



# Human Sacrifice and Its Representation

CRITICAL ART ENSEMBLE





\* So as not to have to redundantly qualify every statement, CAE does not intend this analysis/speculation to be applied to situation(s) in the developing world.  
Examples (contingent manifestations of sacrifice) offered in this essay may only be applicable to US culture, and not to other advanced surplus economies.

\*\* The word “sacrifice” in this essay refers exclusively to “human sacrifice.”

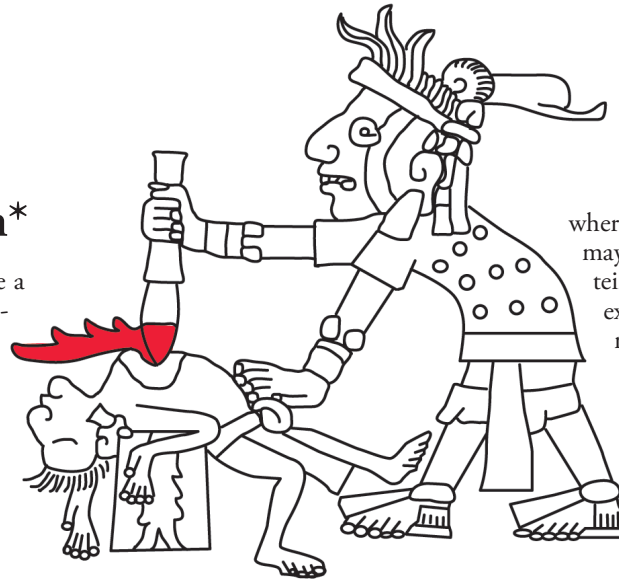




## Human Sacrifice and Its Representation\*

Human sacrifice\*\* is typically assumed to be a “primitive” institution, one that long ago vanished from Western civilization. Unfortunately, quite the opposite is true. The institution of sacrifice lives on. Although much of it is hidden from view in unexpected forms, it remains an essential part of modern everyday life, politics, and economy.

A number of antique cultures, including the ancient Egyptians, the Aztecs, and various Hindu sects, learned to incorporate sacrifice into social life as a visible institution. The practice was legitimized through an association with religious or mystical necessity. Through sacrifice, the gods could be appeased, or even bribed, to perform actions beyond the control of either the collective or individual agent involved in the ritual killing. Sacrifice brought together in a concrete manner the worlds of the visible (sensual) and the invisible (spiritual). Anthropologists have speculated that the psychological benefit of this hyperreal performance lay in its power to relieve anxiety among participants by giving them a sense of control over nonrational elements of existence; an obvious political/economic benefit of ordering death through social ceremony would be enhancement of population management and social control. In cultures



where rituals included cannibalism, human flesh may have been a much-needed source of protein. Yet such theories, while they do have some explanatory power, tend to miss the interconnection between the nonrational economy of death and the rational economy of surplus and waste. This willingness to ignore such a connection is one reason why sacrifice continues, unnoticed and incessant, as a standard institution in all cultures of advanced surplus economy.

The Western propensity for repressing the disturbing aspects of existence means that we are not likely to have a visible institution of sacrifice; at any rate, the legitimizing spectacle that religion would otherwise provide for the practice has melted away under the heated process of rationalization. However, the social functions that human sacrifice once provided must still be fulfilled. Bourgeois society, never content to discard any social action that can either generate profit or maintain social order, allows sacrifice to continue at the margins of (in)visibility. Rather than eliminate the institution, society has driven sacrifice into the under-economy of taboo social relationships and bad objects that should never be brought to mind, viewed, or even named. This realm is the foundation on which the capitalist empire of excess is built.







The under-economy is organized around two kinds of sacrifice, both of which have specific material and hyperreal effects in the over-economy: One is guided by the principle of excess, the other by the principle of autonomy. Sacrifice under the sign of excess is connected to two key economic processes—the production of more than is needed on one hand, and the consumption of more than is needed on the other. To achieve this state of excessive overproduction/overconsumption, considerable numbers of citizens and noncitizens alike must be maimed and killed. For example, consider the use of gasoline vehicles, which most regard as an indispensable right. In light of this context, a minority political contingent claimed that the sacrifice of lives during the Gulf Wars was necessary to provide the Western war machine with a secure supply of fuel, and to ensure that first world citizens could fuel their cars and heat their homes at a reasonable cost. Though this explanation is widely understood in some sense, it remains a marginal opinion. Our social arena demands that political-economic sacrifice be left unmentioned. The Gulf Wars and their sacrifices were officially sanctioned for the purpose of “liberating” Kuwait and Iraq, and stopping a dictator with militant delusions of grandeur. The morality was visible, but the economic imperative was hidden underneath it, and only briefly became visible through the mediating signs of leftist



defiance. While the wars drew some attention to the under-economy sacrifices needed to maintain an excess supply of oil, little attention is paid to the deaths of the 30,000–40,000 people who are sacrificed each year in fatal auto accidents. This number is acceptable to most of us in exchange for the freedom to drive—so long as the sacrifice remains hidden and abstract.

