Andres Serrano: The Spirit and The Letter

BY LUCY R. LIPPARD

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Last summer Serrano’s photograph “Piss Christ” became a cause célèbre when it was attacked by U.S. congressmen and religious leaders. What those critics saw as deliberate sacrilege is in fact only one aspect of Serrano’s work, which encompasses both the theme of spiritual ambivalence and the formal investigation of unorthodox materials.

Since 1964, Andres Serrano has developed a complex iconography that simultaneously evokes the artist’s experiences of Catholicism, criticizes the commercialization of sacred imagery, and pays oblique homage to ideas that Christ originally held. Although his work is grounded in personal concern, his emotional surfaces, retouched colors, monumental scale, and rich context are precise expressions of this ambivalence. For all these reasons, Serrano’s Catholic subjects have steadily become icons of freedom to themselves, thanks to the widespread influence of the American Family Association (AFA), which in April 1989 against Serrano in his photograph Piss Christ (as well as the author in the work of Robert Mapplethorpe), raised the alarm and brought down the wrath of Jesus bolts, the Mormons and other religious souls on the artist’s establishment.

Like the AFA, Serrano is obsessed with the death and benevolent use of blood, but unlike them he decomposes and destroys his own faith. Observed religion gives him a lot of trouble, though he remains a believer. He left the church at age 15—“There must be some conflict between Catholicism and popula- tion”—but like many former Catholics, Serrano finds childhood experiences and conditioning hard to extricate. He says his work is informed by “intuited feelings about my own Catholic upbringing which help me redefine and present my relationships with God. For me, art is a mental and spiritual discipline that cuts across all modules of importance and speaks directly to the soul.” Serrano produces objects of blood and sensual beauty which advance some of the weighted subject matters available to Western artists. He does not in the obli- gatory sense of a document the terms of current art practice, while maintaining a uniquely high sensuous temperature. Piss Christ, the object of emotional force—is a distinctly beautiful photographic image which would have raised no hackles had the title not dined away the process of its making. The soil, wood, and plastic crucifix become visually monumental as an efluse, photographically enlarged, in a deep golden, tones grow that is both sinister and strange. The bub- bles wailing across the surface suggest a nebula. Yet the work’s title, which is crucial to the enterprise, transforms this easily digestible crucifix into a sign of rebellion or an object of disgust simply by chang- ing the context in which it is seen.

Serrano is very much in the postmodern mainstream when he talks about disavow- ing the pleasures of a spiritually comforting image. This strategy reflects his personal distrust of religion as much as it represents his understanding of current debates about photography’s role in representation. If mainstream postmodernist artists (and criti- cs) often seem to promulgate the same val- ues as the religious figures they depict, then perhaps only those artists who have been forced to remain artful can legitimate real choice. In North America, artists of color, like Serrano, are forced to acquire a pre- formed knowledge of both the disavowed cult- tures and of their own often repressed cultural milieus, even as their lives predomi- nantly between the two—embracing the many Serrano’s work is part of the “poly- phonous discourse” many Third World scholars have been calling for. It chal- lenge the binaries formed by class and race, and between abstraction and representa- tion, photography and painting, belief and disbeliefe.

Religious subject matter has been rela- tively fashionable during the 1980s, but reli- gious belief is anaesthetic, in the most an- tithetical and antithetical sense of the concept. It is found exclusively in art by people of color. For them it represents not only a survival tactic but also defiance of spiritual forces. It is a society that perceives both religious and political belief as mere on the one hand and as diagnostically manipulat- able on the other. Few artists have had the courage to tackle the complexities of religion from a position of belief. Not surpris- ingly, the stubborn nature of Serrano’s religious context was fully comprehended only by the fundamentalists, who keep their eyes peeled for—secretly considering as most magnificent art media.

Serrano’s own way of detailing his imag. N. Images, Artists, and Audiences 235
Serrano is obsessed with the flesh and bone of belief, but he destroys his own faith. His harsh content and sensuous surfaces are expressions of 1980s ambivalence.

