

# Playing with Transgressive Light: Serrano's 'Piss Christ'

*Naomi Cumming*

Andres Serrano's photograph 'Piss Christ' provoked a scandal in Melbourne before it was even seen. The Roman Catholic Archbishop, George Pell, pronounced it 'blasphemous and grossly sacrilegious'<sup>1</sup> and was supported by leaders of other churches in his desire to prevent its public exhibition. Keith Rayner, the Anglican Archbishop, gave a measured comment that 'there comes a point ... where there is less and less respect being shown for the sacred in whatever form the sacred comes, and you have to draw a line'.<sup>2</sup> In reflecting on similar reactions from Christians in the United States, a commentator on Serrano's works dubbed it as no more than a 'conservative backlash' against freedom of expression.<sup>3</sup> A polemicised opposition between advocates of artistic freedom and representatives of religious groups is promoted by this kind of dismissive generalisation. It is heightened further when outraged members of the churches withdraw from engagement with the photograph, unable to articulate the nature of the offence it causes beyond noting that the work suggests an act of indescribable irreverence—a 'pissing on' Christ, through his representation in the crucifix. This article will give a semiotic analysis of the photo, showing how it plays with codes of artistic and religious representation. The analysis has been made from viewing the reproduction alone, the original having been removed from exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria after it was attacked by youths, using a hammer.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Translucent Light.

In a letter to *The Age*, Alison Young notes that 'there is nothing in the image that tells the spectator that they are looking at urine: the crucifix appears suffused in a golden and roseate light. Only the title confesses the nature of the liquid used'.<sup>5</sup> A tension between the sensuous pleasures of warmly-coloured light, and a knowledge of its (claimed) source in an evacuated liquid, is a most obvious source of confusion and affront in this work, prompted by this title. Serrano commented on this tension, in an interview, noting that 'a lot of people have commented on the title itself, saying if not for the title, the photograph would have

been unnoticed. It wouldn't have caused the same sort of provocation'.<sup>6</sup> One of the issues raised by the work is, precisely, the relationship between its title and its subject-matter. Is 'piss' part of its content, or only a colour? A letter to *The Age* misquotes the photograph's title as 'A crucifix in urine' and claims it has no relevance to the content of the work at all.<sup>7</sup> Archbishop George Pell, on the other hand, clarifies his objection to the work by insisting that its title be taken literally: 'the conjunction of the sacred symbol and excrement is recognised universally as deeply insulting'.<sup>8</sup> It is the idea of 'excrement' covering the holy object that causes him offence, leading to a court-case in which 'blasphemous libel' was the offence pleaded.<sup>9</sup>

The report of this plea suggests that it was put forward on the assumption that the title discloses the subject-matter of the work, not only its mode of execution. Cliff Pannam QC, advocate for the Catholic Archbishop, conceded that *taken out of context* the photo had 'a certain surreal quality',<sup>10</sup> a quality that derives from the play of light through vibrantly translucent colours. He based his case, however, on a consideration of the mode of creation suggested by the title. A viewing of the work in light of this was what led to its blasphemous suggestiveness for him. 'Blasphemy', in one of the senses given in *Webster's Dictionary*, is 'irreverence toward something considered sacred or inviolable'. Urinating on a crucifix, set aside for devotional practices, would be a relatively unambiguous example, if directly observed, and Pannam's reported case is that the act is so strongly implicit in the titled image as to make the charge relevant. It would be simple to reply in his own terms: '*Taken out of context*, that of a photographic image, an act of urinating on a sacred object would be "blasphemy" in the sense above. But can you actually establish that the work conveys a derisive attitude toward the crucifix, when you consider how the "piss" is used in its imagery?' Aesthetic questions, about the relationship of the title to the work's content, cannot be avoided. The question 'is this "blasphemy"?' might even be seen as invited by the work. The derisive and mocking tone, taken further to define a blasphemous intention, might indeed be found. But if it is so, it runs deeper than the most obvious sense, of a sacrilegious act preceding the taking of the photograph.

