



Quiet Crash Sites: Antun Maračić's Cro Car Crash Chronicle, after War/hol and Usput spomenici/ Sideroad Monuments and Aernout Mik's Refraction

by Ricarda Vidal

INTRODUCTION

M25 Greater London - One lane closed anticlockwise, accident, two cars involved between J6, Godstone and J8, Reigate; opposite lane slow-moving traffic for 2 miles caused by onlookers.

Traffic news like this is frequent: an accident blocking off one lane, curious onlookers causing tailbacks on the other. To those involved and to those who witness a car crash, it is an intimate, shocking, but nonetheless often fascinating, experience as death breaks in upon the smooth flow of life and brings it to a sudden and undeniable stop. Even if the victims survive, their crashed cars attest to the proximity of death and it is that which turns the accident site into a public stage surrounded by curious spectators. "On the one hand the horror of death drives us off, for we prefer life; on the other an element at once solemn and terrifying fascinates us and disturbs us profoundly," writes George Bataille (2001: 45). Paradoxically in death, which is life's greatest certainty, we face the great unknown. This paradox makes us deny death and ban it from consciousness at the same time as we acknowledge its attraction by examining it and by trying to get as close to it as possible without succumbing to it.

While death and dying used to be an integral part of society with intricate rituals and customs of leave-taking and mourning on the one hand and public executions on the other, it has been pushed to the margins with the beginning of modernity



(Benjamin 1969: 93-94). Cemeteries have been moved from the centres of towns to the outskirts and dying has been relegated to hospitals and sanatoriums, where it is regulated and organised by bureaucrats (Ariès 1981: 588). In some sense death is treated like a disease which must be quarantined lest it infect the living.

However, the crowds who flock to the sites of accidents and violent deaths attest to a continuing need to see and to know about death. Goldberg (1998: 28) notes that representations of death have increased dramatically since the disappearance of actual death from public life. Partially this can be attributed to the revolution in the media with the invention of photography and cinema which coincides roughly with improvements in medicine, a rise in life expectancy and significantly lower death rates. At the same time, changes in belief systems and growing doubts about the existence of God created new anxieties about death. Goldberg speaks of the emergence of “a new and newly anxious audience” who “sought novel ways to cope with its fears” (ibid.: 28).

Witnessing the demise of an unknown person, rather than of a relative or friend, allows us to confront it in a purer sense, divested of the sadness of personal loss. Nowadays for many the only time they are confronted with death outside their immediate circle of friends or family, is the chance encounter with the traffic accident. In fact, in the course of the 20th century, death in the car crash has become the most frequent form of public death in peace time with an estimated thirty million fatal accidents having occurred since 1900 (Duffy 2009: 200). However, despite our fascination with the crash and despite the communal awareness of the dangers of speed and the frequency of accidents, Duffy argues that “there is a sense in which the crashes remain unspoken, hovering beneath the horizon of the field of vision of public culture” (ibid.: 200). While it is true that at least since the 1960s there has barely been an action movie without at least one, and often a series of car crashes, these are rarely fatal. Often they are presented as an exhilarating spectacle of destruction from which both drivers and passengers escape unscathed. A notable exception to this trend was David Cronenberg’s 1996 adaptation of J. G. Ballard’s controversial novel *Crash* (1973) with its cold and detached gaze on the violence of the crash and the protagonists’ fascination and openly acknowledged attraction to death and destruction (also see Vidal 2007: 141-145). On the whole, however, just as natural death is institutionalised, the violent death in the car crash is either fictionalised into a media spectacle or abstracted into the jargon of traffic news and eventually turned into accident statistics. However, its fascination to the individual is undiminished. Though dreading what they will behold, onlookers will gather and draw close to the scene of violent death, driven by the urge to see with their own eyes.

This essay sets out to examine our paradoxical attitude to the car crash site, its attraction and repulsion, by looking at three contemporary artworks: Antun Maračić’s photographic cycles *Cro Car Crash Chronicle, after War/hol* (2001-2) and *Usput spomenici/ Sideroad Monuments* (1999-2002) and Aernout Mik’s video installation *Refraction* (2004). Maračić’s two photo cycles are compendium works. Whereas *Cro Car Crash Chronicle* consists of a series of black-and-white press photographs of car



crashes, *Sideroad Monuments* focuses on crosses and monuments by the roadside which mark the deaths of traffic victims. Mik's *Refraction* consists of a tripartite video installation of a large-scale traffic accident. The film is shown in a loop and without sound, which gives it a dreamlike and unreal quality. The accident is stylised into an aesthetic experience with religious overtones, but there is a profound lack of purpose and meaning.

