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# Andres Serrano: *The Body Politic*

ROBERT HOBBS

In the early eighties, when Ronald Reagan's policy of deregulation was contributing to great social and economic inequities, Andres Serrano came to maturity as an artist. His work represents the politicization of the human body that, in the ensuing years, became the focus of debates on AIDS, drugs, abortion, and euthanasia.

In his art, Serrano deals with bodily fluids in large Cibachromes that question the realistic claims made for photography; at the same time, they portray these feared substances with the seductive allure usually reserved for advertising. Thus, his work unites culturally constructed codes for desire with substances usually considered repugnant in Western culture. Marginalized by his African Cuban background, Serrano has made images of such outsider groups as the homeless and the Ku Klux Klan. This study will consider his development in the decade from 1983 to 1992, when he completed his *Morgue* series. Although an artist's work extends beyond personal aims, and represents far more than a mere sum of life's experiences, biographical considerations still provide an excellent vantage point to understand Serrano's orientation to the world. After briefly reviewing his childhood and continued connections to the Catholic Church, this essay will undertake an analysis of his work as it relates to the artistic, social, and political debates that inform it.

"I am drawn to subjects that border on the unacceptable," Andres Serrano said in 1993, "because I lived an unacceptable life for so long."<sup>1</sup> This "unacceptable life" apparently began soon after his birth, in 1950, when he was abandoned by his father, a merchant marine who had three other families living in his native Honduras. Brought up in the predominantly Italian Williamsburg section of Brooklyn by an African Cuban mother who did not speak English, and who was hospitalized on a number of occasions for psychosis, Serrano quickly learned the meaning of being both marginalized and emotionally on his own.

In spite of these difficulties or, perhaps, because of them, he found the Metropolitan Museum of Art a safe haven; there, he spent hours looking at Renaissance paintings. The experience was so intense that at twelve he decided to become an artist. His attraction to these religious works may have strengthened his involvement in the Catholic Church and contributed to his decision to be confirmed when he was thirteen. Despite his strong interest in art and in the Church, he became a high school dropout when he was fifteen.

Serrano's continued interest in art led him, at seventeen, to undertake two years of study at the Brooklyn Museum School. Among his favorite instructors was the African American painter Calvin Douglas. At the time, Serrano was painting in a style reminiscent of Fernand Léger, which emphasized broad areas of color; other influences during this apprenticeship period were Picasso and the abstract expressionists. Feeling

<sup>1</sup> Terry Gross, "Irreverent Images,"  
*Applause* (May 1993): 15.

that he had little talent for painting, Serrano turned to photography. For almost two years after attending the Brooklyn Museum School, he made black-and-white photographs of street scenes; but then he became both a drug addict and a dealer on the streets of New York, and gave up art entirely. "I knew I couldn't serve two masters, so I got rid of my camera," he later recalled.<sup>2</sup> The hiatus between art school and drugs deeply affected his outlook. Addiction, he said, is "like going through a war and coming out a little bit shell-shocked. You don't really come out the same as when you went in."<sup>3</sup> After Serrano was able to break his drug habit and return to photography, he developed a preference for elaborate tableaux that took on the quality of surrealist film stills.

Many of those images, according to the artist, dealt with "unresolved feelings about my Catholic upbringing which help me redefine and personalize my relationship with God."<sup>4</sup> He termed the Church "oppressive, as far as dealing with women, blacks, minorities, gays, lesbians, and anyone else who doesn't go along with their program."<sup>5</sup> Despite his separation from the Church, which began soon after confirmation, Serrano has not renounced his belief, admitting that he "would not be adverse to being called a Christian."<sup>6</sup>

Because of the intensity of his unresolved feelings about the Church, Serrano has surrounded himself with the symbols of Catholicism, choosing to mix the sacred and the secular in such a way that one cannot easily tell if he is profaning the sacred or raising the parochial to a divine level. Although his childhood home contained only a statue of the Madonna and a picture of Christ with a sacred heart—his mother found crucifixes morbid—his apartment contains a wealth of religious paraphernalia, such as a nine-foot, ornate bishop's throne adorned with a painted image of a kneeling monk; a bust of Christ with a crown of thorns; more than one hundred plastic and carved wooden crucifixes (many of which decorate the bathroom); and both deep-red and purple velvet draperies—richly decorated with gold braid and insignia—that cover windows as well as walls. This ecclesiastical and funereal atmosphere even extends to the Pennsylvania Gothic bed frame in the living room that assumes the air of a surrogate altar. These collections are shown in tandem with specimens from natural-history museums, such as bleached animal skulls, a human brain in a bottle of formaldehyde, and stuffed animals, including a fruit bat suspended upside down in a bell jar. The juxtaposition of the accoutrements of Catholicism with Serrano's collection of specimens and trophies suggests their important role in constituting a natural history of the spirit. His easy familiarity with these vestments and ecclesiastical objects borders on profanity, and yet the artist obviously enjoys them:

*Look at my apartment. I am drawn to the symbols of the Church. I like the aesthetics of the Church. I like Church furniture. I like going to Church for aesthetic reasons, rather than spiritual ones. In my work I explore my own Catholic obsessions. An artist is nothing without his or her obsession, and I have mine.<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Vince Aletti, "Fluid Drive," *The Village Voice* (December 6, 1988): 120.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, "Andres Serrano: The Spirit and the Letter," *Art in America* (April 1990): 239.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Walker, "Andres Serrano," *Art Papers* (September–October 1990): 38.

<sup>6</sup> Karin Lipson, "The Now-Notorious Andres Serrano," *New York Newsday* (May 21, 1990): 2:3.

<sup>7</sup> Coco Fusco, "Serrano Shoots the Klan," *High Performance* (Fall 1991): 42.

In this statement, Serrano tries to write off these symbols as merely splendid aesthetic objects resonant with mystery; they obviously connote a great deal more, as his work indicates.

Serrano's maturation as an artist took almost five years. At first, he made street portraits and landscapes; later, in 1983, he became a tableau photographer who created images commensurate with his obsession with Catholicism and interest in dadaist and surrealist art:

*I just felt like I wanted to take the pictures in my head, and I started to do setups with raw meat. I felt the connection to death, and the meat images were living and dead at the same time. I'd been doing religious pictures for two or three years before I realized I had done a lot of religious pictures! I had no idea I had this obsession. It's a Latino thing, but it's also a European thing (I always remember that flock of sheep going into a Catholic church in [Buñuel's] Exterminating Angel), but I've been as influenced by European art as by anybody, specifically Duchamp. I saw him as a free spirit, a provocateur par excellence, which I related to as a young man, a rebel.<sup>8</sup>*



*Memory* 1983

The tableau *Memory* (1983) represents many of Serrano's early concerns, including his fascination with dream images, his obsession with the meaning of the Christian sacrifice, and his desire to transform photography into a fictive realm. In the tableau, an eleven-year-old boy named Wanaki is shown on the right; his mother, Couger, pictured on the left, had known Serrano when he was taking drugs. The artist's wife, Julie Ault, is present, wearing a perforated metal mask; a friend, Michael, is represented by a hand; and a flayed goat appears in its entirety. This highly theatrical ensemble alludes, no doubt, to the child as a scapegoat. The work may also incorporate biographical overtones: The original title was *I Remember Honduras*. Five years before creating this work, Serrano had made a brief visit to Honduras to look up his father. It was the last time they saw each other. Because people assumed that Serrano was born in Honduras, or wanted to connect the work to current political problems in Central America, he changed the title to the more open-ended *Memory*.

The connection to Honduras was probably subliminal since, at the time, Serrano was closely associated with the political art of Group Material. This loosely associated collective of a dozen artists, including his wife, Julie Ault, and her childhood friend Tim Rollins, began to operate a storefront artists' space on East 13th Street in the summer of 1980. Agreeing with the French political theorist Louis Althusser that art can be of critical consequence to class struggle, Group Material aimed to sidestep the established channels of the art world—including its marketplace, which played to the interests of the ruling elite—and provide opportunities for other voices and views. Focusing on issues, it organized, in December 1980, an installation called *Alienation*. Believing that the idealist aesthetics of formalism represented the ideology of an art-world establishment that masked its vested interests under the banner of universalism, Group Material felt that the presentation of objects should be accompanied by a meaningful dialogue that underscored their context. Consequently, the socially

<sup>8</sup> Lippard, "Spirit and the Letter," 241.

significant theme of alienation was buttressed by an Alienation Film Festival and a public lecture by political-science professor Bertell Ollman, of New York University, who had written a book on the subject. Later that same month, neighborhood people were invited to bring their personal treasures to the gallery. According to critic Thomas Lawson, "The show turned into a narrative of everyday life, a folk tale in which intimacies were shared without shame."<sup>9</sup>

Serrano differs from members of Group Material in that he directs social issues within the confines of the art world rather than going outside the established system. Although he has maintained a constant interest in showing his work in art galleries and museums, he has admitted, "I like to think in terms of raising more questions than answers."<sup>10</sup> He has also acknowledged that his works "engage the viewer in a dialogue that is difficult to escape,"<sup>11</sup> thus underscoring a shared interest with Group Material's goal to open art and life to new and highly critical dialogues, to escape the hegemony of canonical art and the elite, and to provide an opportunity for art to become an instrument of social and political change. Serrano cannot be called a proponent of "social aesthetics," but he has acknowledged, in a statement worthy of the social -activist orientation of Group Material, that "religion relies heavily on symbols, and my job as an artist is to pursue the manipulation of that symbolism and explore its possibilities."<sup>12</sup> In his investigation of that symbolism, he has agreed consistently with Group Material that people should be encouraged to exercise their own critical judgment. He likes the idea that his art "can be accessible to more than just an art audience," and has stressed that "the work is meant to be open to interpretation."<sup>13</sup> "In a sense," Serrano has said, "my work has always been like a mirror. Whoever looks at it will have a different reaction, and they'll get from it what they give. If they give it a negative energy, that's what they'll get back. Whereas, if you give it a positive energy, you'll get a positive image, a reaffirmation rather than a negation."<sup>14</sup>

Unlike many members of Group Material, Serrano was reluctant to give up the hook of beauty, which is a key tool of his art. "When one works with difficult subjects," he emphasized, "it is necessary to put beauty back into the accomplished work."<sup>15</sup> On another occasion, he noted, "Maybe it's easier to dismiss the work when you know you're turned off by it completely, as opposed to when you're seduced by it."<sup>16</sup> The interest in captivating viewers through the sheer beauty of his light and color has remained a constant in his oeuvre. No matter how repugnant his subjects may be to some people, his works are stunning. As critic David Deitcher observed, "Serrano's photographs are therefore indefensible to so many, not simply because they blaspheme, which, in a narrow sense, some of them do; they are insupportable because they find beauty in substances that have always made people recoil in horror and embarrassment."<sup>17</sup>

But when an audience is repelled by a subject, as critic Peter Schjeldahl was by the *Morgue* series (1992), it is because Serrano's radiance appears to trivialize death. Schjeldahl writes:

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Lawson, "Review of *The People's Choice*, Group Material," *Artforum* (April 1981): 67.

