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The Problem with Serrano.

By

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CONTENTS

List of plates	page 4
Introduction	page 5
Chapter 1		
Recoding the body	page 9
Chapter 2		
Identity and Identification	page 24
Chapter 3		
Death and the traumatic subject	page 33
Conclusion	page 41
Bibilography	page 43



LIST OF PLATES

Plate 1	<i>Piss Christ</i>	1989
Plate 2	<i>Nomads(Bertha)</i>	1990
Plate 3	<i>Klansman(Great Titan III)</i>	1990
Plate 4	<i>Morgue series(Burnt to Death III)</i>	1992
Plate 5	<i>Morgue series(Death by Fatal Meningitis)</i>	1992
plate 6	<i>Morgue series(Pneumonia Due to Drowning)</i>	1992
Plate 7	<i>Morgue series(Rat Poison Suicide)</i>	1992
Plate 8	<i>Morgue series(Hacked to Death II)</i>	1992
Plate 9	Sue Fox <i>Untitled</i>	1992



INTRODUCTION

In the same instant that a work of art seeks to make a statement, it exposes itself to all the pre-existing statements to which it is related. The intended statement becomes diluted into the very discourse from which it was produced. What has happened to the work of art is that it has entered into the cultural arena, and in doing so has become involved with the problems of the production and circulation of meaning in art.

This assumes that inherent in the makeup of all art is the desire to make a statement. In taking this to be correct it also assumes that its intended statement is subjected to difficulty arising out of its interpretation in society. To whom is the statement directed? Are its motives to be found within art historical discourse, or is this statement intended to enter into culture and be representative of art practice of the day?

Since the mid eighties Andreas Serrano has produced a large body of photography which to varying degrees has tested the boundaries of cultural representation as well as tastes and decency of society. He made his name by way of controversy, photographing religious emblems immersed in bodily fluids. The most famous work being the crucified Christ in a tank of urine *Piss Christ* [plate 1]. The work was deemed to be sacrilegious and not surprisingly caused outrage among conservative politicians in America. Serrano himself considers this and all of his work to come from a purely formalist discourse. For a complete understanding of



Introduction

this work it is important that it is considered in the context of contemporary anxiety with the human body. Towards the late eighties and early nineties he produced four distinct series of work which trade on portraiture: The Nomad series, the Klan series, the Church, and the Morgue series (cause of death).

As these works represent those members on the margins of society their collective meaning can be assumed to be a critique of the dominant cultural representation of the body as historically constructed by the primary spectator. Serrano's project may then be considered as being resistant to those dominant ideologies which inform the individual and collective knowledge in western society. But what impact does this work have outside the art historical contexts in which it was produced?

Contemporary art may have little social power but as Lita Barrie tells us " more than most other social productions, it can expose more intimately the unconscious conflicts which underpin the social psyche " (Barrie, 1990, p23). The everyday spectator experiences difficulty in consuming Serrano's photographs, particularly those of the dead bodies in the morgue series. The work is both intrusive and dangerous, Serrano's subjects are powerless against the intrusion of his camera, they did not grant permission for their photographs to be taken and have no way of assuring their dignity remains intact. The work also intrudes on private fears of death. It is inevitable that the spectator of this work will experience some level of threat to their subjectivity and corporeal existence.

The problems inherent in Serrano's work can be located in three overlapping concerns within contemporary society: the body, self-identity, and death. The nature of the relationships between all three sites will be investigated to explain how the



Introduction

post modern subject's relationship with its body, self identity and death is already a problematic one, and that this relationship is exposed in Serrano's work. Two perspectives will be taken: the social constructionist approach, which has been popularized by the writing of Michel Foucault and a psychoanalytic perspective through the ideas of Jacques Lacan on the condition of the human subject, most explicitly the mirror stage and its role in the formation of the human subject. these approaches may seem to reinforce the traditional mind/body dualisms associated with the human condition, however the importance of each to each other will become apparent throughout this investigation.



Introduction



Plate 1 *piss christ* 1989



**CHAPTER 1:
RECODING THE BODY.**

The body always has been and one suspects always will be a primary subject matter in fine art practice. In high modernity the body has also become one of the most readily available images in the wider social arena (Douglas.1996b.p121). The body has become a highly contested site that is strictly monitored by society. Traditional views of the body as a pre-social, biological entity still remain popular although in recent years social theory has begun to question the validity of such views. Gender inequalities for example, were assumed to occur directly because a woman's body is biologically programmed to be weaker than that of man, as opposed to the idea of it being socially conditioned by society. Recent social theory has broken with these normative assumptions of the body as being purely biological. The idea that the body is subject to sociological invasion has become fashionable. The body has become a social phenomenon that is most likely to be shaped and controlled by society.

The writings of Michel Foucault have been particularly influential in the thought that the ways in which the body is coded, made meaningful, are as a result of social forces rather than biological ones. Foucault's approach to the body involves a building up of knowledge of the body in social situations. He does this by tracing the body's involvement in the development of social institutions. In particular Foucault highlighted how the architecture of modern prisons, the



Chapter 1 Recoding the body

panopticon¹ is responsible for controlling the criminal's behavior. Knowledge of the body is constructed largely through discourse. Knowledge for Foucault is never innocent but always a means for the exertion of power in society.

Discourse is the production of knowledge primarily through the use of language. The body's external experiences become internalised in order to become Knowledgeable. This theory suggests that we do not have any legitimate claims to knowledge as it is external to us, knowledge pre-exists the subject. Constructionist theories like that of Foucault go as far as to suggest that nothing can ever really exist outside of our knowledge of it. Critics of such theories pinpoint this as its downfall as the body must always already be there to be constructed by discourse. Our perception of bodies in the social landscape is easier to see as a social product.

The issue of power is an important consideration here. Foucault insists that the formation of power does not only occur from top to bottom (ruling class to lower class). Power is experienced on an individual basis by individual bodies. We experience power, discourse, and culture first hand through our bodies. The body is at the center of all power considerations.

Representations of the body have been historically structured to be read by the viewer as a linguistic code, a code that supports the prevailing power relationships to the viewer. Whenever a body is photographed the dominant cultural representation of the body is evoked, that of the primary spectator in culture. The primary spectator is responsible for the production of discourse on the body. Serrano's photography of the body is most often outside of the dominant cultural representation. The assumption made here is that it is his deliberate intention that

1. The panopticon is a design in which all the cells in a prison face into a central chamber where the prison guard resides, Foucault argued that this produced the effect in the prisoners that they were being constantly watched and as a result began to monitor their own behaviour.



Chapter1 Recoding the body

the work disrupts or resists the dominant representations. By photographing bodies on the margins of society, homeless people, Klan members and the dead, Serrano presents a threat to the dominant culture. The margins do not represent an acceptable image of society, in that they exist outside of the dominant culture. The fact that society often chooses to neglect those people on its margins is not something it wants to be reminded of as, for example through the work of Serrano. Society is never happy to confront its margins as they are a threat to the dominant order.

In Serrano's Nomad series the representations of homeless men and women have been deliberately made to appear to be outside of the ordinary.[plate 2] By removing these homeless people from the gutter, their cardboard houses and shopping trolleys, Serrano presents them to the viewer outside of the context in which we are used to seeing them. Our knowledge of the homeless is very much dependent on their context. Serrano talks of his interest in making heroes of ordinary people. By doing this what is achieved is a disruption of the dominant cultural representation. Not all of his work is this simple or as effective. Take for example the Klan series[plate 3]. Here Serrano has arguably used one of the most potent signifiers in society. They are strong, highly charged images, but the work fails to say anything new. It simply says look at these members of a hate organization, but not in a new way, in the same way you always have. For Henry Bond this amounts to a total failure of the work. " They fail because they trade not the quality or approach to the subject, but on the mere fact the photograph has been made at all: the problem is that the mythology surrounding 'these evil and sinister men' is reinforced."(Bond.1992.p46). Serrano makes the point that it was a



Chapter1 Recoding the body

dangerous assignment for a Hispanic artist to photograph the Klan. Perhaps he wanted to be considered a brave artist? If this were the case surely the brave thing to do would have been to challenge the Klan's authority instead of confirming it. In any case the situation the artist found himself in will hardly be known to every viewer so it is disqualified from most readings of the work. It is difficult to assess the intention and successfulness of the Klan series.