Serrano, responding to his critics, states that he would like to tell people to 'go see the work, and then to respond to it rather than react to hearsay and hysteria in the media'.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, he draws attention to the seemingly obvious need to give attention to the appearance of the work, in assessing its content, rather than relying on its title or reputation

alone. The term 'piss' connotes a rejected substance—transgressing polite language—but it does not even begin to convey the special effects of light achieved photographically with its use. Perceptible as having their own beauty, the colours offer possibilities of pleasure, quite apart from prejudice against the contemplation of 'piss', and recognition of even momentary pleasure in them can serve to dislodge the assurance of revulsion against the work. The substance of a transgressive term is transformed into a source of pleasure—pleasure in a light that seems to suffuse the cross. Serrano's further comment, that he tries 'to make the images as seductive and beautiful as possible'<sup>12</sup> carries the message that people might be 'seduced' by the beauty of that which they would normally find disgusting, if they put aside preconceptions of what it is. A dominant aesthetic tradition stemming from the eighteenth century would promote just this kind of decontextualisation, suggesting that viewers respond to the qualities of colour 'for themselves', without contingent 'interests' in the substances that produce them.

Serrano's declaration of an interest in the colour of the bodily fluids he uses could be taken at face value, conveying an almost childlike innocence in the play with them: a recollection of their first discovery by an infant, who finds pleasure in bodily activities; intimations of a time before guilt at misplaced urination had been entrained; a playful *jouissance*. Allowing hegemony to this reading of innocence would, however, prevent a concern with Serrano's more sophisticated play with traditions of religious art. Medieval connotations are inevitable in associations of light and religious imagery, and Serrano does not seem to be ingenuous in his playing with these codes of representation. Using a colour close to gold in order to depict transcendence, he takes up a medieval tradition and gives it an ironic twist. Some perspective on this irony can be gained by examining how the medievals understood gold as a precious substance. Describing artworks of the tenth and eleventh centuries, Karsten Harries notes that:

... every attempt was made to eliminate that which might suggest the individual and the concrete. The artist tried to represent a disembodied, immaterial reality. All suggestions of corporeality were carefully avoided; human forms are seen in geometric abstractions. At this time an anonymous monk introduced the gold background into Western painting as a device to remove the portrayed events from the temporal.<sup>13</sup>

Serrano's reversals of the code are obvious. That which has been 'eliminated' becomes the light; an individual corporeal act is the source of a liquid providing golden colourations, symbolising the

disembodied; an act of the least mundane significance, executed in a hidden moment of time, becomes the simulated glow of transcendence—or eternity. All that has been rejected is transformed, in a transmutation of a liquid carrying the body's waste into a vehicle for creating a colour of intrinsic worth, capable of being contemplated 'for itself'. Suggestions of redeeming the unmentionable are clear. The product of a particular body, in its enactments in a circumscribed time, are taken out of a place of hiddenness and shame to be displayed as worthy of being revered in association with a holy image. This transformative effect need not be taken as irreverent. Harries suggests that the medievals themselves held a belief in continuity between material, sensuous, substances and the 'higher' realms of being, and that it was this belief that gave them courage to depict the 'eternal'.<sup>14</sup> Serrano might be seen as taking up this tradition and testing its limits. A bodily fluid is continuous with other material substances in being a possible vehicle for the creation of a 'golden' light. Why should the discontinuity of the debased from the divine be assumed?

