of State under both Kennedy and LBJ, involved with the escalation of the Vietnam war, Rusk also served as Deputy Under Secretary of State (1949) and Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (1950), deeply involved in early US Cold War policy and the Korean war.


281 Warhol, Blue Movie, 70

282 Denby, “Viva and Louis by Andy Warhol,” 43


284 Warhol, Blue Movie, 78.


286 Ibid.

287 Warhol used the color red repeatedly in relation to communist subject matter such as his screen prints of Lenin and the Hammer and Sickle. For a good discussion on some different occurrences of red in Warhol’s politically themed paintings, see Blake Stimson, “Andy Warhol’s Red Beard,” The Art Bulletin, Vol. 83, No. 3 (Sep., 2001), pp. 527-547.

288 Warhol, POPism, 371.

289 Warhol, I’ll Be Your Mirror, 189.


Which is to say, the Paleolithic was the first period of time in which modern humans engaged in exterminatory practices against another group on the grounds of opposing 'cultures,' thus producing, through their very erasure, the world’s first victims of ‘colonial’ violence. See, e.g.: “…Neanderthals and modern humans were two distinct species and that only modern humans would eventually develop the capacity for symbolic behavior, or “neoculture,” giving them a competitive advantage over “paleocultural” Neanderthals, who were driven to extinction.” Julien Riel Salvatore and Geoffrey A. Clark, “Middle and Early Upper Paleolithic Burials and the Use of Chronotypology in Contemporary Paleolithic Research,” Current Anthropology, Vol. 42, No. 4 (August/October 2001), 451.


She wrote, for example, how “Ancient empires used violence to expand their territories in order to gain economic power. The XV, XVI, XVII and XVIII centuries are characterized by this type of colonization. Violence was the methodology implemented as well. The colonization of the Americas, in which the natural inhabitants were submitted to a violent system of inhuman exploitation which cost the lives of thousands of them, including the extinction of whole cultures and peoples (i.e. the Antilles), is evidence of this type of colonization. The colonization of the Americas also used the largest process of coercive traffic of human beings known in history. According to Moreno Fraginals, 9.5 million black Africans were brought to this continent for the simple purpose of economic exploitation.” Ana Mendieta, “The Struggle for Culture is the Struggle for Life,” 172-73.

This notion has a particular pedigree in scholarship since 1945 through, for example, Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Spivak and, more recently, Mariana Botey. See Mariana Botey, Zonas de Disturbio: Espectros del México Indígenas en la Modernidad (Mexico: Publicaciones y Fomento Editorial, 2014) and Gayatri...


308 Ibid, 171.


313 Since the nineteenth century the Mendieta family had been deeply involved in the politics and business of Cuba. In September 1960, the New York Times ran the obituary of Ana Mendieta’s great-uncle, Dr. Carlos Mendieta, Cuba’s president after Batista overthrew Gerardo Machado in 1933. “Carlos Mendieta, Ex-Head of Cuba,” New York Times (September 29, 1960). Well before that, her great-grandfather, Carlos Maria de Rojas, gained fame during Cuba’s war of independence (1895-1898) when “he burned down his own sugar mill rather than allow it to benefit the Spanish government.” Jane Blocker, Where is Ana Mendieta? (Durham: Duke University Pres, 1999), 50. In other words, as Jane Blocker puts it, “the Mendieta name was embedded within Cuban nationalism.” (Blocker, Where is Ana Mendieta?, 50) However, the eventual anti-communist position of Mendieta’s father, Ignacio, who had initially supported the revolution, and his alleged involvement with the CIA, made him an enemy of Castro’s new regime. (Blocker, Where is Ana Mendieta?, 51. Also Robert Katz, Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990): 42, 135.) Concerned for their safety and ideologically opposed to the secular and socialist direction of Castro’s regime, Mendieta’s parents sent her away from Cuba. She was relocated to the United States on September 11, 1961, through a program known as Operation Peter
Pan that was underwritten by U.S. corporations and the Catholic Church, both of which saw their interests on the island threatened by the new regime.


