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The Serrano Controversy,
Questions of Obscenity Religious Imagery
& Picturing the Body

by

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National College of Art & Design

Fine Art Sculpture

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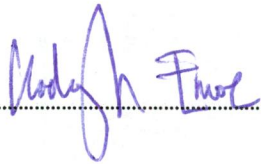
by

Clodagh Emoe

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.....
A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Michael Wilson', is written over a horizontal dotted line.

Contents -

	Page
List of Illustrations	5
Introduction	6
Chapter One: Religious Imagery - The Sanctity of the Icon	12
Chapter Two: Bodily Fluids - The Abhorrence of the Object	17
Chapter Three: “The Pornography of Death” - Exposing the Corpse	27
Conclusion	50
Bibliography	53

List of Illustrations -

			<i>Page</i>
Serrano, Andres	Piss Christ 1987	Fig. 0.01	10
Serrano, Andres	Rat Poison Suicide II 1992	Fig. 0.02	11
Serrano, Andres	Heaven and Hell 1984	Fig. 1.01	14
Serrano, Andres	Pieta 1985	Fig. 1.02	14
Serrano, Andres	Piss 1987	Fig. 2.01	18
Serrano, Andres	Blood 1987	Fig. 2.02	18
Serrano, Andres	Circle of Blood 1987	Fig. 2.03	19
Mantegna, Andrea	The Circumcision c1470	Fig. 2.04	21
Grünewald, Matthias	The Isenheim Altarpiece c1513	Fig. 2.05	23
Serrano, Andres	Fatal Meningitis 1992	Fig. 3.01	28
Serrano, Andres	Fatal Meningitis II 1992	Fig. 3.02	28
Serrano, Andres	Smoke Inhalation 1992	Fig. 3.03	30
Serrano, Andres	Burnt to Death 1992	Fig. 3.04	30
Southwarth & Hayes	Postmortem Photograph of an Unidentified Child ca.1850	Fig. 3.05	33
Harrison	Postmortem Photograph of an Unidentified Child ca.1890	Fig. 3.06	33
Unknown	Postmortem Photograph of an Unidentified Child ca1870 (with eyes painted open)	Fig. 3.07	34
Serrano, Andres	Death by Drowning III 1992	Fig. 3.08	36
Serrano, Andres	Burnt to Death III 1992	Fig. 3.09	37
Monet, Claude	Camille Monet on Her Death Bed 1879	Fig. 3.10	38
Serrano, Andres	Gun Murder 1992	Fig. 3.11	40
Holbein, Hans	The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb 1522	Fig. 3.12	41
Pontormo, Jacopo	Desposition 1525	Fig. 3.13	42
Serrano, Andres	Homicidal Stabbing 1992	Fig. 3.14	43
Serrano, Andres	Knifed to Death I 1992	Fig. 3.15	46
Serrano, Andres	Knifed to Death II 1992	Fig. 3.16	46
Toscani, Olivero	AIDS Pieta	Fig. 3.17	47
Serrano, Andres	Death by Asphixiation 1992	Fig. 3.18	48

Introduction -

“Art upsets us in the cause of expanding and extending human consciousness, revealing the emptiness of conventions by looking under the surface. Often it is dark...and unpleasant.”
(Hall, 1992, p.11)

Senator Alphonse D’Amato’s symbolic act of tearing a reproduction of Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* on May 1, 1989 in the Senate, heralded the coming of the “Culture Wars.” (Boltan 1995, p.3) This term was given to the clash within the government the academy and other culture arenas over funding for the arts. The competency of the N.E.A (the National Endowment for the Arts, set up in 1965 in order to administer funds to artists and institutions) was under question. A letter of protest by senator D’Amato and signed by twenty six senators “assailed” the Endowment for funding “anti-Christian bigotry”. (Hobbs, 1995, p.32) In their opinion the N.E.A had no business funding with tax payer’s money, what they described as an “obscene” piece of art. (Trend, 1992, p.3)

Piss Christ 1989 (fig.0.01) a 40” x 60” cibachrome print displays a crucifix submerged in the artist’s own urine. This piece was part of an uneventful three city touring exhibition which had been organised by S.E.C.C.A (SouthEastern Centre for Contemporary Art). The N.E.A. had supported this institution by granting them \$15,000 in order to produce and organise *Awards in the Visual Arts* 7 January 1989, in which *Piss Christ* was exhibited.

Serrano’s use of the abject with the divine image renders *Piss Christ* an extremely confrontational piece. The crucifix (the supreme symbol of Christianity) juxtaposed with urine (bodily waste, culturally coded as a defiling substance) offended right wing fundamentalists. What further heightened this was the provocative title of the piece. Associating the vulgar slang term for urine - piss, a word most commonly used to indicate displeasure, with the holy and revered name of the Christian saviour, added to the profane nature of this piece.

This single image produced by a relatively unknown photographic artist provoked an historically significant controversy. Public figures such as reverend Donald Wildmon, Senator Jesse Helms ¹ and former Reagan speech writer Pat Buchanan became involved in contributing letters disclaiming this piece and the artist himself to the Senate and the national media. Newspapers not only reported on debates in Government, but contributed to debates by publishing criticism of Serrano’s work and other artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowicz whose works were also deemed indecent.

An example of his personal views made public in a 1984 editorial claiming, if they had their way...“consumer groups, intellectuals, blacks, feminists would run our society while Christians and the military would have little say”

The critic James Cooper described in the New York City Tribune April 1990, that Modern Art had become "the purveyor of a destructive, degenerate, ugly, pornographic, Marxist, anti-American ideology" (Boltan, 1995, p.6). Don Gray described Serrano as a "nihilist" and stated in a letter to the Senate Subcommittee on Education, "Is it any wonder that most contemporary art is itself meaningless and purposeless except to scoff at society and genuine art." (Boltan, 1995, p.168).

Serrano like many artists involved in the *Culture Wars* saw his work shorn of its complexity, being placed in the service of reactionary agenda. Attempts to restrict government funding for the Arts began in the 1980's during the Reagan administration. This articulated a conservative agenda which historically views any funding activity by the Federal Government beyond defence with considerable "suspicion". David Wojarowicz describes art as the "tool" which will dismantle the "One Nation Tribe" (Brandon, 1995, p.132). Liberals generally argued that any attempt to restrict the work of the N.E.A. would ultimately violate the First Amendments rights of the artists. Content restrictions proposed for grants to artists were seen as censorship, and part of a larger plan of government control. In order to control systems of power, the control of information was the key to government strategy. The repressive atmosphere for freedom of expression was evident. During the F.B.I's Literary Awareness Program 1981 librarians were asked to spy on researchers who were foreign, or, those working on subjects of an "anti-establishment" nature. (Boltan, 1995, p.16)

For conservatives, artists such as Serrano, Mapplethorpe (a gay photographer whose work included homo-erotic images), and David Wojnarowicz (an artist, and gay man living with AIDS) were engaged in anti-social art that challenged the ideal of the nuclear family and traditional religious beliefs (the existing structures of power). Both James Cooper and Pat Buchanan described Serrano's work as "degenerate art" (Boltan, 1995, p.93). What is interesting, if not frightening, to note is that this was the official term used in Nazi Germany to designate modern art and any art which did not show a "genetically healthy family life and landscapes of the Fatherland" (Boltan, 1995, p.93). One journalist was prompted to ask Buchanan if he was conscious of using these associations, he made no reply.

Fundamentalists, right wing politicians, even critics reduced Serrano's work to merely shock value. Don Gray compared *Piss Christ* to works of the "Dadaist anti-art" (Boltan, 1995, p.169) and described Serrano as a nihilist. Serrano defends his work by claiming "I am not a heretic, I like to believe that rather than destroy icons, I create new ones". (Fusco, 1991, p.43). Serrano fully intended the piece to have shock value, however this is not the main intention of the work. Placing the revered icon in urine is shocking. However the shock serves to provoke questioning of the pieces motives.

"The work of this artist has not changed, only the times have become more cautious and perhaps intolerant" (Smith, 1989, p.12). By producing an image which was deemed "indecent" and "obscene", Andres Serrano has received, not just public

condemnation, but hate mail and even death threats. Serrano claims to have been “unofficially blackballed” (Fusco, 1991, p.44). The N.E.A rejected a grant application by Serrano despite the fact that his work *The Morgue (Cause of Death)* 1994 which had been endorsed by the Visual Arts Advisory Panel, (a peer group composed of photographic experts from around America.) The National Council for the Arts, a 26 presidentially elected body overturned the panel’s decision. (It is an extremely rare occurrence to veto grants to individual artists.) The council members claimed to vote against the grant purely on quality, this seems remarkable, photographic experts had endorsed these highly stylised and technically accomplished photographic pieces. These five images (of dead people from a morgue) complied with regulations set down in Public Law 101-151.² Although complying with the terms of this Act, Serrano’s portrayal of death was evidently considered obscene. As Serrano deals with a controversial subject in this series it is of major relevance to questions of obscenity.

The following chapters provide a sustained examination of Serrano’s work in relation to cultural practices in regard to representation of religious imagery, the body and death with specific reference to notions of obscenity.

The outline of the chapters is as follows:

Chapter one provides a discussion on the aspect of religious imagery, as it was Serrano’s unorthodox depiction of the crucifix which initially caused controversy. Serrano’s ironic manipulation of religious imagery in his earlier work shall be addressed as it is of relevance to discussion on *Piss Christ*. The derisive title of Serrano’s image hints at his aversion to the church’s ideals. However there is difficulty in this confrontational piece which will be elaborated on. The fact that the image is quite beautiful invests it with a contradictory nature. This piece was reduced to an image of mere shock value by fundamentalists, although Serrano has argued that *Piss Christ* is not “sacreligious” (Tucker, 1994, p.10). However, by producing such a controversial piece Serrano sought to discern the meanings and limits of religious iconography. In order to comprehend this an examination of the sanctity of the icon shall be undertaken making particular reference to the Iconoclastic Controversy. A brief study of the history of the crucifix is of relevance as the representation which is venerated today was (in a manner perhaps similar to Serrano’s piece) once thought heretical.

In the second chapter Kristeva’s notions of the abject will be used in order to address the manner whereby *Piss Christ* was termed “degenerate art” (Boltan, 1995, p.169) by Pat Buchanan and others. The abject may be used to explain the feeling of disgust, abhorrence even fear, when bodily fluids are under consideration. Notions of

The public law 101-151 sought that the chairperson of the N.E.A. was to ensure that “artistic excellence and artistic merit are the criteria by which applications are signed, taking into consideration general standards of decency and respect for diverse beliefs and values of the American public” (Boltan, 1995, p.26). Terms such as “general decency” and the “average person” inevitably caused confusion. To make matters worse each recipient of a grant was indebted to sign a form agreeing to the terms of the new law, under threat of not receiving a grant.

obscenity are inherent in the pieces as these fluids are deemed repulsive. The relevance of Christ's bodily fluids in medieval and renaissance religious thought shall be examined in order to provide one possible context for Serrano's juxtaposition of urine with the cross. It is evident from this research that Christ's blood in fact reiterated his human and corporeal aspect. Serrano uses the potentially repellent fluid as a means of picturing the body. Notions of obscenity are constructed by culture. Throughout history these notions have varied. The martyrs of the medieval periods almost perverse (in today's terms) means of approaching Christ shall be discussed in order to indicate that notions of obscenity are contingent. Serrano's work which was publically attacked seems relatively subdued in comparison with the excesses of Christian martyrology.

The fact that Serrano used bodily fluids in his work might be seen to refer obliquely to the AIDS crisis. The implications of these fluids have complexified beyond mere waste to the spectre of stigmatised disease. These fluids seem to refer to the fear of and intolerance in respect to P.W.A.s (People living with AIDS, Watney, 1994, p.31) I.V. drug users and gays. Significantly Senator Helm's who proposed cuts for the N.E.A. had previously led a successful effort to deny federal AIDS funds to groups advocating homosexuality.