If challenging transformations are part of the work's game, they cannot, even so, be fixed with too great a piety or seriousness. Like many modern artworks, the photograph is capable of multiple meanings, and a fixation on the most elevated would fail to acknowledge the ludicrous. In the title, Serrano lays emphasis on the substance being 'piss'. For all the contemplative possibilities its colourational qualities might allow, its physical nature cannot be entirely expelled from memory, so strongly is it announced. It is Pannam's case, that 'Piss Christ featured bubbles in the urine suggesting that it had been freshly evacuated before the photograph was taken, and that the crucifix had been urinated on'.<sup>15</sup> A photograph inevitably conveys a greater illusion of reality than painting, the buoyant bubbles here pointing at a freshly-completed act 'outside the work'—outside 'art'. Evidence of a painter's brush strokes, or acts of throwing paint, may not refer so insistently beyond the work as do these bubbles of thrown liquid. If awareness of an artist's physical activity in more conventional media is induced by the traces of action in paint, or the ridges on a sculpture, it might be taken as relatively innocuous. The very suggestion of a urinating adult—or his product—is, by contrast, able to promote the extremes of dismay and disgust evident in some letters to the press, especially due to the association of this act with a sacred object in this work. One strategy for avoiding a surrender to spontaneous revulsion might be to contemplate the image for its qualities alone, but take the absolutist aesthetic too seriously, and you will fail to recognise that the

photographer is 'taking the piss out of you' in your refusal to remember the physical fact of production. Neither a protected stance of 'pure contemplation', nor an unmediated reaction to the physical act of urinating, can be sustained. The image disturbs by maintaining a tension between them, achieving mobility in subverting any fixed view. When the religious content of the image is considered, Serrano's subversive stance towards an overly aestheticised view of art as 'absolute' becomes even more obvious. It is hardly a coincidence that the attitudes of contemplative restraint espoused by Romantics as suitable for the contemplation of art are also those encouraged in contemplative traditions of religious practice, where symbols such as the crucifix play a role. The Romantic theologian and hermeneutic theorist, Friedrich Schleiermacher, actually sought to heighten the sensitivity of his generation to the 'spiritual' by encouraging the contemplation of works of art, where reverence toward 'absolute' qualities could be learned. 'Piss Christ' both encourages and resists this view. If a contemplation of the aesthetic qualities of colour is called for in viewing it, an other-worldly amnesia is not permitted as a final state, as some degree of revulsion is part of its point: a very 'interested', personal, reaction to the work without the pretence of sanitised emotions and reverent self-control. This work asks for a mode of engagement which it also undermines, as the very Romanticised glow which is so transformative of 'piss' permits visceral reactions, and a questioning of 'what it is' that so draws the viewer into reverie. Whether contemplative as an aesthete or a religious, viewers cannot avoid the derailment of their most reverent attitudes.

A play on the means of creating an artistic representation of light has now been seen in the possibility that a viewer might have an oscillating awareness of colour and its material vehicle. The play is mobilised further by what the image does not disclose of its origins. A photograph might popularly be conceived as an undistorted image, recording a place and event where the photographer was present. The bubbles might make this impression of immediacy even more compelling, as they did for Pannam, but few observations are needed to recognise that the liquid light in this photograph could be taken as something else, if its origin were not titled, and that its colours must derive in part from the use of photographic filters (or other techniques), unless a urological disturbance involving the passage of blood is to be imagined. In what sense is this 'piss'? The photographer's contemplation, in time, of the substance before him is implied in the adaptation of its colour to an unusual 'roseate' glow. Any representation

distorts its object to some degree, but a photograph can play more effectively than most other media with the illusion of veridity, while also playing with possibilities of distortion. A recognition of this illusion only goes to increase the insecurity of a viewer uncertain of what to see 'in' the work. For a New York journalist this uncertainty itself could only have contributed to his seeing the work as 'deceptive', as, in his words, it shows 'an image of radiant salvation actually fabricated from filth'.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Crucifix

Opposing Serrano's use of the colloquial 'piss' is his naming of the crucifix through the elevated term for 'Christ'. When this term is used theologically it may indicate divinity, in contrast to the name 'Jesus', which speaks of a person with human nature, but in the pairing Serrano gives it with 'piss', 'Christ' could be heard quite readily as an expletive, uttered without any particular concern for high theology. His claim about the title is that it 'was not meant to be critical, or hostile—it's just descriptive'<sup>17</sup> would be more believable if the two items were taken separately, the first as the name for a brand of 'yellow' peculiar to Serrano's work, and the second as a common way of naming Jesus—as the second person of the Trinity—but it cannot be denied that there is a point to the juxtaposition of terms. Serrano opposes a marginal name for a rejected bodily fluid with a name that points to the figure of Jesus as sacred and revered. This opposition is worked out in reverse form by the visual image itself, where a 'glow' of urine surrounds Jesus on the crucifix, rejected and marginalised, dead.