Taking a different approach to Serrano's body photography, there is little doubt over his ability to produce strong images. In some cases the strength of the image obscures a poor approach taken to the subject. When looking at the actual compositional selections made by Serrano there is a very deliberate aesthetic of fragmentation of the body. The cropped view of the body is hardly unique in contemporary art practice. It has been however identified as a largely twentieth century phenomenon. In *"the body in pieces"*, Linda Nochlin discusses how representations of the human body as fragmented can be seen as a metaphor for modernity, how the modern sense of self was no longer assumed to comply to the Cartesian model of a unified self. Previously the tendency in art was towards a more full-bodied (unified self) consideration of the human form. Arising in modern art practice was the increasing desire to abstract the human form by homing in on details of the body. This also served to remove the controlling elements of the body; to remove the head from the frame is to remove the mind also.

The fragmented body has become common place in contemporary photography. This kind of aesthetic has become naturalised for the viewer. The kind of fragmentation exhibited in Serrano's Morgue series (cause of death) is taken a step further than in most photography. It is a much more violent break up of the



Chapter1 Recoding the body

human form which brings the viewer into close proximity to the body. Intimate areas of flesh reveal themselves in their horror to the viewer's dismay. However to a large extent Serrano's hands were tied because one of the conditions under which he received permission to take photographs of the dead in the morgue was that he could not reveal his subjects' identities, this made full body shots and facial representations out of the question. This necessary fragmentation perhaps prompted the end result of extreme fragmentation. An interesting side effect of taking such close ups of the flesh is that the viewer is brought closer to a confrontation with death.

The close up can also in some cases effectively reduce the over all presence of the body and as a result diminish some of the meaning attached to the body by society. An obvious example of this can be found in *Burnt to Death III* [Plate 4]. The detailed segment of ribcage can hardly be identified as belonging to the body at all. *Burnt to Death III* is reminiscent of some of Serrano's earlier monochrome photographs of bodily fluids. The formalist approach, form over content, made by Serrano in relation to the depiction of body fluids is rare in the medium of photography, which normally seeks to heighten the illusion of space in the picture frame. Formalism as in *Burnt to Death III*, has the effect of flattening the picture plain thereby reducing the significance of any would-be generated meanings

In terms of the effect the fragmented body image has on the viewer, psychoanalysis offers some explanations as to its unsettling nature. In particular the mirror stage as theorised by Jacques Lacan is very useful. The mirror stage is considered to be the moment when the formation of the self begins. The subject catches its reflection in a mirror (or in the look of another). The ego is formed in



Chapter 1 Recoding the body

relation to the imaginary unity witnessed in the reflection. The subject begins to identify with itself as a complete, unified form. Previous to the mirror stage, in the auto-erotic stage the subject had a narcissistic relationship with its fragmented body image.

The fragmented body image is thereby a reminder of the pre-mirror stage condition of the subject. A certain amount of hostility is felt towards the fragmented image as it initiates aggression between the imaginary unified self and the memory of the fragmented self, which is in fact remembered as real unity with the mother. Identification with the fragmented self poses a serious threat to subjectivity. The desire to return to real unity with the mother undermines the illusion of unity constructed by the subject in relation to its unified reflection. The mirror stage supposes a necessary identification with the self as other and indeed is dependent on the presence of another other in whose presence the recognition of the self is made. In future relationships with images the presence of a fragmented other will be a reminder of the stage prior to the imaginary construction of a unified self. A certain amount of aggression is deployed against the fragmented body image as it threatens the imaginary unity of the subject.

" These are images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body. One only has to listen to children aged between two and five playing to know that the pulling off of the head and ripping open of the belly occur spontaneously to their imagination, and that this is corroborated by the experience of the doll torn to pieces." (Lacan 1977p12)



Chapter1 Recoding the body

Lacan points to the natural identification of young children with these kinds of images. For an adult to partake in any form of identification with such imagery would be considered to be extremely regressive. A psychoanalytic reading therefore suggests that an adult should feel a certain amount of discomfort when viewing the Morgue series, although young children maybe in turn be attracted to the images of fragmented death. It might also be suggested that the artist himself was drawn to make such images as a symptom of regressivity.

While the social constructionist views of the body are that it is shaped, regulated, even invented by society, psychoanalysis places an emphasis on the importance of the body image in the formation of the self. If the unified image of the body is reassuring to the subject its insides are far from friendly. Julia Kristeva argues that subjectivity is definitively tied to the body's form and its limits. Kristeva sees the abject as a necessary component in the make up of the subject. While the abject is necessary to the subject it is also dangerous and must be kept subverted by the subject. "If I acknowledge it, it annihilates me." (Kristeva.1982.p2). The subject must expel the abject to the boundaries of the self, where it will then remain as a constant threat to the subject.

There are three primary categories of abjection in Kristeva's theory: food, corporeal waste and sexual difference. Corporeal waste, bodily fluids and waste products have been used in Serrano's works more for aesthetic purposes but they still contain elements of horror for the viewer. Bodily fluids and waste products provoke horror and disgust because they represent the body's limits; the body's mortality. The bodily fluids are an important marker of the distinction between the



Chapter1 Recoding the body

interior and exterior of the body. On the inside these fluids are essential to sustain life, on the outside however they suggest death and decay.

" The corpse seen without god and outside of science, is the utmost in abjection."(Kristeva.1982.p4). Kristeva states that in the presence of culturally signified death the subject is not threatened, confrontation with death is avoided. However, " in the true theatre, without make-up or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I must permanently cast aside in order to live."(Kristeva.1982.p3)

Subjectivity for Kristeva is achieved through structures very similar to those of language. Binary oppositions position the subject within the space of its body. Oppositions between inside and outside, subject and object, self and others all contribute to a stabilised subjectivity. The body is structured and can be made meaningful by the subject's placement in the symbolic order. On occasions when the distinctions between the subject's binary oppositions become blurred, subjectivity is threatened. The abject plays the role of the enemy forces waiting a moment when the boundaries of the subject have been breached. When the subject's boundaries are transgressed by the abject there is an unavoidable confrontation with subjectivity.

In perhaps the most literal way possible Serrano has selected imagery in his work which threatens the boundaries of his spectators. Having already achieved notoriety with his bodily fluid works he turned then to what is considered the ultimate in abject the corpse. The corpse is the ultimate threat to the symbolic order and as such is the ultimate threat to social order.

" In that compelling, raw insolent thing in the morgue's full Sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore No longer signifies anything." (Kristeva.1982.p4)



Chapter1 Recoding the body

Hal Foster describes this lack of signifier as the principle attraction of abject art in the contemporary art world." Abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, 'where meaning collapses'."(Foster.1996.p153). The discourse on the body in society is unsettled by the abject. The abject is disruptive of the dominant system of representation and as the subject is informed by this dominant system it follows that the abject disrupts the subject also.

"Abjection is the body's acknowledgment that the boundaries and limits imposed on it are really social projections - effects of desire, not nature."(Gross.1990.p90) The subject's entry into the symbolic language begins with the social influence on the body. Concepts of a clean and proper body inform the subject's personal space. The symbolic overpowers the abject and assumes the dominant position. Proper social subjectivity can only be achieved with the exclusion of all that is improper, the unclean. What prevails is the clean and proper body. Crucially in Kristeva's writing is the belief that the abject can never be fully defeated by the symbolic. Kristeva argues that the abject remains on the boundaries of the subject, a constant reminder of the insecurity of the subject's stability.