Finally in chapter three there is a discussion of Serrano's move from using bodily fluids as a means of picturing the body to the dead body itself in *The Morgue (Cause of Death)* series 1994. The fear of the corpse is explored by drawing on the work of Kristeva once more. The generalised abhorrence of the corpse is further questioned by pointing to Jay Ruby's studies which demonstrate the relative normality of postmortem photography in the nineteenth century. This attests to the fact that notions of obscenity are historically contingent. Many of Serrano's photographic images of the corpse are handled with reverence, the fact that some resemble religious imagery enhance the implications of this series. These images were deemed obscene in a way that may be related to *Piss Christ*



Fig. 0.01 Andres Serrano *Piss Christ* 1987 40" x 60" cibachrome print



Fig. 0.02 Andres Serrano *Rat Poison Suicide* 1992 40" x 60" cibachrome print



Chapter One:

Religious Imagery - The Sanctity of the Icon

Serrano's work has often been spoken of in terms of the "sacred" and the "profane" (Fusco 1991, p.45). Serrano has claimed that "you can't have one or the other, you need both". It is these contradictory elements in his work, the dualism that creates a "dilemma" (Fusco, 1991, p.45). *Piss Christ* is in fact described by Serrano as an aesthetic piece, stating one can find "sublime beauty in these pictures" (Fusco, 1991, p.44). Serrano's treatment of light, his "painterly tool" (Lippard, 1990, p.242) enhance the wood and plastic cross. An auratic glow further enhances the shadows and the tiny bubbles caused by the urine are illuminated suggesting "nebula" (Lippard, 1990, p.239). Serrano's photographic images have a suggestion of transcendence. Ironically the crucifix represented had not the grand monumental scale (40x60 inch) of Serrano's cibachrome print, but was a small (13x18 inch) object.

Without the title *Piss Christ* is a reverent representation of the crucifix - with the title it becomes potentially offensive. Serrano chose the title because it was confrontational - his use of the photographic medium further extends this and the element of obscenity.

The photograph as a medium presents the viewer with a certain undeniable reality. It implies that the scene or incident in the photograph took place, whether it was staged or candid. If the same image were painted it would not be as 'real' or provocative to the viewer" (Smith 1987, p.12).

"What this Serrano fellow did, he filled a bottle with his own urine and then stuck a crucifix down there - Jesus Christ on a cross. He set it on a table and took a picture of it." (Helms quoted in Boltan, 1995, p.30). Serrano employs the photographs "power of authentication" (Barthes, 1984, p.89) inferring that which is seen has indeed existed, the crucifix was actually immersed in his own urine. This heightens the profanity and accuracy of the title.

Although Serrano has argued that this loaded piece is an aesthetic image and has claimed to like the "aesthetics of the church" (Fusco, 1991, p.42). His work does not depend on religious imagery for merely decorative purposes or to enhance aesthetic value. Serrano has often used religious imagery/symbolism in his photographic images. These symbols inform the work and their subversion suggests his distrust of the religious establishment.

Heaven and Hell 1984 (fig.1.01), one of Serrano's earlier works, is an image depicting a Cardinal and a naked woman. The woman's hands are bound together and stretched

above her head, her body is streaked with blood. The Cardinal's eyes are directed away from this suffering woman. The Cardinal's indifferent attitude operates as a metaphor of the church's attitude towards women: he is completely oblivious to her or he chooses to ignore her. *Stigmata* 1985 also depicts a suffering woman. Wearing only white leather cuffs her hands and wrists are covered with blood. These images of woman represent all who are condemned by the church. Serrano describes the church as...."oppressive as far as dealing with women, minorities, gays, lesbians and anyone else that doesn't go along with their programme" (Walker, 1990, p.38).

The celestial backdrop which often appears in Serrano's work recalls the "gaudy tints of sentimental religious prints and pictures" (Reid, 1987, p.9). Resembling the skies depicted in technicolour films of religious epics, Serrano's staged scenes undermine the seriousness of the icon, highlighting its artificiality. *Pieta* 1985 (fig. 1.02) is in fact an image of Serrano's wife, the fish she holds is like a prop, bought for \$5 at the market. The cardinal depicted in *Heaven and Hell* is in fact Serrano's friend, a renowned political artist Leon Golub wearing a rented outfit.

There's a lot of irony in my work, but it's not sacreligious...
I have no problem with God, my issue is with the Church, with
the dogma and confusion, a perversion of the actual teaching
which seems to have failed Christianity (Tucker, 1994, p.100).

These earlier pieces and *Piss Christ* indicates Serrano's attitude to what he views as the shortcomings of the religious establishment. The church's intolerance of certain minorities such as the gay community. Cardinal O'Connor's public preference of "coffins to condoms" (Lippard, 1990, p.136) is typical of such animosity.

There is a distinct dualistic nature in Serrano's work. Urine desecrates the representation of the cross and at the same time formally beautifies and monumentalises it. In doing so Serrano rejects the mass produced icon and what it symbolises - religion for profit and a hypocritical doctrine.

Irony abounds in this affair. Those who rise in outrage against the "Piss Christ" photograph raised not a whisper of protest against the long running "Praise the Lord Club" (P.T.L.C.) heresy. Jim and Tammy Barker were allowed to preach and practice in the name of Christianity a doctrine of pure materialism (Fox, 1989, p.5).

By beautifying Christ in urine he reaffirms the connection between Christ and man, giving spiritual value to the body. Serrano's work explores how spiritual belief has been "exploited" (Potter quoted in Smith, 1989, p.12) and spiritual values "debased" (Potter quoted in Smith, 1989, p.12).

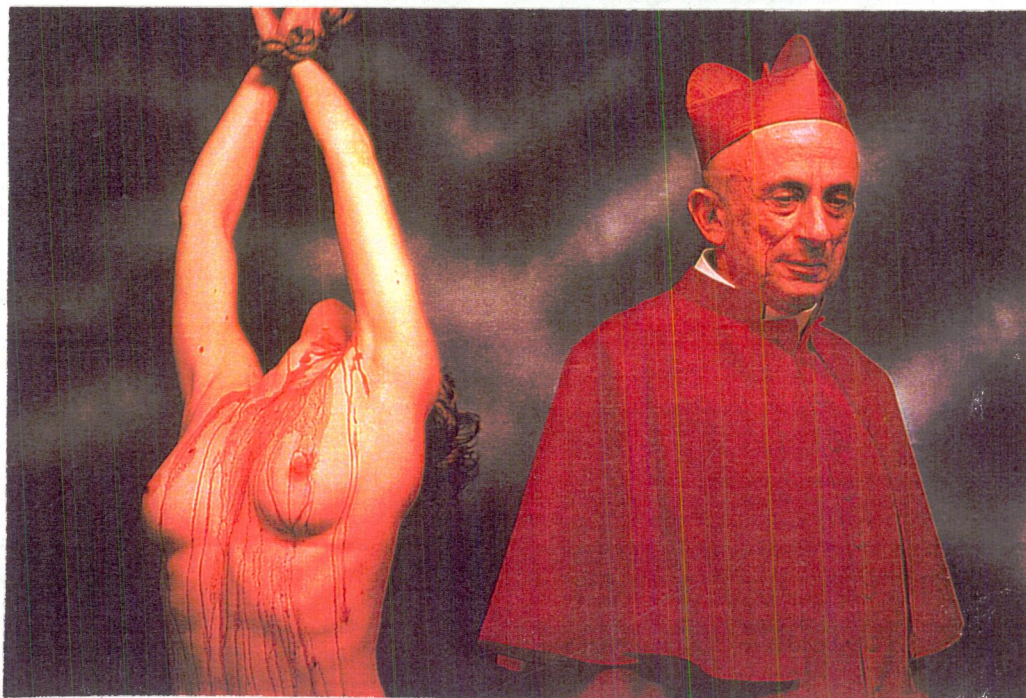


Fig. 1.01 Andres Serrano *Heaven & Hell* 1984 40" x 60" cibachrome print
 Fig. 1.02 Andres Serrano *Pieta* 1985 40" x 60" cibachrome print



What they are afraid of is that it may not be what it seems.
The plastic cross is already found in society - society made it.
What Serrano is doing by means of irony is revealing that they
are the ones who have violated the spirit of Christ
(Kuspit quoted in Boltan, 1995, p.49).

The crucifix, now the most familiar of symbols throughout religious iconography actually appeared comparatively late. It was not until the thirteenth century that the image of the crucifix which is venerated today had been fully established. Symbols of the cross had appeared to a small extent before the tenth century, however depictions of Christ himself on the cross were forbidden. (Belting, 1994, p.358). It was deeply problematic to render, the divine, materially visible. Councils were established in which theories on the validity of the sanctity of icons were debated amongst theologians. The Iconalistic Controversy lasted (with intermission) from about 725-842. This moot point was highly topical amongst prelates and the laity. One of the first theorists of this theological debate was Bishop Claude of Turin. He argued against the veneration of icons. He claimed it heretical to represent God- divinity, as a material object. "The image is dead. The icon becomes idol" (Weiss, 1994, p.19) Attempting to produce and venerating these icons was in his opinion an act of profanity. However in 843 the Nicene Council stipulated that the incarnation justified, indeed necessitated the veneration of icons of Christ, the Virgin, the Angels and the Saints. The iconoclasts denial of this was at this point seen as heretical, as it was thought to align with the denial of the Incarnation (the foundation of the New Testament).

Religious images were a means of propagating Christianity as the early Church needed converts. The Crucifixion was not an enticing subject to would-be Christians. It's ambiguous nature was highly problematic. The cross, like the gallows or guillotine was a symbol of criminality and death. After the tenth century Christ began to appear on the cross, however he was represented not as a suffering crucified man but alive and glorious. The image makers had a difficult task to distinguish between the figure of Christ enduring pain and death (moving the beholder into enduring the suffering of the Son of Man) and the opposing concept of the radiant resurrection of the Son of God. The naturalistic representation of the dead Christ was thought to strip him of power and divinity - it was thus seen as heresy. It was the Franciscans who in the thirteenth century took the lead in propagating the image of the Christ, hanging lifeless with closed eyes on the cross which had formerly offended Western Christians. The new devotion to the dead Christ stressed the human suffering on the cross and was thought to elicit empathy with the beholder.

The image which had formerly been considered blasphemous is today one of the most venerated religious icons. Similarly Serrano's image of the cross immersed in urine is another means of representing the crucifixion. This representation has the same implications as the *Christus Patiens* (dead Christ on the cross). Serrano claims his

crucifix also implies a “humanisation” of Christ, thus “connecting” his own body with that of Christ. (Barrie, 1990, p.24) The heretical nature of the naturalistic representation of Christ before the 13th century can be aligned with the heretical nature of *Piss Christ* in 1989. Allan Weiss notes -

To add, subtract or damage a sign in a theological system is to create heresy, but it is only in relation to the multiplication of heresies that orthodoxy can be established. (The heterodoxy of blasphemy, heresy, phantasms and simple (or complex) errors is the provocation at the origins of orthodoxy (Weiss, 1994, p.10).

Reformers during what has been termed as the “Second Iconoclastic Controversy” in the 16th Century rejected religious imagery and icons. The role of the icon seems to be a move from religion or theology to aesthetics. The veneration of images seems to oppose the adoration of God. The veneration had intensified to adoration. Sainly relics, statues, even images were believed to have miraculous powers ³.

The stipulation that St Basil set down “the honour rendered unto the icon returns to its prototype” (Weiss, 1994, p.20) at the Second Nicene Council had subsided. The extreme almost fetishistic treatment of these icons recall the principal associated with paganism. The veneration of images seems to oppose the adoration of God. The outraged reaction of fundamentalists to *Piss Christ* highlights their apparent devotion to the religious icon. However this reverence is stifling. The icon has been placed in a no touch zone yet the religious icon was created not to be worshiped but as an aid for people to envisage and honour God. They attack Serrano for his use of the image of the crucifix which he draws on to -

redefine and personalise [his] relationship with God. For [him] art is a moral and spiritual obligation that cuts across all manner of pretence and speaks directly to the soul (Lippard , 1990, p.239).

By using urine with the crucifix Serrano hoped to humanise the contrived notion of spirituality inscribed by society and the religious establishment. The symbolic quality of the crucifix has not been denied by Serrano. The fact that the cheap mass produced cross in *Piss Christ* is ennobled by the corporeal bodily fluid heightens its symbolic qualities.

Carolyn Bynum deals extensively with this in her essay “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Latter Middle Ages”

Chapter Two: ***Bodily Fluids - An Abhorrence of the Abject***

Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self possession, with the possession of a recognised and stable individuality (Batille, 1985, p.16).