<sup>10</sup> Walker, "Serrano," 38.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Blume, "Andres Serrano," *Bomb* (Spring 1993): 39.

<sup>12</sup> William H. Honan, "Artist Who Outraged Congress Lives amid Christian Symbols," *The New York Times* (August 16, 1989): C20.

<sup>13</sup> Walker, "Serrano," 38.

<sup>14</sup> Laurie Kalnin, "Andres Serrano: Life after *Piss Christ*," *NICA News* [Nevada Institute for Contemporary Art] (Winter 1990-91): 9.

<sup>15</sup> Serrano, as quoted in Daniel Arasse, "Les Transis," in *Andres Serrano: The Morgue* (Paris: Galerie Yvon Lambert, 1993), unpag.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Morgan, "An Interview with Andres Serrano," *Artpaper* (September 1989): 1:14-15.

<sup>17</sup> David Deitcher, "Cumulus from America," *Parkett* 21 (Fall 1989): 142.

His relentless aestheticizing defuses the psychic mechanism of identification (*that could be me or that could be my loved one*), which can make pictures of the dead particularly unbearable.... In Serrano's new work, both fantasy and reality fall away, leaving only the aesthetic.... In this light, Serrano's show is not about death at all. It is only about art—art with an attitude.<sup>18</sup>

This review does not recognize that beauty is an essential component of Serrano's art, which heightens its tension by seducing viewers with the radiance of subjects traditionally considered objectionable.

Not content to turn art into political propaganda or mere documentation, Serrano, instead, has chosen to straddle a fine line between art and advertising, which, unfortunately, has only been recognized, in passing, in a few derogatory references. The single exception is the prescient analysis offered by critic Tobey Crockett, who wrote in 1989:

Serrano has taken the iconography of Photography As Conceptual Documentation and blown it up into a second generation where rich, glossy color photographs up the ante from a homespun by-product to the polished allure of an advertising campaign that lulls us with a false sense of security. The beauty of the color and the richness of the image seduce us, and are at variance with the literal meatiness of their content.<sup>19</sup>

The adverse criticism of Serrano's *Morgue* series is worth recounting at the outset of this chronological survey for it enables us to consider a significant aspect of his art that heretofore has not been acknowledged. In the same review by Schjeldahl, Serrano is taken to task for emphasizing the gorgeous surfaces of the cadavers. Calling him "coldly clever in his conceptions and anything but subtle in his meaning,"<sup>20</sup> Schjeldahl does not recognize the significance of Serrano's explanation of his work: "They're seduced and then they feel tricked when they realize what they're seduced by. To me, that's the work's saving grace—that it doesn't repel altogether, that it works on more than one level."<sup>21</sup> Schjeldahl thinks that Serrano "has made his career as a sort of advertising campaigner against supposed taboos...[and his] invariably superb execution suggests an art director's workaday perfectionism, though in service to audacities."<sup>22</sup> Reviewing the same exhibition for the *New York Times*, Michael Kimmelman connects the corpses with "the simple graphic pizzazz of some of the ads that adorn bus stops. But the commercial ambitions of those ads are unambiguous." He adds darkly, "It is not clear what Mr. Serrano's ambitions are."<sup>23</sup> Equally negative is Bart de Baere's review of the exhibition for *Flash Art*: "Serrano seemed like he was selling death...I have lost my trust in his work because he relies so much on a reproducible energy."<sup>24</sup>

All three writers castigate Serrano for commercialization, leaving their readers with the uneasy feeling that he has either sold out to the general public or is unable to comprehend the full tragedy of death; none, though, connects this commercialization with the artist's earlier series that created elisions between commercial and

<sup>18</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, "Art after Death," *The Village Voice* (February 16, 1993): 91.

<sup>19</sup> Tobey Crockett, "Andres Serrano," *Splash* (April 1989); clipping from artist's file, Paula Cooper Gallery.

<sup>20</sup> Schjeldahl, "Art after Death," 91.

<sup>21</sup> Morgan, "Interview," 14–15.

<sup>22</sup> Schjeldahl, "Art after Death," 91.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Kimmelman, "Serrano Focuses on Death," *The New York Times* (February 5, 1993): C3.

<sup>24</sup> Bart de Baere: "There is no rational way of presenting the Biennale.... There can only be consistent fragments"; *Flash Art* (October 1993): 70.

fine-art imagery and cast doubt on the autonomy of each area. They do not recognize that the beauty of his art relies on the mechanism of advertising to sell repressed ideas, thus forcing viewers to come to terms with advertising's seductive power as well as to cope with difficult subjects.

Serrano's hybrids of commercial and fine art open the field of cultural production to debate in new and particularly meaningful ways. To his credit, his hybrids have been so provocative that initial discussions of his work focused solely on his choice of subjects. Because his commercial and fine-art conjunctions preceded these discussions, they have been able to function as a subliminal, yet highly effective means of seizing people's attention with such titles as *Piss Christ* (1987). Serrano's titles often sound like ad copy, and their glossy, seemingly impervious, large formats, created by four-by-five-foot Cibachrome prints, silicone-bonded to Plexiglas with a heat press, assume the seductive and seamless manipulation of desire common to advertising imagery.

This blending of commercial and fine art is evident in Serrano's first tableaux in the condensation of elements, the figures brought close to the foreground of the compositions, the monumental sense of scale, and the heightened, often saturated color. This approach, no doubt, is indebted to the six months in 1970 that he worked for Winthrop-Hoyt, an advertising agency in Manhattan, as an assistant art director and junior copywriter. At the time, Serrano was only twenty. He had obtained the job through the auspices of the Young & Rubicam program that was designed to help young people enter the advertising field (members of the advertising firm volunteered to help promising students put together portfolios). While employed by Winthrop-Hoyt, Serrano wrote copy and made layout drawings—but not mechanicals—for Great Bear drinking water. Instead of hyping such innocuous products as drinking water in his art, however, Serrano used the glitz of advertising, the drama of cinema, and the power and beauty of art both to sell and to dignify provocative images of subjects.



*Heaven and Hell* 1984

For *Heaven and Hell* (1984), he invited the renowned political artist Leon Golub—whom he had met through Julie Ault's participation in the Artists' Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America—to pose, in a rented cardinal's outfit, with Ault's cousin Lisa Pukalski, who is shown nude to the waist and streaked with beef blood. Wishing the narrative to be open-ended, Serrano still refuses to say whether he intended the woman to be viewed as a victim or a mere pawn. He has pointed out that the work heightens the Catholic Church's problematic treatment of women: "In that photograph I'm referring to the relationship the Church has with women, whether they are aware of women as human beings or just take them for granted and dismiss them. The cardinal in fact seems quite oblivious to the woman's suffering."<sup>25</sup> The woman can be linked to an installation piece for a store window that critic Lucy Lippard asked Serrano and Ault to create the following year for Printed Matter. In addition to an image of a male nude carrying an animal carcass, it included *Stigmata* (1985), a photograph of a female, nude except for her white-leather cuffs and bloody

<sup>25</sup> Walker, "Serrano," 39.

hands. According to Lippard, the stigmatization in this work is a reference to menses.<sup>26</sup> Because neighbors objected to the subject matter, the image was reversed so that it could be seen only from inside the store, and a statement on community censorship was posted on the outside window.

Since Golub is known for his paintings of victims and oppressors, his appearance as the cardinal in *Heaven and Hell* heightens both the theatricality and the artificiality of the scene, making his role akin to that of the product endorser who parodies what he hypes. The striated background, spray-painted on photographer's backdrop paper, is reminiscent of the highly theatrical scenes painted by Roger Brown. The artificiality of this background helps to undermine photography's assumed truth and to ensure that the entire piece will appear as a pastiche of both Luis Buñuel's films and counter-reformation art of the baroque period. The critic Cornelia Read has connected the artificial color of Serrano's photographs to a host of popular and fine-art sources that underscore a loss of faith in photography's claim to epitomize objective realism:

Color in these prints is theatrical, reminiscent of cinema's VistaVision process (what *Rear Window* was shot in), or the gaudy tints of sentimental religious prints and paintings. The overall effect is like a collaboration of Man Ray, Norman Rockwell, and students of the Black Velvet Jesus Painting Institute. Serrano has succeeded in creating icons for a new age.<sup>27</sup>

The artist himself has pointed out that the reds, blacks, whites, and yellows occurring in this print and in other works are especially suited to Cibachromes as opposed to C Prints and dye transfers; consequently, he considered them the mainstays of his palette.<sup>28</sup>



*Cabeza da Vaca* 1984

In *Cabeza da Vaca* (literally cow's head; 1984), Serrano plays on the reference to conquistador Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (born c. 1490), who spent eight years in the Gulf region of present-day Texas and described the legendary Seven Golden Cities of Cíbola, which inspired later expeditions by Hernando de Soto and Francisco Coronado. Pictured on a faux-marble pedestal found in the apartment of Tim Rollins and Kate Pierson, where Serrano and Ault were then staying, the animal is absurd and haunting. According to the artist, "Blood is a sensuous material, like pigment," and so a natural subject for one of his tableaux.<sup>29</sup> He recalls not needing to enhance the blood on this cow's head, only to clean the animal's eyelashes.