Abject art transgresses the boundaries as well as the tastes of social order. As an element in the formation of the subject its danger is often unexpected." The abject defines a pre-oedipal space and self - conception; it is the space between subject and object, both repulsive and attractive." (Gross.1990.p94) One of the most troubling aspects in Serrano's work is the inherent beauty of his photographs. The viewer is seduced by the warmth and intimacy of the appearance only to later realize the full horror of the subject matter. There is little doubt that ' *Piss Christ* ' would not have caused such a ruckus if it were not for its title. Likewise the images



Chapter1 Recoding the body

of the recently deceased babies in '*Death by Fatal Meningitis*' and '*Pneumonia Due to Drowning III*'[plates 5&6] would hardly prompt sadness if it were not for the title confirming the children to be dead. The viewer is perhaps more disturbed at the willingness to become this work's voyeur than the fact that the work was produced in the first instance.



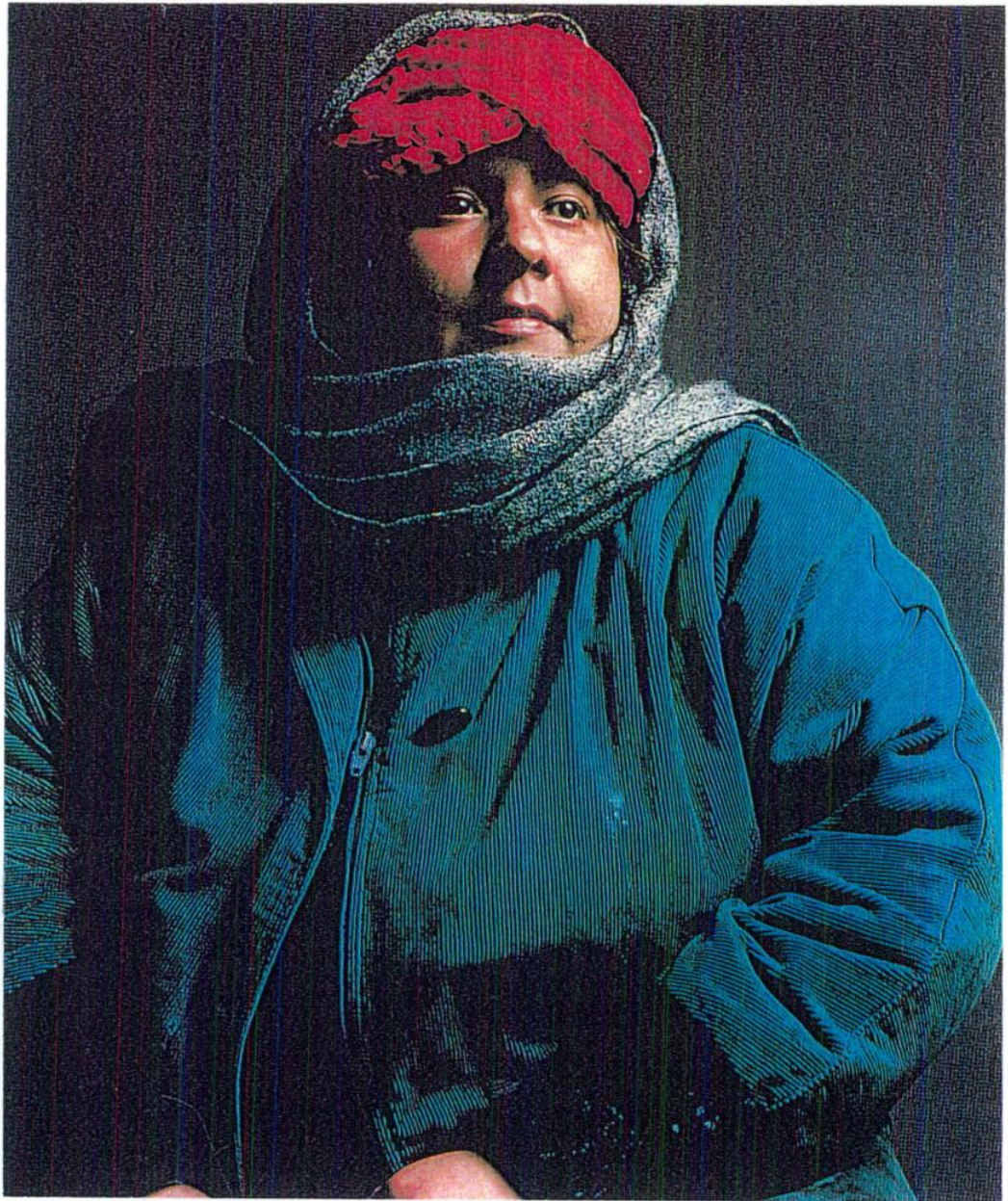


Plate 2 *Nomads (Beartha)* 1990





Plate 3 *Klansman (Great Titan III)* 1990





Plate 4 *Morgue series (Burnt to Death)* 1992



Chapter 1 Recoding the body



Plate5 Morgue series (Death by Fatal Meningitis) 1992



Chapter 1 Recoding the body

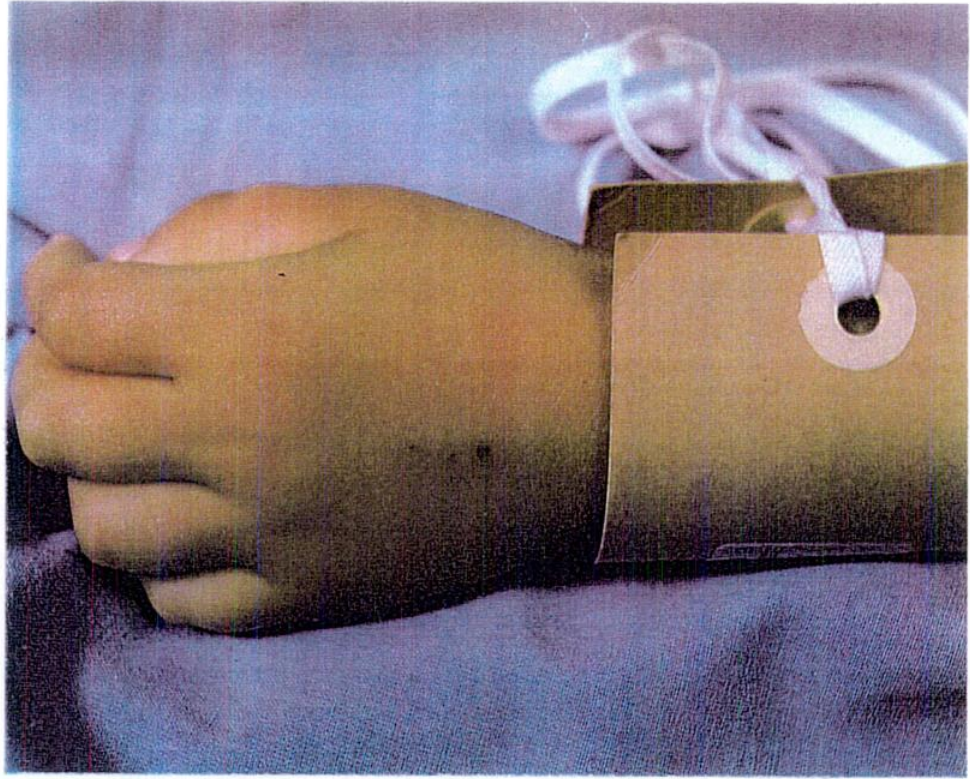
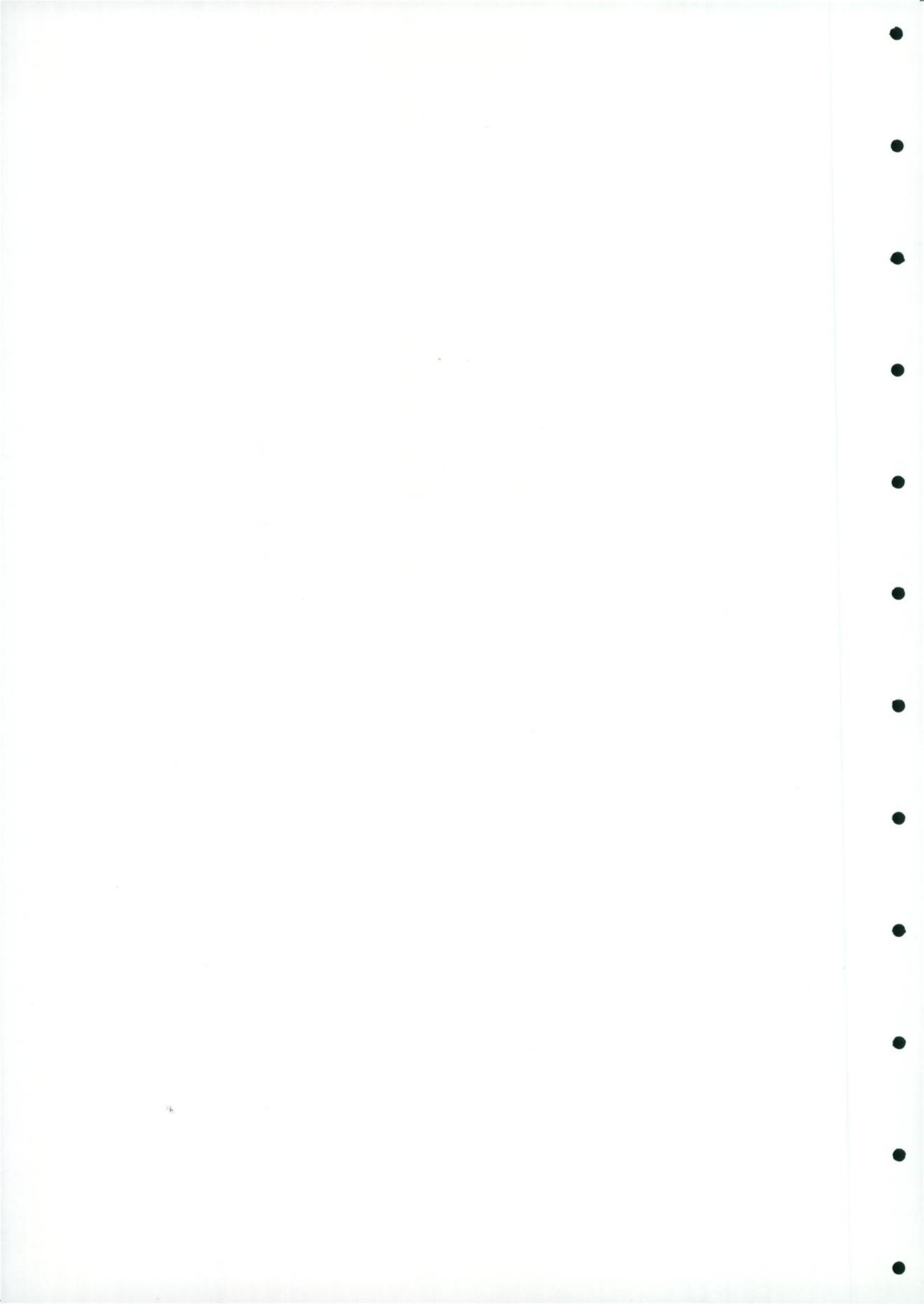


Plate 6 Morgue series (Pneumonia Due to Drowning) 1992



**CHAPTER 2:
IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION.**

The increased interest in the body as subject is not merely focused on the body image, but on the usefulness of the body in bridging the gap between the individual and society. The body has become, as Terry Eagleton tells us, one of the most recurrent preoccupations in post-modern thought. (1996.p69). The body is the most important site in marking identity. Identity is chiefly constructed by difference. Serrano's portraits of those people from selected groups within society could be very easily assumed to be a comment on the importance of lifestyles in the construction of identity. Lifestyles are a particular way of investing in already constructed safe identities. What is perhaps more interesting however is the threat to identity that could be seen to occur in the Morgue series.' Who we are? ' has a great deal to do with how we interpret meanings." Identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to representation,"(Hall, 1992,p292). Identity and identification are important in understanding the post-modern subject's relationships to their bodies as well as their interpretation skills.

As post modern subjects we are currently experiencing what theorists have labelled a ' crisis of identity '(Woodward, 1997, p15). We can, as a direct result of post-modern thought, no longer lay claims to a continuous, fixed identity. Modern identities have been fragmented and dislocated by modern knowledge. As subjects in post-modern society we have been de-centered. Advances in social theory and the



chapter 2 Identity and Identification

