A Passion Play: Serrano in Melbourne

So much has been written on the Serrano affair that it is virtually impossible to discuss it without feeling the oppressive weight of the anxiety of influence. The debate has cast its shadow wide, and any assertion runs the risk of repetition. I became acutely conscious of this when I composed a possible opening gambit, after Foucault, after Magritte (here we go). "This is not a crucifix." This move, while predictable, was doubly useful in that it drew on contemporary theories concerning images, reality, reference, and originality, and at the same time contextualized debate by invoking a theme de rigueur in public discourse, that of sophistry (don't worry, it's not a real crucifix, just an image of one). It allowed me, in other words, to comment on the debate, and relieved me of the duty of attempting to add something new to it. However, in an aphorism worthy of Marge Simpson, I quickly realized that my strategem was simply replaying, with a twist, Robert Hughes' "ceci n'est pas un Dieu" from his *Culture of Complaint* (1995), which was in itself a printed version of a lecture given by Hughes at the New York Public Library in
January 1992. This vertigo of repetition soon became more of a focal issue for the Serrano affair than I had first thought.

To anyone familiar with the history of the reception of *Piss Christ* in the United States in the late 80s, it is clear that its Melbourne reception was less an event than a re-run, what Serrano himself described as an “old hat” media event replaying a sense of moral and religious indignation that occurred elsewhere. Serrano’s weariness in response to the whole thing was hardly surprising. There was something very tawdry about the unfolding of this re-hash of an outdated American drama, with George Pell playing understudy to the Rev. Donald Wildmon and the Australian Family Association standing in as body-politic double for its American counterpart. Re-run ennuoi was also apparent in the religious bigotry of the two fanatics who brought the whole thing to a head. Their misguided lip-service to patriotic moral outrage (“This guy can’t be allowed to do this in my country”) lacked conviction in the light of their appearance as vapid, clouse homeboys, not to mention their promotion of Melbourne as a Southern backwater, a hick town of redneck crackers, convinced that public display of a picture of a Ku Klux Klansman would lead to racism.

There were some differences that made the Melbourne event distinctive. It was the first time *Piss Christ* has ever been physically attacked, and also the first time a Serrano show had been cancelled, anywhere in the world. That should really put Melbourne on the map. Regardless of what one thinks of Serrano as an artist, the media event that emerged around *Piss Christ* portrayed Serrano as a one-hit wonder, and *A History of Serrano* as a one-work retrospective. Apart from sensation-seeking overtures to licentiousness and perversity, the *History of Sex* exhibition at the Kirkcaldy Davies gallery was hardly mentioned. Similarly, the NGV was taken to task by critics of the situation for not sufficiently preparing its staff and the public for the potential offensiveness of Serrano’s work (staff were purportedly given a day’s notice on the protocols of complaint management). In failing to provide the kind of preparation that went into the Museum of Contemporary Art’s Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition of 1995, the NGV seemed to be assuming that the Melbourne art-going public was a homogenous wild bunch, aficionados of affrontery turned on to cutting edge treatments of the pornosophical image. These dubious distinctions are, in fact, the most troubling and demoralizing features of the whole Serrano fracas with the National Gallery of Victoria. It is with tremendous regret that we must concede that Melbourne is not New York or Sydney, and does have an unfortunate history of regressive art conservatism, to which we can now add the Second Coming of Andres Serrano.