Serrano has repeatedly used bodily fluids in his work. His earlier pieces resemble monochrome paintings of Yves Klein. *Piss* 1987 (fig. 2.03) and *Blood* 1987 (fig. 2.02) are bold luxurious prints of pure yellow and red. *Circle of Blood* 1987 (fig. 2.03) has the same sumptuous quality. The seamless manipulation of these substances “tricks” (Hobbs, 1994, p.20) the viewer into admiring what would otherwise be considered offensive fluids. It is only on noting the titles that one becomes aware of the subject matter.

Serrano's photographs are therefore indefensible to so many, not simply because they blaspheme- which in a narrow sense some of them do; they also are insupportable because they find beauty in substances that have always made people recoil in horror or embarrassment (Hobbs, 1994, p.20).

French theorist Julia Kristeva has written extensively on matters in which “proper” sociality and subjectivity are based on the expulsion, or exclusion, of the improper, the unclean and the disorderly elements of it's corporeal existence that must be separated from it's “clean” and “proper” self (Kristeva, 1982, p.4). Throughout history the body has been shaped into a territory. Certain areas of the body which have this disorderly, ambiguous nature have been culturally coded and deemed obscene. Taboos have been inscribed in certain places of the body such as orifices and bodily fluids. The orifices are neither inside nor outside - they cannot be categorised as subject or object ⁴.

Julia Kristeva has written extensively on this “Liminal Zone” which she herself has termed “abject” (Kristeva, 1982, p.2). These orifices weaken the stability of the body image, especially as it is through these that bodily fluids are secreted or ejected. The body is no longer contained as it's fluids seep out. Bodily fluids are classified as abject. They occupy this region as they cannot be labelled or classified as subject or object. What was formerly part of the body, what constituted the insides, when expelled is no longer the subject. However these fluids still retain their characteristics.

Mary Douglas has explored the pollutant nature of unclassified elements in *Purity and Danger*. Just as matter out of place is considered repulsive, so too are these parts of the body which have the ambiguous properties of anomaly (an element which does not fit into a given set or series).

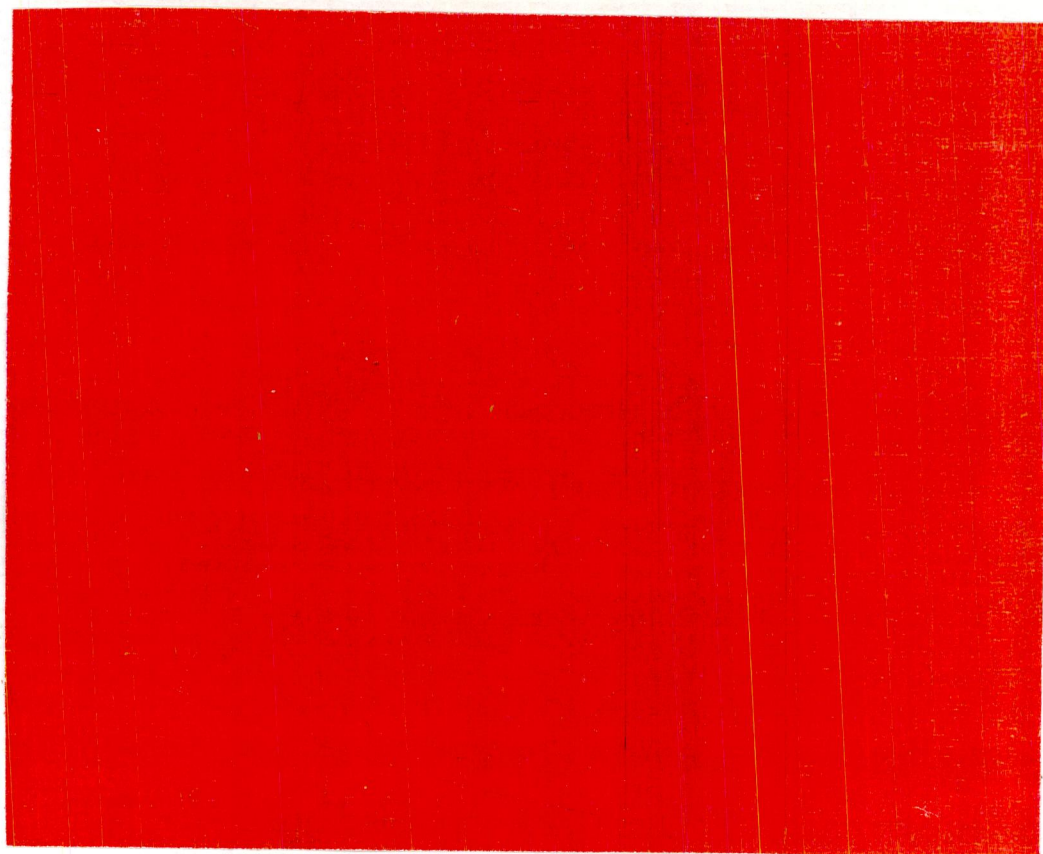
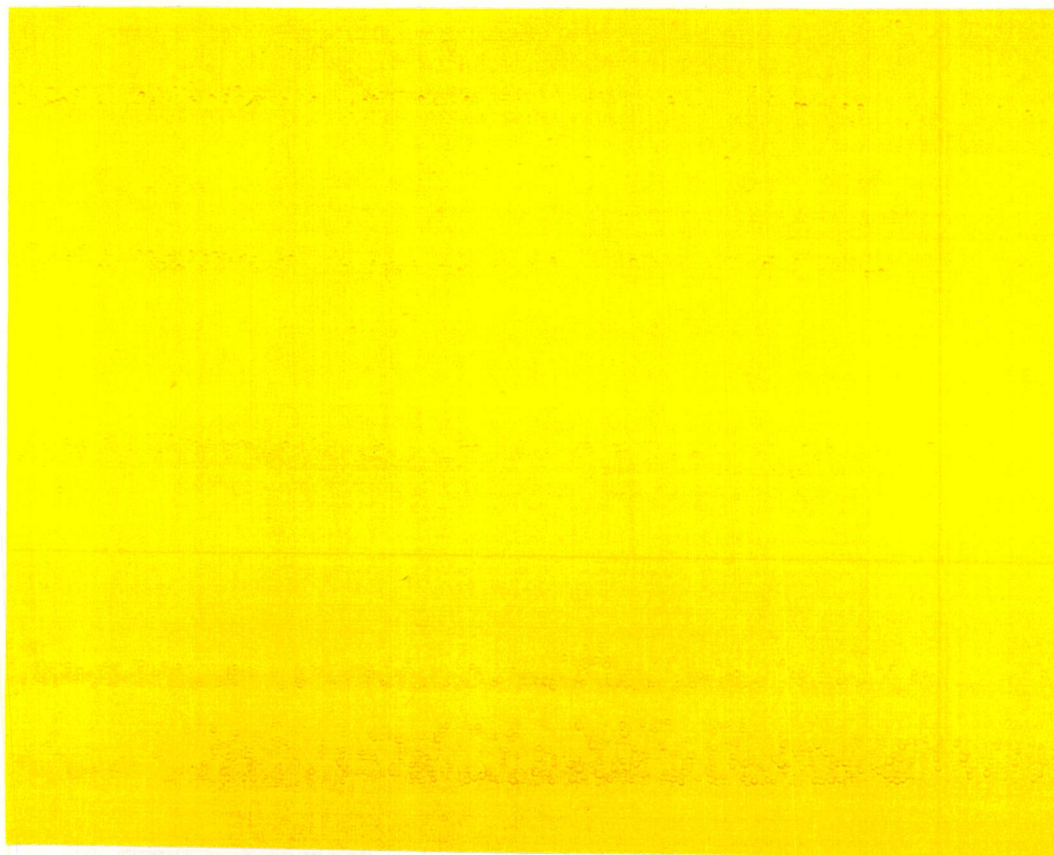


Fig. 2.01 Andres Serrano *Piss* 1987 40" x 60" cibachrome print
Fig. 2.02 Andres Serrano *Blood* 1987 27.5" x 40" cibachrome print

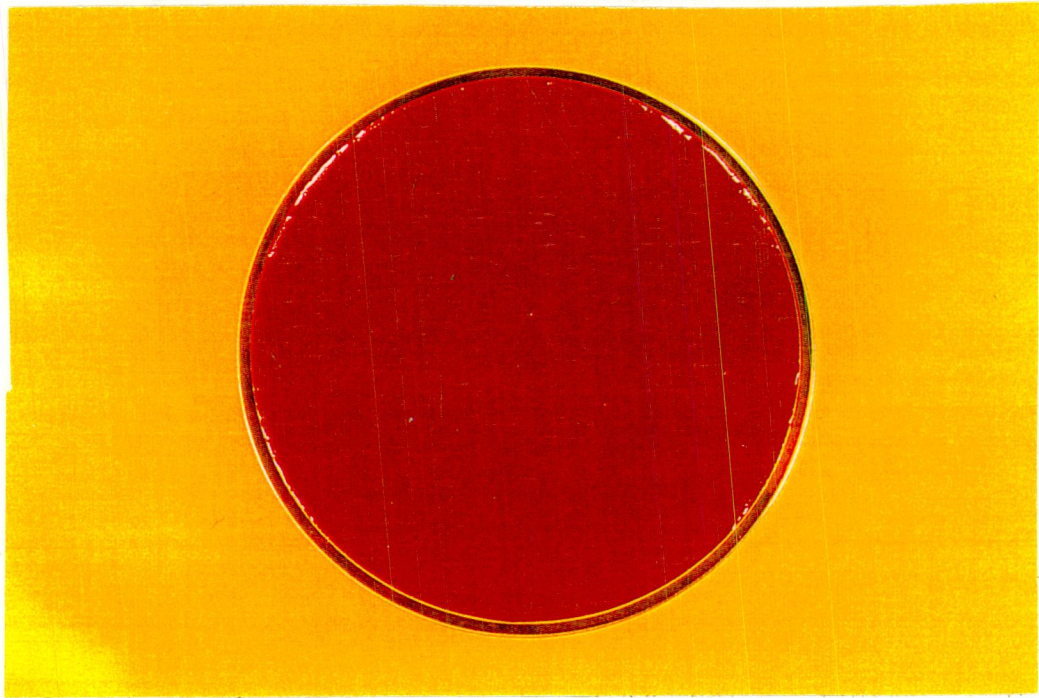
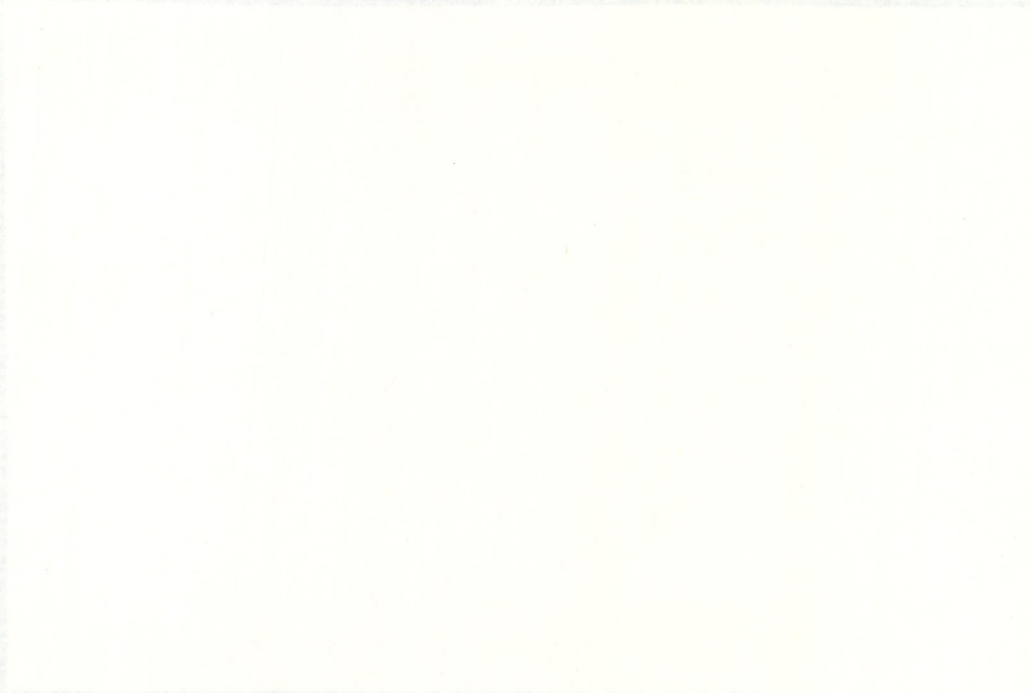


Fig. 2.03 Andres Serrano *Circle of Blood* 1987 40" x 60" cibachrome print



On being emitted from the body, these fluids cannot simply be identified as object. These fluids are displaced, out of the body, out of context, becoming pollutants no longer integral parts of the body. "The sight of bodily fluids disturbs us because it threatens the fantasy of our own self-containment and corporeal stability." (Tamblyn, 1990, p11).

