# The Sacred and Profane Dichotomy in the Art of Warhol and Serrano

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Submitted to OCAD University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Contemporary Art,
Design and New Media Art Histories.

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2023

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# Abstract

Contemporary art has acquired the reputation as a space where “anything goes” and where diverse cultural topics are brought into conversation: politics, sexuality, philosophy, science and technology are all open to exploration within art. The “F-word," however, still remains off-limits for discussion within the contemporary art world and, even more so, the “C-word." These words, of course, refer to faith and Christianity. This paper seeks to determine why this rift exists between religion and art through Émile Durkheim’s dichotomy of the sacred and profane. I begin by tracing Christian tradition in art up to the late eighties, where I focus on the sacred and profane dichotomies in the works of Andy Warhol and Andres Serrano. I argue that the removal of theological perspective from art criticism has resulted in both under interpretation and misinterpretation of works, drawing on Serrano’s *Piss Christ* and Warhol’s *Last Supper* series as examples. By relying on authors such as Thomas Crow and Erich Auerbach, I argue that spheres of the sacred and profane, secular and religious and art and theology are not inherently oppositional but, instead, interdependent.

# Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude to each one who made this endeavor possible. Firstly, I would like to thank my advisor Charles Reeve, a person unafraid to traverse boundaries and engage with diverse perspectives. I am grateful for his dedicated support, insight, honesty and open-mindedness, without whom none of this dialogue would be possible.

Thank you to Rebekah Smick for sharing your rich knowledge and enthusiasm and to Jay Wilson for supporting these interests early on.

I am grateful to OCAD University and all the faculty for supporting my academic interests, cultivating new ones and allowing me the opportunity to pursue this project.

I would like to thank my mother Sharon Ollila for her enduring love and prayers, not only during the writing of this document, but throughout my life.

Finally, thank you to my husband Stephen Gison for tirelessly standing by my side through this entire endeavor and encouraging me to pursue this dream in the first place.

In memoriam of my father
who always believed I could.

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# The Sacred and Profane Dichotomy in the Art of Warhol and Serrano

AnnaLiisa Ollila Gison

Transgressive, provocative, blasphemous, obscene—these descriptions have plagued artist Andres Serrano since he first arrested public attention with his notorious photograph *Immersion (Piss Christ)*. In 1987, the same year that Serrano produced this work as an emerging artist, Andy Warhol presented what would become his final exhibition and most religious series, *The Last Supper.* These two New York contemporaries, both from immigrant homes, created work that not only reflected their devout Catholic origins, but responded to consumer culture, Reagan era politics and the AIDS crisis. But despite the rich religious and contemporary content, Serrano's and Warhol's art has been painfully misinterpreted: Warhol's as areligious and Serrano's as antireligious.

It is no secret that religious content has been largely ignored in the analysis of modern and postmodern art. The *Immersions* and *Last Supper* series are two examples of this tendency. Categorization and specialization emerging from Enlightenment to modern theory have not only separated disciplines but also discourse within disciplines. While contemporary art boasts of hosting a space where "anything goes" and where diverse cultural topics are brought into conversation, the hesitation to discuss religion appears conspicuous. Contemporary works that have to do with Christian spirituality, in particular, have been under-interpreted and the full import of these works is missing from critical discourse. While the boundaries of sacred and profane have been fiercely defended by both the religious and the secular, Serrano's *Immersions* series and Warhol's *Last Supper* exhibition question why these divisions exist, suggesting that perhaps there is no division at all.

The piece that brought Serrano both fame and infamy was the 1987 photograph, *Piss Christ*. This little-known artwork exploded onto the public scene in 1989 when US Senator Alphonse D'Amato tore a copy of the work in half and threw it onto the Senate floor, simultaneously dividing the US public and igniting the American culture wars. The deep orange-red portrait featured a glowing gold crucifix surrounded by ethereal clouds of tiny swirling bubbles (fig1). It was not this simple composition that inspired outrage, but the materials that Serrano chose for his work, specifically, the clear tank of urine in which the crucifix was submerged. The piece raised questions surrounding government funding, morality, decency and what constitutes art. Since this affair, Serrano has been obligated to defend his own religious devotion, pointing to his Catholic roots and his right to employ Christian iconography.[1] While Serrano avows sincere religious enquiry, some, like D'Amato, cannot comprehend how anything but animosity can be read from the debasement of a sacred object. The reaction to this work, which even today can rarely be exhibited without vandalism attempts,[2] highlights the extreme views toward religious reference in art.

Warhol's *Last Supper* series, exhibited in Milan the same year, also caught many off guard. After accepting the commission from Alexander Iolas, the worldly, fame-obsessed, queer, pop artist suddenly began to produce image after image of Jesus Christ. The series took him two years to complete with over one hundred renditions of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, many of which were hand painted.[3] Warhol filled an entire wall with copies of a yellow head of Christ in *Christ 112 Times*, surpassing's his *Marylin x 100* in number of replications (fig 2). His black and white *Sixty Last Suppers* took its place as his largest silkscreen work. If this was Warhol's first religious work, it would be easy to brush it off as coincidence—dispassionate interest in just another iconic image, as art critic Blake Gopnik insists. But others, notably Jessica Beck and Jane Daggett Dillenberger, have pointed to moments of religious influence in works from his earliest to last. The confusion lies in reconciling the

artist of pop culture images and homoerotic art to the creator of sincere religious art, an unwarranted assumption that these three things——pop culture, homoeroticism, Christianity——are incompatible.

Upon hearing the term "religious art" what comes to mind? Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*? Caravaggio's *Calling of St. Matthew*? Or, perhaps, Warner Sallman's 1940 *Head of Christ*. The latter was likely what my undergrad professor referred to when he queried, "is there actually any good Christian art?" Art historian James Elkins echoes this sentiment with *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, where he complains, "Most religious art…is just bad art."[4] He points out that "Sooner or later, if you love art, you will come across a strange fact: there is almost no modern religious art in museums or in books of art history."[5] Elkins, however, fails to differentiate between *religious* art and *devotional* art. It seems logical that a devotional piece would reside within a religious building or community rather than a museum, be it a Buddha statue in a temple, a biblical scene in a church, or calligraphic script from the Qur'an within a mosque. This fact is not strange at all. Purely devotional art holds little relevance for a secular public since its purpose is for veneration or a particular religious function that may be didactic, inspirational or illustrative.

Some devotional art, especially commercial, has indeed earned the inevitable eyeroll that accompanies its mention. Paintings like Sallman's have become the stereotype of religious art—a blue-eyed, white Jesus with flowing medium-brown hair and unblemished complexion that would elicit the jealousy of any skincare fanatic. Works like Stephen Sawyer's *The Undefeated,* dubbed the "Macho Messiah" by the *New York Times*, falls to a level of kitsch where even earnest devotional sentiment becomes drowned within its own cheesiness. These types of work warrant the titles: overly sentimental, shallow, dishonest, propagandist and ignorant and reside on the extreme end of religious art that can often only resonate with the devout.

