



ART AND LAW ENFORCEMENT IN A RING BOX: TALWST's Miniature Aesthetic Revolution

by Cristina Vatulescu

In writing about art and law now, I felt compelled to address a part of law that often gets left out of such lofty conversations: law enforcement, or more specifically, policing. Force is both fundamental to and obscured in the workings of the law; Jacques Derrida famously made this argument in *The Force of Law* already in 1990.¹ Yet recent events and technologies have made the force of law newly visible, and newly obscured. Notable in this renewed quest to make law's force visible is the Canadian-Trinidadian artist TALWST, whose *Minimized Histories* (2014 – 15) restage, among other disturbing scenes of “marginalization and unrest,” the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner as miniature dioramas in antique ring boxes.² TALWST is certainly not the first in tackling these issues, yet, bringing together art and policing inside a ring box is new. TALWST's miniature dioramas are the antithesis of the iconic history of art and policing writ large such as Andy Warhol's famous *13 Most Wanted Men*, his enlargement of a 1962 NYPD police booklet of mug shots that became a massive mural covering a large part of a circular cinema at the 1964 New York World's Fair. Art and censorship were both magnified, as exhibition officials painted over Warhol's mural with silver paint, creating their own work. Allan Sekula drew another unforgettable link between art and policing in *The Body and the Archive*.³ This one, too, was on a massive scale, involving a whole medium—photography—and its foundational complicity, through mugshots and Bertillonage, to policing. Film has a whole genre, the noir. So a miniature gave me pause. That's how this article started: with me paused, in front of TALWST's *Por qué?*, recently on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem.⁴

Por qué? Why put the infamous scene of Eric Garner's death at the hands of the NYPD in a “reclaimed 1950's ring box,” framing it in gold leaf and purple velvet? To start with, judging from viewers' body language, so that we stop and look closer. People instantaneously switch modes of attention: eyes squinting, neck pushed slightly forward. At first sight, this is not unlike the way we watch particularly striking things on our cellphones, whose screens—the hand holding the ring box reminds us—are exactly the same size, the size those images of Eric Garner's death actually came to most people through their cellphones. Miniature size. Framed in a little box made to fit in a hand, shiny and eye-catching.

TALWST's ring boxes recall our cellphones, those shiny objects of desire we keep on unlocking in the hope of a present—a precious message, eye candy, news, something else than what's here now. TALWST delivers, and his ongoing engagement with ring boxes, the *Infinity* series, mixes sheer visual pleasure with politics, popular culture, and many layered references to art and histories usually other than the mainstream ones. It is only every once in a while that his enticing jewelry boxes open, with little or no warning (just like with our cellphones) to something deeply disturbing like the Eric Garner images.

Of course, TALWST's boxes recall many other things besides cellphones, depending on the viewer. To my friend, curator Sarah Demeuse, they brought up the connection to folk art through the memory of “miniature Mexican tableau boxes (sometimes even nutshells)” typically furnished with domestic scenes. Against that memory, she had to contend with “police brutality taking the place of rolling tortillas.” She also thought of “smallness and smuggling” and subversion (“you could take this in your pocket and insert it into a hegemonic context”). Coming from Eastern Europe, I thought of camp museum displays of prisoners' art. This was a miniature art form by necessity: made of wood, paper, stone, and (even that most precious material in the camps) bread, it was hidden from guards' eyes in little handmade boxes.

