It was 1963 and 11,000 people crowded into the stands at Islip Raceway to view the new spectator sport, the Demolition Derby. “They fortified themselves with soda, popcorn, pizza, cotton candy and ice cream. They grew restless. They stamped their feet. They began shouting: ‘Bring ’em on!’” the press reported.1 In these popular venues—public raceways and county fairs surrounded by fast foods and 4-H exhibits—a carnivalesque rite of destruction was staged across America beginning as early as 1961. Cars devoid of glass windows and doctored up for safety lined up, waited for the signal, and crashed into each other until the winning vehicle remained running. Why the humor and fear of destruction formed such a ubiquitous theme in the early sixties forms the subject of this paper.

On a March evening in 1960, a decidedly art-world crowd, including Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III, sat waiting in the Museum of Modern Art’s sculpture garden for the much anticipated performance of Swiss artist Jean Tinguely’s self-destructing machine, Homage to New York. The over 27-foot-long junk sculpture, comprised of an assortment of recycled scraps from bicycle wheels to a baby bassinet, began its demise through a variety of happenstances that ended with the piano in flames and the audience enveloped in smoke.2 It was an exercise in “total anarchy and freedom,” Tinguely quipped.3 His experiment in artistic destruction did not stand alone in the early sixties. The Korean Fluxus artist Nam June Paik smashed his violin at the Dada music festival in Düsseldorf in 1962 only to be followed two years later by Pete Townshend of The Who demolishing his guitar to crowds of cheering youth—a practice he repeated for years to follow.

Why, we shall ask, did crowds whose composition ranged from America’s capitalist elite, to counter-culture rock concert fans, to the working class visitors of popular race tracts and county fairs, all frequent and lionize rites of destruction? Are these destructive events anti-capitalist critiques, anarchist gestures, rituals of carnivalesque inversion that are symbolically offered to the public as play, or complex mediations that in some manner share all of these practices?

That these events all date to the early sixties is not surprising as it was a problematic and transitional moment—so apparent in the award-winning television series Mad Men set exactly in those years. The timeframe marks both the ending of the fifties with its cold war arms race, fears of atomic destruction, and culture of the spectacle and the rise of the sixties generation of revolt. These rituals of destruction are in fact among the earliest manifestations of that impending insurgency. Destroying machinery in the United States at the height of postwar corporate capitalism and in advance of sixties critiques is a loaded act to be sure.

From the time that car racer Lawrence Mendełsohn repeatedly staged the first Demolition Derby in 1961, the sport gained momentum. By 1963, when cultural critic Tom Wolfe famously chronicled the event in his article for the Herald Tribune, “Clean Fun at Riverhead,” the raceway had hosted 154 derbies in two years and had drawn over a million spectators.4 Originating in the United States, the sport speaks to America’s relationship to technology and waste. It was just this aspect of the culture that struck the painter Fernand Léger when he came here in the early forties. As historian Martin James recalled about his meeting with the artist in 1945, Léger marveled at the quantity of goods that rural Americans relegated to the junk heap, musing, “In France, the paysan carefully picks up each nail, every stick. They patch and repatch a garment until hardly a shred remains of the original fabric.”

What Léger observed was minor in comparison to postwar excesses when planned obsolescence was corporate America’s key marketing strategy. And it was the automotive industry, the target of the demolition derby, that was best known for this practice. General Motors’ prewar policy of changing the car’s detailing annually in an effort to stimulate consumption is legendary. It led ultimately to the postwar populace automobile with soaring tailfins and enough chrome brightwork to rival the fifties jukebox. These excesses arguably culminated in the sixties demolition derby where these extravagant machines were pulverized in stadiums to cheering crowds. The “planning” of the planned obsolescence had, one could argue, been liberated, changing

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By Mona Hadler

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Mona Hadler is a Professor of Art History at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Opposite: Demolition Derby, Franklin County Fair, Malone, New York, 2011. Photo by author.
hands from the CEO to the garage mechanic. But the story is more complicated and the motivations more bifurcated.

Today one can observe demolition derbies in local county fairs across America. At the annual Franklin County Fair in Malone, New York, close to the border of Canada (which I have frequently attended), one walks past displays of identical goods (see images pages 12 and 13), carnival rides, fast food counters, and 4H exhibits to arrive at a grandstand that seats crowds for country singers, truck pulls, and demolition derbies. In this remote town, the fairgoers are by and large local citizens from the town or neighboring areas. The fair, one of approximately 2,500 held in America annually, is celebratory of the rural economy, a latter day harvest festival. It is a site for the mixing of the dwindling population of farmers with the rest of the community in the service of both educating and entertaining the public.