In the three artworks, death in the traffic accident is removed from both institutionalisation and media spectacle and placed within the frameworks of aesthetics. Less controversial than Ballard or Cronenberg but nonetheless provocative, Maračić and Mik only invoke but do not show the dead body. Quietly their work transforms the gallery into a site of pilgrimage, where we can contemplate death and reflect upon our attitude towards life.

CONTROL AND FATE

"That the accident could happen in a moment, wholly unexpectedly, meant that for many the car crash was (and is) Western culture's prime example of the very idea of accidentality, the very example of fate itself" (Duffy 2009: 204). The shock of the car crash is all the bigger as the car promises total control. Driving means being in charge of one's fate even while we are aware that speeding means challenging fate. At all times the car gives us the illusion of protection and power while it is simultaneously the greatest cause of accidental death. In the crash, which is most often the immediate result of a loss of control, the technologically created illusion of invincibility is destroyed. Driving is a paradox of absolute control over, and at the same time total exposure to fate. Both Maračić and Mik play with this paradox in their works.

Let us first look at Maračić's *Cro Car Crash Chronicle, after War/hol*. The series is made up of several unframed, scanned and enlarged reproductions of black-and-white press photographs of car crashes, which are hung in a continuous frieze around the walls of the exhibition space creating a circle which is only broken by the door. Every print carries the title of the series in the left upper corner and the name of a random weekday in the right upper corner. There is no date, only the weekday, which emphasises the randomness and the daily recurrence of the accident. Below the image there is the original newspaper caption and, in some cases, the name of the press photographer. On the bottom of every print the artist has pencilled "E. A. Usvojena slika" ("Appropriated Image") and his signature (Fig. 1). The layout of all the prints is similar. Together they form a grid-like pattern, which seems to extend into infinity. While it has been argued that the image in proliferation loses meaning and eventually becomes nothing but a figure of forgetting (Baudrillard 1981: 103f), in the case of *Chronicle* the symmetric and circular repetition of the crash in its various manifestations works to the contrary. Isolated from the noise of the everyday within the silence of the exhibition space, the accident in infinite repetition gains the power of inescapable fate.



The title of the series alludes to Andy Warhol's out-sized, brightly coloured silk-screen prints of car crashes from the early 1960s. Taken from newspapers and revisiting Warhol's crash series, Maračić's images are appropriated in a double sense. Warhol as the avatar of American consumer culture, and the car as the symbol of freedom and progress appear especially significant in Maračić's home country, post-communist, post-war Croatia. *Cro Car Crash Chronicle, after War/hol* is not only "after Warhol" but also "after War", and the English title was not only chosen for its obvious onomatopoeic qualities but also as a reference to capitalism and the Americanisation of Eastern Europe after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the war in Yugoslavia. As soon as the war was over, ownership of fast big cars in all of former Yugoslavia increased exponentially and, while accident rates were dropping in Western Europe, the death toll on Croatian roads was rising steadily. Using the jargon of war, Maračić refers to the daily carnage on the roads as "peacetime killings" (quoted in Župan 2002: n.p.). In *Chronicle*, he shows a world where the road has replaced the battlefield; where war continues "after War/hol" in the shape of speeding Western cars and where the death in the car crash has become as quotidian as the violent death in wartime. Further, the almost obsessive repetition of the layout of the prints is reminiscent of the repetitive reporting of fatalities during war, when the dead are turned into numbers to be broadcast in the formulaic rhetoric of the news bulletin.