"I was always bad at seeing things as black or white," Serrano says. "I'm of mixed blood. The great-grandfather was Mexican and he was raised in an Italian neighborhood in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn by his grandmother and his African-Cuban mother, a factory worker who never learned English and was frequently hospitalized for psychoses. As a child, he rarely saw his Honduran father, who served in the merchant marine; the last contact was 25 years ago, when he tracked him down for a brief stay in Honduras. "I've always accepted that reality is my reality. My work is a reflection of it. If there's been a running theme throughout my work, it's the duality of contradiction." Serrano's freely blissful childhood in a highly visible Latin culture may have been the impetus for his longstanding desire to be an artist and the source of his transcen-
dence iconography. He recalls, however, that there was no art at all in his home, and no crucifixes, though his mother did keep "a Madonna and one of those Chrome pictures with a sacred heart." He always wanted to be an artist, and he soon in art was permitted to ride the subway alone. At age 12, he began to spend a lot of time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, looking glumly at a school trip. "Actually, my first interest was in architectural models for drawing or painting," he says. "I became fascinated with the lives of painters. My religious imagery owns a lot to Renaissance art." At 11, he dropped out of school, then returned at 17, in 1977, for two years at the Brooklyn Museum School, where he studied with the African-American painter David Douglass, and that's for education.

Attracted in painting and sculpture, he continued to be bad at it; Serrano took up photography ("portraits, critical work work"), but he could not see the art as the years went by. After working at various jobs, including assistant art director in an advertising agency, he began to make art again in 1980.
I first made color images, but at some point I just felt like I wanted to take the pictures in my head, and I started to do something with raw stuff. I felt connected to sculpture, and the actual images were dying and dead at the same time. I’ve been doing religious imagery for two or three years. Before I realized I had done a kind of religious imagery! I had no idea I had that awareness. It’s a curious thing, but it’s also a European thing, more than an American thing. I’ve been struggling to find it. I always remember that Bunnell’s photograph of a Catholic church in Ennsweilating, Austria, but I’ve been influenced by Eastern art as by anything, specifically Buddhism. I now live in the spirit, a prescriptive and coherent, which I returned to as a young man, a rebel.

When he began his elegant and bizarre "tabula" photographs in 1983 at the age of 30, Germano seems to have moved directly from student work to mature work, skipping the intermediate stage of art-making. Her first show was in 1988, at "Artspace," Against U.S. Intervention in Central America." Initially, the tabulae were overtly theoretical, incorporating backdrops and several props or figures and resembling stills from a Surrealist theater piece. Memory (1984, originally called "Beard and Houndmen"), a hallucinatory recreation in which a red-draped, moated, quartered figure offers a cup of coffee while a small boy looks away, evokes the cruelty and innocence of a Central American church divided between corrupt support for U.S. backed oligarchies and the healing empowerment of Liberation Theology. In Anti-Christian (1986), a redheaded woman head against a painted wooden pole on which a deer's head is mounted, implying a pagan worship of the natural.

A related work, Stigmata, led to Germano's first censorship experience. In 1989, I asked her to have her work, "Chile," in collaboration with the artist, for the Art Institute of Chicago. Having seen the tabulae, the authorities were overly theoretical, incorporating backdrops and several props or figures and resembling stills from a Surrealist theater piece. Memory (1984, originally called "Beard and Houndmen"), a hallucinatory recreation in which a red-draped, moated, quartered figure offers a cup of coffee while a small boy looks away, evokes the cruelty and innocence of a Central American church divided between corrupt support for U.S. backed oligarchies and the healing empowerment of Liberation Theology. In Anti-Christian (1986), a redheaded woman head against a painted wooden pole on which a deer's head is mounted, implying a pagan worship of the natural.

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Serrano’s use of raw meet and blood can be seen as prnial or decadent, critical or creepy. It can be understood as sacrifice, nurturance or torture.

De Vaca is also the name of a 16th-century Spanish explorer of North Texas and Brazil who proclaimed California. The head of an invading conquerors on a "shield" is thereby linked with the sacrificial victims of the Conquistadors, and the work reads multiple reverberations into the present. In another work, The Passion (1984), Christ’s tragic head appears over a lamb’s carcass lit by the metaphor of the sacrificial lamb. In the Rubble (1984), a crucifix is surreptitiously killed by chicken claws. A house-shaped Plexiglas receptacle filled with a clear liquid is called Blood and Brain (1983), a variant on cold mind. The ominous red "MT" of the landscape Photo and Source (the Nazi slogan "Blood and Soil") from 1987 raises in mate- rial form issues of patriotism and land, violence and sentimental nationalism. The Serrano (1986)—a contented corpse head with a nose smeared in red—referred to Mexican internationally balancing its sus- pense between reference to the animal world and to racial typing, this piece is typically ambivalent: the nayle symbolism both prey and predator. Serrano did not execute the animal: it was bought dead from a farmer in Mision for the 45-berry Brawn (1992)—a rare close-up of a head of Rasta crumbs—is a classically under- developed combination of raw meat and a cele- bration of deserted pride as the subject of this powerful hair turns his back on the viewer.