Because serious contemporary art does not often feature narrative biblical scenes or traditional religious iconography, the misconception abounds that religion and successful, critical, exploratory art have long been divorced. Warhol's *Last Supper* and Serrano's *Immersions* series are some of the few that contain overt Christian iconography. However, the view that religious art equates to devotional art demonstrates a rather simplistic view of the historic trajectory of art and religious tradition. It is naive to imagine that religious art only consists of overt Christian imagery, crucifixes and biblical narratives.

What, then, defines religious art? Theologist Paul Tillich considered all artwork to be theological in nature and argued that every work expresses humanity's "ultimate concern," the existential questions universal to all humankind.[6] But rather than seeking to impose religious perspective on all art, the pieces I am referring to are ones clearly influenced by a particular religious ideology, contain religious references or raise critical questions of theological and spiritual significance. Works that I label "religious" are not necessarily church-commissioned or devotional and are not restricted to artists with religious backgrounds or personal faith. The art that I will address here is primarily Christian art that has emerged in the Western artistic tradition. Hugo Ball, Emily Carr, Natalia Goncharova, Ed Ruscha, James Turrell and Dan Flavin are a few of many who have engaged with these themes, while more recent artists include Anselm Kiefer, Kiki Smith, Paul Thek, Damien Hirst, Cornelia Parker, Fred Tomaselli and Bill Viola.

Since the early Christian period, Western religious themes have evolved with concurrent philosophy and ideology, embracing the styles of each period. During the Renaissance, biblical imagery took on humanist forms. Michelangelo's *David* (1501—1504) portrays the reliance on a disciplined mind and body as a function of faith. During the Counter-Reformation, passionate Italian Baroque art reflected Catholic fervor, while prolific religious imagery emphasized the authority of the

Church. Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647-1642) presents sensuality as spiritual expression—the physical as a vessel of divine connection, which reaffirmed the use of icons and relics that were approved by the Counsel of Trent. In the Dutch north, the lack of Christian iconography did not reflect a lack of religious conviction. On the contrary, this iconoclastic break aligned with the Protestant break from the Catholic Church and its control. Rembrandt's serene landscapes and Van Steenwijck's vanitas aestheticized personal piety over religious exuberance. Neoclassical, biblical scenes upheld Enlightenment ideals, while classically themed history paintings supported religious morals. Angelica Kauffman's *Christ and the Samaritan woman at the well* (1796) places intellectual value in the common worker and the outcast, whereas her painting *Cornelia Presenting Her Children as Her Treasures* (1780—1790) exemplifies classical virtues in tandem with the Christian virtues of humility, modesty and love.

As styles shifted from classical representation to expressive, religious content shifted as well. Romantic artist Casper David Friedrich documents this shift, merging Burke's and Kant's theories with his Lutheran faith. His piece *Morning in the Riesengebirge* (1811) depicts a vast landscape of mists and mountain peaks. A barely distinguishable figure struggles toward a faint crucifix in the foreground. His piece *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) seven years later boasts a similar landscape, but now the figure dominates the center looking outward toward the view with no cross to be found. Both depict a sublime experience between God and man. Despite the lack of religious iconography, the latter remains heavy with spiritual resonance, even more so than the former as the individual contemplates something greater beyond himself, the natural evoking the supernatural.

Post-Impressionist artists, such as Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Émile Bernard, continued to explore religious representation. Art historian Rebekah Smick explains that "Van Gogh was particularly distressed by the willingness of [Bernard and Gauguin] to appeal to traditional religious

subjects in their paintings" which he identified as "out of touch with our modern sensations."[7] Van Gogh, instead, created new spiritual symbolism using "line, colour and form" and, like Friedrich, chose to express the divine abstractly through landscape and nature.[8] Although artists over time continued to reference traditional iconography, the fact that artistic expression could now produce spiritual connotation meant traditional iconography was no longer required for a work to be considered religious.

Just as theological questions have persisted in past art movements, they have continued to emerge in modern and postmodern art. In his 2017 book *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art*, Thomas Crow examines modernist works that transcend material significance. He describes how artists such as Robert Smithson recognized the "inseparability of the Western art tradition from its founding in Christian observance" and did not shy from acknowledging this relation in their work.[9] While spiritual themes in modern works remained abstract in accordance with modernist views, pop and postmodern art, turning to pastiche, began to reclaim and repurpose religious iconography within new contexts. Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974–1979), for example, offered a feminist reimagining of the Last Supper with three long tables of thirteen seats, which featured the names of notable historic or mythological women. Mark Wallinger's unconventional Christ sculpture *Ecce Homo* (1999) aligns Jesus' trial and torture with ongoing social injustice and oppression. Modern technology and globalization have only increased religious influence as Western art opens itself to a broad range of Indigenous, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Eastern traditions. From ancient history to the present, religious influence never left art; it simply changed in expression as art changed in expression.

The historical trajectory of religion and Western art demystifies Elkins' "strange place" as merely natural progression. What seems strange is not the place of religion in art but its lack of

acknowledgement in contemporary art discourse. Regardless of the fact that spiritual belief and practice permeate the lives of many viewers and artists, art criticism either disregards or denies the theological import of a work and its social implications. In *No Idols*, Crow describes this ignorance as "a blind spot obscuring full apprehension of past art in the West."[10] He stresses the need to acknowledge these religious tenors but explains the concerns that art history holds toward maintaining boundaries between art and theology:

> to raise in the present day the issue of religious art as an actual terrain of theology comes with risks. The first of these might be undoing a historically key conceptual break with the predominantly Christianised culture of Europe and North America, such that the art of that tradition might be viewed apart from any devotional reverence. Without such separation, no dispassionate examination of the historical record—which is to say, no art history worth the name—would have been genuinely conceivable.[11]

Here, Crow relays art history's fear that the sphere may become tainted with piety if one dares to encroach theological perspectives on religious art—that the boundaries separating art and religion may disintegrate, overwhelming the art world with religious sentiment that drowns impartial art criticism. It is, however, possible to discuss theological concerns in a work without being forced to adopt "devotional reverence." Crow accomplishes this task in *No Idols* through his discussion of James Turrell, Robert Smithson and Corita Kent. Agnostic artist Mark Wallinger has explored Christian faith successfully through a number of his works, including *Ecce Homo*, *Talking in Tongues* and his 2007 Turner prize winner *Tate Britain*. Despite the reservations that exist toward religion, their conclusions demonstrate that theological import remains socially relevant and can be examined impartially and independently within the art field.

