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## Taboo Icons

### The Bodily Photography of Andres Serrano

Tyler Shine

#### Abstract

Andres Serrano's photography is often dismissed as being shocking for the sake of being shocking. His infamous photograph *Piss Christ* (1987) is the oft-cited example at the center of the National Endowment for the Arts controversies during the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s. I return to *Piss Christ* as a way to expand the interpretative scope of Serrano's early photographs, which I call "taboo icons" because of their ambiguity and ability to crisscross symbolic boundaries in the unstable space between sacred and profane, thus making his images both powerful and potentially dangerous. Building upon previous scholarship that draws connections between modern and early modern aesthetic practices, I look to the material practices of Christianity in medieval Europe characterized by a sophisticated visual culture that mixed both the physical and the spiritual. The intensifying rejection and reverence of matter resulted in divergent responses, yet the contradictory nature of matter remained central to the ideological beliefs of Christianity where the doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection are at its core. Serrano's visceral photographs are emphatically material and can productively be read vis-à-vis medieval visual culture. In doing so, this reading changes the narrow perception of Serrano's early photographs and provides an alternative understanding of his artistic project that reinserts religion into contemporary American art discourse.

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## The Bodily Photography of Andres Serrano

### Taboo Icons

Tyler Shine

"To me they're icons...I've never felt that I destroy icons, I just feel as if I'm developing new ones."

Andres Serrano<sup>1</sup>

Two decades ago a photograph of a small wooden and plastic crucifix immersed in a Plexiglas tank of urine prompted a maelstrom of responses ranging from fascination to disgust. Suspended in an ethereal mist of red and orange hues and surrounded by constellations of tiny bubbles, this tiny crucifix appears to emit a mesmerizing and

radiant yellow light that sutures the viewer's gaze to the image (Fig. 1). Andres Serrano's infamous 1987 photograph, *Piss Christ*, in addition to his early photographs depicting bodily fluids, are often framed solely within the context of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) controversies during the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s. I return to *Piss Christ* as a way into a discussion that expands the interpretative scope of Serrano's early photographs, which I would like to call "taboo icons" because of their ambiguity and ability to crisscross symbolic boundaries. Taboo icons are in a dialectical relationship in which two seemingly antithetical elements are entangled in the unstable spaces of the sacred and profane, creating images that are simultaneously traditional, polarizing, and can be perceived as dangerous.

Numerous studies have examined the relationships between "modern" and "early modern" artistic practices, which suggest an ongoing fascination with temporalities and the social biography of objects moving across time in a variety of ways.<sup>2</sup> However, Serrano is usually mentioned briefly or not at all in these studies. For example, in *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time*, Alexander Nagel imaginatively discusses the ways in which modern and contemporary artists have deliberately and, at other times, unintentionally "put pre-Enlightenment modalities back into operation."<sup>3</sup> Nagel wants to "steer clear of loudly iconographic medievalism" and instead focuses on what he identifies as the "deeper structural analogies" shared between medieval and modern art, such as "questions regarding the generation and dissemination of images; site-specificity and mobility; fetishism and iconoclasm; memory and anachronism; and authorship and authority."<sup>4</sup> Serrano would probably be excluded from this conversation for the "loud iconographic medievalism" of his early photographs, yet this is a missed opportunity to examine Serrano's abstract bodily fluids photographs outside of the NEA controversies.

Mieke Bal, Eleanor Heartney and Alexander Nagel's works are instructive examples offering possible strategies to liberate Serrano's photographs from the straightjacket of the culture wars. In *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Bal proposes a way of dealing with "the past today" in what she terms "preposterous history," which "puts

<sup>1</sup> Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society, 1970s-1990s* (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, Inc., 1996), 162.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Amy Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2012); Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Nagel, *Medieval Modern*, 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

what came chronological first ('pre-') as an aftereffect behind ('post-') its later recycling."<sup>5</sup> The recycling of ideas is helpful in avoiding linear accounts of art which presuppose that tradition is unified and stable. In her discussion of Serrano, Bal briefly touches upon *Piss Christ* and focuses predominately on *The Morgue (Cause of the Death)* series. However, the other abstract bodily fluid photographs are consistently overlooked by commentators. Building on these scholars' writings, I take Serrano's early bodily photographs as the center of my study. I will contextualize *Piss Christ* within Serrano's other bodily photographs from his early tableau images to photographs of the artist's own ejaculation and finally his series of cadavers in *The Morgue (Cause of the Death)*.



**Figure 1**

Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987. Cibachrome print, 45 1/4 x 32 3/4 in. (114.9 x 83.2 cm.) Courtesy of Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art, New York City.

<sup>5</sup> Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 7.

Although several commentators have made reference to the Baroque elements in Serrano's photography,<sup>6</sup> I consider his images in relation to Christian ideas about the body and its traces in medieval Europe. The visceral and seductive qualities of Serrano's practice positions his photographs in dialogue with a longer and polemical tradition regarding experiencing Christianity through the body. Scholar of medieval culture Caroline Walker Bynum writes that it was the *materiality* of religious experiences that was significant to faith during the Middle Ages. A sophisticated visual culture characterized the religious and daily life practices of medieval Christians that mixed both the physical and the spiritual.<sup>7</sup> This intensifying rejection and reverence of matter resulted in divergent responses to the body, yet the contradictory nature of matter remained central to the ideological beliefs of Christianity, where the doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection are at its core.<sup>8</sup> I emphasize the physicality of Serrano's photographs because it is their polarized reception that illustrates the passionate and bodily experiences viewers have with his works, which I believe find a counterpoint in medieval visual culture with its stress on the comingling and separation of the material and immaterial in the individualized spiritual experience. Although Serrano does not make explicit reference to medieval Christian visual culture, I will argue that the mediation of images through bodily experiences unite Serrano's photography with medieval images, thus blurring the periodizing distinctions between "modern" and "medieval" understandings of the material and intangible. In order to understand in a fuller sense what work Serrano's photographs can do aesthetically and conceptually it is necessary to reconsider *Piss Christ* in relation to his wide ranging interests in Christian imagery and photographic representation.