It is these ambiguous parts of the human body that have unnerving properties what Kristeva herself has termed the "Power of Horror". The presence of bodily fluids is a reminder of the instability and vulnerability of the human body. Mike Kelly, an artist who deals with abject subject matter has spoken of the "intense fear of death and anything that shows the body as a machine that has waste products or wears down.." (Taylor, 1995, p.160). Kristeva explains our abhorance of excrement. "The damage to identify that comes from without, the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside life and death" (Kristeva quoted in Gross, 1990, p.92)

Serrano unnerves the viewer by provoking recognition of the abject and corporeality. His use of bodily fluids as a means of picturing the body is therefore considered obscene by many. Abjection is the revolt of subjects and cultures against their own corporeality. This uneasiness is highlighted as Serrano portrays these feared substances with the "seductive allure" (Hobbs, 1994, p.17) usually reserved for advertising. Critic Michael Brenson states Serrano's "use of bodily fluids is not intended to arouse disgust but to challenge the notion of disgust where the human body is concerned" (Hobbs, 1994, p.28).

Serrano explains the reason for the reaction of disgust from many - "It's waste, and I think it's seen as something repugnant' but I think this aversion to piss has more to do with the aversion we have to our own bodies than it actually has to do with Piss" (Gutherie, 1989, p.45). By picturing this condemned and abhorred element of the body, Serrano acknowledges our rejected corporeality. This is comparable to New York artist, Kiki Smith's appropriation of the grotesque body in her figurative sculptures such as *Tale* 1992 and *Virgin Mary* 1992.

The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism, the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world
(Russo quoted in Tamblyn, 1990, p.12)

"My intent was to aestheticize Christ. Beautiful light, I think aestheticizes the picture, visually it doesn't denigrate Christ in anyway." (Niederkon, 1989, p.7). Because a bodily fluid *aestheticizes* the kitsch statues the image cannot be read solely as defilement. Significantly bodily fluids have played a paramount role



Fig. 2.04 Andrea Mantegna *The Circumcision* c.1470

Oil on canvas

throughout Christianity. The bible recounts the miraculous powers inherent in Christ's bodily fluids.

And he took him aside and put his fingers into his ears and he spat and touched his tongue. And looking up to Heaven, he sighed, and said unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened. And straight away his ears were opened and the string of his tongue was loosed and he spoke plain (Mark 7:33-35)

The body and blood of Christ are, in St Augustine's words "what we know to be the sacraments from which the Church is built up." (Camporesi, 1989, p.112). The doctrine of transubstantiation reaffirms the miraculous powers as the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ ⁵.

Christ's fluids are believed to have redemptive qualities and are beheld with reverence. The incarnation implied that the blood shed by Christ in the Passion must have been human blood. The blood of Christ is venerated not due to its divine nature. Christ's blood symbolises the human suffering which he underwent at the crucifixion

Medieval and Renaissance texts increasingly emphasised the humanisation of God as the salvation of all humanity. The extraordinary devotion in the fifteenth and sixteenth century to the holy foreskin and the feast of the circumcision endorses the importance of the "humanisation" of God in Christ. "The child Jesus cries today because of the pain he felt in his soft and delicate flesh, for he had real and susceptible flesh, like all other humans." (Steinberg, 1984, p.5) The logic is sound since the incarnation draws its effectiveness from the responsive faith, it would have forfeited that effectiveness had it been open to legitimate doubt. Without proof of blood the flesh assumed by the godhead might have been thought merely simulated, phantom, deceptive- this was the belief held by the Gnostics. Their heretical doctrine held Christ's assumed body to be spiritual and not carnal, so that he only appeared to suffer.

Representation of the crucified Christ, especially in Gothic paintings, after the 15th Century captured the horrific torture of the crucifixion with their particularly close attention to the oozing blood. A horrific painting of Christ's body covered with seeping wounds by M. Grünewald was originally displayed on the high altar in a church in Isenheim (fig. 2.06). This representation of Christ exemplified the pain and suffering which is a human rather than a divine characteristic. Stressing Christ's corporeality moved the beholder to identify and join with Christ, his suffering, bloodshed and eventual death emphasised his humanity. Serrano relates his corporeal fluids to the image of Christ to give spiritual meaning to his own body.

During medieval times, there was substantial drama to the infinite powers of the consecrated host. *The Miracle of Bolsena* 1263 which is depicted in a fresco shows the host which allegedly began to bleed during a mass celebrating it by a priest who doubted the transubstantiation (Camporesi, 1989, p.220).

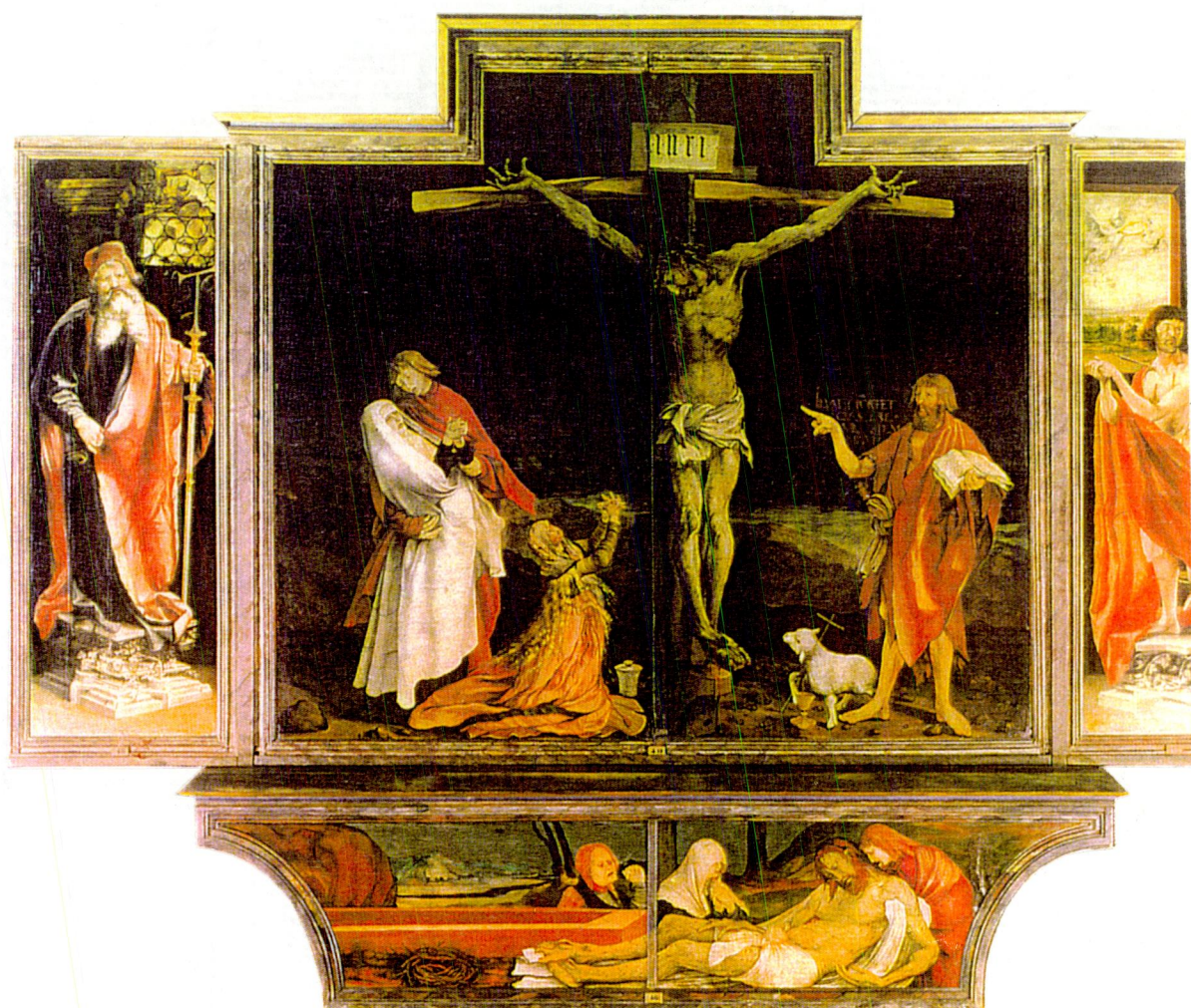


Fig. 2.05 Matthias Grünewald *The Isenheim Altarpiece* c.1513 Oil on wood panels



Throughout the medieval period emphasis was placed on the body as a means of becoming like Christ, which opposed the gnostic belief of the dualism of man and their rejection of the body as an enemy of the spirit.

No religious woman failed to experience Christ as wounded, bleeding and dying. Women's efforts to imitate Christ involved becoming the crucified, not just patterning themselves after or expanding their compassion toward, but fusing with the body of Christ (Bynum, 1991, p.129).

Saints and martyrs (esp. women) manipulated their bodies from the outside by flagellation and other forms of self-inflicted suffering in order to approach Christ's suffering. Martyrs felt joined with the crucifix through voluntary physical suffering. Association with the crucifix could also be attained through non-voluntary means such as illness. Illness itself was looked upon by many Sainly women as a gift from God. An anonymous biographer described St. Alice of Schaerbeke's leprosy in these terms.

God wished to purge her from within.....because she was his spouse. And so that she would be free to rest with God alone and daily in the cubicle of her mind as in the bridal chamber.....he gave her an incurable disease leprosy (Bynum 1991 p.133).

These martyrs made physical and mental anguish an opportunity for their salvation and others. In such piety the body was not so much a hindrance to the soul's ascent as the opportunity for it. The body was the instrument upon which the "mystics ring changes of pain and delight" (Bynum, 1989, p.170). Illness and asceticism were rather *imitation Christi* (Bynum, 1991, p.130) an effort to plumb the depths of Christ's humanity at the moment of his most insistent and terrifying humanness - the moment of his dying. Self torture and the frenzy of pain were described as an ecstatic fusion with Christ. Women regularly spoke of "tasting God ...of kissing him deeply, of going into his heart or entrails, of being covered with his blood" (Bynum, 1989, p.168). Viennese Beguine Agne Blannbekin received the foreskin in her mouth and found it to taste as sweet as honey (Bynum, 1989, p.164). Hadewijch the Flemish poet described herself as embracing Christ feeling him "penetrate deep within her" (Bynum, 1991, p.86).

These saints described their union with Christ in terms which are both sexual and erotic. There are sado-masochistic undertones as these saintly people lost themselves in a frenzied ecstasy while undergoing pain and torture. It is possible to conclude that these martyrs and saints were themselves performing an act of obscenity. Twentieth Century viewers and readers tend to eroticise the body. We define ourselves by the nature of our sexuality. Medieval people on the other hand did not define themselves by sexual orientation. On noting Hadewijch's feeling of Christ "penetrating deep within her" (Bynum, 1991, p.86). It is important to realise that medieval people did

not understand as erotic or sexual a number of bodily sensations which we interpret that way. The penis of Christ was not seen primarily as a sexual organ but as the object of circumcision and therefore as wounded, bleeding flesh implying his sacrifice.

Urine has been culturally coded, denoting a single construct - waste. Inaccurate readings of *Piss Christ* were made by resolute fundamentalists based on culturally coded perceptions. Serrano's work was deemed "offensive" in the Washington Times, and "perverse" by Senator D'Amato. Serrano's work seems a minor perversion relative to the sado-masochistic rituals of the medieval martyrs. As culture changes so too do obscenity. Cultural codes determine the perception of the obscene, cultural coding has deemed our bodily fluids obscene. *Piss Christ* has therefore has been deemed inaccurately to be an obscene representation.