The offence of this image to Christians in general comes from its targeting of a central moment in the narrative of the Gospels. That other Christian statuettes immersed by Serrano in urine have not created the same degree of offence may derive simply from the fact that they do not represent such a crucial moment in salvific history and thought. The resonances of Jesus' death through New Testament writings and Christian theology could hardly be greater, defining the sense of 'Christian' itself. Hence Archbishop Pell's plea that this 'most potent image' not be promoted as desecrated. A gutter-insult, 'piss on you!', has been associated visually with a figure whose narrative speaks of a free relinquishment of life, and whose experience of being insulted is part of his passion. In the Catholic tradition of engaging meditatively with the events of passion week, through symbols and special liturgies, the crucifix asks a response of self-reflective

remorse, not for denigration or insulting acts.

Yet Serrano claims not to have intended an insult. By commenting that he was taught by Catholic Sisters 'that we worship not the crucifix but Christ',<sup>18</sup> he emphasises the disconnection of a symbol and any metaphysical reality it might represent. It is the symbol that has been immersed, not the person. By insisting on this separation, Serrano actually points up the problematic features of the crucifix as an object of devotion. As a symbol, it can be mass-produced and traded in. Search for it on the Web, and you will find a list of religious jewellery stores. A symbol with commercial value, it does not always ensure domesticated devotion among ordinary Catholic people, or even a pretence of recollecting the 'presence' of Christ. No horror of death need attend this possession or accoutrement. If it inspires reverence for some, it may be casual. Reproduce this symbol in a context interpreted in traditional religious terms as 'violation' (due to the 'uncleanness' of bodily fluids), and the kind of shock it instigates becomes more appropriate to the content of the image itself. The crucifix can be sentimentalised and traded in, separated from the thought of crucifixion as legal murder, but an act of violent artistic displacement brings awareness in attentive viewers of this sanitisation of brutality, inducing self-consciousness about how the symbol of crucifixion has been over-used. The Uniting Church moderator, the Reverend Pam Kerr, comments, for example, that the photograph 'reminds us Christians that the cross was a highly offensive event and that Christ himself was treated brutally ...'.<sup>19</sup> The offence, or sense of violation, felt by a viewer for whom the crucifix is a devotional object can, then, be turned around, to become a reminder of the kind of reaction that the subject-matter of crucifixion itself command. No more realistic painted representation of an act of crucifixion as brutal, or bringing agony, is necessary to this effect. Serrano's 'violation' of a commercially-reproduced product in which the image of Christ is benignly peaceful, and visually obscured, can still bring a shocked recognition of felt offence. Nor is an explicit religious conviction on the part of a viewer necessary to the image's effectiveness. Comparison with a critic's reaction to another picture, entitled 'milk, blood', draws out its capacity to stir memories of religious restraints, as violated, even in those for whom religious practice has lapsed. Of secular Jewish extraction, the critic Steven Dubin was confronted with the residue of his own tradition, where Kosher laws determine that these substances cannot be combined. He felt his shock as palpable, despite an absence of religious conviction.<sup>20</sup> Looking at 'Piss Christ' while aware of 'piss'

### *Literature and Aesthetics*

can have a similar effect for a viewer who recognises in the crucifix a central moment of Christian thought, whatever their own relationship to this idea. Acts against the symbol are not merely acts against a material thing, but offend a religious sensibility that many have thought dead, even in themselves. A careless or disinterested tolerance toward religious kitsch, in the form of a mass-produced plastic crucifix, is transformed by this felt 'violation' into a stronger response. It is not a defence of the representation that is at issue, but of a theological conviction residual in many strands of Western culture, and imbibed even by the habitually irreligious.

