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AES+F – More than just a matter of (bad) taste

The spectacle is capital to such a degree
of accumulation that it becomes image.

Guy Debord¹

‘Last Riot’ seems to re/present just that: capital exponentiated – through and through spectacular image, a flawless appearance and fascinating semblance. Or is it?

‘Last Riot’ constitutes a recent opus magnum by the Russian artist group AES+F. It consists of several self-contained ensembles in two and three-dimensions including a series of tondi, smaller digital sketches for white marble(-like) sculptures, large scale, frieze-like digital print collages, sculptural groups and a three screen video installation created between 2006-7.

The Panorama works, 24 tondi and the video installation feature scenes that have in common a background digitally modeled on the imagery of video animations or computer games. [Figure 1, 2] There is no attempt to disguise the faked, synthetic nature of these collages of symbolically charged object fragments. They are reduced to archetypal cultural schemata that belong to a diversity of clearly identifiable cultural and topographical typologies. Although the actual symbolic ingredients vary from image to image, their functions – emulating the history of European (heroic) landscape painting – remains the same: to invent sublim(ating) backdrops. Motivating and playing with a high degree of familiarity and recognition of their typified signifiers, the vistas provide an ‘ideal’ of ‘natural’ beauty which serve as ‘sounding boards’ for the combat scenes in the foreground. With all haphazardness, randomness, imperfections and ugliness screened out, the synthetically abstracted backgrounds have a lot in common with the world of Walt Disney and glossy tourist brochures.

Take *Panorama II* for instance: archetypal buildings suggesting a period of European cultural history that is closely connected with urbanization. These visible signs of the ascent of the western bourgeois class, and emergence of capitalist production and trade, are placed in proximity to star-wars-like structures, as well as a pagoda towering from cake-formed rock plateaus. [Figure 3] Distant mountain

¹ Guy Debord, *Society of Spectacle*, Detroit, Michigan: Black and Red, 1983, un-paginated, 34

silhouettes, bare and simplified, frame non-descript planes and bizarre rock formations in the middle-ground that invoke landscape settings from early Renaissance and romanticist paintings. In other panorama prints, the ensemble of cultural fragments differs and includes seascapes, oil platforms, railway viaducts, barrages, contemporary skyscrapers, historical townhouses, churches and strongholds. The tondi, slightly brighter in their overall appearance, feature pleasure wheels, power stations, wind generators, rocket launchers and fake mediaeval architecture, set in deserts of stone, ice and sand and surrounded by fictitious rock formations. [Figure 4] What remains the same in all the images is their proximity to an arsenal of contemporary military structures (watchtowers, bunkers etc.), combat vehicles (tanks, jetfighters, submarines), and armory (rockets, canons) – rendered again by means of computer graphics. A returning ingredient is also the middle and foreground foliage employed in the simulated vistas: house plants – those exotic and delicate species that have become fashionable in European (domestic) interiors: Yucca palms, Ficus barteri, Guzmania, Cyclamen and Poinsettias amidst leave-less shrubs, and, less frequently, singular tree specimen.

The panoramic sceneries are overshadowed by an apocalyptic sky that simulates images from the burning oil fields during the Iraqi war, extreme air pollution by heavy industries or the immediate aftermath of a major industrial or natural disaster or intense (fire) bombings. The tondi display sky formations that, again, point deliberately to 16th century European traditions in landscape painting. It is strikingly obvious that neither topography nor the architectural structures and cultural accessories pretend to re/represent a specific location. Quite the opposite, the settings offer a universally decipherable computer game environment, an artificial tourist trail or what Marc Augé called a ‘non – place’ in his ‘anthropology of supermodernity’.² It is the global place of capital.

As the impersonal rule of capital extends throughout society well beyond the factory walls and geographically throughout the globe, capitalist command tends to become a ‘non-place’, or really, an every place.³

² Marc Augé, *non-places. Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, London: Verso, 1995.

³ Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005, pp. 101–2.

The accumulation of those highly mediated and thus easily recognisable material signifiers of Western civilisation and cultural identity, are occasionally juxtaposed by similar markers from the Orient to produce a forceful compression of historical place and time. This time warp does not so much generate a condensed moment of historical nor dramatic development. In combination with the non-place / any-place situation it renders the time-space continuum and narratives of progress obsolete and replaces it with the insignia of a post-histoire, a hyper-space of ‘supermodernity’.