human sciences have reinforced the insecure nature of the body. The foundations upon which we base our sense of identity, our sense of self, have been destabilised. Our experiences, in direct opposition to those of the all knowing Cartesian subject are not our own. That is to say that we partake in formations of knowledge that are external, pre-existing us. The tendency is to think of us as the possessors of knowledge. There is a desire on our behalf to construct a stable identity to compensate for our unstable self. More and more the body has become the greatest location for the marking of difference and the construction of identity." The post-modern subject unlike its Cartesian ancestor is one whose body is integral to its identity". (Eagleton, 1996,p69) It is not just through our experience of our own personal bodies but also in our engagement with other bodies that our identity is reinforced. The representation of the body produces signifiers against which identities are confounded. Representation as a cultural phenomenon, signifying practice and symbolic systems can have a direct influence on identity.

As was already stated identities are not things we are born with but things we are constantly seeking to define. Although it is known that we develop dynamic ever-changing identities throughout our lives the general feeling we get is that we have one continuous identity from birth to death. As our identities are constantly evolving so too are the positions from which we interpret meaning changing. Representation, which governs the mechanics of how we produce meaning, is as Stuart Hall put it, responsible for the formation and transformation of our identities. Language then becomes integral to the formation of identity and as language is external to us identities are subject to outside interference. What a



chapter 2 Identity and Identification

particular identity means is not fixed by us, similarly what we 'mean' cannot be fixed by us either.

The two principal systems of representation both come from the socially constructed perspective. Saussure first theorised how language and other symbolic systems worked by the development of the semiotic approach. While Saussure was interested in the actual mechanics of language Foucault argued that it was through the use of language that knowledge was gained. Foucault placed the emphasis on discourse as opposed to signification. Discursive analysis is only ever possible through the act of using language; a discourse around an object is formed when statements concerning the object are united to other statements on the object to provide an overall knowledge of the object. For example, when looking at any of the homeless in Serrano's Nomad series it is not just through this singular representation that knowledge of what a homeless person 'means' is derived. It is important to apply all other related knowledge to the consideration of the photographs. What is also an important consideration is the position from which the knowledge was gained in the first place. A former or current homeless person will obviously have much greater experience of life on the streets.

The Morgue series (cause of death) presents unique problems particularly for the use of discursive analysis. In order to use a discourse successfully we must in effect experience the discourse. " We must locate ourselves in the position from which the discourse makes most sense, and thus become its subject, by subjecting ourselves to its meanings, power and regulations."(Hall, 1997, p56). The role of the subject in the image is to invite us to experience their experience (subject ourselves). With the earlier example of the homeless discourse



chapter 2 Identity and Identification

in the Nomad series it was a relatively easy task to adopt their experiences and relate them to our own. When we come face to face with a corpse as we do in the morgue series, problems arise. We need to attempt to experience what it is these corpses are experiencing which of course is not possible. These bodies are outside the symbolic and as far as we are concerned can no longer have any real symbolic experiences.