While Warhol used the bright signal colours of advertising to comment on consumerism (Vidal 2007: 109f.), Maračić randomly intersperses his continuous circle of grey accidents with gaily coloured adverts of high-tech sports cars. There are no blank spaces in Maračić's cycle, only these bright promises of a better life. "Uzbuđenje" (Excitement), one of them says, showing a speeding car (Fig.2). Duffy describes the crash as "a flash bespeaking the intrusive revenge of the real on a culture whose pleasures are built on the dream of escaping the illusionary world of consumerist simulation while still wishing for its cossetting promised security" (2009: 203). The adverts in Maračić's installation illustrate her point and at the same time take it one step further. They are invitations to daydream, but ultimately they will cause the next accident. Ivica Župan refers to them as "intruders in the monotonous continuity of accidents" (2002: n.p.). Here the accident is the rule and the shiny speeding car only the exception — soon it, too, will be a grey wreck on a grey roadside in a grey newspaper. All excitement ends in the square boxy van of the local funeral services, which appears in one of the photographs (Fig. 1). Maračić conflates the freshly produced new car with the broken wreck — the daydream with its harsh reality. *Cro Car Crash Chronicle* illustrates the natural cycle of production and corruption; like the new car the accident is produced "on the assembly line" (Maračić quoted in Župan 2002: n.p.). The artwork can then be seen as a contemporary version of the medieval Dance of Death.

Maračić understands his series as a sort of warning sign to others and at the same time as a pilgrimage. Signing every single image means "stopping by every scene of the tragedy" (Maračić quoted in Župan 2002: n.p.). The viewers of his show



are invited to repeat this slow procession from one image to the next before leaving through the same door they entered or repeating their circular journey.

A PILGRIMAGE TO AN EMPTY GRAVE

In *Usput spomenici/ Sideroad Monuments*, the compendium work to *Chronicle*, Maračić took the idea of the pilgrimage further and visited the roadside shrines and monuments for crash victims that abound on Croatia's roads. This real pilgrimage, as opposed to the metaphorical pilgrimage of *Chronicle*, resulted in a series of colour photographs of gravestones, elaborate sculptures with ornamental flowerbeds, or simply flowers left at the roadside. These memorials, or "monuments" as Maračić calls them, are often in beautiful spots overlooking the sea or the plains with the mountains in the background. All of them appear quite new; many carry birth and death dates demarcating the sadly short life span of some young male driver who died there (Fig. 3).

Peter Suchin writes about the act of public mourning constituted by laying down flowers or the erection of a monument that "there is something a little pompous about this gesture, signifying as it does the desire to be seen to mourn, rather than simply expressing one's grief in a private, less emphatically visible way" (2007: 12). But we can also see this public act and sharing of grief as a remnant of the old customs of mourning, the public display of the dead and the death vigil which was shared by the community.

Maračić's use of the word "monument" to describe these memorial sites deserves a closer look. Monuments are built to last; they are built for posterity; they are built so the dead are not forgotten, so that something remains, lives on. Bearing crosses and other religious symbols, roadside monuments should be wayside shrines inviting prayer and contemplation: but due to the nature of their origin they are often in dangerous spots where stopping is out of the question and merely looking can be fatal. Moreover, these constructions by the roadside, be they flowers or marble sculptures, have only a fleeting presence. It is easy to drive by them without ever seeing them. Ultimately nothing but empty graves, every now and then, when they have become too many, they are removed by governmental orders. Thus from the start the roadside monuments fall short of the traditional definition of the monument as immortal bearer of memory. Maračić addresses this in his title with the wordplay on "*usput*" ("by the way") and "*uz put*" ("by the road"): "it means 'monuments by the road', but also 'by the way', 'en passant' [...] monuments to which you don't pay complete attention because you are passing by quickly" (Maračić in an email to the author, 28 July 2010). The English translation of the title as "*Sideroad Monuments*" can capture the double meaning only partially.

Roland Barthes opposes the alleged immortality of the monument with the mortality of the photograph, which has replaced them as "the general and somehow natural witness of 'what has been'" (1993: 93). In the case of the roadside monuments,



however, mortality and immortality are reversed. By taking photographs of the monuments, Maračić prolongs their otherwise limited lifespan. Though the photograph certainly does not immortalise, it preserves and ensures that at least a trace of the monument lives on some time after the actual artefact has disappeared. In the exhibition, the photograph becomes the monument and the art gallery turns into the site of memory. While the actual three-dimensional monument was still as much a memorial for an individual as a symbol of death and reminder of the fragility of life, in its two-dimensional form it loses all individual meaning. In the hushed atmosphere of the gallery setting, the roadside monuments are way stations on a communal pilgrimage – Maračić's pilgrimage as much as our own, as we slowly walk from frame to frame.