However Christ's corporeal blood has historically been venerated and believed sacred. Thus sacredness can be constructed as present in the ordinary dimension of human life, in our bodily functions, the urine and blood that mark us. Serrano has claimed his work to be apolitical ⁶, however the general topicality of AIDS in the 1980's invested the substances of bodily fluids with meanings of more than just waste. As the H.I.V virus was spread via these fluids, they became more menacing to the notion of the bodies stability. The virus was contracted through wounds in the skin or orifices, the body had become even more vulnerable. AIDS was spreading disproportionately in minority communities such as African Americans, Hispanics and gay men.

In an interview with Coco Fusco Serrano states : "My work has social implications, it functions in a social arena. In relation to the controversy over *Piss Christ*, I think the work was politicised by forces outside it and as a result some people expect to see something recognisably "political" in my work.

Because of the early identification of AIDS with sexual transgression and marginalised social groups, a HIV or AIDS diagnoses was a form of social stigmatisation. Serrano seeks a connection between his own corporeality and the figure of Christ "in the same way a dog establishes territory by pissing." (Barrie 1990 p.25) The fact that Andres Serrano is himself Hispanic and a former drug addict allows *Piss Christ* to be read not solely on a personal but on a broad social level.

By using urine Serrano brings these considerations to bear on *Piss Christ*. Just as Christ was regarded with disdain by those who had him crucified so too are minority groups ⁷. In a way Serrano's work relates to the vilification of Christ to that of P.W.A.s, drug addicts and other minority groups.

The initial association of the syndrome with what many in society considered a deviant lifestyle had a profound impact on the way in which researchers, the media and the public responded to the new disease. News of the syndrome reached the general public through the mass media in late 1981 with headlines such as "Diseases that Plague Gays" (Feldman, 1990, p.11).

...to say someone has AIDS is to say much more than that person is experiencing the progressive exposure of fragile vital organs to the ravages of common infections. It is to say that he or she is a certain type of person socially and morally defined...the metaphoric predication of AIDS opens the door to the dark musty cellar of cultural association of the profane, the defiled, the denied, the unshown, the forbidden, the feared. (Mutchler quoted in Lupton, 1994,p.57).

The governments inability to deal with the AIDS crisis can not be ignored.. The "lethal" lack of funding for medical research and the absence of contributions toward medical expenses were part of government policy (M.I.T. List Visual Art Centre,1992, p. 29). Senator Helms had been a frequent advocate of restrictive legislation in the area of sexuality. He led a successful effort to deny federal AIDS funds to groups "advocating" (Boltan 1995 p10) homosexuality (for example Gay Men's Health Crisis)⁸.

A show curated by Nan Goldwin, an exhibition by and about P.W.A.s, "Witness: Against Our Vanish" 1989 caused controversy within the N.E.A. In the catalogue for the show David Wajnorowicz explains the stigma attached to P.W.A.'s, which he himself experiences.

The rest of my life is being unwound and seen through a frame of death. My anger is more about the culture's refusal to deal with morality. My rage is really about the fact that when I was told I had contracted this virus it didn't take me long to realise that I'd contracted a diseased society aswell (Boltan, 1995, p.127).

His horrific proposal of compulsory AIDS testing as well as mandatory quarantine for people infected with H.I.V. exemplifies the inhumane attitude toward PWAs held by many fundamentalists.

Chapter Three: **"The Pornography of Death" - Exposing the Corpse**

Serrano has again lured the viewer into the realms of the abject, a place where meaning collapses, "the edge of non-existence and hallucination" (Tamblyn, 1990, p.11). Serrano's use of blood, semen and urine has progressed in his Morgue series onto using the corpse itself. As discussed in Chapter Two, the sight of bodily fluids disturb us because they hint at the "ill-considered fantasy" (Gross, 1990, p.93) of our own self-contained corporeal stability, they hint at our death. The sight of the corpse is even more threatening. It is -

the most sickening of wastes ...a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer "I" who expels, 'I' is expelled. This border has become object...the corpse seen without God and outside of science is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life, Abject. It is something rejected from which it does not part, from one which does not protect oneself from object (Kristeva, 1982, pp.3/4).

As early as 1955 Geoffrey Goer used the term "the pornography of death" (Arcand, 1993, p. 249). He used this definition to describe how far death had become a subject of scandal in contemporary society. Although pornography is most often associated with sex, Bernard Arcand has discovered that the arena of obscenity has shifted from sex to death - explaining that death has subsided from being a public event to a private act. Although some of the images in this series are quite beautiful, notions of obscenity instilled by culture transforms our opinions, these aesthetic photographs into images which are disturbing. An example of this is *Fatal Meningitis II* (fig. 3.01). A baby's face partially covered by a white sheet is the subject matter. The baby seems asleep, the soft shining skin on the forehead catches the light, the wisps of hair on the head, the gentle eyelashes enhance the life like quality. However although a beautiful image on realising that the baby is dead and the body is in fact a corpse - it is thus rendered obscene.

Serrano has the ability to choose particular details which are extremely poignant, for example the tiny hands of the baby in *Fatal Meningitis III* (fig. 3.02). The little fingers intertwined suggest that the baby is alive, however the actual fate of the baby seems hinted by the brown tag attached by white ribbon to the wrist. Serrano again uses the device of ruthless descriptive titles, this emphasises that these little hands belong to a dead baby. Again a serene representation alters to become a repellent image. Also included in this series of works are photographs which are extremely graphic, resembling stills from horror movies. *Smoke Inhalation* (fig.3.03) is a



Fig. 3.01	Andres Serrano	<i>Fatal Meningitis II</i> 1992	49.5" x 60" cibachrome print
Fig. 3.02	Andres Serrano	<i>Fatal Meningitis III</i> 1992	49.5" x 60" cibachrome print



particularly visceral piece, showing a close up of burnt charred feet on a white blanket. The whiteness of the blanket with the high colour of the print intensifies the rawness of the skin, which is now a strong magenta red and in some places black. The skin flakes off the big toe to reveal the bone beneath the flesh, and the toenails have turned a putrid yellow.

Serrano gives equal attention to both the beautiful and disgusting features of the corpses. He goes to great lengths to light the bodies so that each pore, each tiny hair is revealed, and further enhanced by the scale of the image. Like *Piss Christ* are shocking due to the assumed actuality of the colour photograph, what are represented are actual corpses. Photography never lies: or rather it can be, as to the meaning of the thing being by nature tendentious, never as to its existence. (Barthes, 1984, p.87)

Our earliest encounters with death are mediated and dramatised by others - televised representations of death, few are actual - most are make-believe. The American Psychological Association's study of television estimates that the average American child sees over 8,000 murders by the age of seven. (Ruby, 1995, unp.). "Our culture is permeated by images and accounts of death, but they are only fictions, works of the imagination, counterfeits. The real thing is carefully hidden" (Ruby, 1995, p.12) These visual images are too limited and distant to be deemed unacceptable. Images of people whose flawless fictional characters guarantee the immunity of the spectator. One could add that these images are tolerable and entertaining only to the extent that the private immediate and concrete deaths remain unknown and unreal.

While natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences-detectives stories thrillers...and eventually horror comics (Goer, 1965, p.197).

What is so striking in the more visceral of Serrano's pieces is that these burned bruised bodies are not latex props used in cinema but formerly living people. The face in the *Broken Bottle Murder* appears to have come away from the skull as the features slide over one another. It is almost incomprehensible that the black skeletal remains in *Burnt To Death* (fig. 3.04) were once those of a living being. The fact that Serrano exposes what were hidden and kept in a morgue is considered obscene. There is a longstanding tradition of taboo in respect of contact or proximity to the dead body. In early Judaism the corpse was a site of impurity -no. 19:11-16 "He who toucheth the dead body of any man shall be unclean for many days" (Binski, 1996, p.10). The pagan Roman world saw the corpse as an "abomination abhorred by the Gods" (Binski, 1996, p.10). The dead were to be honoured, but the notion of honour was attached to that of appeasement, leading to the idea that the dead should be distanced and placated. The dead were buried *extra muros* (Binski, 1996, p.11) outside the city walls as intra mural burial within the city walls were prohibited by the Roman imperial law of Tachre Tables. The dead were to be removed from the city of Constantinople and placed in *necropoli* which were the cities of the dead. These were well removed from the living.

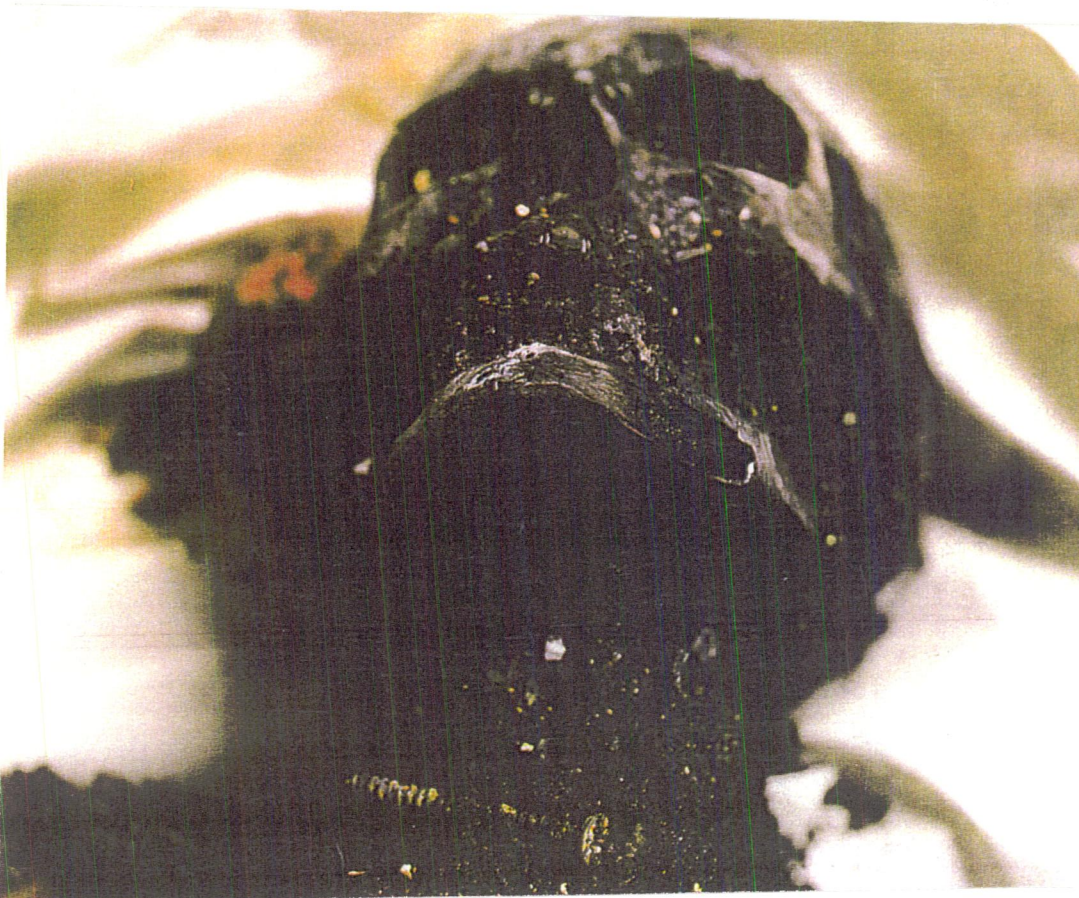


Fig. 3.03 Andres Serrano *Smoke Inhalation* 1992
 Fig. 3.04 Andres Serrano *Burnt to Death* 1992

49.5" x 60" cibachrome print
 49.5" x 60" cibachrome print

Our fear of the corpse is well-founded, in our technological world which is so advanced in scientific and medical knowledge, death is still invincible, it remains the only certainty of our existence. "For since the moment you came into this world, life and death go forward at the same pace" (Moore quoted by Kristeva, 1989, p.267). Theories of the Enlightenment invested the ego with greater significance and importance than the body. Modern society continues to support the view that the mind is more elevated than the body⁹.

This is the reason for our fear of the corpse. The mind, reason and will are disobeyed by the body. The body poses a danger to the ego in so far as it questions its stability and tangible grasp on and over itself, the corpse recollects this in our minds. The Cartesian formula 'Cognito ergo sum', (I think, therefore I am) is ridiculed by the sight of the corpse.