Given the Artists' Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America and Group Material's contemporaneous interest in this project, which consisted of exhibitions and demonstrations, one might say that a sufficient political discourse on art and political intervention was then established to advance a political reading of *Cabeza de Vaca*. Certainly, the formal elements of this photograph have enabled critics to consider its subject matter "the substitution of a slaughterhouse product for the head of St. John the Baptist."<sup>30</sup> But a reading of the work as only a meditation on politics or on the relationship between the sacred and the profane is confounded by the high gloss of this

<sup>26</sup> Lippard, "Spirit and the Letter," 241.

<sup>27</sup> Cornelia Read, "Plundering the Sacred and Profane. Photographers Serrano and Salcedo Use Familiar Images To Chill and Satirize." *New Times* [Syracuse, New York] (February 18, 1987): 9.

<sup>28</sup> Andres Serrano, interview by the author, New York City, March 10, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Crockett, "Serrano."



Cibachrome print, which makes the image appear as much a parody as an unsettling dream and the photograph itself a strange commercial icon of death.

Serrano is generally unconcerned with the process of photography and uninterested in developing his prints. He regards himself at this time as more of an installation artist than a photographer: "I'm not that interested in the technical aspects of photography. For years I used the same lights and camera and I never learned to print. I think I'm more an artist with a camera than a real photographer. I would say that sometimes I'm anti-photography."<sup>31</sup> In line with this thinking, he emphasizes the careful planning of his tableaux in order to remain faithful to his initial concept; he never crops images and, consequently, does not have contact sheets made. To make photographs during this early period, he used a Nikkormat (a cheaper Nikon) and bracketed his shots, selecting the best image directly from the negative. Then, as now, he sent the film to a commercial developer. From there, the Cibachrome print went to a professional mounter who used a heat press to ensure that the Plexiglas became an integral part of the picture, turning the ensemble into an industrialized equivalent to the tradition of reverse painting on glass. The results displace the traditional veracity of photography by transforming reality into a series of highly mediated representations—estranged signs picturing the world in terms of spectacular illusions.



*Pietà* 1985



*The Passion* 1984



*Blood Cross* 1985

Serrano's ironic sense of the absurd continued in *Pietà* (1985)—a set-up photograph that also resembles a Buñuel film still. It was anticipated by a particularly unsettling work entitled *The Passion* (1984), which consisted of a weeping plaster Jesus wearing a wreath of dripping blood and peering over the flayed carcass of a large animal. In *Pietà*, Julie Ault holds a five-dollar fish, purchased in Chinatown, that transforms her into an absurd Virgin embracing a literalized symbol of Christ, who was sometimes represented by the rebus ICHTHUS. Although Serrano's staged scene undermines the seriousness of the icon, the artificiality and irony of his tableau does not completely eradicate its evocative power. Like Buñuel, he attacks the Christian icon because he apparently needs to free himself of its power. Yet, as his photograph adopts what it also parodies, it is akin to Buñuel's love/hate relationship with the Church. According to Serrano, "Buñuel deals with religion subversively, he's completely sacrilegious. And yet, this is the work of a man who holds some religious beliefs, if not all that Catholicism embraces. He obviously has a love/hate relationship with the people and institutions he criticizes."<sup>32</sup> Serrano's criticism could be considered self-criticism, pointing to the tensions that give rise to his imagery and acknowledge his need to excoriate what he also affirms.

On Good Friday 1985, Serrano photographed his *Blood Cross* in Leon Golub's studio. Consisting of a Plexiglas tank in the form of a cross, which the artist filled with cow's blood purchased for ten dollars per gallon, the work is an important transitional piece; it led to the abstract work that began the following New Year's Eve, when he created *Milk, Blood*. The tank for *Blood Cross* started to leak as he filled it with blood

<sup>31</sup> Walker, "Serrano," 40.

<sup>32</sup> Blume, "Serrano," 39.

(Serrano was just learning to work with Plexiglas); deciding that the image of a dripping cross might prove interesting, he filled the tank to the top and photographed it against a spray-painted backdrop especially created to suggest an ersatz apocalypse. Although the darkening sky and the light rising from behind the cross may appear to spoof religion, this image was inspired by the genre of religious illustrations dealing with the cross in the landscape that he had seen in stores selling religious paraphernalia.

Photographed from a low vantage point, the bleeding cross seems monumental. Regarding the use of blood in this and other images, Serrano stated:

*The Church is obsessed with the body and blood of Christ. At the same time, there is the impulse to repress and deny the physical nature of the Church's membership. There is a real ambivalence there. It's one thing to idealize the body and it's another to deal with it realistically.... In my work, I attempt to personalize this tension in institutional religion by revising the way in which body fluids are idealized.<sup>33</sup>*

The abundance of blood in this print stretches the symbol to the point of absurdity, making Serrano's work a comment on both the religious observance and the commercial illustrations memorializing the cross.

A few months after the creation of this piece, the curator Bill Olander approached the artist about participating in an exhibition at the New Museum—"Fake: A Meditation on Authenticity." According to Olander, "Experimentation is what 'Fake' is about—a modest attempt...to undermine the humanist project which continues to promote a totalizing spirit of creativity, traversing all perceptible forms to arrive at a complete expression of self."<sup>34</sup> Reacting against the idealist approach of formalism, Olander wished to critique originality as an outmoded concept in an age of mass media and postmodernism. His conversation with Serrano was the catalyst for a major change in the artist's orientation. Rather than making tableaux that looked like film stills or Renaissance and baroque paintings, Serrano began to think of ways that he could short-circuit photography's traditional claim to record objective reality and make it abstract. Discussing his new goals, he said: "I wanted to use a photograph in the way that a painter uses a canvas, and to involve myself less in traditional photographic concerns like space and perspective. These abstract series are still tableaux, but the distinction between the prop and the background has been eliminated many times."<sup>35</sup> One might say that abstract photography is a contradiction in terms that suited the artist's need to disrupt known categories and cast doubt on apperception.



*Milk, Blood* 1985

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Finnegan, "Bearing the Cross," *Contemporanea* (November 1990): 32ff.

<sup>34</sup> Bill Olander, as quoted in Jack Bankowsky, "Review of 'Fake,' The New Museum of Contemporary Art," *Flash Art* (October 1987): 105–6.

<sup>35</sup> Finnegan, "Bearing the Cross," 32ff.

<sup>36</sup> Serrano, interview.

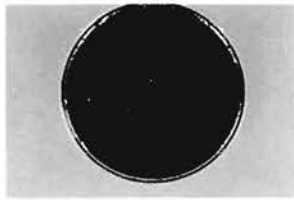
The result of the conversation with Olander was the creation several months later of the first piece exclusively relying on bodily fluids, entitled *Milk, Blood*, that is concerned with flattening out the picture plane of photography so that it simulates a Mondrian. When making this diptych, with one side blood and the other milk—which were then placed in a Plexiglas container and shot from above—Serrano was thinking of Mondrian's simplicity and elegance as opposed to his spirituality and quest for a new reality.<sup>36</sup> The piece depends on an essential contradiction between conceptual and



*Bloodstream* 1987



*Milk Cross* 1987



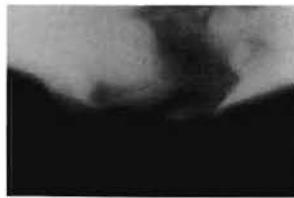
*Circle of Blood* 1987



*Blood and Soil* 1987



*Piss* 1987



*Piss and Blood* 1987

perceptual knowledge: What we know to be reproduced appears to be denied by the two monochromatic fields of color. The piece, therefore, interrogates traditional ways of establishing truth because the presence of the liquids is denied by the resolutely flat surface of the photograph.

The abstractness of *Milk, Blood* paved the way for a great deal of experimentation in 1987; it proved to be one of the most important years in the artist's development. For *Bloodstream*, his next piece, he filled a Plexiglas tank with milk before pouring blood into it. To attain the image he wanted, to catch the momentary effects of the liquids coming together, Serrano found that he had to pour blood and shoot at the same time. *Milk Cross* was created by submerging one tank within another and filling the larger one with blood and the smaller one with milk. For *Circle of Blood*, he placed a plastic cylinder, purchased at Ains on Canal Street, on a sheet of yellow Plexiglas before filling it with blood; then, he positioned himself directly above in order to photograph the ensemble. The next in this series of bodily fluids, *Blood and Soil*, was inspired by Anselm Kiefer's work and his references to the excesses of German patriotism. To create this photograph, Serrano partially filled a Plexiglas tank with soil before pouring blood into it. Although the tank buckled under the pressure of the two materials, the resulting photograph looks like a minimalist painting.

After creating *Blood and Soil*, Serrano decided to make several monochromes. Each was to emphasize a single bodily fluid. Monochromes were then a commonplace in painting, but they rarely appeared in photography. At the time, Serrano had discovered the work of Yves Klein and felt the idea of emphasizing a single color was particularly strong. The first piece in the series was *Blood*. The second, *Milk*, consisted of a tank of that liquid, which he wished to photograph head-on and at close range; but the glare from the Plexiglas made it difficult to light. The printer suggested simply resorting to white paper, but Serrano did not want to cheat with his abstract realistic images. For the third monochrome, he decided to use urine. He titled the work *Piss* to avoid too clinical a reading and to assure its accessibility to a broader audience. To make the piece, he filled a tank with his own urine and placed lights both to the side and behind the tank. Referring to urine as the third main color in his palette, Serrano then employed it for *Piss and Blood*. Unlike the earlier *Milk, Blood*, the two liquids did not mix. Their interactions, according to the artist, resembled the activity of a lava lamp.

Although the use of bodily fluids in art may appear novel, the German conceptual artist Wolfgang Laib, a former medical student, had already become well-known in art circles for his milkstones—flat, rectangular pieces of white marble, whose tops were ground slightly to form depressions that the artist filled with milk. With these milkstones, Laib also exhibited squares of yellow pollen, carefully dusted on the floor and shown with several glass jars of this material in different colors. Regarding these substances as important sources of energy and symbols of life, Laib has taken an almost mystical approach to his resonant and low-key installations, which differ

markedly in appearance from Serrano's later Cibachromes of this liquid. In spite of his postmodern presentation, Serrano has affirmed that the milk in his art connotes traditional values. "Milk," he told critic Derek Guthrie, "signifies purity, the purity of life or the maternal aspect of life."<sup>37</sup> The need for an ochre color similar to Laib's pollen may have been a factor in his decision to use urine, but this liquid engenders ambivalent feelings that differ radically from the affirmation of Laib's pollen.