Such statistics point toward the second variety of sacrifice, that which is guided by the principle of autonomy.

This type of sacrifice, especially when visible, is evidently abhorrent to all political positions except the radical left. For those who occupy this lonely political position, sacrifice is an unfortunate but necessary consequence of the liberation of desire, a compromise which must be accepted as part of the responsibilities of autonomy. For the greater the autonomy given individuals, the greater the sacrifice required. Death and autonomy (that is, the expression of desire) are inherently linked. For example, if we desire rapid transportation with speeds beyond what flesh and bone evolved to survive, we must expect accidents that end in death, as well as the possibility that these technologies could purposefully be used to kill. Desire can take any emotional form, and it is difficult to accurately predict how it will manifest in action. A possibility always exists that the action will be violent, and hence actively connected with mortality. There

**MOVE ALONG, THERE'S NOTHING TO SEE HERE.**





is a high degree of emergent uncertainty associated with nonrational activity, and this tends to produce great anxiety; when reminders of our own mortality begin to surface, and the economy of sacrifice becomes more visible, hysteria and panic are typically not far behind. The alternative to facing up to this form of sacrifice and the discomfort of uncertainty has traditionally been the surrender of individual sovereignty to the state apparatus, which is entrusted to legislate what forms of social action will be acceptable. The greater the fear of this form of sacrifice, the more homogenous and repressed the social action required to allay the fear.

## Lawn Darts

Every commodity has a degree of risk attached to it, and the possibility for loss of life always exists. Most people manage to keep the uncertainty of life at a reasonable distance, and thereby save themselves the constant trial of wondering whether it is about to end. Yet some cannot keep mortality out of their minds. One situation that conjures this unfortunate state of consciousness is when one loses an intimate to sacrifice. In this case, the object associated with that sacrifice typically becomes regarded as abject by the individual suffering the loss. Often, aggregates of individuals who project death onto the same object form organizations that attempt to reveal the particular sacrifice signified by the fetish object, as well as attempt to destroy the abject object itself.

Much confusion has arisen recently over the nature of the abject. Given recent literature and art exhibitions on the subject, one would think that the abject is defined only by the bourgeois aesthetic of repulsion toward the “filth” of homelessness and toward “perverted” sexual activities. Such things are but one tiny aspect of the abject, if they are in the realm of the abject at all. (Extreme sexual practices may well be a means to escape the abject rather than a means of participation in it). Any object that mediates the affective apprehension of mortality can become a temporary manifestation of the abject. The abject is liquid, sliding into existence at one moment, only to evaporate into nothingness the next. Abject objects are everywhere: they may be safety pins, telephone cords, or automatic garage door openers.

Consider the following strange, but true, story: A child is accidentally hit in the head with a lawn dart, is seriously injured, and eventually dies. What followed? An alarm was sounded announcing the need to ban lawn darts (now in a state of limited fetishization). The Consumer Product Safety Commission was lobbied for a law to ban the offending objects. The arguments were simple: “If banning lawn darts saves one life, just ONE, it will be worth it,” and “Lawn darts are killing our children!” The manufacture of lawn darts was discontinued. The commission sent out a press release asking people in possession of lawn darts to destroy them, even though lawn darts sold before the ban remain legal and can even be legally repaired.





Once an object is claimed to be abject by a credible organization, its role in the over-economy is assessed. If the object is deemed profitable, and much beloved, or if it provides efficiency in everyday life, then its connection to sacrifice will once again be repressed, and the object will retain its place in the pantheon of either luxury or convenience. (Lots of lobbying, spectacular actions, and other tactics of influence will be used to either destroy or save the contested object's image. Whichever occurs, the perception that triumphs in the legislation process is primarily a product of hyperreality.)