The safe category in which the self resides, is unstable. The border between life and death is constantly present. It is our own fear of death, our own fear of our unstable, vulnerable bodies that we acknowledge upon seeing both these horrifying and beautiful images of death in Serrano's *Morgue Series*. The fact that Serrano's use of urine was deemed obscene in *Piss Christ*, signifies our rejected corporeality. Serrano acknowledges our corporeality in this piece, as he does in his *Morgue* series. By producing these pieces, Serrano confronts the way in which death has been ostracised from our sanitised society.

In this mediate and glamorous culture, you don't die anymore; the images of the body overwhelm us with their models of immutable youth and sumptuous beauty...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, its physical flesh, right there (Arasse, 1985, unp.).

Serrano's act of photographing the dead may seem morbid, however there was in fact a phenomenon of photographing the dead before him, which Jay Ruby traced back to 1840. Though the idea of post-mortem photography may seem unhealthy, it was a common occurrence. According to Fritz Kempe in Austria "photos of corpses were the rage in the 1850's and 60's (there were even photographers who specialised in this practice)" (Ruby, 1995, p.196). Professional photographers regularly advertised, using slogans such as "We are prepared to take pictures of the deceased person within one hours notice." (Ruby 1995 p.52). The fact that this service was publicly advertised and

In order to understand the notion of the body's processes occurring without instruction from the mind, the act of dying can be compared to pregnancy. Pregnancy is more of a "process, filter or cypher than an act or decision.". Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is another. And no-one is present within this simultaneously dual and alien space to simplify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there...I cannot realise it', but it goes on in 'motherhood's impossible syllogism'" (Gross, 1990, p.95)

the ease with which 19th Century photographers discussed the task of photographing the dead, gives some indication of how culturally acceptable the practice was ¹⁰. Death was in fact a topic of polite conversation. The most common reason for the amount of these post-mortem photographs was that the family had few if any photographs of the person when they were alive (figs. 3.05 & 3.06). These people used the photographic image as a means of preserving the exact likeness of the deceased for posterity. All of the subjects in the photographs are intended to look peaceful, and have the appearance of being alive, (in some cases the eyes were touched over with paint to give the impression that they were open e.g. fig.3.07) However in most cases the corpse was made to look as if it was sleeping. Photographers would actually position the corpse in the most natural and life-like pose. These photographs enabled survivors to have extended viewing of the remains prior to burial.

"Expression of grief has been considered embarrassing, even in bad taste for many decades. Interest in death has been thought morbid, or at least maudlin" (Stitt, 1980, p.7). Attitudes on this subject seem to have changed to indignation and disgust. Howard Raether, Executive Director of the American National Funeral Directors Association believes that "...in the minds of many ...photography of the deceased, regardless of where it is done, is abhorred"(Ruby, 1995, p.175). What is note-worthy are Ruby's findings on receiving responses to the questionnaires which she sent to the Pennsylvanian Association of Professional Photographers in 1982. She found that out of the 74% who responded, 63% claimed to have been commissioned to take a photograph of a deceased person (Ruby, 1995, p.166). Funeral directors claim to have found empty photo cartridges in the rubbish bins after families have visited the dead. While Americans may publicly think that the idea of taking pictures of corpses is unhealthy, privately many practice it (Ruby, 1995, p.167).

The widespread use of the post-mortem photograph in the 19th Century indeed questions the attitude to death prevalent in today's society - our social sense of death has changed. The destruction of the individual existence - which has always been a public event (note the tradition of 'the wake') has been transformed into a deplorable and private incident. It could be said that Serrano is in a way exposing what has been publicly concealed? There is however a major element which differentiates the art of Serrano and the postmortem photographs of the Nineteenth Century, that is their use and the reason for their existence. Whereas the families and friends of the deceased would gaze upon the image in a private act of remembrance, Serrano photographed the dead not for private contemplation, but to bring them into the public domain, literally to exhibit them. Serrano's representations are not kept in the family album or upon one's person, but are enlarged and hung in a public space. The photographs (bar *Fatal Meningitis*) are not depiction's of the corpse in the likeness of sleep, these images do not serve as a form of nostalgic remembrance. Serrano fragments these people, they

See 'Secure the Shadow', Jay Ruby pp.160/161-an extract from a 19th Century post-mortem postcard of the deceased, recounts the death of the person depicted, and in the same paragraph talks about tomatoes!

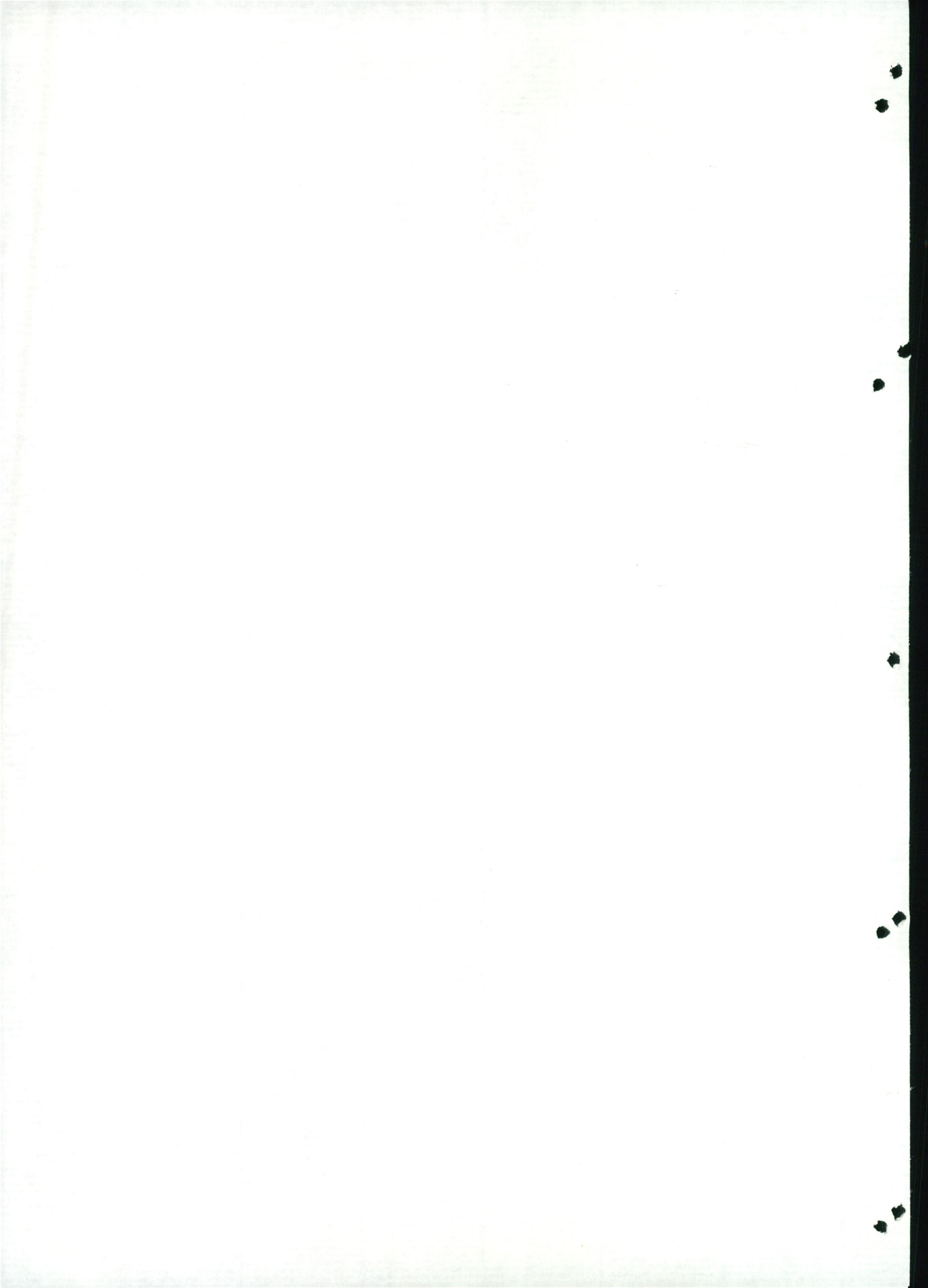


Fig. 3.05	Southworth & Hayes	<i>Postmortem Photograph of Unidentified Child</i>	ca.1850	Daguerreotype, full plate
Fig. 3.06	Harrison	<i>Postmortem Photograph of Unidentified Child</i>	ca.1890	Tinted gelatine silver print





Fig. 3.07 Unknown *Postmortem Photograph of Unidentified Child (with Eyes Painted Open)* ca.1870
8.38" x 6.44" Tintype



are represented as mere body parts. *Death by Drowning II* (fig. 3.08) is a portion of the chest and upper arm, the skin discoloured with pink, purple even black tones (which naturally occur to the corpse of a drowned person after a certain period). Serrano has reduced the dead body to such an extent that, for example in *Burnt to Death III* (fig. 3.09), the body is merely a piece of glossy red, raw flesh. He has reduced the body to pure colour, in a manner resembling his earlier abstract piece *Blood* 1985).

Serrano's reduction of the human body to an image of pure colour is reminiscent of Claude Monets account of the circumstances surrounding the creation of the portraiture of his own wife Camille on her death bed, conversing with his friend, he, like Serrano, reduced the body of his wife to a series of colours and tones.

I caught myself, my eyes fixed on her tragic forehead in the act mechanically analysing the succession of appropriate colour graduations which death was imposing on her immobile face. Tones of blue, of yellow, of grey, what have you. This is the point I had reached (Monet quoted in Nochlin, 1971, p.63).

Enlightenment, ideals of rationality with their emphasis on the present rather than future life lessened the religious meaning of death. Works of the mid nineteenth century portraying death attempted to grasp and convey the mundane truth of death. These images such as H.W. Trübner's *Dead Christ* 1874, were stripped of all transcendental meaning and metaphysical implications. In Zola's *L'Oeuvre* the artist, Claude Lastler, who is overcome by the death of his son, suddenly seizes a brush and begins painting him. The dead body of the son becomes simply a strange interesting subject for him.

As societies advance, or believe themselves to advance, to the degree that there is civilisation, progress, so the cult of the dead, the respect for the dead diminishes. The dead person is no longer revered as a living being who has entered the unknown, to the formidable. "Je ne sais quoi" of that which is beyond life. In modern societies the dead person's simply a zero, a non-value (Goncourt quoted in Nochlin, 1971, p.60).

The corpses which Serrano photographed in the morgue were all unidentified and anonymous people. Without documents, passport, driving licences etc. and with nobody to claim them; in this society they are seen in terms of what Esmond de Goncourt describes as a "non-value". Since Serrano pictures them as merely fragmented parts of a body, he also reiterates that they are fragmented in another sense that they are like things discarded in society.