Although Serrano views his emphasis on blood as a natural progression from the carcasses, as well as a critique of the implicit violence of Catholicism, this substance became highly politicized in the mideighties, when it was first acknowledged as a medium for transmitting AIDS. On January 5, 1984, the *New York Times* reported that the disease could be transmitted in heterosexual relations through the blood, noting that, in Atlanta, a hemophiliac was thought to have passed on the disease to his spouse. Seven days later, the *Times* referred to the concern over the spread of this disease through blood transfusions. In May, the American Red Cross decided to begin evaluating tests for detecting AIDS in blood donated for transfusions. The following February, the concern about blood and AIDS assumed even greater dimensions when the Federal Drug Administration required all donated blood to be tested for antibodies to the virus suspected of causing AIDS. On May 19, 1985, the *Times* announced that AIDS is caused by the virus LAV or HTLVIII and can be transmitted through such bodily fluids as blood or semen. The following year, Governor Mario Cuomo proposed legislation barring insurance companies from requiring policy applicants to get blood tests for AIDS. And by February 1987, the AIDS epidemic had reached such proportions that federal health officials were considering extending blood testing to all applicants for marriage licenses, everyone who was hospitalized, all pregnant women, and anyone afflicted with sexually transmitted diseases. The next month, the U.S. Public Health Service indicated that some tens of millions of Americans who had received blood transfusions and other blood products between 1978 and April 1985 should be tested for possible infection by the AIDS virus. Adding to the general confusion and fear, scientists confirmed in July 1987 that mosquitoes ingesting infected blood could retain the AIDS virus in their bodies for two or three days, even though there was no evidence that they were able to transmit it to others.

Given the widespread public concern about blood as a medium for transmitting the AIDS virus and the ongoing discussion about testing large sectors of the population, it is difficult to regard Serrano's work as completely apolitical, even though the criticism directed at it initially avoided making any such comparisons. Either the controversy was so prevalent in people's minds that the association with his work was widely recognized and, consequently, did not need to be mentioned or only a few perceptive critics hesitantly made a connection. In the critical literature, the first reference connecting Serrano's use of bodily fluids with the disease is an oblique allusion by Elizabeth Hess in the *Village Voice*:

<sup>37</sup> Derek Guthrie, "Taboo Artist: Serrano Speaks," *New Art Examiner* (September 1989): 45

If Serrano is the devil's advocate, he's just not doing his job; the artist doesn't advocate one position or another, which is why his work speaks to a mainstream audience. Yet, even his most abstract images are able to pose questions: What happens when religious icons crumble? Why are our bodily fluids toxic?<sup>38</sup>

Considering the concern over AIDS, it is surprising that most of the comments about Serrano's references to blood and other bodily fluids are in line with Michael Brenson's low-key conclusion that his "use of bodily fluids is not intended to arouse disgust but to challenge the notion of disgust where the human body is concerned."<sup>39</sup> Only in 1989, two years after *Piss Christ*, and at a time when Serrano was making photographs of semen—*Untitled (Ejaculate in Trajectory)*—did critics begin linking his work directly to AIDS. This was even suggested by the artist in an interview by Derek Guthrie. "But the semen pictures," Serrano emphasized, "in the age of AIDS could and do refer to sexuality and AIDS."<sup>40</sup> Three months later, Amei Wallach applied this idea to the artist's use of other bodily fluids:

AIDS is an obvious presence in these soft-focus photographs, but so are all the sufferings of humanity. The high-gloss, high-fashion presentation makes terrible verities seem as though they were photographed through as many filters as it used to take to make Doris Day seem young enough to fall in love with Rock Hudson.<sup>41</sup>

The next year, the subject was addressed in an interview by Christian Walker. The exchange is enlightening.

WALKER: The whole notion of body fluids in your work seems to be about the age of AIDS, but also about the primitive, alchemy, and healing and ritual ceremony.

SERRANO: *All that stuff is traditionally more important to the non-white artist than the white artist. I try to personalize the work, and that's why I draw on these things. My work is not terribly intellectual or theoretical. I want it to be accessible, to be personal, and at the same time I hope it strikes a universal chord.*<sup>42</sup>

A month later, G. Roger Denson wrote in *Contemporanea*:

But in this age of AIDS...Serrano's bioproducts implicitly project an even more menacing foreign body: HIV. Since HIV is invisible to the eye and transmitted in human body products, hysteria not only encircles the AIDS patient but also trespasses in the clinic. Blood, semen, urine, and feces are no longer just thought of as indelicate or perverse; now they are labeled "biohazards," to be managed cautiously in even the most sanitized environment.<sup>43</sup>

Evidently, Serrano's conjunction of the sacred and the profane was so inflammatory that critics initially did not need to look for further implications in his work, and, consequently, did not take note of how it presented highly cathected and controversial materials without appearing to take sides.

Serrano's concern for bodily fluids may have stemmed from their general topicality as well as from the fast-growing reality that AIDS was spreading dispropor-

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Hess, "The Last Temptation of Jesse Helms," *The Village Voice* (December 26, 1989): 125.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Brenson, "Andres Serrano: Provocation and Spirituality," *The New York Times* (December 8, 1989): C1.

<sup>40</sup> Guthrie, "Taboo Artist," 45.

<sup>41</sup> Amei Wallach, "Piercing the Boundaries of Religion," *New York Newsday* (December 15, 1989); clipping from artist's file, Paula Cooper Gallery. Author's note: Doris Day, born 1924, was, in fact, little more than one year older than her frequent costar Rock Hudson, born 1925.

<sup>42</sup> Walker, "Serrano," 40.

<sup>43</sup> G. Roger Denson, "'Bad Boy' Sublimations," *Contemporanea* (November 1990): 38.

tionately in minority communities, with African Americans and Hispanics being the hardest hit. Although he took pride in being a Hispanic person who was not regarded solely as a Hispanic artist,<sup>44</sup> he also was resistant to being totally identified with mainstream art: "I have a problem with, or I resist what I perceive as, homogenized white art, that is to say non-threatening work. I think for a person of color to do any work that is in some way threatening to a lot of people is indicative of where his roots are."<sup>45</sup> The statement would accord with Group Material's overall outlook and with Louis Althusser's belief that the arts can be a significant arena for contesting symbolic orientations that represent conflicting ideologies.

Similar to blood, urine in the mideighties was a highly cathected substance, only the controversy was about drug testing instead of AIDS. Debates in 1985 regarding employers' rights to test workers for alcohol and drug abuse increased the following year as civil-rights lawyers and labor unions challenged the reliability of tests and the biases that such actions, in particular, constituted against African Americans and Hispanics. Routine testing of job applicants, however, was already accepted as an established practice. On September 2, the *New York Times* reported that a poll undertaken in conjunction with CBS News revealed that three-fourths of full-time workers were willing to take drug tests. A week later, the *Times* reported that manufacturers were anticipating a tremendous growth in tests for drug abuse since both the federal government and many large corporations were considering mandatory testing of job applicants and employees. The poll predicted that the total market for tests might more than double by 1990. On September 19, however, Judge H. Lee Sarokin, of the federal district court, ruled that mandatory urine testing of government employees to determine the presence of illegal drugs was an unconstitutional invasion of their privacy. His ruling in a case involving police and fire personnel of Plainfield, New Jersey, came three days after President Reagan ordered heads of federal agencies to establish a program for testing a broad range of employees for evidence of drug use. Despite Sarokin's ruling, drug testing was still widespread at the end of the year, and such individuals as Jeffrey Nightbyrd, of Austin, Texas, were selling drug-free urine for \$49.95 a bag.



*Piss Christ* 1987

<sup>44</sup> In Walker, "Serrano," 40, the artist states: "If I have anything to be proud of as an artist, it's the fact that I am a Hispanic person who's not thought of as a Hispanic artist, necessarily. I think it's important for artists of color to be aware that there's a tendency, if you let society do it to you, to segregate you and ghettoize you. It's important not to be lost in the shuffle."  
<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> Brenson, "Provocation and Spirituality," C1: "The photograph [*Piss Christ*] needs to be seen on the wall, at its altarpiece scale."

Considering the widespread concern about drug testing and Serrano's earlier addiction, his use of urine in works that came soon after this debate no doubt plays on these discussions. The piece most challenging to the general public has been his *Piss Christ* (1987), a radiantly lit, almost soft-focus, altar-size, sixty-by-forty-inch Cibachrome. This work presents a thirteen-inch-high, wood-and-plastic crucifix placed in a four-gallon, eighteen-by-twelve-inch Plexiglas holding tank filled with the artist's own urine, which he had saved for several weeks.<sup>46</sup> Although there are a number of contemporary art-historical precedents for the use of urine in art—including Jackson Pollock's famous act of exhibitionism and works by both Robert Smithson and Andy Warhol that, no doubt, are indirect parodies of the macho-oriented approach of abstract expressionism—the religious connotations of Serrano's photograph have

upstaged other considerations. This piece inspired such a torrent of controversy from the American Family Association and other groups and individuals who claimed to be concerned about what they perceived as a desecration of a religious icon that the work's contribution to the discourse on urine testing only entered the critical literature in 1990 with Denson's "'Bad Boy' Sublimations." Because this work's connections with religion were so firmly established, Denson's essay did not change the course of the criticism of Serrano's work.