In "Modernity—An Incomplete Project" Jürgen Habermas describes how these extreme views and deep-seated fears regarding the boundaries between religion and art criticism came to exist. He explains that the Enlightenment "project of modernity" sought to divide disciplines one from another, in order to specialize and institutionalize science, morality and art "for the enrichment of

everyday life."[12] But rather than providing enrichment, the separation has resulted in isolation and consequentially, "cultural impoverishment."[13] He argues that "this splitting off is the problem" that Modernity has unintentionally created.[14] Yet it is this separation that the art field holds so dear. Divisions between art, science and religion have resulted in each being suspicious of the other. Habermas affirms that no single discipline can adequately relieve this cultural impoverishment.[15] His observations lead one to conclude that these disciplines must collaborate, enriching each other by sharing knowledge while simultaneously endeavoring to pursue their own distinct focus.

Since Greenbergian modernism banished most overt external references, this mode of artmaking was ideal for an isolated discipline with exclusive interpretations. If art was nothing but itself, the form, then criticism need not look elsewhere but itself. But as Thomas Crow and Rosalind Krauss have both pointed out, Greenberg's egocentric model has always been a fallacy.[16] With the emergence of postmodernism, art has long moved beyond these borders. Fredric Jameson explains that postmodern pastiche borrows and reuses references from all places, past and present.[17] While the "project of modernity" split knowledge into strict disciplines,[18] postmodernism blurs boundaries, delving into topics of every field. The discipline of art criticism must expand in knowledge as art expands. And while the art field has now become known for its interdisciplinary nature, it tends to stop abruptly at the doors of the church.

To be clear, it is the discipline of art criticism, not art that has separated from theology and religion. Institutionalized art history remains secular but art, itself, has never been completely secular. Some would prefer to think of contemporary art as a segregated space, untainted by religion. Yet art is fluid and flows beyond boundaries to touch every discipline and every area of life, a synthesis of many spheres. While disciplines are necessary and categories are required to communicate specific

ideas, they often represent generalizations; the boundaries between these spheres are more illusion than they are reality.

Humans are multifaceted and so is the work they make. Specialization has created interpretive tunnel vision, oblivious to the kaleidoscopic realm of contemporary art. Crow suggests that "Religious interpretations of avowedly religious subjects…all too readily fall into unrevealing tautology."[19] In other words, religion interpreting religion for the sake of religion is simply redundant and contributes nothing of value to art criticism. This argument easily applies to the interpretation of overt devotional pieces but does not pertain to informed analysis of critical works surrounding theological questions. This argument, however, can also be turned toward art history. If art history only interprets work one-dimensionally, through its own single lens, how can it account for the nuances of a work? Interpretation, then, could only be based on form alone.

Too often, due to tunnel vision, art criticism categorizes and disregards works, banishing them to the gutters of low art or religious sentiment. Categories have been used to determine a piece's value to the art community and whether or not it belongs at all. Clement Greenberg was famous for his strict criteria of art, denouncing pop and describing kitsch as "the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture."[20] And yet many pop and kitsch works have become an essential part of the art historical canon. While oftentimes helpful, labels can also be harmful, dismissive and polarizing. We make assumptions and judgements based on limited information and all too quickly stereotype before making open-minded, thorough assessments. Regardless, people tend to be drawn to classification. Labels provide comfort; they tell us what we know. If we label something, we feel we understand it. It is the unknown that we fear—the other. As we enforce boundaries between these categories, simultaneously enforcing what we think we know, they come to represent oppositional extremes such as high and low art, secular and religious, sacred and profane.

This extreme either-or mentality that sets categories and spheres in opposition has led to the under interpretation of religious artworks. Some of the most common descriptions of Serrano's *Piss Christ* characterize it as a provocative piece that brings together the sacred and the profane. In art criticism, this phrase has become an easy catch-all with little thought or explanation to account for artwork that combines secular and religious imagery, works by artists such as Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, Renée Cox and Chris Ofili. In 2014, cultural critic Ilan Stavans and philosopher Jorge Gracia debated whether or not *Piss Christ* was blasphemous. While they acknowledged that the act of urination does not always equate to desecration, they offered no adequate theological reading and reduced Serrano's intention to "anger at religion."[21] In 1998 Archbishop George Pell declared, "Both the name and the image *Piss Christ* not only demean Christianity but also represent a grossly offensive, scurrilous and insulting treatment of Christianity's most sacred and holy symbol."[22] These misconceptions lie in the assumption that the sacred and profane are at odds—that the "sacred" refers to the religious symbolism present in a work, while "profane" describes its intentional desecration. Profane in this sense holds the negative connotation of profanity, an irreverent mockery of what is holy. It is the sacrilegious, the antithesis to the sacred.

This merging of both seems to equate to the negation of sanctity, tarnished holiness—the cross drowned in urine or the Virgin Mary caked in dung. The problem lies not in whether this assumption is true but in the ignorance to the spiritual and social import present in these works. Many viewers, both religious and nonreligious, cannot move beyond the idea that *Piss Christ* merely represents the debasement of the sacred. Elkins, for example, acknowledges Serrano's religious background, describing him as a "conflicted Catholic" who is not really "against religion" but categorizes his work as "antireligious."[23] Others, like Jesse Helms, view this piece as a shallow attention-seeking work, provocative for the sake of being provocative.

Christian radicals tend to view *Piss Christ* as a sacrilegious trashing of Christ, which has led to multiple physical attacks on the photograph over the years. In the late eighties, the American Family Association, a Christian fundamentalist organization, voiced strong objections after Serrano was selected to receive a monetary grant from the government-funded National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). It did not take long before these objections resounded in Congress. Conservative senators Alphonse D'Amato and Jesse Helms verbally attacked the work in 1989, D'Amato calling it an "obscenity," "piece of trash," "garbage," "filth," a "desecration" and "perverse."[24] Jesse Helms' sentiments concerning Serrano were equally presumptuous, stating, "He's not an artist, he's a jerk! And he's taunting the American people just as others are in terms of Christianity."[25] In 1994 he published an article: "Policy Review: Is it Art or Tax-Paid Obscenity?" denouncing the work. The consequential defunding of the NEA launched lengthy cultural battles with the US Supreme Court to determine whether "general standards of decency" and the "values of the American public" were legitimate factors for determining the distribution of government funding to the arts.[26]

These extreme religious and political responses demonstrate the "cultural impoverishment" that Habermas describes. As a result of specialization and segregation between disciplines, "the distance grows between the culture of the experts and that of the larger public".[27] The lack of meaningful dialogue between spheres leaves society ignorant to interpretive nuances in works such as Serrano's. Uninformed outrage progresses to what Habermas describes as "terroristic activities and the over-extension of any one of these spheres into other domains," as was the case during the cultural wars with D'Amato and Helms.[28] While specialization was intended to collaboratively enrich culture and society, disciplines wrestle amongst each other for control over the public sphere.