315 With Mendieta’s explicit reference to “the female body,” it should be noted that my reading of Mendieta’s work focuses on the politics of her practice somewhat at the expense of the strictly feminist reading that we can perhaps call the dominant angle of her critical reception. Mendieta had a famously contentious relationship with feminism in the United States (most poignantly captured in her A.I.R. tenure), a relationship that I discuss further on as emblematic of her politics (in the context of the exhibition Dialectics of Isolation, which she co-curated at A.I.R.). Jane Blocker has discussed more broadly Mendieta’s relationship to feminism and how her work can best be understood in relation to either other U.S. feminist practices or to a broader feminist critical framework in Blocker, Where is Ana Mendieta?, in particular 58 – 63, 127, ff.


318 The exception would be Nancy Spero, who restaged a performance of Mendieta’s Rastros Corporales (“Body Traces” or “Body Tracks”). Spero explicitly drew a comparison between them and “the recessive mark left by a victim of the bomb in Hiroshima or Nagasaki.” Nancy Spero, “Tracing Ana Mendieta,” Artforum, Vol. 30, No 8., (1992) 77. Spero frequently featured the atomic bomb and its legacies in her work. As Johanna S. Walker writes, “This shadow image—an icon which has become emblematic of the ghostly human imprints left by nuclear genocide—was adopted by Spero many times as a printed and collaged female figure, and which she imbued with symbolic significance as an archetypal sign of female suffering and endurance.” Johanna S. Walker, Nancy Spero: Encounters, (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 24.


320 Lisa Yoneyama, Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Akira Lippit, “Atomic

321 These positions are well represented, for example, in the catalog to the exhibition *Dialectics of Isolation*, which Mendieta co-curated at the A.I.R. Gallery in New York in 1980. She also wrote the introduction to the catalog, which she concluded: “This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but more towards a personal will to continue being ‘other.’” Ana Mendieta, “Introduction,” *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States*, co-curated by Ana Mendieta, Zarina and Kazuko (New York: A.I.R. Gallery: September 2 – 20, 1980).

322 Linda Montano, “Interview with Ana Mendieta,” 66 (also, Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?,* 55). In another interview, she explained how she saw her first *Silueta* as “having nature take over the body, in the same way that it had taken over the symbols of past civilizations.” Ana Mendieta, in conversation with Joan Marter (February 1, 1985) reprinted in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, 228. At first this would seem like a blatant mis-identification of the agent that ‘over took’ past civilizations, as “nature” was and is not, strictly speaking, the reason why these Zapotec architectural structures now stand in ruin. Jane Blocker has investigated this notion in relation to *First Silueta* in great detail. On the one hand, Blocker sees past the ruins to the stones themselves identifying a time signature that “is measured by a clock set on galactic time.” “The stones, the grave itself, and Mendieta’s body lying in it tell a story of time and history,” Blocker continues, “one that begins not with Mendieta, or with Zapotec culture, but with the very formation of the earth.” (Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?,* 56.) Blocker’s notion at first seems to skip too easily over the significance of the site of Zapotec culture, foreclosing the simple question of why Mendieta was at Yagul in the first place, and why she would return to this specific site over a period of four years. As we have seen, to the contrary, Mendieta’s conception of the Paleolithic (or of this “galactic time”) is not simple for the sake of an abstraction but serves to connect a specific version of history through to her present moment. In this context, however, Blocker has displayed a wariness of readings that are too quick to Mendieta’s personal postcolonial experience as an interpretive framework for the work: “It is very common for critics to link statements such as [her statement “my art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the Universe”] with the fact of Mendieta’s expatriation. They read her desire to ‘re-establish’ bonds as a result of having been forced into exile.” (Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?,* 57.) It is through a feminist reading, however, that Blocker returns to the importance of the actual site: “If we consider this work as a template for the earth as feminine, it is significant that Mendieta chose a Zapotec monument as its site. The Zapotecs, as Mary Sabbatino explains, ‘were the only Mesoamerican people who resisted the
Aztecs. Their reclamation of identity and the domination spoke to Mendieta of her own struggles. The piece shows that the earth is never simply an enormous prehistoric womb; it is always also the subject of national, political, and patriarchal claims. [...] It is clear that Mendieta’s earth is neither general nor traditional; rather it is deeply tied to colonial resistance. This earth is an enduring origin that manages to escape a foreign culture and an enslaving history.”

(Blöcker, Where is Ana Mendieta?, 57).