The artist's own reactions to *Piss Christ* appear to be divided. His range of responses may be attributable to the intense debate over this image. The public outcry was so great that Serrano received a number of death threats from religious fundamentalists. Consequently, he refused to be photographed, to appear on Donahue and other TV shows, or to allow his address to be published. At one point, he insisted that *Piss Christ* was "absolutely not calculated to offend" and was "a normal and perfectly natural development" of his art.<sup>47</sup> On another occasion, he minimized the controversy of his image with a tongue-in-cheek statement: "My intent was to aestheticize Christ. Beautiful light, I think, aestheticizes the picture. Visually, it doesn't denigrate Christ in any way."<sup>48</sup> More ambivalent, however, is his conclusion:

*I think it's charged with electricity visually. It's a very spiritually, I would say, comforting image, not unlike the icons we see in church, you know? There is, I think, a very reverential treatment of the image. At the same time, the fact that you know there's a bodily fluid involved here...it's meant to question the whole notion of what is acceptable and unacceptable. There's duality here, of good and evil, life and death.<sup>49</sup>*

Another time, he speculated that his purpose was to enable people to rethink their hierarchical evaluations of bodily fluids: "I've completely aestheticized this very base material, and in my pictures piss is not something repugnant, it's something very beautiful, it's a beautiful glowing light."<sup>50</sup>

In the same interview, however, he admitted that his title was intentionally provocative: "If I didn't indicate by the titles of the pieces it was piss, most people would be completely seduced by them."<sup>51</sup> Since the word "piss" is considered vulgar and is commonly used to indicate displeasure—as when someone is pissed off—its association with the figure of Christ proved offensive to many. Closely related to this approach, and, perhaps, to the controversy of drug testing, is the artist's elucidation of the ways the work plays on society's ambivalence toward urine:

*It's waste, and I think it's seen as something repugnant, but I think this aversion to piss probably has more to do with the aversion that we have to our own bodies than it actually has to do with piss—because it's very difficult to me, personally, to think of putting a value system on these fluids and saying that they're either good or bad.<sup>52</sup>*

A number of times, Serrano pointed to his desire to create work that challenged his own sense of propriety: "But I still look forward to the day when I can offend even me."<sup>53</sup> In conversation with Christian Walker, he explained that his work must even make him uncomfortable by forcing him to think about intentions and meaning:

<sup>47</sup> Honan, "Artist Who Outraged Congress," C20.

<sup>48</sup> William Niederkorn, "Artist Defends Depiction of Christ," *Boston Sunday Globe* (August 20, 1989): 89.

<sup>49</sup> Peter J. Boyer, "Mean for Jesus," *Vanity Fair* (September 1990): 224–29ff.

<sup>50</sup> Guthrie, "Taboo Artist," 45.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Kathy Kemp, "'Denunciations Hurt.' Artist Says," *Birmingham Post-Herald* (May 13, 1991); clipping from artist's file, Paula Cooper Gallery.

"That's why I took these pictures, to explore the nature of that discomfort, to be able to look at that fine line we walk between exploration and exploitation."<sup>54</sup>

Despite the heroics of such a statement, the artist has also indicated the much more prosaic goal of countering the everyday debasement of religious belief.<sup>55</sup> He is particularly persuasive when he says that "the nuns told us...that we worship not the crucifix but Christ.... We weren't supposed to worship the symbol or give it the same level of reverence that we give Christ, because it's only a representation."<sup>56</sup> Such reasoning establishes a basis for his statement, "I don't really feel that I destroy icons. I feel that I create new ones."<sup>57</sup> And it prepares one to accept his declaration that his "use of bodily fluids, especially in connection with Christianity, has been a way of trying to personalize and redefine [his] relationship with Christ."<sup>58</sup>

Strangely enough, the initial response to *Piss Christ* was favorable. When first exhibited at the Stux Gallery, in New York, a minister's wife came up to the artist and said, "When it comes to religion, my husband and I don't agree about anything, but we were both very moved by your picture."<sup>59</sup> The next year, the work was included in the traveling exhibition "Awards in the Visual Arts 7," organized by SECCA (the South-eastern Center for Contemporary Art, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina). SECCA appointed a juried panel, consisting of Howard Fox, Donald Kuspit, Howardena Pindell, Ned Rifkin, and Tom Sokolowski, who selected Serrano and nine other artists from among five hundred ninety-nine applicants to win fifteen-thousand-dollar fellowships and appear in the show. Marcia Tucker, director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, had nominated Serrano. She stated that his use of bodily fluids causes discomfort because it "indicates the extent to which we're unable to deal with our humanity."<sup>60</sup> For the traveling exhibition, artists were encouraged to choose their own submissions, and one of Serrano's was *Piss Christ*. The exhibition was shown without any criticism at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Carnegie-Mellon University Art Gallery, in Pittsburgh.

Serrano's photograph only became problematic when it was shown at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, in Richmond. The first public notice of this controversy appeared almost two months after the closing of the exhibition on January 29, when the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* printed, on Palm Sunday, a critical letter to the editor from Philip L. Smith. In his letter, Smith noted:

The Virginia Museum should not be in the business of promoting and subsidizing hatred and intolerance. Would they pay the KKK to do a work defaming blacks? Would they display a Jewish symbol under urine? Has Christianity become fair game in our society for any kind of blasphemy and slander?<sup>61</sup>

In his response, published in the same paper on Good Friday, the museum director, Paul N. Perrot, observed that the only earlier controversy regarding this piece was a January 2 letter that he had received from Mr. Smith, followed by his own reply of January 6. Even though the artist had given a lecture on his work at the Virginia

<sup>54</sup> Walker, "Serrano," 40.

<sup>55</sup> Deitcher, "Cumulus," 142.

<sup>56</sup> Niederkorn, "Artist Defends Depiction," 99.

<sup>57</sup> Shayne Bowman, "'Initial Shock Wears Off' from Serrano's Work," *Auburn Plainsman* (May 16, 1991): B1.

<sup>58</sup> Guthrie, "Taboo Artist," 46.

<sup>59</sup> Joyce Hanson, "Interview: Andres Serrano," *CAC News—Chicago Artists' Coalition* (October 1989): 4.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Atkins, "Stream of Conscience," *The Village Voice* (May 30, 1989): 87.

<sup>61</sup> Philip L. Smith, "'Appalled' by Photography on Display at Museum," *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (March 19, 1989): D6. In the vast literature regarding this controversy, the significance of this date has not been noted.



Museum on January 8, and detailed, according to Perrot, "his intention...to use natural fluids as being part of the essence of life and to either exploit their coloristic beauty or use their luminous effects," there was no public outcry.<sup>62</sup>

The controversy over *Piss Christ* might have ended with this exchange if a member of Donald E. Wildmon's American Family Association had not sent him a newspaper clipping from the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Based in Tupelo, Mississippi, the United Methodist minister, Reverend Wildmon, had started, in 1977, the National Federation for Decency; a decade later, he renamed it the American Family Association. At first upset about television programming that he deemed offensive, Wildmon started a lobbying group that crusaded, with varying success, against Clorox and Mennen for sponsoring shows containing violent scenes and exhibiting an "anti-Christian bias"; against convenience stores selling *Playboy* and *Penthouse*; against Waldenbooks for selling adult magazines; against Holiday Inn for showing R-rated movies on cable; against MCA-Universal for releasing Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in which Jesus is characterized as having sexual desire; and against Pepsi for sponsoring Madonna's video, in which crosses are burned. In 1980, Wildmon had formed the Coalition for Better Television (CBTV) with the Reverend Jerry Falwell, then leader of the Moral Majority. CBTV disbanded barely a year after its formation because Wildmon and mobilizing concerted dissent was his *AFA Journal*, a glossy twenty-four-page publication that supposedly had a circulation of four hundred twenty-five thousand (of which one hundred seventy-five thousand were sent free to ministers). He used this journal to register his strong disapproval of Serrano and of the NEA for providing him with an award. He urged people to write the NEA, their congressional representatives, and the organizations that had cosponsored the show, including Equitable Life Assurance and the Rockefeller Foundation. The newsletter provided relevant names and addresses, and letters from AFA supporters soon poured in; Equitable, for instance, was bombarded with forty thousand letters. In addition, Wildmon sent a letter of protest, together with a reproduction of Serrano's photograph, to every member of Congress. In his mailings, he incited people to action with such statements as, "I would never, ever have dreamed that I would live to see such demeaning disrespect and desecration of Christ.... Maybe, before the physical persecution of Christians begins, we will gain the courage to stand against such bigotry."<sup>63</sup> He also admonished followers not to "let Congress give your hard-earned tax dollars to people who will produce hate-filled, bigoted, anti-Christian and obscene art."<sup>64</sup>

Within a few months, Senator Alphonse M. D'Amato of New York, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, evangelist Pat Robertson, and even Oliver North joined the assault on the NEA. To dramatize his disgust to the Senate, D'Amato, on May 18, tore up a copy of the exhibition catalogue containing the Serrano photograph. Later, together with thirty-five other senators, he wrote, "This work is shocking, abhorrent and completely undeserving of any recognition whatsoever."<sup>65</sup> The fundamentalist,

<sup>62</sup> Paul N. Perrot, "Museum Responds to Letter Critical of Photograph," *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (March 24, 1989): A14.

<sup>63</sup> Wildmon quoted in Atkins, "Stream of Conscience," 87-88.

<sup>64</sup> Wildmon quoted in Bruce Selcraig, "Reverend Wildmon's War on the Arts," *The New York Times Magazine* (September 2, 1990): 24.

<sup>65</sup> Honan, "Artist Who Outraged Congress," C13.

born-again southern Baptist Jesse Helms commended D'Amato's action:

The senator from New York is absolutely correct in his indignation and in his description of the blasphemy of the so-called artwork. I do not know Mr. Andres Serrano, and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an artist, he is a jerk. Let him be a jerk on his own time and with his own resources. Do not dishonor our Lord.<sup>66</sup>

Soon, thereafter, Helms sent his supporters the following request: "Please rush Jesse Helms a special contribution of \$29 today! He needs you to support his legislation to stop the liberals from spending taxpayers' money on perverted, deviant art!"<sup>67</sup>

As a result of the Serrano grant and the contemporaneous funding of the Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective that elicited great controversy because of its selection of provocative photographs, the Senate proposed such extreme measures as placing a punitive five-year moratorium on funding to SECCA for its support of Serrano, transferring four hundred thousand dollars from visual-arts programs to folk and local arts programs, and banning funding of art that is obscene, indecent, or offensive to any religion or nonreligion. Ultimately, the NEA received a slap on the wrist, consisting of a symbolic cut of forty-five thousand dollars in operating funds from its next year's appropriation of \$171.4 million. The forty-five thousand reflected the thirty-thousand-dollar grant to the Institute of Contemporary Art, in Philadelphia, for the Mapplethorpe exhibition and the fifteen-thousand-dollar award to Serrano. The statement by the NEA's acting chairman, Hugh Southern, noting that "the Endowment is expressly forbidden in its authorizing legislation from interfering with the artistic choices made by its grantees," may have helped to mitigate this crisis.

