

Profane and Sacred: Religious Imagery and Prophetic Expression in Postmodern Art

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THE 1980S AND NINETIES have seen the Religious Right flex considerable political muscle in its attempt to have society regain what it considers to be the traditional Christian values and beliefs that presumably guided generations of Americans in decades past. It is ironic that during roughly the same period of time a number of artists, identified with the Postmodernist avant garde, have utilized Christian images and religious references to attack or question some of the societal conventions and mores which are associated with the western cultural traditions. The 1980s were, and the nineties continue to be, eras focused on apocalyptic social issues, including environmental pollution, the AIDS crisis, and the empowerment of oppressed and exploited peoples. It should also be noted that the images discussed in this article are intended to illustrate but not limit the broad and varied agenda that contemporary women and men have artistically addressed within the context of social issues.

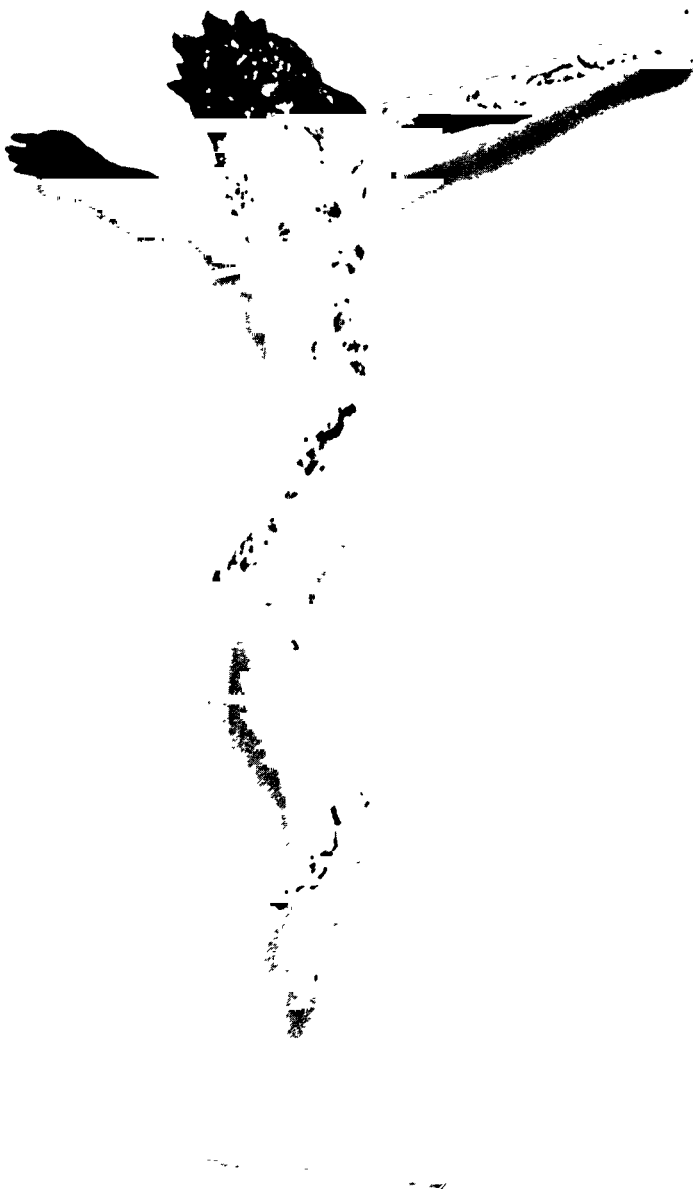
Postmodernist artists intent on engaging contemporary culture in issues of political portent have referenced religious images and formats in order to invest the aesthetic artifact with a power and authority still resonating with the shadow of its former religious context. And while the new contexts may not arise out of traditional ecclesiastical inspiration or sources of religious patronage, they do in a real sense speak to some aspects of religious tradition and theological concern: the issue of regendering divinity and broadening or redefining the humanity of Christ, with particular attention to the claim by some that a phallogocentric religion has marginalized women or that the orthodox church is too often exclusionist; the application of religious imagination to a prophetic tradition, a call by the culturally or socially marginalized to the politically

empowered for a moral reexamination of cultural constructs; and within that prophetic tradition, a call to sacralize anew bodily fluids identified with aspects of suffering and martyrdom for redemptive cause.

The eccentric, non-conformist William Blake was probably the first modern writer to intimately link religion and imagination. He wrote in his epic 1804 poem *Jerusalem*: "I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination" (Erdman.231). And, much more recently, it was religious imagination that feminist scholar and theologian Paula Cooley tapped in order to demonstrate how modern art and literature using religious imagery may be prophetic and redemptive, even if those creating it are not conventionally pious (5). Finally, although made in reference to literature, Susan Sontag's remarks concerning the vocabulary of religious imagination might be applicable to some of the Postmodernist imagery I will be discussing:

. . . despite the virtual incomprehensibility to most educated people today of the substantive experience behind religious vocabulary, there is a continuing piety toward the grandeur of emotions that went into that vocabulary. The religious imagination survives for most people as not just the primary but virtually the only credible instance of an imagination working in a total way (69)

The Crucifixion and Pieta as subjects are among the most empathetic in the history of Christian art and have been extensively utilized by contemporary artists of both genders to reference issues of religious and cultural inclusion. While the male Messiah is the customary victim in artistic renditions of the Crucifixion, the English sculptor Edwina Sandys in her 1975 bronze work entitled **Christa** (fig. 1) reverses gender in title and image and poses a nude female victim in the traditional posture generally reserved for the crucified Christ. The work, created during a period of heightened feminist activities in the United States and Europe, seems at first glance to comment not only on the patriarchal traditions of Christianity but on the traditionally male-oriented purview of western culture itself. It might be recalled that Mary Daly's theological tract, *The Church and the Second Sex*, published in 1968, was particularly provocative in questioning the relationship of orthodox Christian theology to women. By the early 1970s an expanding, radical feminist coalition in several American centers of religious study, including Harvard Divinity School, had begun to challenge long held views concerning the place of women in a religion defined by centuries of patriarchal interpretation. In the most militant of the Lentz lectures given at Harvard University in the winter of 1972-73, Daly focused particularly on the traditions of sin as female-generated and salvation as male-engendered:



1 Edwina Sandys, *Christa*, 1974, bronze, 4 x 5 feet (photo courtesy the artist)

I propose that Christianity itself should be castrated by cutting away the products of supermale arrogance the myths of sin and salvation that are simply two diverse symptoms of the same disease. . . I am suggesting that the idea of salvation uniquely by a male savior perpetuates the problem of patriarchal opposition (138)

The interpretation of **Christa**, however, is complicated by the subjective attitudes of those who gaze upon the female body Might the male gaze, for instance, persist in seeing erotic provocation rather than suffering victim in this work? Is it not, as suggested by Margaret Miles and some other writers engaged in revisionist scholarship, nearly impossible even in this historic context of redemptive suffering to expose the nude female body without inviting phallic prejudice? (Miles:177, 179).