These elaborate stage sets provide the backdrop for groups of young people and children who are engaged in performing violent acts against each other. [Figure 5] They have been ‘inserted’ into the computer-generated environment as collaged overlays of digital still photography and videos of real actors captured directing assault objects of all sorts towards each other: swords and sabers, baseball bats, police batons and golf clubs. The protagonists are dressed in fashionable camouflage trousers, jeans, leisure gear and undergarments, complete with trendy trainers or combat boots. All their clothing and accessory is pristine, as though they were just taken from the shelves of a department store, as fresh and flawless as the bodies of their wearers. Their appearance underlines a calculated aestheticism of image subject that emulates life-style advertising and trendy fashion imagery, the shopping mall and the absurd and intoxicating blending of commoditized youth culture and mythified combat/sports traditions.

The performers and their constellation in the stage acts play consciously with notions of racial diversity and gender equality that have become de rigueur for political correctness and the ideal of a multicultural democratic society: women are depicted as perpetrators as much as victims of violence; likewise skin colour does not appear as a determining factor in the arranged power play. Such a strategy was deployed to great public effect by Benetton in its controversial ‘critical advertising’ campaigns during the 1990s, including *Handcuffs*; *Children on Pots*; *Embraced in a Blanket* and *Tongues*. Furthermore, in the Last Riot video, the figures continually morph into different identities across sexual and racial identities. Handsome young men transform into beautiful young women and vice versa.

The uniform fashion style featured by the protagonists, despite a few variations, also serves to negate individual identities. The register of the combat dress code as a ‘marker of belonging’ proposes a culturally competent ‘tribe’ of consumers that is more inflected by generational attitude than by geography or distinction of

social class. It is an image modeled on *Action Man* and *Tank Girl* – a branded image with global reach that plays down sexual difference and gender-defined codes of conduct in favour of the mythified aggressive stereotype of the warrior. Though the rough edge has been taken of this typus in AES+F imagery, the staging of the riot figures remain closely linked to notions of (spec/tac/ularized) heroism.

The epic element is brought into play by the monumental format of the panorama works and the complexity of the imagery as well as the physical expanse of the video projection. The works' sheer size demands engagement, places resistance in the way of instant screen scanning. The powerful composite soundtrack that accompanies the video installation draws on Wagnerian pathos and more contemporary, electronic emulations of it sets the scene. In deed, the idea of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk', that is, the total work of art, so avidly promoted by Richard Wagner, reverberates throughout the Last Riot works, but especially in the video screen installation. Wagner saw the all-encompassing creative work as the format of art for the future. Pathos as codified formal repertoire of gestures saturates the highly stylized choreography of the confrontation between aggressors and victims within diverse 'rioting' groups. Rather than articulating passion and hatred directly and vehemently this 'rhetorical figure' has been traditionally employed with affective and pragmatic intent.

As compositional means the controlled action creates a critical tension to the associations and interpretative impetus prompted by the series' title. Riot signifies a public disturbance, people who are out of control, acting violently and often causing damage to each other and to property. The term suggests wild, noisy and energetic scenes. In the Last Riot the destruction unfolds in the background, seemingly unconnected to the scenes in the foreground: a model train crashing from a railway viaduct and breaking apart, a 'toy' plane plunging into a desert of snow and ice giving view of its hollow interior. These disaster scenarios seem to have been lifted straight out of Hollywood's manufacturing of fear. Yet, the formal realization denaturalizes them and thus amplifies their pragmatic sensationalisation.

The heroes and heroines of the Last Riot take centre stage with actions that seem motivated outside of the picture frame, by something or someone in the far distance, if one trusts the removed gazes of the protagonists. The execution of their acts is suspended just at the moment where the impact of the weapons could cause actual physical injury: a classical distillation into what has been traditionally known

as the ‘fruitful moment’. In the video this is endlessly repeated and heightened through the act of morphing one figure into a new one. The flowing movements of both action and transmorphing appear in strange slow motion and insert elements of tension and denaturalization. This suspense over the outcome of the completion of the movement serves as a potent tool for affective manipulation building on the tension between passion and contemplation.