Because so much critical attention has been directed at *Piss Christ*, many of Serrano's other works in the *Immersion* series are unknown to the general public. A number were created before the NEA controversy. One early example made shortly after *Piss Christ* was *Female Bust*, which the artist undertook soon after his first trip to Europe, in the fall of 1987. Just as *Piss Christ* joined the traditionally sacred and profane in one work, *Female Bust* combines the classical ideal form of beauty with bodily waste. The plaster Venus used for this piece was purchased in a flea market. Serrano placed the small reproduction in a tank of urine and lighted it from the sides, making it mysterious and luminous. Although the deep coloration beneath the figure's breast appears to be blood, he has confirmed that it is a result of his lighting.<sup>68</sup> *Piss Discus* is another of the classical images inspired by his European trip. The figure used for the photograph, an unprepossessing plaster replica of the famous Greek statue, is transformed into a mythic figure by the light-saturated, urine-filled tank, which makes it appear a conveyor of transcendent values instead of mere waste.

It is unusual for Serrano to return to a subject as he did in *Madonna and Child II* (1989), a close-up view of another plaster figure. He is particularly pleased about the congealing of the liquid between the heads of the mother and child that binds them



*Female Bust* 1988



*Piss Discus* 1988



*Madonna and Child II* 1989

<sup>66</sup> Carole S. Vance, "The War on Culture," *Art in America* (September 1989): 39.

<sup>67</sup> Boyer, "Mean for Jesus," 224-29ff.

<sup>68</sup> Serrano, interview.

together. The subject matter could be related to the important study on the sexuality of Christ in Renaissance painting that art historian Leo Steinberg published in *October* in 1983. In this work, Serrano creates a glowing image that is a correlative of the first in utero pictures, by Lennart Nilsson, which *Life* published in its April 30, 1965, issue. His immersion of the Christ child in liquid may also be linked to the icons for the pro-life movement that are variations on Nilsson's images.



*Untitled VII (Ejaculate in Trajectory)*  
1989

Using the Christ child—a symbol of the spiritual incarnate in the human—may have been a natural transition for the artist's next series, *Untitled (Ejaculate in Trajectory)* (1989), which deals with the life force in terms of the artist's own semen. To create the series, Serrano added a motor drive to his camera. Working at home with a vertical background, he started shooting a few seconds before he felt an oncoming orgasm. Each session lasted about twelve seconds and resulted in about thirty-six shots—and he counted himself fortunate if two out of the thirty-six exposures were worth using. Although Lucy Lippard notes that the works have become occasions for multiple "puns about conception, about art and creativity, photography and reproduction,"<sup>69</sup> the photographs themselves call to mind Brancusi's *Bird in Flight* series and Barnett Newman's zips (the vertical shafts of light that accentuate his paintings). Photographed against a black background, these images appeared to Amei Wallach to be "rife with references to the origin of the universe as a sci-fi movie or the book of Genesis."<sup>70</sup> To critic Vince Aletti, they seemed "like a brilliant flash of light, a flame thrower in the dark." He believed them to be "especially defiant in these anxious, repressive times."<sup>71</sup> Elizabeth Hess regarded the photographs as images of modern alienation and found them particularly haunting:

Semen alone, however, isn't a particularly "sexy" image. Semen is also the carrier of a potentially fatal agent. These lone jets spurt out into a void, as if they have no place to go. The absence of any figures in these works is as poignant as their presence in others. Whether Serrano is consciously dealing with AIDS or not, the fact of the virus invades the series and another: the next room in the gallery is filled with Serrano's blood work.<sup>72</sup>



*White Christ* 1989



*Black Jesus* 1990

In contrast, G. Roger Denson considered the series to be a statement on safe sex. He reasoned, "Now, aside from being released in condoms, it [semen] is ejaculated more often in the open."<sup>73</sup> Serrano himself concluded that the series is "autoerotic as opposed to homoerotic." He stated, "The only possible reference to homoeroticism, I think, is that in the age of AIDS, male sexuality is thought of in homosexual terms."<sup>74</sup>

After *Untitled (Ejaculate in Trajectory)*, he returned to his *Immersion* series. The controversy over *Piss Christ* may have been the reason. His main response to this furor was to create *White Christ* (1989), a figure placed in a tank containing a mixture of water and milk, as a rejoinder to the public outcry for an image of purity. "But of course, then, I had to do a black Jesus, a black Mary, so I did," he said. "I just put them in water."<sup>75</sup> Serrano spray-painted both of these figures black, and the water formed natural clusters of bubbles that clung to them. For his *Black Jesus* (1990), he used a

<sup>69</sup> Lippard, "Spirit and the Letter," 243.

<sup>70</sup> Wallach, "Boundaries of Religion."

<sup>71</sup> Aletti, "Fluid Drive," 120.

<sup>72</sup> Hess, "Jesse Helms," 125.

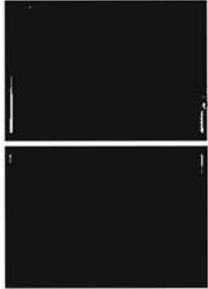
<sup>73</sup> Denson, "Sublimations," 40.

<sup>74</sup> Walker, "Serrano," 39.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Hagen, "After the Storm," *ArtNews* (September 1991): 63.



*Rape of the Sabine Women I 1990*



*St. Michael's Blood 1990*



*Black Supper III 1990*

slow exposure of one-eighth of a second. Other works in this second *Immersion* series include such monumental pieces as *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1990), which uses a plaster figure, purchased in Los Angeles, and was based on a well-known sculpture by Giovanni da Bologna; *St. Michael's Blood* (1990), which employs a white plaster figure, and was realized by placing the figure in a tank filled with urine and then adding blood, which adhered to the figure; and *Black Supper* (1990), which relies on a small, plaster relief replicating figures in Leonardo's painting that Serrano spray-painted black and immersed in water. All these works are postmodern in their emphasis on art as an act of criticism and transformation rather than an *ex nihilo* creation. They are also postmodern in the way they deflect the traditional regard for photography's supposed essence as a medium of truth by showing how it can aggrandize reproductions and make them appear transcendent images.

Serrano's initial response to the entire *Piss Christ* controversy was to continue making art and to deny that it was intentionally political. "My most effective political statement is to keep working," he said. "The NEA controversy clarified that for me. I do not doubt that there are multiple ways to interpret my work, and I welcome that."<sup>76</sup> But, slowly, he began to be conscious of the role his art could play in bringing subjects to the public's attention. In a moment of introspection, he related the change in awareness this furor had initiated:

*One of the things that the controversy made me aware of was that I have always been a loner. There have been times in my life where I have been fairly antisocial. I have never been part of the system. I have never voted in my life. Whenever possible I operate outside the system. Now I realize that I can no longer function as a human being in a vacuum. All of a sudden people were reaching out to me—in critical or supportive ways—but in either case I was bombarded by human contact, which was very strange for me. It made me change. I began to allow people to enter my life and work.<sup>77</sup>*

This change is first apparent in the exhibition of *Nomads* and *Klansmen*, made in the winter and fall, respectively, of 1990, and shown that fall in two rooms of the Stux Gallery. Instead of dealing with bodily fluids and waste, Serrano turned to marginalized and rejected individuals.

In her essay "No Place Like Home," Elizabeth Hess considers the *Nomads* series in relation to the problems of the homeless, and quickly passes judgment on it for appearing too "Bachrach Studios" and for being "removed from any social context."<sup>78</sup> In discussing the eviction of fifty homeless residents from Tompkins Square Park on June 3, 1991, she mentions that this area has been a problem for decades; she fails, though, to connect Serrano's images with the ongoing problems, even though the artist found many of his models covertly staying in the then-closed Lower East Side park. In addition to Tompkins Square, Serrano and his friend Michael Coulter, together with another assistant, visited subway stops at Astor Place, the Brooklyn Bridge, Bleecker Street, and Grand Central Station, between 12:30 and 5:30 a.m. in the winter of 1990, in search of "the hard-core homeless," who, according to the artist, "even the homeless

<sup>76</sup> Finnegan, "Bearing the Cross," 32ff.

<sup>77</sup> Fusco, "Klan," 44.

<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Hess, "No Place Like Home," *Artforum* (October 1991): 95.

don't want to talk to."<sup>79</sup> Taking a blue-gray photographic background, a battery-operated lighting system, an umbrella, a Mamiya RB 6x7 camera with a tripod, and a stool, Serrano photographed people he found in the parks, subways, and streets. "I even found people looking through garbage," he related.<sup>80</sup> He gave his chosen models a fee of ten dollars to pose for ten minutes, and asked them to sign a release. While taking photographs in the subways, he had to work quickly because he did not have a permit. He encouraged each model to assume his or her own posture before the camera; his only request was that they look to the left or the right. The camera was placed twenty-four to thirty inches from the ground so that the viewer's eye would be level with the middle of the model's chest. The intended result? Aggrandizing his sitters. In taking his portable studio to the homeless, Serrano was reenacting the process developed by Irving Penn, the fine-arts and fashion photographer, for his series of images of New Guinea tribesmen, *Worlds in a Small Room* (1970). By placing figures in a portable studio that removed them temporarily from their everyday world, Serrano was able to establish a strange contradiction between glamour and reality and between advertisement and documentation. Rather than settling these contradictions, his photographs suspend them, leaving viewers with the dilemma of being either prospective consumers or, possibly, serious advocates of social change.



*Nomads (Johnny) 1990*



*Nomads (Sir Leonard) 1990*

Serrano's *Nomads*, which resulted in portraits of thirty homeless people, took twenty to thirty nights to complete. Among his most memorable portraits is the one of Johnny, who appears to be a remnant of the Old West with his rabbit-fur hat and shearling coat. In another photograph, Sir Leonard, who wears a floppy felt hat and thrusts out his belt buckle emblazoned with a lion and the logo "In Denim We Trust," appears more dandified than destitute. For Serrano, the *Nomads* are akin to the images of vanishing Native Americans photographed by Edward Curtis at the turn of the century. At the time that Serrano made this series, he had four Curtis photographs hanging in his dining room. Although he has acknowledged being versed in the recent criticism of Curtis's efforts to romanticize and idealize Native Americans by photographing them only in elaborate traditional dress and avoiding references to contemporary culture, Serrano still believes that Curtis made a significant contribution: "A certain historical moment...would be lost forever unless he [Curtis] captured it."<sup>81</sup> Like Curtis, Serrano wanted to record "a class of people on the verge of displacement."<sup>82</sup> In the same statement, he emphasized, "As far as I'm concerned, the displacement of a people is the first step in their genocide."