What, then, is this sensibility, which finds a 'blasphemy', or offence against God, in the (presumed) immersion in urine of a crucifix? It could be dismissed as a confusion of the symbol with the person and action it represents, but the dismissal would be too simplistic. Few people are subject to suspicions of occult properties in the symbol itself, that is, to a primitive fetishism whereby the sign 'coincides with what it indicates'.<sup>21</sup> That does not mean, however, that religious symbols lack any appreciable difference from their secular counterpart. If their mass-produced replication allows forgetfulness, even among Christians, about God as the one whose actions are represented, the shock of felt violation brings a renewed sense that these symbols are 'set apart' by their place in ritual practices, such as acts of prayer. Even if it is not, as Serrano points out, the crucifix itself that is worshipped, it does serve in worship to direct a believer's attention to a redemptive act whose relevance and present reality are a matter of faith. For one who understands Christ as God, his 'presence' can be found both in an historically complete redemptive act, and in a present moment of time, a 'recollection' of this presence being facilitated by visible symbols such as this. Some commitment is implicit in acts of prayer to a reality beyond the symbol—a reality of God that makes the symbol more than simply an idea, to be freely traded in. The use of the crucifix in religious acts thus gives it a stronger sense of making 'present' a felt reality than is the case for symbols in non-religious contexts. A flag is an obvious example of secular symbol-use, a symbol of nationhood that might be ritually saluted in a public event, but does not serve to make nationhood more than a human conception. Acquiescence to the idea of 'nationhood', and the usefulness of its symbolic representation, need not entail a commitment to its being 'present' in any special way—even if marching with flags does create feelings of unity among participants. Acts of vandalism against the flag might certainly be interpreted as insults to a nation, but the sense in which 'nationhood' is

believed to be present in acts of flag-carrying is, nonetheless, weaker than the sense in which God is taken by Christians to be present in acts of devotion centred on the crucifix; 'nationhood' remains a human conception, while 'Christ'—for the believer—is more than that. The crucifix in Christian ritual bears a much stronger relationship with the idea of a 'present-ing' reality, especially for those who are engaged in a Catholic tradition of prayer.

This, then, is the crux of a conflict between the uses of symbols in ritual practices with specifically religious intent, and the use of symbols in secular rituals, or art. For a believing participant, the symbol is a vehicle for worshipping God, understood as a reality apart from forms of representation. For a non-believing observer, the symbol is an entity that can be manipulated quite apart from its relationship to a set of beliefs. It is the 'trespass of the sign', writes Kevin Hart, that it can be separated from its motivating presence, and circulate freely with new contexts and interpretations.<sup>22</sup> To believers, the person of Christ is a living sign of the present reality of God, and some might be motivated to restrict the forms of his representation, but for others symbols of Christ relate to belief-structures with no special claim of ontological privilege. They can be treated as 'constructs' much like nationhood, and their forms of symbolisation can be changed with impunity. Umberto Eco explores what it is for an interpreter to work with such constructs. Taking, as an example, the doctrine that 'there are two natures in Christ, the human and the divine, and one Person', he notes that the statement may be dismissed by a 'logician or scientist' as lacking referent, but concedes that the dismissal would fail to acknowledge its purchase in many people's lives.<sup>23</sup> In Eco's view, it is more profitable to acknowledge such statements as capable of having meaning, than to dismiss them as 'untrue'. Understood minimally as 'cultural units', they can, he suggests, be explicated within their own framework of reference, without forcing commentators into a position of assent to a given theology or construction of 'truth'. A play like this, with constructs of meaning and 'truth' by people uncommitted to a particular set of beliefs, is neither revolutionary nor unusual. It is just part of the normal game of interpretation, practised by anyone who wants to understand a tradition to which he or she does not belong. Bracketing the idea of 'truth', making it a construct irrelevant to interpretation, does, however, limit outsiders in their capacity to understand the force of a belief for someone who holds it as more than a construct, even if fallible in its form. The same issue arises in the formation and interpretation of art with religious content. A play with

symbols as cultural units is part of the normal activity of art, not demanding of the artist any particular commitment to a tradition (except in the case of controlled traditions, such as icon-painting in Orthodoxy). What may be for the artist or interpreter simply a play with symbolic forms, is nonetheless capable of holding a greater force for an artist or viewer who links the symbols with a commitment to a set of beliefs. Representations in language or art may be understood as meaningful without any particular concern for their truth, but someone who is not a participant in the tradition is in a subject-position where they must necessarily be cautious in explicating—or condemning—the feeling-tone of one who is a participant, and feels a personal affront in the manipulation of symbols for their belief.