Serrano enjoys experimenting with spe- cial effects, light, and interesting, are his "painfully" head. He is not interested in the sexual, technical aspects of photography. In the tableau he produced from 1984 to 1986, backlighting provided with eight stages for Palmas Cristal (1985) and Brawn and Blood (1986). The latter is an open space with de- signs forming Leon gold as a cardboard standing cardboard (but turned away from) a bloody male woman with her liquid bound and her head flag. Painted at the two figures are, in some direction in which represents heaven and which hell. The horrified woman was intended to demonstrate that somehow, somewhere, lacking in the church’s relation to woman, in people is given, his horror away because he can’t eat, or because he’s. The allegory of this work is broader, however. Though Serrano’s use of a female form clearly expresses the very topical issue of the church’s brutal and sexual re- lationship to women’s bodies (and minds), theinen for such overt content is ques- tionable.

Since late 1986 Serrano’s art has literally been made, in food. Ribs, "live meat". Many of his recent works are visually abstract, set in different "styles"—minimalist, geometric, monochrome or "ex- pressionistic." The burning Blood Cross (blood in a cross-shaped Plexiglas container, made on Good Friday) as an example of what the crucifixion and Christianity are all about—sacrifice—also enters reference to the healing power of the Red Cross and to the brutal history of Catholicism in this hemisphere. In contrast, Milk Cross, refers to the breastfed, maternal side of the Church, to the maternal, all inclusive "purity" of Western religious traditions. They differ (the Cross heroic, the Milk Cross heroic, but a triangular Plexiglas table filled with blood—was a transitional work in which the liquid began to rise. Milk, Blood (1986), the first wholly abstract work, was influenced so much by art symbolists" (Montastruc, Masaccio) as by religious symbolists. It is an apparent divided equally into red and white rectangles. It is in fact, as symbolists, a photo of two Plexiglas tanks holding red and white fluids. There is a perceptible tension between the "head" ap- pearance of the photographic object and the "oil" liquid presence of the subject. The work was followed in 1987 by two monochromes—Blood, and Kid—"the prem- iers Circles of Blood.

In 1988, Serrano decided that he needed a new color in his palette. "The pig was the na- tural stain." It offered a peculiarly deep brownish black, and being less "acceptable" more- food and milk, renamed the nude-ecosys, blood poured into a canister of wine (the Pig and Blood) series of 1988) possessed genuine Celebrity blood. Other similar experiments produced incendiary "tartan" series and even a sideways figure. Blood Victory (1988) represented an accidental and transparent shape perfect not by the clas- sic sculpture but by a broken crockery head and only. The pouring of milk and blood into milk, the juxtaposition of blood against milk, blood ideas of wounds and pain in a single frame. Scale is Serrano’s particular genius. The forms in his photographs exist at a vast, ambiguous scale. Backlighting is particularly used to enlarge them, pushing the objects photographed in the field of the picture plane. The minimum quantity, often emphasizing quality of detail, distinguishes the abstract element (interest in his subject) and achieves a monumental simplicity. The por- tion of his photographs has several sources generally, an aura of unambiguity, a signature unfamiliarity, a subdued but important connection to his multiplicity, multicultural background and a certain ambivalence about Catholicism, a climate of authority, which is the literal "rest of the matter.

Serrano is interested in making "pain- ing" through photography, not by the usual reductive means of photography, but by contrasting the entire aesthetic, emotional, and sentimental abstraction of photography. In the metaphors, for instance, the tank frames are visible and therefore the picture are still tank frames, rather than "set up". But the distances between figures, which play an important role has been changed. The hard-edged lines of the abstraction of the metaphors is more clear than in the previous "images", which, although they look more like conventional literal abstrac- tions, are active photo. The images as
MontDISPLAY, MAJESTY! 4.