RITUALS OF SPECTATORSHIP AND RESCUE

While *Chronicle* brings the crashed car into the gallery and allows the viewers to imagine and examine the moment of impact and to wonder about the moments of intense life ("*Uzbuđenje*" — "Excitement") immediately before, *Sideroad Monuments* looks at the time of mourning and the memory of the crash. The last artwork I want to look at, Aernout Mik's *Refraction*, focuses on the time in-between the shock of the crash and the acceptance of death and loss: this is marked by the incomprehension and curiosity of onlookers and the attempt of rescue teams and forensic scientists to impose structure and order onto the chaos of the accident.

Like Maračić's works, *Refraction* offers a circular and spatial experience. However, while Maračić invites the viewer to step inside his circle of crash sites, *Refraction* offers the outside of the circle: the film is projected onto a tripartite structure, which curves away from the viewer and creates a sense of distance and alienation at the same time as it sparks their curiosity (Fig. 4). Like most of Mik's films, *Refraction* is a carefully staged creation of what could have been an actual event, i.e. a traffic accident. As the camera travels slowly from scene to scene we discover that a tour bus has fallen over on its side, causing a long tailback on a country road. Amidst the paramedics, the doctors and the firemen there are also a number of soldiers and scientists in white protective clothing who are searching the site. From time to time a herd of sheep is driven across the road by a shepherd and there are several lingering shots of pigs foraging in the mud in a wooden enclosure by the roadside, whose behaviour curiously mimics the forensic scientists' search of the site. The overturned bus and the presence of the rescue teams, the scientists and the military indicate that something catastrophic must have happened, but there is no sense of urgency or purpose. Rather, the film's protagonists exude an air of boredom or, at the most, expectancy. While there are a few people in rescue blankets sitting by the roadside, there is a prevailing sense that the victims have not yet arrived (Fig.5).

With its slow and quiet shots *Refraction* is both the antithesis of the car crash in the action movie and the opposite of news documentation or reality TV. However,



despite or perhaps precisely because of its lack of drama, the film has all the appearance of documenting a real event. Indeed, it is remarkably similar to the artist's later work *Raw Footage* (2006) which consists of actual footage shot by news teams during the Balkan wars and rejected for lack of action. While *Raw Footage* uses real footage, Mik subverts the documentary qualities of the camera for the purposes of subtle alteration and alienation in *Refraction*.

Video, like its other, related technological predecessors, film and photography, relies on the fact and fiction of indexicality, on the physical presence of a subject before the camera lens. But it also implies the presumptive presence of a subject behind the camera lens, a subject who, by proxy or not, sees. Camera as prosthetic eye: it is the camera that bears witness. (Saltzman 2006: 83)

While Maračić plays on the notion of truth in photography by juxtaposing adverts for new cars with press photographs of crashed cars, Mik meticulously plans and creates his videos.

Earlier I mentioned the patterns and structures emerging from the closely hung repetitive images of Maračić's *Chronicle* which lend the accident an aura of inescapability and fate, but also open ways of a ritualistic perception of the work through the slow walk from one image to the next. Especially in combination with *Sideroad Monuments*, the circular walk facilitates a coming to terms with death. Mik creates a similar walk from scene to scene. However, in the absence of victims, this becomes an empty ritual. In their various uniforms the scientists, paramedics, firemen and soldiers appear to be part of a play enacting the motions and customs of catastrophe and rescue. Though motiveless, their behaviour appears well-rehearsed and orchestrated by an invisible hand. Quoting the biblical metaphor of the human herd and the divine shepherd, their actions are reflected in the sheep which are herded repeatedly across the accident site (Fig. 6).

Mik's careful staging as well as the absence of the victims undermine and question the tool video as "witness-bearer" (Saltzman 2006: 83) of true events. In *Refraction* the real event does not happen on the screen but in the space of the gallery. The artificiality of the crash site leaves the viewer with a sense of unease, which is akin to the sense of unreality we feel towards death, and which pervades any experience of the catastrophic. The inexplicable search in the film and the purposelessness which is interrupted every now and then by a flurry of activity which almost immediately subsides into lethargy, create an atmosphere of being lost, which reflects our incomprehension in the face of death, especially when it occurs outside the framework of religion or the institution.