With this lengthy caveat in the name of tolerating the position of a viewer affronted by this art, other possibilities of response might be reconsidered. A state of affront can be transformed, upon further reflection, into one of recognising the manipulation of a symbol, without taking it as a direct offence against belief. Viewers familiar with, and engaged in, Catholic devotional practices are not excluded from this possibility. They might chose to see in the representation of 'piss' a reminder that incarnational theology has God made present in human flesh, with all its unsanitary parts. Or they might recognise in the haze of urine an ironical twist on the Romantic theme of using hazy textures as means of conveying sublimity, the prerequisite to 'wonder'. This piece of artistic photography is not, after all, presented as transparent vehicle for viewing, and responding to, the crucifix as an object of devotion, but as a visual incitement to reflection on ways of seeing it. Even a believer does not need to take any given presentation of a symbol for Christ as the transparent vehicle for divine presence. Nor does he or she need to take habitually-formed states of altered awareness, in devotional contexts, as unambiguously enlightening in their effect. This artistic presentation, with the modes of interaction it invites, can serve the purpose of unsaddling the self-conscious pride of pseudo-piety. A moment of contemplative enjoyment meets a moment of affront, and the two states oscillate, allowing a shift in awareness of acts of devotion themselves. The context of the photograph's display as 'modern art' is a cue to this kind of self-reflexive activity.

### 3. Participation and Publicity

A theme of Serrano's recent photographs (in the 'History of Sex' series) is an exploration of the boundaries of what might be taken as

'transgressive'. 'Piss Christ' anticipates the same theme by presenting with vibrantly attractive colours an image that intimates the occurrence of a transgressive act—pissing on a devotional object representing Christ. The conflict of aesthetic values with aversive reactions to the presumed act of creation further opens up the question of what it is for something to be 'transgressive' or a 'sin'. Does the artistic end justify the use of any materials, so placing the art in a domain outside that of normal inhibitions? To supporters of the work, this is so. Freedom to create is the value 'on the bottom line', and the fruitfulness of the image in opening up a domain of interactive 'work' is support of its privileged status. To opponents of the work's public exhibition, its capacity to offend the semiotically unaware, for whom the symbol is inviolably linked with a devotional attitude, is sufficient to ensure its judgement as decadent art. An ethical dimension enters, and is difficult to resolve. The work itself cannot proclaim the artist's intentions, to offend or not, and the degree of 'guilt' attributed to him depends largely on its interpretation. As the image invites a participatory dialogue, not simply a passive response, the guilt imputed to the artist by the viewer has to derive, at least in part, from the viewer's own construction of what he or she sees, in relation to its title. The act of urination can suggest desecration—a response that reflects on the performative moment implied as preceding the work. It might, further, suggest an act of angry defiance aimed at a symbol which has come to represent 'the church'. The emotional associations such an act could assume have the potential to be very complex, illiciting further interpretive moves, as the viewer thinks of what the crucifix, in its institutional use, connotes for him or her. Imagine, for example, a viewer for whom the imagery of suffering has been oppressive, in his or her own experience of church traditions. The crucifix then symbolises an obsession with suffering, a lurid fascination with it. This viewer might well find the idea of 'pissing on it' satisfying, and see its representation with pleasure. If anger were then to follow, it could be no more than an expression of his own participatory guilt, or of his resentment at having been led to enjoy the 'seductive beauty' of an image resulting from urination on a crucifix—an act he would openly repudiate. The 'desecration' is, from this viewer's position, an act of liberating (but uncomfortable) resistance to memories of imposed remorse. It has invited enjoyment in the beauty of its presentational form, but left him to deal with the fact of his own enjoyment—with anger and guilt, or self-reflexive questioning.