When a lab technician suggested that the *Nomads* looked like fashion shots, the artist agreed.<sup>83</sup> Believing that the homeless have been too easily categorized as merely derelict and hopeless, he hopes his images may dispel this erroneous and damaging myth.<sup>84</sup> "I wanted to photograph the homeless not lying on the street, not begging for food or pushing a shopping cart, but with the dignity that all human beings deserve."<sup>85</sup> In responding to the accusation that he has merely romanticized the home-

<sup>79</sup> Walker, "Serrano," 40.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> C. Carr, "Going to Extremes. Andres Serrano Looks at Our Invisible Empires," *The Village Voice* (November 20, 1990): 67.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Susan Morgan, "Andres Serrano. His Photographs Are Sheer Wizardry," *Mirabella* (March 1991): 56-57.

<sup>84</sup> Walker, "Serrano," 41.

<sup>85</sup> Kalnin, "Life after *Piss Christ*," 9.

less, Serrano said: "I found them exactly as they were. Their clothes are sometimes tattered, you can see dirt on their clothes and (one man's) eyes are kind of bloodied. They *are* heroic, because I have a desire to monumentalize what I photograph."<sup>86</sup> And monumentalize he did: Some of the heads are eight times human scale.

Both the relevance and the urgency of Serrano's goal become abundantly clear if one surveys the plight of the homeless living in Tompkins Square Park prior to the creation of the series. But before looking at this debacle, it is important to recognize that the homeless began to be regarded as possible AIDS victims in 1989. On June 5 of that year, the *New York Times* reported on the first study of AIDS among the homeless in New York City: Of the one hundred sixty-nine men tested at a municipal shelter on Wards Island, one hundred five were found to be infected with the virus. One month later, on July 7, the *Times* reported on the confrontations between more than two hundred fifty police officers and hundreds of residents of the Lower East Side over the shantytown of forty tents and shacks located in Tompkins Square Park. Two days later, seventy police in riot gear opposed more than two hundred people protesting the cleaning up of this makeshift settlement. Four days later, Mayor Koch pledged to rebuild these ramshackle dwellings, but his promises never materialized. On July 31, the situation was exacerbated by several hundred more homeless people who moved into the park. On December 14, Mayor-elect David N. Dinkins publicly supported the city's efforts to clean out the tents and other temporary structures, noting that the homeless would continue to be permitted to sleep in the park and occupy benches. The next day, an elaborately planned siege was undertaken by scores of city and park police officers to remove the temporary shelters because of the complaints lodged by local residents who believed that the camp was a center for drug use and prostitution. Considering this history of the homeless, Serrano's effort to monumentalize them later that same winter in works of art, which were intended to dispel clichés and create empathy among members of the art world, appears to have been a concerted political act. To be most effective, however, he needed to avoid sermonizing and to dramatize their humanity rather than focus on their plight. In this series, he employs the implicit metaphor of the vanishing American, which has a long history in nineteenth-century art. He also hints that his *Nomads* may be the last remnants of the pioneering spirit responsible for settling this country.

The same month that Serrano completed the *Nomads*, the Ku Klux Klan once again became a topic of national concern. On April 15, the *New York Times* reported that Klan member Shade Miller, Jr., was challenging a thirty-eight-year-old Georgia law banning the wearing of masks or hoods in public. Miller's legal defense, Michael R. Hauptmann, president of the Georgia American Civil Liberties Union, attested that this law was an infringement of Miller's right to free speech. To support his client's right to make public statements anonymously, Hauptmann cited a case involving the NAACP. On May 26, Judge Howard E. Cook ruled that the Georgia law illegally restricted free-

<sup>86</sup> Steven Rosen, "Images of Controversy—Andres Serrano Brings Klan Photos to UC-Boulder," *Denver Post* (January 20, 1991): D9.

dom of speech by the Klan, which Cook termed a “persecuted group,” much to the chagrin of state lawyers and civil rights groups who began to seek ways of overturning this ruling. The Klan, which had been characterized the previous year in the film *Mississippi Burning* as a particularly violent group, appeared to be on the rise. This feeling became widespread when David Duke, a former Klan leader who had been elected to the Louisiana House of Representatives, made a strong bid for the United States Senate that summer. Duke’s power seemed to portend a new nationwide white-supremacist movement, according to a *New York Times* article on June 18. This concern about the Klan may have been one reason why Serrano decided in his next series to focus on masked figures. After working with individuals who were anonymous by virtue of their poverty, he wished to make photographs of people whose extreme prejudice led them to assume an anonymous guise.



*Klansman (Imperial Wizard III) 1990*



*Klansman (Knight Hawk of Georgia of the Invisible Empire I) 1990*



*Klanswoman (Grand Klaliff) 1990*

At first, Serrano wanted to investigate the Klan in North Carolina, perhaps as a way of embarrassing his former adversary Jesse Helms. But the staff at SECCA did not know any Klansmen. He then secured the telephone number of Imperial Wizard James Venable, of Georgia. He spoke with Venable’s helper Bobbie, who told him that he should come to the large rally at Stone Mountain City, near Atlanta. Serrano said, “Bobbie, you don’t understand: I’m not white. I’m Hispanic.” She responded, “Don’t worry, baby. It won’t make any difference at all.”<sup>87</sup> At the rally, however, he was asked to leave almost immediately by the skinhead security force: It could not guarantee his safety.

After this episode, Serrano decided to approach Michael Hauptmann about his desire to photograph Klan members. Since Hauptmann is Jewish, Serrano reasoned that he, better than anyone else, would be able to break down Klan resistance about working with a Hispanic. The strategy worked, and five days after the Stone Mountain rally, Serrano returned to the park, where the forty-foot-high burnt crosses were still stuck in the ground, and met the new Imperial Wizard, David Holland—an unassuming air-conditioner repairman during the day. He was at once struck by the fact that Holland knew about the NEA controversy and the position taken by Jesse Helms. Although reluctant to work with Serrano because of his own past difficulties with the press, Holland agreed, largely because of Hauptmann’s persuasiveness and, perhaps, in part, because of the successful September 3 rally in Washington, D.C., and on the Capitol’s grounds by forty Klansmen wearing robes and hoods. Holland’s influence enabled Serrano to photograph the senile, eighty-three-year-old James Venable, who had to borrow Holland’s green robe: He was so indigent, he could not afford to replace his Klan outfit, which had been borrowed the previous year but not returned. That same evening, Holland also agreed to sit for Serrano. On this same trip, Serrano met Knight Hawk of Georgia—“really a nice old man, a Baptist preacher...[who became] threatening in his robes.”<sup>88</sup> The Klanswoman that he photographed was so poor, she did not have a telephone. In order to pose, she had to obtain permission from her father

<sup>87</sup> Amei Wallach, “Photos on the Edge,” *New York Newsday* (November 11, 1990): 2:27.

<sup>88</sup> Carol Dickinson, “Irony Inescapable in Black and White,” *Rocky Mountain News* (January 20, 1991): 90.

because he was her KKK superior. While working with Klan members, Serrano noted that some children joked about their parents wearing their venerated robes, referring to them as "dunces" and "nerds."<sup>89</sup>

Serrano was surprised to find himself so sympathetic to the Klan members that he met. "I discovered that they are very poor, at the bottom of the barrel. Even the scapegoats need scapegoats."<sup>90</sup> His sympathy is evident in the completed series; his friend Richard Sudden compared the photographs to recruitment posters for the Klan. This mixture of commercial and fine art, which Serrano has called "a fine line between exploration and exploitation,"<sup>91</sup> is an important component of the series. It forces viewers to come to terms with their own feelings about the Klan and to consider, as well, the ways that advertising has so infiltrated modern life that even political considerations are given both the gloss and the seal of approval of Madison Avenue advertising. Serrano's photographs help to deconstruct advertising by employing the same tactics for selling products that are used for programming desire. Referring to the disparity between the extreme prejudice and poverty of the Klan members posing for him and their seemingly glamorous and mysterious personas, which manage to transcend their homemade robes, he observed, "Photography lies and sometimes it lies well."<sup>92</sup> Part of the power of this series is the artist's refusal to take sides. His success can be gauged by the telephone call that his wife received after the New York press reviewed the exhibition at the Stux Gallery. "Tell Andres he did good," the caller said. "Tell him he's still a brother and welcome in Georgia as long as he doesn't say anything bad about the Klan."<sup>93</sup> Although Klan members may have felt that Serrano's images glorified them, the success of the Georgia contingency that had fought for the right to wear masks publicly was short-lived. On December 6, the Georgia Supreme Court overturned Cook's ruling that permitted Klan members anonymity as a means of guaranteeing them freedom of speech.



*The Church (Soeur Yvette II,  
Paris) 1991*



*The Church (Soeur Bozema,  
Paris) 1991*



*The Church (Father Frank,  
Rome) 1991*

The next year, Serrano moved from the Klan's ersatz ecclesiastical robes to the real thing in the series entitled, simply, *The Church*. Traveling in France, Italy, and Spain with his portable studio, he made images of a Lebanese nun, Soeur Yvette, as seen from the back; a Greek Orthodox nun, Soeur Bozema, pictured against a red background; the bishop of Chartres; and the Irish priest Father Frank, whom he met at a church in Rome. Still attracted to the Church for aesthetic reasons, Serrano found reflections of his earlier works in some of the garments and interiors of the forty images making up this series. Particularly noteworthy is the red cross emblazoned on the front of Father Frank's habit; it calls to mind both the artist's *Blood Cross* (1985) and *Milk Cross* (1987).

A selection of Serrano's *Objects of Desire*, made in New Orleans in April 1992, is being shown for the first time in this retrospective exhibition. While in New Orleans, the artist made the acquaintance of Black Boyd, a young man of about twenty, who introduced him to the gun collections of both his father and his stepfather, an auxiliary

<sup>89</sup> Carr, "Going to Extremes," 108.