In an untitled 1990 photo screenprint (fig 2), the American Neo-Conceptualist Barbara Kruger provides us with a still more pointed revisionist interpretation of the Crucifixion theme, this time acknowledging the reality of the male gaze The spread-eagled female figure, her face covered with a gas mask, has a meaning-laden phrase, "It's our pleasure to disgust you" captioned across her nude body¹ The text reminds us, among other things, that women are frequently reduced to objects of sexual pleasure in our historically male-oriented culture

Concern for the exploited has also been the focus of work by the English-born and trained artist Sue Coe She emerged in the 1980s with a confrontational, populist style which looked back for inspiration to the vast moralistic art of the pre-modern past as well as to the great expressionists and social realists of the first half of the twentieth century While she claims no orthodox religious beliefs and, in fact, distrusts most traditional power structures, especially those associated with capitalism, she has frequently borrowed familiar religious images and formats for her compositions, because these historically embedded patterns and subjects speak so directly to the heart and emotions of her intended audience. In this sense Coe conforms to Cooney's concept of a prophetic, religious imagination at work, making real a self concerned with the condition of suffering, a suffering that is transfigured through religious imagery: "The transfiguration of suffering understood as focused on *this* world allows adherents to challenge the egregious exercise of human power in its exploitation of others . ." (Cooney:16) Echoing this broad-based social concern in her own artistic commentary, Coe remarked, "Art stems from conflict When we have true civilization, art will stem from challenge" (Gettings) In commenting on her use of familiar artistic formats and the public that her art targets, Coe has said:

¹The concept for this figure may have been inspired by George Grosz's 1928 drawing, *Christ with Gas Mask*, as suggested by Mary-Margaret Goggin 84



2. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (It's our pleasure to disgust you)*, 1991, 90 x 77 inches, photographic screenprint on vinyl (photo courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York).

when I go back to England to see my family and friends they're all working people—I realize that I would go crazy without them I would think it's all New York, and it isn't Well, these people don't think of art as something in a history book. They don't read art magazines, have never been to a gallery And their response and criticism is more real than anything else (Yau.46-47)

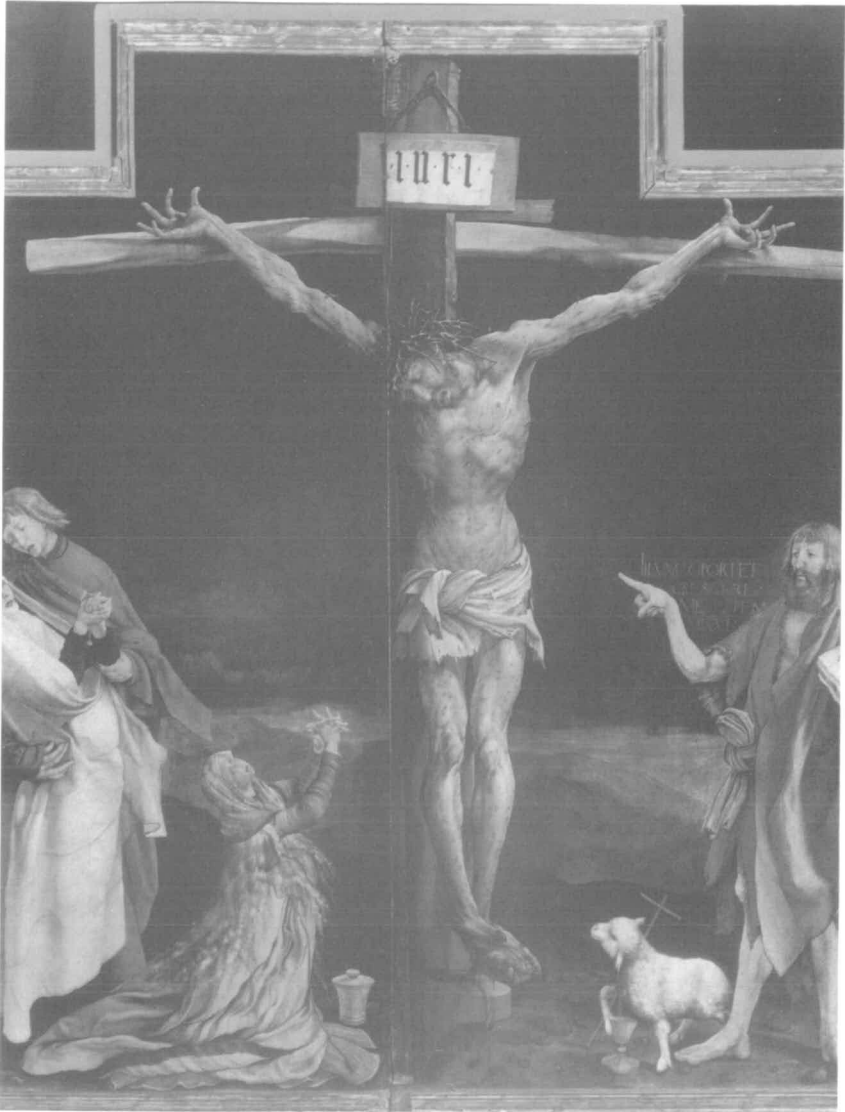
In her picture **Gray Rape** (fig. 3), the insinuations of the cruciform figure by Barbara Kruger are made graphic and horrific, seen here in the pathetic female figure spread with arms outstretched on a pool table. That Coe had firmly in mind a tormented vision of Christ-like suffering is confirmed by our realization that the strained and tortured arms and hands of the victim have been borrowed from Grunewald's well-known Isenheim Crucified Christ (fig. 4). Coe's charcoal composition is one of a series of works from 1983 that comment on the highly publicized gang rape of a twenty-one year old woman in a New Bedford, Massachusetts, tavern while twenty male patrons looked on As seen in this picture, her human figures are frequently attenuated and often brutalized The sense of a kind of Hell on earth permeates her lessons on injustice, and the critic Donald Kuspit has called her "the greatest living practitioner of such an art" (Kuspit).