Serrano connects these photographs of corpses with religious imagery. These photographs are more than studies in colour and form, for example *Gun Murder* (fig. 3.11) is a perspective view, looking from the head (which is excluded from the shot)



Fig. 3.08 Andres Serrano *Death by Drowning III* 1992 49.5" x 60" cibachrome print



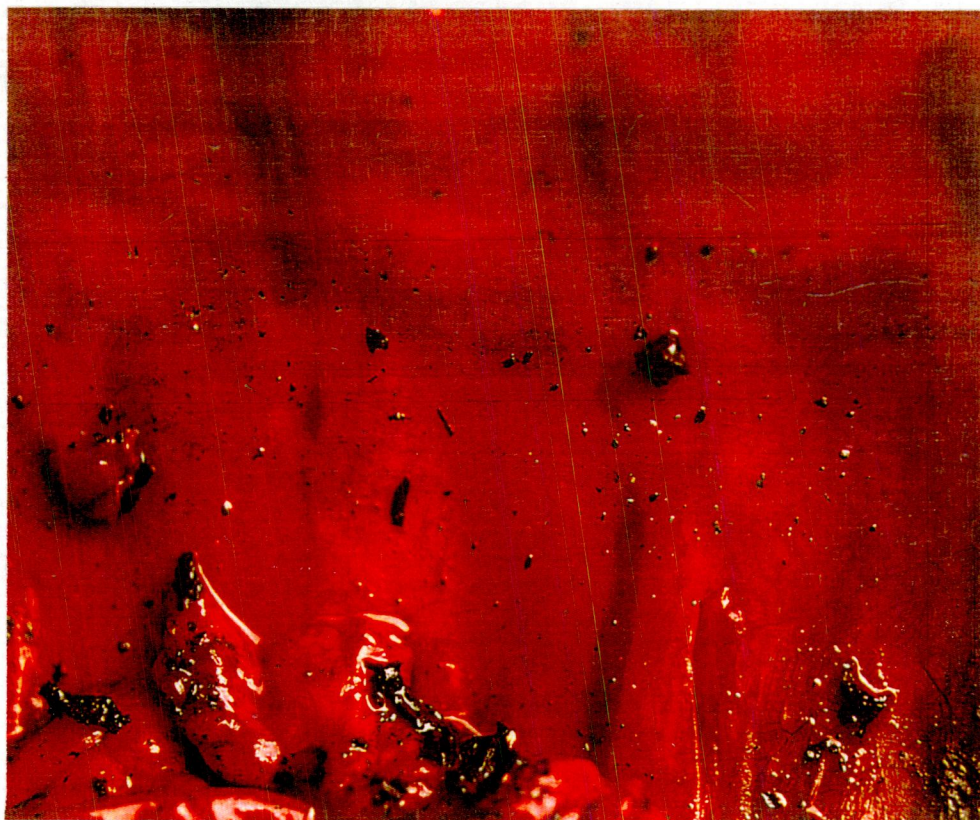


Fig. 3.09 Andres Serrano *Burnt to Death* 1992 49.5" x 60" cibachrome print

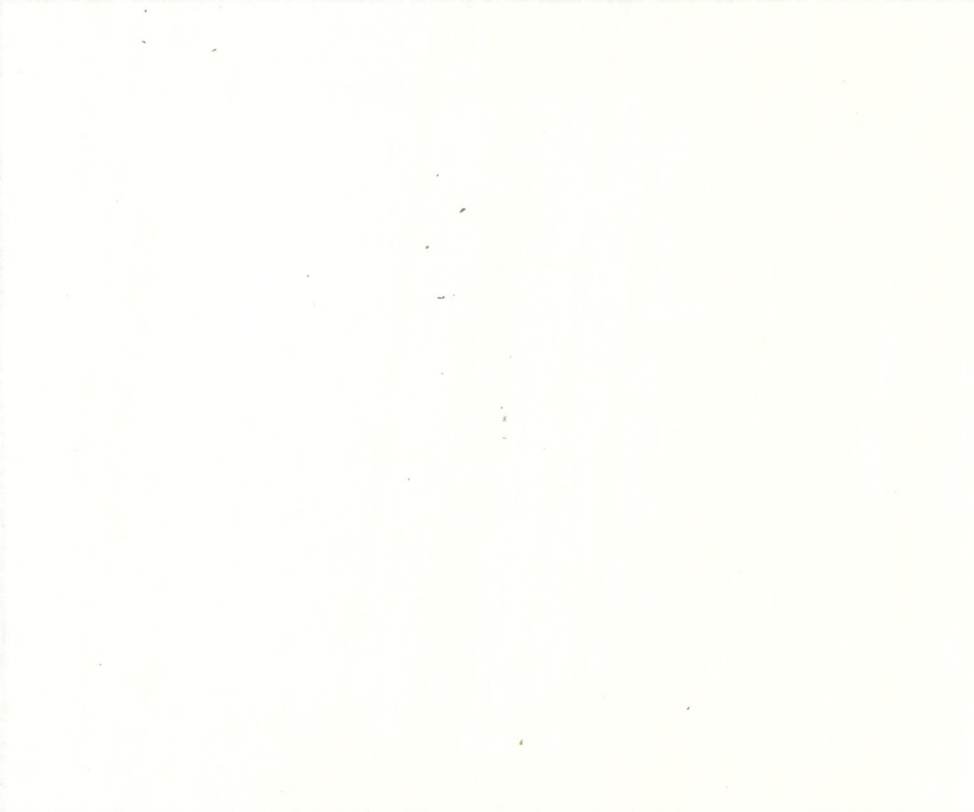




Fig. 3.10 Claude Monet *Camille Monet on her Death Bed* 1879 90cm x 68cm Oil on canvas

down to the feet. The white nappy resembles Christ's loin cloth. The realism of Serrano's photographs brings to mind Holbein's *Dead Christ* 1522 (fig. 3.12). Holbein's painting is stripped of the luxuriance which previously adorned representations of Christ (which were almost erotic in their beauty as in the *Depositioni* of Jacopo Pontormo 1525 (fig. 3.13). Holbein's Christ is a faithful representation of a man who has undergone unbearable torture and torment. Like Serrano's *Broken Bottle Murder*, Christ's face is contorted to an extreme, the most frightening aspect of Holbein's Christ is his open eye, with the deathly glassy glint, yet the gaze does not extend to heaven. Serrano's close up of the male torso in *Homicidal Stabbing* (fig. 3.14), is reminiscent of Christ's lance wound (with a wound albeit on the other side). Holbein's Christ, like Serrano's subjects, is completely alone; the claustrophobic space which seems impossible to escape intensifies the hopelessness of Christ's final words: "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me". Serrano's subjects also appear forsaken. The causes of death in many cases were tragic and violent. *Knifed to Death I* (fig. 3.15) and *Knifed to Death II* (fig. 3.16) are photographs of what Serrano called "the hands of a criminal" (Hobbs, 1994, p.42), because of police fingerprints. Serrano reversed the hands in these images so that they would resemble Michaelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam*. The doctors surgical probes resemble the stigmata of Christ. By associating these criminals hands with religious imagery Serrano re-invests the corpse, which had become merely an object of analysis, with the element of sacredness. He pictures this abhorred object with reverence. As Serrano monumentalises the wood and plastic cross in *Piss Christ*, he does the same to the abandoned corpses which he pictured in *The Morgue*.

However critics have rejected this work as simply "sanctimonious urbanity" (Lifson, 1991, p.124), Jerry Salce said that this "conspicuous renegade" took advantage of the taboo subject of death and to some extent the corpses he depicted (Salce, 1993, p.124). Many felt this was an infringement on the dead body. It was felt that it was an obscene gesture for Serrano to photograph these dead people, without their consent. It could be said of Serrano, as it was said of the early anatomists that they were violating that special domain which belongs to the dead. Prior to the nineteenth century dissection of the corpse violated beliefs about the sanctity and mystery of death and the dead body. What is significant is that the corpses used for anatomy were criminals which were retrieved from the gallows. The 1752 murder act sanctioned "penal dissection" as a specific form of punishment subsequent to execution. The 1832 Anatomy Act empowered authorities to confiscate the bodies of dead paupers for dissection. What is note-worthy is that all Serrano's subjects were anonymous and unclaimed like the paupers or criminals. Just like those affected by the above mentioned acts, Serrano's subjects had no say in the matter, they had nobody to speak on their behalf as they lay mute.

His photographs could be viewed as intrusive in their highlighting of specific elements of the corpse. The most invading photograph in this sense being *Death by Asphyxiation* (fig. 3.18). What emphasises this fact is the similarity of Andres



Fig. 3.11 Andres Serrano *Gun Murder* 1992 49.5" x 60" cibachrome print



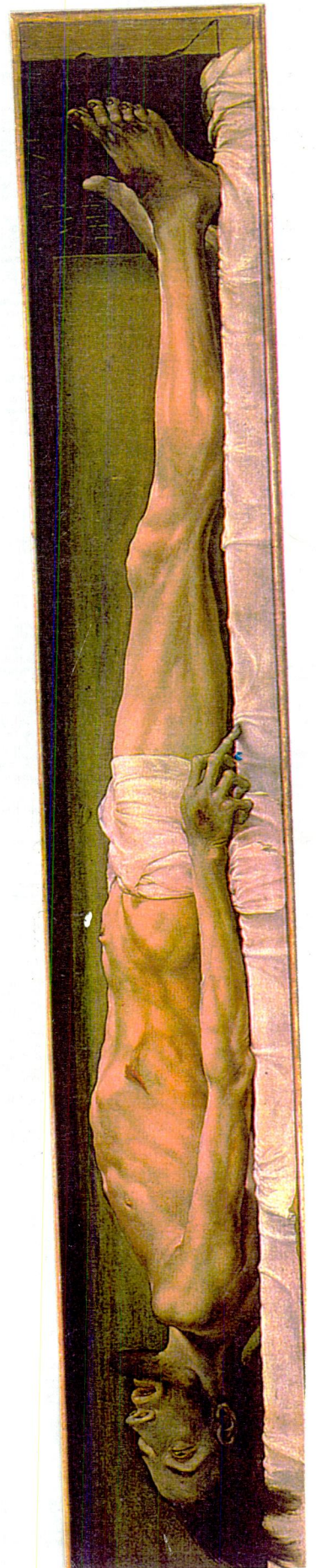


Fig. 3.12
Hans Holbein
The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb 1522
Oil on wood panel



Fig. 3.13 Jacopo Pontormo *Desposition* 1525 10'3" x 5'7" Oil on Wood

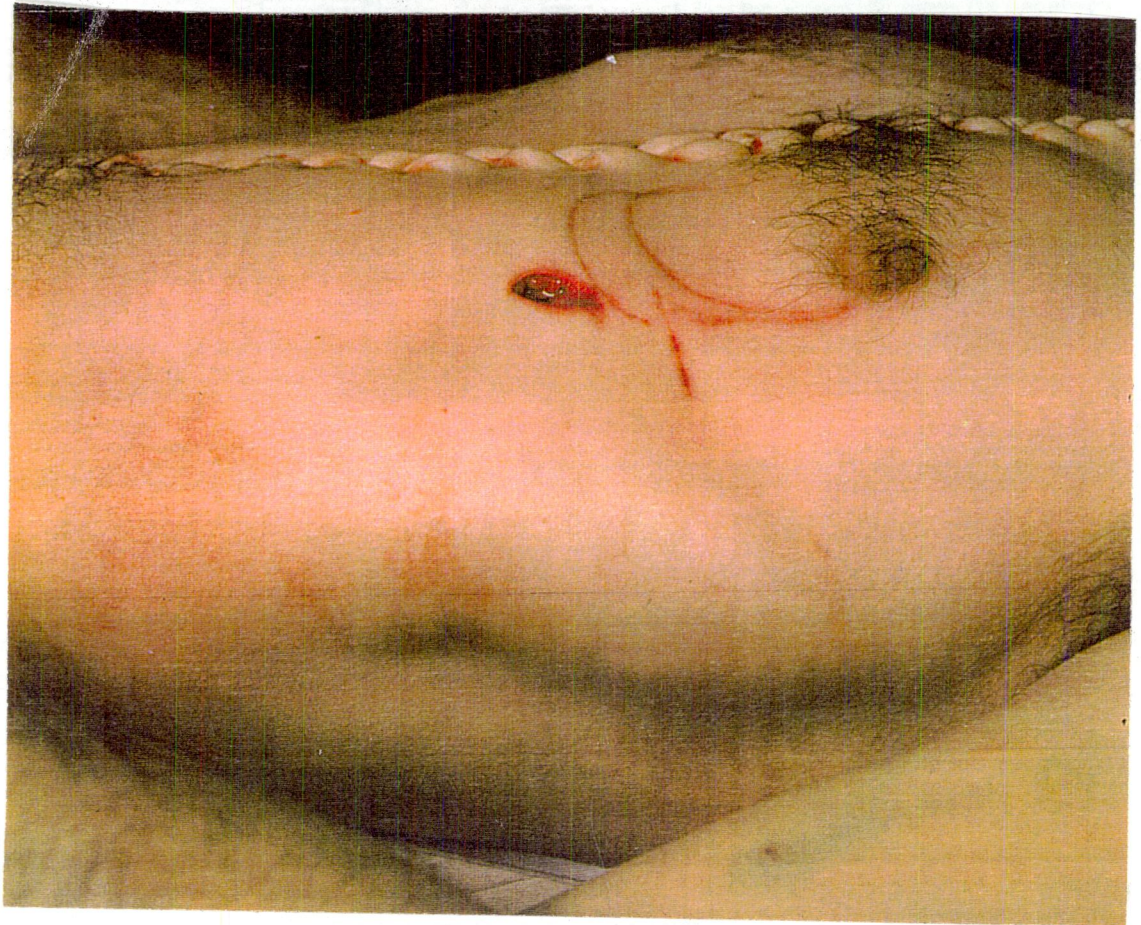


Fig. 3.14 Andres Serrano *Homicidal Stabbing* 1992 49.5" x 60" cibachrome print

Serrano's art to the photographs of advertising. Serrano's pieces have the same slick and flawless characteristics as advertising imagery - using the large 5' x 4' high saturation colour prints silicone bound onto Plexiglass. In using controversial subjects such as religion in *Piss Christ* and death, in *The Morgue (Cause of Death)*, he is comparable with Benetton's in house graphic designer Oliviero Toscani who depicts victims of AIDs, religion and war in his advertising images. Benetton's recent commodification of causes brings to the fore the power imbued within these issues. One of the most controversial of these advertisements was the image Toscani used of David Kirby, an AIDS activist lying on his deathbed surrounded by his family (fig. 3.17). This image is seen by many to have been manipulated by Toscani with the main objective being to sell sweaters. Ben Lifson accuses Serrano of "thinking more about packaging and his own art world image than about his subject" in reference to the *Morgue Series*. Equally negative is Bart de Baere's review of the exhibition "Serrano seemed like he was selling death" (Beare, 1993, p.70). Serrano's tactical use of hyperventing realism evokes parallels with Benetton's advertising strategy; a realism of sensational shock and spectacle.