As Olga Visa notes: “The following summer, Mendieta returned to Yagul with [Hans] Breder to create another central but less well known Silueta found in the artist’s slide archive. This time the artist used animal blood (purchased from a butcher at a market in Oaxaca) to draw the outline of her body in the earth. It was rendered with Breder’s assistance in the ruins of the Palace of Six Patios, the former residence of the Zapotec rulers of the region. The work is notable in that it marks the first time Mendieta employed her silhouette rather than her own person in the series. What is also noteworthy is the amount of planning needed to realize both works at Yagul: the advance purchase of flowers and fresh blood as well as the fast-paced choreography of execution at a guarded cultural site suggest forethought and careful coordination.” Olga Viso, Unseen Mendieta, 78.


The piece is also the subject of one of Mendieta’s films, a silent super 8 colored film titled Silueta del Laberinto (Laberinth Blood Imprint). As one description goes, “The camera comes in for another close-up and moves to the left. The sunlight is reflected off the surface of the blood imprint, adding a jewel-like quality to the figure.” Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta, ex. cat. curated by Lynn Lukkas & Howard Oransky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 100.

The quote in more context: “But let us return to this atmospheric violence, this violence rippling under the skin. We have seen as it develops how a number of driving mechanisms pick it up and convey it to an outlet. In spite of the metamorphosis imposed on it by the colonial regime in tribal or regional conflicts, violence continues to progress, the colonized subject identifies his enemy, puts a name to all of his misfortunes, and casts all his exacerbated hatred and rage in this new direction.” Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 31.

Ken Cooper, “The Whiteness of the Bomb,” in Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 97. Cooper notes other qualities of Silko’s Ceremony that seem to have an affinity with Mendieta. Reminiscent of Mendieta’s criticism of some of her peers, such as Smithson, Cooper writes how Silko “notes the cultural imperialism of Caucasian art, and the ‘dissolution of their consciousness into dead objects’ such as plastic and neon, concrete and
steel; the whites try to ‘glut the hollowness with patriotic wars and with great technology and the wealth it brought.’” (Cooper, “The Whiteness of the Bomb,” 97). Other descriptions of Ceremony seems relevant to an understanding of Mendieta’s work: “The turning point comes when Tayo [the protagonist of Ceremony] realizes that ‘there were no boundaries; the world below and the sand paintings inside became the same that night’. The execution of Japanese soldiers that Tayo witnesses as an infantryman in the pacific is, after all, related to the death of his uncle Josiah on the Laguna Pueblo thousands of miles away; the ‘dismembered corpses and the atomic heat-flash outlines’ of Hiroshima victims are connected to witchery being practiced near Tayo’s home.” (Ibid, 98.)

Not only did Mendieta explicitly frame her Siluetas as being “a direct result of my having been torn away from my homeland during my adolescence” but she also wrote how her efforts point “not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but more towards a personal will to continue being ‘other’.” Ana Mendieta, “Introduction,” Dialectics of Isolation.


Viso, Unseen Mendieta, 77-8. For Mendieta’s own words comparing Cuba and Mexico, see Joan Marter’s interview from February 1, 1985. While she makes a distinction between the desert landscape of Mexico and the tropics of Cuba, in response to Marter’s prompt that “It would seem that something sparked [in Mexico] that’s obviously connected with Cuba” Mendieta says “Well, definitely the culture. The language, the culture, and also I felt that at that time very important for me, the resurrection of the real spirit of America, America the continent.” Ana Mendieta: Traces, 230.


This formula is slightly confused in the context of Mendieta at Yágul insofar as, in a literal transposition, it could be mistaken as a protest against the Zapotec in a desecration of their architecture. It is, however, better understood as protest against that architecture’s agent of ruin.