In another work of the same year, **It's Not Safe** (fig. 5), her social perspective is cast more broadly. She has envisioned a Boschian infernal projected into the nuclear age The general references are to a near future holocaust and the consequences of fallout and panic A brutalized, partially nude human figure in a pieta format is braced by a companion near the open back doors of a decimated ambulance The pair of figures is fashioned after Rogier van der Weyden's familiar fifteenth-century pieta groupings Immediately in front of Coe's pieta group is another figure wearing the fragments of a shirt emblazoned with an anti-nuclear weapons emblem. He is a pastiche of traditional Crucifixion figures, including Grunewald's tortured Isenheim Christ, and red rays trace lines from stigmata-like wounds to the silhouette of a nuclear missile lying on the ground Coe, like a latter day Jeremiah, has through her composition cried out against militaristic and political policies that could transform our world into an endless night of suffering and terror

While Coe's pictures use religious formats to enhance comment on primarily secular situations, the large photographic pieces of Andres Serrano frequently inhabit an uncomfortably ambivalent realm between profane and sacred art In a number of Serrano's most notorious works, such as the now infamous **Piss Christ** of 1987 (fig. 6), the eschatological and scatological are immutably fused Serrano is quite conscious of the ambiguous status of his images, noting that his Cibachromes are



3. Sue Coe, *Gray Rape*, copyright 1983 by the artist (photo courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York).



4. Matthias Grunewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, detail, Crucifixion panel, 1512-15, Colmar, Musee Unterlinden (photo: Giraudon/Art Resource, New York).



5. Sue Coe, *It's Not Safe*, copyright 1987 by the artist (photo courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York).



6. Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987 cibachrome, 60 x 60 inches, edition: 4 (photo courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York).

informed by “unresolved feelings about my own Catholic upbringing which help me redefine and personalize my relationship with God” (Lippard 1990a 239) He further notes that for him “art is a moral and spiritual obligation that cuts across all manner of pretense and speaks directly to the soul ” In fact, Serrano reflects in his work a richly diverse cultural and ethnic mix his mother is African Cuban, his father Honduran Serrano was abandoned by his Merchant Marine father shortly after birth in 1950 and raised in the Italian neighborhood of Williamsburg in Brooklyn His experiences growing up (which included both drug addiction and drug dealing) taught him the pain of being considered marginal, leading him to comment later: “I am drawn to subjects that border on the unacceptable because I lived an unacceptable life for so long” (Serrano 17)

Towards the mid-1980s Serrano began making pictures obsessed with Church symbolism, and by 1986 he had commenced the first of an ongoing sequence of provocative photo images incorporating bodily fluids References to bodily fluids, especially blood, are prominent in the Bible, central to the most sacred of Christian rituals, the Eucharist, and an important aspect of mystical experience throughout the late Middle Ages Caroline Walker Bynum, for instance, has extensively documented the intimate, sacralized correlation between blood, milk, and flesh as divine food and the theology of the medieval Church, noting that “. . . in the mass the priest prepares food, and the food itself is a body that feeds with its own fluids and saves with the fleshly covering it provides” (278) In some respects, drawing upon his Catholic upbringing, Serrano commenced re-sacralizing body fluids in his series of staged photographic images of the 1980s Relative to the political scene in the mid-1980s, however, bodily fluids had also begun to receive international attention in conjunction with the AIDS pandemic By the late 1980s a number of artists were including references to bodily fluids in their work, among them blood and semen. And these images and, in some instances actual substances combined with pigment, were on occasion variously integrated with religious metaphors

One of Serrano’s first major works utilizing fluids was **Milk, Blood**, a photographic diptych of two rectangular plexiglas tanks containing the two liquids referred to in the title. The highly abstract picture (and as such relatively noncontroversial) was inspired, as the artist notes, by Mondrian’s rigorous Neoplastic style and created on New Year’s Eve, 1986 (Hagen 62). The previous year he had already experimented with containers of fluid by photographing a leaky cross-shaped plexiglas tank filled with cow’s blood, which he entitled **Blood Cross**.

In spite of what may seem to the casual art observer to be the largely formal constructs of **Milk, Blood**, its title and altarpiece-like format sug-

gest other levels of meaning and intent. Blood and milk, for instance, can represent sacrifice and nourishment, two important elements historically and theologically associated with the Christian faith and its scriptural foundations. Christ was sometimes described in the Middle Ages as a lactating and birthing mother, the blood flowing from his wounded side echoing in some imagery the milk flowing from a mother's breast (Bynum 266, 270-271). Milk and blood are also two among several bodily substances that Serrano referred to as "life's vital fluids," fluids that he regarded as "visually and symbolically charged with meaning" (Lippard 1990a:242)

In 1988, in conjunction with a public exhibition of **Piss Christ**, Serrano was cast into public notoriety when the ever-vigilant American Family Association and a number of U.S. Congressmen, among them Jesse Helms, focused their claims of obscenity and blasphemy on this piece. The work is actually quite striking, with the otherwise rather tawdry, commercial plastic and wood crucifix transformed by an otherworldly glow of deep reddish gold. Gold, after all, was the traditional signifier in medieval and early Renaissance art of the saintly and divine. The reddish hue might suggest the historical context of suffering and sacrifice. However, Serrano's title, serving as a conceptual qualifier, destroys for many observers the romantically sanctified context. In an apparent reference to the historical and sociological aspects of Jesus as man and in defense of his fusion of the sacred and profane, Serrano declared that "you can't have one without the other" (Dubin 99). The artist also noted:

The Church is obsessed with the body and blood of Christ. At the same time, there is the impulse to repress and deny the physical nature of the Church's membership. There is a real ambivalence there. It's one thing to idealize the body and it's another to deal with it realistically. In my work, I attempt to personalize this tension in institutional religion by revising the way in which body fluids are idealized. (Serrano 25)

In some respects Serrano, like Sandys, was, through his depiction of the Crucifixion, drawing attention to the sometimes exclusive as opposed to inclusive nature of the Church and its theology.