Country fairs are more local than state fairs and function, above all, for these two purposes. The demolition derby falls on the entertainment side of the equation, but is still very much a family fare with drinking, and often profanity, prohibited in the bleachers (see image page 14). The same very much a family fare with drinking, and often profanity, prohibited in the bleachers (see image page 14).

The drivers come from the area or they travel together in teams bringing vehicles painted with the names of loved ones, their garages, or local sponsors. They spray paint their cars with more or less innovative designs but most are covered with simple prose: the names of loved ones, such as “I love you mom and dad” or the name of their shop. The artwork is judged, but the winners are selected by the audience members, voting with their hands and feet—a holdover from the early days when the crowds chose the winners as they did in Roman gladiatorial fights.” “The cars themselves in their goofy, badass splendor are a mechanized American folk art,” explains derby photographer, Bill Lowenburg. The drivers ride for passion, not for profit.

According to one contestant at the Franklin Fair they pay $2,000 for each vehicle, more than the price of their own private automobiles and more than they can win in any event (2012 prizes range from $300-$1,000). At a smaller upstate New York derby, one mechanic reported that the prizes were $50. The cars cost considerably more but the owners could later reclaim some of their expense by selling parts. Most drivers are not professionals and prize money can be used to fund the next junker car. What emerges is the picture of a local sport rife with indigenous and enduring common threads all the more tantalizing. The drivers come from the area or they travel together in teams bringing vehicles painted with the names of loved ones, their garages, or local sponsors. They spray paint their cars with more or less innovative designs but most are covered with simple prose: the names of loved ones, such as “I love you mom and dad” or the name of their shop. The artwork is judged, but the winners are selected by the audience members, voting with their hands and feet—a holdover from the early days when the crowds chose the winners as they did in Roman gladiatorial fights.” “The cars themselves in their goofy, badass splendor are a mechanized American folk art,” explains derby photographer, Bill Lowenburg. The drivers ride for passion, not for profit.

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The automobiles are altered for safety according to rules that are strictly enforced. Stipulations for the cars include welding) the trunk, hood and doors. Head-on collisions are forbidden as are attacks upon the diver’s side door, which renders the sport relatively safe. But when cars pile up there is, without a doubt, a sense of potential danger which, like so many extreme sports, adds an element of transgressive humor to the proceedings. Fire trucks and emergency personnel hover ominously near the track as they did in the MOMA for Tinguely’s performance. Each heat (match) takes a relatively short time during which the raucoous crowds are enveloped with exhaust fumes and assaulted by noise until the action stops and the winning car’s engine remains operative. The entire performance of a derby is greeted with laughter.

My recent experiences at the county fair accord with articles from the sixties and seventies which stress the sense of community and play attending the events. In 1971 the cars cost $10 to $12 and were large ones such as Cadillacs and Lincoln Continentals. (At the Franklin Fair in 2011, the size varied depending on the “heat” but heavy older cars are generally prized.) The 1971 derby was decidedly a family affair, but one that elicited a range of responses. The parents interviewed predictably rehearsed the debate surrounding the pros and cons of violence on young viewers—they were after all the generation that created or grew up on the comics code— with one parent concluding rather absurdly that the derbies teach lessons in safety since the drivers are required to wear seat belts. Tom Wolfe, writing at the time, took a somewhat limited view, concluding that the crowds thrilled to the joy of destruction. Other writers of the day supported his conclusion. Robert Jewett and John Lawrence, for example, place the derby in the context of American rites of reversal, such as Halloween’s “trick or treat” mantra. These rites function, according to the authors, as a form of catharsis which ultimately valorizes normative behavior. Read in this manner, the derby forms a rite of reversal where working class men symbolically transgress against the power of corporate America through destroying its omnipresent symbol—the automobile.

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The derby is clearly an exercise in destruction that forms a rite of reversal with an element of carnivalesque humor, but a great deal more is performed at these events. Historian Aurian Haller, takes an alternate position by stressing issues of empowerment and identity. In an excellent article on Canadian artist Bill Featherston's hyperrealist paintings of the derby, Haller argues that these contests form sites of hyperbolic masculinity whereby anti-productive performative strategies challenge capitalist commodity culture and the effect it has on worker's subjectivities. The derby is for him, in essence, an exercise in empowerment that operates through "waste, violence, and temporariness" in an alternate site of production.