### The Power of Offensive Images

It is perhaps incidental that the initial reception of *Piss Christ* was actually favorable. However, I briefly return to this moment because it is illustrative of how *Piss Christ* largely appeared in the public imagination which prompted much of the critical literature on Serrano's photography. During this period an increased anxiety surrounded the body and the dissemination of its internal fluids, transforming the body into a politically charged site. Deeply imbedded in these anxieties were the fears of transgressing established social and moral boundaries that were central to efforts to define and maintain an "appropriate" American culture.<sup>9</sup>

First exhibited at the Stux Gallery in New York City, *Piss Christ* was then selected for inclusion in the 1989 group exhibition *Awards in the Visual Arts 7* organized by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The juried exhibition was partially funded by the NEA with a committee consisting of Tom Sokolowski, Ned Rifkin, Howardena Pindell, Donald Kuspit, Howard Fox, and Marcia Tucker. The committee selected ten artists, including Serrano, from a pool of five hundred ninety-nine applicants and each artist received a monetary fellowship and would participate in the

<sup>6</sup> Mieke Bal connects Serrano's dramatic use of light to Baroque aesthetics in *Quoting Caravaggio*, while Amelia Arenas describes Serrano's photographs as conjuring up a Baroque theatricality for aesthetic overload in her essay "The Revelations of Andres Serrano," in *Andres Serrano: Body and Soul*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: Takarajima Books, 1995), 114-119.

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 285.

<sup>9</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 39.

group exhibition. The exhibition traveled to ten cities from Los Angeles to Pittsburgh without scandal and it was not until the exhibition reached the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) that Serrano's photograph was perceived as problematic.

The first public critique of *Piss Christ*, which would be replicated for the next few decades, appeared about two months after the closing of the *Awards in the Visual Arts 7* exhibition on January 29, 1989 when the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* printed Phillip L. Smith's letter to the editor. Smith wrote:

The Virginia Museum should not be in the business of promoting and subsidizing hatred and intolerance. Would they pay the KKK to do a work defaming blacks? Would they display a Jewish symbol under urine? Has Christianity become fair game in our society for any kind of blasphemy and slander?<sup>10</sup>

VMFA director Paul N. Perrot replied with a statement in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* responding to Mr. Smith's letter where he claimed that Serrano's intentions were "to use natural fluids as being part of the essence of life and to either exploit their coloristic beauty or use their luminous effects."<sup>11</sup> It is probable that the controversy surrounding *Piss Christ* would have ended with this simple exchange if Methodist minister Reverend David E. Wildmon had not introduced Serrano's photograph as a blasphemous gesture into the national spotlight. Reverend Wildmon – founder of the National Federation for Decency in 1977, later renamed in 1987 the American Family Association (AFA) – sent one million letters of protest along with Serrano's photograph to members of Congress and within a few months, the *Piss Christ* controversy was born.<sup>12</sup>

This series of events is interesting because it raises a set of questions not only about what is defined as being *offensive* or *indecent* and who gets to make these judgments, but also largely ignores the fact that the various artists, like Serrano, who came under attack during the Culture Wars were in fact Catholic.<sup>13</sup> Serrano was raised Roman Catholic in the predominately Italian section of Williamsburg, Brooklyn and although he is no longer a practicing Catholic he is not opposed to being identified as Christian.<sup>14</sup> In *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, Eleanor Heartney attempts to answer how we might account for this paradox by thinking of the diverse practices of these "blasphemous" artists as working through an "Incarnational consciousness" that repudiates the commonplace assumption that art and religion are necessarily mutually exclusive categories.<sup>15</sup> However, not all of the critics of the culture wars were Catholic. As sociologist James Davison Hunter has shown in his study on the period, the unlikely alliance of Christian fundamentalists, Orthodox Jews, and conservative Catholics against their liberal counterparts to influence the direction of mainstream American culture troubles our understanding of the nature of cultural conflict. Hunter argues that the many instances of cultural tension did not

<sup>10</sup> Robert Hobbs, "Andres Serrano: The Body Politic," in Robert Hobbs, Wendy Steiner, and Marcia Tucker, *Andres Serrano: Works 1983-1993*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Hobbs, "The Body Politic," 32.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Meyer, "The Jesse Helms Theory of Art," *October* 104 (Spring, 2003): 135.

<sup>13</sup> Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: MidMarch Arts Press, 2004), 5. Heartney discusses Serrano along with other artists who identify at varying degrees with their Catholic heritages such as Renée Cox, Chris Ofili, Kiki Smith, Karen Finley, Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarowicz among others.