If the object's abject status cannot be spectacularly sustained at a social level, then containment strategies are often used. For instance, many people drown in swimming pools each year, and yet swimming pools (or even better, bodies of water) are not banned. Rather, they are contained. Laws are passed requiring locked fences around pools. The fenced pool does not conjure associations with death—hyperreality has declared that this object is not used as a sacrificial altar. Such is also the case with helmet laws for motorcyclists or seat belt laws for drivers. These laws help us to disassociate motorcycles and cars from the under-economy, and keep them clean and visible in the over-economy. At the same time, we know that approximately 33,000 will die in the US this year in motor vehicle mishaps.

2010: Workplace  
Deaths: 4,690  
Attitudinal Status: Acceptable  
Remedy: Status quo  
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics

Recognition of the car as an abject object is extremely temporary. Much care has been taken by the state to mediate the temporary abject relationships between subject and auto. Signs of safety abound—traffic laws, safety inspections, the highway code—and so the auto is disassociated even further from death. Even more important, however, is the vague intuition of the fairness surrounding this variety of sacrifice. The victims of this ritual seem to be selected by lot. If one has a spatial connection to cars, one enters the dead pool.

The greater one's association with the object, the greater the chance of personal sacrifice. Those who love the mechanical extensions of existence as cyborg, and use their engines to explore speeds that defy the intentions of the flesh, are those willing to trade their lives for forbidden sensations. Mix this desire with rationalized indulgence in various intoxicants and the probability of death continues to rise, along with the intensity of pleasure. Unfortunately the intensity of the violence that often accompanies this sensual exploration is so great that others not receiving the foretaste of paradise are also swept into the vortex of mortality; however, if one drives or rides in autos, such consequences must be recognized. The secondary victim, rewarded at best only by the freedom to drive, is chosen at random, so once again sacrifice lurks under the sign of blind occurrence.





## Sociopathic Killers

Sociopathic killers are terrorists devoid of political intentionality. This is a popular perception. Like terrorists, sociopaths tend to bring out the worst in people as well as in governments. Terrorists and killers force people to confront the abject in an unstable situation where the horror of the abject seems to consume all that is visible—revealing the malevolent foundation of hyperrationalized political economy. When this process continues for long enough, panic and hysteria are bound to follow. These nonrational motivating impulses are unacceptable in rational society, and yet so many decisions are made on their behalf. The fear of killers surpasses the fear of terrorists—having a political agenda at least makes the latter somewhat predictable, but sociopaths have no intelligible agenda. They are the very icon of the under-economy. They are a frightening reminder that anyone can be a sacrificial victim—none shall be spared. Rational argument means nothing when a killer bursts into visibility. Dying in a car accident is far more probable than being the victim of a killer, and yet the news of a killer on the loose inspires panic; the news of a fatal traffic accident—so long as an intimate is not involved—evokes indifference. When one is faced with a killer, individual autonomy seems to



come at too high a price. The idea of passively existing at one moment and then being violently thrown into nonexistence the next makes people want to give their sovereignty to a protector. The police state offers the illusion of total order, a place where such happenings are seemingly impossible, and yet the opposite is true.

The police state, in fact, dramatically increases the odds of violent death. Unlike the nonrational (and hence unpredictable) sociopath, the police state has instrumental reasons for killing (for example, its own self-perpetuation). Giving it the sovereignty to treat life as it pleases only increases the odds of untimely death for everybody (although for malcontents and marginals, the odds are extraordinarily increased). But the hysterical group, caught up in the panic of crime spree hype, has never been known for cool thinking. Is it any wonder that crime bills are passed on the heels of media-scrutinized deaths, or that contemporary campaign platforms are saturated with “tough on crime” rhetoric? Serial killers, macho gang kids, and armed mad junkies cannot be stopped by more police, by tougher sentencing, and/or by more jails. Those who live in the under-economy (or is it those who fulfill the stereotypes of over-economy hyperreality?) cannot be deterred by the disciplinary apparatus of the over-economy, such as fear of capital

**WARNING: IT'S FOR YOUR OWN GOOD**







punishment; that apparatus only works to repress the desires and deter the actions of those who are already members in good standing of the over-economy itself.

## Guns

For much of US history, the gun has been considered a necessary tool of production. Whether it was used for the common defense, to clear the land of its indigenous inhabitants, as a means to procure food (particularly protein), or as a means to legally collect commodities (such as furs), guns were considered instruments of construction, without which a household was incomplete. Guns were also perceived as revolutionary tools: Private ownership of weapons acted as a safeguard against tyranny. This latter notion is somewhat anachronistic, since guns are no longer the locus of military hardware, but many still cling to the idea. The NRA tells us that to be good Americans we must be “forever vigilant,” and just in case, we must also be armed. These notions have provided conservatives with a mythology and dream of the US that allows them to do that which they rarely do—keep hysteria at a distance and maintain liberty. Given the conservative record, in which the answer to most social problems is to incarcerate those enveloped in them, isn’t it surprising that conservatives do not want to outlaw guns and put those who possess them in prison?