The theological debate concerning the humanness of Christ is, we might recall, as old as Christianity itself. It was in somewhat similar iconoclastic fashion to **Piss Christ** that William Blake, anticipating much earlier Serrano's focus on the possibly servile circumstances of Christ's humanity, penned some verses supporting his belief that Jesus, in order to bring humankind again to oneness, partook intimately of the profane world:

Was Jesus Born of a Virgin Pure
With narrow Soul and looks demure
If he intended to take on Sin

The Mother should an Harlot been
 Just such a one as Magdalen
 With seven devils in her Pen.²

Perhaps, as one critic posed in reference to Serrano's image, rather than the crucifix having been defiled, the urne had been sanctified (Carr: 108) And Wendy Steiner wrote: "Baptizing a cheap crucifix in urine reminds us that it was Christ's *body* that died on the cross—a body that bled and contained other fluids" (Serrano.14)

In 1989, in response to the critics of **Piss Christ**, Serrano created **White Christ**, a rather anemic looking photograph of a plaster head of Christ submerged in milk and water. Commenting on the intention of the piece, the artist remarked. "They want a white Christ, a Christ they can call their own, so I'm giving it to them" (Lippard 1990a:244) Serrano also observed:

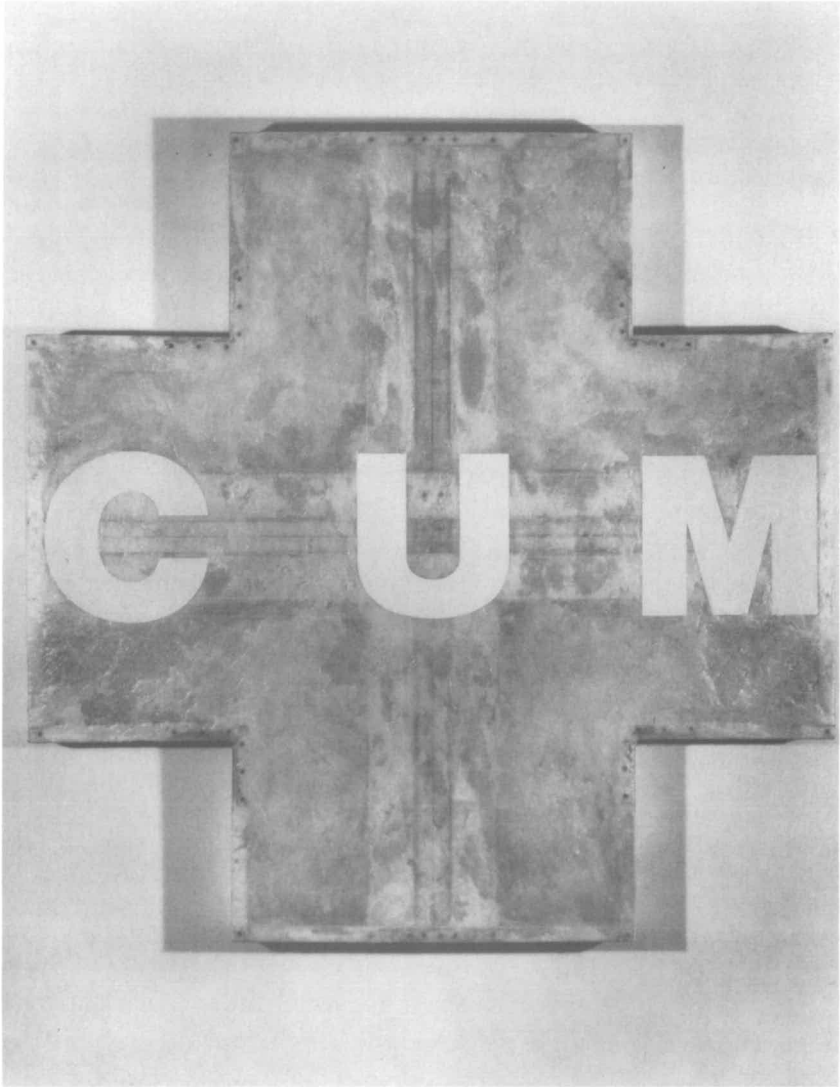
I have a problem with, or I resist what I perceive as, homogenized white art, that is to say, non-threatening work. I think for a person of color to do any work that is in some way threatening to a lot of people is indicative of where his roots are. (Serrano 29)

Metaphorical references to the Crucifixion and cruciform took on new meaning for gay artists in the AIDS-plagued 1980s. Perhaps inspired in part by the notoriety and confrontational success of Serrano's **Piss Christ** and certainly echoing, like Sue Coe, a reordering of religious imagery for prophetic purposes, the Zimbabwean-born English artist team Ridgeway Bennett (Jeremy Ridgeway and David Bennett) exhibited a series of square and cross-shaped canvases in 1990, their "CUM Paintings," each of which incorporates a cross image and is emblazoned horizontally with the three-letter vernacular word for semen (fig. 7). In fact, semen has been mixed with the waxed-based pigment in creating the modulated tonal effect of works in the series. While image and word caution against the danger of exchanging bodily fluids, the cross also connotes a plethora of meanings, including the tradition of suffering and death.

In her discussion of symbolism and meaning Susanne Langer mentions the complex, "charged" nature of the cross as a symbol.

. . . the actual instrument of Christ's death, hence a symbol of suffering, . . . also an ancient symbol of the four zodiac points, with cosmic connotation, a 'natural' symbol of cross-roads . . . , and therefore of decision, crisis, choice, also of being crossed, i.e., of frustration, adversity, fate, and finally, to the artistic eye a cross is the figure of a man. (284-285)

²The verses were formerly associated with Blake's poem *Everlasting Gospel*, see Erdman 877



7. Ridgway Bennett, *Reactive Armor*, semen, wax, vinyl and resin on lutrador with aluminum studs, 1990 (photo courtesy Wessel O'Connor Gallery, New York).