It would be easy for a fictional viewer such as this to blame the photographer for 'taking him or her in'—an 'innocent' viewer made to feel unwelcome sentiments—but one of the questions the photograph poses might very well be 'who is innocent?' Or 'whose guilt is genuine, and not a mere revulsion for things he or she rejects in his or her bodily self?' The photographer's act and the viewer's participation are part of the 'meaning' of the image as much as are its intrinsic properties. The very lack of closure in the interpretive process that can accompany viewing it is part of its point. If an emphasis is placed on the mobility of self-questioning interpretation, Serrano could easily be viewed as a religious artist, with a capacity to induce reflection on such ideas as sin and guilt, death and suffering, the false rejection of sensuousness or the pleasures of transgressive acts.

In the public debate about this photograph little consideration could be given to the subtleties of questioning that it is able to provoke in viewers with a sensitivity both to processes of sign-formation and to Christian traditions. Instead, its display in the National Gallery of Victoria was taken as an endorsement for the violation of a Christian symbol, particularly offensive to those who belong to churches in which the crucifix is used for devotional purposes. This assumption of public support for representations offensive to religious groups says nothing of the attitudes actually held by members of the Kennett government, responsibility for the exhibition having been delegated to the administration of the Gallery. Nor does it say anything of the significations developed in the photograph itself. What it could indicate is that an unprepared audience, responding more to the title than to the image, too readily assumes a work's content to be obvious and immediate, without any conception of its play on signs. If this assessment is right, ethical questions, relating to whether public institutions should exhibit such art, could be treated separately from aesthetic judgements. The ethical concerns would not arise out of an assessment of the photograph's signification, as understood by the informed initiates of modern representation, but from a concern about its capacity to create offence among those who hold sincere religious beliefs, and are not equipped to deal with an artistic play upon the symbols representing them. This was the position implied by Behan McCullagh in a letter to *The Age*, noting that 'we may criticise each other's beliefs and practices, but in a respectful way, especially in public'.<sup>24</sup> Many cheap reproductions of crucifixes may be judged by the religious and irreligious alike as displaying bad 'taste' in varying degrees, but this does not mean that the crucifix is fair game for ridicule in a society where it

represents a central value for at least some members. Serrano's photo touches an uncomfortable and telling point where a symbol ceases to be seen by all in the public as an item to be freely manipulated and reproduced, and starts to be held instead as embodying a content that asks for some restraint, without a necessary commitment to the Christian faith.<sup>25</sup>

If a distinction were upheld between judgements of the photograph itself, and judgements of its possible effects on a broadly-based public, it would not be inconsistent both to endorse the work aesthetically, as offering an invitation to reflective activity, and to withhold commitment to its being displayed in a public rather than a privately-endowed gallery (which could conceivably receive public sponsorship, without carrying the institutional image of official endorsement). A danger with separating questions of aesthetic judgement from decisions about public policy for supporting the art is, however, that it could come across as patronising towards those who express offence, at the same time as marginalising modern works of art by restricting their exhibition in public galleries. It also leaves unexplored the possible intertwining of ethical and aesthetic concerns. Would it not be possible for someone to judge the photograph itself as ethically suspect, insofar as it seems to manipulate (at least some) viewers into a shocked recognition of what they are seeing—despite Serrano's claim not to be interested in 'shock' but in getting people's attention?<sup>26</sup> Art which merely exercises the power of shock does not move far beyond titillation, and that which merely offends the religious does not transcend the cheapest acts of iconoclasm. Are the claims of this article, that subtlety of interaction is possible with this photograph, merely a withdrawal from its most obvious content? A sceptical journalist, Robyn McKenzie, suggests that 'the straightforward view of the man in the street' should be taken seriously. It is, she thinks, the view that sees the work 'for what it is—pornography, blasphemy—take your pick', rather than being duped by 'a pretentious intellectual elite'.<sup>27</sup> Another art commentator, Evelyn Tsitas, finds that Serrano's work reminds her 'of singer Madonna's use of religious imagery. High gloss, camp, obvious. A crucifix here, a sailor boy there, here an angel's head, there a man clutching his penis, everywhere something intended to jolt you'.<sup>28</sup> Perceptions of shock in these comments are palpable, and it would take more than a bland denial to convince that a capacity for shocking effect was not being manipulated in some sense by the artist in creating these works. A search for sophistication in response should not lead to blindness for the obvious.