This alignment is most famously spelled out in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s “Civilization and Barbarism” (1845). For the role of graffiti in this particular history, see Brendan Lanctot, “Graffiti and the Poetics of Politics in Rosas’s Argentina (1929-1952),” Hispanic Review, Vol. 78. No. 1 (Winter, 2010), 49-70. It is also worth noting, on another note, that one of the most storied archeological moments of extinction from antiquity, the destruction of Pompeii, also acted as a great preservation of ancient Roman graffiti. See for example, Rebecca R. Benefiel, “Dialogues of Ancient Graffiti in the House of Maius Castricius in Pompeii,” American Journal of Archaeology, Vol. 114, No. 1 (Jan., 2010), pp. 59-101.
Retamar cites, for example, Jose Martí’s critique of Sarmiento to explain how “the presumed barbarism of our peoples was invented with crude cynicism by ‘those who desired foreign lands’; those who, with equal effrontery, give the ‘popular name’ of ‘civilization’ to the ‘contemporary’ human being ‘who comes from Europe or European America.’” Roberto Fernández Retamar “Caliban: Notes towards a Discussion of Culture in Our America,” trans. Lynn Garafola, David Arthur McMurray and Robert Márquez, *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 15, No. ½, Caliban (Winter–Spring, 1974), p. 38. Retamar locates violent and racist tendencies in over-zealous appeals to “civilization” that had been recurrent in the post-Conquest history of the Americas, using in particular the example of Sarmiento of Argentina to argue how this idea can lead to a conceptualization of governance that takes as its basic logic colonial violence: “For Sarmiento, to govern is also to depopulate the nation of its Indians.” (ibid, 40).


See *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*, 228.

These experimental films were produced through a back and forth process of film to tape transfers in which Mendieta manipulated and processed the tape, screened it, and then refilmed it back on to 16mm. The catalog for *Covered in Time and History* explains this process of Mendieta’s film works in detail, annotating the production processes of her various experiments: “In order to manipulate the color of the video image, the artist would assign unique RGB (Red green blue) values within the sixteen thresholds to different levels of brightness. Miller did not have the necessary equipment for his students to record the posterized video back to tape, but he did have a quality RGB monitor and would rent a 16mm camera (an Auricon Pro 1200 with the TVT shutter), which was designed to film the video without the usual flickering produced by the frame rate differential between video and 16mm film. Along with a number of her peers, Mendieta experimented with this process. In this case, she likely transferred her Super 8 film to video, input the video into the processor, manipulated the color values, and then filmed the resulting images off the monitor using the special 16mm camera. *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*, 228.

The 2015 exhibition catalog *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta* is the first time much of this material has been collected and published, making it an extremely useful tool in the expansion of these lines of inquiry within the Mendieta literature.

Covered in Time and History, 227 – 231.


Survivors and observers of atomic blasts have recalled seeing a “great blue flash” or a bluish light at detonation. See Richard L. Miller, *Under the Cloud: The Decades of Nuclear Testing* (The Woodlands: Two-Sixty Press, 1991), 54.


Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, 77.

The citation is taken from a discussion of the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. See John Whittier Treat, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8. Cited by Akira Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, 110. “Specters of invisibility” is a phrase borrowed from Lippit, who also influenced much of my thinking around the *siluetas*. He writes: “Since 1945 the specter of invisibility has haunted the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The unimaginable nature of the destruction has produced a proliferation of concrete and abstract, literal and figurative tropes of invisibility that move toward the atomic referent. The visual materiality of the tropology is marked by erasure and effacement, by a mode of avisuality that destroys the lines between interiority and exteriority, surface and depth, visibility and invisibility. Avisuality is the possibility of the spaceless image, the impossible figure of that which cannot be figured, an image of the very facelessness of the image. It opens onto a site of the atomic spectacle that is irreducibly exstatic, other–archival. Avisuality is, perhaps, the only true semiotic of the archive. Its only figure, or *sugata*. In the archive of atomic destruction, at its center, in the place where it takes place, inside and out, transparent and invisible, the spectacle of the impossible signifier burns, *cinefied*: radiant, specular, avisual.” Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, 102-3.

Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, 102.

For this idea I am, of course, indebted to Jane Blocker’s book *Where is Ana Mendieta?* which, as I explore in greater detail below, discusses this phenomenon in great detail.


Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, 51.

The figure is cited in Emron Esplin, “Cuban Types, Distorted Memory, and a Return to Cuba in Cristina García’s ‘The Agüero Sisters’,” *Confluencia* (Vol. 20, No. 2, Spring 2005), 86.