In order to assume a position from which these images can make any sense to us we need to temporarily resurrect the corpse; we need to play god. Reinvesting Serrano's subjects with life is made easier because of his approach to the work. It is possible through the framing and beauty of these images to bring them back to life. This may seem somewhat impossible. However the contrast of aesthetic in the Morgue series to other pathology photography is staggering, compare the work of Sue Fox for example. [plate 6] In Sue fox's photography there is no question of denying death, the post post-mortem corpses have literally been excavated of all traces of life. Chest cavities either lay hollow or are stuffed with shredded paper. The Morgue series allows for the presence of life in the corpse, at least this is something that the artist himself admits to doing." I never saw the bodies as corpses, I called them my models, my subjects. I was interested in the way they still had human presence, that something of their soul was still intact." (Heartly, 1997, p81). In bringing these bodies 'back to life' in order to identify with them we impose a new identity on them too. In order for us to situate ourselves within them they must have an identity.

The cause of death assumes an important position in the construction of a new identity in the corpses. A fantasy identity, constructed entirely by the



chapter 2 Identity and Identification

viewer is formed in relation to the cause of death. What the cause of death does is it provides a context through which it is possible to identify with these bodies. A narrative is provided by the viewer of the events leading to the demise of these bodies. Narratives are frequently used in everyday life to add a sense of continuity to our fragmented identities. They work by connecting key moments throughout our lives. These key moments are connected to create an illusion of continuity, of a lifestory, which gives us a stable identity. The only key moments which we are privileged to know in the Morgue series are the causes of death. This being the case the cause of death becomes the definitive moment in the lives of the corpses and as such is the moment around which we construct the fantasy identity. The only possible exception to this is in the aids related illness photo in which case the contraction of the H.I.V. Virus is the privileged signifier.

The cause of death allows us access to each victim in the very instant of death, bordering between life and death. In most cases the cause of death is only an indication to physical end of life. However it can also in some cases, suggest the emotional condition of the victim. In *Rat Poison Suicide* [plate 7] for example, the fantasy identity we may have constructed owes as much to the knowledge that this woman took her own life. In addition the method by which she chose to die; suicide by rat poisoning, suggests a woman intent on really punishing herself. Whereas most of the other victims in the Morgue series have a calm quality about them, the woman in *Rat Poison Suicide* remains animated after death. Her arms are held rigidly in front of her, the hairs standing on end and Goosebumps clearly visible. The use of a narrative presupposes a narrator as well as a narrate². In the morgue series the viewer must inhabit both positions. The different positions experienced by

2. Madan Sarup (1996) uses 'narrate' in the context of the audience to whom a narrative is directed by a narrator, it is in this context that I have used narrate here.



chapter 2 Identity and Identification

the viewer in discursive analysis allow for the strengthening of the viewer's own identity, which is constructed through difference.

Saussure's explanations as to the nature of language form the basis for semiotic analysis. This model of language was also influential in Lacan's thinking. The process of language is largely an unconscious one. Language is a signifying process, which can be reduced to a series of signs; each sign is an element in a much bigger code. Understanding or being able to use a code is crucial to taking part in culture. A sign according to Saussure can be broken down into two parts; a signifier and its signified. The relationships between a signifier and its signified is never a fixed one, it is always arbitrary. The mental concepts or signified are not merely floating about in our heads but are arranged into deliberate patterns. We arrange concepts not only in relation to other concepts to which they are similar but also in relation to concepts to which they are opposite. This binary opposition is relevant to the manner in which we construct our own identities, as we relate to people through similarities and differences to ourselves.

Lacan's psychoanalytic theory places an emphasis on language as a system within the symbolic order that is instrumental in the formation of identity. Returning to Lacan's mirror stage, it is the point when the subject first encounters the self and begins the process of identity formation. The process described in the mirror stage is not a once off occurrence around the age of six months. The identification that occurs in the mirror stage, the formation of the self in the look of an other is an ongoing process. Therefore every time we encounter our reflection in a mirror or in the look of an other it has implications for our identity. These could serve to reinforce our identity or alternatively pose a threat to our identity. The



chapter 2 Identity and Identification

mirror stage represents the first encounter with subjectivity, but this subjectivity remains problematic as it is dependant on a sense of self which is located outside of the self; the self reflected in the other. This also leads to a part of the self being permanently located in the other. The problem with this is when the other is threatened so too is the subject.

In the Morgue series identity and subjectivity are challenged by the break down of the other. A powerful reference to this danger is recognisable in the photograph *Hacked to Death II* [plate8] . In this image Serrano has cropped the view of the victim to just include an intimate section of the face. In the midst of the blood encrusted surface we find a solitary eye staring back at us. The eye has remained undamaged, apparently unaffected by the carnage that has invaded the rest of its body. A closer inspection reveals a light reflecting in the eye. This eye is still capable of reflection. Just as we did in Lacan's initial mirror stage we expect to be confronted with our self once again, and somewhere in the glossy surface of this photograph this is indeed possible. We locate the subject, its identity and ourselves in the look of a defeated other; this photograph must then possess an obvious danger to subjectivity.