For any public debate on this art to make progress, it needs to move away from a polemicisation which simplifies the position either of 'art-lovers' or of members of religious groups. Neither an aestheticism that isolates art from questions of value relating to its religious content, nor a religious reactivity that fails to attend to the image itself—after reading its title—can possibly do justice to the kind of dialogue the work has a potential to promote. It would be naive to assume that interpretive discourse on a work such as this can reach a point of decisive closure, as the mobility it allows a viewer can encompass many different interpretive positions, not all compatible, yet still motivated by the work. A hammer-blow might have prevented further viewing of the work, but it should not prevent discussion of the issues it presents.

## Notes

- 1 *The Age*, 8 October 1997, p.1.
- 2 *The Age*, 8 October 1997, p.2.
- 3 Bruce Ferguson, 'Andres Serrano: Invisible Power', in *Andres Serrano: Body and Soul, Catalogue for the NGV Exhibition*, New York, [1997].
- 4 Jane Faulkner, 'Serrano show axed: NGV acts after hammer attack', *The Age*, 13 October 1997, p.1; Karen Collier, Vanessa Williams and Mike Edmonds, 'Christ Art Scrapped', *Herald Sun*, 13 October 1997, p.5.
- 5 Alison Young, 'Andres Serrano: what next?'. Letter to *The Age*, 9 October 1997, p.14.
- 6 *The Age*, 9 October 1997, p.B3.
- 7 John Laurie, 'Perhaps it's a hoax!'. Letter to *The Age*, 9 October 1997, p.14.
- 8 *The Age*, 8 October 1997, p.A1.
- 9 Peter Gregory, 'Court hears of blasphemy, God and urine', *The Age*, 9 October 1997, p.A4.
- 10 *The Age*, 9 October 1997, p.4.
- 11 *The Age, Metro*, 9 October 1997, p.B1.
- 12 *The Age, Metro*, 9 October 1997, p.B1.
- 13 Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art*, Evanston, Illinois, 1968, p.7, my italics.
- 14 Harries, p.12.
- 15 *The Age*, 9 October 1997, p.4.
- 16 Christopher Knight, in Alan Attwood, 'Artist in the Storm: A Meeting with Andres Serrano', *The Age*, 9 October 1997, p.B3.
- 17 *The Age*, 9 October 1997, p.B3.

- 18 William Niederhorn, 'Artist Defends Depiction of Christ', *Boston Globe*, 20 August 1989, p.89.
- 19 *The Age*, 8 October 1997, p.A2.
- 20 Bell Hooks, 'The Radiance of Red: Blood Work', in *Andres Serrano: Body and Soul, Catalogue for the NGV Exhibition*, p.4.
- 21 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, a translation of *Sein und Zeit*, by Joan Stambaugh, New York, 1996, p.76.
- 22 Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1989, p.14.
- 23 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, 1976, p.68.
- 24 Behan McCullagh, 'Let down by lack of respect'. Letter to *The Age*, 13 October 1997, p.12.
- 25 See Jason Koutsoukis, Gareth Boreham and Rachel Gibson, 'Police refer Serrano work to censors', *The Age*, 9 October 1997, p.A2.
- 26 *The Age*, 9 October 1997, p.B1.
- 27 Robyn McKenzie, 'Clash of Cultures', *Herald Sun*, 13 October 1997, p.82.
- 28 Evelyn Tsitas, 'It's enough to break your art', *Herald Sun*, 13 October 1997, p.5.