The erosion of boundaries causes discomfort to both religious and secular spheres. While categories remain set in opposition, fear of the other encroaching in one's space marks the same

irrational fear that leads to prejudice and discrimination, xenophobia and racism. Religious zealots cry sacrilege while secular extremists accuse of moralization. Friedrich Nietzsche, in particular, denounced Christian moralization as something that impedes creative genius and prohibits freedom, but even Nietzsche's view of Christianity was an extreme one.[29] His theories, perhaps, fuel the fear of theological perspective imposing "devotional reverence" in art criticism.[30] When the secular and religious converge, both spheres fear that their autonomy will be threatened.

This apprehension of eclipsing spheres emerges from a social desire to preserve the sacred from the profane. French sociologist Émile Durkheim developed this dichotomy in the early twentieth century in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) where he identified it as the basic element shared by all systems of belief. He defined religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart."[31] The sacred amounts to any object, totem, motion, narrative or word that has an active part in bringing meaning to "collective effervescence"—a transcendent, spiritual experience produced through a sharing of common values, hopes and opinions.[32] The profane is everything else: the everyday, the physical, the mundane.[33] While the *act* of profaning means to render something holy, unholy, to *be* profane simply means to be ordinary and unconsecrated. Neither inherently equate to good or evil, abject or obscene.[34]

Durkheim explains that this act of dividing the sacred from the profane is not limited to religion but is a natural social tendency shared by all. It is society, he suggests, "nearly every collective representation," that forms consensus for what is sacred based on shared values as we continually seek transcendent experiences: "religious beliefs are only one particular case."[35] While Durkheim credits society with the construct of these categories, he stresses the impossibility for society to reconcile the two, pointing to the utter chasm that lies between the two states. He explains, "if the profane could in no way enter into relations with the sacred, this latter could be good for

nothing…The two classes cannot even approach each other and keep their own nature at the same time."[36] If the transcendent touches the ordinary, then it is no longer transcendent. Their very definition is the negation of the other. In light of Durkheim's theory, each sphere creates its own standard for what is sacred and profane.

Durkheim's views have impacted art interpretation through his concept of an impassible divide. The merging of sacred and profane in the life and art of Andy Warhol seems incomprehensible to many. In his 2020 biography on Warhol, art critic Blake Gopnik cannot account for Warhol's sincere Byzantine Catholic devotion, despite its affirmation by Pat Hacket in *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, John Richardson, Jane Dillenberger and most recently, Jessica Beck who served as chief curator at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. Beck explains that Warhol's "final paintings are neglected and rejected…the divide between the readings of the 'queer Warhol' and of the 'religious Warhol' has perpetuated a misunderstanding of his *Last Supper* paintings."[37] Gopnik does his utmost to discredit all evidence of sincere faith, brushing off Warhol's life-long church attendance and spiritual practice as merely superstitious or ethnic habit.[38] His staunchest argument, however, rests on his inference that Warhol's lifestyle as an impenitent, materialistic, homosexual man does not likely describe someone who also possessed genuine Catholic faith.[39] Gopnik's reading demonstrates the inability to move beyond one dimension.

It is comforting for secular scholars to conclude that Warhol was not sincerely devout because the secular is what contemporary art criticism knows. In a 1997 interview with Bill Moyers, religious sister and art historian Wendy Beckett denounced the tendency to view art single-mindedly and indulge in what she called "comforting art"—art that viewers can easily judge without having to be challenged.[40] She criticized Senator Jesse Helms reaction to *Piss Christ,* explaining, "He thinks he's right and he hasn't had to think about it. It's obvious to him, and that's comforting."[41] The

unwillingness to become *un*comfortable and move beyond initial judgement has led to polarization and cancel-culture. These propensities align with Jameson's description of postmodernism's schizophrenic nature—fragmentation and disconnection while being fully immersed in our vivid and immediate 'now'.[42] Many quickly dismiss what appears to be oppositional without careful consideration of the whole, which is required for art interpretation or any legitimate assessment. In a simple but potent statement, Christian Reformed philosopher Calvin Seerveld admonished, "one should not react by thinking that…art is bad because we don't like what is says."[43] This observation can relate equally to both religious and secular spheres. When critics and art historians take the opportunity to move *beyond* boundaries, viewing contrasting ideas in conversation with one another, complexities unfold that can enrich both religious and social spheres.

Titian's piece *Sacred and Profane Love* (1514) offers an alternative view to Durkheim's belief that the sacred and profane "cannot coexist in the same place."[44] Although the title was not assigned until 1693, the dichotomy presented remains obvious. The painting's symmetrical composition features a serene village landscape with two identical, regal women seated at either end of a well, which lies in the center. One woman, majestically clothed, sits in a reserved manner and covers her abdomen with her arm. The other is fully nude but for a bright red robe that billows out behind her. She stretches her body out, both arms open, one lifted to the sky. Each represent love, one sacred and one profane, but which is which? A "comforting" reading might suggest that the nude represents the profane. She exudes vivacity, boldness and sexuality, while the clothed woman appears grounded, modest, reverent. Yet art historian Erwin Panofsky offers a different reading of the piece––the clothed Venus as the profane, earthly, and the nude Venus as the sacred, celestial.[45]

Titian validates both forms of love. The earthly Venus indicates nobility through her glorious, material raiment. The celestial Venus requires no adornment; she declares her nobility through her

divine nudity and unashamed beauty. Nature encompasses the clothed Venus while the other is crowned by heavens. Although one represents profane love and the other sacred love, these women are not the "hostile and jealous rivals" that Durkheim describes.[46] James Elkins aligns with Durkheim claiming that serious religion "does not mix" with secular art: "Wherever the two meet, one wrecks the other."[47] Titian's image questions this notion as he sets the women in correlation with each other. The scene demonstrates a co-existence and even a co-dependence as the profane Venus embodies an earthly version of the heavenly. Panofsky viewed Cupid as a "symbol of the bond between earth and sky."[48] Cupid unites the two, mixing the waters in the well between them. Artists who make critical, religious works, like Warhol and Serrano, take on this role of Cupid as they, like Titian, merge the sacred and profane.

While Durkheim emphasizes the utter dissension between the sacred and profane, Serrano dissolves this tension in a single tank of urine. Yet how could this work be anything more than simply attention-seeking irreverence, as many have suggested? If he had placed the American flag inside the tank instead of the cross, the outcome would have been pandemonium (as Dread Scott confirmed). Serrano's work is certainly provocative but in no way superficial. He exposes what has socially been censored and persuades his audience to re-examine uncomfortable realities. By completely undermining the boundaries between sacred and profane, Serrano examines the role of the Church within society. He criticizes cosmetic Christianity while drawing attention to the AIDS crisis and the response of the Church. *Piss Christ* raises questions about what it means to be a Christian and what true religion really is.