What pleasure is to be found in looking at a mangled corpse, an experience that evokes revulsion? Yet whenever one is lying people crowd around to be made sad and to turn pale.
(St. Augustine quoted by Arenas, 1995, unp.)

Goer's term of the "pornography of death" explains how death is now considered taboo. As taboo subjects are merely hinted at they retain a certain level of fascination. The scandal of 1994 in the University of Copenhagen emphasises this. The practice of exhibiting corpses to paying members of the public in the university laboratories had begun in 1980 and continued ever since. People would arrive at the laboratories to look at and touch the dead, films and slides were shown. The viewing of the human corpse had become similar to a trip to the cinema, even coffee was served!. A police investigation was convened as the story circulated in the Danish press, which caused considerable embarrassment to the university authorities. This case exemplifies the subliminal quality invested in the corpse; on the one hand it is considered respectful to hide it away from societies view, and yet on the other, there appears to be a morbid fascination with looking at and examining it ¹¹.

What is note-worthy is the mass audiences fascination with the spectacle of shock. As already mentioned death plays a large role in the media of cinema and television. Looking is itself a source of pleasure. Originally in his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exists as drives quite independently of the eroto-genetic zones. Later in *Instincts and there Vicisitudes*, Freud developed his theory of scopophilia attaching it initially to a pre-genital auto-eroticism after which the pleasure of the look is transferred to others by analogy. The pleasure of looking at the other as an erotic object is the scopophilic instinct. This desire to look is an instinctual fascination. However involved in this when looking at images of the dead is the ego-libido. This has developed through narcissism and is an identification forming process. There is a fascination with these images as the viewer associates with them.

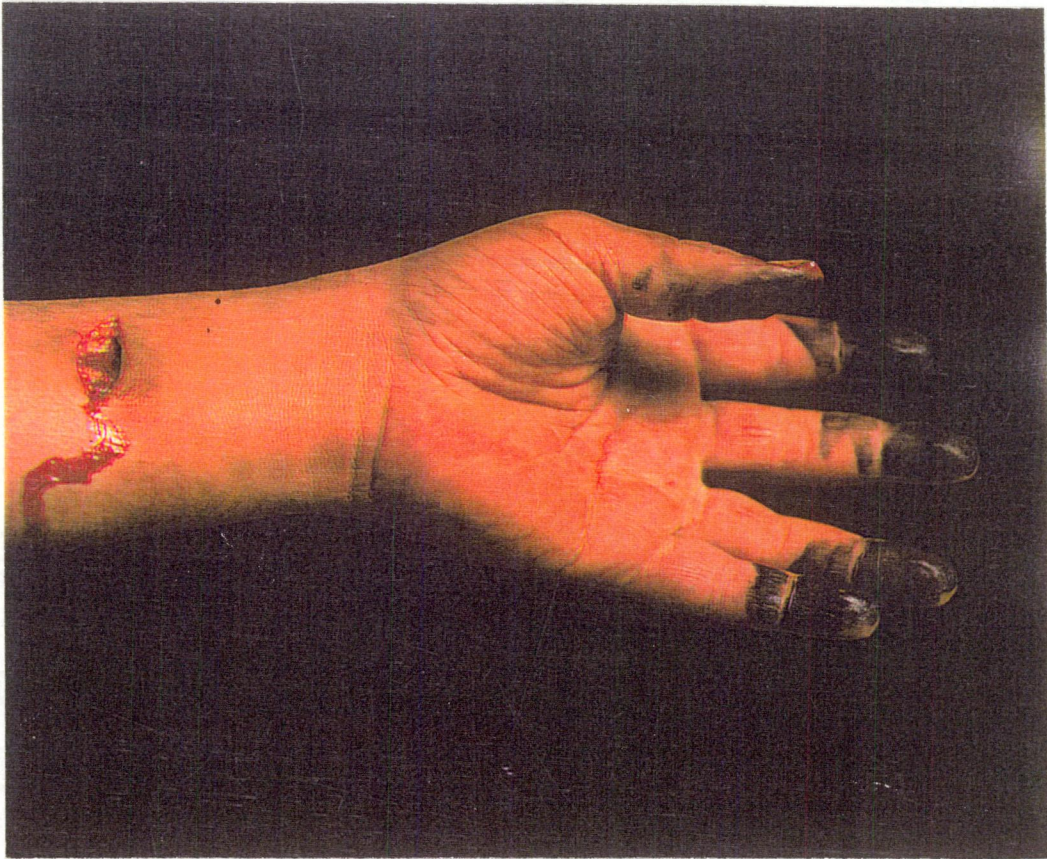


Fig. 3.15 Andres Serrano *Knifed to Death I* 1992

49.5" x 60" cibachrome print



Fig. 3.16 Andres Serrano *Knifed to Death II* 1992 49.5" x 60" cibachrome print





Fig. 3.17 Olivero Toscani *AIDS Pieta* Billboard Poster Design



Fig. 3.18 Andres Serrano *Death by Asphyxiation* 1992 49.5" x 60" cibachrome print



Daniel Arasse's piece in the catalogue for *The Morgue (Curse of death)* exemplifies the dualistic nature of the corpse:

Faced with the photos, the first reaction is one of discomfort, malaise. First we're suspect just looking at all that, and above all with noticing that we're fascinated, we want to get a closer taste, the detail of these pieces of corpses from the photographer are taken in by their strange repulsive beauty (Arasse, 1993, unp.).

Conclusion -

In conclusion it can be seen that Serrano's provocative art causes one to reassess the reasons for and affects of culturally perceived notions of obscenity. In the tradition of photography his work functions simultaneously as a revelation and critique, rendering the hidden and invisible, even when somewhat unpalatable, perceptible. It is for this reason that Serrano's work is deemed obscene.

By voice-vote to an almost empty Senate chamber the Helms Amendment was added to Public Law on July 26 1989. This prohibited the use of N.E.A. funds for "promotion or production of obscene or indecent materials." (Boltan, 1995, p.73). Helms claimed that the work of artists such as Serrano, Mapplethorpe and Wojnarowicz "is clearly designed to poison our culture" (Boltan, 1995, p.7).

Fundamentalists and some critics felt that Serrano's act of placing a crucifix in urine was created purely with the intent to offend. Critic James Cooper called on U.S. artists to consider an 'alternative agenda, whose priority is the restoration of beauty, harmony and order in the arts....conservatives have an opportunity to celebrate the values that have enabled America to prevail.' (Boltan, 1995, p5). However as noted from David Wojnarowicz's extract from the "Witness Against our Vanish" exhibition catalogue (see Chapter Two, p.26) his art speaks of and portrays the ugly, discriminative and intolerant attitude society has toward P.W.A's.

"Artists are society's watchers, critics and champions. They speak the unspeakable, even if it manifests itself in horrifying, untidy or cloteric matters." (Weiss quoted in Boltan, 1995, p.20). The works analysed inspire in viewers an unsettling mixture of empathy and outrage. In *Piss Christ*, a reverential representation of the crucifix suddenly becomes a profane image, on acknowledging that it is immersed in urine - it is thus desecrated. In doing so Serrano challenges the tradition of the Church. He is disgusted with the loss of spirituality as a doctrine of material wealth seems to have become prominent (note Tammy Bakera's P.T.L. Club, Chapter One, p.13). His work exposes how conventional notions of good taste, with which we are raised and educated, is based on an illusion instilled by culture. Serrano's use of urine explores and celebrates the individual's corporeal sacredness which has vanished in our sanitised society.

Julia Kristeva's argue that bodily fluids are deemed abhorant, repulsive, obscene and abject. It is the fear of our corporeality, our vulnerability, our mortality. By juxtaposing urine with the crucifix this contradiction is affirmed. The fact that *Piss Christ* was so shocking and caused historical controversy highlights the fact that Kristeva's theories are accurate, our fluids are considered obscene. The ambiguous nature of Serrano's pieces reiterate the abject. "To be at once attracted and repulsed indicates the presence of the abject, for ambiguity is a state which does not answer to systems or rules." (Kristeva, 1982, p.6)

Serrano explains the motives behind his "shock tactics" is purely to provoke questions from the viewers. "That's what art is all about - to try to tell the truth, to try to portray reality, or shock or move us into thinking about it" (Buchanan J. quoted in Boltan, 1995, p.56). Serrano makes visible, at a cost to the viewer - things that most people prefer not to see or acknowledge. "Serrano's pieces cause discomfort because they indicate the extent to which we're unable to deal with our humanity" (Tucker quoted in Fox, 1989, p.13). This is especially evident in *The Morgue (Cause of Death)*. Serrano by picturing the feared corpse provokes the viewer to confront corporeality and mortality which is ignored and hidden in today's society. Just as his use of bodily fluids can be taken as a metaphor for the human condition, so too are the corpses more than just images. Many of the photographs of cadavers suggest the sacredness and majesty of religious imagery. By doing so Serrano gives our humanity an element of sacredness and transcendence. This is especially evident by his mode of representing the hands of a criminal, (evident from the ink left on the finger tips) which harken to the Creation of Adam. Serrano represents all elements of society, deviants included, with formal elegance and monumentality.

Many critics claimed however that Serrano's act of photographing the dead was not reverential but "seemed like he was selling death" (deBaere, 1993, p70). The fact that the medium Serrano employs for his work is borrowed from the advertising industry would seem to support this. Peter Schjeldahl stated the "radiance" of Serrano's cibachrom's "trivialised death", and that the show "is not about death at all. It is only about art - art with an attitude." (Schjeldahl, 1993 p9). Olivero Toscani's use of taboo issues as a marketing strategy is comparable to Serrano's constant use of these issues - Serrano has stated that he is "drawn to subjects that border on the unacceptable." (Gross, 1993, p15).

Although derided by critics many visitors wrote grateful comments in the guest book of the Paul Cooper Gallery, such as, "Thank you for sharing images that are always taboo." (Hobbs, 1995, p.40). The fact that death is now considered taboo is elaborated by examining Jay Ruby's studies on post mortem photography. These illustrate how death has subsided from being an integral part of life, to remaining hidden away. It is only "fictionalised" death on television which is ironically deemed as acceptable. Serrano's photographs which seem unacceptable and are attacked, retain the principal of provocation which is elementary to his work. Serrano claims to "like to think in terms of raising more questions than answers." (Hobbs, 1995, p20). It's these questions which arise on viewing Serrano's work which are complex and problematic. He has also admitted that his work "engages the viewer in a dialogue which is difficult to escape." (Blume, 1993, p39). The Church's social intolerance, our corporeal existence, our mortality are all issues which we would prefer to ignore.

Serrano's use of bodily fluids and the corpse as a means of picturing the body, and his associations of these with religious imagery, questions the validity of our notion of obscenity. The fact that there is a fascination with the obscene (Mulvey, 1992,p.268) is important (note p.44 relating to the scandal in Copenhagen of the exhibition of corpses). However, Bataille's description of the obscene reiterates why it is hidden from society. It is another name for an uneasiness, it upsets the physical state, it has the power to destabilise the individual and society. The obscene like the abject, deals with our mortality and corporeality which is for some preferably kept unchallenged.

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