2008: Dog Bites  
Deaths: 23  
Attitudinal Status: Unacceptable  
Remedy: Proposals for  
breed-specific bans introduced  
in 86 municipalities

Source: *Dog Bite Law*

Oddly enough, in this case, liberals are the ones who want to throw people in jail. For liberals, guns have become spectacularly abject, the ultimate bad object choice. The hysteria over assault weapons in particular is at a frenzy. (The actual probability of being killed by an assault weapon is so low that it hardly merits consideration.) The hype generating the hysteria is based on three developments: First, the sacrifice of ghetto inmates has been spilling into suburban visibility; second, the media continuously replays images of socio-

paths entering shopping malls, cinemas, suburban elementary schools, post offices, commuter subway cars, and other public places, and shooting everyone in sight; and third, a decontextualized principle has been discovered that when a gun is fired in a household, the casualties are usually household members. For the most part (excluding victims of sociopaths), the victim of a shooting is not a universal subject, but a subject enveloped within a specific variety of predatory environment. On the other hand, being the (universalized) victim of a sociopath is less likely than being struck by lightning. However, without the stabilizing myths to which the conservatives subscribe, and which help keep the boundary between the over- and under-economies intact, the possibility seems all too likely that one will join the sacrificial pool of victims exchanged for the freedom to possess a gun. The liberal perception is that a gun is more likely to be

**DON'T WORRY, EVERYTHING IS UNDER CONTROL.**







used against them than on their behalf (yet surprisingly, CAE has never heard a liberal of the over-economy suggest that their alleged protectors, the police, should not have guns). Consequently, the sacrifices necessary in exchange for freedom seem too disorderly and too visible, and hence the reactionary call for repression. Reforms, such as reducing magazine capacity or closing background check loopholes, may prevent some deaths; however, even with maximum repression (a full ban on all guns with mandatory draconian sentences for possession), the pathologies of an under-economy, straining under the weight of capitalist excess, will not be stopped. Sociopaths aside, the armed citizen in and of herself is not the problem; the real problem is the armed citizen enveloped in a predatory and hyper-rationalized economy. Why is the symptom always attacked, and never the sickness?

## Sacrifice in War

Sacrifice has always been understood as a necessary component of war. Typically, the youth of a culture are sent to battle as cannon fodder, while the support structure (spectacle) of the war machine bemoans their loss, and covers their victimization by granting them the status of patriots or he-



roes. The connection between the spirit world and sacrifice may be lost, but it is replaced here by metaphysical notions of national principles (progress, democracy, free markets, etc.). The lack of any absolute grounding for these “sacred” principles is obfuscated by spectacles of misdirection, illusion, and distraction: parades, military funerals, monuments, TV specials, and so on. At the same time, the rationalized contract—that the sacrifice of  $x$  amount of people will yield  $y$  amount of profit, prestige, land, and other sacrificial victims—is well known, but unmentionable. Whether this silence is a means of avoiding the dissonance of moral contradiction, or a means of avoiding negative sanctions, tends to vary.

The most recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken a turn from tradition. Since these wars primarily consist of battling insurgent nonstate combatants who are poorly equipped to fight their military juggernaut opposition, combat deaths have been greatly reduced, currently standing at 6,519 over the eleven-year period. Compared with Vietnam (a very similar war), the death toll has dropped considerably. Unfortunately, war requires blood from all sides, no matter how much technology stands in for the flesh. In spite of all the “we support our troops” attitude, the profuse thanks for their service, the applause as they walk through air-





ports, and the labeling of every soldier a hero, the disconnected American public fails to recognize the true depth of the sacrifice, because it is too abject to witness and consider, and because it contradicts too deeply the social imaginary of what a soldier is and what war is. No one other than the Veterans Administration seems to acknowledge, let alone worry about, the approximately 72,000 suicides among veterans of all wars during this same eleven-year span of time. The over-economy will never be able to cleanse the veteran suicide rate of its abjectivity, any more than the coffins of soldiers killed in action returning to the homeland can be cleansed of their abjectivity. Instead, it will be censored and kept invisible and silent in the realm of the under-economy, because the only real solution would be to stop going to war.