The Last Riot’s ‘pathos formulas’⁴, which at times verge on the terse, also stem from the canon of cultural and art history. They vacillate between the combative energy present in the battle scenes of a Peter Paul Rubens and the elegiac pieta motif in Christian altar painting from the Renaissance onwards, between the measured rhythm of a Jacques Louis David and the heroic gestures of Socialist Realism. Providing a distinct emotive and intellectual atmosphere of the Last Riot more than an actual recognition of art historical precursors, the scenes call upon the spirit of the much admired and debated Hellenistic *Laocoön Group* (between 160 B.C. – 20 B.C.). This complex marble sculpture became pivotal for the 18th century generic debates and form(ul)ation of an aesthetic of effects with its orientation towards the reception of art rather than its production. This so called *Wirkungsästhetik* centred on art’s capacity to excite the sentiment of the viewer.

Most famously, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his pamphlet *Laocoon* (1766)⁵ argued against Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who had insisted that the pain of the body and the grandeur of the soul have been expressed through the composition of this figurative ensemble. Winckelmann asserted that the soul of the Greeks prevented the screaming as an external(ised) and uttermost expression of pain.⁶ Lessing, on the other hand, held against, that, due to art’s essential ‘task’ to render and promote the ideal of beauty, any ugliness in the representation had to be avoided. The existential dimension of pain had to be reduced in order to maintain the beautiful appearance of

⁴ The term pathos formula was coined by Aby Warburg. As a cultural product of the evolution of wo/man it signifies a means of expressing the traumatic encounter between a human being and threatening external forces. This translation is based on an imitation of ‘tolerable’ aspects of that threat, which in the totality of its force goes beyond any ordinary experience and therefore of what can be consciously and coherently grasped. Being fixed in and as an image it provides an instrument of [for?] recalling this encounter and at the same time of a defence against it. See E.H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg – An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford: Warburg Institute, 1970, pp. 71

⁵ See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: an essay on the limits of painting and poetry*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962.

⁶ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006, p. 198.

the figures and to generate a potentially cathartic empathy on part of the viewer.⁷ It was believed that such ‘emotive transfer’ could only be engendered through *convenevolezza* – an appositeness and commensurateness in the arrangement or disposition of figures and decorum, hence the establishment of ‘pathos formulas’.

The cohesive appearance of the assembled groups in the Last Riot is negotiated through the global markets for consumer goods rather than forged by human relationships.⁸ This strategy relies on the certainty of recognition of the displayed emblems of collective identity. With the emulation of stylistic approaches and motifs taken predominantly from present Westernized culture, the images comment on the early bourgeois ideal of liberty, equality, and fraternity from a contemporary position of global capitalism: the freedom of the individual without moral responsibilities, the equality of citizens as an equality of owners of goods, and the fraternity of all people as a ‘war of all against all’. On the symbolic level, it juxtaposes current consumer culture to its

productivist predecessor, one that holds together the assembly of many different impulses, intuitions and proclivities and lifts the whole aggregate to the status of a coherent life programme, [and?] seems to be the *reversal of the values attached respectively to duration and transience*.⁹

In front of the eyes of the viewer unfolds a spectacular wasteland of anti-sociality that reverberates in the dystopic arcadia of its surrounds. No trace of a multitude and its agency for social change. AES+F’s insistence on pathos formula in image and sound emphasize the gulf between reality and manufactured ideas.

The composition of the Last Riot series, the measured gestures and calculated poses of its main protagonists seem to deliberately re/invoke such notion in contrast to prevailing strategies in mainstream action films with their relentless focus on superhuman actions and excess violence and breathtaking speed. As the majority of video and computer games as well as action films and catastrophe scenarios demonstrate aptly, contemporary media continues to heavily invest in and rely for its audience attraction on extreme levels of physical violence, collateral damage and destruction, psychological terror and emotional conflict that far exceed anything

⁷ Lessing, p. 133.

⁸ See for instance Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*, London: Polity Press, 2007, pp. 82–86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.85.

considered normal or sufficient. Nothing, it seems, is too gut-wrenchingly cruel, inhumane, abominable or intimate that it could not flicker over the screen; and the Internet has extended the opportunities to show (and tell) it all by circumventing the somewhat porous boundaries of state media control. It has fuelled the spiral of spectacularization of re/presentation and the interconnected trans/formation of viewing behaviour, conventions and expectations, and driven obscenity to new levels. Excess violence, destruction and demise cease to represent and mean anything. Obscenity thus marks a state of total exhibition.¹⁰ To be clear, obscenity in this context is considered much broader than exploitative sexual explicitness. It comprises the ‘pornography’ of war documentary, natural catastrophes and man-made suffering such as starvation or AIDS in Africa. These contemporary shock therapies might be administered to move people out of their moral and political apathy. More cynically minded one could argue that such strategic deployment of regimes of representation hankers after audience figures as it con/firms current dominant viewing habits and numbs critical engagement.