<sup>14</sup> Karen Lipson, "The Now-Notorious Andres Serrano," *New York Newsday*, May 21, 1990, 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 23.

arise “simply from academic disagreement over the proper form of ecclesiastical structures or a theoretical argument over doctrinal truths. Rather, America’s uneasy pluralism implied a confrontation of a deeper nature—a competition to define social reality.”<sup>16</sup>

W. J. T. Mitchell proposes that there are two beliefs at play when people are offended by images which are helpful when thinking about the controversies that often accompany Serrano’s photographs.<sup>17</sup> First, there is the notion that the image is somehow transparently and immediately connected to what it represents and second, it is believed that the image possess some kind of vitality. The latter view is a “magical” and “superstitious” attitude towards images and Mitchell argues that modern viewers are not exempted from this way of thinking. He aptly writes, “Far from being defanged in the modern era, images are one of the last bastions of magical thinking and therefore one of the most difficult things to regulate with laws and rationally constructed policies.”<sup>18</sup> Serrano’s ambiguous pictures complicate the relationship between signifier and signified, highlighting the promiscuous nature of meanings that are too mobile to be confined to an inflexible system or contained by an artist’s intentions.<sup>19</sup>

### Negotiating Medievalisms

One of the difficulties of understanding cultural conflicts in the United States is, as Hunter explains, that “the predominant images of contemporary cultural conflict focus on religious and cultural hostilities played out in other parts of the world.”<sup>20</sup> The suppression of the Kurds in Iraq, Sikh nationalists struggling to establish a homeland in Northwest India, or the Hindu Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, are religious and cultural conflicts positioned by US media, popular culture, and film as conflicts not only geographically distant from the US but also temporally separated from its culture. The evocation of the “medieval” becomes a categorizing device that is utilized for a variety of ends to describe these events and places. Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul suggest in the introduction to their edited volume, *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World*, that the narrative of medievalism has supported the “national, racial, and religious identities within Europe” and the contrast between the past and forms of progress.<sup>21</sup> As the various scholars ask in the volume, “what happens to the idea of the medieval when considered from perspectives outside Europe?”<sup>22</sup> The functions of medievalism are not only relevant to the narratives of nationalism, but are intimately connected to the project of colonialism. Like the writers in *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World*, Serrano’s photographs blur the distinctions between the medieval/modern binary. Serrano combines the supposedly “irrational” beliefs of religion with the presumed objective

<sup>16</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 127.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 128. See also Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Amy Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 15. Amelia Arenas, “The Revelations of Andres Serrano,” 119.

<sup>20</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul, *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

veracity of the photograph. This confusion between language, representation, and the material in Serrano's photographs demonstrate the elusive power images hold over viewers. The fragility of the medieval-modern binary, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words, "invite[s] us to ponder the nature of historical time and what may be at stake in such criticism of periodization in the age...of 'globalization.'"<sup>23</sup>

### **The Fragile Limits between the Sacred and Profane**

Art paradoxically occupies a virtual space that is neither identical to reality nor fully removed from it, Wendy Steiner aptly writes, but connected to the world through "acts of interpretation."<sup>24</sup> Meanings are negotiated through a process of interpretation, and the assumption of what art is, its value, and its purpose are inextricably bound up in a particular symbolic system. Art objects that challenge, or more precisely, those objects that are perceived to challenge established assumptions can be ignored, distorted, or condemned, thus evacuating the challenging object from the system. On the other hand the challenging object can be controlled or modified in order to be assimilated into a pre-existing pattern that does not disturb the system.<sup>25</sup> Located within a symbolic system, taboos are established to manage bodily relationships between substances and actions. Numerous scholars in a variety of disciplines have written about the ways in which taboos have functioned in Western culture. For example, sociologist Steven Dubin thinks of taboos as means to regulate encounters between the sacred and profane.<sup>26</sup> Post-structuralist philosopher Julia Kristeva sees abjection as forms of exclusions or taboos in monotheistic religions that then are applied to secondary forms like the transgression of the law.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, anthropologist Mary Douglas argues in her study of pollution and its connection to danger that wherever social or cultural lines are precarious, pollution ideas are not far behind.<sup>28</sup> The "physical crossing of the social barrier is treated as a dangerous pollution...The polluter becomes a doubly wicked object of reprobation, first because he [or she] crossed the line and second because he [or she] endangered others."<sup>29</sup> With this in mind I think of "taboo icons" as provocations to the structural logic behind a symbolic system. The power of taboo icons comes from the way they can shift meanings of specific iconography. Serrano's photographs are taboo icons because they present a tension between literalism and symbolism. The pairing of language and image produces the polarizing responses associated with Serrano's photographs and it is this ability to make "traditional symbols run amok" that subverts the desire to control meanings.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Response: Historicism and its Supplements: A Note on a Predicament Shared by Medieval and Postcolonial Studies," in *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of "the Middle Ages" Outside Europe*, ed. Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 109.

<sup>24</sup> Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1978), 38.

<sup>26</sup> Steven Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 22.

<sup>27</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 17.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 139.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>30</sup> Arenas, "The Revelations of Andres Serrano," 116

In their ambiguity, taboo icons are deviant and, as Dubin explains, deviance has a dual character: it can signal something gone awry in a system and also enables that system to become more flexible.<sup>31</sup> It is possible then that there is a redemptive quality in transgression. Douglas echoes this sentiment when she states that disorder is “unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite...it is destructive to existing patterns...It symbolizes both danger and power.”<sup>32</sup> Serrano has suggested the infinite potentiality of his photographs and has said in the past, “I like to think in terms of raising more questions than answers,”<sup>33</sup> and one “can be subversive just by asking too many questions.”<sup>34</sup> These questions concern the extent of our knowledge of the material and metaphysical dimensions of our existence in the world. One of the elements of Christian medieval devotion and theology was an understanding of the behavior of matter in ordinary and miraculous states when in contact with, as Bynum describes, the “infinitely powerful and ultimately unknowable God.”<sup>35</sup> Serrano is concerned with the relationship between what is visible and therefore known and that which is unknowable. His photographs reveal in their seductive surfaces and contents the illusory connection to reality.