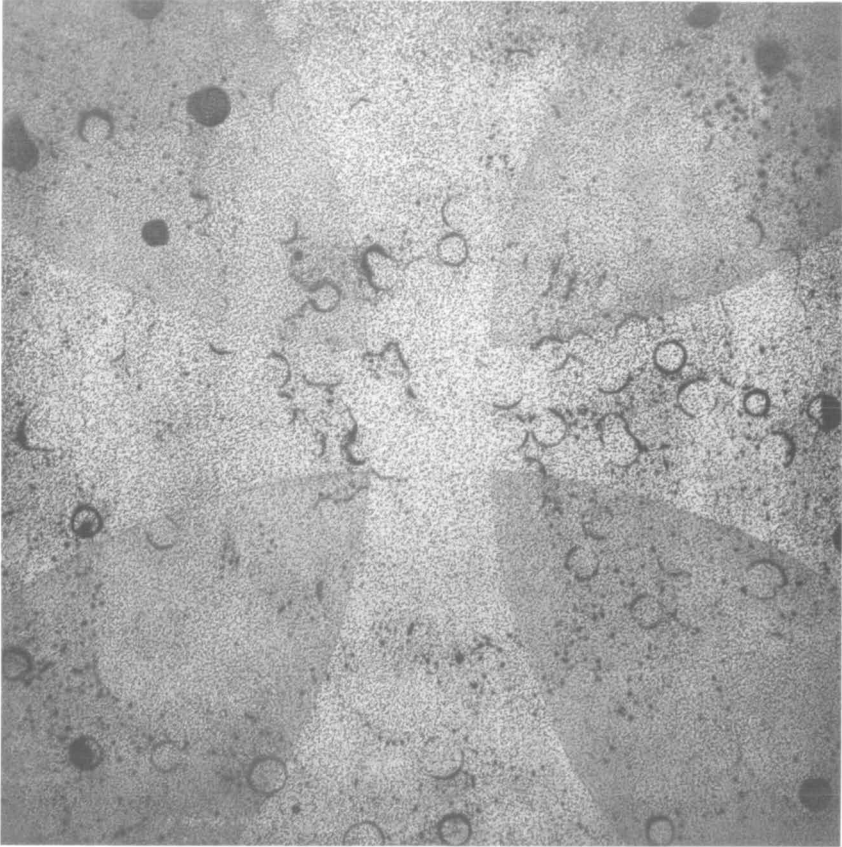
All of these possibilities seem apropos to two male artists whose above-board sexual and spiritual bonding have made them in the eyes of some segments of mainstream "straight" society ethically and socially marginalized. The pictures in the series become, metaphorically, moral and spiritual shields for the artists, as shields with cross insignia did for Christian crusaders in the chivalrous Middle Ages (Rubin 51). The intersecting arms of the cross represent the coming together of two human beings, perhaps at a crossroad in a type of relationship traditionally shunned by many in our culture. And the word "cum," (in Latin "with") while in its idiomatic context generally considered scatological by polite society, may phonetically suggest a coming together or a coming to a cause (as Christians come to the cross). In an undated statement accompanying their exhibition, the artists commented.

The paintings merge the act of painting with the sex act. They are icons that have a binary structure of positive and negative. This reflects the double nature of the body as both human and divine. The male body is the site of an ideological battle over sexuality and disease. Historically, semen was seen as the ultimate product or residue of the male body. Now, it localizes issues of suppression, contagion and the body.

The use of the cross as an image of suffering and martyrdom specific to the context of AIDS and homosexuality takes an even more circuitous route in the sequence of "Elegy" paintings (fig. 8), exhibited in 1993 by the American artist Anthony Viti. Each work has as its central focus a cross shape, fashioned after the German Iron Cross, but partially obscured by a veil or pattern of luminous, atmospheric color, which includes in each instance traces of the artist's own blood. Here, again, bodily fluid is sacralized in a suffering cause. In his use of the iron cross motif, Viti specifically references Marsden Hartley's well-known, semi-abstract composition, *Portrait of a German Officer*, painted in 1914 as a memorial to a dead lover but couched in a coded manner, necessary for earlier generations of gay artists.³ Like Hartley's picture, Viti's paintings are intended as commemorations, but in the late twentieth century these have become poignant shrines to friends and lovers lost to AIDS rather than to the battles of World War I.

Among the most fervent and prophetic artistic campaigns directed to the issue of tolerance for gay lifestyles is the work of the British artistic team Gilbert & George. They initiated their career as "living sculpture" in 1969. Since the early seventies, however, they have devoted most of their attention to the creation of large hand-dyed photo murals which they call photo-

³On Marsden Hartley's work and its relationship to the artist's homosexuality, see Weinberg