This modern aesthetics of effects is underpinned by the capacity of digital technologies not only to record and transmit re/presentations of reality from anywhere in the world and in ‘real time’, but to completely manipulate, increasingly simulate and thus annihilate the ‘real’. In a situation of information over-saturation, particularly those based on the visual, such a shock approach may not work any longer but subsides into ‘noise’. The threshold of intense and distressing experience has been continuously lowered by the media onslaught whilst the opportunities for visuality and visibility have declined. The order of the visible that relies on a ‘scene’ against which the obscene is shaped, albeit in historically and culturally dynamic ways, is fading away towards a ‘dilation of the visibility of all things to the point of ecstasy’ as Baudriallard contents. He continues:

In our culture everything is sexualized before disappearing. This is no longer sacred prostitution but a sort of spectral lewdness taking hold of idols, signs, institutions, discourses; the allusion, the obscene inflection that takes hold of every discourse, is the surest sign of their disappearance.¹¹

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, pp. 43–69.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, op.cit. p 55–56.

Obscenity here means that ‘all secrets, spaces and scenes [are] abolished in a single dimension of information.’¹² It is a condition of ‘perfect transparency,’ as the American philosopher Mark C. Taylor argues in relation to Baudrillard.

In a world of invisible databanks, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology, inside and outside are thoroughly confounded in such a way that the private is public and every secret is told. Baudrillard longs for what he realizes is impossible: the decoding of the real. To decode, in this context does not mean to render transparent but to free the real from the codes that seem to destroy it. Digital technologies become repressive when they absorb everything once believed to be real.¹³

Such a demise and annihilation of the real through ‘digital technologies that absorb everything once believed real’ also affects the resources for resistance. These sources of opposition and con/frontation seem to vanish too, are reduce to an ‘idle dream’ about the opportunity for change. However, ‘the [digital – sic] code is not as seamless as it often appears. [...] lingering vestiges of the real appear in most unlikely places.’¹⁴

In the development of their creative strategies, AES+F have regularly operated with shock tactics and images that went against prevailing notions of good taste. In the series ‘Who wants to live forever’ (1998) they re/created fictitious images of the Princess of Wales after her deadly car crash in Paris in 1996. [Figure 6] The work intended to simulate the ‘media character’ of Diana, who promised profitable camera exploits even when dying, or rather because of her terminal suffering, through establishing a compelling but not perfect degree of resemblance between the icon and the model. The vicarious epitome of royalty and A-list life-style is re/captured posing against and on an ordinary car seat. Set against a white studio background, the scene is completely decontextualised. Against this neutralized and disturbingly sanitized backdrop, the celebrity look-alike is showing off the external traces of her ‘fatal’ injuries posing for the camera in a black cocktail dress with deep cleavages, made-up hair and all accessories intact. [Figure 7] Despite the public prohibition to publish any photographs of the dying Princess and details of the accident scene, in order to

¹² Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernhard and Caroline Schutze, New York, 1987), p 155; cited in Mark C. Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p 70.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 69–70.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

preserve the memory of her (and – ostensibly – also to protect her then small children), the police report of the incident found its way on to the Internet. This document provided a professional film make-up artist enough material to simulate with gory detail the external evidence of injury on the model's body including the torn nylon tights.¹⁵ These ugly vestiges of suffering and death rupture Diana's perfected beauty and grace, immortalized in thousands of photographs. The ugliness generated by the *Unform* (no-form, formless) of the coagulated and incrustated blood corrodes and partially negates the aesthetic order of the body-fashion compound image.

The artists utilize the tension between the globally recognized, sympathy-begging media icon and its skin-deep 'impostor' to foreground the constructed and deceptive nature of both, and thus provoke irritation. Her calculated posturing in front of the camera lens accentuates precisely the manufactured character of the performing body and the body performance as an enticing 'wrapper' for equally manufactured and exploited human desires.¹⁶ The Queen song 'Who wants to live forever, must die' did not only inspire the work's title but lends the soundtrack for the video montage.¹⁷

The *Unform*, Karl Rosenkranz argues in *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* (1853), upsets the coherence and potential recognisability of an image or *Gestalt* and thus their meaning.¹⁸ Operating at the level of representation rather than of materiality per se, the blood spills also bring into play notions of abjection with its attack on a bounded and contained em/bodied self. Their potential to produce temporary disgust or repulsion might affect the viewer's aesthetic sentiment.