### **A Shocking and Uncomfortable Friction between Language and Image**

The friction between the language used in the title *Piss Christ* and what is represented in the photograph contribute to the unsettling quality of the image. It has been suggested that if Serrano titled *Piss Christ* something more innocuous there would not have been any controversy.<sup>36</sup> Further, materials such as ginger ale, honey, or tinted resin, amongst others could have produced the same ethereal effect as urine without inciting scandal. But Serrano made the conscious decision to announce in the title his use of the body fluid and used the charged slang word “piss” instead of the clinical “urine.” The juxtaposition of the two words “Piss” and “Christ” are equivocal depending on whether “Piss” is used such as a noun, adjective, interjection, or verb. For instance, to be “pissed” or to be “pissed upon” are vernacular phrases linked to anger and insult.<sup>37</sup> In conversation with Steven Dubin, Serrano explained that, “as a photographer it’s just important to me to be *descriptive* or *literal*...I could just use piss for the beautiful light that it gives me and not let people know what they’re looking at. But I do like for people to know what they’re looking at because *the work is intended to operate on more than one level*.”<sup>38</sup> The element of shock is important to *Piss Christ*’s power, but unlike what some commentators would have one believe, the work is not *solely* about shocking people. There is almost a pleasure in the revelatory moment of discovering what the luminous material is. This uncertainty and moment of discovery reoccurs with the other bodily fluids and morgue photographs. Without reading the title of

<sup>31</sup> Dubin, *Arresting Images*, 80.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 94.

<sup>33</sup> Hobbs, “The Body Politic,” 20.

<sup>34</sup> Anna Blume, “Andres Serrano,” 40.

<sup>35</sup> Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 17.

<sup>36</sup>For example, Bruce Ferguson, “Andres Serrano: Invisible Power,” in *Andres Serrano: Body and Soul*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: Takarajima Books, 1995), 7-11; Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over*, 161.

<sup>37</sup> Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over*, 161. Jorge Garcia and Ilan Stavans, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Latino Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 51-52.

<sup>38</sup>Dubin, *Arresting Images*, 83. Emphasis added.

*Piss Christ* it is impossible to identify that urine is the material being used to create the luminous effect that is so reminiscent of other sacred images. The precarious nature of language, with its alternative meanings depending on comprehension and context paired with instability of the photographic image that can shift between signifier and signified, sustains an ambiguous and uncomfortable friction.

### ***Piss Christ* as Linchpin**

*Piss Christ* connects two different parts of Serrano's practice together into a single image: the tableau images using specific religious iconography and the abstract images of bodily fluids.<sup>39</sup> Beginning in 1983, Serrano's earlier tableau photographs focused primarily on religious imagery depicting individuals dressed in costumes and posed in his studio with meats and fish. The later bodily fluid photographs were the result of studio experiments on how to use photography to mimic abstract painting. While the presentation of reality in painting is mediated by the artist, the same was not true for photography, because it is the camera and not the photographer that is believed to guarantee an objective vision of truth. By mimicking painting Serrano subverts photography's axiomatic claim to record reality objectively. Serrano believed these abstract works were "still tableau, but the distinction between the prop and the background has been eliminated many times."<sup>40</sup> This dissolution of perceptual space is seen in *Milk, Blood* (1987) (Fig. 2), the first photograph where Serrano relied solely on bodily fluids to create the image.<sup>41</sup> Two tanks containing milk and blood were butted together so all that remained visible was the line separating the two tanks. Serrano then lit the Plexiglas tanks from the sides and photographed the ensemble from above. The solid planes of color in this photographic diptych are a red herring that denies what we believe to be reproduced – milk and blood. Perception is neither a passive activity nor merely remembering past impressions, but requires the active participation of the viewer.

Our impressions, Mary Douglas argues, "are schematically determined from the start. As perceivers we select from all the stimuli falling on our senses only those which interest us, and our interests are governed by a pattern-making tendency...."<sup>42</sup> Serrano's photographs disrupt our tendency to make patterns, disavowing the viewer from attempts to construct a stable world where objects are recognizable. When viewing *Milk, Blood* in a New York gallery Steven Dubin described his own visceral response in the following way:

As the grandson of a kosher butcher, my immediate reaction was 'You don't do this; you don't mix milk and meat. It just isn't done!' Once again this reaction startled me, for although I do not observe kosher laws, this image struck me as a violation of a very basic sort. Categories which I long ago rejected intellectually, I suddenly desired to uphold emotionally; they seemed natural and inviolable. But not only had they been juxtaposed, they seemed to bleed into one another down the middle of the photo. Unthinkable, and yet here was the record of this transgression.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality*, 171.

<sup>40</sup> Hobbs, "The Body Politic," 25.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 36.

<sup>43</sup> Dubin, *Arresting Images*, 5. Emphasis added.



**Figure 2**

Andres Serrano, *Milk, Blood*, 1987. Cibachrome print, 40 x 60in. (101.6 x 152.4 cm.) Courtesy of Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art, New York City.

Dubin's comment here is illuminating because it speaks to a central issue regarding cultural conflicts. As defined by James Davison Hunter, a cultural conflict is a "political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding."<sup>44</sup> Moral principles are often incorrigible and provide communities a source of identity and purpose which is why much of the rhetoric and political actions stemming from these moral stances are so passionate. These stances operate in a system of ultimate moral authority that "determine[s] whether something is good or bad, right, or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable."<sup>45</sup> Even for Dubin, who acknowledges that he does not observe kosher laws, he had a strong visceral and emotional reaction with the photograph which seemed to be a basic violation of a belief he no longer practiced.