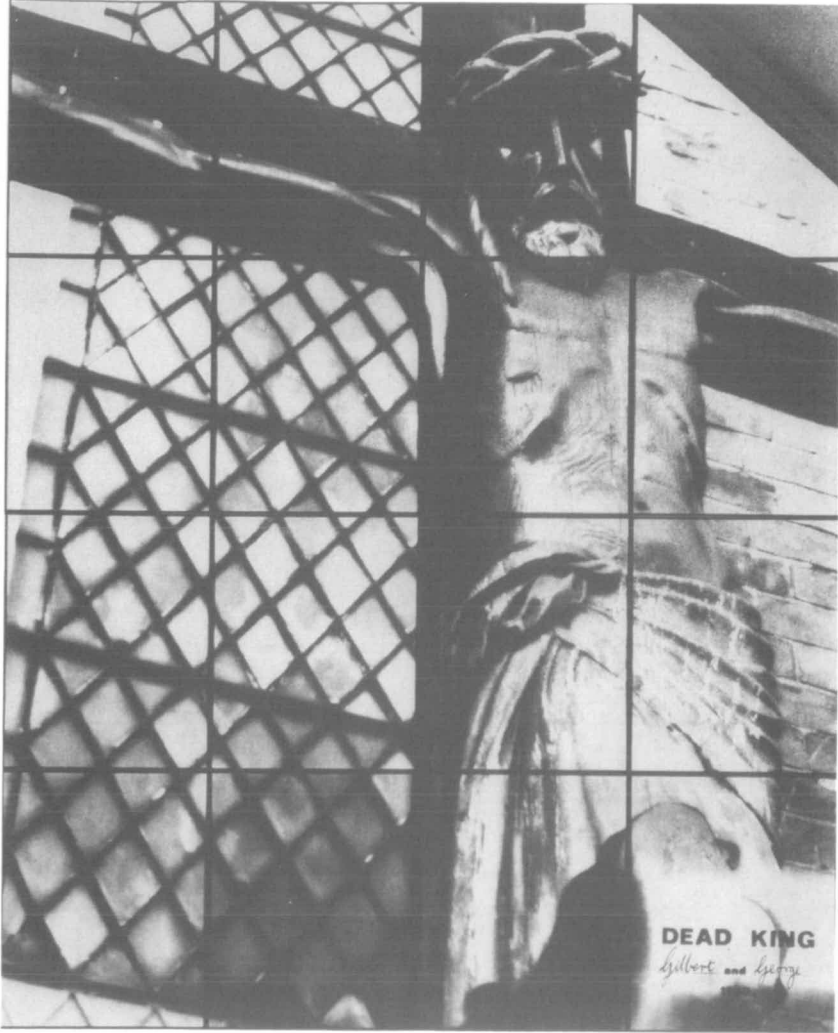
8. Anthony Viti, *Elegy #66 (After MH's Iron Cross)*, 1993, human blood, oil on masonite.

sculptures. The photo murals, constructed to resemble large, decorative stained-glass-like panels, have through a series of on-going public exhibitions elaborated a complex philosophy (or should we say theology) of life directed to the artists' contention that attitudes about morality can be changed and that society should be tolerant of alternative lifestyles. As they have politely commented: "We accept the whole world. We accept all the problems. First we try to sort out our morality, then we put it in front of People. They may reject it, but that is advancement, in a way" (Ratcliff xi).

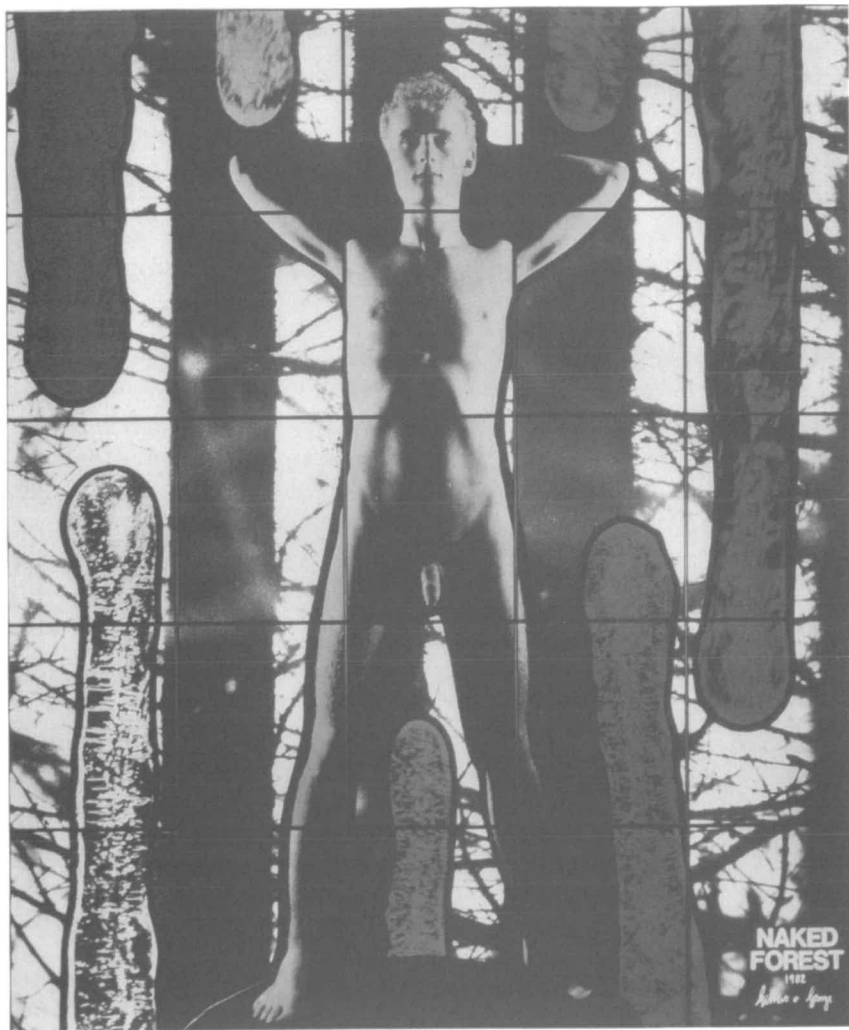
While Gilbert & George claim to be anti-religion, their criticisms are directed most specifically to established Christian bulwarks of faith, whose teachings, they feel, have targeted the sexual freedoms and life-style the artists champion in their art (Dwyer 124). In his 1989 500-page eschatological examination of the evolution of the art of Gilbert & George, presumably written with their participation, the German writer Wolf Jahn contends that the artists have, in fact, assumed the role of a new Christ or God-man, complete with descent into Hell and martyrdom for the sake of rebirth and a new Eden. The artists have transmogrified Thomas a Kempis's *Imitatio Christi* for their late twentieth-century disciples.

Central to the artists' vision of hope and resurrection is an urban world populated by young, glamorous working-class males. Since Gilbert & George have modelled their new world order on the foundations of a familiar Christian theological system, references to crosses and the cruciform extensively populate their compositions beginning in 1974 and extending through the 1980s. For these artists the cross is not only a symbol of martyrdom for the sake of a cause but at once also a convenient device used to reinforce the central, sexual complexion of their crusade. The old order is represented by the dark and gloomy **Dead King** (fig. 9) of 1980, based on the photo image of a Medieval-style sculpture of the crucified Christ. The new order is symbolized by **Naked Forest** (1982) (fig. 10) in which a nude youth has metamorphosed the traditional crucifixion pose into a sensual display of male flesh. The rough beams of the traditional cross are gone, and in their place we see a grey forest contrasted to the illuminated male and bright, frozen liquid streamlets, which we may suspect are the residue of libidinous male ejaculate rather than sacrificial blood. The Christian Crucifixion has been transformed from a message of martyrdom and anguish to lust and desire. Eros has replaced Thanatos, and the cross has become a phallic metaphor. Rather than regendering Christ as depicted in Sandys's **Christa**, Gilbert & George have recast the suffering Messiah as a flaunting, eroticized male, desiring other males.