This is not a heroic and glorified death on a par with ancient and baroque representations of the Head of the Gorgo Medusa for instance. On the contrary, the unglamorous vernacular of an accident attacks the 'flawless' and persistent memories of Diana's media persona. Moreover, the video montage and photographs, devoid of a concrete place and time, are produced with intended 'universal' appeal. Whilst it continues to fuel this contemporary fairy tale a la *Arabian Nights* with all its excessive media spin-offs including countless conspiracy theories, its very visibility also serves to destroy such imaginations as it 'drives' home the banality of love and

¹⁵ Yevgenia Petrova, *AES, AES+F*, Moscow: State Russian Museum and Palace Edition, 2006, p. 36

¹⁶ Siegfried J. Schmidt, 'Werbekörper: Plurale Artefaktionen', in: *Artefakte Artefaktionen: Transformationsprozesse zeitgenössischer Literaturen, Medien, Künste, Architekturen = artefacts artefactions*, ed. Angela Krewani, Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 2000, p. 56.

¹⁷ Yevgenia Petrova, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

¹⁸ Karl Rosenkranz, *Ästhetik des Häßlichen*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1990, pp. 62–69 and pp. 252–260.

death underscored by picturing an ordinary car seat. The shadow of Diana looms large in the background – literally and metaphorically.

This body of work may have been considered bad taste or even obscene and incited consternation or outrage particular amongst the sympathizers of the Princess of Wales in and beyond the UK. Such a value judgment, it appears, carries with it a strong moral dimension. The bloodstains are altogether not powerful enough to dissolve the otherwise beautiful appearance of that woman and render the image ugly. Quite the opposite, they pronounce her beauty through contrast. Her appeal is enhanced too by the clear person deixis of the representation, i.e. addressing the viewer in a direct, face to face manner, not unlike a Pin-up girl. It is the very fact of the existence of such a representation against the social conventions and prescribed an-iconism that carry with it the charge of inappropriateness.

The notion of bad taste consists of two distinguishable aspects. One is connected to the formal qualities of representation and commands its own term: ‘ugliness’, which commonly serves as the other of the beauty. Obscene in this conjunction means something aesthetically dissatisfying. The other aspect of taste concerns the appropriateness of a representation and is thus intimately linked to moral (and to some extent legal) standards and social conventions. It is signified by the qualification ‘bad’ as opposed to ‘good’ (taste). In this context the notion of obscene expresses that a work transgresses what is considered an appropriate dealing with violence or sex, no matter what the perceived aesthetic value of the respective work is. Taste is situated within the field of reception of a work of art. It requires an individual capable of form(ulat)ing an aesthetic and/or moral judgment depending on the specific situation and object. It does not constitute an inherent quality of the work itself. As such, taste is a situated term. It is externally motivated and defined by specific socio-cultural context(s). For instance, in Russia, the depiction of Diana may not provoke as strong a sentiment as it is likely to do in Britain.

However, the underlying issue of taste as with any form of aesthetic or moral judgment is, whether an individual’s capacity is a given – inherited through birth – , or an acquired cultural competence or has been conferred by cultural capital, social status and/or professional identity. In other word, there is a distinction and tension between an individual’s capacity and authority to in/form and articulate a position on matters of taste. Taste is not, as it may appear, a private matter but interconnected with social conventions and collective identities reflecting dominant power relations

and value hierarchies, refracted by class, gender, generational, ethnical and religious perspectives and vested interests.

It is worth noting here that the expression ‘bad / good taste’ does not have a proper equivalent in the German language, where the dominant distinction runs along the line of tastefulness and tastelessness: one either has an individual capacity to form such an aesthetic and/or moral judgment, or one lacks it. The concept of taste reaches back to the Enlightenment period and achieved its full expression in Immanuel Kant’s autonomy aesthetics, where the ‘cultural dimension’ of art became separated and emancipated from other cultural domains and social institutions. Art would no longer predominantly be validated in religious, moral or political terms, but was increasingly considered first and foremost on its own terms, i.e. from an aesthetic perspective. L’art pour l’art, an increasing erosion of the dynamic common cultural code system and visual order that had defined Western art for centuries, and the growing cult of genius put a cessation to the work of art’s first line of occupation as a in/formative ‘conversation piece’ and constituent of the public sphere.