Haller focuses a good deal of his discussion on the compulsive performativity of the derby in the light of Judith Butler's writings on gender and performance which interrogates by parody and exposes car culture as an unattainable object that both entices and marginalizes them. And, unlike the postwar car culture and aligns therefore with the works of artists such Warhol, Chamberlain and Dines whose 1960 happening Car Crash in particular comes to mind. These various representations revolve in and at the same time mock the cycles of capitalist production with its excesses of accumulation, distribution, and garbage. Junk sculptors from the era, like the European artist Arman, arguably function as both witnesses and participants in the cycles of production, consumption and destruction in a manner not dissimilar to derby drivers.

Indeed this dual subjectivity is arguably the appropriate language for this ambivalent time in history. Destruction as construction, has a familiar ring in the postwar era when the residual horrific effects of the atomic bomb leaked into the news while large corporations like Disney tried to reclaim atomic energy for good deeds assuring that we have reached a time when the atom was "on its way to light our houses, to toast our bread, and to run our television sets and vacuum cleaners." But in the end Metzger too parallels auto-destructive art with auto-creative art in his 1961 manifesto entitled "Auto-Destructive Art Machine Art Auto-Creative Art." Writing in 1995 he explains, "When an auto-destructive process takes place, each disintegration of a form leads to the creation of a new form—this applies on the material as it does on the visual level." Metzger’s ideas were catalytic in the sixties. The musician Pete Townsend met Metzger when he was an art student and credits his practice of performatively destroying guitars to Metzger’s influence on him.

Deconstruction as creation involves a complex, dual, subjectivity that is fascinating in regard to the derby. The sport functions in many ways like a Native American potlatch ceremony where destruction is a form of giving that empowers the donor. Georges Bataille argues, "But if he destroys the object in front of another person or if he gives it away, the one who gives it has actually acquired, in the other's eyes, the power of giving or destroying." Hence we move from an expenditure of excess, in this case the American car culture, to the derby as an optimistic vision as its theme. And it is not surprising in this context that Tinguely’s quixotic self-destructing machine was repeatedly called the “gadget to end all gadgets”—a term firmly entrenched in collective memory as the nickname for the atomic bomb.

