129 die in jet

Acrylic on canvas, 254.5 x 182.5 cm
Cologne, Museum Ludwig

On June 4, 1962, a Monday, the front page of the New York Mirror carried the screaming headline 129 DIE IN JET! Between the capitalized lines appeared a press photo, twice as large as the headline, showing a half-destroyed wing jutting into a cloudless sky, with a few policemen or rescue workers silhouetted in the foreground. Shortly after the disaster, Warhol used a slide projector to transfer the page to a canvas measuring 254.5 by 182.5 cm, and rendered it with brush and paint. Newspaper title, headline and illustration (complete with byline) make up a composition with which Warhol introduced the series of what he termed “death paintings”. These, in contrast to the celebration of the American Way of Life in many of his other works, shed glaring light on its seamy side. The letters of the headline have a tremendous visual impact. In subsequent works Warhol would create a similar effect by repeating a single image over and over again. The suggestive force of the capital letters and painted photograph are difficult to resist. Both get under our skin despite the fact that airline disasters have since become an almost daily occurrence. Warhol’s treatment of the press photo adapts it to the graphic presence of the lettering, and reduces the details of the photo reproduction to a few characteristic abbreviations. This increases the tendency to abstraction already present in the enlargement. The few artistic incursions create a distance to the original, and to the event itself, divesting the painting of any suggestion of embarrassing realism and raising its message to an exemplary level. At the same time, they heighten the print-image combination into a timeless symbol. The mediated reality of the yellow press is sublimated into the reality of art, leaving mental associations to the viewer’s imagination. The idea for the picture was suggested by Henry Geldzahler, then curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and one of the few advocates of Pop on a museum level at the time. Warhol was having breakfast with Geldzahler in a Manhattan restaurant. The curator was reading the New York Mirror, whose title page, Geldzahler reputedly said, would make a good subject for a painting. Warhol was always receptive to suggestions from others; in fact, they were an integral part of his aesthetic principles. His founding of a “Factory” to produce pictures a short time later was not only prompted by commercial considerations but reflected an aesthetic stance in which the contemporary artist figured not as a lone genius but as a sort of catalyst for diverse outside influences.