To emphasize the *material* qualities of the bodily fluids, Serrano made three monochrome photographs devoted to each liquid: the first was *Blood*, the second *Milk*, and finally *Piss*. In each image, Serrano photographed a single bodily fluid in its own individual tank, dramatically lit, highlighting the luxurious and saturated flat planes of red, white, and yellow. Serrano felt that this was a decisive step stating, "Photography is normally concerned

<sup>44</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

with spatial relationships, with perspective, with subjects, with backgrounds, foregrounds."<sup>46</sup> Serrano places the mundane bodily fluids of blood, milk, and urine into his photographs connecting abstract representation to the concreteness of the material world.<sup>47</sup> Serrano says he "always [had] seen the bodily fluids as basically a very human component of life" and that he did not associate particular fluids with a moral judgment, but rather "used them much like an artist using paint."<sup>48</sup> However, Serrano was aware that his use of bodily fluids would "have more far-reaching implications than if it was just paint" yet he was comfortable "with the fact that it's loaded imagery."<sup>49</sup> For Serrano, urine is "as human as you can get, it's a necessary bodily function."<sup>50</sup> His later "immersion" series serve as a literal and metaphoric reminder of the centrality of the Incarnation to Christianity's focus on the body and blood of Christ.

### Materiality and Bodily Aesthetics

The body's place in Christianity stems from the doctrine of Incarnation officially established in 325 A.D. at the Council of Nicaea.<sup>51,52</sup> The doctrine of Incarnation answered theologians' struggles of how to explain the ontological status of Christ by declaring that he was both fully man and fully divine. The perfect and sinless body of Christ is perpetually absent, but is reasserted and made legible through the architecture of the church and the objects such as altarpieces and tabernacles placed within its architectural settings. The micro-architectures of tabernacles reinforce the notion of the Virgin Mary as a container that housed Christ. The interplay between the exterior and interior of containers or bodies is paralleled in Serrano's "immersion series" where he took small, cheap, mass-produced figurines and literally placed these figures inside tanks filled with various liquids. *The Shrine of the Virgin* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art also illustrates this idea of a container within a container (Fig. 3). This devotional work – a combination of statuette, altarpiece, and shrine – is a sculptural representation that makes manifest the miracle of the Incarnation. When closed this little statue shows an enthroned Virgin nursing the Christ Child and when opened shows a representation of the Holy Trinity. William D. Wixom writes that "The intimacy between this *Schreinmadonna* and the individual praying before it was intended to elicit an *emotional* and *empathetic response* and the possibility of personal salvation."<sup>53</sup> Thus, the sculpture through its material form and images acted as a visual aid for spirituality and the contemplation of God.

<sup>46</sup> Andres Serrano, Personal Interview, March 14, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Steiner, *Scandal of Pleasure*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality*, 173-174.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-174.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>51</sup> It is necessary to acknowledge that meanings for the female and male body in Christianity both in medieval Europe and the United States at the end of twentieth century have different implications. I do not have the adequate space to rehearse the vast literature on the topic, but I attempt to briefly address the issue of gender in the lines that follow. It is my hope that this is generative for future gendered readings of Serrano's photographs.

<sup>52</sup> Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 9.

<sup>53</sup> William D. Wixom, "Medieval Sculpture at the Metropolitan, 800 to 1400," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 62 (2005): 46.



**Figure 3**

*Shrine of the Virgin*, Germany, Rhine Valley, c. 1300. Oak, linen covering, paint, gilding, gesso. Open: 14 1/2 x 13 5/8 in. (36.8 x 34.6 cm), Closed: 14 1/2 x 5 in. (36.8 x 12.7 cm.) Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

The simultaneous humanity and divinity of Christ was expressed in the metabolizing metaphor of the Eucharist and this analogy of worshippers consuming Christ was not just rhetorical, but taken literally. It was not just belief that the bread of the Eucharist on the altar became the body of Christ at the moment of consecration; there are accounts of people experiencing miracles in which the bread turned into bloody flesh on the paten or even inside the recipient's mouth. In this way, the reception of the Eucharist becomes a kind of symbolic cannibalism.<sup>54</sup> Bynum writes that "women regularly speak of tasting God, of kissing him deeply, of *going into* his heart or entrails, of being covered by his blood."<sup>55</sup> The physicality and rawness of these sensorial descriptions blur the lines between spiritual, psychological, and sexual states and experiences paralleling Serrano's immersion photographs.

The belief in the Incarnation is mirrored in medieval scientific ideas which tended to associate flesh with women. However, Bynum cautions against a reading that simply connects the body with woman; instead she suggests that the tendency to associate woman with the physicality of body in fact gave women a privileged position. According to medieval scientists and theologians, who held the Aristotelian theory of conception, it was the mother who provided the matter of the fetus and the father who provided the fetus its form, life, or spirit in his seed. Conversely, the second-century Greek physician and philosopher Galen suggested that two seeds, one from the father and one from the mother, were necessary. In Galen's theory both the mother and father are connected to matter, but "the mother is the oven or vessel in which the fetus cooks, and her body feeds the growing child, providing its stuff as it matures."<sup>56</sup> Bynum writes, "all medieval biologists thought the mother's blood fed

<sup>54</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 185.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>56</sup> Galen quoted in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 214.

the child in the womb and then, transmuted into breast milk, fed the baby outside the womb."<sup>57</sup> The feminine biological characteristics of bleeding and feeding were attributed to the body of Christ and equated his side wound to a vaginal-like opening. Christ's ultimate sacrifice in the Passion is seen as analogous to the blood that women shed when giving birth. "Not only was Christ enfleshed with flesh from a woman," Bynum explains, "his own flesh did womanly things: it bled food and gave birth to new life."<sup>58</sup> It is through Christ's death that all humanity is given birth and able to achieve redemption.