Chapter 2 Identity and Identification

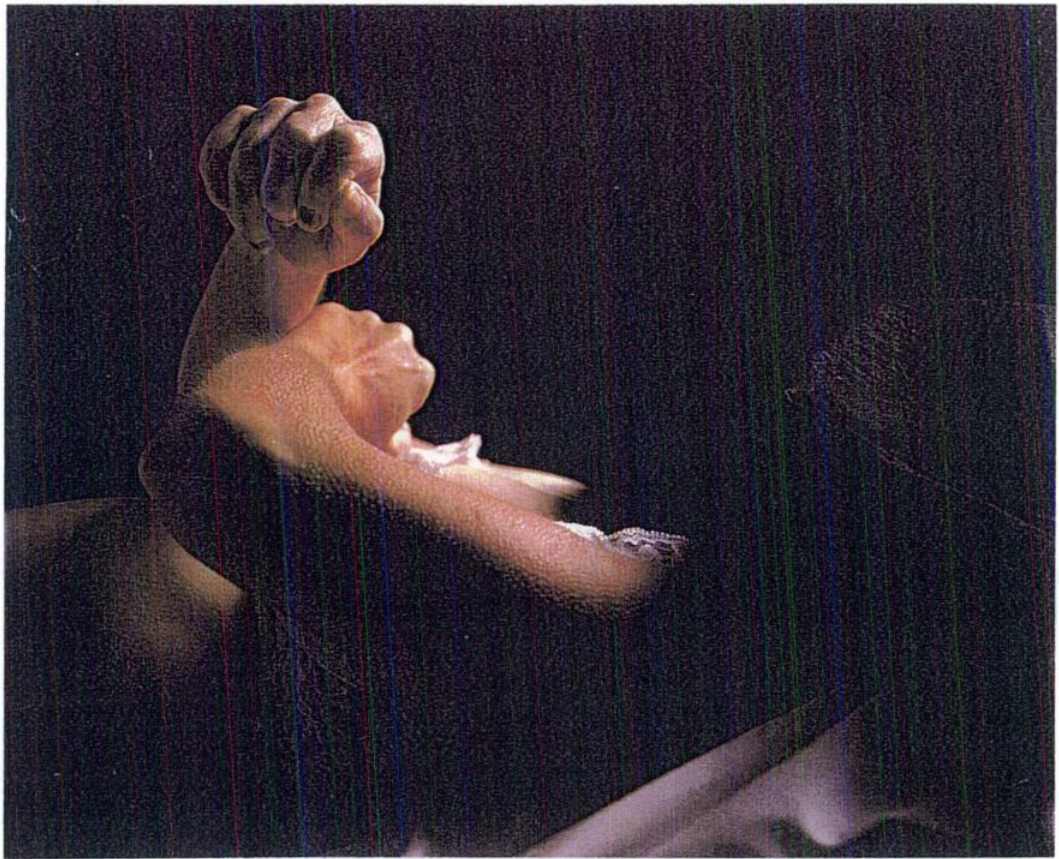


Plate 7 *Morgue series (Rat Poison Suicide)* 1992



Chapter 2 Identity and Identification

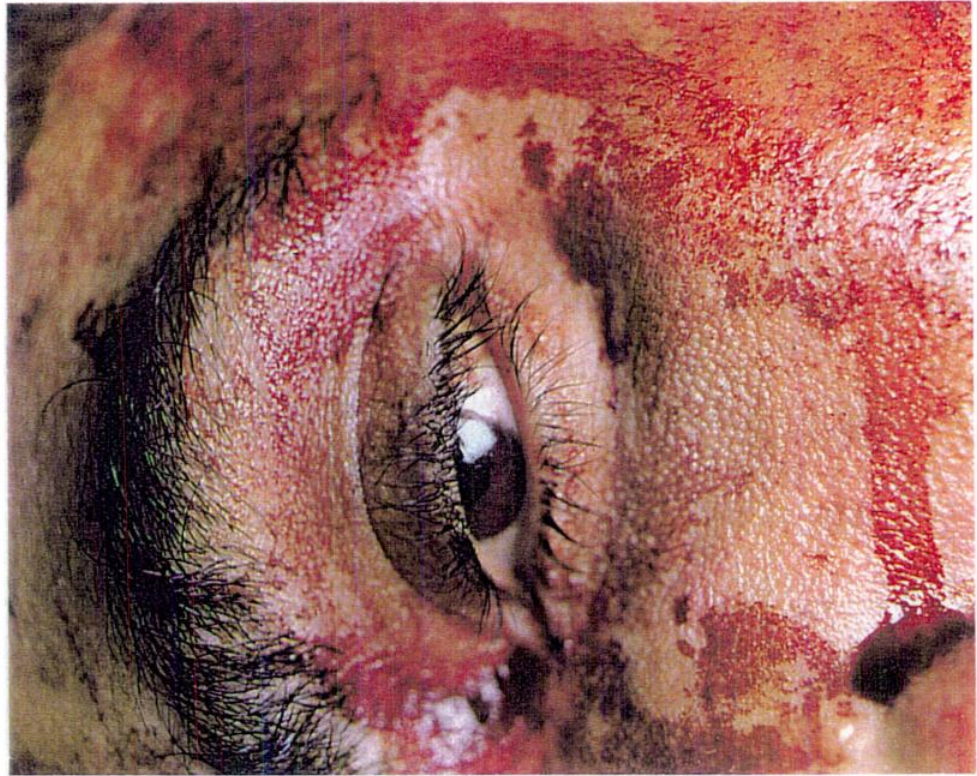


Plate 8 *Morgue series (Hacked to Death II)* 1992

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**CHAPTER 3:
DEATH AND THE TRAUMATIC SUBJECT**

Already some of the problems of representation have been addressed in relation to the body and self-identity. What will be suggested here is that the codes of knowledge have been manipulated to an extent where it is no longer possible to represent death. Psychoanalysis offers various explanations as to the subject's difficulty in identifying with and thereby experiencing death. The subject becomes disturbed to a point that any confrontation with death is experienced as an extreme threat to subjectivity.

Within sociological perspectives death is an equally difficult subject. Death is an inevitable feature of the human condition and as such requires people to develop a means for coping with it. There is a notable tendency in modern cultures to avoid death at all costs. To ignore death is hardly a satisfactory position as it is ignoring one of the few universal 'truths' of the body.

But, the representation of death and its experience has been modified to the extent that it is possible to call into question the possibility of death being represented at all." A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay does not signify death, in the presence of signified death I would understand, react, or accept."(Kristeva, 1980, p3) The actual fact of death has been removed from contemporary forms of representation. That is to say that Society has replaced death with new 'safer' codes and signifiers, which do not pose a threat to

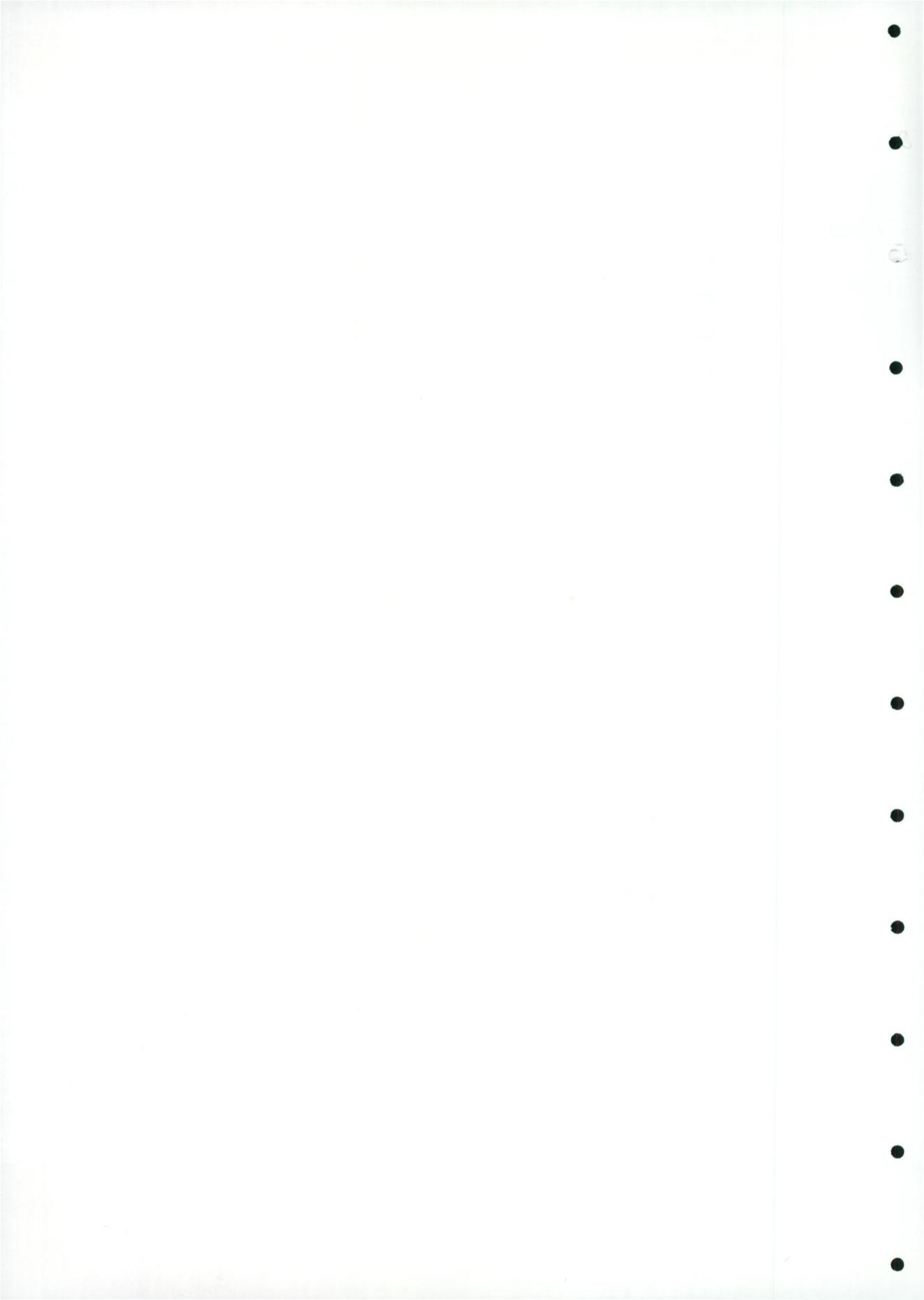


Chapter 3 Death and the Traumatic subject

social order. These new codes do not represent death, but represent a socially acceptable form of death. In western societies there is little or no contact with the corpse, it could be argued that a funeral wreath or a black tie is a more relevant signifier of death than the corpse in contemporary society. These new signifiers for death allow us to 'understand, react, accept' death without it calling into question our deep-rooted fears of death.