As mentioned earlier, though both Maračić and Mik focus on the car crash, they show neither injured nor dead bodies. However, in all three works the absence of the dead body is tangible. Death haunts the work and spills out into the exhibition space. In *Refraction*, the absence of sound and the strange tranquillity of the filming augment



this sense of palpable absence and haunting. Taussig speaks of a “*calm of place*” which challenges the viewer to look more closely:

The silence makes what you see seem incomplete. You feel a mystery. You have been shut out of something. Where is the beginning? Where are we going? You feel a mystery. So you look harder. (2006: 18f.)

Taussig describes the birth of a “new eye”, brought on by video and TV, which have changed our ways of perceiving reality: “AM’s artwork turns this very same eye in on itself. It makes you aware of this new eye of ours” (ibid.: 12). Mik invites us to take the place behind the camera and to adopt what Saltzman had called the “prosthetic eye” as our own. We become those who bear witness, but like the involuntary witness of the road accident we have limited control over what we see. There is no comprehensive narrative but only fragments. Mik’s camera offers the gaze of the witness who has been caught up in the accident and strains to see what has happened, but whose attempts at making sense of the situation are constantly thwarted. Our view of the scene is restricted to the frame of the camera, which is very wide but not very high. Often the viewpoint is very close to the ground and even though some shots are taken from a higher vantage point, we are never able to survey the scene as a whole. The experience of the work becomes one of frustration, but it also poses a challenge. Instead of the spectacle of violent death, *Refraction* shows the spectacle of disaster and the search for meaning that surrounds it. The work invites us to become part of this search. Like Maračić’s *Chronicle* and *Sideroad Monuments*, the slow-moving contemplative shots of *Refraction* allow us to visit each scene and analyse it. The absence of real victims makes us focus on the rituals, the motions and patterns of rescue and witnessing. Ultimately we will question our own role, our fascination and expectation but also our fear of suddenly being confronted with violent death.

CONCLUSION

By bringing the car crash into the art gallery, the three artworks make it possible for us to examine it on quasi neutral ground. Surrounded by the strange calmness which emanates from the images we can contemplate the crash for what it is: a profoundly disruptive experience which is at the same time entirely banal, a daily occurrence and undeniable part of life. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of the absence of dead or injured bodies, these quiet crash sites can be seen as perfect *memento mori* of contemporary times.



PICTURES

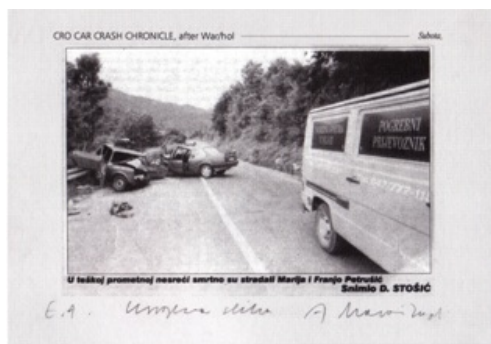


Fig. 1 Antun Marčić, print from the series Cro Car Crash Chronicle, 2001–2002, digital print on graphic paper, 18.2 x 25.7 cm. Courtesy the artist and Miroslav Kraljević Gallery, Zagreb.



Fig. 2 Antun Marčić, print from the series Cro Car Crash Chronicle, 2001–2002, digital print on graphic paper, 18.2 x 25.7 cm. Courtesy the artist and Miroslav Kraljević Gallery, Zagreb.



Fig. 3 Antun Marčić, print from the series Usput spomenici/Sideroad Monuments, 1999–2002, colour print, 50 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artist and Miroslav Kraljević Gallery, Zagreb.



Fig. 4 Aernout Mik, *Refraction*, 2004, Installation view Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, USA, 2005, Photography: Michal Raz-Russo, Courtesy carlier | gebauer and the artist.



Fig. 5 Aernout Mik, still from *Refraction*, 2004, dig. video on harddisk, Loop, Edition of 4 + 2 a. p., Courtesy carlier | gebauer and the artist.



Fig. 6 Aernout Mik, still from *Refraction*, 2004, dig. video on harddisk, Loop, Edition of 4 + 2 a. p., Courtesy carlier | gebauer and the artist.

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