To understand the piece, one must start where Serrano began. Raised Roman Catholic by his mother of Afro-Cuban origins, his early work centers heavily on traditional Christian themes, most of which graphically feature the body, animal flesh or blood with underlying themes of redemption,

sacrifice, death and torment. Serrano no longer affiliates with the Church yet openly affirms his Christian faith and acknowledges its influence in his work.[49] Art historian Eleanor Heartney notes that the "preoccupation with flesh and sex in the work of artists who were raised as Catholics reflects an essential aspect of that religion's world view"—that the Divine can be experienced through the physical.[50] Christ's Incarnation, God taking on human flesh, remains a central focus in Catholic imagery both in the church and in contemporary art with works like Serrano's *Immersions*.

Before Serrano created his *Immersions* series, he conducted investigations through his *Bodily Fluids* series, where he borrowed inspiration from Piet Mondrian's grid paintings. In these works, Mondrian used black lines to divide white and primary coloured squares and rectangles into balanced compositions. He endeavoured to transcend his art with abstraction by reducing it to its purest features. Serrano mimics Mondrian's solid yellow, white and red rectangular shapes, but only when looking closely would a viewer notice air bubbles and irregularities in the photographs that allude to the material—not paint, but *Piss*, *Milk* and *Blood* (1987). These bodily substances represent the cycle of birth, life and death. The breast milk symbolizes birth and provision as nutrients enter the body. The blood expresses the vitality of life; as it carries these nutrients, it sustains life. Finally, the urine marks death in the passing of waste from the body. While Mondrian looked for universal beauty and truth on the flat plane of the canvas, Serrano sought to capture pure, universal symbols of life and humanity by abstracting and reducing the body to its emissions.

Serrano uses these symbols to draw connections to Christ's Incarnation and sacrifice. In the photograph *Milk/Blood* (1986), he juxtaposes these two, dividing the solid white and red coloured rectangles in Mondrian's fashion. He uses these same materials a few years later in *Milk Cross*. Here, the breast milk is contained in the clear shape of a cross, offset by a red background, presumably blood. The association of Christ with milk not only emphasizes his humanity in reference to images

of the lactating Virgin, but personifies Christ as mother, himself. In Matthew and Luke's gospels, Christ likens himself to a mother when he laments, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem…How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"[51] The synthesis of blood and milk calls to mind historian Caroline Walker Bynum's concurrent, 1986 essay, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," where Bynum discusses medieval art and theology that associated Christ's humanity with motherhood––the mother of all believers. During the Middle Ages, a mother's milk was believed to have come from her blood. Medieval physiology, she explains, "saw all bodily fluids as reducible to blood and saw bleeding…as an obvious symbol for cleansing."[52] Milk, then, is produced through the sacrifice of the blood.

The Christian connotations here are unmistakable; this cleansing blood, necessary for the purging of sins, is also Serrano's symbol for human life. The blood surrounding the milk cross demonstrates the sacrifice of Jesus's life that must occur for spiritual new birth and nourishment. This nourishment from the blood aligns with Catholic doctrine on the sacrament of the Eucharist. Transubstantiation marks the transforming of the wine and bread into the *real presence* of Christ–– the true body and blood of Christ, through which partakers can enjoy perfect union with him. St. John's gospel describes this dependence on Christ's body when Jesus announces: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."[53] In her essay, Bynum refers to the writing of fourteenth-century theologian and mystic Catherine of Siena who adjured:

> We cannot nourish others unless we nourish ourselves at the breasts of divine charity…We must do as a little child does who wants milk…We must attach ourselves to that breast of Christ crucified, which is the source of charity, and by the means of that flesh, we draw milk. The means is Christ's humanity which suffered pain, and we cannot without pain get that milk that comes from charity.[54]

St. John's gospel describes Christ as "the Word" of God who "became flesh," and St. Peter's epistle, like Catherine of Siena, exhorts believers "as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby."[55] Here, God becomes flesh through the Incarnation. The Saviour's mortal pain provides food for the soul. As medieval scholars believed milk issued from blood, Christ's eternal care and provision springs from his.

The import of this deceivingly simple work goes far beyond the tautological, devotional reflections of Christ's sacrifice and care for humanity. It is no coincidence that Serrano associates Christianity with bodily emissions during a time when the AIDS crisis was at its peak. While already controversial as a medium, the use of bodily fluids, transmitter of HIV, was now intolerable. In January of 1986, the CDC reported an 89% increase in AIDS cases; of those infected, more than half had already died.[56] By 1988 in New York, HIV infection "was the leading cause of death among Hispanic children...and the second leading cause of death among black children," exceeding deaths from all other infectious diseases.[57] As a New York resident living among these communities, the urgency of this crisis did not escape Serrano's notice.

Frustration at this time began building in New York toward the Church's lack of support for those affected. Protests broke out as desperation mounted. Serrano's *Milk Cross* speaks to this situation. The blocky, solid white cross and red background creates a near inversion of the Christian-founded Red Cross emblem—a movement historically grounded in "aid without discrimination."[58] The irony of this inversion points to overall Christian failure in care for AIDS victims—the reversal of the nourishment for others that Catherine of Siena alluded to. Just as milk emerges from the blood and nourishment from sacrifice, St. Catherine concluded that "we cannot without pain get that milk that comes from charity."[59] It is Christ's pain and charity, Serrano points out, that Christians are eager

to accept yet often unwilling to endure for the sustenance of others surrounding conditions deemed profane.

The association of AIDS with homosexual activity and immorality, along with paranoia in the US surrounding the contraction of this barely-understood disease, prompted many to classify it as profane and outside the sanctity of the church. This stigma produced mixed responses in both Catholic and Evangelical circles.[60] The question arose whether or not to continue the shared cup in Holy Communion.[61] At the same time, a number of congregations took an active role in support for people with AIDS and their families, ministering and attending to the sick, providing hospices, holding prayer vigils and educating on prevention.[62] Some preferred to remain anonymous for fear of being publicly associated with the disease.[63] Medical center chaplain Robert Bird had previously avoided AIDS patients but became convicted that his discrimination was wrong. He stated: "as I read the Bible, I thought, I can't do this. I can't just avoid these men if I'm a follower of Christ…[Jesus] met people at their point of need."[64] The majority of Christians, however, remained inactive, some hostile.[65] Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of the Reagan-allied political organization Moral Majority, publicly linked the HIV pandemic to divine judgement against sin.[66] The July 1983 issue of his *Moral Majority Report*, headlined: "AIDS: Homosexual Diseases Threaten American Families."[67] In a 1983 CBC debate against Reverend Troy Perry of the Metropolitan Community Church, Falwell apathetically stated when asked about AIDS, "we pay the price when we violate the laws of God."[68]

In 1992 while this crisis was still ongoing, Serrano created his *Morgue* series in an attempt to reverse the judgement being aimed toward those with AIDS. Karen Finley one year earlier had installed *The Black Sheep* poem in New York with the same goal.[69] Serrano's series featured serene, post-mortem images of those who had died from brutal causes, including HIV infection. Despite the grotesqueness of the bloodied, broken bodies that many would consider obscene, Serrano presented

them as saintly and holy—some with shrouds or positioned like traditional, post-mortem depictions of Christ, such as Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1480). The piece *AIDS Related Death* features the clasped, clean, elegant hands of a woman. Another work he titled: *Blood Transfusion Resulting in AIDS*, eschewing stereotypes surrounding the disease. By referencing the *Dead Christ*, he invokes thoughts of resurrection and hope. When addressing this series he remarked, "death is not the end."[70] With these works, Serrano connects HIV to Christ's tortured death in an attempt to enlist empathy from the Church, while simultaneously honouring and sanctifying these bodies against the stigma and disdain surrounding them.