The implications this has for Serrano's Morgue series are difficult to assess. The corpse amounts to a stale signifier, which has failed to comply with a signified in the current symbolic system. The spectator has no bearings on which to construct a meaning for the corpse. The Morgue series borders on being meaningless art. Many of the recent social theories on the human condition are based on the premise that the human experience craves meaning. Life and its processes are made meaningful in order to add stability to the otherwise unstable, meaningless subject. In *"The sacred canopy"*, Peter Berger suggests that if the human condition requires all subjects to construct their worlds, those constructions must also be heavily invested with meaning. Socially constructed meanings offer to the subject an appearance of reality and authenticity. This reality however is not actually real but an ideal which has been constructed through the symbolic order.

Shared meaning systems, knowledge that is constructed by society are also points where the individual can experience stability. The role played within a particular society has the effect of ordering the individual's experiences to the extent that the individual need only invest in a lifestyle and then give over control to that particular lifestyle. Even so-called alternative lifestyles are themselves highly constructed. The main problem with shared meaning systems is that they have been



Chapter 3 Death and the Traumatic subject

constructed from the primary spectator's perspective. Marginal situations within society pose a threat to the dominant social order by calling its experience into doubt. The major marginal situation is that of the individual confrontation with death. Death undermines the normal processes of every day life. Apart from challenging the dominant codes of knowledge in society, death also threatens the individual with the "dread of personal meaninglessness" (Shilling, 1980, p179) Death is most dangerous to the individual who craves meaning.

Death is a challenge to the organising principles of society. Religion has traditionally made death a safe prospect for the individual by calling into question the finality of death. Religion preaches about the possibility of a renewed life after death, not just an after life but an existence that is even more meaningful than ours here on Earth. This is, of course, provided you are resurrected in God's afterlife. The possibility of an even more meaningful existence proved very tempting indeed. With religion on the decline in modern societies new strategies have had to be thought of to alleviate the insecurity generated by the anticipation of death.

So the decline of religious beliefs has forced the individual to find new ways of coping with death. In one sense this has manifested itself in the denial of death. As an act of further defiance of death the contemporary subject not only refuses to accept the mortality of the body, the body becomes an integral part of their identity. It is in this context that death must have the most dangerous impact, for even if the after life is a possibility the resurrection of the physical body certainly is not. Death spells out the end of the body and therefore also the individual whose identity is bound up with their body.



Chapter 3 Death and the Traumatic subject

Once again if we return to the mirror stage in psychoanalysis, there is an explanation for the difficulty of coping with death and also the difficulty with the representation of death if we recollect that the formation of the self is reliant on the look of the other. The representation of the dead other we have seen is a problem for the subject. The dead other presents the subject with an insurmountable void. The Morgue series does little to attempt to fill this void, the dead other is pictured alone, without another member of the symbolic order present to mediate the void for the viewer.

This difficulty can be explained in psychoanalysis by the location of the corpse in the real order. Lacan's subject negotiates its experience through its involvement within three orders, the imaginary, the symbolic and the real orders. The imaginary order evolves out of the mirror stage and is responsible for the subject's fantasy unity. The imaginary order is important to any future relationships the subject may have with the other.

The symbolic order is assumed to be dominant throughout the life of the subject. The subject is born into the symbolic orderings of society - the family being the first. The subject will only become a full member of the symbolic by the acquisition of language. It is only through language that the subject can make sense of itself and its experiences. The third order is the real. The real is by far the most elusive order as it is situated outside of the symbolic order. As it is outside the symbolic order the real cannot be represented or expressed by the subject. Being outside the symbolic and the imaginary the real must also be assumed to be outside the subject. The subject can only experience the real outside of the symbolic, either pre-mirror or after death. The real therefore precedes and succeeds the subject. This



Chapter 3 Death and the Traumatic subject

is crucial to the subject's difficulty with death. As Lacan has located death to be in the real, outside the symbolic its representation is impossible.

For Lacan the subject negotiates all of its experiences within the symbolic and the imaginary. The real is subverted by these orders similar to the way in which the symbolic subverts the abject. Here there is the suggestion of a common bond between the real and the abject. The abject may be used as a tool to confront the real, thereby overthrowing the symbolic." When there is a gap in the symbolic order and the place of the other is deleted or seriously disordered, a gap opens up in the imaginary order, leading to various imaginary distortions, and new phenomena in the real order"(Benvenuto1986, p146)

Hal Foster noted that in contemporary art practice "there is a tendency to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma." (Foster, 1996, p168) This tendency to represent the subject as a subject of trauma is evident in the rise of abject art. As the subject cannot experience the real order there is no system to compensate for coming into contact with the real. When the subject does come into contact with the real it experiences trauma. The subject experiences the real 'in terms of trauma' (Foster, 1996,p132) This all comes down to a lack of knowledge or meaning in the real. This lack is experienced in similar ways to the lack of phallus (fear of castration) and the lack of the mother (fear of separation) in psychoanalytic theory.

Lacan defines trauma as a missed experience with the real, and as missed the real cannot be represented. Death is the ultimate in terms of the missed experience as not only is death beyond the symbolic, it holds no possibility for an eventual return to the symbolic order. The overlap of Kristeva's theories to those of



Chapter 3 Death and the Traumatic subject

Lacan is obvious in terms of the effect of contact with the real. Kristeva suggests that we experience the real as melancholia (Lacan's trauma) Melancholia is an unavoidable condition in the human subject. Excessive melancholia is brought about as a result of insecurity in subjectivity. The subject's imaginary unity belies the fact of a lack of real unity - that with the mother. The subject desires a return to its original state of unity with the mother, although realises this will never be possible. The desire is repressed and experienced as melancholia.

In order to return to the real order the subject must first overcome the symbolic and imaginary orders. Kristeva speaks of the real as an escape from the insecurity felt in the other orders. To desire a return to the real order, the subject must have an unconscious 'death drive'(Freudian theory) this death drive is brought about as a failure to construct a stable identity in the symbolic. Any denial of the symbolic is also a denial of representation, hence the failure to communicate. " I was speechless " (Steiner, 1994,p11) Wendy Steiner suggested as much in her reaction to the Morgue series. Serrano's subjects have already transcended the symbolic and as such belong in the real order. This breakdown in representation occurs because society has removed the confrontation with death from every day life. These corpses do not represent death but evoke the sadness of separation. The corpse allows the subject to relive the pain of separation in signs.

An assessment of abject art in psychoanalysis would perhaps conclude that the objective of abject art is to evoke the real. By evoking the real subjectivity is called into question and the result is the traumatised/melancholic subject. Abject art teases out this discomforting of the subject by representing the body as violated. The distinctions between inside and outside are blurred. The



Chapter 3 Death and the Traumatic subject

disrupted body is a reminder of death. The corpse is the ultimate abject. " The corpse is intolerable; it exists at the very borders of life, it shifts the border into the heart of life itself. It poses a danger to the ego in so far as it questions its stability and its tangible grasp on and control over itself " (Gross, 1992, p92)