The shedding of blood was a purifying action, so much so that some medieval physiologists spoke of males "menstruating," which presumably meant hemorrhoidal bleeding, and even recommended bloodletting with leeches as a substitute.<sup>59</sup> The interchangeability between the sexes is seen in many aspects of medieval physiological theory, in which, as Bynum notes, "all human exudings—menstruation, sweating, lactation, emission of semen and so on—were seen as bleedings; and all bleedings—lactation, menstruation, nosebleeds, hemorrhoidal bleeding and so on—were taken to be analogous."<sup>60</sup> In this scheme, piss, milk, tears, and semen would be considered another form of blood. Serrano's series of photographs entitled *Untitled (Ejaculate in Trajectory)* depict the artist's own ejaculation and are multivalent images about the notions of sexuality and creation. To create the images Serrano added a motor to his camera, used a plain black vertical background and began photographing a few seconds before he felt an oncoming orgasm.<sup>61</sup> *Untitled VII (Ejaculate in Trajectory)*, like Serrano's other bodily fluid images, is a gender-specific abstraction of human sexuality (Fig. 4). The gestural sweeps and twisting forms of semen in the photographs are magnified and suspended in midair. The photograph arrests a moment in time and comments on the tension between the visible and invisible of creation and life. The ejaculate photographs, as art historian Rune Gade suggests, resemble "The thin streaks of light surrounded by a great dark surface may well refer to the Biblical account of the Creation in which God creates light over an earth that is 'empty' and 'dark'."<sup>62</sup> However, by representing semen visually Serrano signifies pleasurable, not theologically-sanctioned procreative sex. Semen within the act of Christian heterosexual coitus is necessarily unseen, and in the context of the late-twentieth century the HIV/AIDS epidemic the visibility of bodily fluids illustrated the destructive aspects of sexuality. It was impossible to distinguish between "healthy" and "infected" fluids and as a result all fluids were potentially dangerous.<sup>63</sup> Yet the presentation of semen, whether "healthy" or "infected," remains abject within Christianity precisely because the fluid is seen, thus making Serrano's aestheticization of this repugnant substance both striking and unsettling.

<sup>57</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 214.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>61</sup> Hobbs, "The Body Politic," 34.

<sup>62</sup> Rune Gade, "The Ejaculation Motif: A Discussion of its Iconology in the Light of Works by Andres Serrano," in *Symbolic Imprints: Essays on Photography and Visual Culture*, ed. Lars Kiel Bertelsen, Rune Gade, and Mette Sandbye (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1999), 123.

<sup>63</sup> Shooting semen became synonymous with safe sex and has been associated with the porn industry's climactic shots. See G. Roger Denson, "How Andres Serrano's Piss Christ Reconciles Nature and Civilization," *The Huffington Post*, April 22, 2011.



**Figure 4**

Andres Serrano, *Untitled VII (Ejaculate in Trajectory)*, 1989. Cibachrome print, 40 x 60 in. (101.6 x 152.4 cm). Courtesy of Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art, New York City

#### **In Defiance of Matter: *The Morgue (Cause of Death)***

Describing Serrano's photography, curator and art historian Marcia Tucker said his photographs cause discomfort because they indicate "the extent to which we're unable to deal with our humanity."<sup>64</sup> Unable to deal with these signifiers of the human body, the dead body is the ultimate source of anxiety with its associations with uncleanness and disease. Julia Kristeva writes that the corpse is the utmost of abjection, but it is "not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes objection, but what disturbs identity, system, and order...what does not respect boundaries, positions, or roles...the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>65</sup> Serrano's series of photographs entitled *The Morgue (Cause of Death)* disregard ordered boundaries and heighten the ambiguous spaces between material, form, and content. After obtaining special authorization to photograph in a morgue from a forensic pathologist, Serrano was free to work with the cadavers provided that he disguised the individual and did not identify him or her. Depicting a variety of deaths ranging from murder to suicide, Serrano focused on details of the body, taking dramatic close-ups, extremely foreshortened, and tightly cropped shots against a black ground. The close-up shot abstracts the body into pieces and disrupts the viewer's attempts to construct a complete and legible

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Hobbs, "The Body Politic," 31.

<sup>65</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

narrative. Serrano's close-up, rather than revealing information through detail, only provides an illegible fragment that increases the viewer's desire to create a unified whole.

Simplifying the body through close-ups, Serrano's fragmentation of the body and his attention to its orifices (ears, eyes, mouths, and wounds) inspire mixed connotations that speak to what Wendy Steiner calls "our primal fears" that the form of our bodies "will spring a leak, letting the insides—fluids, organs, *life*—spill out, to become visible and, in the process deathly. The flawlessness of bodily form is a reassurance of mortal safety and a denial of death."<sup>66</sup> Mary Douglas considered the body a useful model to represent a bounded system because in its intricate form, the body can be translated to reflect complex structures.<sup>67</sup> By the simple fact that when bodily fluids leave the body, they have traversed its fragile boundaries making the margins of a system its most vulnerable location. The danger of crossing the boundaries of the body and exposing its interior carried significant weight in the late twentieth-century when the United States was responding to the transmission of HIV and AIDS.

When asked in an interview what he was trying to achieve with the morgue photographs, Serrano replied: "The morgue is a secret temple where few people are allowed. Paradoxically, we will all be let in one day. I think you're upset and confused that I've brought you there prematurely. My intention is only to take you to this sacred place. The rest is entirely up to you."<sup>68</sup> Death in contemporary society is at once ubiquitous in such diverse forms as news media, videogames, and movies, but also unrepresentable. It is actively separated in the private spaces of our homes and daily lives. Instead of the active division between the dead and the living that fuels current anxieties about death, for medieval Christians it was a fear of decay. Historian and anthropologist Piero Camporesi writes, "Human existence, tenuous and precarious, developed in an unsure, unstable, fluctuating equilibrium, ever on the verge of unraveling, constantly about to slip into corruption, to begin the journey to putrefaction."<sup>69</sup> It was the inevitable decay of matter, which occurs over time due to its material nature, that was troubling.