The infamous work *Piss Christ* criticizes this lack of empathy and the propensity of some to remain distant from the alleged profane while simultaneously pronouncing judgment. Serrano reveals the irony of this stance by pointing to elements of Christianity that are often overlooked—the profanity of the cross and Incarnation. While the milk and blood symbolize spiritual provision through the body of Christ, the urine in *Piss Christ* emphasizes his Incarnation much more poignantly. By lowering the crucifix into the urine, Serrano mimics Christ's descension from the sacred heavens to the profane earth as a lowly and humble man. The urine, one of Serrano's universal symbols of humanity and mortality, represents Christ's willingness to take on a full physical body with all its abject functions, including excretion. In an interview, Serrano pointed out that Christianity often glosses over these uncomfortable elements—that Christ's death "was a disgusting, torturous way to die," noting that the process of bowel and bladder evacuation upon death would have been inevitable in crucifixion.[71] While some may view these details as trivial and crass, Serrano views them not only as testimony to the divine becoming flesh, the *kenosis* and submission of Christ, but as the key to appreciating the shame and public humiliation that Christ endured for the salvation of humankind.

Serrano's portrayal complements St. Augustine's view of the Incarnation. In his sermon, "For the Feast of the Nativity," Augustine describes Christ's alignment with the profane for our sake:

> The Word of the Father, by whom all time was created, was made flesh and was born in time for us…The Maker of man became Man that He, Ruler of the stars, might be nourished at the breast; that He, the Bread, might be hungry…that He, the Truth, might be accused by false witnesses; that He, the Judge of the living and the dead, might be brought to trial by a mortal judge; that He, Justice, might be condemned by the unjust; that He, the Teacher, might be scourged with whips; that He, the Vine, might be crowned with thorns; that He, the Foundation, might be suspended upon a cross; that Strength might be weakened; that He who makes well might be wounded; that Life might die. To endure these and similar indignities for us, to free us, unworthy creatures.[72]

According to St. John's gospel, it is love that motivates this departure from divine exultation to humiliation that St. Augustine poetically describes. Jesus commands his followers, "love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends."[73] The mission of the Incarnation, then, does not stop with Christ's sacrifice but should continue on in the lives of others.

With *Piss Christ*, Serrano juxtaposes Christ's abjection and suffering with Christian preoccupation to remain separate and unsoiled by the profane—a contradiction to true Christianity and the very Incarnation of Christ. Serrano's view contrasts with artists like Warner Sallman, who created an American idealized image of Christ, his outward perfection mirroring his inward, divine perfection. The fact that Sallman's image became the most widely reproduced Christian artwork reveals the social tendency to align with what is familiar and comfortable.[74] Philosopher Calvin Seerveld described the sentimental attachment to this piece as an example of how "out-of-date our consciousness" can be.[75] This is the Jesus people want to see—cosmetic, pleasing, unchallenging with no responsibly on our part.

By selecting a mass-produced, plastic crucifix for his piece, Serrano criticizes commercialized iconography for its cheapening of Christian symbolism. Like Sallman's *Head of Christ*, these icons have emptied themselves of incarnational reality, the very heart of Christianity. He advises:

> you have to look at what the crucifix actually represents; it represents the death of a man who was cruelly put to death…there was nothing pretty about it. When you look at a crucifix…We see it as a harmless object that really has lost its significance. If the image Piss Christ upsets you, maybe you should think about what the crucifixion actually symbolizes.[76]

Serrano's statements challenge believers to consider whether they are truly embracing the whole of Christian truth or only the parts that are comfortable.

This commercialized, self-affirming version of Christianity is blind to the connotations of the Incarnation and rejects responsibility toward others. American philosopher and social justice activist Cornel West identifies this ignorance as "sanitized" religion.[77] Like Catherine of Siena, West points to the pain that results in spiritual new birth and nourishment, quoting from Augustine to remind us that we are "born between urine and feces," in pain, chaos and grime, the unseemly "funk," through pure, sacrificial love.[78] This observation aligns with Serrano's view of the Incarnation in *Piss Christ*. West notes, "I am who I am because somebody loved me."[79] In the same way that sanitation erases the gravity of Christ's affliction, West warns that "Deodorized, sanitized, sterilized discourses…don't allow us to keep track of the funk that's operating on the ground in the lives of precious everyday people."[80] This sanitation is the removal of what has socially been deemed profane and results in the tendency for both religious and nonreligious alike to plead ignorance to oppression and injustice surrounding us and caused by us. Like West suggests, the "funk" must be faced—admitted, acknowledged and regarded in order to move forward with appropriate action.

This sterilized social discourse prevented efficient action toward HIV during the eighties. It was not until September 1985 that President Reagan first publicly mentioned AIDS, calling it a "top

priority," despite its discovery more than four years prior.[81] Reagan's cuts to domestic welfare programs intensified an already precarious situation. The detachment from the disease by both political and religious spheres drove people to outrage as the virus spread, devastating the art community in New York. By the time Serrano was creating his *Immersions* and Warhol his *Last Supper*, AIDS had claimed the lives of artists Richard Amsel, Mario Amaya, Perry Ellis, and two years later, Robert Mapplethorpe, who was already infected.

Warhol makes multiple references to the disease in his *Diaries*, his empathy trumped by his own apprehension over AIDS contraction. The *Diaries* relate constant worry over his health, which intensified after his shooting. After a David Salle gallery convention, featuring his work and the work of other major pop artists, Warhol recounts how Bruno Bischofberger "wanted to sit with Robert Mapplethorpe but I didn't want to. He's sick. I sat at another place."[82] He afterward expresses genuine concern over Mapplethorpe's health, commenting, "I hope he makes it."[83] His fear and misconceptions surrounding HIV reflect the general confusion and paranoia surrounding HIV at this time.

In 1987, the same year that Warhol and Serrano exhibited their series, the activist party ACT UP was formed and openly criticized the Catholic Church for its stance on homosexuality. Although the Catholic hospital St. Vincent's was the first and largest AIDS treatment centre in New York and had become an asylum for the gay community, ACT UP stormed the hospital's emergency room, covering its crucifix in condoms to counteract New York Archdiocese John O'Connor's denunciation of contraception.[84] In a desperate attempt to arouse awareness, the party organized a demonstration in 1989 that interrupted the mass O'Connor was conducting and desecrated the Eucharist in St. Patrick's Cathedral,[85] the same cathedral that held Andy Warhol's memorial service.