But let's return to TALWST's ring box and the Eric Garner video it most closely remediates, focusing this time on its departures from the moving image.⁵ Right when you approach the piece, there is its undeniable tactile materiality. It comes from the clashing of media TALWST mixed in this diminutive space, gold leaf and velvet clashing with the pavement's crushed rock. Of these media, the most unusual is encaustic, a mixture of pigment and hot wax, used for *Flag*. Which flag, you may ask, before you notice that the image credits call the off-white background created by the interior of the ring box lid by that title. The combination of “Flag” and “the long out of favor and largely forgotten, encaustic,” make unmistakable the reference to Jasper Johns's *White Flag* (1955), famously created in that unusual medium.⁶ In her analysis of this “pivotal object within the history of modern American art,” Isabelle Loring Wallace explains that “the anachronistic encaustic,” was at the time “most closely associated with [...] Egyptian funerary portraits. Affixed to the deceased's mummy prior to burial, these highly realistic portraits [...] were designed to preserve the image of the dead.”⁷ Johns commented that he chose encaustic because, as “pigmented wax sets quickly,” “each discrete trace was preserved, effectively embalmed.”⁸

TALWST took up working in this painstaking medium of hot wax for the first and only time so far in *Flag*.⁹ Providing a material reference to Johns, the encaustic, “with its mortuary, embalming, and trace preserving properties” perfectly fits TALWST's own project of artfully preserving the dead body for



TALWST, *Por qué?*, 2015. reclaimed 1950's ring box, model putty, plastic, crushed rock, gold leaf, Acrylic paint, 3vled light.3v coin battery. Flag: encaustic and ball point pen on gauze/7.5×7.5 cm. Image courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Todd Duym.

eternity, while also preserving traces (not just of the artistic process but also of the crime). The reference to Johns's *White Flag* adds layers of interpretations to the piece through a back and forth of echoes and dissonances. First there is the radical downscaling of the flag and art object. Placed against the black body and its incandescent white light, the off-white of the flag's whitewash can never again pretend to be neutral. Similarly, set against the background of a whitewashed American flag, this everyday scene of police violence can never again be dismissed as a marginal accident; instead, this scene of the abuse of the force of law is cast as an iconic national tableau, a central stain on the flag.

Last but not least, there is the gauze, another fantastic choice of medium for this tiny background. Gauze usually conjures the thought of the body it covers and protects—a wounded body. Johns's *Flag* may have hidden references to a dead body in its use of encaustic or in Johns' autobiography (he recalled his father had shown him in his childhood a statue of a soldier uncle, another Johns, killed while raising the American flag). Yet a viewer could well look at Johns's *Flag* without the thought of a dead body ever occurring to her. This is not a choice for the viewer of TALWST's work: the abused dead body, its raised spirit, as well as its police killers are all unavoidably foregrounded. As much as the intricately layered background, with its exquisitely arranged materials and references attracts the viewer's attention; as much as she would love to get lost in talk of encaustic, there is just no escaping the foreground. TALWST's miniature "aesthetic revolution," to borrow and adapt Jacques Rancière's term, has to do with rearranging the relationship between what we consider foreground and background, central and marginal, national and minoritarian, stories to be told in courts of law or stories to be told in museums.¹⁰ Not surprisingly for an aesthetic revolution, this starts with our perception. To this end TALWST's use of miniature, which he rightly credits with the "unusual physical engagement in both creating and viewing the work," and, I would add, with summoning new and atrophied modes of attention, works wonders.

Jacques Derrida, "Force de loi: le "fondement mystique de l'autorite"/Force of Law: the "mystical foundation of authority" *Cardozo Law Review* 11 no. 5/6 (1990).

TALWST, *Minimized Histories: Marginalization and Unrest*, February 26 – April 12, 2015. Art Gallery of Mississauga.

Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39, no. 4 (1986).

***Por qué?* is currently on show as part of *A Constellation* (November 12, 2015 – March 6, 2016), at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, curated by Amanda Hunt.**

Ramsey Orta, "Original Eric Garner Fatal Arrest Video," *New York Daily News* (July 17, 2014). The full 12 minutes of the unedited version of the video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpGxagKOkv8>.

Isabelle Loring Wallace, *Jasper Johns* (New York: Phaidon, 2014), 14.

Isabelle Loring Wallace, *Jasper Johns*, 13-14.

Isabelle Loring Wallace, *Jasper Johns*, 14.

TALWST, personal communication with the author, January 13, 2016.

Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London Continuum, 2004), 37-38.

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