Having said that, though, it must be conceded that any artist working with heavily charged icons, such as the crucifixion, will always be open to public censure. No matter how tiresome Serrano found the whole controversy in Melbourne, his incredulity is a little out of place, especially when his work is exhibited in a country for the first time. But this is not to make any concessions to censorship or the devaluation of art. I’d like to think that Melbourne is a sophisticated, intellectually robust city capable of intelligent, considered engagement with tough social, cultural, political and religious issues, especially as they are dramatized through art forms, such as photography. I am not in the least bit perturbed by interpretations of *Piss Christ* which emphasised its iconoclasm. My own childhood experience of the Catholic world view has led me to regard controversial treatments of Catholic iconography as legitimate and necessary critiques of an insidious, demeaning and repressive regime, which, in the final analysis, is a retreat from the world of lived experience. As a powerful text that defamiliarizes an image saturated with the weight of history, and therefore impunity, *Piss Christ*’s impact is unquestioned; the title alone is a guarantee of that. Catholicism is an act of forgetting as much as anything else, and Serrano’s images constitute, among other things, willful prompts to remembrance. There is more gone in Sam Peckinpah or Quentin Tarantino than in the contemporary trade in crucifixion iconography. Serrano is surely right in identifying the crucifixion with the expulsion of bodily fluids, as in medieval representations of the Passion, which often featured the body of Christ as a jellied mess covered in blood and the urine of Roman centurions. This is not to say, of course, that this is all there is to the image. *Piss Christ*’s value as art, as an aesthetic object, and the possible readings that can be made of it, are necessarily relative and contingent. It may well stand for the degeneration of modern art, as Robert Hughes has suggested in *American Visions*, the rector at the end of a century of art that has lost track of its mission. It may also be a sublime testament to Christian sacrifice, were it not for the title. However its relevance as a commentary on, and critique of, a particular belief system is very powerful and deeply personal to many who have regarded it and reflected upon it.
The Serrano debacle has certainly announced to the world that Melbourne has difficulty coping with such art, especially with art that forces people to think beyond dogma and narrow-mindedness, and challenges taken-for-granted assumptions through provocative, disturbing images. This is a function that modern art has always fulfilled, and should continue to fulfill, especially as new modes of thought, alternative ways of living, and different forms of sensibility are being defined and negotiated. Debates, then, to do with censure, pornography, blasphemy, and freedom of speech, have been done to death in discussions of Serrano. It is actually more instructive to see the harrying of *Poo Christ*, and the harrowing of Serrano, as a remake of the Passion of Christ. Public humiliation and the persecution of those who hold unpopular views are central to the Catholicism which produced Serrano, and are also played out in *Poo Christ* and its contexts of reception. Serrano esposes a typically modern conception of the artist as one called to a vocation, as a priest to the order. In casting himself as a religious artist whose work is deeply misunderstood and misinterpreted, Serrano invokes the historical portrait of Christ as a controversial agitator, whose teachings and world-view were also misunderstood in his own time. *Poo Christ* was not damaged, it was desecrated.

In this postmodern mystery play, proceedings began in ritual fashion by declaring the essential Catholic belief in transubstantiation, the symbolic embodiment of the deity in the host of a worldly object. *Poo Christ* was the substantial manifestation of Serrano's values and ideas, and as such acquired an unholy, anti-sacrificial significance. Its turbulent and intensive passage along the Via Dolorosa of media scrutiny and public debate enacted a dramatic parable concerning difference and unpopular opinion. When that 16-year-old zealot tolched *Poo Christ* it was not a moral but a eucharistic act, a stage in the assault and battery of the body of Christ (ranters failed to notice the potential heresy of stamping on and then taking a hammer to Catholicism's focal icon). When this innocent, who was not of admissible age, entered the gallery packing heat, the writing for Serrano and his Passion was already on the wall: "suffer the little children to come unto me".

The desecration of *Poo Christ* was not the culmination of the Passion, but an intermediate event. The seventh station of the cross, in which Christ falls for the second time. Serrano's travail along the road to Calvary is quite clear in the scriptural narrative I gleaned from the biblia of news print:

1st station: Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne Dr George Pell washes his hands of Serrano and condemns him.
2nd station: In a three-hour Supreme Court hearing, Serrano receives a cross to bear, the stain of common law misdemeanor and blasphemous libel.
3rd station: Serrano falls for the first time and is trampled on by John Allen Haywood.
4th station: Serrano is given matriarchal solace by one of his supporters: "the controversial photographs of religious icons immersed in bodily fluids seemed to me quite beautiful as works of art".
5th station: NGV director Dr Timothy Potts defends Serrano and eases his burden by re-hanging the fallen *Poo Christ*.
6th station: Serrano wipes his brow in a gesture of relief. "Whew!"
7th station: Serrano falls for the second time. *Poo Christ* is taken down and leans in a corner of the gallery after being attacked with a hammer.
8th station: A History of Serrano is cancelled. Serrano exhibits the people of Melbourne to make a "great sacrifice" in his name and boycott the National Gallery's Rembrandt exhibition.
9th station: Betrayed by the trustees of the NGV, Serrano falls for the third time.
10th station: Denuded. Serrano bares his ignominy to a divided public.
11th station: Serrano is nailed to a wall before witnesses. At the ninth hour, he averts his eyes to heaven and beseeches, "Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood".
12th station: Mute and impassive, Serrano is frozen in a barrage of press photographs, which fix him for eternity as a martyr to artistic integrity.
13th station: In a solemn pieta, Serrano's body is presented to conservators for inspection and assessment.
14th station: Serrano is buried in a "spineless" display of compromise and cultural terrorism.

Appearing to his followers after harrowing his own private hell, Serrano announces plans for a new Jerusalem, in which the battered *Poo Christ* will feature as a homage, unwitting or otherwise, to one of his heroes, the patron saint of smashed glass, Marcel Duchamp. A fitting act of appropriation when you think about it. To those of us left behind, what's left? Perhaps an Elvis-like resurrection cult? Or a tradition of folk ballads in the mode of "I dreamed I saw Andres Serrano last night". Maybe, too, the National Gallery of Victoria should now be thought of as a sacred site, of sorts, and be appropriately renamed Golgotha.

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