The emergence of the concept of taste indicated a growing awareness of the autonomy of the aesthetic. This autonomy was anchored in the authority of the aesthetically judging individual and went along with a loss of authority of culture-determining institutions and, thus, with the compensatory growth of the respective responsibility of the individual. Like a moral judgement, taste as an aesthetic judgement is based on a critical awareness, a conscience so to speak. Therefore one really cannot argue about taste. Oscar Wilde famously asserted ‘[t]here is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.’ And he continued, ‘[a]ll art is quite useless.’¹⁹ Fichte, amongst others, pointed to the tension between the offering and potential of a work of art and the capacity of its audience to appreciate and comprehend it accordingly. He concluded that educating the viewers is part of the work of a work of art, to enable them to fully grasp its form and meaning and judge it accordingly.²⁰

Compared to ‘Who wants to live forever’, AES+F’s seven light boxes and accompanying video titled ‘Defile’ (2000–7) are likely to exasperate and repulse more widely. [Figure 8] The work features dressed up corpses. Photographed in a

¹⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1988, pp. 3–4.

²⁰ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Nicolais Leben und sonderbare Meinungen, cited in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, ed. Karl Heinz Barck, Martin Fontius, Dieter Schlenstedt et al, Stuttgart, Weimar: J. B. Metzler, p. 810.

morgue, the nameless ‘bodies’ are shown wearing exuberant haute couture garments. In contrast to the lifeless bodies, their costumes are draped in a disturbingly animate manner – a fancy dress party of a special kind. Their pointed toes lend them a lightness that resembles ballet dancers and is underpinned by the swaying clothes. The exquisiteness of the extravagant dresses and their careful and elegant arrangement on the bodies support a beautiful and alluring appearance of the deceased in stark contrast to the principally abject quality of death and the embodied ugliness of dying inscribed particularly in the visible scares and sores on those bodies.

The simulated photographs of an injured Diana fuse the ugly with the abject that is, the erosive effect of no-form with the implied fatality. The abject is connected to the material condition of being, or more accurately, to the boundaries that demarcate respective physical identities. The strong effects of the ‘Defile’ series reside in the abjectness of death rather than being played out at the level of representation.²¹ Whilst the pictures stress the beauty and grace of the deceased, the boundaries of good taste are transgressed by a combination of the exposure of the corpses and their carnivalesque shrouding. The highly exploitative nature of the operation through photographing anonymously dead aggravates this circumstance and bears similarities to the controversial work of American artist Joel-Peter Witkin. Whereas ‘Defile’ and ‘Who wants to live for ever’ amongst other works by AES and since 2000 AES+F explore the boundary between life and death, beauty and ugliness, measure and excess, the ‘Last Riot’ series sets out to recapture a concept of beauty within the dominant paradigm of art and explore its potentials for viewing impact, collusion, critical intervention and resistance. The pathos of the beautiful body and gesture resides in close proximity and conjoins momentarily with the pathology of beauty. The work’s exclusive focus on beautiful young people takes up contemporary compulsion for blinding aesthetic semblance. In an age of pedophilic scare mongering it may appear extreme bad taste showing kids staging such a captivating orgy of senseless violence. In overexposing and undercutting the myth of innocent youth through repetition, it thematises current perceptions of the world as much as it takes issue with the ‘habitual’ lies of (media) images. The extensive repetition of motif and gesture elevates the work from submerging completely into the ‘political economy of the commodity sign’ and related simulacral readings. [Figure 10] The merging of

²¹ On the abject, see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 69–75.

different registers also prevents the work being tied too cosily to themes such as youth, fashion, combat, computer games, (art) history, (Socialist) Realism, and desire but maintains an uncomfortable friction between them. They employ a strategy that eerily converges the simulacral – the second-handedness of experience – and the referential. Thus the Last Riot images exist in proximity to what Hal Foster called ‘traumatic realism’.