Art historian Paul Binski explains that Christian death was a sacral process. The death rituals were seen as acts of healing the sick and the soul.<sup>70</sup> For medieval Christians the temporal body was a signifier for the condition of the eternal soul, thus curing the soul of sins in the death rites was a way to also cleanse the body. While the finality of death was acknowledged, faith paired with the Christian view of personhood as progressive enabled the medieval Christian to view death as prospective. The rituals reinforced this view, as Binski succinctly writes, "we leave the world as we enter it, naked, needy, and vulnerable, and so the rites of departure can resemble the rites of entry."<sup>71</sup> To the medieval Christian the body was divided metaphysically into a body a soul. Bodies could be further divided, but it was only the bodies of holy individuals that were perceived by laymen to have a synecdochical relationship and believed to act and feel like the living. Holy figures such as saints were

<sup>66</sup> Wendy Steiner, "Introduction: Skin Deep," in Robert Hobbs, Wendy Steiner, and Marcia Tucker, *Andres Serrano: Works 1983-1993*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), 11.

<sup>67</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 115.

<sup>68</sup> Blume, "Andres Serrano," 38.

<sup>69</sup> Piero Camporesi, *Juice of Life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 32.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

exemplars for ordinary Christians. Their divided bodies were signs of a triumph over death, and close proximity to their fragmented bodies was thought to offer protection after death or to miraculously heal the sick.<sup>72</sup> Thus, the mortal Christian body was a sign of the postlapsarian human condition that strove throughout its Earthly life to overcome iniquity and achieve salvation after death.

Death was conceptualized as the gateway to heaven, and accounts of the excruciating deaths of Christian saints and martyrs—the special dead—were viewed as heroic gestures that brought them closer to the divine. “Decay was feared, repressed, denied; partition was sublimated,” Bynum writes, “yet fragmentation was central to the Christian cult of holy matter. However much Christians might disclaim or obfuscate the disintegration brought by putrefaction and partition, they were busy dividing bodies for religious purposes.”<sup>73</sup> Hagiographers in the late-Middle Ages claimed that the bodies or parts of bodies of holy people defied corruption. Paradoxically this “miraculous return of wholeness and miraculous division are signs of resistance to violation and decay”<sup>74</sup> but such miracles are not to be only understood as resisting decay but also a manifestation of life. Reliquaries from the mid-Middle Ages onwards *displayed* the pieces of holy bodies in death and also elevated these pieces to eternal life by placing the objects in incorruptible metal and gems. Medieval reliquaries and Serrano’s photographs, with their glossy and glowing surfaces, remove their objects from the flow of, thus time allowing these fragmented pieces of the body to simultaneously transcend the material world through matter itself. While reliquaries *presented* what was believed to be the actual pieces of the body that defied putrefaction, Serrano’s photographs *re-present* pieces of the body. In both instances, reliquaries and photographs defy the finality of death.

Cibachrome photographs, because of their luminous quality in tandem with their association with advertising, invoke a sense of distance and commodification. It is not surprising, then, that Serrano has been criticized as trivializing death and having an excessive predilection to aestheticize everything.<sup>75</sup> Yet, it is exactly this strange position that Serrano throws viewers into when confronted unexpectedly with images from the morgue. Aesthetics are just one component of Serrano’s photography. In response to accusations of the pictures being exploitive, Serrano replied, “Maybe it’s easier to dismiss the work when you know you’re turned off by it completely, as opposed to when you’re seduced by it.”<sup>76</sup> The photographs can be said to have, as Mitchell calls it, “the Medusa effect.” He argues that an image first wants to attract the viewer, then arrests the gaze, and finally enthralls the viewer.<sup>77</sup> Ultimately, the photograph’s desire is to trade places with the viewer, “to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture.”<sup>78</sup> Serrano’s *Morgue* series demonstrates Mitchell’s claim by injecting the monumentalized images of horrific deaths with personality, which makes the images’ clinical and direct titles

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 192. See also Binski, *Medieval Death*, 29-69.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>75</sup> See for example Michael Kimmelman, “Serrano Focuses on Death,” *New York Times*, February 5 1993, C3; Peter Schjeldahl, “Art after Death,” *The Village Voice*, February 16 1993, 91; Andrea D. Fitzpatrick, “Reconsidering the Dead in Andres Serrano’s *The Morgue*: Identity, Agency, Subjectivity,” *Canadian Art Review* (2008), 33.

<sup>76</sup> Hobbs, “The Body Politic,” 20.

<sup>77</sup> Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 36.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

even more unsettling. The confluence of content and form throws into doubt the seemingly transparent relationship between the photograph and reality.



**Figure 5**

Andres Serrano, *The Morgue (Death by Drowning II)*, 1992. Cibachrome print. 49 x 59 ½ in. (124.4 x 151 cm.) Courtesy of Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art, New York City.