## Spectator Sports

Not all sacrifices end in death. Some victims need only be maimed to fulfill their sacrificial function. Sports are an excellent example. Some may object that sporting practices exist under a rationalized contract: Professionals are well compensated for the damage done to their bodies. Perhaps this class of sacrificial lambs does lie on the altar voluntarily, since prior to their pain they are treated as kings and given a foretaste of paradise, and



therefore their fate is not so grim. But what about all the victims sacrificed to produce this royalty? The quality of sports entertainment demanded by consumers is unquestionably high. Direct participation requires a lifetime of training (although spectacular participation also requires a long indoctrination process), and sometimes even biomodification, through mechanical or synthetic means, is necessary. Since the question of who will mature to join the athletic elite has no certain answers, large numbers of people must begin the grooming process early on so the pool of potential tal-

ent is large enough to yield the very finest athletes. The leftovers from this process must be wasted. Most escape the grooming process no worse for wear, happy to have participated; however, some do not fare so well. Among this class of throwaways are the sacrificially maimed. They are of all ages: Peewees, middle schoolers, high schoolers, and collegiates parade in a stream of biodestruction. Joints, limbs, bones, ligaments, and more are torn, ripped, and shattered. Unlike their professional counterparts, these victims receive no compensation other than the fun they had on the way to the altar.

In this case, maiming can serve a double function. Those who fail to become participant athletes still bring profit to the developers of professional





sports in a manner beyond offering themselves as material to the sports manufacturing machine. Since these sacrificial victims (the failed athletes) are not ordinarily killed (although such errors do occasionally happen), they become potential perfect spectators. The sacrificially disabled are deeply interested in their sport of choice, perhaps even nostalgic for it, and because they cannot play, they are even more willing to pay to watch it being played. The sports industry not only gets product (athletes) from institutionalized sports, but also has its market developed for it free of charge. The harvesting of so many youths for the purpose of developing a sport that can only be watched is surely a sign of the love and sincere desire for the activity. However, it may be a more profound sign of the American love for an ocular order of passivity.

### Statistical Representations of Death (Sacrifice)

Numbers regarding the dead should be a case of simple interpretation: the number solely represents the known aggregate of people who existed in an animated material form on earth at a particular time in the past, and who exist no more. A simple fact, that just *is*—but that is not what happens. Statistical representations require complex forms of interpretation because, like all signs, they relay into other signs, slowly building into narratives and discourses and thus becoming untethered from the referents they supposedly represent. Quantity never stands alone, but bleeds

into quality. For example, 6,519 US soldiers have died in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Merely revealing this number puts a host of emotions, desires, politics, and aesthetics into play. Meaning immediately balloons and, depending on the cultural and political context, it can take any form. The intentionality of consciousness makes it a near imperative that one interpret statistics about death beyond their referents. There must be a willing of narrative. What would a military person, a peace activist, a neo-conservative, or a Taliban fighter read in this number? What knowledge would it offer beyond a reckoning of nonexistence for a set of people at a given time? Could we even come to a conclusion as to whether this number is big or small?

Finding ways to tilt the narrative by selecting the “right” statistic or set of statistics for the context in which it is placed and the audience who reads it is the recombinant/creative act of the statistician. This too is what makes a statistic boring, telling, outrageous, absurd, or inexplicable. Are the narratives that CAE presents in this essay visible in the numbers that represent the sacrificed?

**THIS SITE HAS BEEN SECURED.**







2010: Motor Vehicles  
Deaths: 33,687  
Attitudinal Status: Acceptable  
Remedy: Status quo  
Source: Centers for Disease  
Control & Prevention

2001: Terrorism  
Deaths: 2,995  
Attitudinal Status: Unacceptable  
Remedy: Wage 2 wars; radically narrow 5  
Amendments in the Bill of Rights  
Source: *The Washington Post*

2007: Lead Paint Toys  
Deaths: 0  
Attitudinal Status: Unacceptable  
Remedy: Recall nearly one million toys;  
ban distribution of children's books  
printed before 1985  
Source: Consumer Product Safety Commission

2002: Recreational Water  
Deaths: 4,174  
Attitudinal Status: Acceptable  
Remedy: Status quo  
Source: Centers for Disease  
Control & Prevention

2000: Medical Errors  
Deaths: 44,000  
Attitudinal Status: Acceptable  
Remedy: Status quo  
Source: Institute of Medicine

2010: Hot Dogs  
Deaths: 13  
Attitudinal Status: Unacceptable  
Remedy: American Academy of Pediatrics  
calls for redesign of hot dogs  
Source: American Academy of Pediatrics

**PHILIP  
FELDMAN  
GALLERY**

at Pacific Northwest College of Art

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