The compulsion to repeat, to recall after its occurrence the distressing event over and over again without ever being able to grasp the ‘real’, as Freud and Lacan have developed, forms a key aspect of trauma. Through repetition, rather than working through it, the traumatic object/event is drained of its significance, and the subject defends itself against the object’s/event’s affect in an attempt to restore the psychic coherence as well as the symbolic order.²² That effect of repetition can be well observed with regard to the constant replay of horrifying images of carnage and death that enter our living rooms day by day through the media – the staging of images of 9/11 still stick in the mind. Drawing on Lacan’s understanding of trauma as a ‘missed encounter with the real’, Foster argues in relation to Warhol’s *Electric Chair* and other of his images, that they do not just reproduce but produce traumatic effects.²³

‘As missed, the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it must be repeated. [...] repetition is not production. [...] [R]epetition 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 also points to the real, and at this point the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition. It is a structure less in the world than in the subject – between the perception and the consciousness of a subject *touched* by an image.’²⁴

In the Last Riot, this rupturing element – akin to Barthes’ ‘punctum’ – can be located in the ‘slipping’ of registers, in the application of ‘pathos formulas’ and the visual echoing of ghost-like combat scenes in the computer-generated background implemented with an irritating perspective of significance. Cracks emerge between the ‘life-affirming’ ‘ersatz-beauty’ and ostensibly pleasurable ersatz sublime that smoothes over or blends out the complexity of reality, its frictions, conflicts and

²² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 131.

²³ Hal Foster, p. 132.

²⁴ Hal Foster, p. 132.

ugliness. Through the fissures of the beautiful surface and between different registers, styles and media (sources) seeps a sense of both the unspeakable and gross, encapsulated in the gestures of the ‘rioters’, and a lingering desire – like the real punctuating the image screen. The overload of beauty and action cuts through the anaesthetizing effect of the glossy commodity and anachronistic spectacle. [Figure 10]

This con/frontation of different registers in the Last Riot also foregrounds a wilful slippage of high art and popular culture that is akin to the migration and fluidity of images across different cultural and social domains. The skilfully composed digital ‘eye-candy’ not only re/mediates different visual genres into a digital collage, but it operates with a range of distinct aesthetic dictions and intensities, particularly at the level of motif and gesture. There, art historical tradition is infused with and refracted through formulaic slickness and accessible sensation appealing to contemporary popular taste and familiar sentiment.

In that, the media-savvy artists not only play deliberately with an aesthetic prerogative prescribed by the widest possible re/productibility, circulation radius and perceived desires of the (ideal) target clientele for video simulation, computer games, and real and virtual advertising in an age of worldwide and accelerated mobility of cultural commodity. Their refusal to clearly indicate value hierarchies between the different cultural references and fragments, complicates the reading of the work. On offer is a model of coexistence, not a hybrid(ity) with its arguable promise of impulses for renewal.

Their pictures exploit the defining and dividing (post-)modernist tensions between an industrially ‘manufactured’ culture on the one hand, and the authentic and authoritative work of art with their specific locations of display and debate. The extensive references to the canon of European art history mark the historical foundations from which an autonomous and autotelic modernist art developed since the middle of the 19th century. Yet, at the same time this history is equally closely aligned to the formation of Socialist Realism, an art that has been perceived as the ‘Other’ of modernism. In that constellation, Socialist Realism was outrightly discredited, albeit with varying degrees and motivated by a diversity of complex political interests, as an instrument of the ‘totalitarian’ state, and thus lacking of aesthetic purity, which, from the modernist perspective equates with a loss of quality and value.

AES+F, whose formation as artists has taken place within this art tradition, scrutinize and challenge aesthetic value hierarchies from a contemporary Russian perspective. Under the condition of Russia's radical and rapid engagement with global capitalism and the persistence of elements of the previous period, the history of that dichotomy affords renewed exploration. With an astute awareness of the pragmatics of image production and consumption and the 'cross-fertilisation' between and convergence of different cultural spheres, they reinvest into a tradition of images as effective conversation pieces. At the same time they seek to disconnect their visual work from hastily asserted ideological interests, moral judgments and creative value. Moments of resistance are brokered both through their courage for a re/new/ed vision, literally and metaphorically, and the puncturing of aesthetic re/semblance at a time of omnipresent capitalist commodification and spectacle.

Figure 1, Last Riot #1, 2005–7

Figure 2, Last Riot 2, Tondo #2, 2005–7

Figure 3, Last Riot 2, Panorama #2, 2005–7

Figure 4, Last Riot 2, Tondo #8, 2005–7

Figure 5, Last Riot 2, Panorama #3, 2005–7

Figure 6, Who wants to live forever, 1998

Figure 7, Who wants to live forever, 1998

Figure 8, Defile, 2000–7

Figure 9, Last Riot 2, Tondo #13

Figure 10, Last Riot 2, The Bridge