<sup>90</sup> Catherine Fox, "In Facing Controversy, Artist Eyes Vindication," *Atlanta Constitution* (October 8, 1990): C1.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Wallach, "Photos on the Edge," 2:27.

<sup>93</sup> Dickinson, "Irony," 90.





Virginian Dragoon .44 Magnum 1992



Colt D.A. 45 1992

sheriff. Allowed to fire the Virginian Dragoon .44 Magnum, which he later photographed, Serrano was intrigued by the way the weapons are regarded as almost sacred symbols of male power. His photographs play with both the power and the eroticism of these highly cathected objects; the Colt D.A. 45 actually was loaded when he photographed it. Between the loaded weapon and the equipped camera, there is an interplay of semantics and risk in which the photographer shoots the gun and brings back his trophy in the form of the Cibachrome print.

*Objects of Desire* may have paved the way for *The Morgue (Cause of Death)* (1992), which was shown first at the Yvon Lambert Gallery, in Paris, in the fall, before traveling to New York, where it was presented as a larger exhibition that opened on January 7, 1993, at the Paula Cooper Gallery. Unlike Serrano's other works, this exhibition appealed to the general public, but was rejected by such critics as Michael Kimmelman, who deemed it too beautiful and trendy "in this era of AIDS and rampant street crime: death."<sup>94</sup> His comments and those of other critics who were negative about Serrano's new work, even though they had been supportive in the past, may have been, in part, a response to the recent commodification of causes found in the Benetton ads of the previous two years. Attempting to "break through the barrier of indifference," according to the company's in-house graphic designer Olivero Toscani,<sup>95</sup> the company linked its products to such images as unrolled pastel condoms, a kiss between a priest and a nun clad in old-fashioned habits, a full-color image of a gunk-covered newborn baby, AIDS campaigner David Kirby on his deathbed, a group of tombstones (one bearing the Jewish Star of David) as the first Iraqi SCUD missiles hit Tel Aviv, and the tattoo "HIV positive" on arms, buttocks, and stomachs of models.

Ignoring the opinions of art-world cognoscenti—among them, Kimmelman—many visitors wrote grateful comments in the guest book at the Paula Cooper Gallery, such as "Thank you for sharing images that are always taboo" and "Thanks for demystifying the flesh."<sup>96</sup> One former New York City police officer who was familiar with the city morgue became philosophical: "It seems to me that death is a strange equalization we all eventually meet in a mutual space."<sup>97</sup>

In his essay for the Paris exhibition catalogue, Daniel Arasse pointed out that Serrano's *Morgue* is an important antidote to the widespread denial of death that characterizes late twentieth-century culture:

In this mediatic and glamorous culture, you don't die anymore; the images of the body overwhelm us with their models of immutable youth and sumptuous and aseptitized beauty—and meanwhile, the inventor of American utopia, Disneyland, big Walt, is waiting, cryogenized, for his return to life. In this series Serrano has chosen to envisage death and to give a face back to dead people. Photographic art puts in front of our eyes, close-up, the various aspects of the dead body, in its physical flesh, right there.<sup>98</sup>

Although death may be denied in popular culture and polite society, it has made a startling comeback in the nineties in the debate over the legality of euthanasia.

<sup>94</sup> Kimmelman, "Serrano Focuses on Death," C3.

<sup>95</sup> "Tasteful," *The Economist* (July 20, 1991): 80.

<sup>96</sup> Berta Sichel, "Andres Serrano," *Flash Art* (Summer 1993): 96.  
<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Arasse, "Les Transis."

Termed "this century's Civil War," and considered the next most important new civil rights issue of the late twentieth century,<sup>99</sup> euthanasia, or the right-to-die issue, was the subject of an important Supreme Court ruling in June 1990, when all but one of the justices endorsed an individual's constitutional right, as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment, to avoid unwanted medical treatment, even if this rejection meant death. That same month, Dr. Jack Kevorkian described to the press his "self-execution machine," which dispensed drugs. This machine was first used by Janet Adkins, of Portland, Oregon, a victim of Alzheimer's disease, who was supposed to be able to undertake full responsibility for her own death. In the *New York Times* account, Kevorkian outlined his goal "to make euthanasia a positive experience." In November of that year, the Patient Self-Determination Act became effective. Under this act, hospitals and nursing homes receiving Medicaid or Medicare funds were required to give patients written information about the right-to-die options available to them under state law.

In January 1991, the Hennepin County Medical Center, in Minneapolis, announced its precedent-setting intention to go to court for permission to turn off a patient's life-support system against her family's wishes. In October of that same year, the Hemlock Society, an eleven-year-old organization with its headquarters in Eugene, Oregon, and forty-six thousand members on its lists, had successfully campaigned for Initiative 119 (the Death with Dignity proposal) to be placed on Washington State's November 5 ballot after nearly a quarter of a million signatures were gathered by people wishing to legalize euthanasia. This initiative states that a patient can request "aid in dying" only if two doctors are in agreement that the patient has less than six months to live. It sparked a nationwide controversy. Although the Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Methodist Church endorsed the initiative, and the 1.6-million-member United Church of Christ passed a resolution affirming the right of individuals to make their own choice, the country's two largest Christian groups, the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, showed firm opposition to all forms of euthanasia or suicide. As the debate continued, the American Medical Society's ethics committee cited Hippocrates in reaffirming its opposition to doctor-assisted euthanasia and suicide. In the midst of this controversy, Dr. Kevorkian announced that he had helped two more women commit suicide, using a new device that enables patients to breathe carbon monoxide through a mask.

The controversy provided Serrano with a ready-made forum, yet in no way can *The Morgue (Cause of Death)* be reduced to a simple case of reflecting its historical-political context. In this work, he refrained from taking sides when he changed the variables of the discussion by providing extremely beautiful images of horrific situations involving murder, accidental mortality, and death by suicide.

To create the series, Serrano needed access to a morgue. A pathologist and well-known forensic expert authorized him to photograph the bodies housed in the

<sup>99</sup> Ronald Dworkin, "Life Is Sacred. That's the Easy Part," *The New York Times Magazine* (May 16, 1993): 36, and Peter Steinfels, "At Crossroads, U.S. Ponders Ethics of Helping Others Die," *The New York Times* (October 28, 1991): A1.



*The Morgue (Knifed to Death I)* 1992



*The Morgue (Knifed to Death II)* 1992

morgue under his jurisdiction, providing that the people were disguised and not identified. As a way of protecting the identity of the corpses, Serrano has never revealed the location of the morgue; there have been speculations, though, that it is in France or the environs of New York City. Many of the bodies were there for autopsies, but others were merely awaiting removal to a funeral home. Serrano was asked not to touch a body slated for autopsy because everything about it was possible evidence. After an autopsy, he could work with a cadaver, provided he wore two pairs of gloves.

When he first appeared at the morgue, the first body he encountered was of an eight-year-old child with red hair and freckles. After watching the child be disemboweled, he decided that he would have to begin photographing immediately or he would never be able to continue. During the three-month project, Serrano photographed 95 percent of the bodies that passed through the morgue. At first, he made shots of entire sections of the bodies, but his photographs were too similar; all the figures were lying on their backs. At that point, he decided to focus on details, and made close-up shots. At times, the bodies looked like latex Hollywood props, but when the photographing began, he felt himself to be in touch with a human presence instead of a cadaver.



*The Morgue (Pneumonia Death)* 1992



*The Morgue (Rat Poison Suicide)* 1992



*The Morgue (Hacked to Death II)* 1992

While he was working, Serrano was aware of the potential religious overtones of some figures. He reversed the hands of *Knifed to Death* so that they would resemble Michelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam*. Calling these "the hands of a criminal," because police had fingerprinted them, Serrano said of the new hand position, "I like him reaching out in death because maybe he couldn't do it when he was alive."<sup>100</sup> He found that the doctors' surgical probes, which appeared in many figures, resembled the stigmata of Christ.<sup>101</sup> A number of the works, such as *Pneumonia Death*, resemble Renaissance and baroque images of the recumbent Christ.

Although the artist calls the morgue "a secret temple where few people are allowed,"<sup>102</sup> he also regards the area as a particularly upsetting place: "Most of us assume we are going to go gently into that good night. What I found when I went to the morgue is that most of these people there died tragic, violent deaths."<sup>103</sup> A clear example is *Rat Poison Suicide*, a woman of about thirty who, according to the artist, "looks as if she is fighting off demons." Found in the freezer after rigor mortis had set in, she is shown with her head covered to protect her identity and her arms raised in the air. *Hacked to Death* is a photograph of a man in his early to midtwenties whose wife had stabbed him more than a dozen times with a kitchen knife. *Death by Drowning*

<sup>100</sup> Blume, "Serrano," 41.

<sup>101</sup> Gross, "Irreverent Images," 13.

<sup>102</sup> Blume, "Serrano," 37.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.



*The Morgue (Death by Drowning II)*  
1992



*The Morgue (Burnt to Death III)* 1992

appears to be condemned to an eternal cry. Apropos of this figure, Serrano was surprised to learn that the skin of a drowned person will change color in a few days. Before death, the victim was white; in the photograph, his skin has become green, blue, brown, and purple. In *Burnt to Death III*, the artist's ambivalence toward his subject is clearly evident. Depicting the inside of the rib lining of a burn victim, this work is both realistic and abstract, grisly yet seductively beautiful. It looks as if the artist has found a way of making a photograph the equivalent of an early Alberto Burri construction, and has also discovered a means of turning Burri's post-World War II expressionism into an actual record of mortality.

In his first decade of mature work, Andres Serrano has tested both personal and societal limits. Using art as an investigative tool to explore his own residual spiritual longings as well as to consider such cultural constructs as advertising, he has merged these two in works that focus on the body politic. His use of bodily fluids can be taken as metaphors of the human condition. At a time when AIDS, urine testing for drugs, debates on pro-life and pro-choice, the mounting numbers of homeless people, the upsurge of the Klan, and the legality of euthanasia have all been major concerns, Serrano has created provocative images that not only refuse to resolve these issues but even introduce elements that make such difficult subjects new objects of desire. He forces viewers to make up their own minds about these issues, which he usually presents in his art in a nonpartisan manner. He also utilizes the visual language of advertising and high-fashion photography to encourage them to consider the extent to which the human condition, including its spiritual realm, has been reduced to a commodity in the late twentieth century.