“Our Cuban Colony: A Study in Sugar” is the name of a book from 1928 written the U.S. economic historian Leland Hamilton Jenks (1892 – 1976). Retamar cites it the context of discussing his relationship to the United States, noting how at the time of his birth (in 1930), “Cuba had been part of the empire for some thirty-two years.” See Goffredo Diana, John Beverley, and Roberto Fernández Retamar, “These Are the Times We Have to Live in: An Interview with Roberto Fernández Retamar,” 428-429. Retamar elaborates further on the historical roots of the state of rupture between the United States and Cuba: “To
understand the *différand*...between Cuba and the United States, you have to go back before Fidel’s proclamation of the socialist character of the revolution in 1961, back before even the triumph of the revolution in 1959, to the early nineteenth century, when the ruling elites of the rapidly expanding United States expressed their interest—never abandoned by the way—in annexing Cuba, or to the beginning of this century when the imposition of the Platt Amendment limited our sovereignty at the precise moment of our birth as an independent nation. The cancellation of the Cuban sugar quota by the United States in 1960 was consistent with such a posture.” (Ibid., 420).

Retamar himself speaks highly of the U.S. revolutionary war: “But the United States wasn’t born a monster. Quite the contrary. It was the first country in this hemisphere to carry out a successful revolutionary war of independence. However incomplete we might judge that revolution today—given that it allowed slavery to survive for almost a century more and produced terrible consequences for indigenous peoples of the continent—it was one of history’s great moments. It would not have been fair to call the United States a monster then.” (Ibid., p. 417-18.)

See above, Chapter 1.


Original: “Cuando a mi me auancaron de mi patria yo me senti como si huberia pecado sin saber lo que habia hecho para que me separaran de Cuba, subconsciencia del pecado me da tendencia a la auto destruccion.” From a diary entry c. 1979 – 1981, reprinted in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, 210.

Quoted in Judith Wilson, “Ana Mendieta Plants her Garden,” 71. In these quotes, the passivity and anonymity of the grammar ("being ripped," “to be taken,” “they”) points to the extent to which specific historical agency surrounding Operation Peter Pan, and thus by extension Mendieta’s exile, remains deeply in flux. Operation Peter Pan was facilitated by various agencies in the United States governments (such as the Department of State and the CIA), but also the Catholic Church and private businesses. And, what’s more, those against the revolution, or those, like Mendieta’s father, who supported the revolution but who soured on Castro’s realignment with the Soviet Union, would of course blame it on Castro. For a discussion on this complex situation in the context of Cuban literature, see Emron Esplin, “Cuban Types, Distorted Memory, and a Return to Cuba in Cristina García’s ‘The Agüero Sisters’,” pp. 83-97.


See Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, 97; 144, n. 21.

Quoted in Emron Esplin, “Cuban Types, Distorted Memory, and a Return to Cuba in Cristina García’s ‘The Aguero Sisters’,” 86. In a footnote, Esplin writes how “In 1978, De la Campa was one of the writers and editors of Contra viento y marea, a book written by several of the participants in Operation Peter Pan that harshly criticized the operation and overtly opposed Miami’s position on Castro and Cuban/United States relations. (p. 96, n. 2)


Blocker, Where Is Ana Mendieta?, 93.


Ibid.


Ibid, 175.


Blocker, Where is Ana Mendieta?, 93.

Blocker, Where is Ana Mendieta?, 93.

See Blocker, Where is Ana Mendieta?, 77.

Joan Marter and Ana Mendieta in Conversation, reprinted in Ana Mendieta, Traces, 228.


Michel Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 242.


Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 148.

Ana Mendieta: Traces, 224.

In 1982 Mendieta broke away from certain circles of New York feminism, which she criticized for not sufficiently acknowledging the struggles of non-white women in her introduction to Dialectics of Isolation discussed above. “During the mid to late sixties as women in the United States politicized themselves and came together in the Feminist Movement with the purpose to end the domination and exploitation by the white male culture, they failed to remember us. American Feminism as it stands is basically a white middle class movement.” Two years after that exhibition, she resigned from the A.I.R. Gallery altogether in October, 1982. Residue of this tension is long lasting; the former
director of A.I.R. cited an account of a disagreement between the gallery and Carl Andre as the reason why Mendieta resigned, mediating this important decision through a man without considering the extent to which the views she expressed in *Dialectics* might have contributed to her decision. See Kat Griefen, “Ana Mendieta at A.I.R. Gallery, 1977-82,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* (21:2), 177.


387 For a far more incisive and detailed exploration of the complexity of Mendieta’s “La Venus Negra” in *Heresies*, see Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta*, 114-129.


389 In full: “So it follows as a Cuban American and cultural inheritor of the Tainan Culture that I want to make a small publication a collaboration you might say between them and I, using their myths and my drawings” [sic]. Published as “Transcription of Ana Mendieta’s notes for a book of drawings, c. 1982” in *Ana Mendieta: A Book of Works* (Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1993), 25.