It has exactly the right look to it in fact, an integrity of two Pictographs like April rain. There's a 3, between the "hairy" hair, the nearness and the need of the subjects. This is 1985 by two women, M.I., and the present decided that he would divide it. It is not the number of a "flexible" class, but the work on the camera. (He calls this work, "portrait face," "somewhat scientific in nature.") Many of the scenes shot--pads augmented streams against black grounds--are appropriately eloquent; others deceptive--calm areas, and are so nearly symmetrical it resembles Benjamin's "Red of Open." These works, too, once the process, is comprehended, set in motion a series of pure about conception, art and creativity, photography and reproduction.

The most recent Serra has explored is memorial blood. (As he explains, in recent works he has wanted to balance the raw blood, otherwise I'd be on some kind of madcap trip. It's also about frozen reproduction, referring to the whole question of reproductive rights.) In the "Red River" series (1985) the blood pads are shot very close up so that they become sculptural rather than matter, sometimes even something foreign. For obvious reasons these are his most unequivocal works. (When he showed these in a photo workshop there was the inevitable diagnosed it as the audience; and on and on and on one cited, his, source's bodily functions are apparent less visible.) It is true, however, that he has been less successful in emphasizing the subject, even close up, the body and body are often enigmatic, and I couldn't help but think of theі smгіІ that gained all the definitive early feminist art challenging the}

The use of memorial blood is particular points up how Serrra plays with present concepts of nature and culture, body and spirit. Well aware of the "natural discourse"—the Catholic and fundamentalist discourse with the body (that of Christ and those of spirituality)—Serrra confronts the discontent most people feel with their own bodies and their products, and the prevailing cultural disgust for bodily fluids. Just as his earlier work explored myths of bodily fragmentation, death and rebirth from Orisis to the Verow King, the finds power being with in a global cultural tradition that acknowledges the sacred aspects of bodily waters. Body rites and sacramental dances and high-spirited "transubstantiation" with sacred cows, for instance, apopled the Judeo fundamentalist of the late 19th/early 20th century, who managed to have a number of ancient Native American religious ceremonies closed down because they offended Western sensibilities.

Serrra is currently working on a series

United 3 (Epsicopate in Trajectory), 1989, Chromogenic, 60 by 60 inches

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of portraits that embody the theme of blackness, called "The Blacks." It is a reference to the American South. They are black people, dressed in black, against dark ground, and the lighting is very soft, like a faint glow; only the front of the fact lights up and everything else fades into blackness. They are kind of gray. To me, black is a color.

In his 1928 show "Black Geez," at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the show that included the infamous Picasso, the series included an "unreal" portrait of a black man and a black woman. The portraits were sold for $1,000 each, and the money raised was used to support the artists. This was the first time that black artists were paid for their work. The series was called "Black Geez," and it included portraits of black people, both real and imagined. The series was a response to the racism and discrimination that black artists faced. They were paid for their work, and the money raised was used to support the artists. This was a significant step towards the recognition of black artists. The series was a sign of hope for the future of black art.

Art and America: The Story of an Idea, 1870-1945

In his book "Art and America: The Story of an Idea, 1870-1945," the author explores the history of art in America. The book is a comprehensive history of art in America, covering the period from 1870 to 1945. The author discusses the role of art in American society and the changes that occurred during this period. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of art in America.

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adapted from readability and content in the New York Times, “Artistic Who Occupied Congress?”
11. Serrano, quoted in Borque, “Interview.”

An exhibition of Andrew Serrano’s recent work took place at the New Gallery in New York City, Dec. 5, 1989.

Author: Gay R. Rippard, forthcoming book in revised format.

Bibliography:
2. Samuel Margulies, "Serrano and Serrano's Bipolar Disorder," Metropolitan, Sept. 1989, draws some interesting parallels between gay's work and Serrano’s. "Exposing the Angst" was the name of a retaliatory art event held in late August.
3. "The idea was during the Washington, D.C., event, he contin...d" but it’s generally general of his own remarks. "New York Times" quotes from a press release. The New York Times quoted inscription: Remains of the everyday life is identified with the controversial concept of Serrano's. A "needle-tooled" image of a man's skull and brain, as well as other objects that are similar to those used by artists and political activists.

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