Numerous photomurals from the early eighties pointedly underline the artists' phallus-centered aesthetic. Such cruciform compositions as



9. Gilbert & George, *Dead King*, hand-dyed photogram, 1980 (courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York).



10. Gilbert & George, *Naked Forest*, hand-dyed photogram, 1982 (courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York).

Holy Cock (fig. 11) in its thrusting, ready authority, emphasize the life-giving power of the male sex. According to the artists' philosophy as expounded by Jahn, "Life is bestowing by erecting, setting up, re-creating, re-forming, and all these energies and processes are 'male' ones" (328-329)

New York's East Village art scene produced a number of dynamic and very talented artists in the early 1980s whose individual styles were variously inspired by images drawn from popular culture, including comic books, television, and graffiti. Unlike the Pop painters of the 1960s whose stylistically cool imagery usually shrouded political commentary under layers of media-inspired pabulum, the neo-Pop artists of the East Village created heated, excited, and sometimes stridently political art. Sue Coe's art was briefly inspired by this scene as was the art of David Wojnarowicz.

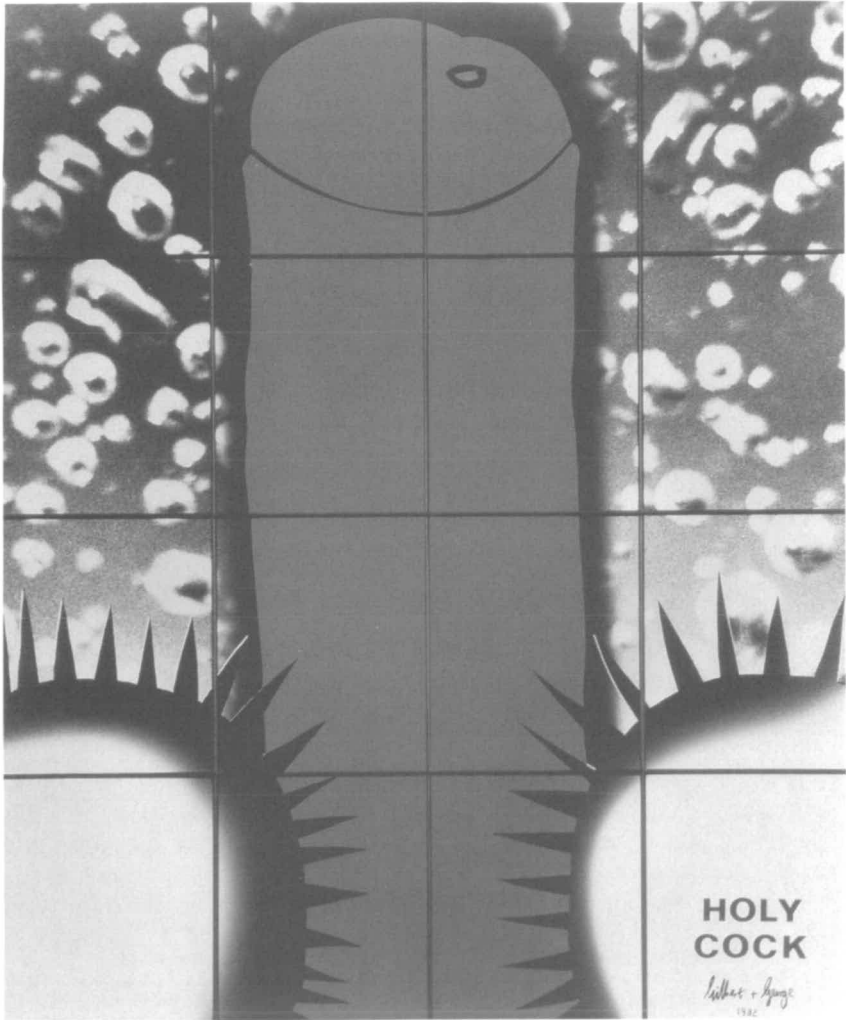
Wojnarowicz led a horrific life as a child. He began hustling the streets of New York when he was only thirteen, having discovered his homosexual proclivities by this time. Art eventually became the means whereby he was able to rise above and channel his despair. During the 1980s, as his art matured, he was to see many of his acquaintances wither and die from AIDS, including his close friend, the photographer Peter Hujar. When Wojnarowicz discovered that he too was HIV positive, his outlook on the world changed, and his outsider identity, cast through an art of increasingly subverting, collaged images, became even more prophetic:

One of the things I realized after getting diagnosed, is that my whole life I've felt like I was looking into society from a[n] outer edge, because I embodied so many things that were supposedly reprehensible—being homosexual or having been a prostitute when I was a kid, or having a lack of education. (Blinderman:49)

A recurring theme in both the written and graphic work of Wojnarowicz is the loss of spirituality in western culture, with which he associates society's materialism and the deleterious nature of organized religion:

spirituality has become a dirty word in this society because of the destructive nature of organized religion and the controls exerted by its human structure. Myths get played out only in pop culture, in the forms of toys and cartoons, animals, monsters and fantastic creations. (Lippard 1990b 136)

In his collaged pictures, Wojnarowicz created his own mythology, often combining religious references with disparate images from wide-ranging sources including popular culture. These pictures asserted the artist's own sexuality and his rage at injustices which he felt had been



11. Gilbert & George, *Holy Cock*, hand-dyed photogram, 1982 (courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York).

perpetrated on those whom society chose to ignore or ostracize. An early work, **Untitled (Genet)** (fig. 12) of 1979, coincides with a period when Wojnarowicz was hanging out in abandoned warehouses along the Hudson River, exploring the world of underground sex and drugs and experimenting with film. The photocopy collage coalesces a World War II-vintage view of a battle-torn church interior filled with soldiers, an altar-piece of Christ as the suffering Man of Sorrows transformed into a drug addict complete with syringe and makeshift tourniquet, a foreground image of a haloed Jean Genet (based on a cropped photograph by Gilberte Brassai), angels appropriated from fifteenth-century Flemish art looking down on the disheveled nave below, and a comic book hero pointing his blazing automatic weapon up at the angels from the picture's lower left corner.