In *Death by Drowning II*, Serrano depicts the bloated and discolored upper body, zooming in on the mandorla-shaped mouth (Fig. 5). A human figure lying horizontally is sharply cropped above the upper lip leaving only the mouth, chin, and shoulders visible inside the pictorial frame. Light falls on the lips and chin, drawing attention to the wrinkly surface of the skin. The mouth becomes like a gaping wound in the face and this same shape is reminiscent of the side wound as depicted in an illuminated manuscript at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Fig. 6). Divided into three registers, the *Arma Christi* shows the Crucifixion at the top, Christ's side wound in the center, and the flagellation column at the bottom. In the center register the side wound is magnified, taking on its own physical bodily presence and transforming Christ's full body, as seen on the Cross in the top register, into a giant wound. The faded appearance of the side wound in the manuscript is the result of

being kissed or stroked by the devout.<sup>79</sup> There is an intimate connection between worshipper and the divine via the mouth. Representations of the side wound often serve as the measure of the length of Christ and worshippers could feel “in contact with the actual body of Christ when they prayed according to—or actually kissed—an image of the wound that exactly calculated his stature.”<sup>80</sup> As an entry point into the body, the mouth is both a private and public margin of the symbolic system of the body.



**Figure 6**

*Arma Christi*, MS Fr. 574 fol. 140v, 132, illuminated manuscript. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

### **Conclusion: Taboo Icons in the Twenty-First Century**

The debates that arose during the culture wars of the late-twentieth century in the United States are not over and we can still feel their reverberations. These discussions continue as we attempt to reconcile our various belief systems on a variety of social issues ranging from reproductive rights and education to same-sex marriage and multiculturalism. However, it would be a mistake to view the culture wars – then and now – as merely debates over social issues. While cultural conflict inevitably encompasses a variety of social issues, the actual challenge is how to negotiate those conflicting ideological visions of how society should approach them.

<sup>79</sup> David Areford, “The Passion Measured: A Late-Medieval Diagram of the Body of Christ,” in *The Broken Body: Passion Devotion in Late-Medieval Culture*, ed. A.A. MacDonald, Bernhard Ridderbos, and R. M. Schlusemann (Groningen: Egerbt Forsten, 1998), 200.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

"I am drawn to subjects that border on the unacceptable," Serrano said "because I have lived an unacceptable life for so long."<sup>81</sup> In his work before 1987, Serrano's photographs dealt with what he calls his "unresolved feelings" about his Catholic upbringing, and the photos helped him to redefine and personalize his relationship with God.<sup>82</sup> He considered the Church "oppressive, as far as dealing with women, blacks, minorities, gays, lesbians, and anyone else who doesn't go along with their program."<sup>83</sup> In a way, marginalized groups are "taboo" because they disrupt the assumptions of an established system. But these "taboos" and cultural conflicts have material consequences for both majority and minority groups because the culture wars fundamentally impact the structures and individual relationship to the institutions of American society.<sup>84</sup>

The body in the late twentieth century, although confronted with a specific set of socio-historical concerns, is not far removed from medieval preoccupations with the material. Rigid dichotomies between life and death or the sacred and profane do not neatly fit into the complex schema of medieval thought, in which an endless fluidity characterized matter. This denial to be contained within a system is what I argue to be the strength of taboo icons that alternatively use the materials and images of Christianity. Serrano began his series of bodily fluid photographs at a moment in history when the mass media reported that our bodies could be dangerous because of their internal fluids. This new body contained vital yet potentially lethal substances. Thus, the body became the politicized and social battleground over which debates were waged between differing political groups about AIDS, homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, and drugs. In his discussion of the allusive power of pictures to offend us, W. J. T. Mitchell writes that a picture is not a text that is simply read, but like a ventriloquist's puppet into which the viewer inserts his or her own voice. He sardonically remarks if we are offended by what that picture "says" it is like the ventriloquist being insulted by his own puppet.<sup>85</sup> Serrano has made a similar analogy in that he thinks of his work as being like a mirror: "Whoever looks at it will have a different reaction, and they'll get from it what they give. If they give it a negative energy, that's what they'll get back. Whereas, if you give it a positive energy, you'll get a positive image, a reaffirmation rather than a negation."<sup>86</sup> Serrano's statement here encapsulates an important distinction about cultural conflict and the controversies that surround his photographs: it is the different moral visions of society that struggle to control the symbols of public life and how reality should be defined.

Complicating photography's association with representation, Serrano's photographs, as Hobbs explains, engage "the viewer in a dialogue that is difficult to escape."<sup>87</sup> This dialogue is not just about making us as viewers uncomfortable, but a reminder of the strange contradictions he is exploring between the material and immaterial. The photographs suspend these contradictions in a visually seductive language that leaves viewers in a dilemma of simultaneously being consumers, voyeurs, and willing participants. Fraught with

<sup>81</sup> Hobbs, "The Body Politic," 17 and Lucy Lippard, "Andres Serrano: The Spirit and the Letter," *Art in America* (April 1990), 240.

<sup>82</sup> Hobbs, "The Body Politic," 18.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>84</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 50.

<sup>85</sup> Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 140.

<sup>86</sup> Hobbs, "The Body Politic," 20.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

political, religious, aesthetic, and social layers of meanings, Serrano's photography is never exclusive, but rather exponentially flexible as the photographs interact with different viewers. What implications might arise through other imaginative readings of Serrano's early photographs? Serrano wants his work to be "accessible to more than just an art audience," stressing that "the work is meant to be open to interpretation."<sup>88</sup> Therefore, to relegate this early body of work to the easy descriptors of "controversial," "blasphemous," or "shocking" eliminates the possibility, in Serrano's words, of "asking too many questions."<sup>89</sup> In his photographs, Serrano has created and sustained a perpetual tension that shifts between representation and abstraction that does not remove Christianity or other religious traditions from the discussion, but demonstrates that they are a constitutive part of the conversation. He is creating taboo icons for our time.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>89</sup> Anna Blume, "Andres Serrano," 40.

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