Artist Gustav Metzger, who wrote his manifestos on Auto-Destructive Art in London in 1959, 1960, and 1961, makes these connections clear by asserting, “Auto-destructive art is an attack on capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation.” Metzger conceived of auto-destructive art, which included the work of Tinguely, as an art of social action with roots in the Dada movement and the Russian avant-garde. He proposed various large scale public sculptures that would deconstruct in time. "Auto-destructive art sets up a kind of mirror image of reality," Metzger later mused. "Society is deteriorating. So is the sculpture." Yet in the end Metzger too parallels auto-destructive art with auto-creative art in his 1961 manifesto entitled “Auto-Destructive Art Machine Art Auto-Creative Art.”
of the “possibility for man to grasp what eludes him, to create. The notion of destruction as construction leads us to the many products of the late fifties and early sixties. He asked then more famous artist, de Kooning, for a drawing with the sole purpose of erasing it. Rauschenberg reminisced, “I had been working for some time at erasing the idea that I wanted to create a work of art by that method... So I went to his studio and explained to him what I had in mind. I remember that the idea of destruction kept coming into the conversation and I kept trying to show that it wouldn’t be destruction.” Rauschenberg considered this act of obliteration to be productive, as historian Branden Joseph argues, “the meeting between Rauschenberg and Cage initiated a new paradigm of avant-garde production, in which the idea of destruction as a type of potlatch create. Non-functioning machines as key figures of “useless science” form a leitmotif in the postwar era and these machines in turn counter the all too efficient manufacturing sector. From Tinguely’s Hommage to New York, to the many projects of the EAT (Experiments in Art and Technology) collaborations of artists and engineers in the sixties, works of art joyously malfunctioned. The Derby cars work for a few moments and then through mechanical acts of destruction cease to function as productive machines, but instead release a fragment of individual spirit that confronts the force of industrial power. In the aftermath of the derby the drivers work manually—countering the assembly line—to reconstruct and decorate their spoiled cars, and reenter them to start the game once again. The derby itself takes part in a repetitive cycle of destruction, reconstruction, and play that counters the industrial cycles of production and distribution. These repetitions of spectacle and play both subvert and mimic (or subvert by mimicking), and it is this complex subjectivity that renders the derby such a significant cultural practice. References to Duchamp’s bachelors as machines that do not reproduce and that do not produce the excess of capitalism were ubiquitous in the late fifties and early sixties. He asked then more famous artist, de Kooning, for a drawing with the sole purpose of erasing it. Rauschenberg reminisced, “I had been working for some time at erasing the idea that I wanted to create a work of art by that method... So I went to his studio and explained to him what I had in mind. 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Pontus Hultén, The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 171. 4 Tom Wolfe, “Clean Fun at Riverhead,” 1963, reprinted in Wolfe, The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 31. According to Wolfe, Medelhoff got the idea for the derby in 1958 when someone crashed into his stock-car and the crowds went wild with enthusiasm. 5 Martin S. James, “Léger at Rosents Point, 1944: A Memoir,” The Burlington Magazine, 130, no. 1021 (April 1988): 278. 6 Michael T. Marsden, “The County Fair as Celebration and Cultural Text,” The Journal of American Culture, 33, no. 1 (March 2010): 27. 7 Bill Lowenfield, Crash, Burn, Lose, Demolition Derby (Revere, Pa.: Back Pocket Books, 2005). 8 Discussion with driver, Chad King, Franklin County Fair, Malone, New York, August 6, 2011. 9 Discussion with a mechanic, Saratoga County Fair, Ballston Spa, New York, July 22, 2012. 10 Jeff Savage, Demolition Derby (Minneapolis, Minn.: Capstone Press, 2007), 37. 11 Pamela Lee, Chromophobia on Time in the Art of the 1960s (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 89. 12 Overheard by John Maciuika, Franklin County Fair, Malone, New York, August 6, 2011. 13 Ibid., 762. 14 Heinz Huber, The Walt Disney Story of Our Friend the Atom (New York: Doubleday, 1958). See also, Mona Hadley, “Art in the Atomic Age: From the Sublime to Red Causue,” Source: Notes in the History of Art, 31, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 88-43. 15 Lee, Chromophobia on Time in the Art of the 1960s, 134. 16 Aurian Haller, “Art of the demolition derby: gender, space and antiproduction,” 773-775. 17 Haller, “Art of the demolition derby: gender, space and antiproduction,” 773-775. 18 Doug Hebdige, Hiding in the Light, On Images and Things (New York: Routledge, 1987), 71. 19 Doug Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (New York: Routledge, 1979, reprint 1987). 20 Ibid., 769. 21 Ibid., 778-79. 22 See Janey Hamilton’s subtle argument in “Aryan’s System of Objects,” The Art Journal, 67, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 55-67. 23 Lez, Chromophobia on Time in the Art of the 1960s, 134. 24 Gustav Metzger, Damaged Nature, Anti-Destructive Art (London: Coracle, 1996), 60 from the 1961 simulacrum. Metzger’s practice has been receiving considerable attention of late in the wake of his 2009 retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery in London. 25 Ibid., 49, from Metzger’s 1995 lecture. 26 Philip Dodd, Interview with Pete Townsend, BBC Radio, September 28, 2009. www.bbc.co.uk/節目/episode/b00tvn/67 Night,Waves,Pete,Townshend. I would like to thank my colleague, the musician and historian David Grubbs, for his thoughts on Metzger and on the relevance of Metzger’s work to Pete Townsend’s practice. 27 Georges Bataille, The Accursed Share, Volume 1 (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 69. The text first appeared in French in 1967. 28 Ibid., 70. 29 Midori Yamamura discusses this aspect of the performance in, Graffiti: Toho Oto in 1964, press release, Ice Cultural Foundation, 2004. 30 Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Remembering Toho Oto’s “Cut Piece,”” Oxford Art Journal, 26, no. 1 (2003): 122. This could place performances in the context of race and gender issues in postwar Japan and America. She problematizes the word “gift” through the writings of Bourdieu, who claimed that the temporal nature of the gift distinguished it from commodity exchange, p. 112. 31 Douglas Kahn, “The Latest: Fluxus and Music,” in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rutterbusch, & the Spirit of Fluxus (Minneapolis, Minn.: Walker Art Center, 1993), 114-15. 32 Douglas Kahn, “The Latest: Fluxus and Music,” in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rutterbusch, & the Spirit of Fluxus (Minneapolis, Minn.: Walker Art Center, 1993), 114-15. 33 Ibid., 56. 34 Ibid., 56. 35 Ibid., 56. 36 The Art Journal, 59, no. 4 (Spring 1976): 976. 37 Tomkins, The Bride and the Bachelors, chapter 2.