Wojnarowicz was first exposed to Genet's narrative ideas in 1974 when he saw a screening of the author's controversial 1950 homoerotic film *un chant d'amour*; and he undoubtedly empathized with this rebel, on whom Jean-Paul Sartre, in the title of his biography of the writer, sardonically conferred sainthood.⁴ In his collage the artist has paired Genet (a social outcast much of his life) with Christ (updated as a suffering addict) and revealed the traditional symbols of religion (the angels and church interior) threatened or in shambles. Like Genet, Wojnarowicz was homosexual, a youthful hustler and sometime thief, and a non-conformist whom society sought to punish. And like Genet, through art, Wojnarowicz struggled to rise above his despair and rage

The artist's depiction of Christ as a drug addict was considered blasphemous by some who saw the image in exhibition or publication, including the Reverend Donald Wildmon, spokesman for the American Family Association. Following Wildmon's distribution of a highly critical pamphlet to conservative Christians, legislative leaders, and major media outlets in 1990, attacking the National Endowment for the Arts and selectively extracting details of Wojnarowicz's work, including the Christ image, the artist together with the Center for Constitutional Rights brought suit against Wildmon and his organization.⁵ In his explanation,

⁴Sartre's biography, published in English translation in 1963 by Braziller, carries the title, *Saint Genet Actor and Martyr*. Sartre in part intended his title to draw an analogy between Genet and St. Genestus (or in French, Genest), the third-century Roman actor and martyr and patron saint of actors. Genet himself made frequent metaphorical references to religious imagery and Catholic ritual in his writings. At the end of *The Thief's Journal*, Genet writes "I am waiting for heaven to slam me in the face. Sainthood means making good use of pain. It's a way of forcing the devil to be God."

⁵The suit was decided in favor of Wojnarowicz. In his decision the judge prohibited Wildmon from distributing additional copies of his pamphlet and ordered him to send a corrective mailing to former recipients. Finding no strong evidence that the artist's reputation had been harmed, however, Wojnarowicz was awarded only one dollar, which he insisted on receiving by check so that he could collage it into his art.



12. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Genet)*, photocopy collage, 1979 (courtesy P.P.O.W. Gallery and the David Wojnarowicz Estate, New York).

made during litigation, of the genesis and intention of the image, Wojnarowicz retorted

I thought about my upbringing, I thought about what I had been taught about Jesus Christ when I was young, and how he took on the suffering of all people in the world, and I wanted to create a modern image that, if he were alive physically before me in the streets of the Lower East Side, I wanted to make a symbol that would show that he would take on the suffering of the vast amounts of addiction that I saw on the streets. . . (Lippard 1994 37)

In a later work of 1988, **Spirituality (for Paul Thek)** (fig. 13)—a photo composite now desparingly reflective of the AIDS crisis, a sequence of surreal-like images are positioned above the detail of a crucifix which includes, in Dali fashion, black ants crawling on the tortured head of Christ.⁶ The smaller photo images suggest, in abbreviated fashion, the artist's perspective on a cycle of life: the young child whose mask may hide from parents the awareness of incipient desires labelled perverse by society; money, a signifier of capitalist greed; a machine, portent of the manner by which technology has come to dominate modern life, men dancing with each other, an acknowledgement of sexual preference, a clock, symbol of the passage of time; and the reclining figure of a man, perhaps dying of AIDS, whose exhaled cigarette smoke suggests a metaphor for transcendental release. The small vignettes featuring human figures form a triangle above the crucified figure of Christ. While the triangle is a traditional representation of the Trinity in Christian iconography, in the Gay and Lesbian communities of the 1980s it became an activist banner equating silence with death, in memoria of those homosexual individuals imprinted with triangles and disfranchised by the Nazis during the Third Reich.

In the crucifixions and pietas generated by Sandys, Kruger, Coe, Serrano, and Gilbert & George, the traditional figure of Christ is made to assume new roles or to foster reassessment of conventional mores. Sandys has coopted the male Messiah with a female figure suggesting the need for a more inclusive Christianity and targeting conventional attitudes about women in patriarchal society. Gilbert & George have also coopted the orthodox conception of Christ but with a new male sovereign whose image becomes a metaphor for the acceptance of gay men and their sexual perspective. Finally, Kruger, Coe, Serrano, Ridgeway Bennett, Viti, and Wojnarowicz have used Crucifixion motifs (linked in some instances to bodily fluids) to reference human suffering or to criticize

⁶ On the meaning of ants in his work, Wojnarowicz explained " I used ants as a metaphor for society because the social structure of the ant world is parallel to ours " See Blinderman 58



13. David Wojnarowicz, *Spirituality (for Paul Thek)*, photo composite, 1988 (courtesy P.P.O.W. Gallery and the David Wojnarowicz Estate, New York).

cultural precepts and political attitudes which, in their consequences, have tended to disenfranchise groups or individuals

In traditional Christian devotional art the suffering figure of Christ and the image of the cross are the ultimate symbols of sacrifice for a cause, both of faith and in celebration of the revolutionary ideology intended to transform those prevailing religious and cultural attitudes that during the time of Christ and primitive Christianity oppressed disadvantaged peoples. Christ as the definitive social outcast provided a redemptive message. With some considerable irony, however, a number of Postmodern artists have assumed a prophetic stance, referencing religious images in a revisionist context outside of orthodox theology to suggest, again, the need to reexamine those religious and cultural attitudes that foster persecution or exploitation. The individuals selected for inclusion in this article, however, are but a small cross-section of the many artists, both male and female, who during the late twentieth century have utilized religious references in very prophetic, if disturbing, ways for diverse expressive, political, and social commentary.

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