Warhol's life and art reflects this tension between the Church and the queer community of New York. He was raised by his Slavic parents within the Carpatho-Rusyn Church in the Byzantine Catholic tradition. For the majority of his life, before and after his parent's passing, Warhol continued to pray and regularly attend church up until his death.[86] The ten year span of his *Diaries* are filled with entries like "It was raining hard all day long. Went to church," or "Got up dead tired…Went to church."[87] In one entry he accounts, "I was in a really depressed mood…I cried three times. I decided to pull myself together and go to church."[88] Father Sam Matarazzo, the prior of Saint Vincent Ferrer where Warhol attended, affirmed that even though Warhol never confessed or took part in the Eucharist, he "visited the church two or three times a week."[89] Such tireless consistency makes Gopnik's suggestion that Warhol's practice was merely an "ethnic habit" highly unlikely, especially considering that he was extremely self-conscious of his ethnicity.[90] While Warhol's faith may have been unconventional, it was certainly an important part of his life.

The 2019-2020 Warhol Museum exhibition *Andy Warhol: Revelation,* curated by José Carlos Diaz, expelled all doubt as to whether or not Warhol was religious. The exhibition featured over one-hundred objects and Christian motifs from Warhol's personal collection, including Bibles, crosses and illustrations of Christ, paintings, prints and films all relating to his spiritual interests throughout his life, from his Carpatho-Rusyn childhood to the *Last Supper* series.[91] The juxtaposition of these with his other works introduced complex themes ranging from the Catholic body, life and death, the role of women, pop culture and queer desire. This strange medley reveals the impossibility of assigning Warhol exclusively to either secular or religious spheres.

During a time when outspoken moral tradition clashed with activist outcries for acceptance and civil liberties, Warhol kept his Catholic devotion hidden from his secular community and his homosexual relationships private from the public. In October 1979, Pope John Paul II made a pastoral

visit to the United States where he addressed American bishops regarding certain issues, including homosexuality. He emphasized the difference between sexual act and orientation and the sinlessness of the latter, exhorting, "you also rightly stated: 'Homosexual activity...as distinguished from homosexual orientation, is morally wrong'" and love must be shown toward those "confronted with difficult moral problems."[92] While this stance represented the exact position that the majority of the gay community and ACT UP stood against, Warhol journeyed to the Vatican only months later for the sole purpose of receiving a blessing from the same pope. Many scholars have pointed to the fact that Warhol was inactive and publicly quiet over the AIDS crisis. While unapologetically flaunting his queerness, he never fully came out and played up the idea that he was a virgin. Despite his strong preference for privacy, this claim left him guilt-free in the eyes of the Catholic Church, since it was only homosexual *activity* that was condemned. By remaining silent, he was not openly opposing his own religion.

While his queer lifestyle was profane to the Catholic religion, his Christian faith was profane to the secular communities that he frequented. Except for a few Christian associates like Ronnie Cutrone and those who served at the soup kitchen with him at the Church of the Heavenly Rest, very few joined his religious activities. His *Diaries* relate an account where a friend, whom he had invited "to feed the poor with us," was mistaken for a homeless man by a server. Offended, he flew into a rage, cursing. Warhol was shocked, exclaiming "This is in a *church*!" Warhol admonished him, reminding him, "we're here because we *want* to be."[93] Cutrone describes difficulties identifying as a Christian in Warhol's circle at the Factory, recounting, "I had gotten sober and I was reading and studying the Bible. Other people were making fun of me or staying away. One night I was going to be late for my biblical research class and Andy got a silver limousine and personally took me to the class himself."[94] Preoccupied with his public persona and not one to make himself purposefully

uncomfortable, Warhol certainly preferred that his faith remain private, especially during the AIDS pandemic. Exposure meant the risk of being viewed as an enemy to his community and potentially losing the connections that he had so carefully built up. Rather than be misjudged by both communities who viewed each other as oppositional, Warhol chose to remain silent.

Warhol was caught in the no-man's-land between the religious and secular conflict of the eighties. The fact that he went to a drag club in Italy only hours before meeting the pope at the Vatican and seemed completely unbothered by this strange itinerary demonstrates his ability to simultaneously navigate both sacred and profane spheres, which Durkheim declares impossible.[95] When Alexander Iolas offered him the *Last Supper* commission in 1984, Warhol leapt at the chance to recreate a religious masterpiece. Leonardo's *Last Supper* was recognized and loved by all—just like Coke. It was safe ground, accepted by both religious and secular. He had previously begun to create a *Modern Madonnas* series, inspired by traditional images of the lactating Virgin, but quit the project mid-way through in fear of backlash and people finding it "too strange."[96] Besides the *Madonnas*, his works before 1984 had only hinted at religiosity: his *Gold Marilyn Monro*e—a sex icon in the style of a Byzantine icon, works surrounding death, such as *White Burning* Car, which Jessica Beck describes as "saintly," his skull images, inspired by Baroque *memento mori* and his meditative "Sunset" films, likened by some to Rothko's paintings.[97]

While his *Diaries* admit his dissolution toward his work prior to this commission, the *Last Supper* reignited his passion. In making this series, he revisited hand painting, personalizing the work. Warhol claimed to have been physically hands-on in every *Last Supper* print and painting.[98] The series was by far his grandest in scale and complexity. Both Beck and Dillenberger describe his unwavering fixation on the project. The fact that he went above and beyond, even while enduring gall bladder disease—the very disease that led to his death one month after the exhibition, demonstrates his

personal attachment to the project. It was a piece that finally allowed him to openly explore both dimensions of himself, the sacred and profane.

The original *Last Super* by Leonardo expresses the same ambiguity and duality that Warhol embodied. In *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, art critic Leo Steinberg argues that the painting not only depicts the institution of the Eucharist, but simultaneously points to the impeding betrayal of Christ, indicated by the gestures of Christ and the disciples; it is this dichotomy that marks the crux of the *Last Supper*.[99] Warhol emphasized this double narrative in his pink *Last Supper* by duplicating the image—one to represent the most sacred act of Christianity, the partaking of Christ's body, and the other to represent the most profane act, the renunciation of Christ. By visually splitting these narratives, Warhol simulates the divide between religious and secular spheres concurrent in his own life.

Through duplication and symmetry in the red *Last Supper*, Warhol mimicked the secular-religious conflict, situating himself in-between. Leonardo's *Last Supper* is, in itself, both symmetrical and chaotic. Christ marks the center of two opposing sides in disarray over the announcement of his betrayal. Warhol intensified both chaos and symmetry, dissecting the image into eight sections and inversing them strategically (fig 3). The interplay that occurs between the characters in this rhythmic pattern is remarkable. If split down the center, one half represents the inversion of the other. He spliced the figures into three main groups: those at the far left end of the table (Bartholomew, James and Andrew), those at the opposing far right end (Matthew, Thaddeus and Simon) and finally Jesus and John at the center. With this arrangement, Warhol created a visual representation of his own everyday reality: the far-left party symbolized his liberal, queer community, the far-right party, the Church and tradition, while his own beliefs lay between the two.