390 Ken Cooper, “The Whiteness of the Bomb,” 99. While more or less absent from postwar art history, fields like literary and communication studies have situated investigations of the nuclear issue at this intersection.


393 On a purely speculative note, it is worth pointing out that A.I.R. had, in 1979, lost important funding from the National Endowment for the Arts that had a direct impact the budget of *Dialectics of Isolation*. They were able to make up for this loss with an $8,000 grant from New York State Council on the Arts. While the dramatic politicization of arts funding would explode later in the decade, its worth asking to what extent the explicit citing an important intellectual source behind Cuban revolutionary theory with U.S. funding would have been discouraged at that time. On another note, in the context of Mendieta’s citation of Retamar, it is also worth noting that the two met in the early 1980s on one of Mendieta’s trips to Cuba, though it was not entirely clear if it was before or after the *Dialectics of Isolation* introduction was composed. In a 1995 interview, Retamar recalls: “I had the chance to meet the late Ana Mendieta, whose remarkable work as an artist, which I deeply admire, was so influential for the
generation of artists that emerged in Cuba in the 1980s. We published not long ago in *Casa de la Américas* a beautiful poem by Nancy Morejón on Ana’s tragic and unnecessary death.” See Goffredo Diana, John Beverley, and Roberto Fernández Retamar, “These Are the Times We Have to Live in: An Interview with Roberto Fernández Retamar,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Winter, 1995), 431

Ken Cooper has traced the questions about racial politics within the emergent Atomic Age, reminding us how writers like Langston Hughes questioned “whether America would have dropped atomic bombs on ‘white folks’ like the Germans” or the sentiment that “atom belongs to white folks.” Ken Cooper, “The Whiteness of the Bomb,” 79. Others more recently have explored the more material effects the U.S. weapons testing regime has had on indigenous populations. See for example, Danielle Endres, “The Rhetoric of Nuclear Colonialism: Rhetorical Exclusion of American Indian Arguments in the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Siting Decision,” *Communications and Critical/Cultural Studies* (Vol. 6, No. 1, March 2009). See also “Nuclear Colonialism and Environmental Racism: An Indigenous Perspective,” a text delivered by Richard N. Salvador at the United Nations in Geneva, 1998, reprinted in the Pacific Islands Report, http://archives.pireport.org/archive/1998/november/11-03-17.htm, retrieved April 2016. It should be noted that the testing regimes in the U.S. have also had a significant impact on the broader U.S. population. For comprehensive documentation of this, see Carole Gallagher, *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War* (New York: Random House, 1993).


Again, recent scholarship has explored “nuclear colonialism” under a more narrow understanding as well as a more expanded theoretical notion of “nuclear age colonialism.” Danielle Endres, cited in note 391 above gives an example of the former, describing nuclear colonialism as “a system of domination through which governments and corporations disproportionately target and devastate indigenous peoples and their lands to maintain the nuclear production process.” See Danielle Endres, “The Rhetoric of Nuclear Colonialism,” 39. Others broaden the approach into a more theoretical inquiry of “Nuclear Age colonialism,” a designation that presupposes the covert survival of the colony within the ‘postcolonial’ era—much like the related flourishing of (covert) war within the ‘postwar’ period—and the centrality of the nuclear issue therein. Cooper cites “more recent assessments of Nuclear Age colonialism by Paul Virilio, Edward Said, Michael Paul Rogin, Gayatri Chakrovory Spivak, and Joseph Gerson.” (Cooper, “Whiteness of the Bomb,” 87)


Ibid.

Ibid.

The great precedent for this complexity is Diego Rivera, whose vision, discussed above in the introduction to this dissertation, for the future in his prophetic pre-atomic bomb but nuclear themed mural Man at the Crossroads collided terribly with the reality of the postwar in his potent anti-Korean war mural The Nightmare of War and the Dream of Peace, which attempted to bring the exploitation of indigenous groups into the context of the nuclear armed Cold War conflicts.

Proposal to Bard College for La Maja de Yerba, 1984; reprinted in Ana Mendieta: Traces, 224.

Printed in Ana Mendieta: Traces, 228.

Virilio, War and Cinema, 81.

Akira Lippit, Atomic Light: Shadow, 94.


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