Chapter 3 Death and the Traumatic subject

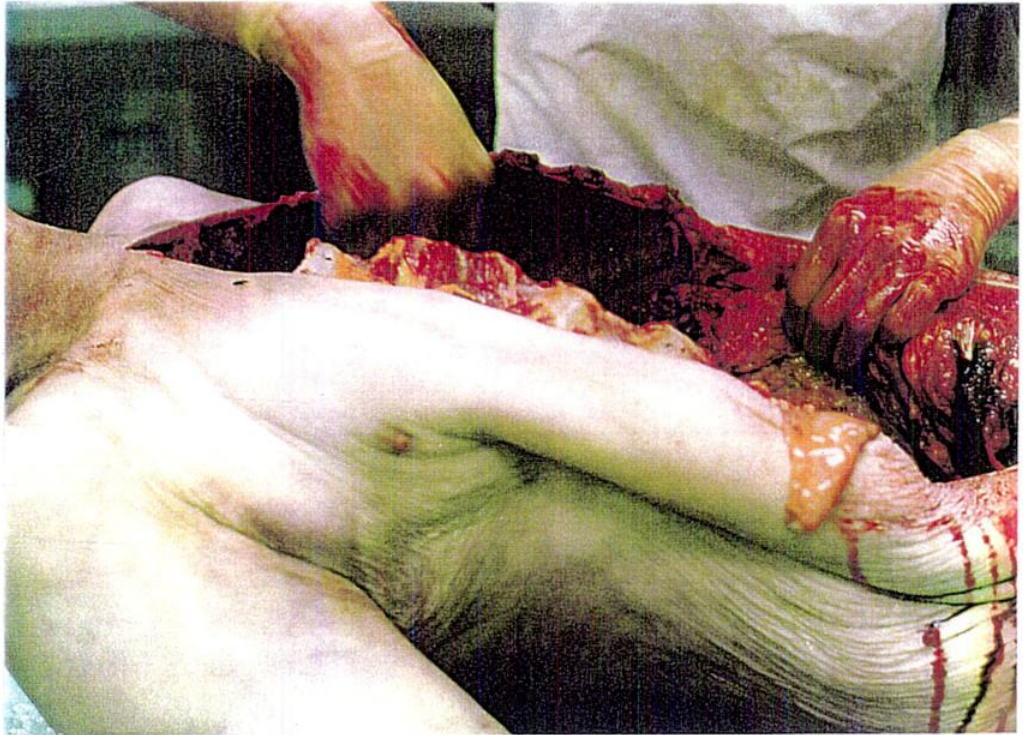


Plate 9 Sue Fox *untitled* 1992



Conclusion

CONCLUSION.

If we are to believe that inherent in the make-up of all art is the desire to make a statement, we must also accept that At any one time the intended statement is subjected to difficulty arising out of it's interpretation in society. The work of Andreas Serrano is no exception to this rule. His photographs of the body, especially those of the recently deceased in the Morgue series are particularly difficult to interpret in western society.

In his essay "*On Violence in Art*" Harold Rosenberg makes the point that if art does not engage itself in the struggles of the time it runs the risk of becoming insignificant. By addressing social problems, particularly in relation to contemporary anxiety over the body Serrano has thus far managed to produce work that remains significant. From the sociological perspective Serrano's work rarely fails to provoke controversy. Society has a difficult enough time dealing with problems without being reminded of them in its Galleries, places of supposed sanctuary.

The images produced by Serrano in the Nomad series as well as the Klan series present images which society does not want to see. Often what is most disturbing in Serrano's work is his seeming ability to make the most horrifying subject matter so seductive. In the Morgue series we are reminded of the inevitable fate that awaits us all -*Memento Mori*, remember that you must die. Death is a particularly difficult subject and one which is relatively excluded from



Conclusion

contemporary forms of representation. What the Morgue series does achieve is to highlight this difficulty. The ideal nature of representation is exposed by the corpse which emerges as a statement of 'truth'. Death is an undeniable feature in our existence and the corpse is testament to this fact.

The psychoanalytic version of events does nothing to alleviate the dangers in Serrano's work. The subject whose identity is bound up in their relationship to the body image will always encounter difficulty in these images. As a way of connecting the two approaches taken here Hal Foster(1996 p166) suggests that for many in contemporary culture, truth lies in the traumatic subject, such as the corpse. The corpse then occupies a double position, it reminds us of our own immanent death while setting us up in opposition to its condition - it reminds us that we are still alive." In this psychological register the subject, however disturbed, rushes back as witness, testifier, survivor."(Foster,1996,p168). The traumatic subject thus becomes the truthful subject (in opposition to the dominant representation) which in turn suggests that the traumatic subject is the 'real' subject. And so we arrive at an endless cycle of trauma brought about by the confrontation with the real order. In Serrano's case the real is held in the presence of the real subject.



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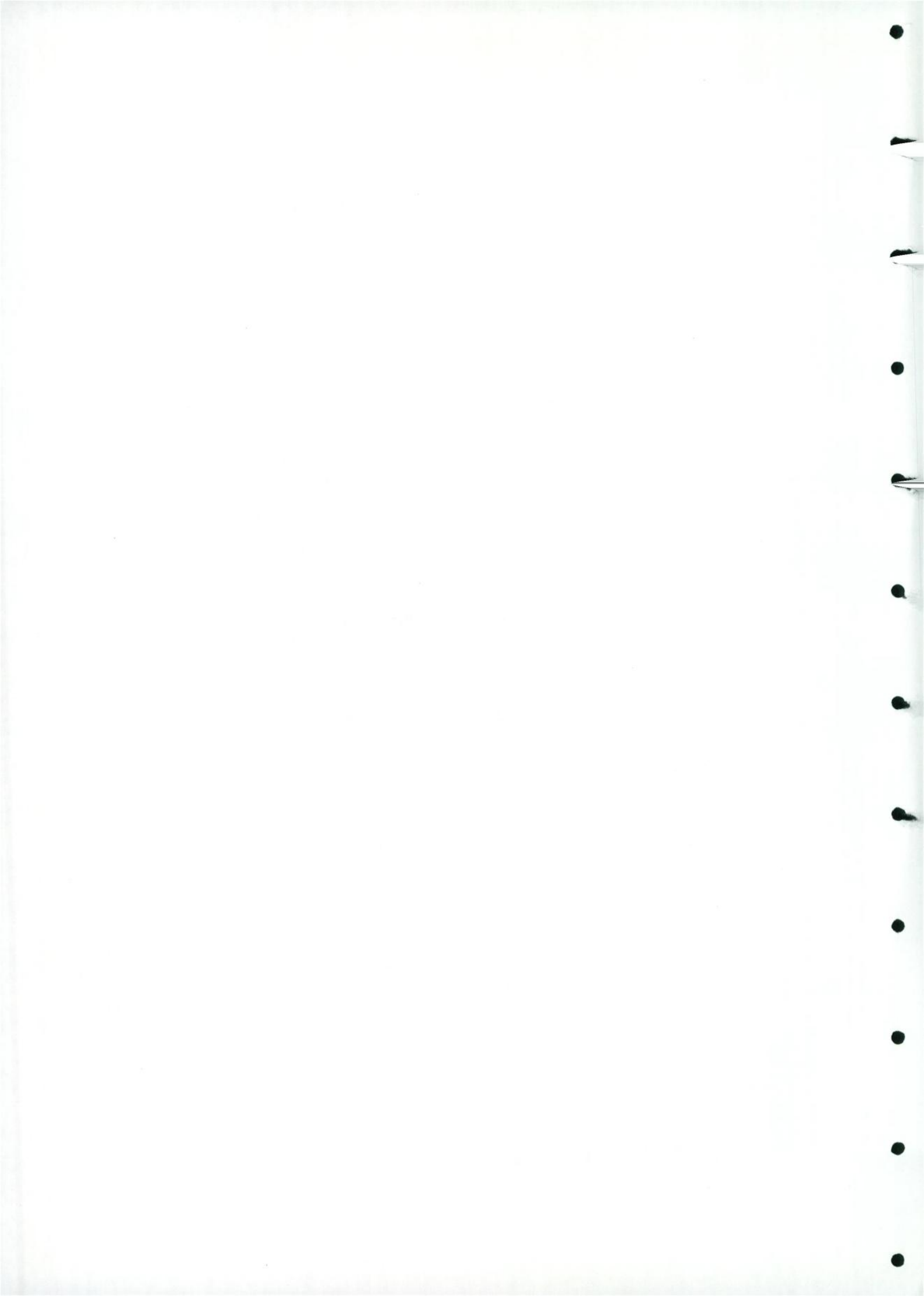
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