Warhol represented himself in the central figure, apostle John. In "Andy Warhol's deaths and the assembly-line autobiography," art historian Charles Reeve notes Warhol's tendency to project himself onto his images, especially ones concerning death.[100] Leading up to this series, Warhol's work began to focus more intently on death due to his own failing health, the AIDS pandemic and, directly before accepting the commission, the loss of his lover Jon Gould to the disease.[101] The gospels portray John as the quiet, faithful disciple, compared to Peter. St. John's gospel describes him as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" who was reclining next to Christ at the table that evening.[102] In Leonardo's depiction, John appears the most effeminate—beardless and beautiful with soft expression and long flowing hair. He sits directly beside Christ and mirrors his pose, creating a distinct V-shape between them, which draws attention to their almost-touching hands. John's downcast eyes also seem to rest there. Whether or not Warhol saw this as a homoerotic moment remains uncertain but he isolated the two, focusing on their loving relationship, and contrasts them against the rest of the disciples.

When read from side to side toward the center, comparing the same proportions, the tranquility of Jesus and John counteracts each warring side. The opposite ends of the table are forced together, creating a face-off between Bartholomew on the far left and Simon on the far right, both accusing the other of betrayal while denying their own guilt. They are contrasted by two panels of Jesus and John on the other side of the print. A smaller Jesus and John section mirrors the smaller far-right group and, in the center, Jesus and John off-set the final far-left group. This composition demonstrates the judgement and antagonism occurring between Warhol's religious and secular communities, his affiliation with each and his personal perspective that transcended both. Father Matarazzo speculated that "Warhol was bonding with a God and a Christ above and beyond the church."[103] The figures Jesus and John represent Warhol and his faith. They never fuse with either

side but correspond with both. For better or worse, Warhol did not fully commit to the requirements of either party and chose to adopt only what he valued from each.

Warhol's hand painted image, *The Big C*, demonstrates his unique religious stance. Here, the benevolent Christ gazes serenely toward "the big C," or "gay cancer," an early term for HIV.[104] Beck notes that the 6.99 price tag points to the sexual position 69 and its moral stigma in its similarity to 666, the mark of the beast.[105] She interprets the piece as Warhol's personal confession of homosexuality and a "plea for salvation" for the end of suffering caused by AIDS.[106] But rather than a confession, the painting reveals Warhol's confidence in Christ's acceptance for who he was. While Thomas points upward, declaring himself guilt-free before heaven, Jesus gestures to an empty motorcycle, symbolizing sexuality, power and freedom,[107] along with an eagle, the representation of St. John in traditional iconography. Here, Warhol demonstrated his satisfaction in his own freedom and Christ's approval.

The painting *Repent and Sin No More!* has been interpreted as an expression of Warhol's religious conflict and guilt surrounding his sexual lifestyle, but this interpretation does not take the full context into account. The phrase "sin no more," comes from St. John's gospel account where Jesus offers compassion and pardon to a woman facing the death sentence for the sexual crime of adultery. After he rids her of her accusers, the religious rulers, and shames them for their judgement and hypocrisy, he turns to the woman and declares, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."[108] In the same gospel, Jesus rebels against social and religious conventions. He condemns the coldness of religious leaders toward the needy and moves into "unclean," profane spaces to touch and heal contagious people riddled with disease. When facing a blind person, his disciples ask him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus rebukes them, declaring "Neither."[109] The disciples' judgement and assumption of guilt brings to mind the same sentiments

that surrounded the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s. Rather than simply depicting guilt and religious moralism, Warhol's perspective was more nuanced, focusing on Christ's love, compassion and acceptance. His entire *Last Supper* series exults the figure of Christ through repeated hand painted images and his *Christ 112 Times*. Instead of condemning commercialized iconography, as Serrano does, Warhol created his own. The *Last Supper* series captures Warhol's contentment with both sides of himself. To Warhol, there was no sacred or profane.

As Warhol and Serrano fused the sacred and profane in their works, they, like Titian, contradicted Durkheim's theory of absolute polarization and established a middle ground. In the same way that Durkheim defined the sacred and profane, Greenberg's modernism defined itself by what it was *not*—an elevation beyond the common. However, in "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," Crow points out that, ironically, the "interdependence between high and low lay at the heart of [Greenberg's] theory."[110] The very act of defining oneself against another declares a dependence and an inescapable bond between the two. While modernism boasted singularity and form alone, Krauss dismantled this assertion, calling modernism a mere repression of the spiritual connotation that exists within it, ready to burst out in a "Pandora's box of spiritual reference."[111] Elements thought to be original and exclusive were simply moments of common profane reality. Extreme perspectives rarely take into account the whole, forgetting the ambiguity that lies between what is sacred and profane.

In *Mimesis: the representation of reality in Western literature,* Erich Auerbach details a similar intermingling of high and low—the literary styles *sublimis* versus *humilitas* that were never meant to converge. Auerbach explains that these styles unite in the Biblical New Testament, which recounts "the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of contemporary life."[112] He expounds, "In the world of Christianity…the two are merged,

especially in Christ's Incarnation and Passion, which realize and combine *sublimitas* and *humilitas* in overwhelming measure."[113] Christ, the Divine, lowers himself to take on ordinary human flesh and faces the shameful and horrific death of the cross that he might bring humankind to God. This narrative marks the focus of Serrano's *Piss Christ*. While accused of blasphemy and insolence, Serrano depicted the very center of Christian doctrine—the union of sacred and profane in Christ, mediator between God and man.

While secular fields may assume that the dichotomy of sacred and profane must be a moralizing, religious problem, Durkheim points out that all society constantly replicates sacred and profane spaces within different communities in search of a transcendent experience.[114] When old dichotomous structures collapse, new ones are formed. Religion, itself, has become a profanity in the sacred world of art. Works like Serrano's and Warhol's challenge both the religious and secular to examine their own boundaries and to consider whether these divisions should remain as they are. True art, religion and politics will look beyond boundaries to find value, unafraid to associate with what has been labeled profane. These boundaries are not fixed. They are movable. All it takes is one rebel to challenge them. While this endeavor may seem idealistic, it is something that many have already proven possible.

*These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point, why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk things…The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "How banal." Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity.*

*David Foster Wallace, E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction, Review of Contemporary Fiction (1993).*

Figure 1. Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*. 1987. Image credit: *Wikipedia*.

Figure 2. Andy Warhol, *Last Supper (Christ 112 Times)*, 1986. Image credit: Dan Cichalski.

Figure 3. Andy Warhol, *Last Supper (Red)*, 1986. Image credit: photographed from Jane Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy* Warhol (1998).

Notes

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